In Absence of Black Atticus:
Cinematic Portrayals of Racism and Redemption in the Jim Crow South

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Introduction
Acknowledging the Imperfection of our Heroes

In 2015, the beloved novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was contradicted by its own creator. The release of Harper Lee's sequel to the novel, entitled *Go Set A Watchman*, revealed a world in which even Scout Finch had to question the morals she based her childhood on. Atticus Finch, it was revealed did not stand for tolerance and racial justice as the first novel had indicated. The novel itself actively worked to deconstruct the white savior complex created by its predecessor.[1] The narrative of *Go Set a Watchman* created a discussion over the intent of fictional civil rights activists, and how they fit into the modern context. The issue, however, is that Atticus Finch continues to be named one of the greatest characters of all time, despite his own conflicting character traits.[2]

Atticus Finch had become an emblem for racial tolerance and integrity, becoming a role model for Barack Obama himself in his presidential farewell address, stating that "if our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation…each one of us must try to head the advice of one of the great characters in American fiction, Atticus Finch." Obama continued with the famous quote: "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view…until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."[3] Atticus Finch had initially

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[1] Ariela J. Gross, "'Go Set a Watchman" and the Limits of White Liberalism," *Cumberland Law Review 47,* iss. 1 (2016): 57, accessed May 5, 2020, from https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/api/document?collection=analytical-materials&id=urn:contentItem:5N4K-1150-00CW-41HH-00000-00&context=1516831.

[2] The release of *Go Set a Watchman* was highly controversial due to Harper Lee's age and health, and fears of exploitation and elder abuse preceded the release. For further reading, see Derek Fincham, "Is Go Set a Watchman Authentic?" *Cumberland Law Review 47,* no.1 (2017), 45-48.

[3] Barack Obama, "Farewell Address," 2017, *Great Speeches, Volume 30: Michelle Obama, Seth Rogen, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Ivanka Trump, and Mike Pence*, 49:00-49:30, accessed May 9, 2020 from https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=152903&xtid=143047.

advocated for understanding among others, and when the new novel was released and Atticus's character was exposed, the world failed to acknowledge the change it would mean to one of America's most beloved novels of racial justice.[4] Although *Go Set A Watchman* was a novel, it represented the changes in the learning approach to teaching racial justice to society.

Much like the ways in which popular culture has changed its discussion over race, as has the understanding of the lasting racism in the South changed. The Jim Crow era's impact on black Southerners represented what W. E. B. Du Bois understood as a veil, creating a feeling that he and the black community had been "shut out from their world by a vast veil."[5] Du Bois was an advocate against the Jim Crow laws, and spoke to the experiences of black Americans and their identity, famously writing about "the unbowed pride of a haunted race, clinging…to a hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes…a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty is a lie."[6] However, the continuity of the Jim Crow era has represented a situation in which interracial relationships have become complicated through the ways in which the history itself is told.

The Jim Crow Era began towards the end of Reconstruction, when the Fourteenth Amendment was essentially voided in the 1890s and the Supreme Court ruled on behalf of segregationist statues in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896.[7] The era was created around the implementation of a "second-class citizenship" and the fundamental laws and regulations which worked together to subordinate black Southerners. From the 1870s to the 1960s, Jim Crow laws dictated the ways of tenant farmers in the South, disenfranchisement, segregation, and extralegal

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[4] Ariela J. Gross, 57.
[5] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 8. Originally released in 1903.
[6] W.E.B. Du Bois, 150.
[7] William H. Chafe et al., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South, e*d. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad et al. (New York: The New Press, 2001)*, xxvi.*

violence.[8] The Jim Crow era consisted of black Southerners existing separately from whites—from water fountains to transport to schools—and fearing violence and retribution. During this time, black Southerners represented a challenge to white supremacy, and existed in a world where power was afforded on the basis of skin color.

Although the legal actions of the Jim Crow laws were ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, its societal implications lasted. The South, as a "racially hierarchical society," threatened any black Southerners who sought to cross the boundaries that white supremacy sought to continue.[9] These boundaries consisted of the "Southern way of life," one which the white proponents of the system upheld. This statement reflected the integration of the ideology into everyday life, as it was a justification for the proceeding of society as normal. It was "a way of life, a culture, a code of everyday behavior, a mode of experience, a set of mind for white as well as blacks," meaning that to go against the status quo was a factor of societal deviance as well as a legitimate crime.[10]

Rendered to a set of expectations based on race, the black community had to adapt to preserve their own existence. Black youths experienced degradation as a fundamental aspect of their childhood, as they witnessed and learned to live in a world in which their every move was at risk of retribution. Young women experienced sexual violence from white men who were rarely held accountable, children witnessed their family homes burn down out of white jealousy over land ownership, and the sight of a naked body hanging from a tree, the victim of a lynching,

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[8] William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, Robert Korstad et al., *Remembering Jim Crow, xxvi.*

[9] Jane Dailey, introduction to *The Age of Jim Crow: A Norton Casebook in History,* ed. Jane Dailey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), xiii.

[10] Jane Dailey, xiii.

were not uncommon.[11] Jim Crow existed as much more than a set of laws, and dictated the everyday actions of a black Southerner under the constant watch of their white counterparts.

The societal measures of Jim Crow also delved into the popular culture of the time. Jim Crow was a dance, known as to "jump Jim Crow," in which the performer jumped over a line.[12] The origins of the term Jim Crow represent much more than a dance, and rather the performative measures of race in the South. Lynch crowds performed the superiority of their race in murdering black Southerners, reducing their lives to that of objects. The performance of race allowed for participation by both sides of the spectrum, as it invited both black and white Southerners to interact with each other in a prescribed manner, performing their perceived racial roles with intent.

The role of white supremacy in the Jim Crow era and beyond focuses on the concept of redemption. Initially, it was the redemption for losing the institution of racism, and the ultimate superiority that had accompanied it. Through the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, it began to focus on redeeming white Southerners for their past, and indicating that they can and have made up for the mistakes of the past. The redemption concept creates a vacuum for Southerners, as it contributes to the entirety of their interactions, although often without proper guidance. Characters such as Atticus Finch, the number one greatest film hero of all time on AFI's 100 Years…100 Heroes and villains list, are still praised for acting within their roles as redeemers of white America, representing the need for the solutions to racism, violence, and segregation as yet another thing that needs to be controlled by white leaders, whether real or

[11] William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, Robert Korstad et al., *Remembering Jim Crow,* 14, 9-13.
[12] Jane Dailey, xiii.

otherwise.[13] The saving of America, it seems, is another redemption arc for white characters, one in which acting race is intrinsic to the furthering of the ideology.

The redemption of the South and Southerners has been a focus in popular culture, particularly films inspired by literature. Thomas Dixon Jr's novel *The Clansman* was later taken on by director D.W. Griffiths, who released *The Birth of a Nation* as a film in 1915 to reaffirm white supremacy in the face of emancipation.[14] Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* romanticized the antebellum South, while the original emancipation story *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe still related slavery and racism back to the interpretations for a white audience, both of which were turned into movies.[15] Ultimately, the white audience was a focus in some of the most prominent literature from the South.

The history of the black South has been a topic that has been valued by black writers for generations. W.E.B. Du Bois was a civil rights activist, writer, and scholar, and eventually became one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). His works also consisted of *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* in 1903, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* in 1920, and *The Gift of Black Folk: Negroes in the Making of America* in 1924, all of which focused on the experience of racism in America while simultaneously empowering the black community.[16] Ida B. Wells had been born into slavery, and over her lifetime became an important journalist, working to expose lynching and white supremacy in the South. She also helped to establish the NAACP.[17] She eventually won a

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[13] "100 Years…100 Heroes and Villains," American Film Institution, retrieved on January 5, 2020, from https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-heroes-villians/

[14] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 7-10.

[15] Donald Bogle, 4, 76.

[16] "NAACP History: W.E.B. Du Bois," from NAACP, accessed May 8, 2020 from https://www.naacp.org/naacp-history-w-e-b-dubois/

[17] Alisha Norwood, "Ida B. Wells-Barnett," last modified 2017, accessed May 8, 2020 from www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ida-wells-barnett

posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for her "outstanding and courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching."[18]

Langston Hughes was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance who presented the dichotomy between representation and misrepresentation of black Southerners. He wrote of the struggles and frustrations of life in a racist society, which received criticisms from black critics, and was largely ignored by white critics. Over time, his work reflected an optimism which clashed against the turbulent years that his work was released in.[19] The honest portrayal of life in the South was furthered by Maya Angelou, who contributed many works, most notably *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which gave readers a unique look into her childhood in the South, and the racism and poverty that she encountered. For Angelou, her experiences were difficult, as "if growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razer that threatens the throat."[20] W.E.B Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou represent only a small amount of writers who sought to expose racism in America, and their works represent the ability to change over time.

White authors also sought to contribute to racial justice and equality in America. Harper Lee, John Grisham, and Sue Monk Kidd are among a number of authors who sought to create a way to discuss the racism and morality of the South from the perspective of white Southerners, in the hopes of creating change and understanding in the ways in which white activists can work towards ending racism.[21] Harper Lee and John Grisham have both released sequels to their

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[18] "Ida B. Wells," The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed May 8, 2020 from https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/ida-b-wells
[19] "Langston Hughes," Poetry Foundation, accessed May 8, 2020 from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes
[20] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015), 4. Originally released in 1969.
[21] Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), originally released in 1960; John Grisham, *A Time to Kill,* (New York: Dell Books, 2013), originally released in 1989; Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees,* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), and Kidd, *The Invention of Wings,* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

original works which seek to give a more modern take on racism and learning in the South, while Sue Monk Kidd's work evolved to include black perspectives as well as white.[22] Although not intended to create harm, the perspective of Southern racism from white characters and white authors often fails to truly encompass the issues, as demonstrated by the change in the authors' tactics when writing.

In studying the popular culture from the South, historians must consider the ways in which representation is equitable, realistic, and to whom the objectives will most appeal. What is most interesting is that the works of Harper Lee, John Grisham, and Sue Monk Kidd have all been turned into popular films, which still rank below even more problematic films—*Gone With the Wind* is ranked as the 4th greatest American movie of all time, while *To Kill a Mockingbird* is placed as the 34th.[23] This represents the difficulties in establishing accountability among film, as both convey problematic visions of race. Historians who study film based on the Jim Crow era South, and the repercussions of it, must therefore account for not only the flawed narratives, but also by focusing on the ways in which black-centered and-celebratory films can and should be created.

The lasting influence of Jim Crow lays in many facets of society, but most noticeably in the concept of spectacle. The days of lynch mobs have been replaced by videos, whether it be a recorded attack on a phone or a movie that premiers to wide acclaim. The spectacle that has been created around race, always serving as a mechanism to degrade the black victims and provide a feeling of redemption for the white viewers, has resulted in a system in which people can and do watch films based on events they have never experienced, especially racism in the South. These

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[22] Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman,* (HarperCollins, 2015); John Grisham, *Sycamore Row,* (New York: Dell Books, 2014); see also Sue Monk Kidd, *The Invention of Wings.*

[23] "The 100 Greatest American Movies Of All Time," American Film Institution, accessed May 8, 2020 from https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-movies/.

films serve as the moral guideposts for viewers, but present a complicated narrative, struggling to demonstrate compassion, empathy, and individuality to its viewers.

Chapter 1
A Character of Its Own:
The Influence of the South in Shaping Film

It is important to remember the difference between the white South and the Black south because not only is it very real, but it also contributes to the ways in which racial issues are accounted for. The realities of these different Souths create a complicated narrative, both for its inhabitants but also those who view the region. Film especially struggles to convey the complexities of the existence of multiple perspectives, which creates instances in which the story of interracial interactions is not properly told. Film is a difficult medium in which to convey history because it presents a complicated way in which differing perspectives and experiences are not always considered.

The South is a complex space for researchers. Its history, way of life, and values present a space in which the South as an idea has garnered the interest of historians. Authors such as Houston Baker, Leigh Anne Duck, and Martyn Bone focus on the study of culture of the South, demonstrating the ways in which the South creates its image based on the rest of the world's interpretation of it.[24] Through this study, historians seek to understand the ways in which the South has adapted in its narrative structure, and how it as both a physical and thematic setting influences the creation, distribution, and interpretation of film.

The interpretation of the region as an entity of its own was discussed by Lewis Simpson in the 1980s, in which "the history of the literary mind of the South seeking to become aware of

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[24] Houston Baker, *I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

itself" had slowly began to stop.[25] Moving forward, historians began to acknowledge the complexities and power of it as a physical and thematic setting. Matthew Bernstein, in his discussion of the Southern influence on Hollywood, focuses on the ways in which the "ambivalent mix of pride and shame" meant that some white Southerners began to resent the representation of their history in film.[26] As a medium of study, the South creates an interesting dilemma for historians, as they seek to understand its influence on film, and ultimately, the view of it in the general public.

The representation of the South in film is highly complicated because of the color divide in the region. For some viewers, *Gone with the Wind* is a masterpiece, focusing on the legitimate hardships and resiliency that white Southerners experienced. However, its portrayal of slavery and the newly freed black population was controversial, because it did not adequately address the issue. Hattie McDaniel's Mammy character became one of the many ways in which stereotypes about black Southerners became a mode for film studios to rely on.

The study of stereotypes in film is complicated because of the ways in which race is discussed in history. Hattie McDaniel consented to her character, and created her into a boisterous, strong woman rather than an inferior one, which led her to become the first black actor to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.[27] Yet Mammy was written to be a happy, caring slave with no desire for freedom, nor does she have an ultimate goal other than serving her masters.[28] The stereotypes lasted from the days of slavery, and continued as a way to

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[25] Lewis Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 268.
[26] Matthew H. Bernstein, "A "Professional Southerner" in the Hollywood Studio System: Lamar Trotti at Work 1925-1952," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary,* ed. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 123.
[27] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 72-78.
[28] Donald Bogle, 78.

create entertainment through the perceived inferiority of black Southerners.[29] Historians must therefore seek to remember the autonomy of the black community, while ultimately working towards a discussion over the ways in which race is determined and acted by filmmakers, and remember the importance of true and equal representation.

The South functions as its own dimension when it is created into film because it has compelling storylines and a unique power to alter those narratives as the people see fit. To understand the South, an exploration of its place in film, known as the 'Southern imaginary" must be established, which seeks to explain the importance of the region as a setting.[30] With the understanding of area as its own entity in both the creation and popularization of film established, the ways in which people from the South have established the proper racial dialogue will suggest the barriers of portraying history in film. Finally, the power of themes, motifs, and of whitewashing film will be discussed, contributing to a more fulsome understanding of the lasting consequences of stereotypes on racial progress in popular culture.

Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee have created a way in which to understand the South as a setting through the lens of the world of film. According to Barker and McKee, movie makers have "imagined the "South" both to construct and to unsettle national narratives."[31] The prominence of the South can be defined in its traditions, morals, and ways of being. Because it is an anomaly in America, wherein social and moral codes are much stricter and more contradictory, the setting of the South allows for filmmakers to create their own worlds within an already contradictory setting.

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[29] Donald Bogle, 1.
[30] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, "Introduction: The Southern Imaginary," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary,* 2.
[31] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 2.

This contradictory yet alluring nature has led to the understanding of the term of the "southern imaginary." This is defined by Barker and McKee as the South that "is not contained by the boundaries of geography and genre; it is not an offshoot or subgenre of mainstream American film but is integral to the history and the development of American cinema."[32] For the purpose of understanding why the South is such a prominent setting for important, identity-forming films, the "southern imaginary" can be thought of as "an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, ideas, attitudes, practices, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographic region and time."[33] This is effective because it makes a film setting exciting and nostalgic, while at the same time pardons racist discourse by demonstrating the beauty of the white experience.

The Southern imaginary focuses on constructing an already mythologized past in a way that is marketable to the future. Barker and McKee assert that it "began as a construct predicated on the past."[34] This construction can be surmised as such:

> the fallen plantation, in particular the ruined house at its center, has undeniable served as a national symbol of unrepentant pride and the failure to recognize defeat and as such, it has served as a mythic repository for the shifting specters of our national wrongs, the historical legacy of U.S. slavery, and the persistent blight of poverty. It is a national narrative of limitless opportunity and unrestricted resources that validated the present and looked to a bright future, the cinematic South often served in terms of both place and time (the past) as a repository for the nation's unresolved problems and contradictions.[35]

The complex history as described by Barker and McKee represents basis from which filmmakers, and moviegoers, can delve into to create their own place within the setting, as it represents a space in which myth, opportunity, and optimism exists. This setting, however, is

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[32] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 2.
[33] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 2.
[34] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 4.
[35] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 4-5.

often used in an exploitative way against black southerners, as film represents another aspect in which exclusion from the historical narrative exists, especially through themes, motifs, and stereotypes.

The South is a common setting for film because of its complex nature. The nostalgic history and strict social customs allow for the construction of appealing settings to the audience. The mix of morals, customs, and general way of life allow for a setting in which the viewer is brought into a world to which they may yearn to belong. Barker and McKee further this, as "the movies tell people who they are and where they are: suspended in a South that is as much imagined and represented as it is concrete, as much created and performed as it is organic."[36] It is such a desired setting for films because it is a space where drama and life can be explored so long as it fits within the framework of Southern identity.

Exclusion and segregation worked together in the South to allow for a white monopoly on regional power. Segregation was legal as per the Jim Crow laws, and in theory was meant to allow for black and white citizens to be 'separate but equal.'[37] The exclusion within the area can refer to what Scott Romine discusses as the creation of a regional imaginary, instead of focusing on individuality within it.[38] Exclusion can represent the seeming homogeneity of the southern identity, which is especially prevalent in both the creation and representation of films, as decisions over which films entered the South and how they were shown, were made by powerful white Southerners who failed to expand their biases when approving and accepting the stories of the past.

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[36] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 1.
[37] William H. Chafe et al, introduction to *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South,"* ed. William H. Chafe et al (New York: The New Press, 2001), xxv.
[38] Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 2.

The South has historically been very influential regarding the success and distribution of films in the region because of its history with race. Films both based in and distributed to the region were often met with significant pushback from Southern whites over cinematic portrayals of issues of race, slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. As early as the 1920s, film studios began to consider the disadvantages of the South when it came to portraying black characters.[39] The prominence of opposition to favorable portrayals of black characters meant that studios feared boycotts from white Southerners, especially over sympathetic or realistic interpretations of black identities.[40]

The 1927 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* for example, was highly controversial for the South, and many theatres refused to play the film. Zella Richardson, a film censor in Atlanta, stated that to show the film "would be suicidal!" as "to send this South would either increase sectional feeling where it already exists or create it where it does not." Richardson further articulated her distaste for the film by stating that because the novel "was a precipitating cause of the war" and "we feel that no one person has ever done us the injury nor had been as unfair to us [as Harriet Beecher Stowe]…I am sorry that [the film] was made."[41] Richardson's response to a film in which slavery is criticized and people of color are humanized represents the importance of the South in determining a film's success, as her response demonstrated the unwillingness of white Southerner's to endorse such a film.

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[39] Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 32.
[40] Kathryn H. Fuller, 32.
[41] Zella Alonzo Richardson, "Letter from Mrs. Zella Alonzo Richardson,) n.d., attached to Lamar Trotti to Governor Milliken, memo, May 13, 1927, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* File, MPPDA. From Matthew H. Bernstein, "A "Professional Southerner" in the Hollywood Studio System: Lamar Trotti at Work 1925-1952," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, 127.

Further, Lamar Trotti, a studio executive to whom this correspondence was made, responded that "I think that Mrs. Richardson expresses the view of a great many Southerners….the appearance of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin could not possibly mean anything to me but an evening not to go to the movies."[42] This demonstrates not only the inherent whiteness of catering to certain populations in the South, but also the unwillingness of studio executives to offend them. The inability to accept alternate views of history is inherently racist because the experiences of black Southerners conflicts with white supremacy. As such, refusing to accept black history creates a space in which it is deemed a threat to that of white history and the racism upon which white Southern society has been created would be displayed to the audience. Through this, studio executives prioritized the continuity of white supremacy as a way to perpetuate the propriety of racism and segregation in the South, and America as a whole, by demonstrating how the fear of white retribution outweighed the ability to show alternate perspectives.

The ability to have Hollywood cater to its regional and racial needs has been termed "the Myth of the Southern Box Office," which "dictated that films must not offend the white South by depicting interracial or African American scenarios."[43] This has been described by Fred Hobson as "a regional inferiority complex" combined with "a perverse and defiant pride in the southerner, a sense of distinction of superiority, stemming *from* this inferior status. The southerner, that is to say, wears his heritage of failure and defeat as his badge of honor."[44] It is a

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[42] Lamar Trotti, "Lamar Trotti to Governor Milliken, memo," May 13, 1927, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* File, MPPDA. From Matthew H. Bernstein, 127.

[43] Thomas Cripps, *The Myth of the Southern Box Office: A Factor in Racial Stereotyping in American Movies, 1920-1940,* quoted in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, 123.

[44] Fred Hobson, *Tell about the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 9-12, quoted in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, 123.

region in which privilege over history is valued and protected, meaning that oftentimes any attempt to demonstrate the inequity is discouraged.

The overall power of the South as both a setting and an economic priority to films is represented in some of the biggest films of all time. Both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* were two of the highest-grossing films of all time and were undertakings unlike film had ever done before, and represented the development in Hollywood into catering towards the South.[45] Focusing on gallantry, romance, and the privileged points of the region's history, these films created a longing in their audiences for something that could never be again. They also avoided, and sought to rewrite, the issues of slavery that emerged from the Civil War.[46] The grandeur that accompanied visions of the Antebellum South meant that Hollywood discovered the potential to create cinematic masterpieces.[47] Once Hollywood realized it could create these masterpieces based on emotion, interpretations continued to be reflected on the expectations of powerful white Southerners rather than the black community. The racial representation followed this trend, and have been reflected in films that seek to tell stories through the lens of the white South. Films reflected the value of the region in mainstream Hollywood, as well as the ability of the South to determine which narratives would be followed in film.

Issues of racial representation and the South are also prominent in filmmaking. Langston Hughes wrote to the "Dear Southern White Folks" that "if it were not for you, I, Langston Hughes, might have a nice Hollywood job…but you won't let Hollywood do anything decent with Negroes in pictures, so Hollywood won't hire Negro writers—not even to write about

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[45] Donald Bogle, 7; Godfrey Cheshire, ""Personal in My Memory": The South in Popular Film," *Southern Cultures 17,* no.3 (Fall 2011):29, accessed May 7, 2020 from https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/906065200?accountid=12063.

[46] Godfrey Cheshire, 29.

[47] Donald Bogle, 7; Godfrey Cheshire, 29.

Negroes."[48] Hughes stated that the reason for this exclusion of black presence in film was because Hollywood was afraid that they "won't write the kind of scripts you like down South."[49] The exclusion of black voices from film demonstrate a desire by the powerful inhabitants to continue along its trajectory of a society based on exclusion.

Characters of color are often overlooked because they do not represent the power for change that popular culture expects. A flaw in the way the South is viewed in film is that it is often shown through the perspective of white narrators and ignores the lives and experiences of black Southerners. In creating a strong role model, studio executives model their white, usually male hero as "a representative figure of "history"" which serves to directly "address…the white male audience, who constitute a significant power base within contemporary Western capitalism."[50] Films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Green Mile* are all told through the experience of white characters in the South, with black characters shown as only supportive of the white experience. Because they seek to appeal to the powerful members of the audience, the general view of the South has taken a white perspective and the true impact is ignored because it does not encourage that audience to change for the better.[51] Instead, it placates the audience so as to continue in their power structures, allowing them to believe that the present cannot be as bad as the past.

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[48] Langston Hughes, "Letter to the South (July 10, 1943)," in *The Age of Jim Crow: A Norton Casebook in History,* ed. Jane Dailey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009), 208. Originally in *Langston Hughes and the* Chicago Defender: *Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942-62,* ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Urbana, 1995), 13-14.
[49] Langston Hughes, "Letter to the South (July 10, 1943)," in *The Age of Jim Crow*, 208.
[50] Vincent M. Gaine, "Last (White) Man Standing: The Philosophy of Racial Responsibility in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Last Samurai,"* in *Bringing History to Life Through Film: The Art of Cinematic Storytelling,* ed. Kathryn Anne Morey (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 57.
[51] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* directed by Robert Mulligan (1962; Universal Studios Canada, 2005), video streaming from Amazon Prime Video; *The Green Mile,* directed by Frank Darabont (1999; Warner Bros Pictures, 2013), video streaming from University of Lethbridge Catalogue.

Film uses visuals and metaphors to teach its audience about the history being shown on the screen, and how the audience should interpret it. Visual effects, color themes, and music are used to convey to the viewer the less tangible, although arguably more intrinsic, aspects of history that the written word cannot. Themes and motifs carry a much higher weight to history because it provides a dramatic, perhaps even fetishized, view of a scene, one which appeals to the more interpretive aspects of the audience. The 2017 Netflix film *Mudbound* uses "its central setting-a waterlogged and mud-soaked farm, which struggles to yield any crops" as a "metaphor for the sinking hopelessness of racial harmony in the U.S."[52] As stated before, film represents a way for history to be accessible to all, and so visual metaphors provide a powerful way to reach audiences, whether through acknowledging racism, or continuing it.

Examples of themes and motifs exist particularly in films regarding the Jim Crow era South. The lynching scene in *Mudbound*, for example, showed even more despair and terror due to the heavy rain and perceived disillusion of the main characters—the thunderstorm served to literally and figuratively wash away the relative innocence of Jamie and Ronsel as they are faced with the racist structure of their lives.[53] Films take this liberty to add dramatic effect as a way to enhance the experience of the characters, which in turn applies more heavily to the audience.

Stereotypes are central to the American film identity because they predetermine a person's value in society. Bill Brown states that "the narratability of the US depends on excluding particular identities that nonetheless remain perpetually present."[54] Southern society existed on the oppression of black citizens, in which their very beings were meant to contrast the

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[52] Anthony Kaufman, "'Mudbound': Sundance Review," *Screen International London,* (Jan 22, 2017): 1, Performing Arts Periodicals Database, accessed May 5, 2020 from https://search.proquest.com/docview/1912486253?accountid=12063

[53] *Mudbound,* directed by Dee Rees (2017; Elevated Films Joule Films, distributed by Netflix), viewed online through Netflix. 1:51:50-1:57:19.

[54] Bill Brown, "Identity Culture," *American Literary History 10,* no. 1 (Spring, 1998), 169.

superiority of the white lawmakers. Therefore, the very consideration of the American identity is tied to this ideology, as it brings into question the concept of culture; and through culture, Brown states that "the question of what constituted an American can be answered…because the question of what constituted culture…is the expression of race."[55] The practice of racism[56] followed the adaptation of Hollywood to the social changes in the South during the twentieth century; however, films were still "marshaling memory for their own competing visions of the future."[57]

Stereotypes of black characters in film mirror the control mechanisms implicit in American society. Such values as gender, purity, and power are intrinsic to racism because they indicate an imbalance in the mores which dictate society. They have caused black Americans to become "mired down in a simplistic debate" over good and bad racial stereotypes.[58] Through film, racist perceptions of black Southerners, and Americans as a whole, are preserved as a way to continue the existing white supremacy upon which American society has been created. This is done through understanding the racism in stereotyping, understanding which ones are commonly used in film, their effect on the black community, and how portrayals of white people in film contribute to further racism in power structures.

Stereotypes are prominent in film because they are easy ways to create a setting which the audience can immediately understand and relate to. The foundational understanding of black Southerners has, as demonstrated by Donald Bogle, been directed towards the Mammy, the Tom, the Buck, the Coon, and the Jezebel.[59] Because of these interpretations, viewers have become so

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[55] Bill Brown, 173.
[56] Bill Brown, 166.
[57] Robert Jackson, "A Southern Sublimation: Lynching Film and the Reconstruction of American Memory," *Southern Literary Journal* 40, issue 2 (Spring 2008): 117-118, accessed May 2, 2020, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/216427748?accountid=12063&pq-origsite=summon
[58] Mia Mask, Introduction to *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies,* ed. Mia Mask (New York: Routledge, 2012) 5.
[59] Donald Bogle, 1-14, 46.

accustomed to the same images of black citizens, that when new imagery is found, it often goes unused because it goes against the theme.[60] They are also often repeat patterns.[61] Stereotypes are then used as a way to guarantee the success of the film without offending predetermined cultural ideologies, because they work with classic, well-known and accepted tropes.

Further, stereotypes in film are used in a more intrinsic way and can often be shown without drawing attention to the character or the concept. Unlike a critical historical study, film creates an implicit direction in which the audience should view it, which is created through appearance, behavior, and dialogues. These repeat patterns of showing people and events in symbolic and thematic ways means that the audience is often not encouraged to evaluate what they have witnessed, or to understand the biases behind the messages.[62] These symbolic and intrinsic stereotypes create a situation in which the viewer is ingrained with those concepts, without being outwardly told to think that way. Such situations allow for the characters to exist without encouraging the audience to question their actions, or the other perspectives of the story.

Willem Hesling argues that stereotypes are difficult to avoid in films. According to Hesling, "even when filmmakers use their camera in the most delicate and painstaking way it is almost impossible to avoid stereotyping" and that they cannot guarantee that "all historical details are dealt with correctly."[63] Further, certain plot devices that have become common, particularly for the South—the Southern Belle, or the handsome lawyer—have become welcome sights, and have become so cherished and established in the realm of film that any new

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[60] Willem Hesling, "The Past as a Story: the Narrative Structure of Historical Films," *European Journal of Cultural Studies 4,* no. 2 (2001): 199.
[61] Willem Hesling, 199.
[62] Scott Alan Metzger, "Maximizing the Educational Power of History Movies in the Classroom," *The Social Studies 101,* iss. 3 (2010), 129.
[63] Willem Hesling, 196.

perspective will neither be accepted, nor change the direction of the stereotype.[64] As such, filmmakers are unlikely to attempt to change the direction of an established expectation of the South, for fear of both rejection and the futility of the task.

Film creators contribute to the construction of myth. History cannot be answered and is too complex to be solved. They need to provide some form of an ending, something that ties up any questions or puts down any doubts that the audience may have had. They need to be satisfied in their hero's actions, and therefore filmmakers need to provide a convincing narrative without straying from what the audience is comfortable with.[65] The conclusion of a storyline, perhaps one that is multifaceted and realistically inconclusive, creates an almost mythological perspective of that ending, as it does not—cannot—exist. Myth allow for people to be inspired by what they see, which contributes to the furthering of white supremacy. If the audience never sees the alternate view of Southern race relations, where the white person is not actually the hero, they will not understand it that way.

Stereotypes are utilized as a control mechanism over the film's success. While creating a dramatic interpretation of the past, films have a powerful influence over the viewers "historical consciousness" in that they can shape what people believe they know about the past.[66] Historical cinema is "the result of selection and interpretation," which causes it to show the past in a selective way.[67] As Willem Hesling explains, this is because "the field of American studies…preoccupies itself with the question of just who Americans were and are. Our America is an identity culture definable not by *an* identity but by the fixation *on* identity."[68] This

[64] Willem Hesling, 197.
[65] Scott Alan Metzger, 128.
[66] Willem Hesling, 190.
[67] Willem Hesling, 197.
[68] Willem Hesling, 165.

demonstrates the lack of overall desire to change, as those who continue the stereotype may gain financial success, but are contributing to the further marginalization of black Southerners. This control is key to the concept of white supremacy in the South, in the fact that filmmakers have control over the progress of white supremacy.

Stereotypes in films about the South exist to bring down the black community while upholding the supremacy of the white power structure. Misrepresentations of race take control of the black body, infiltrating the minds of both the characters and the viewers. Even when seemingly going against the established stereotype, movies such as *A Time to Kill* represent the inability for audiences to see racism for themselves, and seek to invert it so that they can better understand it.[69] The film industry decides what is created, and what is forgotten or overlooked; most often, this is the agency of black Southerners.

Cinematic portrayals of stereotypes represent the symbolic impact of racism on the black body. George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes: the Continuing Significance of Race in America* states the existence of the impact of the black body:

> the history of the Black body in North America is fundamentally linked to the history of whiteness, primarily as whiteness is expressed in the form of fear, sadism, hatred, brutality, terror, avoidance, desire, denial, solipsism, madness, policing, politics, and the production and projection of white fantasies. From the perspective of whiteness, the Black body *is* criminality itself. It *is* the monstrous; it is that which is to be feared and yet desired, sought out in forbidden white sexual adventures and fantasies; it is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality.[70]

Ideology is created through the usage of certain actors. In many historical movies that are not based on a concrete individual, the character may represent a symbolic or mixed ideal, blending together overall qualities deemed acceptable for the plot.[71] The influence that film has on the ways that the audience interprets these qualities is meant to bring meaning and

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[69] Donald Bogle, 377.
[70] George Yancy, introduction to *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), xxx.
[71] Willem Hesling, 195.

understanding to the event being depicted. Through this, films can further alter the audience's perception of the characters based on the actors cast to play the role. This is reflected in Hesling, who states that the industry relies on the logic in which the greatness of the person is best demonstrated through the status of the actor, and that "an almost unavoidable implication of this logic is that the image of the stars will come to dominate that of the historical characters."[72] For example, white-centered films which focus on racial tensions cast actors with established commercial success. They are relatively handsome and generally applauded as important casting choices capable of giving the performance needed to convince others against their racist views.[73] Casting a less-handsome up-and-comer, for example, would not indicate to the audience the character's strength, charisma, or integrity; nor would it indicate the importance of the film, if anyone less than a star were to perform the solemn role of a white savior.

The presence of interracial experiences in film allows for intrinsic racism to go unchecked. When set specifically in the Jim Crow era South, white and black characters are shown together in ways that while making the physical and political barriers obvious, often underscores the intrinsic paternalism in the white character while dealing with their black counterpart. Even in movies where the white character is seemingly "good" they often portray behavior that is demeaning or parasitic, yet not directly racist. This is demonstrated through Turner, who states that it creates a mistruth, that "to suggest that bad people were racist implies that good people were not."[74] Through this, portrayals of racism are diluted so that while they are not blatantly racist, facets of racism remain, although shown to be progressive.

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[72] Willem Hesling, 194.
[73] Donald Bogle, 377.
[74] Patricia A. Turner, "Dangerous White Stereotypes," in *The New York Times* A23, (August 28, 2011), quoted in Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass 6*, no. 9 (Jan 9, 2012): 764, accessed May 2, 2020 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00486.x.

An outcome of stereotypes in film is that characters are forgiven for their actions so long as there is someone else who is shown as worse. Through the dichotomy between "not that bad" and "bad" white characters in movies about race, harmful stereotypes are reflected on the black bodies and minds which are being "saved" by their white counterpart. The cinematic continuation of the plot device of the reliance on white power is best described, at length, by Shawan M. Worsley in "Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture." In it, Worsley states that

> one cannot ignore the residuals of slavery manifest in entrenched demeaning stereotypes. Stereotypes inherited from slavery raise a fear and loathing of blackness, at the same time that they present belittled and disparaged black subjects. They create restrictive boundaries that limit and narrow the possibilities for black subjectivity, which has an incredibly damaging effect on society's image and treatment of black people. Stereotypes are the ghosts of slavery that haunt African Americans.[75]

Worsley demonstrates through this assertion the extent of the harm created by stereotypes and the fact that they began with slavery. As a result, showing black bodies in such roles only continues the normalization of racial mistruths. The existence of black and white alliances to truly fight systemic and societal racism is commendable, yet these narratives do not tell that story, rather they show that black people cannot seek advancement in the South without the moral superiority of whites, and that white people can redeem themselves for generations of abuse by taking over and exploiting black lives.

Further, movie tropes in which white characters are shown also create a situation in which moral superiority of white Southerners continues. White savior films see the ultimate racist villain as the hillbilly, redneck, or otherwise poor whites either committing the crime, or accusing the black character of the crime. For example, in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the night

[75] Shawan M. Worsely, *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 5.

before the trial, Atticus saves Tom Robinson from being lynched by a group of poor farmers.[76] However, lynching represented a return so social normalcy and hierarchy for white Southerners, and therefore, it was largely a middle class event.[77] Lynching was often meant by the middle classes to validate "their own claims to respectability and social authority that placed them on par" with elites.[78] Violence against black individuals was not limited to poor whites, yet film portrays this as the norm. Through doing so, the blame of the Jim Crow era is shifted to the poor, ignorant white trash, rather than the wealthy, and seemingly better, middle and upper classes. This not only enables racism but is a fundamental aspect of the white savior complex in film: that the wealthy and educated are not the ultimate villains.

The South constitutes a powerful entity in the creation of history into film, as it consists of settings, themes, and stereotypes. In recognizing the prominent role the region plays in contributing dialogue around racial justice in America, it attempts to provide an answer of sorts, one in which an honest attempt at reconciliation is impeded by the desire for redemption for its actions; white viewers do not want to be blamed for their privilege, they want to be a solution. Through this, film risks conveying history through stereotypes, controlling the narrative with catering to the audiences' expectations, and can alter the true purpose of the film itself: to help the viewers broaden their minds when considering racism and intolerance.

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[76] Rachel Watson, "The View From the Porch: Race and the Limits of Empathy in the Film To Kill a Mockingbird," *The Mississippi Quarterly 63,* no. 3 (2010): 423, accessed May 5, 2020 from https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/882302185?accountid=12063

[77] Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940, (*New Directions in Southern Studies, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 88, accessed May 4, 2020, from http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/logins.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=354831&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[78] Amy Louise Wood, 88.

Chapter 2
Performing Memory:
Stereotypes and Misrepresentation of Black Southerners in Film

Films about racism in the South create complicated representations of history to the general audience. As a medium, film allows its audience to witness and learn about situations they have not experienced before. The complex racial issues of the South present an important facet in popular culture, as they can be introduced and recreated in a way that is compelling and inspiring to those who view them. It also represents a component of history that is easily understood and attainable, that welcomes viewers into participating regardless of their academic background. However, the issue of race in the South is much greater than can be contained in film, and this creates many flaws in its representation. Such flaws include the exclusion of black voices in film and the struggle to recognize the importance of reconciliation through the preservation of emotion in historical memory.

The study of memory and emotion in the history of the Jim Crow South seeks to represent the complicated narratives presented, while also striving to create empathy and understanding in those who learn it. Works from Jonathan Scott Holloway, Leon Litwack, the *Behind the Veil* project, and the *Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America* collection work to distribute the stories of black Southerners in the South as a means to both acknowledge their experiences and create an understanding in those who were not affected.[79] The *Behind the Veil* project was completed between 1993 and 1995, and worked to

[79] Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America Since 1940*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Leon F. Litwack *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow,* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., 1998);

"preserve the living memory of African American life" during the Jim Crow era.[80] *Behind the Veil* highlighted the strength and resiliency of the community while exploring the ways in which the Jim Crow laws affected the lives of black Southerners. Works such as *Without Sanctuary* brought the trauma of lynching to the public eye by demonstrating clear, unedited pictures of the victims and their perpetrators, giving clarity to the otherwise uncomfortable historical subject.[81] The introduction of the black perspective into the history of the South represented the desire for historians to make their audience question their existing knowledge on the topic.

Film is a powerful mechanism for conveying the difficult topics of racism. Robert Rosenstone, Roslyn Satchel, and Robert Toplin recognize the power that film has on an audience, especially given the ways in which film creates subjects and fits them into the conventions of both the society and the audience.[82] Toplin and Scott Alan Metzger similarly understand that, despite the need for accuracy, film exists as a mechanism separate from written history, and can take more of an artistic license regarding their portrayals; however, this is complicated by the fact that this artistic license can be the difference between millions of people understanding the real past, or giving them a filtered, unrealistic version.[83]

Film has a powerful ability to control the way that an audience interprets the past, and so historians often find themselves discussing the flaws of cinematic history because of complicated narratives. How should history be learned through film? How can discussions around film be facilitated? These are topics which Rosenstone and Metzger discuss, and are reinforced by the

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[80] "About Behind the Veil," Duke University Libraries Digital Collections, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://documentarystudies.duke.edu//

[81] "Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America," Without Sanctuary, accessed May 7, 2020 from https://withoutsanctuary.org/

[82] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

[83] Robert B. Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 225; Scott Alan Metzger, "Maximizing the Educational Power of History Movies in the Classroom," *The Social Studies 101,* iss. 3 (2010), 128.

existence of oral records, as it reflects the inconsistencies between the actual lived experiences of black Southerners and how they are portrayed. Film, emotion, and memory represent the need for historians to reflect upon the difficulty of bringing these topics to the public, and the ways in which academics can broaden the scope of their studies.

History on film also embodies a more accessible way for historians to demonstrate the intrinsic ways in which racism has lasted in the lives of viewers. Rosenstone reflects this by asserting that it is the job of historians to discuss the accuracy of the films and to mediate the subsequent impact on the audience, whether it is good or bad.[84] Historians can therefore work alongside cinema to guide it in a way that is positive, while also recognizing that history on film is subject to a flawed interpretation by the audience. Historians of cinema, as well as the memory it creates can therefore focus on what Donald Bogle concedes as the powerful ability of film, especially the discussion of race, as an embodiment of the "black experience," making it appear concrete and unquestionable, whether they were accurate or not.[85] As such, historians can be active participants of analyzing the integrity of a performance, while also maintaining that representation is complicated because of its lasting emotional evocativeness.

Film uses emotion to transition between history and memory. The preservation of the complex realm of human history into film is constantly changing because film is shaped by when it was created, who it was created for, and by whom it was created. Memory is crucial to understanding racism in the South, because it is "the lasting consequence of an experience…memory is the consequence of *learning* from an experience," and therefore is an

[84] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film,* 21.
[85] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 13.

important way to measure the progress of inclusion and diversity as a value of the public.[86] The South, as both a region and as a plot setting, presents a complicated, often dangerous narrative, and ultimately, a place in which the problems of racism cannot be easily answered. Because of this, the creation and preservation of memories of the South play a key role in creating progress and discovering where issues continue to exist.

Through the preservation of an emotional aspect of history, filmmakers attempt to instill in their viewers a sense of intentionality in learning the history presented. However, this purpose can become flawed when the voices of the survivors, in particularly the black community in the South, are not properly considered when theorizing change. To demonstrate this issue, an understanding of the historical beginnings of film as a social movement must be discussed, as it presents the conflicting relationship between film and black voices. Memories, whether created firsthand or through general knowledge, shape thoughts and actions of a person, and are therefore imperative to deconstructing the violence and exclusion that currently exists in society.[87] Because of this, the implications and power of popular culture demonstrate the ways in which racism can be counteracted, while the ways in which academic work and the history of emotion demonstrate the complexities of preserving the genuine experience of the Jim Crow Era. Further, the ways in which film blends history and memory is reflected in the oral histories of those who lived through Jim Crow, as they serve to challenge popular conceptions of the time.

Historical memory is constructed with inherent biases. Archives function as "repositories of a constructed truth," as they are mediated by those in charge, and therefore subject to government, familial, and legal biases.[88] Intrinsic racism in the South has contributed to this, as

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[86] James L. McGaugh, *Memory and Emotion: the Making of Lasting Memories* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2003), 3.
[87] James L. McGaugh, 3.
[88] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 10.

the politics of white supremacy dictated that the subordination of black Southerners continue within the creation of historical memory; as such, the remembrance of events, and the creation and upholding of meaning, became a "terrain of cultural and social struggle.[89] Emotion and memory create a conflict in facts, which ultimately renders them a difficult barrier to constructing a less interpretive truth.[90] For the continuity of the Jim Crow era especially, biases have created an instance in which black voices are subordinated in favor of preserving the societal value of white superiority.

Racial violence was a common theme in early film. From the very early years of motion pictures as a method of entertainment, films including lynchings and hangings were created to appeal to the prevailing social opinion of the race issues at the time. Between 1897 and 1905, white northern producers created these violent films to appeal to the "morbid thrills" of racism in the South.[91] From the perspective of white Southern moviegoers, these films served to "publicly manifest their notions of white supremacy," seemingly solidifying their unity as a racial superior.[92] The intent of these films was to mimic the feelings of righteousness in seeking justice against a black person who went against the norms of society, whether by committing a crime, or even by speaking out of turn.[93] From its very beginning, a facet of film represented racial superiority and intervention, serving to encourage its white viewers' actions, and to discourage the presence of black audiences. Although not all films in this period were lynch films, they were

[89] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 58.
[90] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 10.
[91] Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940, (*New Directions in Southern Studies, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 115. Accessed May 4, 2020, from http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/logins.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=354831&site=ehost-live&scope=site
[92] Amy Louise Wood, 116.
[93] Amy Louise Wood, 116.

an important contribution to the Southern views of cinema, in that ultimately, the white audience should be able to identify with the hero of the film, regardless of the actions onscreen.

The segregation of film as a medium is also reflected in the physical act of attending movies, and the inherent whiteness of film as an ideology. During the silent film era, the South had fewer movie theaters, and therefore less attendance and influence on the distribution practices of film. Southerners in rural areas had less money to spend on films, and less access to them. Because of this, those isolated areas often saw older, lower-quality productions.[94] Access to movies began to change in the 1940s and 1950s, when urbanization and the introduction of air conditioning became more prominent in the South.[95] Despite their shared experiences with poverty and accessibility, Southern moviegoers were further divided by racial segregation.

The strict segregation of the South prevented many films from entering the South, as film distributors could not afford to show them. This was based on the way that companies calculated a town's population as they would count regardless of skin color when assessing the earning potential of a film; however, most Southern movie houses did not have room for segregated seating, and so prohibited black Southerners from entering at all. As a result, the companies could not make the revenue needed to provide many new and high-quality films in the South.[96] The beginnings of film is demonstrative of its potential to become a space in which racial tensions could be made more public.

Film presented an interesting dichotomy between exclusion and inclusion in the South. By 1919, film companies pushed for movie houses to build separate seating and entrances for

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[94] Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture,* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, 1996) 30-31.
[95] Kathryn H. Fuller, 30-31.
[96] Kathryn H. Fuller, 31-32.

black viewers, so they could generate more revenue.[97] 'Colored' theaters were limited in the South, with 461 black theaters across the nation making up only two percent of the country's movie house numbers as of 1920.[98] While the spaces allowed for more access for black Southerners to watch movies, the increased accessibility was another way in which they were humiliated by racism.[99] Movies represented a freedom within the white society, to an extent. The creation of black movie theaters allowed for an expansion of leisure time for those that could access and afford to attend silent films. Further, William H. Jones, a Howard University sociologist, recognized in 1927 that the social activity of attending the movies meant that black Southerners could participate in the "white-controlled commercial amusement" that was represented by films.[100]

Author Mia Mask, in the introduction to *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies,* equates the disconnect between black attendance at films and exclusion of black characters in those films as "analogous to a form of taxation without representation."[101] Further, Mask states that "the discrepancy has widespread ramifications for the academic discourse on representation in popular culture." [102] The absence of accurate black history in film is especially damaging to the audience, as black viewers are left without their stories told, while white viewers, whether they realize it or not, are placated in their existing views.

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[97] Kathryn H. Fuller, 32.
[98] Kathryn H. Fuller, 33.
[99] Kathryn H. Fuller, 32.
[100] Kathryn H. Fuller, 33.
[101] Mia Mask, introduction to *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.
[102] Mia Mask, 5.

The importance of film in conveying the history of the Jim Crow era is reflected in understanding the theory and accessibility of film as a medium. History in film is one of the many ways in which memory can be preserved, as memories create an adaptive value in those who experience them, reminding them to act differently or with empathy when they encounter a situation, even if they only have experienced it through film.[103] This is created through recognizing how history is constructed, the creation of empathy in historical contexts, and in realizing how film can truly impact people's perceptions. From this, an understanding of the incomplete nature of black history, and the transmission of cultural knowledge will serve to further the importance of the impact of exclusion on black communities, the issue of ignoring their truths, and the benefits of empowering their voices while seeking to confront white supremacy.

Remembering and preserving black history through film is a way to counteract the racism and white supremacy of America as a whole. History often caters to the outcomes and desires of the winners, and therefore studying the violence, exclusion, and oppression of black Southerners is an act of defiance against white supremacy. The Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1943 understood that advocacy for better representation of black characters was important to combatting racism and increasing knowledge "since the moving picture is one of the most potent educational agencies."[104] Mary J. Blige, one of the stars of Netflix's *Mudbound,* found herself reconnecting with her family history when playing a poor Mississippi tenant farmer.[105] The representation of her family history was an empowering moment for Blige, one which is

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[103] James L. McGaugh, 8.
[104] Commission on Interracial Cooperation, "Negroes and Motion Pictures (December 15, 1943)," from *The Age of Jim Crow,* ed. Jane Dailey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 204-205.
[105] Shannon L. Bowen, "'Mudbound' Star Mary J. Blige on Why the Film's Most "Horrifying" Scene Is Her Favorite," *The Hollywood Reporter* (February 22, 2018), 2.

relatively absent from popular culture. The film could therefore be a learning opportunity for white Americans, because "in the absence of lived experience, films are often understood as "authentic" reflections of "real life."[106] Proper representation in films about race in the South is therefore imperative not only to creating equality in film, but also to deconstructing the existing harmful interpretations of racism as an issue that has been solved by civil rights.

Popular culture is determined by those with the power and privilege to create it. For example, in current day Hollywood, panels of people get together to decide which movies are made, and which are not—directors, investors, and production companies.[107] They make the decision, based on their agendas or beliefs, on what constitutes a movie worth making, and how to do it. In making their decisions, they must take into account the way that meaning is constructed through language and culture, as these are important in attracting specific viewers.[108] Through this, Satchel determines that audiences are targeted through both the study of demographics and psychographics to learn how to communicate effectively. This is meant to increase profits, because large audiences increase profits."[109] The result of the need to make profit is that filmmakers and studio executives rely on "tailoring stories, settings, characters, casting, and dialogue for the greatest appeal."[110] However, this need to dictate their stories based on profit margin is flawed, as it plays into the greater sociopolitical issues that have been present in American society for hundreds of years.

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[106] Matthew W. Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films," *Social Problems 56,* no.3 (August 2009): 547, accessed May 4, 2020 DOI: 10.1525/sp.2009.56.3.543.
[107] Roslyn M. Satchel, *What Movies Teach About Race: Exceptionalism, Erasure, and Entitlement,* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), 10.
[108] Roslyn M. Satchel, 28.
[109] Roslyn M. Satchel, 27-28.
[110] Roslyn M. Satchel, 28.

As well as giving an emotional experience to history, films also exist to shape how people view and remember the history and its lasting consequences. Roslyn M. Satchel states that "media not only tells the public what to think about, but also shapes how the public should think about an issue" and that "priming and framing are two fundamental concepts in second-level agenda setting that also influence the activation of racial stereotypes."[111] As a result, media is meant to create a narrative that serves to persuade its audience to think the way its creators want. This is most usually meant to sway the audience towards the status-quo, or what mainstream society wants and desires.[112] Through this, media has both an agenda to push while not disrupting prescribed social mores. In America, where blatant racism has faded to a more minimal, exclusionary method, racialized groups are either underrepresented or misrepresented, falling in line with the general majority preference for the physical and symbolic ways that whiteness equates to superiority.

The suppression of black voices and experiences towards the societal value of racism and segregation of the South has been a prominent factor in film. Langston Hughes, in his 1943 "Letter to the South," wrote that when creating scripts about normal black lives, he was often denied, with the reasoning that "well, you see, our programs are heard down South, and the South might not like this."[113] This is further complemented by John Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture,* as unequal power structures allow for a contradictory way in which people make sense of their "social differences."[114] Because of the unequal power dynamics in the South, popular culture was a way to interpret how society functioned, although only in the way that was approved.

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[111] Roslyn M. Satchel, 25.
[112] Roslyn M. Satchel, 4-6.
[113] Langston Hughes, "Letter to the South," in *The Age of Jim Crow,* 209.
[114] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (USA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 5.

Depictions of the past in film is an important factor in the transmission of cultural knowledge, as it presents history for the public to view, interpret, and empathize with the characters. As demonstrated by Scott Metzger, when teaching history to students, their reactions to the past works to "engage students in historical thinking about significance, long-term causation, and interpretation of events and meaning."[115] As such, it is a way for those who are not interested in history to learn, have their opinions challenged, and at best, to better recognize their own biases. Popular film is an important learning device because it allows the viewer to witness the subject in a complex, emotional way.

The experiences of black Southerners need to be included in popular culture to truly understand the racism of the time and place. For the *Behind the Veil* interviews, the contributors felt that their "deep personal knowledge of American race relations at their worst" has "resulted in a sense of obligation to pass on an understanding of Jim Crow's bitter truths to subsequent generations."[116] Oral tradition is especially important to community history, serving as a cultural experience as well as a method to retain their stories. Primary evidence from those who experienced the events provides a more fulsome understanding, and especially when the subordinated voices are included. Racism is conveyed by those who have superiority, and therefore using the real stories of those who were affected by the assumed "superiors" allows for history to not only be more inclusive, but to be truthful.

Not including the true perspectives of black Southerners in film perpetuates a false sense of history. When showing films in schools, educational researchers have found that students interpret every aspect of the film as the whole truth, without considering the possibility of

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[115] Scott Alan Metzger, 133.

[116] William H. Chafe, et al, "Bitter Truths," in *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South,* ed. William H. Chafe et al. (New York: The New Press, 2001), 3.

missing narratives or falsified accounts. Because of this, students are unaware of what is fictional and what is fact in the film, and "may draw naïve conclusions about how movies depict racial groups."[117] Anne Poitier's life story involved severe poverty, hunger, and violence against black Southerners, and when she gave her interview in 1994, she said to her interviewer that "it sound funny to you because you never have been subject to nothing like this, but it's what I want to tell you: how horrible it is when everything you do, the [white] man's got to approve it."[118] When people are given a biased piece of history, they may accept it as fact or be resistant to other truths, much like Ann Poitier feared in her interview. Further, creating a resistance to changing historical perspective harms the lived experiences of those who suffered and survived the Jim Crow era.

History on film is stronger when it includes emotion. Much like popular culture, film presents a human aspect to the analysis of complicated events. Historians and academics are important to the preservation of these experiences, such as through the *Behind the Veil* project which recorded the experiences of black Southerners during the Jim Crow Era. Popular culture distributes the work of historians, making it accessible to anyone. Popular film is an important learning device because it allows the viewer to witness the subject in a complex, emotional way. The subject of history does not often appeal to non-historians because of its more rigid structure. As stated by Jonathan Holloway, author of *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America Since 1940*, "history may do violence to memory" and in order to convey the emotion in memory, historians can "embrace a faulty memory as a kind of reality."[119] Film shows events in

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[117] Scott Alan Metzger, 128.
[118] Ann S. Pointer, "Interview with Ann S. Pointer," (btvct10098) interviewed by Paul Oritz, Tuskegee, Alabama, July 22, 1994, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 33, 101, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvct10098.pdf
[119] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 9.

such a way that it brings the viewer to feel personally involved, which clarifies and complements the underlying historical facts.

The concept of embracing a faulty memory is reflected in Scott Metzger's "Maximizing the Education Power of History Movies in the Classroom." Metzger stresses the importance of creating an honest symbolism, as films create a visual culture that presents viewers with a new medium to understand the past.[120] This was inspired by Robert Rosenstone's view that history movies do not "provide literal truths…but symbolic or metaphorical truths."[121] Through this, films are able to create a feeling within the viewer that they are experiencing a unique, relatable scene. Creating feelings for or against something such as a character or a film plot is a crucial step in acknowledging social injustices, and through feeling, reemphasizes the need to evaluate the way the situation reflects current social injustices.

Preserving memory in a lasting medium such as film is important in completing and recognizing the lost history of racism from the survivor's perspective. Physical ties to the violence have either been lost or were unaccounted for. Jane Dailey asserted that the power of the Jim Crow laws came from the "disempowerment" of black Southerners.[122] Ignoring history, lineage, and injustices against black Southerners was a way this was achieved. The societal standards of the Jim Crow era were that black history was omitted, as it was considered irrelevant and a way to continue the subordination of black Southerners.

The suppression of black experiences in film represents another facet of remembrance and storytelling that has often been prevented from taking precedence in popular remembrance

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[120] Scott Alan Metzger, 128.

[121] Robert A. Rosenstone, "Inventing Historical Truth on the Silver Screen," *Cineaste 29,* no. 2 (2004): 33, accessed May 5, 2020 from https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/apps/doc/A114925647/CPI?u=leth89164&sid=CPI&xid=b9c5f7b1

[122] Jane Dailey, introduction to *The Age of Jim Crow: A Norton Casebook in History xv,* ed. Jane Dailey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009), xv.

of the time. This facet is the support of the black community as a whole. During Anne Poitier's childhood, "when they didn't have nothing, there was a lot of love existed."[123] The general perception of the South during the 1900s-1960s focuses on the interactions between white and black Southerners; while this is a highly contentious historical aspect to study, it is no more important than understanding, respecting, and acknowledging the community that black Southerners created among themselves, which served as the basis for their wellbeing and survival during this time.

The depiction of black-white relationships in film provides a distorted view of history, as the relationships were not often positive. Walter M. Cavers discussed how "your best friend in the white race would come for you at night…you couldn't trust them. Then night come and they come for you and give you a good thrashing."[124] Similarly, Tolbert Chism began learning about black history in secret, because to discuss it in front of white people "would cause some kind of disturbance of misunderstanding."[125] The existence of race as an essential ideology was further reflected in popular films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird.*[126] These films demonstrated that even tolerant white Southerners were not necessarily willing to deconstruct the racial barriers between them and their counterparts.

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[123] Ann S. Pointer, 41.

[124] Walter M. Cavers, "Interview with Walter M. Cavers," (btvnc02007) interviewed by Karen Ferguson, Charlotte, North Carolina, June 17, 1993, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p.47, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvnc02007.pdf

[125] Tolbert T. Chism, "Interview with Tolbert T. Chism," (btvct01114) interviewed by Paul Oritz, Brinkley, Arkansas, July 15, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 2-3, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvct01114.pdf

[126] Rachel Watson, "The View From the Porch: Race and the Limits of Empathy in the Film To Kill a Mockingbird," *The Mississippi Quarterly 63,* no. 3 (2010): 420.

The act of remembrance is important in studying the Jim Crow era for a variety of reasons. Firstly, physical evidence of the humiliation, exclusion, and violence against black southerners holds less weight than their actual personal histories. Charles Gratton of Birmingham, Alabama, stated that "you just automatically grow up inferior…and you had the feeling that white people were better than you."[127] Ralph Thompson, a tenant farmer who grew up near Memphis in the 1930s and 1940s, stated that despite the existence of separate water fountains, his mother had him drink before they left the home, so that they "didn't get caught into drinking water out."[128] Memories of inferiority and humiliation do not transfer into the general understanding of history, and has often gone untouched. As such, "history may do violence to memory; it may be the original cut that invites the scar, but it's likely the best we are going to do in our efforts to understand the past."[129] This is representative of the issue of bringing the racism of the Jim Crow era to the public, as it can bring deep pain; however, it is necessary to attempt to educate everyone in whatever way possible. As such, the history of the era presents an issue of itself, as it rarely acknowledges the perspective of black Southerners.

The emotional evocativeness of film allows for past events to be simplified in a way that audiences can empathize with, learn from, and develop compassion for the people and situations depicted. While film takes many liberties in creating history, it also creates a more easily accessible way for people to access it. Simplistic storylines, complex characters, and visual

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[127] Charles Austin Gratton, "Interview with Charles Austin Gratton," (btvct02026) interviewed by Tywanna Whorley, Birmingham, Alabama, June 22, 1994, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 21, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvct02026.pdf

[128] Ralph Thompson, "Interview with Ralph Thompson," (btvct05102), interviewed by Paul Oritz, Memphis, Tennessee, July 7, 1995, , *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p.15, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvct05102.pdf

[129] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 9.

effects create a setting in which the past is real and attainable to its viewers, one which inspires curiosity and empowerment. However, cinema functions as a source for "ideological consumerism" such as "individual consumerism, American dominance and patriotism, and Protestant-based morality codes," which ultimately direct the audience towards a view which supports white supremacy, regardless of the perceived intent.[130] Therefore, as with any aspect of history, it is not without its flaws, as issues of representation, manipulation of plotlines and situations, stereotypical characters, and the present-day political messaging that inspired the creation of the film all work to convey a message to the audience. This message varies based on the aforementioned factors and can be detrimental to the social issues raised in film when not completed properly.

Memory is important to the transmission of cultural knowledge by contributing a proactive approach to understanding black history, as it considers stories from those who were most affected. Memory and emotion are complex tools in the study of the history of Jim Crow. However, memory is especially important in documenting the impact of racism on the lives of black Southerners, as experiences such as "the "shocks of childhood" could [shape] lives, personalities, outlooks, prospects…to learn to live with racial fear could be debilitating and devastating."[131] The traumas of these experiences were not easily translated into physical history. Public archives and government documents focus on complete accuracy, often excluding the softer aspects of a person's life, such as emotion. This is important to the history of the South because it represents a space in which the stories of black Southerners can be remembered, acknowledged, and told from their own perspective.

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[130] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass 6*, no. 9 (Jan 9, 2012): 760, accessed May 2, 2020 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00486.x.

[131] Leon F. Litwack, 47.

Emotion is also a way to allow agency of black voices in telling their stories through their own way. Oral history is an essential aspect of black American culture, especially in the South. Memories of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction featured heavily in families during the Jim Crow era, as "these memories formed the bedrock of African American identity" during a time in which the social order "sought to deny African Americans a legitimate heritage or place in society."[132] Stories served in many ways, such as to maintain dignity, hope, and to teach young people how to survive.[133]

Film allows for memory to be created in a way that is both factual and emotional. In accordance with Holloway, a perspective from which film can take when dealing with memory that "the literal truth is less important…than the act of remembrance itself. This is the act that shapes a consciousness and an identity" which is a factor that is "most compelling in telling stories about the black past."[134] For those who have never experienced the true extent of the Jim Crow Laws, and are therefore more removed from its lasting impact, can, theoretically, use film as a way to experience and empathize with the events, and perhaps to even make connections from the film to their current society.

Emotion and memory were an important coming-of-age factor for black youth. Lillian Smith grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina in the 1930s, and stated how "from about age seven on, they started giving us information about slavery…because in our culture, was our racial group, what most of us knew about slavery was handed down from word of mouth." The storytelling that Lillian Smith grew up with was, according to her, "black storytelling, but with a

[132] William H. Chafe et al., *Remembering Jim Crow,* 56.
[133] William H. Chafe et al., *Remembering Jim Crow,* 56.
[134] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 9.

message to let you know what to avoid and how to respond and behave…you have to watch your behavior."[135]

The history of black Southerners needs to be transferred into film because black history has been altered in education. The overall knowledge does not exist in other modes of learning. Georgia Sutton, a schoolteacher in North Carolina, discussed in her *Behind the Veil* interview that the only way to teach black history was to do so in secret, as it was not included in textbooks and curriculum. Further, they "learned about white America and the white American government, because there were very, very few of us in it then, practically none."[136] Legal and extralegal institutions, illiteracy, and poverty were all means by which the voices and history of black Southerners were kept subordinate.[137] Through film, the pieces of history can be implemented into the common understanding of the time, while also working against persisting racist perspectives.

The importance of acknowledging black voices is demonstrated in Ann Poitier, who grew up in Macon County, Alabama, during the Great Depression. She grew up in intense poverty, to the point where she had a nervous breakdown and slight heart attack at school due to the lack of food for her family. Poitier's statement that "we didn't talk about nothing" especially their food scarcity and the stress it caused for her as a child reflects the concept that "you cannot say a word or let anybody know that you haven't had anything to eat, and didn't know when you were ever

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[135] Lillian Quick Smith, "Interview with Lillian Quick Smith," (btvnc07038), interviewed by Sonya Ramsey, Wilmington, North Carolina, July 19, 1993, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 12-13, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvnc07038.pdf.
[136] Georgia Glasper Sutton, "Interview with Georgia Glasper Sutton," (btvnc06023), interviewed by Rhonda Mawhood, New Bern, North Carolina, July 30, 1993, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 23, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvnc06023.pdf.
[137] R.A. Lawson, *Jim Crow's Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners 1890-1945,* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 11.

going to get anything else, that is a horrible experience for a small child."[138] Poitier's childhood represented a large factor in the lives of black southerners, as their hardships were often diminished or ignored. Further, the trauma of slavery, racism, lynching, and Jim Crow had created a system in which black voices could not be spoken for fear of community retribution.

Black history in film can be a way to acknowledge the lives and progress of black Southerners. Anne Poitier's father was raised by enslaved people and she remembered her parents and the other adults in her life encouraging her to "make something of [her]self, be my dream. I can't read or write, but I want you to make something."[139] Ann discussed how "[slavery was] all they talked about…they would sit down and talk about the old times and the work that they did and the hard times that they had. Tell you all about it and tell you to make something of yourself."[140]

Ignoring the importance of emotion and memory discredits the lived experiences of black Southerners by not acknowledging their struggles. Avoiding the study of how events made people feel, or affected their future, diminishes the weight of these feelings, because it indicates that they are not valid as sources, and therefore not valid feelings. Many black Southerners lived their lives "in relative obscurity" and never had their experiences truly documented during their lives in the Jim Crow era.[141] In an era where black voices were limited to their own confidential circles, the telling of their stories is both important to empowering them to share their histories through their cultural means, but also gives them the space to share the truth that had often been denied through the system in which they lived.

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[138] Ann S. Pointers, 32-33.
[139] Ann S. Pointers, 2, 16.
[140] Ann S. Pointers, 16.
[141] Leon F. Litwack, *xv.*

The memory of racism in the South can also be used as a mechanism to honor and encourage African Americans to pursue their futures. Tolbert Chism began to learn about black history through the Fargo Agricultural School, as his education had been "limited to only what the whites wanted us to know about ourselves, but nothing about our background as to what our origin was and where we had come from."[142] What he learned, and what he passed on through his interview, was the importance of preserving cultural knowledge in any way possible. He was likely inspired to learn more to honor those who came before him.

Acknowledging black voices in film is important in recognizing the pain and the truth behind the realities of the Jim Crow era. Cleaster Mitchell grew up under the constant threat of sexual violence from white men, being taught protection skills by her mother, such as to lock the doors when she was home alone. She used these skills as a young adult, when she would be approached by her white boss.[143] These were skills that she was able to bring into the present day as a way to recognize the injustice of her situation. The *Behind the Veil* project allowed her to know that her voice was worthy of telling the story, which reminds the viewer of the oppression caused by viewing the South not only from the white perspective, but how the continuous nature of these perspectives have infiltrated the very understanding of the history of the South.

Including the experiences of real black Southerners in film allows for the pre-existing interpretation of interracial relationships to be challenged. The white supremacist politics of the South insisted on the subordination of African Americans in society, which meant that the exclusion of black perspectives was necessary to accomplish this. The meaning of slavery, the

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[142] Tolbert T. Chism, 2.

[143] Cleaster Mitchell, "Interview with Cleaster Mitchell," (btvct02016), interviewed by Paul Oritz, July 16, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 24-27, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvct02016.pdf

Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments were debated and altered in favour of white Southerners and their search for supremacy in America.[144] The history of a struggle is a highly privileged outcome, and black Southerners often had their history ignored and altered to keep them further subordinated, and to continue the status quo of white supremacy.

Despite the efforts to ignore black history, the Jim Crow era served as a time in which black communities passed down their knowledge and experiences of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, as a means to preserve their identities while also recognizing their place in history.[145] These stories were also ways to "strengthen [their community's] resolve" and to create hope going forward. As such, despite being omitted from the official narrative, the stories of survival, hope, and community can serve as powerful lessons for those who view them, as they were once the guidelines that kept black Southerners, especially children, alive in their interactions with whites.[146] These lessons parallel the intent of films, in that they seek to demonstrate lessons for those who have not experienced the event themselves, and therefore represent the importance of using the emotional aspects of memory by uplifting the voices of those excluded from the common narrative.

Although film is an important mode of transporting history, its focus on black-white relationships often takes precedence over the relationships of black communities. Kinship was the main support system when battling the violence and intolerance of the South. When Walter Cavers left the farm he grew up on, he received help and companionship from the community, finding entertainment and support through them.[147] Film's portrayal of gentle interracial

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[144] William H. Chafe et al., in *Remembering Jim Crow,* 58.
[145] William H. Chafe et al., in *Remembering Jim Crow,* 56.
[146] William H. Chafe et al, in *Remembering Jim Crow,* 56.
[147] Walter M. Cavers, 46-50.

relationships in the South is an untruth, as they often forgo the autonomy of the black community by focusing solely on the white-black interaction.

Remembering and preserving black history is a way to counteract the racism and white supremacy of America as a whole. Keeping and studying the violence, exclusion, and oppression of black Southerners is an act of defiance against white supremacy. The Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1943 found that advocacy for better representation of black characters had existed for many years, and that film "can continue to preserve the stereotype of Negroes…or [it] can break this stereotype by showing cultivated, educated Negroes playing a dignified part in American life."[148]

Emotion, memory, and history all work together to create a more fulsome understanding of the past because humans exist to feel, and therefore, feeling is just as important to historical knowledge as hard facts. The act of remembrance is a central facet to the way that people live within and interpret history for years afterwards. The act of remembrance, explored by Jonathan Scott Holloway, represents "the act that shapes a consciousness and an identity."[149] Emotion creates context within historical knowledge that encourages people to view how lives have been shaped by the formative events of personal histories—in a time and place where many people were affected similarly, such as in the Jim Crow South, this new understanding of history is invaluable to the study of the perpetuity of racism in America.

[148] Commission on Interracial Cooperation, "Negroes and Motion Pictures (December 15, 1943) in *The Age of Jim Crow*, 204-205.
[149] Jonathan Scott Holloway, 9.

Chapter 3
Redemption and Beyond:
The Plight of the White Savior

The white savior complex demonstrates the complicated nature of analyzing history through film and presenting it to an audience. When combined with the history of the South, and the importance of creating empathy in its audience, the white savior complex is a white-centered way of approaching the history of racism because it omits the narratives of the victims of racial violence while ultimately seeking to solve the problem of race in America for the viewer, rather than encouraging an open dialogue. The white savior presents the idea that issues of racism in the film are not only localized in the South, but also that there is little left to do to support the movement for racial justice. This is demonstrated through first analyzing the white savior complex, its conditions and interactions with black characters, and the films in which the savior is best represented in Southern race issues. Further, the films will be discussed based on their interpretation of extralegal violence, law and justice, and finally moral salvation. An understanding of each film, and the ways they interact with each other, will serve to reflect the views that the audience is expected to achieve from the films, and the consequences of it.

Discussions of the white savior complex seek to expose the underlying issues while maintaining a firm stance on the importance of working against racial injustice in both popular culture and American society. Works by Matthew Hughey, Donald Bogle and Darnell Hunt seek to understand the intent and purpose of the white savior in current film, focusing on the ways in which the savior seeks to satisfy the white audience's feeling of guilt and privilege by situating

them as the savior rather than the oppressor.[150] Further, Hughey discusses the issue in retaining the audience's attention if they cannot relate to the characters, and therefore the white savior acts as a bridge between the audience and the story by making them feel as though they are not the privileged oppressors, but rather the solution.[151]

As an outcome of the white savior complex and the "magical negro" myth, A. Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus focus largely on the way in which the interpretations of racial traumas impact an audience's learning, largely through encouraging them to live "in relation with the past" as a means of coping.[152] David Frank and Mark McPhail contribute to this understanding, by urging those who control the narrative of race to demonstrate how "the color line has shaped not only the souls of black folk, but the souls of white folk as well."[153] Combined with the focus on the white savior complex, historians, sociologists, and activists seek to establish the ways in which race traumas can be further understood by delegitimizing the power of the white savior in popular culture.

The study of the white savior complex is not without its flaws. Alongside the savior is the existence of the "magical negro," both serving to demonstrate moral dilemmas and redemption. They work together for the ultimate gain of the white character and can be considered within the realm of the general white savior complex. However, few studies of the white savior complex

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[150] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass 6*, no. 9 (Jan 9, 2012), accessed May 2, 2020 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00486.x; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Darnell Hunt, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[151] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 764.

[152] A. Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, "Communities of Memory, Entanglements, and Claims of the Past on the Present: Reading Race Trauma through *The Green Mile," Critical Studies in Media Communication 27,* no. 2, (June 2010): 132.

[153] David Frank and Mark McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)Possibility of Racial Reconciliation," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs 8* (2005): 598.

and its affiliate "magical negro" focus on the actual impact of the black characters and audience, nor do they seek to bring it back to a lens in which black autonomy is valued. Discussions by Hughey in particular revolve almost entirely around the character of the savior and the impact on the audience, and function only within the spectrum of the white savior.[154] While a study of the white savior will obviously focus on the problem of the savior, the flaw in which it is focused is that it creates a situation in which the black community is once again overshadowed by the presence of a white character.

Although it is far from a paradox, awareness around the methodology and purpose of exposing the white savior complex is important for historians to consider. While some white savior films have been successful in kindling the public's interest in race issues, such as the release of *The Green Mile* overlapping with that of the *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* exhibit by James Allan in the winter of 1999 and 2000, respectively.[155] Although coincidental, the release of both cultural artifacts has been considered "a crystallizing moment in American cultural memory of race violence."[156] Far from perfect, *The Green Mile* is an example of a film that did not necessarily harm the perspective of race from the viewpoint of trauma and violence. It did, however, contribute to directing the focus away from the perpetrators that worked more secretly—those with the power to create trauma more intrinsically in society, rather than outwardly.

Through this example of the way in which history can ultimately be self-serving towards those in power, historians are in a unique space in which they can create their own involvement in bringing intrinsic racism into their works. Demonstrated through Hughey, A Susan Owen, and

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[154] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 761.
[155] A. Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 133.
[156] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 133.

others, the black character is created to offer redemption to the white, because it is easier to blame the black community for the disgrace of white actions, rather than to accept that the autonomy of the black community can exist on its own. Through researching the white savior complex, historians such as A. Susan Owen demonstrate how the political act of asking for empathy should introduce those involved in what they cannot relate to in a broad approach, encompassing as many aspects as possible.[157] Historians must also create this understanding in their works, as the history of racial trauma and violence in the South are much more than what even the white savior complex can demonstrate, and must always create an understanding that they cannot be easily solved, regardless of whom the blame is place upon.

Black characters in white-centered films are portrayed in stereotypical means. Films over time have shown the dangerous, sexually predatory freedman (*The Birth of A Nation*, 1915); the happy, dedicated slave (*Gone With the Wind*, 1939); the contented, grandfatherly Tom (*Song of the South*, 1946); and finally, the downtrodden, morally right black person who accepts the gracious help of their white social superior (*To Kill a Mockingbird, The Green Mile*).[158] Stereotypes of black characters work to diminish the stories and experiences of black Southerners who endured the racism of the Jim Crow era. Riche Richardson discussed how popular culture emasculated the black southern male by becoming dependent on the tropes of the Uncle Tom or the black rapist as parallel representations of black inferiority.[159] Such stereotypes create a situation in which black voices are voided in favor of what the white audiences understand; the black man can either be a gentle friend, or an absolute enemy. Films such as

[157] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 146.
[158] Donald Bogle, 76, 122, 187, 387.
[159] Riche Richardson, introduction to *Black Masculinity and the US South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*, (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 4.

these contributed to the early cinematic experience of the South, most notably through *The Birth of a Nation, Uncle Tom's Cabin,* and *Gone With the Wind.*[160]

During the Civil Rights era, when black citizens across America were seeking equality, rights, and the ability to create meaningful lives for themselves, a new stereotype developed, although not in opposition of Civil Rights. This new stereotype was the innocent man—the poor, misunderstood black man who was blamed for a crime he did not commit.[161] This black man finds himself in the care of the white savior, a person who sees the injustice of the Jim Crow era and goes against societal norms to seek justice.

In these specific films, the downtrodden black person comes to find themselves being offered help by the brave, morally pristine (although not without a few personal demons) white savior, a person who places the racism of their situation aside and is fundamentally changed regardless of the outcome of the film. These films seek to portray the interaction between white and black people in a time where such work was taboo, and they "carry resonance because they provide scripts that instruct audiences on the means of receiving redemption…during times of social upheaval and change."[162] These films seek to find the good among the bad, but fail to do so in their focus on racist tropes.

Recent white savior films also focus on the lasting effects of black-white relationships past the end of the Jim Crow era. They include new tropes: the morally right, complicated black man (*A Time to Kill*),[163] and the innocent, systematically downtrodden gentle giant (*The Blind Side*).[164] Both of these films have white saviors in them, who go out of their way to provide some

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[160] Donald Bogle, 3-5, 7-10, 76-81.
[161] Donald Bogle, 187, 377.
[162] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 751.
[163] Donald Bogle, 377.
[164] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 763.

form of justice for the person they are protecting. Both films bring the lasting impact of the Jim Crow Era into the modern context. They continue, however, to show that the process of true integration and anti-racism is a morally complex process in which white saviors gallantly take the work, despite working against social norms. These films, in tone with those depicting the 1930s to 1960s, demonstrate the perception that interracial relationships cannot function without some form of dependency.[165] This stereotype is incredibly harmful, and contributes to the methods in which popular culture can maintain blatant racism while veiling it with an inspiring, thrilling atmosphere.

The white savior complex is a theme in films in which race relations are solved through the white savior's interaction with the non-white social order, resulting in the white character's redemption from living in a racist setting in the eyes of the audience. Films about in the South use this concept often, particularly ones created during and after the Civil Rights Era. As stated by Hughey, these films seek to navigate the supposedly "color-blind world" of the mainstream audience, yet do this by appealing to the audiences pre-existing racial stereotypes.[166] The white savior complex seeks to comfort society's views of racial injustice by demonstrating the power that supposedly ordinary people have in the face of racial injustice; through this, the audience can be inspired to do the same in their community. While not intended to be negative, the white savior complex is a self-fulfilling act in which the ultimate aim is not racial justice; rather, it is the redemption and moral satisfaction of the savior themselves.[167] The white savior is a cinematic mechanism in which prejudice and racial stereotypes can exist in a modern sense,

[165] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 752.
[166] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 752.
[167] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 755.

ultimately ensuring the social dictions of white supremacy by encouraging a self-centered, homogenous understanding of race relations in the South.

The white savior complex differs from the "magical negro" in the intended outcome of the white savior.[168] While both present "viewer friendly depictions of racial cooperation," the "magical negro" serves to uplift the moral integrity of the white character, acting as a life-lesson for the white character.[169] Both the white savior and the "magical negro" serve as white memory projects, acknowledging the need for atonement yet realizing that the nature of the crime has rendered true compensation impossible.[170] Through this, a racial awareness is created, which encourages the preservation of white power as a means to accommodate that awareness. [171] The complex and ultimately powerful nature of white supremacy assures that even when genuinely seeking redemption, it can be marred by the desire for moral self-preservation of the character. The resulting impact is the devaluing of the community in which the white character is seeking redemption, as they seek to satisfy their own "agenda" while overlooking the true task of racial justice: that of understanding the perspective of the other.[172]

The complicated realm of film tropes, which include both the white savior and the "magical negro," indicate a flaw in the ultimate pursuit of racial cooperation. Films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Green Mile* present an instance in which the immorality of the Jim Crow Era is confronted with a more palatable outcome with which the audience can better identify.[173] The flaws are more intrinsic than first presented: in order for the film to pursue its

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[168] As per Hughey, the term "Magical Negro" will refer to the historical connotation, recognizing that it is not the correct term as determined by the black community.
[169] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 752.
[170] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 134-136.
[171] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 136.
[172] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 136.
[173] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 764.

end goal of demonstrating racial inter-cooperation, they rely on the foundations of white supremacist values, which are white superiority and black servitude.[174] The white savior film depend on the continuity of the white character finding some form of moral or legal success through their interaction with the black character, regardless of the outcome for the black character. The achievement of the moral victory is not the intended outcome as the film focuses on using racial issues to further elevate the redemption of the character in the eyes of the audience, which ultimately undermines the true understanding of the presence of racial injustice prevalent in society.

The white savior film is arguably a product of racial tensions and white guilt at past legalized racism. Simply put, people in the present are being held accountable for the decisions made in the past, an act which may become wearisome on a person. As stated by Hughey, white savior films are "an important cultural device and artifact of our modern "post-racial" era because it helps to repair the myth of White supremacy and paternalism in an unsettled and racially charged time."[175] As such, the white savior is a guiding figure that the audience can rely on for inspiration without actually having to redefine their own racial prejudices, or examine their privilege in society.[176] The white savior and the "magical negro" film therefore work to preserve the status quo while giving reassurance that some form of justice or atonement is possible, as demonstrated by the white heroes of the story.

The white savior complex in film consists of three thematic areas. They consist of the white savior attaining some form of moral salvation; the white character protecting the black character from extralegal violence such as lynching; and the white character providing aid to the

[174] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 756.
[175] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 761.
[176] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 761.

innocent (or morally complicated) black character in achieving their ultimate goal. These situations allow for the white character ultimately to be transformed into a better person at the disadvantage of the black character, all while encouraging the audience to view them as contributors to interracial progress.[177] It is important to remember that as the messages of white paternalism and black humility are created, they seek to avoid a message of white supremacy while still instilling racial stereotypes that echo the master-servant control and obedience of the South.[178] The ultimate intent of these themes is that the white savior benefits from the struggles of the black character, whether it be morally, protectively, or in a legal role.

The white savior complex resonates with white audiences because it reinforces their pre-existing ideas of their own involvement in race through their socioeconomic status. The issue of race in the films is rendered to poor whites versus liberal leaders, which brings attention to the obvious signs of racism, such as violence, while ignoring the broader systemic issues of paternalism and the erasure of the identity of the black community. The outcome of this is described by Hughey as encouraging the audience to be satisfied in their desire to participate in improving their community's race relations, while simultaneously placing the blame for racism on the lower class.[179] This not only directs undue blame on the lower classes, but excuses the mechanisms from which higher class white citizens retain their power. The moral uplifting of audiences is prominent in some of the most notable white savior films of the South and contribute to the narrative of paternalism and parasitism on the black community by pursuing the outcome of supposed racial justice.

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[177] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 753-755.
[178] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 761.
[179] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 761-765.

The films *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Green Mile* demonstrate the white savior and "magical negro" working together to uplift the integrity of their protectors, while *A Time to Kill* demonstrates a post-Civil Rights setting in which racial justice has yet to be achieved, and the Netflix film *Mudbound* acts as an example of a film in which race relations are not meant to be solved, and leave the audience to determine their own place in the search for racial justice.[180] Through analyzing these films and how they confront racial justice, an understanding is developed of the complex role of film in creating recognition for the survivors of the Jim Crow Era, while also recognizing the danger of complacency in discussing racism in the American South. To demonstrate how these films interact with the white savior complex, a synopsis of each plotline is required.

To Kill a Mockingbird is arguably one of the most important films (and novels) regarding race in American history. Harper Lee's novel was released in 1960, and the film soon followed in 1962. Narrated by a reflective Scout Finch, she retells the story of her childhood in small-town Alabama in 1932, in which her father, Atticus Finch, defended Tom Robinson, a black man accused of the rape of a young white woman named Mayella Ewell. Atticus instills wisdom in his children throughout the film, stating that "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird," referring to the future case against Tom, in which his innocence is clearly stated against the background of ignorance and poverty.[181] Scout begins to understand the prominence of racism in her small Southern town during the trial.

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[180] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 751-752; Deborah E. Barker "Introduction: The Southern Imaginary," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary,* ed. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 10.

[181] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* directed by Robert Mulligan (1962; Universal Studios Canada, 2005), 0:37:00-0:37:43, video streaming from Amazon Prime Video.

The experiences of the Finch family during the trial begin when Atticus accepts the case, recognizing his moral duty to the law.[182] His decision creates an outrage through the town, and Scout faces ridicule from her peers because of it.[183] Atticus, his children, and Tom Robinson's family are intimidated by Bob Ewell, Mayella's father and the main accuser against Tom (and ultimately, the 'real' villain of the film).[184] Tom Robinson is nearly lynched by a mob of poor whites the night before his trial, but the Finches employ their superior moral abilities to calm down the mob and ultimately remind them of their humanity.[185] The county attends the trial, in which Scout, her brother Jem, and her friend Dill sit in the coloured balcony to watch as Atticus proves Tom's innocence, as Mayella had made a sexual advance on Tom, which he denied. Enraged at his daughter for breaking the strict social barriers between blacks and poor whites, Bob Ewell places blame upon Tom Robinson for assaulting his daughter to reassert his sense of racial superiority.[186]

Despite Atticus imploring the jury to remove their prejudices for the obviousness of Tom's innocence, Tom Robinson is found guilty by an all-male, all-white jury. Atticus leaves the courtroom, and the 'colored' balcony rises to show their respect for him.[187] Atticus learns shortly that Tom tried to escape while being transferred to prison and was shot and killed. When Atticus leaves to tell Tom's now-widow, she collapses in despair, and Bob Ewell threatens him for humiliating him in front of the town.[188] It is then understood that the trial was meant to be a way

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[182] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 0:16:06-0:18:00.
[183] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 0:51:33-0:51:56.
[184] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 0:23:00-0:23:42, 0:46:13-0:47:01.
[185] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 1:01:48-1:06:39.
[186] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 1:23:26-1:29:51. It is important to note that in the novel, it is strongly implied that Bob Ewell had been sexually assaulting his daughter for most of her life. This was not translated into the film, perhaps to make the Ewell's intentions even more clear: that they were acting out of pure ignorance and desire for power, rather than a more abusive dynamic. See Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 203-221.
[187] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 1:39:18-1:43:22.
[188] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 1:45:40-1:51:00.

for Bob Ewell to rise above his social class of poor white trash into greater Maycomb society, which is thwarted by Atticus in the trial.

The film comes to an end when Bob Ewell is killed while attacking Scout and Jem. It is decided that Ewell's cause of death would be deemed self-defence, so as not to bring the children's savior, an abused recluse, into the harmful public eye. To do so, Scout insisted, would be like killing a mockingbird; or, punishing the innocent, echoing the fate of Tom Robinson.[189] Through the events, the Finches are able to bring some form of justice to the trial, bringing the story full-circle.

The Green Mile is a novel by Stephen King released in 1996 which was released as a film in 1999. Set in Louisiana, it begins with an elderly Paul Edgecomb reflecting on his time as a death row prison officer on the "green mile" in 1935, the year he met John Coffey, an impossibly large but mentally challenged black man who had been convicted of the rape and murder of two young white girls.[190] The film demonstrates the benevolence of Edgecomb and the rest of the guards while working against the sadism of Percy Wetmore, a privileged guard.

John Coffey reveals his "magical healing" abilities to Edgecomb when healing him of his persistent bladder problems. Because of the healing abilities, Edgecomb researches Coffey's case, certain that he was not capable of the crime.[191] Edgecomb values Coffey's powers, using them to heal a white woman and defending him against racial slurs.[192] Edgecomb's benevolence towards Coffey is intended to convey the way in which he is reflecting on his own biases towards race.

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[189] *To Kill a Mockingbird,* 1:55:17-2:06:18.
[190] *The Green Mile,* directed by Frank Darabont (1999; Warner Bros Pictures, 2013), 0:08:33, 0:12:16-0:18:12, 0:18:43-0:21:18, video streaming from University of Lethbridge Catalogue.
[191] *The Green Mile,* 01:02:22-01:14:12.
[192] *The Green Mile,* 02:13:05-02:21:08, 01:16:19-1:16:43.

Coffey reveals his ability to read minds and learns that a psychotic prison inmate had committed the crime. He released the woman's tumor into Percy, driving him insane and causing him to shoot the real perpetrator, rendering justice served.[193] Edgecomb is uneasy over executing Coffey, fearing that he will go to hell for killing one of God's magical gifts; however, Coffey values death over the cruelty and evil of the world.[194] After the execution, it is revealed that Edgecomb resigned as a prison warden. He then states that he is 108 years old, and the magic used by Coffey has extended his life.[195] It is his cross to bear, so to say, for executing such an innocent and pure man.

Mudbound is a 2017 film based in 1940s Mississippi and focuses on the interactions between the white McAllan family and the Jacksons, a family of black tenant farmers. The film depicts the mundane and often conflicting lives that the McAllans and Jacksons live, as well as their interactions with each other. Jamie McAllan and Ronsel Jackson both return from the Second World War, and they find comfort in each other despite being separated by the racial divide of the time.[196] They both suffer with their trauma from the war, and begin a friendship in which Jamie treats Ronsel like an equal, inviting him to sit in the front of the truck when they drive to and from town.[197]

Ronsel begins to question the strict social codes of the South and is shocked to find that he had a child with his (white) European lover. The film culminates in Jamie's father, Pappy, discovering the child Ronsel had and lynching him in a barn with the Ku Klux Klan.[198] They

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[193] *The Green Mile,* 02:26:13-02:35:43.
[194] *The Green Mile,* 02:40:29-02:42:10.
[195] *The Green Mile,* 02:53:07-02:59:16.
[196] *Mudbound,* directed by Dee Rees (2017; Elevated Films Joule Films, distributed by Netflix), 1:13:27-1:15:31, viewed online through Netflix.
[197] *Mudbound,* 1:15:31.
[198] *Mudbound,* 1:49:25-1:50:03.

kidnap Jamie and force him to make a decision on how the Klan should seek revenge on Ronsel—to cut out his eyes, his tongue, or his testicles.[199] Through this, they seek to punish both Ronsel and Jamie for crossing the social boundaries that keep racism in place. Jamie eventually tells Pappy to cut out Ronsel's tongue, indicating his inherent weakness in the face of violence.[200] The scene ends with Jamie crying and yelling while he watches his father attack Ronsel.

Ronsel is found by his family and community, naked and tied to the rafters of the barn in which the lynching occurred. His weeping mother uses her head scarf to cover him.[201] The next scene begins with a bloodied Jamie smothering his father to death shortly after the lynching.[202] The Jackson's move away, and Ronsel, with his tongue cut out, travels to Europe to find his son. Jamie leaves the farm and travels to Los Angeles.[203]

A Time to Kill is a 1996 film based on the 1989 legal novel by John Grisham. It follows the rape and attempted murder of ten-year-old Tanya Hailey by two white rednecks in the 1980s.[204] The attack shakes the small Mississippi town, especially her father, Carl Lee. As the two rapists are led into court to be tried, Carl Lee shoots and kills them with.[205] Carl Lee is arrested and calls on young lawyer Jake Brigance to defend his case. The murder of the two white men causes the Ku Klux Klan to re-emerge in the town, and the case is complicated by the rapists actions.[206] The racial divide is furthered when the Klan and the black community clash,

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[199] *Mudbound,* 1:52:03-1:57:00.
[200] *Mudbound,* 1:55:19-1:57:00.
[201] *Mudbound,* 1:57-:07-1:58:16.
[202] *Mudbound,* 2:00:10-2:00:35.
[203] *Mudbound,* 2:01:51-2:07:48.
[204] *A Time to Kill,* directed by Joel Schumacher (1989; California: Warner Bros Pictures; 2013), 0:1:18-0:07:48, video streaming from the University of Lethbridge Catalogue.
[205] *A Time to Kill,* 0:18:50-0:19:48.
[206] *A Time to Kill,* 0:40:31-0:42:45.

causing injury and the death of a Klan member.[207] Ultimately, Carl Lee pleads not guilty by reason of insanity, and despite many setbacks along the trial, Jake ultimately sways the jury's opinion by appealing to their inner conscious: he details the crime committed against Tanya, and after he does, asks them to imagine what their position would be if she were white.[208] The jury determines that Carl Lee is innocent of all counts, and Jake attempts to reconcile his previous racial misgivings by introducing his own daughter to Tanya.[209] The film is an attempt to invert the southern rape narrative present in the aforementioned films.

The synopses of these films all convey the message that overcoming racism and prejudice is not a simple task. These films, with the exception of *A Time to Kill,* are all set years before they were actually created, and all based between the 1930s to around 1946, despite being released in 1962, the 1999, and 2017. This is important to note because, as stated by Michael Shudson, the relevance of a cultural object such as film is not to the individual interests of the viewers because those seemingly "individual" interests are shaped by broader social ones.[210] As a result, the era in which the film was made, and in which the film is based, are key messages to the implementation of the white savior complex, as they represent distinct historical times which are deemed important to viewers. These considerations are important when acknowledging the three leading themes of the white savior complex.

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[207] *A Time to Kill,* 01:19:02-01:21:54.
[208] *A Time to Kill,* 02:13:25-02:20:35.
[209] *A Time to Kill,* 02:21:13-02:25:34.
[210] Michael Schudson, "How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols," *Cultural Sociology* ed. L. Spillman (Malden, Massachusetts, 2002): 145, quoted in Matthew W. Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films," *Social Problems 56,* no 3 (August 2009): 547, accessed May 6 2020 from https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2009.56.3.543

Lynching was the most common form of extralegal violence committed against the black community in the South.[211] The peak at which America saw the most lynchings was between the 1890s and 1910s, although it lasted well into the twentieth century. Although it existed throughout America, and was performed occasionally against non-blacks, it became "an identifying marker" of the South and its racial violence against black men.[212]Lynching was so popular in the South that it was determined to be the "lynching belt."[213] Many victims of lynching became famous in the Civil Rights Movement, most notably Emmett Till, a young boy murdered for speaking to a white woman.[214]

Although lynching changed over time, it ultimately focused on two important factors of success. Firstly, the concept of protecting white male dominance, especially in the concept of black social autonomy.[215] Secondly, it relied on spectacle to be successful. Whether it was a large crowd of hundreds who took what they considered 'souvenirs'—pieces of the victims hair, for example—or just two or three men who murdered a person and left their body to be found, it was important to the cultural message of lynching that people witness the abuse and give their approval.[216] This theme is reflected in the lynching scene in *Mudbound,* in which Pappy forces Jamie to witness Ronsel being punished for having a relationship with a white woman.[217] The

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[211] Violence against the black community is prominent throughout America, and has adapted in many ways since the end of the legal Jim Crow era. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* (New York: New Press, 2012).

[212] Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940, (*New Directions in Southern Studies, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 4. Accessed May 4, 2020, from http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/logins.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=354831&site=ehost-live&scope=site

[213] Amy Louise Wood, 4.

[214] Philip C. Kolin, "On the Record: The Emmett Till Murder Trial and the Southern Press," *Southern Quarterly 50,* no. 3 (2013): 29, accessed May 6 2020 from https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/1436022884?accountid=12063

[215] Amy Louise Wood, 3.

[216] Amy Louise Wood, 3.

[217] *Mudbound,* 1:55:19-1:57:00.

evidence of a lynching was meant to affirm white superiority while also satisfying the urge to see justice brought as desired by the crowd.

As mentioned, lynching as a plot device reinforces within the audience the extralegal actions of race violence. However, in white savior films, they are used in a manner which, intentionally or not, relies upon the very concept of the 'spectacle' as the real, historical lynchings did. In *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the Finch family protect Tom Robinson from a group of poor whites who want to lynch him. The scene ultimately conveys the lynching party as relatively tame; in the murder of Will Potter, a mob overpowered Will Potter's protection and lynched him in the town's opera house.[218] The fact that Atticus was not overpowered points to the general direction of the film, as Atticus was capable of using his intense moral goodness (and his children) to remind the mob of their humanity and ultimately save (at least temporarily) Tom's life.

In contrast, the lynching scene in *Mudbound* employs a more realistic, although volatile, approach to demonstrating a lynching. The scene shows Ronsel beaten, ridiculed, and in fear for his life; Jamie, his friend, is also beaten. Jamie is also indicated as one of the reasons why Ronsel was targeted by Pappy to begin with. In lynching Ronsel, Pappy seeks to maintain the racial boundaries that guard his own masculine hierarchy.[219] Although at times the scene focuses on Jamie's anguish more than Ronsel, ultimately it does not put Jamie in the position of a savior. Firstly, Jamie does not attempt to help Ronsel because he feels it is his duty to protect the innocent; rather, he seeks to avoid the confrontation altogether by asking them to kill him. Jamie does not follow the typical trope of the white savior, nor does Ronsel become the "magical

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[218] Amy Louise Wood, 113.

[219] Robert Jackson, "A Southern Sublimation: Lynching Film and the Reconstruction of American Memory," *Southern Literary Journal* 40, issue 2 (Spring 2008): 110, accessed May 2, 2020, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/216427748?accountid=12063&pq-origsite=summon

negro," because Jamie is not ultimately healed by the experience. Jamie's story ends with him in the same disgraced state he entered the scene, demonstrating that not only did he not sacrifice anything of himself, he did not receive any form of racial or moral justification as a result of his actions.[220]

Once again, the lynching scenes in both films focus more on the interactions of the white characters rather than the impact on the black (near) victim. Mirroring the *Without Sanctuary* photographs, the victims were often surrounded by the perpetrators, showing their pride in the permanence in their actions.[221] In this sense, the focus was on the actions and successes of the lynch mob, rather than the perspective of the victim. In film, focusing on the white characters—even the benevolent ones who are trying to protect the victim—reflect the value of 'spectacle' of past lynch mobs, by reinforcing the idea within the audience that the event taking place is about the white person.[222]

As such, demonstrating extralegal violence ultimately from the perspective of the white character, even when they were on the victim's side, attempts to indicate to the audience that white benevolence in the face of racism can exist. When popular films are the only way for audiences to access the experiences of racism, they understand them as "authentic" examples of "real life," but in order to be truly successful, needs to push them from their comfort in their own experiences and interpretations.[223] It indicates that the white character can only prove their

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[220] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 752.
[221] *The unidentified corpse of an African American male with posse,* circa 1900, card-mounted gelatin printing-out paper, (7 x 5"), location unknown. From James Allen and John Littlefield, "Without Sanctuary," *Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America,* Twin Palms Publishers, 2000-2018, accessed May 6 2020 from https://withoutsanctuary.org/
[222] Amy Louise Wood, 3.
[223] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 754.

benevolence when violence is threatened, and that the audience is entitled to view their role model in a heroic position.

A Time to Kill offers an alternate viewpoint on extralegal violence. When Carl Lee Hailey shoots and kills his daughter's rapists, he inevitably recalls an inverted lynching narrative. Lynch mobs worked to make their actions publicly known; Carl Lee Hailey seeks his revenge in a crowded courthouse. The violence was the result of the rape of a young girl, and the perpetrators of both actions of violence are ultimately not charged with a crime.[224] *A Time to Kill* is not set during the Jim Crow Era, and demonstrates a move by Hollywood as what Matthew Hughey describes as "paternalistic strategies to save dysfunctional communities of color" to draw upon "long-standing racist tropes while they responded to calls for on-screen diversity and uncomplicated tales of black/white cooperation."[225] The plot is not intended to be racist, but ultimately focuses on how the issues of racism can be solved through white Southerners, and only through white Southerners. Once Carl Lee has avenged his daughter, the focus is no longer on him, but rather, on the difficulties his lawyer Jake Brigance faces while attempting to set him free. Carl Lee Hailey is not an individual with a story, he is a plot point to deliver Jake Brigance to a higher moral standing in the eyes of the audience.

A Time to Kill represents the continuity of post-racial thought because "these inter-racial interactions…repair the myth of White supremacy and paternalism" through uplifting the white character regardless of the outcome of the black character.[226] It was released in 1996 as a way to challenge existing notions of race in a time when America was not only racially divided, but seeking films to introduce characters to mitigate the issue.[227] However, *A Time to Kill* reinforces

[224] Amy Louise Wood, 88.
[225] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 755.
[226] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism," 765.
[227] Matthew W. Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism," 548.

what Diana Crane asserted was that films were "designed as much as possible to reflect their tastes, interests, and attitudes" and "reflects back to the consumer his or her own image."[228] Much like Atticus Finch, Jake Brigance was not created to inspire his audience, but rather to placate them by letting them see themselves as the hero already.

This is also reflected in Atticus Finch, a man whose moral integrity is valued even though his client was convicted and killed. In fact, Tom Robinson's death furthers Atticus's morality, because he willingly chose a lost cause, because of his integrity. For the audience, this represents "the moral call to a sympathetic identification with a particular other" which "collapses into a generalized knowledge that hereby has the power to advocate on behalf of the marginalized group."[229] Atticus Finch is created as a champion of the voiceless, but in doing so, removes the individual identity of Tom Robinson. By removing the complexity of the case, "white viewers have been given the opportunity to stand in the shoes…of the African American 'race' itself" which does not dismantle existing understandings of race, because it is not looked at individually.[230]

Salvation and redemption are prominent factors of the white savior complex because they satisfy the audience's moral aims by providing the white savior redemption for their actions. Paul Edgecomb considers the execution of John Coffey a sin, not because of his innocence, but because of his magical abilities. The "melancholia" and sacrifice of Paul Edgecomb as he reflects on his involvement in the death of John Coffey indicates to the viewer that his repentance is his redemption; he killed a gift from God, but because he acknowledged it was

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[228] Diana Crane, *The Production of Culture*, (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1992), 47.
[229] Rachel Watson "The View From the Porch: Race and the Limits of Empathy in the Film To Kill a Mockingbird," *The Mississippi Quarterly 63,* no. 3 (2010): 420, accessed May 5, 2020 from https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/docview/882302185?accountid=12063.
[230] Rachel Watson, 420-421.

wrong, he could be absolved of his actions.[231] Further, because John Coffey was created as a plot point for moral goodness, the audience is asked to see him as more than a victim, and rather as someone who is "transcendent" of moral goodness.[232] Through ending the film with each character either achieving their desired end (John Coffey) or contemplating on their actions (Paul Edgecomb), the audience is not invited to reflect further on what could have been done. Paul Edgecomb received his redemption by acknowledging his involvement; that does not mean that he was correct.

The ultimate flaw in the white-centered race film is that the white savior always presents a form of a solution to the issue of race in America. When reviewing white-centered films, the positive viewer "is constituted by absence of responsibility for that past," allowing for a "counter-memory" to be created.[233] The counter-memory allows for the viewers to believe that they no longer have to continue the dialogue of racial justice because their own society is not as bad as it once was. The ultimate downfall of the white savior is that they seek to give answers to problems, rather than guiding the viewers to conclusions of their own. Thus, race issues continue in America, because the people have been told what to think rather than to work together to create a unified solution.

[231] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 131.
[232] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 131.
[233] A Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, 134.

Conclusion
A Willingness to Change

The representation of racism in popular culture has developed over time, and reflects the way in which society has changed as well. The representation of black Southerners has developed from blackfaced rapists in *The Birth of a Nation* to strong, competent leaders in *Selma,* indicating the growing understanding of studio executives of the affect their content can have on both the black community and the overall audience.[234] The overall change in representation has not been perfected, however, and actors, audiences, and studio executives alike have become even more vocal about the ways in which even the seemingly well-intended white savior complex is flawed in its portrayal racial representation.[235] These flaws, in many ways, reflect the ways in which films attempt to respond to and atone for the setting of the Jim Crow South, particularly in the age when cinematic representation shifted towards a more meaningful approach to racial justice.

The concept of atonement is difficult for viewers of the South. Racism existed in every aspect of a person's life, which Ann Pointer described as creating a "bitter spot in [her] heart."[236] The shift in film from racist tropes to an active promotion of civil rights was a move that was largely accepted as a progressive move; however, these films still lack the self-awareness and inner reflection required for truly understanding the ways in which racism has infiltrated even the

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[234] Donald Bogle *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 9, 473.
[235] Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass 6*, no. 9 (Jan 9, 2012): 752, accessed May 2, 2020 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00486.x.
[236] Ann S. Pointer, Interview with Ann S. Pointer," (btvct10098) interviewed by Paul Oritz, Tuskegee, Alabama, July 22, 1994, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, transcript p. 42, accessed May 10, 2020 from https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/media/pdf/behindtheveil/btvct10098.pdf.

best intended plotlines.[237] Regardless of the reception of the character, films that seek racial justice solely from the perspective of the white character lose their initial intention from the very outset.

The South is a powerful place in the realm of film, both as a setting and as an influence on what is made. As an entity, the South is capable of amazing stories, stunning characters, and inspiring its audience. The South is very much a character of its own, creating and performing as much as it is created and performed.[238] Instilling within viewers the passion and veracity of the South is far from a bad thing; it does, however, call on more accurate and equal representation of its characters and storylines. Recognizing the real experiences of black Southerners, both during and after the Jim Crow era, is fundamental to this concept. Without it, the South will be held back from its true potential as a cultural icon.

Humans are imperfect. Saviors are imperfect. Even the most well-intended storyline has the potential to miss out on the range of experiences that the South provides. The most important part of this understanding is that the world of cinema acknowledge that society can never stop improving on its depiction of race. To do so would be to discredit the very capability of the South as a place of wonder, relegating its stories and its peoples to the confines which they have been held in by those who came before them. Films must show the South as it can be, rather than what it is, and can only do this by embracing the lives of black Southerners as more than a plot point, and instead as the complex and detailed people that they are.

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[237] Matthew W. Hughey, 752.

[238] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, "Introduction: The Southern Imaginary," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary,* 1.

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