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Beasts of the Southern screen: race, gender, and the global South in American cinema since 1963

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**BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN SCREEN: RACE, GENDER, AND THE GLOBAL
SOUTH IN AMERICAN CINEMA SINCE 1963**

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ABSTRACT

“Beasts of the Southern Screen: Race, Gender, and the Global South in American Cinema since 1963,” explores the role that the Southern imaginary has played at the crux of national, media, and personal mythmaking. This dissertation argues that the Southern imaginary—here defined as filmic images of Southernness—has helped Americans manage a series of crises from the late Cold War period to the current moment. Repudiating an allegedly recalcitrant South allowed the United States to see itself as a democratic, progressive place (via downward comparison) even as events like the Civil Rights movement, feminism, and the Vietnam War imperiled the coherence of national identity. Imagined sojourns through the South have also helped filmmakers glimpse the alternative, unauthorized fantasies and fears that swirl just underneath “official narratives” of national and personal identity. Films set in the Southern imaginary are thus crucially important to processing the traumas that connect nation and subject. As a fantasy space, the Southern imaginary allows subjects to confront overwhelming events that can only be endured when “staring over the fence” into a region at once a part of and distinct from the nation.

The first two chapters argue that filmmakers use images of an antiquated South to process Vietnam War-era traumas. Slavery epics like *The Beguiled* and Southern horror films including *Deliverance* allegorize white anxieties over the political influence of minority populations. Later chapters contend that Southern-set films continue to appropriate stories of marginalized peoples, but now under the mantle of tolerance. The third chapter argues that Hollywood films starring Southern, queer cowboys demonstrate the ascendancy of American progressivism even in the once-repressive South. However, these films often exclude minority subjects from their purportedly tolerant landscapes. The final chapter of this dissertation therefore turns to films made within Southern communities like *Moonlight*, analyzing how the filmmakers use silence and visual obscurity to resist the objectifying gaze of the camera. In the films analyzed, the Southern imaginary emerges as fertile site for trenchant social critique and fantasies that connect the personal to the political.

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INTRODUCTION

“Ben Horne: I had the strangest dream...you...and you...and you were there. There was a war, and I was General Robert E. Lee and somehow, in spite of incredible odds, I won.

Audrey Horne: And now you're home, Daddy.

Ben Horne: Yes, I'm home.

Dr. Jacoby: How do you feel? Any after effects? Dizziness?

Ben Horne: I feel terrific!”¹

The second season of the self-reflexive drama *Twin Peaks* (Fox, 1990-91) found viewers desperate to unravel the television show's central mystery: the death of Laura Palmer. Rather than provide answers, producers Mark Frost and David Lynch put former murder suspect Ben Horne (Richard Beymer) on the bizarre tangent excerpted above. Horne spends multiple episodes immersed in a fantasy of fighting and winning the Civil War. In the process, he worries his family and frustrates viewers. *Twin Peaks*' resident psychiatrist, Dr. Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn), insists that Horne is using the Civil War as a kind of map for finding his way out of a psychotic breakdown brought on by Laura's death. The doctor argues that, for Horne, the Civil War fantasy represents the endurance of desperate tragedy as well as its overcoming. During Horne's psychotic episode he imagines he is victorious Confederate General Robert E. Lee. This prompts teenage bystander Bobby Briggs (Dana Ashbrook) to wonder aloud: “Didn't the North win the Civil War?”²

Bobby's question prompts others: of all the experiences that could have been chosen to allegorize Horne's psychosis, why the Civil War? And, given the location of

¹ Mark Frost and David Lynch, *Twin Peaks*, television, perf. by Dana Ashbrook, Richard Beymer, Kyle MacLachlan, Michael Ontkean, Sherilyn Fenn, and Russ Tamblyn (1990-91; Los Angeles, American Broadcasting Company, 2016, DVD).

² Ibid.

the “home” to which Audrey refers—so far North that it borders Canada—why would Horne take the Confederate side, particularly if he needed to win a war to break out of his psychosis? How are viewers to treat Horne’s assertion that having won the Civil War as a Confederate general he now feels “terrific,” and reborn? This scene illustrates the paradoxical role that the Southern imaginary has played at the crux of national, media, and personal mythmaking. New Southern Studies scholars Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee describe the Southern imaginary as: “... an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, practices, attitudes, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographical region and time.”³ In this dissertation, the Southern imaginary refers to filmic representations and fantasies of the South. I argue that these fantasies are crucial to negotiating the traumas that connect nation and individuals even as the South’s presence in film often feels like an unexpected intrusion.

The Southern imaginary often seems to allow subjects to confront an overwhelming event. As in *Twin Peaks*, this event can only be endured by displacing it onto another territory--by “staring over the fence,” so to speak, into a region at once a part of and distinct from the nation. Located on the other side of the fence, this region is both close and far, threatful and lurid, and what it comes to “host” and stand for must be contained through various means precisely because it is so compelling and seductive in its very disreputability. In *Twin Peaks*, for instance, after Horne conquers his problems through his Southern fantasy, the South is never mentioned again. Thus exiling the South superficially restores harmony and whole(some)ness. However, Horne’s assertion that he

³ Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, eds., *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 2.

feels “terrific” rings with just enough exaggeration to make viewers wonder if he has actually achieved closure. Horne’s strained, unconvincing delivery reveals the residue left behind by the South’s resurrection. He and viewers have not fumigated themselves of the region’s threatful presence. Rather, in the cracks in Horne’s smile and demeanor, viewers can glimpse the bodies and battles that Horne comes to disavow but that were an irrefutable part of the Civil War story. Brought to television by an established cinematic auteur, *Twin Peaks* exemplifies the powerful role the Southern imaginary has played in American popular mythology for the past five decades: at once summoning and repudiating an allegedly backward, recalcitrant South has allowed mainstream culture to posit the nation as a democratic, progressive place whenever the coherence of America’s national self-image would become imperiled by traumatic events.⁴ My dissertation specifically focuses on the cinema’s use of and contribution to the Southern imaginary. I analyze filmic images of Southernness produced by Hollywood and independent films since the 1960s as both an index of and a response to individual and national anxieties triggered by political, cultural, and socio-economic upheaval. But I also trace how imagined sojourns through the South at the same time helped filmmakers stage unauthorized erotic fantasies, taboo responses to social fears, and alternative stories that swirl just underneath “official narratives” of national and personal identity.

⁴ These began with the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War in the early-to-mid-60s, then continued with the emergence of the women’s and gay liberation movements in the late 60s as well as Watergate and economic retrenchment in the 70s, and more recently included the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 90s and the corrosion of America’s economic and political sense of control through globalization and renewed migration since the turn of the millennium.

The aim of this dissertation is not to trace the presence of the Southern imaginary in post-1960s Hollywood in its entirety, or to tell all of the stories that flow beneath canonized historical narratives. Rather, this dissertation will, over two time periods, tell one story: the way that the nation dealt with threatful events and social change via specific kinds of Southern-set films that follow the pattern of disavowal/avowal traced above. These narratives appear frequently in periods of racial and social flux, which is why this dissertation primarily examines two periods: the 1960s-70s, as gay rights and feminism peaked, and the black freedom struggle transitioned from Civil Rights strategies to Black Power, and the 1990s-2000s, when all three movements (respectively) transitioned into the fight for marriage equality, empowerment or market feminism, and Black Lives Matter. Analyzing Southern-set films allows viewers new insights into the ways that Americans received and processed these national movements. Such an analysis also illuminates the role that race, gender, sexuality, and class played in cinematic genres or bodies of work that have often been positioned as apolitically white: the B-movie, the slasher film, the Civil War epic, the films of Southern cowboy Matthew McConaughey, and independent cinema.⁵

Focusing narrowly on two time periods and on only certain kinds of Southern-set films will allow the dissertation to be expansive in other ways: namely, to follow these stories across the film, television, and (briefly) advertising industries while being mindful

⁵ The dissertation will not deal with films that un-problematically celebrate Southern womanhood/masculinity, such as *Steel Magnolias* (Dir. Herbert Ross, 1989) or the *Smokey and the Bandit* series (Dir. Hal Needham and Dick Lowry, 1977, 1980, 1983), or those in which the South plays a negligible role, such as *Dazed and Confused* (Dir. Richard Linklater, 1993). I hope to deal with other films of the 1980s including *Daughters of the Dust* and films that center Southern music, including *Nashville* (Dir. Robert Altman, 1975), in later iterations of this project.

of differences within and among their institutional structures. The Southern imaginary makes itself felt across modes of entertainment and at various levels: from the individual level of actorly or viewer choices (the decision to tune one's performance with a particular Southern inflection or in the latter case, to patronize films set in the distant, but not too distant South), director choices (to emphasize some stories over others and thereby reap critical cache), and on the level of the business side of the industry (to institutionally gratify the films that extend Hollywood's audience in diversifying, splintering media landscape). These levels do not just exist alongside each other but are mutually imbricated: an actor does not have total control over the roles offered to him, nor does the industry have total control over that actor as a "property," even if he/she is under contract. Similarly, while the Hollywood industry shapes the public imagination, it is also subject to the whims of an often-fickle audience, and is shaped by their espoused desires. Analyzing the messy, complicated, fruitful, profitable ways that the Hollywood industry moves through the Southern imaginary, like a machine with many operators, is the goal of this dissertation.

"The Nation's Region": The South in the American Imagination

Southern Studies scholar Leigh Ann Duck coined the phrase "The Nation's Region" to describe what the South has meant to the nation. She and other New Southern Studies scholars like Jennifer Rae Greeson, Jay Watson, and Patricia Yaegar detail how the nation has courted or disavowed the South to negotiate its identity on the world

stage.⁶ As Greeson has shown, by defining U.S. literature against the neo-colonialist South, eighteenth and nineteenth century American writers also differentiated their nation from an imperialist Europe. But historians like Nina Silber contend that as the nation modernized and dealt with the ramifications of the Civil War, the recalcitrant South was also romanticized in American letters and history.⁷ Literature abounds that communicates nostalgia for the slower pace and rigid social order that came with plantation society. These two poles—romanticization and disavowal—have defined the nation’s relationship to “its region.”

Yaeger elaborates that the Southern imaginary has proven particularly useful in times of collective trauma:

In a culture dealing with crisis, unable to handle changes in the course of everyday life—the growing demand for African American equality, for greater access to education, citizenship, and economic resources—change erupts abruptly, via images of [Southern], monstrous, ludicrous bodies.⁸

These monstrous bodies appear particularly frequently in Southern Gothic texts, the genre perhaps most closely associated with Dixie in the national imagination. As discussed by Lucinda MacKethan, Southern Gothic literature mixes terror, absurdism, and grotesque images to shock or disturb. The deformed or extravagant bodies in the work of William

⁶ See Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 2006); Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010); Jay Watson, *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985* (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 2012); Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000).

⁷ See Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1993).

⁸ Yaeger 4.

Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor satirize real social conditions and anthropomorphize social anxieties.⁹ The dysfunctional, poor white family in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, for instance, epitomizes the moral and economic destitution of the region more generally. The Southern Gothic genre is built on a set of recurring icons that paint the South as a place not only obsessed with the past but stuck within it: deranged Southern belles born fifty years too late, poor whites who cannot adapt to industrialization, and perhaps most infamously, ruined plantations.

In Southern literature more generally, the image of the plantation encapsulates nostalgia for an entire imagined South replete with elegance and a clear social order. Northern visions of the Southern plantation system served particularly crucial functions that have to do with the nation's ability to construct a coherent collective identity. As Greeson notes, writers from the United States have attempted to reject the image of their nation as a collection of colonies since the 18th century. To do this required a concentrated effort to:

create a story of national emergence in which the United States springs into being, full formed and standing alone on the face of the earth, as the exceptional republic. Untouched by the binary power extremes understood to organize all other human societies—monarch/subject, master/servant, empire/colony—this new nation is supposed to operate, *sui generis*, on primarily consensual terms.¹⁰

⁹ This is by no means an exhaustive definition. See Lucinda MacKethan, "Genres of Southern Literature," *Southern Spaces*, 12 February 2017, <https://southernspaces.org/2004/genres-southern-literature> as well as Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mysteries and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).

¹⁰ Greeson 2-3.

In practice, the nation was built on force and coercion: governmental agents and American citizens displaced native peoples, engaged in slavery (in the North and South), and operated on the principle of *femme covert*, the legal precedent that mandated male control of female citizens.

As the North differentiated itself from the South during the Industrial Revolution, it became easier to envision the former region as the “true” heart of a democratic nation. Unlike the agrarian, slave South, the North allegedly valorized free labor, and industry. It is for this reason that I will use the term “national-North.”¹¹ Like the Southern imaginary, the “national-North” refers not to an existent place, but to an ideology or construct that bolstered American exceptionalism. In this construct, the North is synonymous with nation: the national-North is the place where true freedom, democracy, and equality reside. As Greeson notes, however, American exceptionalism is based on exclusions; in other words, it is defined by what it is not. One major antithesis the national-North has organized itself around is the Southern imaginary, epitomized by the plantation space. Even after slavery officially ended in the North “unfreedoms” have continued to haunt that region—de facto segregation remained the norm, as did other forms of institutionalized discrimination. Focusing on oppression as a uniquely Southern phenomenon yoked to the plantation deflected attention away from the national-North’s

¹¹ Jennifer Rae Greeson, “Plenary Panel: The South in the North,” Presentation at the Biannual Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Boston, MA, March 10-12, 2016.

own contradictory identity. Understanding national-Northern identity through downward comparison to an imagined South has remained integral to definitions of Americanness.¹²

In the early 20th century, immigration increased as did African American migration to Northern cities: so too did an influx of nativism and racial violence. This influx of racism was incommensurate with the North's self-image as a free space. White supremacist, plantation-centered films like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) held a significant appeal for nativist white urbanites. Griffith's film capitalized on national nostalgia for the Old South, and ended with two fantasies of whiteness: a heroic group of Ku Klux Klan members saving a white family and in a parallel scene, the birth of a newly virtuous white race via a triumphant heterosexual couple: one partner a white man from the free North and the other a pure, white woman from the plantation South. Together, these scenes allowed Northerners to conjure an untroubled national reunion they hoped to bring to fruition in the public sphere. *Birth of a Nation* also fed white supremacist nationalism and the desire for racial homogeneity (the latter of which was no longer possible in the post-bellum period). This film, along with adaptations of texts such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, epitomize how the national identity shaped and was shaped by projective fantasies of the Southern imaginary in the early 20th century.¹³

¹² The disavowal of the South and the creation of a North-South binary can never be complete. The Southern region is not only a part of the nation but it powered Northern economy through the 20th century, as Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* has forcefully argued. I will employ the terms "national-North" and "Southern imaginary" throughout this dissertation as one way to reject binary thinking and instead remain mindful of the nexus of relationships that exist along these two concepts and the global market.

¹³ See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002).

The mythic plantation South may thus appear to be a static symbol, but it has proven itself adaptable to dynamic national needs. In Southern Gothic films, impoverished white subjects take over the plantation space and stand as photographic proof of the region's poverty. As Barker and McKee note, tales like *The Story of Temple Drake* (Dir. Stephen Roberts, 1933) abounded in the 1930s and evince the impact of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression: "With the onset of the Depression, the ruined plantation house became a symbol, not only of ravages of the Civil War, but of the economic devastation of an already struggling South, the area that [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] would call 'the nation's number one economic problem.'"¹⁴ The intensity of this image of a depraved South is matched only by the nostalgic sweep of films like *Gone with the Wind* (Dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). As the title of that film implies, the plantation South is only accessible through representation. It is "no more than a dream remembered," and therefore must be valiantly memorialized on film to be experienced. Margaret Mitchell's original novel and the film adaptation play into the ongoing fetishization of an always already lost South.¹⁵

New Southern Studies criticism has increasingly turned to Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic/Marxist theory to define the fetish and its utility in understanding the Southern imaginary's effects.¹⁶ The fetish can be defined as an object which references sexual needs it cannot sate. According to Žižek, the fetish is further capable of

¹⁴ Ibid 7.

¹⁵ For more on this, see Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003); and Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 2008).

¹⁶ See Barker and McKee, "Introduction," *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (7-9) and Patricia Yaeger's discussion of the "unthought knowns" (a Žižekian phrase) of Southern literature in *Dirt and Desire* (xi-xii).

representing unfulfillable social desires such as the yearning for a prosperous, conflict-free nation that is both democratic and racially homogenous—another impossibility. Zizek argues the fetishized fantasy of such a place is the “embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth.”¹⁷ In other words, fully acknowledging the degree of oppression that undergirds the “free” American way of life would disrupt social reality for many. Images like the plantation in *Gone with the Wind* make that social reality bearable by (almost) erasing oppressions from view. The film imagines a past that is free of the forced labor and violence that come with slavery; it thus invites its viewer into a pleasurable fantasy of pastoral abundance and a Horatio Alger story starring a beautiful girl who survives difficult times through “hardheaded, capitalistic determination.”¹⁸ The national allure of these fantasies can be seen in the expansive culture industry that has sprung up around plantations like the fictional Tara (the plantation at the center of *Gone with the Wind*).

The film adaptation premiered in 1939, the same year that World War II began. This war and the Civil Rights movement that followed are historical turning points that would also intensify the South’s importance in the public sphere. While these cultural shifts and displacements regarding the South were already present before WWII, the 1950s and 60s saw the concurrent emergence of television and the Civil Rights era. The South owes its heightened profile to these simultaneous emergences. As Torres notes, tele-journalism needed vivid images and cultural gravitas, while the Civil Rights

¹⁷ Barker and McKee 8.

¹⁸ Ibid.

movement needed a national platform.¹⁹ For a time, the television news industry and Civil Rights leaders formed a mutually beneficial relationship that brought images of protests into American homes on a nightly basis. It is hard to overestimate the impact of these images and the ways they shaped outsiders' views of what the South looked and felt like.

Television news played a crucial role in how the public received President Eisenhower's decision to send federal troops to escort black students to a Little Rock elementary school in 1957. As Torres notes, television's penetration into American homes was almost complete²⁰ and news coverage of the integration crisis was unrelenting: "NBC led with John Chancellor's reports from Arkansas every night for a month. As one journalist put it, the collective nightly ritual came to resemble a 'a national evening séance.'"²¹ NBC, CBS, and ABC all took the side of protestors over Southern authorities. The networks often narrated the news using moral absolutes which also shaped the way that audiences understood the conflict and the South. News stories that cast Freedom Fighters against racist authorities like Bull Connor led the nation to see the South as a monolithically recalcitrant place. This state of affairs prompted historian James Cobb to reflect that "an accumulated panorama of appalling and indelible imagery, from a beaten and bloated Emmett Till to the raw brutality of Selma, presented the South

¹⁹ See Sasha Torres, "In a Crisis We Must Have a Sense of Drama: Civil Rights and Televisual Information," in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell H. Hunt (New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

²⁰ In the early 1950s, the medium of television spread unevenly, with the highest number of televisions being purchased in the Northeast and the lowest number in the deep South. Even as the region gained more television stations, Southern affiliate stations often refused to air news and documentaries about the Civil Rights movement that were produced by networks (Ibid 248-50).

²¹ Ibid.

as not just what Howard Zinn...had called ‘the most terrible place in America,’ but a place that hardly seemed part of America at all.”²²

Many Southerners received televised images of their region differently. Media and Southern Studies scholar Allison Graham argues that when Southern residents turned on the television, they recognized stock stereotypical tropes and characters: talk of the oppressive heat, the frothed-up lynch mob, the “white trash racist.” They were quick to satirize what she calls “the growing lexicon of Southern clichés.”²³ What viewers saw, in effect, were Southern Gothic archetypes transplanted with new, contradictory functions. On the news, these archetypes were deployed as proof of the South’s dangerous conditions. However, concurrent with news coverage, “hayseed” sitcoms sprung up on television schedules. These shows used the archetype of the rural hick to quite different, recuperative effect. Sitcoms like *The Real McCoys* (CBS, ABC, 1957-1963), *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960-1968), *Green Acres* (CBS, 1965-1971), and *Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-1972), drew in family audiences from across the nation and were also good press for the region. These shows also recruited Southern audiences alienated by network news coverage. In this sense, then, there were competing visions of the American South circulating in 1960s America. *Andy Griffith’s* Mayberry reaffirmed the South as a rural space, pleasant in its slow pace and community-driven way of life. This vision of life contrasted against a period rife with social upheaval that was widely televised.

²² James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 1. As distant as the “savage” South may have felt to Northern viewers, it is worth noting that staunch segregationist George Wallace had impressive showings in presidential primaries into the 1970s. His run for President in 1972 was halted only by a wannabee assassin’s bullet which is to suggest that the Southern region and its conflicts were not so distant after all.

²³ Allison Graham, *Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003), 3.

From 1963-1975, identity shattering assassinations (including but not limited to Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy) and violent confrontations at home and abroad (the Vietnam War and the militant student protests against it) forced mainstream America to acknowledge the troubled aspects of the nation and to understand that the great consensus society had become a myth, if it ever had been anything else to begin with. The sense of a fragmenting society was confirmed by various political and social emancipation movements, led by the Civil Rights movement and its radicalization into Black Power, by second wave feminism, and by gay liberation. Each of these social movements upset mainstream conceptions about how Americans were supposed to organize their lives with regard to marriage, partner choice, workplace hierarchy, childcare arrangements, and so on. The questions and demands that emerged from these movements were not posed only by academics and activists, but garnered ever wider currency in the public sphere and in popular culture.

The Vietnam War profoundly shaped everyday life in both material and ideological terms. The United States had entered Vietnam's civil war shortly after the French colonial government fell in 1954. The nation entered the conflict to contain the spread of communism. By the mid-1960s, moral questions about the United States' presence²⁴ were accompanied by concerns over whether the United States could win. Losing would not just mean global embarrassment but would force many to reconsider America's imperviousness, the basis on which American exceptionalism rested. And yet, a path to victory remained elusive as did a workable exit strategy. It is difficult to

²⁴ US involvement had grown from sending advisors to sending thousands of ground troops in this time period.

overestimate the Vietnam War's impact on American culture and, specifically, on American film, despite the conflict's near complete absence from screens. Very few films were made about Vietnam during the conflict itself. But, as controversial 1970s film critic Pauline Kael notes, "Vietnam we experience indirectly in just about every movie we go to. It's one of the reasons we've had so little romance or comedy—because we're all tied up in knots about that rotten war."²⁵ In the period between 1965-1972, the Vietnam War was not actually absent from American screens; rather, as Kael suggests, the films of this period "represent and replay, in a displaced fashion, the Vietnam War's defining experience: the onset of trauma resulting from a realisation of powerlessness in the face of a world whose systems of organization—both moral and political—have broken down."²⁶

As the crisis-ridden sixties turned into the seventies, the South might have seemed poised to remain locked in the same function it always had—as a backwards space against which the national-North compared itself favorably. However, large-scale industrial changes made the perceived and actual binary between a recalcitrant South and a modern North increasingly difficult to maintain. During the 1970s, the South industrialized profitably while the nation's economy stagnated. An increase in defense contracts, the rise of the Southern manufacturing industry, and an anti-union bent created a business-friendly environment that altered the region's course of development. As

²⁵ Leo Lerman, "Pauline Kael Talks About Violence, Sex, Eroticism and Women & Men in the Movies," *Conversations with Pauline Kael*, ed. Will Brantley (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 36. For a discussion of the absence of Vietnam films during the years of the war, see Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Scribner's, 1975), and Gilbert Adair, *Hollywood's Vietnam* (London: Heinemann, 1989).

²⁶ Kael as qtd. in Lerman 36.

Bruce Schulman observes, the Sunbelt South's economy boomed between 1959-1980.²⁷ What's more, the North, historically mythologized as a site of freedom and immigration, became a major site of emigration for the first time since 1900. The flow of people between the North and the South literally changed direction. During the 1950s, a half-million people left the South. In contrast, between 1970-1976, the population of every Southern state grew faster than the national average, and most outstripped California's growth rate. As Schulman notes, during the 1970s, the South "attracted twice as many in-migrants as any other region, including the West...the characteristics of this migration revealed the impact of the defense boom,"²⁸ as well as the uncanny reversal of North-South relations in the 1970s. For the first time in nearly a hundred years, the South was a capitalist, technological, heterogeneous threat. The South would continue to ascend on the political stage through the 1970s-90s.

The Southern Imaginary in the 1960s-70s and Beyond

The Civil Rights movement, hayseed television sitcoms, and the industrial "rise of the Sunbelt South" thus raised the region's visibility in the national media. I would argue that by the 1960s-70s, cinematic and televised images supplanted Southern literature as America's reference point for Southernness. Filmic and televised images of the South actually served as foils for one another. Southern television stations had shaped national programming since the late 1950s. As Sasha Torres argues, as the medium began to

²⁷ Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Cary, NC: Oxford UP, 1991), 152.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

spread through the region, Southern network affiliate stations refused to air news and documentaries about the Civil Rights movement. To avoid Southern backlash, networks largely avoided content that centered black life through the 1960s.²⁹ As far as networks were concerned, it didn't pay to produce or distribute programming that would offend a vocal portion of an entire region, if that programming was permitted to air at all. Throughout this period, television remained restrained in its depiction of controversial topics.

While television was considered a domestic medium that should behave as a "guest in the home," film consumption was envisioned as a matter of choice, and could therefore offer a different set of pleasures.³⁰ Aided by industrial changes discussed in more detail in chapters one and two, films could be more explicit in the 1960s. B-film was particularly well-suited to fill the vacuum left by television: it could directly cover controversial topics like miscegenation, racism, and violence as well as sexually explicit or horrific material that would have been inconceivable under the Television Code. Considering television and film as complementary media allows scholars to see that the Southern imaginary influenced contemporary American media landscape to a greater degree than film historians have yet acknowledged. The scope of this influence becomes

²⁹ There were a few exceptions to this rule, including *Amos N' Andy* and *Beulah*. Both shows, however, were adapted from radio programs and came with a built-in audience. Additionally, both shows were white-produced and comported African American into familiar, stereotypical comedic roles. There are alternative readings to the one provided here, but these are beyond the scope of this introduction. For more, see *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell H. Hunt, (New York: Oxford UP, 2004). In the late 1960s, the black-female-centered *Julia* debuted to controversy and acclaim. Of course, the 1970s saw a boom in black-centered (though still white-authored) comedies such as *The Jeffersons* and *Sanford and Sons*.

³⁰ Television was additionally regulated by a voluntary code of ethics, The Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters, most often referred to as "The Television Code." By contrast, the film industry's Production Code weakened in the 1960s and would be replaced with a ratings system in 1968.

clear when one considers that the Southern imaginary also played a constitutive role in both the auteur-driven New Hollywood (in addition to B-films). In fact, the unique interplay of these two modes of production defines filmmaking in the period under investigation. This dissertation will thus pay attention to television as well as auteurist and genre cinema to trace how the Southern imaginary pervaded different areas of culture and—given the only partially overlapping demographics among television, genre films, and auteur productions—appealed to different audiences.

Because Hollywood's incorporation of the Southern imaginary into its output of genre fare considerably increased during this period, I will devote extensive discussion to genre cinema in the chapters below. Before doing so, however, I would like to expand the present contextualization by including commentary on two examples of the auteur-driven cinema that came to be known as the New Hollywood—two films that easily count among the most influential films of the decade, *Bonnie and Clyde* (Dir. Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Dir. Dennis Hopper, 1969). While the New Hollywood gained some notoriety for its lopsided appraisal by critics and its relative weakness at the box office, the two films at issue became considerable financial successes (the former, however, only after a relaunch and the latter in completely unexpected manner). Their popularity not only indicates their status as countercultural darlings, but also suggests that the Southern imaginary at least partially drove their haunting appeal.

Beginning in the mid-to-late 1960s, young, college-educated directors created what film historians of the period have characterized as a “politically subversive and aesthetically challenging cinema...that has few precedents in the history of mainstream

Hollywood.”³¹ Uninterested in the blockbuster mentality, filmmakers like Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Hal Ashby, Peter Bogdanovich, Bob Rafelson, but also to a lesser extent Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and the early George Lucas, crafted personal films about alienated hipsters and down-on-their-luck drifters, whose casual dismissal of mainstream values and vaguely countercultural attitude resonated with young, white, mostly urban audiences. As Derek Nystrom argues, “the story of this period is almost always structured by the idea of a break or rupture.”³² These films do differ from classical film storytelling, structured as it is on cause-and-effect and the valorization of American hegemonic ideals. In the New Hollywood era rife with political and social turmoil, “heroes could no longer tame the West, heal the sick, or police the streets.”³³ Rather, “The heroes [of the New Hollywood movement] underscore ‘an almost physical sense of inconsequential action, of pointlessness and uselessness, a radical skepticism, in short about the American virtues of ambition, vision, drive.’”³⁴ As Grundmann, Lucia, and Simon note, pessimistic films had always been a part of Hollywood’s output (consider film noir), but the decline of the classical studio system meant that fewer films were produced to offset the New Hollywood “cinema of pathos.”³⁵

³¹ Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, vol. IV., eds. Cynthia A. Barto Lucia Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Malden, MA: 2012), 410.

³² *Ibid* 411.

³³ Cynthia A. Barto Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon. “Introduction to Volume III: American Film, 1946 to 1975,” *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, vol. III., eds. Cynthia A. Barto, Lucia Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Malden, MA: 2012), 14.

³⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, “The Pathos of Failure: American Cinema in the 70s,” *Monogram*, no 6 (October 1975), 15 as qtd. in “Introduction to Volume III: American Film, 1946 to 1975.”

³⁵ Cynthia A. Barto Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, “Introduction to Volume III: American Film, 1946 to 1975,” *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, 14.

If the New Hollywood's formal heterogeneity and dismissal of classical cinema's clear formal structures already suggests a basic complementarity to the narrative and stylistic convolutions of the Southern Gothic, it should be noted that many New Hollywood films—most notably *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*—were actually set in the South. This cinema carefully borrowed from Southern Gothic conventions. Without mentioning Gothicism, film historian Andrew Sarris names key qualities of the Southern Gothic genre to describe New Hollywood cinema as a “cinema of alienation, anomie, anarchy and absurdism.”³⁶ Many examples of the New Hollywood favored kinetic excitement over plot comprehensibility; and they valorized stylized fragmented or otherwise directionless narratives, saturated colors and unconventional camerawork as expressive tools to lay out a world that has lost its bearings. However, both films also exemplify how the New Hollywood not only romanticized Southernness, but also disavowed it in the very act of defining 1960s-70s rebelliousness. Comparing the ending of *Bonnie and Clyde* with *Easy Rider* elucidates how the South functions in this way.

Easy Rider is a road film that ends when its biker protagonists are shot by Southern hillbillies. When the bikers die, the Southern imaginary rises up to mark the bounds of their rebelliousness. In other words, the bikers are anti-establishment martyrs whose rule-breaking is contrasted against the actions of the original “Rebel country,” residents who shoot them. As if to ensure viewers understand that difference, the shooters speak with a Southern accent so strong that their speech is nearly incomprehensible.

³⁶ Andrew Sarris as qtd. in Noel King. “The Last Good Time We Ever Had: Remembering the New Hollywood Cinema.” *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*. Ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2004. 20.

Likewise, *Bonnie and Clyde*'s spectacular romp of robberies comes to an end when one of their Southern friends sets a trap for them. Through these contrasts, both films make clear that, while Bonnie, Clyde, and the two bikers are rebellious white Americans, are not interested in the Old South. Instead, their notion of rebellion is very much that of the northern-coded New Left.³⁷

While New Hollywood films courted an aesthetic break from traditional Hollywood fare, they were still created within and by the Hollywood industry. As Grundmann, Lucia, and Simon note, "...the New Hollywood, its modest experiments and sobering vision, cannot be separated from the industry's shifting economic fortunes, rotating set of studio bosses, and the profound recession that hit the movie business between 1969-1971."³⁸ Studios remained convinced that blockbusters would provide the way out of economic recession, and continued to make genre films that had proven profitable in the past. Many of these films took a revisionist view on genres but few, if any, linked these formal revisions to explicit political messages.

This is not to say, however, that the film industry recoiled from the palpable presence of political crisis during the late 1960s and early 70s. Rather, the Southern imaginary played a crucial role in how viewers understood their relationship to the nation during a series of crises from the 1960s to the current moment. "Beasts of the Southern Screen" thus sits at the center of the Venn diagram between Southern Studies and film

³⁷ As analyzed in Chapter 2, both New Hollywood cinema and traditional fare owes a debt to exploitation cinema. New Hollywood cinema closely resembles exploitation fare, likely because the industries shared personnel. Sentence about *Easy Rider* being inspired by Roger Corman. Corman's films drive Southern Gothic into New Hollywood cinema, and also pushed the mainstream into more daring territory. The decline of the Hollywood studio system, in turn, drove a rise in independent productions.

³⁸ Cynthia A. Barto Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, "Introduction to Volume III: American Film, 1946 to 1975," *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, 15.

studies, bringing the insights and interdisciplinary methodology of the former to bear on contemporary films. The dissertation is divided into two parts, each of which contains two chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 detail uses of the Southern imaginary by Northern directors in the 1960s-1970s. Chapter 3 and 4 move forward in time to gauge how the strategies used to portray the Southern imaginary have changed in the new millennium. If the 1960s-70s made marginalized groups accessories to white, heteronormative fears and fantasies, the films examined in Part 2 appear to center people of color and LGBTQ+ communities. The goal of Part 2, then, is to gauge how truly central marginalized identities have become to Southern storytelling.

The first chapter shows the nation grappling with Vietnam War losses, an eroding faith in American military supremacy, and the meaning of the concurrent Civil War Centennial by recreating (and reenacting the loss of) the Civil War in a spate of historical epics including *Two Thousand Maniacs* (Dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1964), *The Beguiled* (Dir. Don Siegel, 1972), and *Slaves* (Dir. Herbert Biberman, 1969). By using the Confederate South as a metaphor for the Vietnam War, these films suggest the conflict in Southeast Asia as a failing endeavor in ways that the larger public could scarcely afford to acknowledge. These films raised the specter of unrest at the precise moment when nationalistic Civil War Centennial celebrations sought to unify the country in a common, nationalist cause of defending liberty at home and in Vietnam. The nation's reticence to accept impending military defeat may explain why most Civil War film epics were deemed aesthetic, financial, and critical failures. However, I argue that these films' very failures constitute their importance to the 1970s national imaginary.

In addition to speaking radical critiques of Vietnam, these cinematic representations also stumbled into alternative models of revolution, pleasure, gender, and time. I take what seem in these films to be moments of narrative confusion—such as when a black woman resists the subjugation of slavery by invoking the rhetoric of the Black Power movement in *Slaves*, or when a white plantation mistress and bondsman have sex styled on 1970s exploitation films in *Mandingo*—to be productive anachronisms that register continuities between the 1860s and 1960s. The continuities revealed include the neo-colonialism inherent to slave society as well as the Vietnam effort, and interracial relations that defined the plantation system but could only be admitted onscreen with the weakening of the strict Hollywood Production Code in the 1970s. These films' frank acknowledgement of racial tension and revolution particularly appealed to inner-city black audiences, who saw productive parallels between the plantation insurrections of *Slaves* and *Mandingo* and late-1960s protests in Watts, Detroit, and Newark. In their reordering of time and cultivation of marginalized audiences, supposed cinematic failures like *Slaves* articulate social critiques and vented unsanctioned desires that were of broader national significance.

Most directors of Civil War epics were from the North with few personal connections to the South. Chapter Two asks why, then, filmmakers like John Huston, who directed the Southern Gothic adaptations *Wise Blood* (1979) and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) in the 1960s-70s, returned again and again to the region. Their outsider status is reflected in their treatment of the South as an alien space. I argue that the recurring cinematic trope of the confident, urban Northerner who travels to the South

in pursuit of rural pleasures but finds only murderous hillbillies speaks to collective tensions surrounding the inviolability of the American body. Though horror films most regularly torture are people of color and women, *Deliverance* (Dir. John Boorman, 1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Dir. Wes Craven, 1977) visits a special kind of violence on white male bodies that are not only killed but also sexually humiliated. In one memorable sequence in *Deliverance*, a white man is raped. As this chapter explores, these films carried unexpected psychological currency in a nation whose identity as a superpower was deeply embattled due to the decreasingly popular, increasingly deadly Vietnam War. In this conflict, the country was both a purveyor of violence and at the same time felt itself a victim of it. *Deliverance*'s death-soaked landscape allowed audiences to flirt with mortality through characters who are both exploiters and exploited; or rather, protagonists who act as conquerors but who simultaneously believe that they are not. I trace these representations to larger anxieties surrounding the South's new economic prosperity in the 1970s, when, due to an increase in military and private contracts, the South lucratively industrialized while the national economy stagnated. The rural South rose again—reflected cinematically in the body that refuses to sink in *Deliverance*—giving visual form to ambient fears that the nation and the region might have been reversing positions, that national identity might not have been as stable as was traditionally imagined, and that the country might be impotent to stop the multiple threats to its bodily integrity.

Hollywood genre film remained preoccupied with these and other power shifts through the 1960s-70s. Demonstrations of black agency became even more charged as

the Civil Rights movement evolved and became eclipsed by Black Power. This was patently indicated by the reaction to *In the Heat of the Night* (Dir. Norman Jewison, 1967). When black detective Virgil Tibbs (Sidney Poitier) returned a slap from a white man, the public backlash was swift. If assertions of black masculinity remained rare in Southern-set, mainstream cinema of this period, they soon would emerge in the rise of Blaxploitation cinema. White Southern masculinity, in turn, became gentrified—that is to say, its virility was rechanneled into broader territory as part of the political pendulum swing to the right. Films like *White Lightning* (Dir. Joseph Sargent, 1973), *Walking Tall* (Dir. Phil Carlson, 1973), and *Smokey and the Bandit* (Dir. Hal Needham, 1977) popularized a roguish, “good ol’ boy” masculinity. Many audiences came to identify with these working-class heroes in the political swing away from the counterculture of the 1960s. As Derek Nystrom argues, “in order to grasp the rise of the New Right political life during the 1970s—especially its consolidation of an economic and electoral power base in the South—one could do worse than screen the surprise hit of 1973, *Walking Tall*.”³⁹ In essence, the maleness of this film came to be seen not just as an expression of Southernness, but as an “authentic” Americanness. Actors like Burt Reynolds (who starred in *White Lightning* and *Smokey and the Bandit*) and musicians like Lynyrd Skynyrd encapsulated a larger phenomenon termed “Southernization.”

This cultural ascendancy of allegedly Southern ideals and politics on the national stage coincided with the industrial rise of the Sunbelt South previously described. The phenomenon of Southernization was described as early as 1974 by John Edgerton’s *The*

³⁹ Nystrom xi.

Americanization of Dixie: the Southernization of America. He and more recent scholars have traced the influence of the South not only in the popularity of explicitly Southern icons such as Evel Kinevil but in the ascent of politicians who espoused “Southern” values including religious conservatism, traditionalism, jingoism, and a belief in “law and order,” politics. Every elected President from 1974 to 2008 was from the South (by choice or by birth), except for Ronald Reagan.

Reagan may not have had a Southern accent, but at least part of his success was due to his manipulation of “Southern” codes: plain speech, conservatism, and a distrust of federal intervention and bureaucracy. Southernization thus reinforced the linkage of Southernness with rigid conservatism. In the 1980s, Southernness and conservatism would be yoked with cold-hearted ignorance about the decade’s single biggest problem, the cataclysmic health crisis brought on by AIDS. Infamously, President Reagan refused to speak the disease’s name during his tenure, and federally funded research moved at a slow enough pace to cost thousands of lives. This crisis was not portrayed directly in mainstream cinema for approximately 15 years,⁴⁰ but the gap was briefer in independent cinema mainly due to the rise of New Queer Cinema in the 1980s-90s.⁴¹ As the 1990s

⁴⁰ For fuller analysis of the AIDS crisis and representation, see chapter 3 of this dissertation. See also Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009). As Hallas notes, the AIDS crisis was more widely represented on television news, in made-for-TV-movies, and in independent cinema. Documentaries in particular were an important way that survivors, activists, and their loved ones documented their fight as well as archived lives that were cut short by the disease. This is not to suggest that the visibility of AIDS victims in mainstream media was beneficent or without serious drawbacks. As Hallas notes, “During the first decade of the epidemic, the high level of cultural visibility afforded homosexuality in dominant media discourses pathologized gay men more than it empowered them. Yet this visibility, which Simon Watney dubbed ‘the spectacle of AIDS,’ paradoxically engendered the invisibility of queer trauma...Homosexual bodies were put on display as a traumatizing threat to the general public, while traumatized queer lives were discounted” (Hallas 17).

⁴¹ While fighting the governmental intransigence and death wrought by the AIDS crisis, filmmakers including Lizzie Borden, Marlon Riggs, Donna Deitch, Todd Haynes, and Gus Van Sant crafted a spate of

wore on into the 2000s, calls for greater industrial and representational diversity swelled. And, as in the earlier period of the 1970s-80s, one primary space that directors used to negotiate these crisis and demands was the Southern imaginary.

Chapter three explores queer Southern experience on film by examining the career resurgence of the archetypal Texan cowboy, Matthew McConaughey. The actor's rebranding effort has been phenomenal enough to warrant its own title: the McConaissance. Critics rarely discuss the queerness of the McConaissance, but this chapter argues that it is that quality which distinguishes the most recent phase of the actor's career from his earlier performances in romantic comedies targeting female audiences—not coincidentally, the biggest hit of his career came when he played the AIDS-positive Ron Woodruff in *Dallas Buyer's Club* (Dir. Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013). Like the hillbillies of *Deliverance*, the queer persona that McConaughey adopts in *Dallas Buyer's Club*, *The Paperboy* (Dir. Lee Daniels, 2012), and *True Detective* renders him a sexual and regional “Other” to Northern-national audiences.

However, the actor's star pedigree lent gravitas to his queer roles that led to an Academy Award win and career renaissance. In essence, the McConaissance shows the chiastic shifts of ideological constructions of Southernness and queerness, once oppositional identity categories, since the 1980s-90s. McConaughey's appropriation of a Southern queer persona and its success with mainstream viewers marks a new era of

queer themed independent cinema. As New Queer Cinema developed through the 1990s, this arm of independent filmmaking de-radicalized and became its own niche market, working with mainstream distributors in many cases. If the groupings that registered 1960s-70s social crisis were auteur-driven film and genre film, the categories that defined 1990s social crisis film were liberal mainstream media, like *Philadelphia* (Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993) and independent cinema.

tolerance that is ostensibly progressive. In the McConaissance, queerness is no longer secreted or shameful and Southernness is no longer solely associated with backwoods recalcitrance. Instead, the cultural phenomenon also suggests that the privileges that come with a new era of inclusion are precarious and based on ever-narrowing parameters of whiteness, class belonging, and heteronormativity. These films use the South as a space where taboo identity categories can be investigated and then discarded when viewers leave the safe space of the movie theater. Thus, while McConaughey's films signal the degree to which LGBTQ+ populations have become representable in the last thirty years, the moment is not the counterhegemonic victory many hope for; his visibility has not equaled enduring empowerment for the groups he represents: LGBTQ+ populations and rural Southerners. Rather, the ease with which McConaughey seized upon LGBTQ+ identity as a tool for his personal reinvention suggests how devastatingly elastic hegemony can be.

IV. *House of Cards* and the Southern Imaginary Redux

The Netflix series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-) epitomizes the continuing centrality of Southernness to national mythmaking across film and television. The show also indicates how modern media uses the Southern imaginary to court and disavow Otherness in the form of racial, sexual, and gendered difference. Season 2 finds the ruthless, indefatigable President Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) traveling to his South Carolina ancestral home on the 150-year anniversary of a Civil War battle. In many ways, Underwood's engagement with the Civil War recalls Ben Horne's in *Twin Peaks*. Unlike

Horne, however, Underwood pledges no allegiance to the Confederacy. Breaking the fourth wall, Underwood talks directly to viewers, noting, “I personally take no pride in the Confederacy. Avoid wars you can’t win, and never raise your flag for an asinine cause like slavery.”⁴² This Southerner wishes audiences to know that he does not carry the prejudices of his ancestors nor does he take refuge in the Lost Cause mythology said to suffuse the region. On a different trip to the South, Underwood has sex with a man with whom he previously shared a relationship. These two instances illustrate how profoundly representations of the Southern imaginary have changed even since the 1990s when Ben Horne had his fantasy—tolerance of difference now reigns in a region in which repression was once the norm. A progressive South, in turn, can lionize national identity by showing that even the most oppressive region in the union has transformed into a democratic place. However, *House of Cards* also suggests how the South continues to figure into national myths as a space where taboo desires can be vented and explored.

As part of the Civil War sesquicentennial, Underwood visits a war reenactment and learns his ancestor Augustus Underwood died in the battle. His engagement with the South changes as he, like Horne, feels he now must confront Southern history in order to move forward. The rest of the episode finds Underwood exploring the Southern imaginary as his own personal geography. Also like Horne, Underwood recreates a Civil War battle in his home, complete with hand-painted action figures. He pours over Civil War histories as a way of understanding the embattled position of his Presidential administration. When he becomes ill in a later season, Underwood even hallucinates as

⁴² Beau Willimon, *House of Cards*, perf. by Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright (2013- ; Los Gatos, CA, Netflix, 2016, Streaming).

Horne did, and sees an image of his Confederate ancestor. The similarities between Horne and Underwood warrant much greater treatment than given here. For the purpose of this introduction, there are two important lessons to be gleaned by comparing the men's imagined South: first, the way that the South functions as a conduit between personal and socio-cultural crises, and second, the racial unconscious of Underwood's acts juxtaposed against the absence of race in Horne's fantasy.

While the President's apparent rejection of slavery may seem progressive, there is linguistic play in the line: "never raise your flag for an asinine cause like slavery."⁴³ As television critic Brentin Mook argues, Underwood's proclamation may also indicate that, to him, "slavery isn't worth fighting for—or rather the enslaved African-Americans weren't worth it."⁴⁴ This double-meaning applies to much of the dialogue on *House of Cards*. Lines like this signal the way that the show goes beyond merely acknowledging the place of race, queerness, and Southernness in national myths. *House of Cards* uses images of the South to critique the heart of white supremacy still beating in the federal government. Underwood may be an equal opportunity life destroyer, but his actions have a particularly devastating impact on people of color and other minority groups. Very often, audiences see Underwood's reprehensible acts not from the President's perspective, but from the perspective of the person being denigrated. As Mook notes, *House of Cards* thus ingeniously "reveals how racism has worked and continues to work

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Brentin Mook, "The White Supremacy of *House of Cards*," *RaceForward*, 25 February 2014, <http://www.colorlines.com/articles/white-supremacy-house-cards>.

for the preservation of power in America.”⁴⁵ When the show goes South, it is able to powerfully picture how intertwined white privilege, power, and supremacy are and how they got that way. This is the power that the Southern imaginary can carry—it can be the site of trenchant social critiques, fantasies that connect the personal to the political, and alternative worlds.

However, while *House of Cards* pays careful attention to people of color, whiteness is still centralized via its white leads. This is a continuing feature of mainstream Southern-set media, even those texts that attempt a revisionist view of Southern history, such as *Free State of Jones* (Dir. Gary Ross, 2016). This absence reflects a larger industrial problem in which people of color function too often as accessories to white stories. In a counter-movement to the history of Hollywood erasure and a region infamous for racialized violence, a number of independent filmmakers have returned South to tell stories that center people of color.

Chapter four of this dissertation will turn to some of those texts, arguing that the Southern imaginary has provided a paradoxically fertile space in which artists have imagined “radical elsewheres”: sites in which artists conjure possible futures, ways to weather trauma, and importantly, strategies of resistance to oppressive norms. Drawing from James C. Scott’s notion that “Illegibility. . . has been and remains, a reliable source for political autonomy,”⁴⁶ I argue that choosing to remain illegible by settling a community outside of the state’s gaze in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Dir. Benh Zeitlin,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1998), 6.

2012), or resisting the objectifying gaze of the camera in *Nothing But a Man* (Dir. Michael Roemer, 1964), and *Moonlight* (Dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016), allows black Southern subjects a surprising degree of power. This is particularly true in Southern-national context that, from 19th century lantern laws to more modern forms of discriminatory policing, has demanded that black subjects remain fully illuminated under the guise of community safety. Although illegibility may seem irreconcilable with cinema, a medium in which visibility is a foregone conclusion, a robust archive of films that deal with issues of race in the American South offers black protagonists whose illegibility is deliberate, protective, and even politically efficacious. While existing studies have read Southern literature with an eye for its national import, very few mention cinema. Even fewer acknowledge the influence of the South on American cinema. The films analyzed in my dissertation, then, comprise a neglected archive that sheds light on how the nation has used the Southern imaginary to construct its identity and how Southerners have responded in turn.

CHAPTER ONE

“There’s a story you should know from 100 years ago...”:

The Civil War on Film, Civil Rights, and The Vietnam War

“There’s no way to capture in one evening’s broadcast the suffering and the grief of thirty years of a subcontinent at war. There’s no way to capture the grief of our own nation of the most divisive conflict since our own civil war. In Vietnam, we’ve finally reached the end of the tunnel and there is no light there.” –Walter Cronkite⁴⁷

Introduction: War and the Fetish

As the Vietnam War escalated, images of war proliferated—not just of Vietnam, but of the Civil War. In comments like Cronkite’s, the memory of the former war provides the only lens through which Americans could understand the upheaval brought by Vietnam and concurrent social revolutions like the Civil Rights movement, second wave feminism, and Black Power. Popular culture (including Centennial celebrations, political activism, and film) referenced the Civil War with such regularity, it became something of a national fetish or recurring obsession. Cultural theorist Anne McClintock contends that the fetish “can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot solve...the fetish object... is thus destined to

⁴⁷ Walter Cronkite, *CBS Evening News* (1973; New York: CBS), broadcast television as qtd in *The 70s: Vietnam* (June 25, 2015; New York: CNN), broadcast television.

recur with compulsive repetition.”⁴⁸ In the case of the 1960s-70s, the fetish object is the image of the Civil War—the contradiction occurred between American exceptionalism and our losses in Vietnam. McClintock further argues that the fetish marks a “crisis in social meaning as the impossible irresolution.” This chapter will argue that films that fetishize the Civil War South failed, in part, because they functioned exactly as McClintock says fetish objects do: they embodied the irresolutions of a culture beset by division.

Interestingly, most events and films that fetishize the Civil War South, including *The Beguiled* (1971), *Slaves* (1968), and *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964) were appraised as critical, aesthetic, and financial bombs. Moving between 1865 and 1965 without warning or cause, these films do indeed fail as linear narratives. However, the atmosphere of failure and obsession swirling around these Southern-set films indicates their uncanny import to the national-North.⁴⁹ In their apparently incoherent temporal remixes, *The Beguiled*, *Slaves*, and *Two Thousand Maniacs* stumble into rarely articulated parallels between the Vietnam-era national-North and the Civil War South.

By showing the modern national-North and the Old South as eerily similar spaces in time, *The Beguiled*, *Slaves*, and *Two Thousand Maniacs* revealed deeply enmeshing webs of power and pleasure where the embattled nation-state wished to draw binaries.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 184.

⁴⁹ The “national-North,” refers to an ideological construct, rather than an exact location. In other words, the term refers to the way that the subjects within the nation at large—regardless of location—imagines themselves as part of a democratic, free “North” that stands in opposition to an imagined, recalcitrant American South.

⁵⁰ Jennifer Rae Greeson, “Plenary Panel: The South in the North,” (presentation at the Biannual Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Boston, MA, March 10-12, 2016).

A sharp divide between a democratic nation and a communist Vietnam, for instance, justified foreign intervention just as a modern North united against a recalcitrant South reified national cohesion. Such divisions also exclusively attributed the problem of racial terrorism to Southern states. As cultural historian Sharon Monteith argues, Hollywood's "shadow cinema" of B-movies "engaged with the weird and obscene" events occurring not just in the Southern Civil Rights movement but in the Vietnam War and in Northern cities. As such, the films put the three imagined spaces into a productive relationship with one another.⁵¹ Building on Monteith's insights, I argue that instead of asking viewers to think ontologically about the South—that is, to take the South as an authentically backwards territory that opposed a modern North, the films under analysis encouraged their audiences to think politically about the South—that is, to ask what an imagined South *did* to reinforce the identity of national-North. This is not to suggest that the films intentionally subverted the status quo. But in their willingness to put the traumas of the Civil War and of Vietnam into a meaningful relationship with the modern nation, they did fly in the face of official goals and values, such as military triumph and the restoration of racial and social hierarchies.

The Beguiled, *Slaves*, and *Two Thousand Maniacs* differ sharply from critically acclaimed New Hollywood films like *Easy Rider* (1969). Dennis Hopper's film and others made in the New Hollywood genre helmed by young, auteurs like Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese have attracted much scholarly interest. These films blended

⁵¹ Sharon Monteith, "Exploitation Movies and the Freedom Struggle of the 1960s," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, eds., Deborah E. Barker and Katheryn McKee (Athens, GA: Georgia UP: 2011), 197.

classical American genre film, exploitation cinema, and European art film. They drove an artistic renaissance and elevated film form in the minds of the public. In contrast, there is comparatively little written on the films this chapter analyzes. *The Beguiled*, *Two Thousand Maniacs*, and *Slaves* did not impress New Hollywood critics like Pauline Kael or college-age, white, middle-class viewers, but rather, brought in working class, urban crowds. B-level, Civil War epics neither lived up to the high aesthetic standards set by New Hollywood, university-trained filmmakers, nor did they save an economically depressed Hollywood like *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. However, Civil War epics and New Hollywood cinema share an inspiration in the Southern imaginary. Analyzing these films alongside each other reveals the ways that independent film producers capitalized on the racial conflict and scandal-ridden history of that region.

In the 1960s-70s, B-movie producers found themselves competing directly with an increase of European films (many of which frankly depicted sex, current events, and violence) for the coveted youth demographic. The Southern Gothic, which combines an emphasis on deviant populations, violence, sex, and the grotesque provided a potentially lucrative genre.⁵² Through Southern Gothic fantasies, filmmakers could create a sheen of social relevance by touching on current events like the Civil Rights movement, while simultaneously exploiting the opportunity to “slum” in the taboo pleasures that the genre and its location offered. Functioning as a typical Hollywood exoticist space, the films’

⁵² There is also a fair amount of cross-pollination between B-movies and European imports. Savvy businessmen like Roger Corman distributed European films in addition to producing and directing exploitation fare. As detailed in Chapter 2, these two divergent kinds of films were shown in many of the same second run theaters. For more on this phenomenon, see Noel King, “‘The Last Good Time We Ever Had’: Remembering the New Hollywood Cinema,” in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, eds Thomas, Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2004), 22-3.

Old South setting was something viewers could escape back into the national-North when the film ended. Viewers could also experience all the debauched South had to offer under the mantle of social pedagogy. The appeal of many Southern-set exploitation films mirrored the Depression-era volume, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, which supplied images of a poverty-stricken, stereotypical South for a spectacle-hungry public, while proclaiming these images valuable for their “social realist” function. As the Hollywood Production Code weakened, the Southern Gothic’s explicit aspects were further emphasized in film marketing materials that targeted “adults-only” audiences looking to engage with current events, told allegorically through tales of the Old South and “a fire that began 200 years ago and still burns today.”⁵³

The emphasis on Southern stories also carried an unexpected consequence. The more films that used the Civil War, the stronger the allegorical connection became between this war and the current moment. As the optimistic 1960s turned into the disillusioned 1970s, the loss-ridden, “antiquated” Civil War South turned into an increasingly fitting symbol for the nation’s most modern predicament. For filmmakers, the thin veil of regional difference and the freedom gleaned from the new ratings system provided the perfect covers to commodify proscribed desires like interracial sex, same-sex intimacy, and S&M for new audiences.

An analysis that examines the taboo pleasures and recursive temporalities of Civil War films shifts the focus of 1970s film studies from singular New Hollywood auteurs to the overlapping groups at stake in contemporary representations: African Americans,

⁵³ “*Slaves* Trailer,” Youtube Video, 2.22, posted by Tray Davenport, April 4, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVSKUQVXPic>.

women, and LGBTQ+ populations. Such an analysis also highlights the larger, portentous influence that the Southern imaginary exerted on political activism, military strategy, and nationalist projects embattled by Vietnam. *The Beguiled*, *Slaves*, and *Two Thousand Maniacs* fail to signify “correctly” but insofar as meaning can be found in the misfirings of language, their failures allowed viewers to peer into the fault lines of American culture as well as embrace sets of desires only tolerable when enjoyed in an “Other,” Southern space.

The Civil War Centennial and Vietnam

The Civil War, as represented in *The Beguiled*, *Two Thousand Maniacs*, and *Slaves*, is remarkably similar to Vietnam in the ideologies invested into it, its nature as an intra-state conflict, its impact on specific American populations (Southerners and African Americans), and most importantly, in its divisiveness, which ballooned as US chances of winning waned. These similarities may explain why the Civil War, and not the more recent WWII for instance, became an fetishistic obsession of 1970s culture and film. The notion that we might better understand the impact of Vietnam by looking through the lens of the Civil War comes through in a number of histories of the 1960s that open with a claim like the following: “Probably no issue since the Civil War has divided America more deeply than the Indochina conflict. Certainly few, if any, episodes in contemporary history have...compelled a more searching examination of America’s role in the

world.”⁵⁴ But the difficulty of such a “searching examination” registers in the lack of comment beyond these brief remarks.

The similarities are particularly striking when the Civil War and Vietnam are considered from a Southern perspective. From the standpoint of the Confederacy, the former war was not just about preserving a “way of life” but extending it into Western territories as part of a larger colonialist endeavor. The Vietnam War represented another phase of neo-colonialist expansion. While the American military may not have intended to overtake the country, the Vietnam War nonetheless continued France’s colonial occupation and was aimed at expanding America’s ideological influence in the fight against communism. In both the Vietnam War and the Civil War, the South played a decisive role. The South’s role during the Civil War requires little elaboration, but is less well known that the Vietnam War took an ordinate toll on the region. Southerners of all races enlisted in higher numbers, and African Americans were particularly overrepresented.⁵⁵ The South lost more sons and daughters than anywhere else in the country, and not every American felt the cause they died for was just.

On the other hand, as the war’s outlook grew bleaker, a growing number of Southerners used the chivalric, honor-bound code of the Old South to memorialize Vietnam as they had the Civil War, as a valiant “Lost Cause.” These efforts caught on

⁵⁴ Robert McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays* (Independence, KY: Cengage Learning, 2007), page vii. For another example of a similar opening, see Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

⁵⁵ See Harry Spalding, *We Must Remember: The Vietnam War Service of Men from Nelson County, Kentucky* (Louisville, KY: Butler Books, 2012) and D. Michael Shafer, “The Vietnam-era Draft: Who Went, Who Didn’t, and Why It Matters,” in *The Legacy of Vietnam in the American Imagination*, ed. D. Michael Shafer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992): 57-79.

nationally, and appealed powerfully to those concerned about America's eroding moral and ideological strength in the face of anti-war activism and other forms of social protest (ex. Civil Rights, feminism, Black Power, and the gay rights movement). Lost Cause sentiments belied resentment of larger social justice movements and an interventionist American government, while they also connected jingoism with Confederate reverie. As Greg Grandin notes "A backlash against the antiwar movement helped nationalize the Confederate flag...The banner was increasingly seen at "patriotic" rallies in areas of the country outside the old South."⁵⁶ As recent debates over the Confederate flag illustrated with new urgency, the flag so thoroughly understood as the Confederacy's banner was never its national flag—rather the flag became popular during the Vietnam-era as "an emblem of racist reaction to federal efforts to advance equal rights."⁵⁷ John F. Kennedy, and to a greater degree, Richard Nixon, capitalized on the confluence of pro-war/ anti-integration sentiments in their Presidential campaigns. To secure his reelection in 1972, Nixon combined militarism and coded racial appeals in his "Southern Strategy," which appealed to Northern, working-class whites disaffected by Civil Rights as potently as it appealed to Southerners. As the conservative movement grew through the 1970s-80s, so too did the attractiveness of the Civil War South's clear moral, social, and racial hierarchies.

The Vietnam War and The Civil War colluded in public memory because of similar ideological investments, but perhaps more immediately, as an accident of time.

⁵⁶ Greg Grandin, "'The Confederate Flag Still Flies Overseas': Endless War, Domestic Racism and the Forgotten History of the Stars and Bars," Salon, last modified 11 July 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/07/11/the_confederate_flag_still_flies_oversees_endless_war_domestic_racism_and_the_forgotten_history_of_the_stars_and_bars_partner/.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The Civil War Centennial was celebrated simultaneously with increased involvement in Vietnam. Centennial celebrations were a crucial component to demonstrating America's superiority over our Communist enemies, and were planned as testament to the nation's progress, particularly on the issue of race. They were a nationalist tool in the Cold War, not unlike Frank Capra's follow up film to the WWII *Why We Fight* series, *The Negro Soldier*, that showcased African American achievements to attract black men to the armed forces, to win over liberal whites domestically, and to show global audiences the strength of our democratic principles, in action.⁵⁸ But in fact, as David Blight notes, Centennial celebrations had the exact opposite effect as *The Negro Soldier*. They showed, in microcosm, the process by which America squared, or rather, could never adequately square its professed global identity as a free, democratic state with its material reality very much invested in "Southern" practices of oppression. This is nowhere more evident than in the first major Centennial celebration at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina.⁵⁹

At this national affair, one black member of the Centennial commission was denied entry to the headquarters hotel, the Francis Marion, which was still segregated. A compromise was only reached when President John F. Kennedy intervened.⁶⁰ Events like this make clear why criticism of Lost Cause mythology rose with its popularity in the

⁵⁸ This effort was not unlike the 1959 "Kitchen Debates" between President Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. This exhibition was ostensibly a "cultural exchange" that marked progress toward a peaceful future between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, Nixon and Khrushchev's meeting descended into sparring match that revealed inexorable conflict between their nations. Similarly, rather than unite the nation, the Centennial revealed deep divisions.

⁵⁹ David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Centennial celebrations of the 1960s.⁶¹ This mythology suggested the ultimate tragedy of the war was the brother-on-brother fighting between white men, which marginalized slavery in the Civil War narrative and with it, the meaningful participation of African Americans in their own emancipation. As Blight notes, “African Americans...felt offended, or even threatened by, a consensual evasion of the story of Emancipation in favor of efforts to forge national unity in an era of heightened anticommunism and tensions with Soviet Union.”⁶² Black Americans protested or ignored the events in large numbers, as did other groups disenchanted by the events’ omissions.⁶³

While official Centennial celebrations exacerbated contradictions between the nation’s democratic ideals and its material history, Civil Rights leaders often parsed the connection between past and present more clearly. In 1962, Martin Luther King Jr., sent President Kennedy an open letter titled “Appeal to the Honorable John F. Kennedy, President of the United States, for a National Rededication to the Principles of the Emancipation Proclamation and for an Executive Order Prohibiting Segregation in the United States of America.” King appealed to history and memory, astutely mingling 1863 and 1963:

The struggle for freedom, Mr. President, of which the Civil War was but a bloody chapter, continues throughout our land today. The courage and heroism of Negro

⁶¹ This mythology had guided reconciliatory, nationalist efforts in earlier eras, as detailed in Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1993).

⁶² Blight 11.

⁶³ One standout filmic expression of this, as well as black protest efforts discussed in the following paragraph, is *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (1968). This documentary was filmed at an anti-war march from Harlem to the Manhattan United Nations Building in 1967. The march culminated in a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. that condemned the disproportionate percentage of black soldiers in combat in Vietnam. Filmmaker David Weiss also intercut footage of three recently returned black veterans with interviews with black, Harlem residents. This film has currently fallen out of circulation.

citizens at Montgomery, Little Rock, New Orleans, Prince Edward County, and Jackson, Mississippi is only a further effort to affirm the democratic heritage so painfully won, in part, upon the grassy battlefields of Antietam, Lookout Mountain and Gettysburg.⁶⁴

Here and elsewhere, King used the Civil War to draw parallels between Freedom Fighters and Civil War veterans, and to challenge leaders to fulfill the democratic ideals those veterans fought for. King became more outspoken in his opposition to Vietnam due both to the imperialist nature of the conflict, and the inordinate toll that that the war took on black communities. As he argued in his 1967 speech, “Beyond Vietnam,” the government’s war effort stymied funding for social programs that benefitted African Americans while disproportionately drafting and killing people of color.⁶⁵ The Civil

⁶⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “Appeal to the Honorable John F. Kennedy, President of the United States, for a National Rededication to the Principles of the Emancipation Proclamation and for an Executive Order Prohibiting Segregation in the United States of America” as qtd. in Blight 17. For more on this communication between King and Kennedy, see Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana UP, 2007).

⁶⁵ See Martin Luther King Jr.’s anti-war speech “Beyond Vietnam,” originally delivered at New York’s Riverside Church in 1967: “A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated... And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube... Perhaps a more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem... As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men [in Northern ghettos], I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked, and rightly so, ‘What about Vietnam?’ They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.” Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” *The Martin Luther King Jr., Research and Education Institute*

Rights leader and Black Power activists, who opposed King's approach to so many other issues, agreed on the devastating impact of Vietnam. For their part, second wave feminists and New Left radicals also referenced the Civil War in their anti-war speeches and songs⁶⁶, and a wealth of recent historians discuss the link between the Civil Rights era and that war.⁶⁷ But, direct connections between Vietnam and the Civil War have proven difficult to articulate.

The Civil War was a crucial hinge point between Civil Rights and Vietnam—the three cataclysmic events are three legs to a stool, intrinsically reliant on each other. As suggested in activists' speeches and Centennial celebrations, 1970s public memory was saturated with the Civil War, as was American film. But its specter is hard to chase in the context of Vietnam: it is a kind of absent presence that ruptures through in isolated moments or in brief comments like King's without elaboration. Lest one think the lack of comment is because the connections between the Civil War and Vietnam are self-evident, one need only recall recent debates over the Confederate flag to know that the meaning of the Civil War is still far from settled. The lack of comment likely belies the opposite; the Civil War is a fetish that recurs obsessively but shapeshifts to suit the needs of the American populace.

at Stanford University, 12 December 2016,

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/doc_beyond_vietnam/

⁶⁶ Interestingly, some activist-minded popular culture artists resurrected Lost Cause mythology in the Civil Rights era, as Joan Baez did in her cover of The Band's song, "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." Others, including civil right activist and artist Nina Simone, excoriated such mythology in songs like "Mississippi Goddamn."

⁶⁷ A compelling example of this scholarship is David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era*. See note 13.

The paradoxical phantasm of the Civil War in the 1970s makes sense in the context of Southern Gothic literature and New Southern Studies scholarship. As literary historian R. Gray contends, “In southern literature, wars recall other wars, not the least of which because the South is littered with different forms and kinds of dispossession, the passing of one group, the active devastation of another.”⁶⁸ The dispossession of Africans and African Americans in one time period recalls the dispossession of earlier generations; this recalls dispossession of the Native Americans, ad infinitum. To study the South is to know it as a place haunted by absent/present ghosts. Ghostly slave society subjects can and do fetishistically return in the Southern texts set long after the Civil War, from August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, both of which radically reshape William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*. Southern Studies, as a field, also illuminates haunting as a methodology that keeps an eye out for things unseen, like the dispossessed Others that are central to nationalist projects and cultures but who remain at their margins.⁶⁹ Keeping an eye out for the subjects who rupture into the present, like the African American veteran in Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter, reveals continuities between Civil War violence and the de facto segregation still in place into the 1960s.

Using haunting as a guide also helps make sense of the temporality of the Civil War Southern imaginary. In the films this chapter will analyze, the past often intrudes on the present (or vice versa) via sense memories that are difficult to control or place in linear time, which makes the films themselves appear narrative failures. These intrusions

⁶⁸ Richard Gray, *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature* (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 2007), 26.

⁶⁹ As Flannery O’Connor elaborates “Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our [Southern] literature.” Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 45.

include the Black Power rhetoric of *Slaves*, the guerilla warfare of *The Beguiled's* Civil War, or the complete awareness of implications of commodity racism (a phenomenon only in its nascent form in 1865) in *Slaves*. But again, this too has a lineage in Southern literature in which sheets of time layer on top of one another like palimpsests, rather than being linearly structured.⁷⁰ Released just three years after *The Beguiled* premiered, Loyd Little's novel *Parthian Shot* (1975) follows a band of mainly Southern soldiers fighting in Vietnam near the Cambodian border. After lamenting the fall of the Old South, one character asks another, "Doesn't all this—the smells, the sounds, the weather, the rice, the eyes—especially the eyes—stir a lost chord in your soul? A distant memory from centuries past?"⁷¹ Like Little's novel, 1970s Civil War films discover "sense memories," of dispossessions that ripple from Vietnam back to the nation: in these ripples, we can glimpse that alternate conceptions of time, nation, and region.

The Beguiled and the Southern Imaginary

The Beguiled's temporal and conceptual disorientation is evident from its first hazy shot, which captures the disorientation of the historically transitional moment of the film's release, 1971. By that year, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had begun secret talks with North Vietnamese officials but an American exit from the Vietnam War strategy remained elusive. Winning and losing the war seemed equally possible, and

⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson, (London: Ride and Company, 1955), [https://archive.org/stream/SartreJeanPaulLiteraryAndPhilosophicalEssaysCollier1962/Sartre.%20Jean-Paul%20-%20Literary%20and%20Philosophical%20Essays%20\(Collier,%201962\)_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/SartreJeanPaulLiteraryAndPhilosophicalEssaysCollier1962/Sartre.%20Jean-Paul%20-%20Literary%20and%20Philosophical%20Essays%20(Collier,%201962)_djvu.txt).

⁷¹ Loyd Little, *Parthian Shot* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), as quoted in Owen W. Gilman Jr., *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination* (Oxford, MS: Mississippi UP, 1992), 97.

America was indeed trapped in the tunnel Walter Cronkite described in the epigraph. *The Beguiled* riffs on this time, beginning in Confederate territory at another transitional moment near the end of the Civil War. In the film's 1864 setting, the Emancipation Proclamation had been declared law, but the Confederacy had yet to surrender. Women and girls like those in *The Beguiled's* Louisiana setting considered themselves belles but nonetheless carried weightier responsibilities and fuller potential for autonomy than they had previously known. The liminality of a society on the precipice of collapse obsesses Southern Gothic narratives like the novel *The Beguiled* is based on—these texts often trace the Old South's decline backward to the loss of the Civil War.

Also haunted by a feared future decline, *The Beguiled* opens a temporal trapdoor between the Civil War South and the Vietnam era national-North—the film's entrée into an uncanny parallel universe is indicated by its nightmarish, surreal imagery, narrative incoherence, and extreme emotional range. The film proper begins when 12-year-old Amy finds wounded Union Corporal John McBurney (Clint Eastwood) on the verge of death just outside her boarding school. The antiheroic McBurney is then healed/taken hostage by a Confederate girls school. To prevent the women from turning him over to Confederate authorities, he sleeps with three of them before they discover his deceit, cut off his leg in a pseudo-castration, and poison him. McBurney's entrance into the film is highly onerous—the camera moves in odd ways with a gauzy lens; Amy picks mushrooms as though in a fairytale; and the film gradually turns from sepia into full color. The combined effect is to make the audience unsure whether they are inside a nightmare or reality, a past or present. Much like the famously debilitated Scottie (Jimmy Stewart)

in *Vertigo*, McBurney hangs from a precariously high angle in the film's opening moments. Also like *Vertigo*, *The Beguiled* immediately associates McBurney with an archetypally feminine experience of being prone. As he falls into the frame, he speaks his first words "Help me," before fainting into Amy's arms. His fall carries additional racialized import in the South, as he falls from a tree, as though lynched. The line between reality and nightmare becomes clearer as we see Amy help McBurney back to her headmistress Martha, who along with assistant teacher Edwina (Elizabeth Hartman) and other students, nurses him back to health. But, McBurney's fantasies continue to penetrate the film to reveal his unreliability as a narrator and the film's fascinating unreliability as a "straight" historical document.

While the film visualizes a flashback, for instance, McBurney tells Martha he never killed anyone and laments the damage that war has done to the Southern landscape. However, as his voiceover plays over a vision of the past, we see McBurney shoot men in guerilla-warfare-style fighting and then gleefully set a farm on fire—an obvious contradiction. Two things are remarkable about this flashback—how Vietnam ruptures into rural, 1865 Louisiana and how willingly hawkish director Siegel shows his protagonist's duplicity and explicitly links it to his status as a war veteran. McBurney's flashback reveals how little we know about his past, how few facts we can rely on to gauge his actions. Like the "No Name" characters in Eastwood's earlier Westerns and the title character in *Dirty Harry* (also directed by Siegel), McBurney is a cipher—he comes from nowhere and believes in nothing.

McBurney himself seems unsure of his personhood, becoming increasingly unable to distinguish between anxiety, reality, and sexual fantasy. After Martha cuts off his leg, McBurney grossly propositions all the women, then holds them at gunpoint. In a particularly truthful moment, he links his war trauma to sexual conquest, yelling “Why should I deny myself after all I’ve been through?”⁷² This confession is doubly legible. He claims his affairs are due recompense for his suffering, but he also admits that they are compensatory gestures: they allow him to reclaim the sense of mastery lost on the battlefield.

McBurney’s sexual exploits allow him to act as the conquering hero although he knows he is not: more importantly, the audience knows he is not. The opening shot telegraphs his victimized status, problematically paralleling McBurney’s personhood with a black man trapped in an unforgiving Southern landscape, rather than paralleling the character with the victorious Union army of which McBurney is an actual part. If we are meant to identify with him as an entrapped fox-like character taking necessary steps to avoid the lynching foreshadowed in the opening scene, we also see his repugnance and his ineffectuality plainly. The film vacillates on the question of his character in its trailer, which asks “Is he a victim, to be threatened, to be teased and enticed? Or, is he a man? Aggressive, wooing, demanding? Who must love to stay alive?”⁷³ *The Beguiled* does not offer a definitive answer but switches mercilessly between two possibilities: McBurney as a conquering hero in an impossible situation or McBurney as doomed from the start, a

⁷² *The Beguiled*, directed by Don Siegel (1971; Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 2010), DVD.

pawn in a game that outstrips his capabilities on all sides. In this way, McBurney is a metaphor for a country divided by Vietnam that lost the ability to recognize itself as united, complete body, and saw itself instead as both Little Red Riding Hood—the victim of circumstances far beyond its control—and the Big Bad Wolf, responsible for creating conditions that necessitate the question “What have we done?” In this milieu, the idea of winning a war “cleanly” seemed increasingly counterfeit as did the idea of an upstanding, morally righteous soldier.

Withering confidence in, and in many cases, outright opposition to Vietnam was transferred directly onto the war veteran in the 1970s. As film historians Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud argue “During the period of the mid-1960s and early-1970s, when the commercial film industry largely avoided direct representations of the Vietnam war, the image of the veteran became the site where America’s ambivalent feelings toward the conflict were manifest.”⁷⁴ McBurney conveys this profound sense of uncertainty, failing in all the ways that war heroes usually succeed, even in bodily details like the open sores that cover his once-capable hands. In the end, he fails to protect himself and is murdered by his caretakers.

Siegel maintained that *The Beguiled* did poorly at the box office because Eastwood died a broken man, and he is not wrong to suggest that the film violated the terms by which audiences understood the actor’s persona. McBurney’s utter repugnance, his tendency toward prototypically feminine hysterics, and his inability to conquer are quite unusual in the longer history of male heroes in cinema. Men do suffer in the war

films and in the Westerns that Eastwood most commonly starred in: they are momentarily defeated, wounded by their enemies, or challenged by a punishing landscape but the importance of their suffering is that they prevail. These hard-won trials are how they prove their masculinity, and by extension, the imperviousness that underwrites American exceptionalism. This John-Wayne-styled masculinity may have been outmoded by 1971, but the height from which McBurney falls in the *The Beguiled* is still unusual. Other 1970s anti-heroes (ex. the type who commonly starred in New Hollywood films like *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View*) deal with uncertain masculinity, but very few come as close to actual castration as McBurney does in this film.⁷⁵

The fetishization of the male form is expertly deployed in that other Vietnam veteran, John Rambo. The mythologized hero from *Rambo First Blood: Part II* had the machismo, abhorrence of government bureaucracy, and moral fortitude to return to Vietnam in 1985 and retroactively win the war, single-handedly rescuing a group of POWs and annihilating our Soviet enemies. McBurney fails because unlike Rambo, he is not Superman: he is earthbound, limited, and remains so. If Rambo's "hard body" on display in *Rambo First Blood: Part II* represents all we needed to "win the war this time," McBurney's broken, dominated, indecisive body represents the feared failure of

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that Clint Eastwood never fully committed to John Wayne-styled masculinity. While John Wayne's persona always evinced a moral compass, Eastwood often played amoral characters. This persona recurs in his "No-Name Westerns" (*A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) and in *Dirty Harry*. This film was directed by Don Siegel just one year after *The Beguiled*. As if to correct the "wrongs" of his earlier film, the villain in *Dirty Harry* sustains a very similar leg injury to McBurney's and also incurs masochistic punishment. The antagonist (who is not named) pays a black man to beat him and alleges that Harry has beaten him. When *The Beguiled* and *Dirty Harry* are taken together, viewers can see Siegel shifting the deviance of McBurney away from his muse, Eastwood, and onto a symbol of scorn for the masculinist Siegel: the soft, perverse hippy.

the Vietnam project as well as the masculinist institutions that fed it.⁷⁶ The crises he animated cut too close to the national quick, and as such, McBurney was not a figure Americans were equipped to internalize.

When situated in a trauma framework, the fact that McBurney's story went unseen by the general public and was assessed as a failure by critics is not just a matter of choice but a matter of ability. Recalling Cathy Caruth's argument that massively traumatizing events are structured by a "collapse of witnessing" or a lag in which subjects cannot fully comprehend or express the meaning of those events, Dori Laub notes that in the face of trauma: "History [takes] place with no witness: it was the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the notion that a witness could exist...the historical imperative to witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence."⁷⁷ This seems particularly true when one traumatic event is layered over another (Vietnam and Civil War), and told from the side of the losers—the Confederacy—who nonetheless lived within American borders and are forever associated with its history. *The Beguiled* is one of very few films about the Civil War in which the Union appears to lose—a disturbing idea in a nation embroiled in another country's civil war whose outcome was far from secure.

Reading *The Beguiled* in light of Laub's comment opens many questions, paramount among them why a hawkish director, who believed fully in American exceptionalism would make a film which such anxiety at its core. It seems insufficient in

⁷⁶ For detailed analysis of *Rambo*'s cultural import, see Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1989).

⁷⁷ Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 68.

light of Siegel's directorial skill to suggest he simply was not aware of *The Beguiled's* larger implications, though it also seems incorrect to suggest he would have endorsed the reading provided above. He was a masculinist director, albeit one with art film aspirations. *The Beguiled* was an opportunity to step outside the genre he is most associated with, action adventure films, into art cinema. *The Beguiled* channels a stylized, art film aesthetic while also upping its sexual content, both to compete with European art films flooding the American market, and to attract the same key demographic his films always had: young men.⁷⁸

The Beguiled's form reflects a changing world order, the rise of second-wave feminism and the fears both engendered in some members of his target audience. The community of women in *The Beguiled* is not intended as an exemplary feminist icon. Rather, the film uses the war-torn space of the plantation to think through 1970s feminism's implications on men. Martha's boldness is a fever-dream of the wrath women inflict when social crises—like the Civil War and the Civil Rights revolutions of the 1950s-70s—lend them unexpected power. Siegel acknowledges the connection between second-wave feminism and his Civil-War-era film when he warps the feminist rhetoric of empowerment to describe *The Beguiled*:

One reason I wanted to make *The Beguiled* is that it is a woman's picture. Not a picture for women but about them. Women are capable of deceit, larceny, murder, anything. Behind that mask of innocence lurks as much evil as you'll find in

⁷⁸ The film thus functions similarly to the "slasher film." For more on this, see Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015).

members of the Mafia. Any young girl who looks perfectly harmless is capable of murder.⁷⁹

The Beguiled suggests female empowerment does not represent gender equity, but the unmanning and ultimately, the destruction of men.⁸⁰ The film closely parallels anti-feminist cultural discourse, as the media also tapped into the cultural anxiety surrounding male erasure. A 1985 *Time* article goes as far as to say that feminist wins came not just at the loss of male veterans, but masculinity itself:

The damage to American faith in government and authority had a sometimes chaotically liberating effect, breaking old molds and freeing the imagination to create new forms, new movements (environmentalism, say, or feminism). But this liberation came again at the expense of the veteran and of masculinity... Vietnam changed American notions about the virtues of masculinity and femininity. In the 1960s, during the great violence of the war, masculine power came to be subtly discredited in many circles as oafish and destructive... femininity was the garden of life, masculinity the landscape of death.⁸¹

The Beguiled “corrects” the monstrous inversion feminism represents by directly aligning femininity with mortality. The film offers an overwhelming amount of visual evidence that women are harbingers of death, including: the patrolling of the plantation on the “widow’s walk,” the black crow that dies mysteriously just after McBurney is “castrated,” and Amy’s story about a group of female ants who cannibalize a male

⁷⁹ Don Siegel as qtd in Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (London: UCL Press, 1993), 79.

⁸⁰ This sentiment is also expressed in primary documents from veterans themselves, like those presented in A.D. Horne, *The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Trade, 1981).

⁸¹ Jeffords 119.

caterpillar. Most damning of all is the song that opens and closes the film. If there was any doubt about the song's relevance to the plot, Clint Eastwood assuages that doubt by singing the song himself:

Come all you fair maidens, come walk in the sun, select your young men, don't carry a gun...Come all you young fellows, take warning from me...don't join no army. The dove she will leave you, the raven will come and death will come marching, at the beat of the drum.⁸²

With this song, the transfer of blame for male loss is complete—from the war effort onto “ravens” like Martha, who not only possesses situational power (within the film she can physically overpower McBurney and control her students) but financial independence and enduring agency. Of course, there is no room in a 1970s exploitation film universe for a woman like Martha, particularly one still quite suspicious of feminism's consequences, and the film eventually pathologizes her. Ensuring viewers understand her as a raven, the film tells viewers late in the film that Martha's empowerment is ill-gotten: she gained ownership of her school after an incestuous, and it's implied murderous, relationship with her brother. However, the power that she holds constitutes her danger and attractiveness to McBurney and the larger viewing audience. By the end of *The Beguiled*, the woman who seemed the picture of Southern gentility is proven to be monomaniacal. The glossy surface that is Martha's body is shown to be a “phantasmic topography, a surface which hides ugliness and anxiety with beauty and desire,” as film theorist Laura Mulvey argues generally of the cinematic female form. When, in a horror

⁸² *The Beguiled*.

film, a female vampire cracks open upon being staked to reveal the slime within, for instance, the female body is demystified, shown to be a monstrous, uncontrollable creation.

Martha's excess—of power, of monstrosity, of femininity—has everything to do with her Southernness. Femininity is often synonymous with excess in Southern Gothic literature, and the region itself is highly feminized. Women like Eula Varner in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* are fecund personifications of nostalgia for an agrarian, fertile Old South and the hedonistic (sometimes sado-masochistic) pleasure to be found there: "...her entire appearance suggested some symbology out of the Old Dionysic times—honey in sunlight and bursting grapes, the writhen bleeding of the crushed fecundated vine beneath the hard rapacious trampling goat-hoof."⁸³ But even in the context of the Southern Gothic, Martha is something of an anomaly. In contrast to the Lolita-esque Eula, for instance, Martha is barren and brittle. And yet, the attraction she carries originates from the same source as Eula's: an excess that excites for its potential to subsume and annihilate men. As a schoolteacher stalks Eula, he thinks in the third person: "He was mad. He knew that. He knew that sooner or later that something was going to happen. And he knew too that, whatever it would be, he would be the vanquished."⁸⁴

⁸³ William Faulkner *The Hamlet* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 105. Later, speaking directly to the notion of excess, Faulkner writes "It had been almost five years now since this sight became an integral part of the village's life...the girl of whom, even at nine and ten and eleven, there was too much—too much of leg, too much of breast, too much of buttock: too much of mammalian female meat..." (Faulkner 111).

⁸⁴ *Ibid* 132.

Similarly, through Martha, McBurney can access the desire to be dominated that is forsaken in his rational home within the national-North.⁸⁵

Martha's temporal positioning is also crucial to *The Beguiled's* exploration of taboo sexuality—her power is only possible in “this time:” an amalgam of the 1860s that left Martha in charge of the plantation, propertied and without the pressure to re-marry and the 1970s, a decade in which sexual liberation, second wave feminism, and a weakening Hollywood Production Code converged to make female sexual expression newly possible, and perhaps most importantly, profitable. Martha's sexual history includes incest, S&M, and Sapphic desire, and the film noticeably lacks the moralizing conclusion that accompanied the exploration of such pleasures in earlier films of Cecil B. DeMille for instance.

The Beguiled's soft-core pornographic aesthetic and dip into the Southern Gothic tropes provided the context for Siegel to titillate an imagined male viewer but it is worth noting that Martha controls the taboo sex onscreen, in effect suggesting that in “this time,” sexual exploitation is no longer the exclusive purchase of white men. She sets the terms of her encounter with McBurney, turning from mother to lover to punitive schoolteacher as it suits her—her sadistic, motherly passion is in fact, what turns McBurney on. Early in the film, Martha bathes the Union general in a gesture with obvious infantilizing content, then tenderly asks McBurney if he would like wine to dull his pain. She is appalled when he replies that he would like to drink with her. To her

⁸⁵ The North is mentioned as McBurney's birthplace but is mentioned nowhere else so that *The Beguiled's* South becomes its own, segregated universe. *The Beguiled* attempts to narratively segregate the South in two ways: spatially, onto the other side of a border from the American body, and temporally back into the 1860s. Southern-set films often end with such a separation, with the protagonist returning to the civilized North with the urging that he should forget what he experienced, or think of it as a dream.

ostensibly shocked claim that she offered wine “for his pain, not his pleasure,” he replies “sometimes the two aren’t so different.” Her reaction carries the air of propriety, but is confirmed as part of a larger cat-and-mouse game in the film’s most pornographic sequence, which finds Martha initiating a threesome with McBurney and assistant teacher Edwina, piercing his skin with an arrow.

Sadomasochistic sex with multiple partners of varying sexualities is not uncommon in straight, soft-core pornography or exploitation movies, but *The Beguiled*’s gaze here differs from those films. Those genres center on objectified female bodies as a source of male pleasure and are most often told from a male perspective while this sequence is told from Martha’s perspective. *The Beguiled*’s fantasy ends with Martha holding McBurney in a Pieta-like pose so that the body most on display McBurney’s, not Martha’s or Edwina’s, who remain fully-clothed. The religiosity of the scene ironically highlights Martha’s fantasy of herself as a benevolent Virgin Mary and further ensures viewers know this is *her* dream. The addition of a desirous, but not objectified woman, Edwina, to the Pieta scene underscores the film’s intent to show female-gendered desire. The reversal of looking relations here suggests the “Other” audiences that this film hails in addition to the young, male audiences it likely seeks to titillate.

This seems a surprisingly transgressive gesture from the masculinist Siegel, but as Linda Williams argues, that a film engages in taboo pleasures does not mean it defeats them. In fact, the charge of the film’s threesome relies on its forbidden nature. As Williams observes, prohibitions provide an element of fear that can enhance desire. In pornographic plantation romances of the 1970s like *Mandingo*, the fear of violence

generated by white plantation masters trying to keep their authority over white women and black men lent erotic tension to interracial arrangements. A similar power reversal is at work in *The Beguiled* between the unattached Martha and the much younger McBurney. As Williams claims “The ‘hotter’ the sex, the greater the transgressed-against power.”⁸⁶ When Martha later decries that her Sapphic fantasy and power evinced within it evolved from a dearth of available men, the film ensures that her apparent transgression reinforces male importance—this is certainly in keeping with Siegel’s oeuvre.

The sepia photographs that open and close *The Beguiled* confirm the film’s attempt to foreclose the desires it produces and to send figures like Martha back across the Mason Dixon line and back into Civil War time: the film fails at this attempt in fascinating, likely unplanned ways. Both the photo of Amy that opens the film and the photo of the monstrous women at its close imply the South as a static, pictorial space. They attempt to place the dangerous region back into a decaying photograph of a history textbook, or more evocatively, a family album. By placing these Southern women in amber, in a history-tinged photograph, the film attempts to jettison them into a sphere that constitutes absolute alterity. This transition severs the tie between “then” and “now,” in an attempt to contain the women and the region back into their proper historically, geographically distant place.

However, it is worth noting that in the film’s final sepia shot, the women carry McBurney out in a body bag and more importantly, leave the domestic sphere of the plantation, poised to enter modernity and bringing their Southernness and taboo pleasures

⁸⁶ Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 298.

with them. Whether the women return to the plantation or scatter, the film implies that their shared psychopathy will bring more men into their web of influence. The intended terror of the ending is the realization the women's "Southern" practices—oppression, sexual pleasure that relies on a history of violence for its charge, the registering of war-time trauma that obliterates men—will reveal networks of pain where rigid boundaries (between men and women; North and South; 1870 and 1970) were once comfortably imagined.

There is also no way around *The Beguiled's* misogynistic take on female empowerment but the film does signify an interesting wrinkle in commodification of sex and violence on screen in that it upsets the social relations it means to cement. Other 1970s exploitation films—including *Mandingo* and *Slaves*—continue to explore plantation romances. They too recycle Civil War relations in ways that recast the 1970s adding a significant focus on race. Coincidentally, *The Beguiled* and *Mandingo* were filmed on the same Louisiana plantation, making connections between the 1860s and 1970s even easier to glimpse.

Antebellum Slavery in the Vietnam Era

The cult classic *Mandingo* (1975) has figured prominently in the study of exploitation cinema. It is one of only a few B-films to reap significant financial success, and its legacy has endured mainly due to an infamous sex scene between the white

plantation mistress Blanche (Susan George) and the enslaved Mede (Ken Norton).⁸⁷ But, there is a forgotten film that predates *Mandingo*, extends that film's racialized critique, and intentionally avoids gratuitous sex: Herbert Biberman's *Slaves* (1968). Biberman's film adapts *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in melodramatic fashion, adding a critique of capitalism that is nearly Marxist in its excoriation of the economic system's roots in slavery. Like other films looking to capitalize on the popularity of Black Power in the 1970s,⁸⁸ *Slaves* ends in a plantation insurrection. But unlike other contemporary slave-centered dramas, Biberman's film pairs this act of rebellion with an Afrocentric reclamation of black culture that spoke to an emerging cultural nationalism. *Slaves*' didactic radicalism was rejected by the mainly white, middle-class film critics who reviewed it. Their consensus on *Slaves*' failure landed it in the cultural wastebin.

However, the film's revolutionary argument resonated in cities particularly powerfully in 1968, just after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination led to a wave of urban insurrections. Biberman's film yields provocative insights into connections between the plantation system, the Vietnam War, and the 1960s-70s inner city. While cities burned and the nation was engulfed in turmoil, the film asserted that there was no progressive, Northern sphere nor a separable, recalcitrant South: there were only

⁸⁷ Film historians Andrew Britton asserted that it was "the greatest film about race ever made in Hollywood," and Robin Wood referred to it as a "masterpiece," while others suggest the film revived the slavery genre as an excuse for sadistic sex and violence. See Andrew Britton, "Mandingo," *Movie 22* (1976): 11-25; Robin Wood, "Mandingo: The Vindication of an Abused Masterpiece," in *Sexual Politics & Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Robin Wood (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 265-83; and Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 2011), 10.

⁸⁸ Other slavery-centered films of this period include: *Slavers* (1978), *The Legend of Black Charley* (1972) *Ashanti* (1979), *Blake Snake* (1973), *Slaves* (1969), *Drum*, the sequel to *Mandingo* (1976), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1976), as well as a number of "mondo" films like *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971).

devastatingly fluid capitalistic projects and social networks whose influence was traceable from the cotton fields of 1865 to the cities of 1968.⁸⁹

The film makes this clear through its cruel plantation owner, MacKay (Stephen Boyd), a Southern Gothic version of *Gone with the Wind's* Rhett Butler. Although Margaret Mitchell's novel never states this directly, what makes Rhett attractive is his Otherness: where Southern gentlemen like Ashley Wilkes are polite, the Northern Rhett is direct; where cavaliers are honorable, he is unapologetically self-serving; where they follow courtship rules, Rhett is unabashedly hedonistic. The novel and film versions of *Gone with the Wind* correlate this roguishness to blackness, which lends a racialized charge to the scene in which Rhett rapes Scarlett, and to their relationship more generally.⁹⁰ *Slaves* turns all of this subtext into text in Southern Gothic fashion, exaggerating MacKay's taboo appeal and showing that appeal's roots in the grotesque aspects of his person: his self-interest, his contradictory investment in blackness, and his abuse of enslaved people. Like *The Beguiled's* McBurney but with a dangerous amount of power, MacKay's charisma constantly vibrates against his repulsive character.

MacKay's family wealth is built on the slave trade, and he understands his involvement in the slave system as a foregone conclusion. At a slave auction, MacKay

⁸⁹ Jennifer Rae Greeson, "Plenary Panel..."

⁹⁰ This scene takes place during post-Reconstruction period and rearticulates the contemporary "black male rapist." This pervasive myth held that black men were seeking revenge on white men by raping white women. Ingenious in its cruelty, the myth justified white violence against black men, the continuing rape of black women, and white male control over black women. As in *Mandingo*, the prohibition against interracial sex could heighten its erotic charge for white women like Scarlett. Rhett contains the roguishness and magnetism correlated with blackness temporarily in a safe, white, upper-class package. That he carries the charge of Other does not mean he empathizes in any way with racially Othered. The novel version of *Gone With The Wind* makes this clear when Rhett rides with KKK to terrorize a black neighborhood, but the film strategically omits Rhett's ownership of slaves or connection to the slave trade.

explains to an abolitionist that his choice to buy slaves is a choice to control his participation in a system he is always, already implicated in; if he “must play this game,” he explains, he will “play it to win.”⁹¹ The film makes clear that MacKay’s gamesmanship and scorn for the South (both riffs on Rhett’s disregard for Southern social customs) do not denote admirable character; he is, rather, the “cynical subject” described by Slavoj Zizek, who behaves as though awareness of a corrupt system precludes ethical action. His mask of smugness belies what he knows to be true: that despite feigning a kind of powerlessness, his actions powerfully devastate others. This contradictory mask is also the only way he can justify his participation:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask...Cynical reason is no longer naïve but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it...⁹²

MacKay is the face of the global reach of capitalism and its self-perpetuating, self-effacing drive. This is made clear in a conversation when MacKay reveals that he is from Boston, MA. His father is an abolitionist preacher there who is “long on scruples, short on cash.”⁹³ Some of MacKay’s plantation profits will go to his father and fund missionary trips to Africa. In this conversation, he asserts that the slave system is not just connected to capitalism, but *is* capitalism incarnate. Slavery-fueled capitalism reaches

⁹¹ *Slaves*, directed by Herbert Biberman (1969; Los Angeles: Continental Distributing).

⁹² Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso Books, 2009), 718.

⁹³ *Slaves*.

from South to North, from America to Europe to Africa. As the foundation of the nation's economy, the "peculiar institution" also extends forward and backward in time—in *Slaves*, the national-North has always acted as the slave system's money-lauderer and primary benefactor. The film's insistence that there are no innocent regions, only globalized, modern networks of capital was forward-thinking enough to seem alien to mainstream viewers in the 1970s.⁹⁴ MacKay's cynicism coupled with the film's implication of the national-North was likely a contributing factor in its poor reception. *Slaves* touched an uncanny kernel of national identity, the unfreedom that resides at the heart of American democracy, at a time when our global status was already embattled by the Vietnam War, a war that had at its heart, the issue of dispossession and ideological influence.

Viewers can see the immediate devastation that MacKay causes in his relationship with, Cassy (Dionne Warwick), a slave mistress. MacKay flaunts Cassy as a prized possession in addition to emotionally and physically violating her. But, in the private space of her bathroom she transforms her objectified status into self-care rituals, declaring she is both "black and comely."⁹⁵ When other slaves on the plantation radicalize, she eventually joins them and combines a cultural nationalism culled from self-care with revolutionary drive in the film's final, insurrectionary scene. Cassy's amalgamation of "black is beautiful" sentiments and interest in rebellion did not reflect

⁹⁴ The argument that slavery powered the development of capitalism can be traced from W.E.B. DuBois through Eric William's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). It has reached an apotheosis in recent historical texts like Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* and Greg Grandin's *Empire of Necessity*. However, many more scholars argued that slavery was a medieval, "peculiar" institution that slowed the South's modernization and participation in industrial capitalism.

⁹⁵ *Slaves*.

the liberal universalism of the Civil Rights movement that preceded the film's release. Rather, she uses Black Power strategies so that in effect, the film transforms the Confederate South into a kind of parallel universe for the 1960s-70s, a staging ground where Biberman can gauge the efficacy of Black Power resistance against entrenched forms of oppression: slavery as well as 20th century discrimination.

As MacKay's display object, Cassy reflects the 19th century cultural discourse that objectified Africans, African Americans, and women by placing them outside the flow of history and deeming them incapable of altering its course. Among other consequences, these discourses would erase black populations from the first histories of the Civil War. As Anne McClintock contends in 19th century advertising, "Africans are figured not as historic agents but as frames for the commodity, valuable for exhibition alone."⁹⁶ When MacKay invites local planters to his estate, he treats Cassy in exactly this way—he does not conceal their sexual relationship but rather, objectifies her as a piece of African art.⁹⁷ His exhibition of Cassy as his partner is an expression of his power over her, and the fact that he conducts this forbidden relationship openly without reproach shows the extent of his power over his fellow planters.

⁹⁶ McClintock 141.

⁹⁷ While describing the African art in his plantation home to his fellow planters, MacKay acknowledges, "I know it makes you uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable too. That's why I keep it" (*Slaves*). The planters' collective uneasiness comes from the sense that MacKay reveals a reality that is typically disavowed. To justify enslavement, plantation owners charged that slaves were less intelligent than their masters, and thereby benefitted from the structure of plantation life. These intricately carved African objects, in conjunction with MacKay's speech about African doctors performing complex surgeries, subverts a central tenet of plantation ideology. His parading of Cassy also makes the permeably-boundaried relationships between enslaved people and white plantation owners too visible. MacKay's retention of African objects and objectified people, including Cassy, does not mean he values them more than other planters. He is simply more forthcoming about his abuse of those "objects" and the pleasurable friction he derives from making visible what is typically submerged.

Slaves's advertising campaign further fetishized Dionne Warwick. The film's posters prominently featured Cassy rising naked from a bath, a ploy to market *Slaves* as an exploitation film, and thereby, attract a wider (i.e. white) audience with the promise of sex. The brand of sex that *Slaves* advertised was particularly titillating in the era of Black Power, whose ground troops and some of its most visible leaders were black women. In this cultural context, it seems particularly important to note that Cassy wears her hair naturally, styled not unlike Angela Davis or Pam Grier,⁹⁸ and takes a militant stance against her objectification. Unfortunately, just as MacKay uses Cassy's body to his own ends, the film's marketing campaign appropriated the "strong, black woman" stereotype to sexualize Warwick. According to *Slaves*'s advertising campaign, the film was an opportunity to dominate, and by dominated by assertive black women. It is easy to see how the film fixed the meaning of Warwick's body into a much longer lineage of objectified black women. However, when assessing Cassy only in the 1970s context of exploitation cinema, it is easy to miss the 19th century meaning attached to the bathing ritual that the poster depicts. Considering this meaning brings Cassy's simple act closer to the Black Power discourses she vocalizes.

Cassy's act of bathing connects the domestic space of the plantation to the global capitalist market via the commodities of soap, cotton and the symbolic, cleansing power of water: it is yet another way *Slaves* connects the plantation system to global capitalism. Here though, the film asks whether a dispossessed person can massage that economic

⁹⁸ Pam Grier most famously played the female Blaxploitation hero, Foxy Brown. Her natural hair and assertive persona made her icon of empowered black womanhood; unfortunately, the actor was also relentlessly sexualized in *Foxy Brown* and other contemporary roles including *Drum*, the sequel to *Mandingo*.

system to her benefit. The question had practical import in an era when Marxist Black Power philosophies challenged the white supremacy built into the capitalist system, noting that the twinning of race and economics had deep roots in American history. As McClintock contends, the crumbling social order of the Civil War South was predicated on precarious notions of white supremacy, the cultivation of cotton, and finding markets for the clothes created from it:

If imperialism garnered a bounty of cheap cotton and soap oils from coerced colonial labor, the middle class fascination with clean white bodies, and clean white clothing stemmed not only from the rampant profiteering of the imperial economy but also from the realms of the ritual and the fetish. Soap did not flourish when imperial ebullience was at its peak. It emerged commercially during an era of impending crisis and social calamity, serving to preserve, through fetish ritual, the uncertain boundaries of class, gender, and race identity.⁹⁹

19th century soap advertising offering images of racial separation and white salvation through commodity consumption. In advertisements that showed soap magically turning black bodies white (save for their faces that remained marked as African American, thus reinforcing “proper” boundaries between black and white), soap eugenically promised the commodity could wash away all signs of blackness: it was a technology of capital as well as social purification.

The longer scene of Cassy bathing disrupts this 19th century ideology and the longer history of white capitalism and black female fetishization. 19th century

⁹⁹ McClintock 132.

advertisements hailed white, middle-class women who understood soap as the ultimate marker of their racial purity, chastity, and morality. When Cassy purchases soap, she disrupts the global chain of consumption, at least insofar as she does not seek to wash away or negate her blackness by using it. Her understanding of herself as both “black” and “comely,” places her in a much longer lineage of opposition to white supremacy through self-care—this lineage created the “black is beautiful” rhetoric that underwrote cultural nationalism. As bell hooks contends, “If the white world told us we were dirty and ugly and smelled bad, we retreated into the comfort and warmth of our bathtubs...and reminded ourselves that ‘white folks don’t know everything.’ We knew how to invent, how to make worlds for ourselves different from the world the white people wanted us to live in.”¹⁰⁰ Dislocated from her family as well as other slaves on the plantation, Cassy uses the private space of the bathroom to create an “invented world.” Of course, MacKay’s presence haunts the space, both because Cassy’s money comes from him and ultimately perpetuates the slave trade she is enmeshed within. Moreover, MacKay can and does penetrate this space to curtail her attempts at self-determination.

In an argument just after the bathing scene, Cassy breaks one of MacKay’s cherished antique mirrors. MacKay grabs her and counters, “Disgust makes you look so womanly. Like you’re about to reveal some man-woman truth. Don’t waste it on a mirror. Give it to me.”¹⁰¹ As Patricia Yaegar has argued in reference to other Southern texts, images of shattered whiteness (like the mirror) are often allegories for white

¹⁰⁰ bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1993), 60.

¹⁰¹ *Slaves*.

anxiety.¹⁰² But here, MacKay compels Cassy to redirect the energy she expends on resistance, on him. He seeks to solve the riddle she presents through sex that ensures he can dominate her. He can compel this sexual solution because he brings the whole capitalist system to bear in his assault. He owns her, can sell her, or abuse her whether she rebels or not—in effect, Cassy is perpetually trapped between “thinghood” and “personhood.”¹⁰³ At the height of America’s war against communism in Vietnam, *Slaves* shows capitalism not as a productive, free market system that ensures healthy economic competition. Instead, capitalism is a no-win, objectifying, global schema.

Slaves suggests that the only solution to the dilemma capitalism presents is a total overthrow of the system. But, even when revolution is possible, *Slaves* does not guarantee it will succeed. At the end of the film, Cassy along with two other slaves, burn down MacKay’s plantation and escape. MacKay is relatively unfazed, uttering words that seem strange to a man who just lost his livelihood, “Nothing has changed, nothing has really happened.” The film implies that the world has changed in ways that MacKay will not admit to, but it also makes clear that the system does not crumble as a result of Cassy’s efforts. MacKay is right that he can always get more slaves. It is not even clear if Cassy’s escape is successful—the last line of the film is “We aren’t free yet. They’ll chase us all the way to Canada. Freedom better be worth it.”¹⁰⁴ Unlike other Civil War

¹⁰² Patricia Yaeger, “Southern Women Writers: A Confederacy of Water Moccasins,” *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000), 1-33.

¹⁰³ MacKay does not often resort to physical force to control Cassy, but rather tells her that she can leave whenever she wants. He says she could even go to Paris if she wishes and be “free.” But her apparent mobility ultimately shows the totality of MacKay’s control. If she went to Paris, she would go as his property, as a commodity that moved itself. As she moved through Paris, she would do so as an object of MacKay’s control that illustrated his global reach.

¹⁰⁴ *Slaves*.

films including *The Beguiled*, freedom is the central conflict of *Slaves*, but there is no moral or clear way to attain it within the existing political system. The catharsis of overcoming that typically drives slave-centered narratives is noticeably absent here.

Film critics had no trouble seeing *Slaves*'s temporal remix or the ways it banked on insurrectionary sentiments. Vincent Canby noted, "*Slaves* is a kind of cinematic carpet-bagging project in which some contemporary movie-makers have raided the antebellum South and attempted to impose on it their own attitudes that will explain 1969 black militancy."¹⁰⁵ Inherent in this review are three judgments: the notion that Biberman cherry-picks or in Canby's parlance, "raids," lessons from a helpless South for professional gain; that the director forces a parallel that does not fit; and that he is too moralistic in his attempts to do so. Of course, in less than ten years that followed *Slaves*'s release, many more films would draw similar parallels, culminating in the release of *Mandingo*. But, Canby's appraisal (indeed, *Slaves* itself) came before Black Power/Blaxploitation was standard fare, and so a film that may have been read as progressive in 1975 was instead judged out-of-step, Manichean, and propagandistic. The film was poorly received by most other American critics, and their appraisal, rather than *Slaves*'s reception by its target audiences became the film's legacy.

Critics further pounced on the film because the melodramatic genre was out-of-vogue by 1968-69 and because *Slaves* looked antiquated next to the film was often double-billed with: the stark, existential *Night of the Living Dead*. Although they were produced by subsidiaries of the same company, Walter Reade, *Slaves* was *Night*'s

¹⁰⁵ Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Slaves' Opens at the DeMille: Militancy Depicts Life in Antebellum South Dionne Warwick Plays Mistress in Debut," *The New York Times* (New York), July 3, 1969.

antithesis—where *Night* looked like a prototypical independent production (stark and grainy), *Slaves* was produced as a prestige picture. Where *Nights* offered nihilistic horror and action, *Slaves* offered cheap opulence and long monologues. The films are different enough to make *Slaves* appear obviously misguided and it would be easy to assume that *Slaves* tanked upon its release, like *The Beguiled*. The fact that *Slaves* has fallen almost completely out of circulation makes minimizing the film's impact even easier. But in fact, the film was popular at the Cannes Film Festival and, according to the film's director, outgrossed Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and *True Grit*, starring John Wayne, in its first week of release.¹⁰⁶ Biberman who made the critically-acclaimed *Salt of the Earth* (1954), maintained that *Slaves*'s ticket sales grew in the film's second week of release, largely by word of mouth.¹⁰⁷ How should we account for this popularity, and the gap between viewer reception and critical appraisal? Perhaps more importantly, what does this gap suggest about the film's connections to the Vietnam and Black Power era?

Clues can be found by examining movie theaters in the inner city where the film was most popular, and by briefly considering *Slaves*'s distributor: Continental Pictures. After WWII, the white middle class abandoned urban movie palaces as they flocked to newly constructed suburbs. While the mainstream film industry chased viewers with new theaters in these neighborhoods, Continental distributed films that courted the ignored, black viewers who frequented urban theaters. As an unnamed Continental producer

¹⁰⁶ Biberman's words here must be taken with a grain of salt. The letter in which these comments appear is a reaction against the film's critical rejection. Biberman sent this letter to the principle actors in his film to assuage them that their actorly efforts had not been in vain. However, as *The Wild Bunch* and *True Grit* were their 4th and 5th weeks of release, it is possible that *Slaves* outperformed the films in some markets. Herbert Biberman to Robert Kya-Hill, 8 July 1969, Box 1, Folder 8, Robert Kya-Hill Collection, Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University Library.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

remarked about the documentary *Black Like Me* in 1963: “We are budgeting our picture so that, if necessary, we can recoup our costs in just the Negro market, even while aiming at as broad a market as possible.” *Slaves*’s marketing as an exploitation film (a category that never fit well) was how Continental aimed for a “broad market,” but the film’s content specifically targets African American audiences and liberal viewers sympathetic to racial inequality.

In a letter to the film’s stars, director Biberman hypothesized that *Slaves*’s popularity centered on its refusal “to present the individual slave as a crushed, defeated, accepting creature and to plead for pity for him. [The film] shows him capable of ‘burning the barn down.’”¹⁰⁸ Biberman’s letter echoes *Slaves*’s marketing campaign which, through words like “blazing,” and “fire,” explicitly connected the image of a burning plantation to the fires of urban insurrections occurring with increasing frequency in the late 1960s-70s.¹⁰⁹ The 1965 Watts insurrection and a second wave of insurrections in 1967-68 (just before the film’s debut) vented pent-up rage against larger intransigence on discrimination and poverty that disproportionately affected people of color. These insurrections were also about Vietnam.

Eradicating economic inequality was a cornerstone of 1960s-70s activism, but President Johnson could not convince black Americans his War on Poverty would successfully achieve those goals as long as the nation was spending 25 times as much on the Vietnam War as it was on eliminating poverty at home. Additionally, a persistent lack

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ 1965 saw the most famous of these insurrections in Watts, Los Angeles. More insurrections came in 1967 and 1968 in cities from Newark to Detroit. While these events all had local causes ranging from police brutality to Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, they were more precisely a reaction to the lack of employment opportunities, inadequate housing, and poverty in urban centers.

of jobs in the private sector led African Americans to enlist at higher rates than white Americans, and the racist effects of “channeling” and the draft combined to increase mortality rates for black men—Vietnam robbed communities of color twice, economically and in lives lost. With this history in mind, it becomes easier to see why the film’s insurrectionary ending, whose appeal seemed patronizing or contrived to critics like Canby, may have meant something very different to inner city viewers. What the film lacked was the visualization of sexual exploitation that would make *Mandingo* a crossover cult hit—without Hollywood’s target audience of white, young men represented in ticket sales or hailed by the film’s content, *Slaves* was deemed as insignificant by the industry and summarily disavowed by critics.

But, by the director’s account, the film was incredibly successful in Detroit, Chicago, and Washington DC—the exact cities experiencing the largest urban insurrections in the late 1960s. Film historian Christopher Sieving confirms that the film did indeed “smash house records” across the country, which suggests that *Slaves* validated the fantasy of revolution when the government could not.¹¹⁰ Other films with similar revolutionary spirit, like Jules Dassin’s *Uptight* (1968), failed to attract urban audiences which indicates that if the independent film industry was trying to capitalize on insurrectionary sentiments, their attempts were not indiscriminately successful. What *Slaves* had on films like *Uptight* was its powerful combination of political revolution and Cassy’s Afrocentric reclamation of blackness. Her “black is beautiful” worldview spoke to cultural nationalist imperatives coming to increasing prominence in the late 1960s as

¹¹⁰ Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching: Black Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2011), 151.

other strategies—including the Civil Rights and the anti-war movements—fractured. Through the film, viewers could explore cultural nationalism’s potential to enact change where other kinds of activism had failed.

Perhaps *Slaves* was not popular because black audiences were starved for meaningful representation (although they were), or because studios exploited the anger of these audiences and the appeal of Black Power for profit (although they did). These theories, like Canby’s review, posit a passive black audience who rushed to any film with revolutionary content, but as the popularity of *Slaves* proves, this audience actively differentiated between films: they saw nuance where film critics saw a slate of indistinguishable products. Perhaps *Slaves* was popular because black, urban viewers could see the inner workings of the film—its connections between capitalism, slavery, and contemporary insurrections—in ways that mainly white, middle-class film critics could not.

“The South’s Gonna Rise Again”: *Two Thousand Maniacs*

Like *Slaves*, Herschell Gordon Lewis’s horror film *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964) carried in-group appeal, but for an antipodal population—rural, white Southerners. As detailed in Chapter 2, *Two Thousand Maniacs* is one of the first “Southern Revenge” films, a genre that features Northerners who stumble into Southern territory and are tortured by its impoverished inhabitants: other standouts of the genre include *Deliverance* (1972), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1978). Like those films, *Two Thousand Maniacs* shows the appeal of Lost Cause

ideology and Southern Gothicism to the allegedly modern nation—as such, it undermines the very binary it seeks to solidify between the urban, modern North and the backwards Old South.

Two Thousand Maniacs debuted in the wake of the 1961 Freedom Rides and near the end of Civil War Centennial celebrations, in 1965. The films' Southern residents are literally Lost-Cause-motivated ghosts killed during the Civil War and resurrected for the express purpose of killing Northern tourists to celebrate the Centennial. The film's metaphoric take on the meaning of the Centennial in the Civil Rights era was not lost on viewers—for anti-Civil Rights populations, *Two Thousand Maniacs* presented a cathartic opportunity to take revenge on Northern white interlopers and by extension, African Americans demanding social change. The strategies used to torture white Northerners in the film indicate its palimpsestic layering of Civil War/Civil Rights, as the murders of the Northerners eerily mirror the horrific violence visited on Freedom Riders as well as punitive techniques used during in slave era. As the film to most explicitly mix time and space in the Southern/national-North imaginary, *Two Thousand Maniacs* unintentionally links 1860s and 1960s, venting issues that the nation was not prepared to confront directly. In other words, *Two Thousand Maniacs* performs similar cultural work as *The Beguiled* and *Slaves* but in a uniquely visible, and uniquely phobic way. The film appropriates the image of the Civil War to provide a funhouse mirror reflection of the Centennial celebrations at their height in 1964—this funhouse reflection also illustrates the limits of nation's fetishization of the Civil War.

Two Thousand Maniacs appealed to Southerners not only due to its revenge premise but also its satire of Northern inability to understand Southern codes of behavior. The film opens after a group of tourists are lured into Pleasant Valley, Florida. The town's mayor welcomes them with a speech, spoken in a saccharine, Deep South drawl:

Now some of our guests ain't sure yet what this shindig is all about, so we better get started with our Centennial, right folks? Yessirree! Now, it's been a hundred years, but what we celebratin' ain't important. What we need are guests, and you all are it! Now for the next few days y'all gonna be guests of the town. You gonna have the best hotel rooms, the best food, the best entertainment, and it's all on the house! Yessir, y'all our guests, and we gonna show you some Southern hospitality!

The six Northerners are so taken with the mayor's apparent warmth that they ask few questions about their role in the celebration. As American Studies scholar Anthony Szczesiul notes though, the crowd of locals (surrogates for Southern viewers) responds to the speech with "knowing, even mocking laughter..."¹¹¹ They can see the cartoonish performance for the harbinger of doom that it is. The mayor's speech renders Southernness not as ontological attribute, but as performative and excessive show, a construction with ironic, political force that requires a kind of interpretive intelligence that the film's Northerners do not possess.¹¹² The outsiders do not feel themselves in

¹¹¹ Anthony Szczesiul, "Re-Mapping Southern Hospitality: Discourse, Ethics, Politics," *European Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 2 (2007), 132.

¹¹² Director Herschell Gordon Lewis also created a tie-in novelization of the screenplay in an attempt to capitalize on the film's anticipated success. His ability to manipulate the Southern Gothic genre through the film and novel may have something to do with his former career as an English professor at Mississippi State University.

danger because the mayor's welcoming demeanor fits their limited definition of the region. Imagining that space as recalcitrant and ready to serve also flatters the Northerners' self-image. And so, even while the film tortures visitors in ways that become increasingly discomfiting, in true Southern Gothic fashion it also shows the underbelly of the national-North, its tendency to look Southward to reify its own identity.

The mob of smiling and cheery faces turns violent when a Northern woman asks a resident "What do you do when you're not celebrating the Centennial?" Of course, these men do not do anything when not celebrating the Centennial—they do not exist without it. As if forced to contemplate an unspeakable reality, the resident's laughter turns hysterical and he answers her question by cutting off her thumb. He then carries her into the domestic space of his home where, in front of a mantle filled with Confederate flags, he and two other men dismantle her body. In some ways, the residents' existence is a satire of the Southern obsession with the Lost Cause. The Northerner's question clearly touches the Zizekian "kernel," the hard unutterable thing, at the center of their existence. This partially explains why the film goes haywire into an orgy of violence. At this moment, the film seems to approach the limits of what it can articulate directly. As Szczesiul continues, evidence that the film has approached the limits of its language abounds in the two other deaths shown: one man's limbs are tied to separate horses and torn apart, while another is rolled in a barrel spiked with nails. Both of these murders have antecedents in antebellum violence. This violence suggests how the film brings up, but cannot fully articulate continuities of oppression between 1865 and 1965:

Some historical sources say the slave Gabriel, who led an unsuccessful slave revolt in 1800, ‘was executed by having a horse attached to each of his four limbs, and was thus torn asunder.’ Similarly, several sources describe slaves being punished or killed by being placed in a barrel lined with nails and rolled down a hill.¹¹³

While the film can satirize national-Northern and Southern identity, *Two Thousand Maniacs* cannot voice its racial unconscious—instead, blackness haunts the fringes of its expression, always threatening to rupture into the narrative but never doing so in a comprehensible way. This is evident from the film’s first moments, when a blonde boy chases a black cat and places a sign around his neck that reads “Damn Yankees” before hanging him off-screen. Like *The Beguiled’s* opening, *Two Thousand Maniacs* here references the Southern history of black lynching but can only do so in displaced manner. These racialized symbols call to mind the contemporary context of violence of the Civil Rights era, while also reflecting on the contradictory meanings of the Centennial at 1965. As Sharon Monteith contends, the tragic murders that inaugurated Freedom Summer were still raw when *Two Thousand Maniacs* was made: “Events [of the Civil Rights era] are treated with irreverent haste as well as vulgar excess.”¹¹⁴ But, that sloppy, nausea-inducing treatment speaks volumes about the modes American used to confront trauma in real-time.

For all three films discussed, but particularly for *Two Thousand Maniacs*, the Civil War seems at once distant and too ideologically close for comfort to work as an

¹¹³ Szczesiul 134-35.

¹¹⁴ Monteith 212.

interpretive lens; and yet, the Civil War recurs obsessively through the 1960s-70s, seemingly necessary in the embattled production of nationalism. Activists used the war to narrate the fight for social justice, and entire industries mobilized the Civil War to unite a divided nation. McClintock contends that modern nationalism often takes shape through the organization of collective spectacle in popular culture, and the Civil War provided one such display in the 1960s-70s. Its image contained all of the components of the fetish, as defined by McClintock:

Far from being merely phallic substitutes, fetishes can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions... These contradictions may originate as social contradictions but are lived with profound intensity in the imagination and the flesh. The fetish thus stands at the cross-roads of psychoanalysis and social history, inhabiting the threshold of both personal and historical memory. The fetish marks a crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution.¹¹⁵

As an object that societies return to ritualistically, the fetish also disrupts linear notions of time. The linear time that structures national temporality assumes steady human progress toward an ideal. The fetish, on the other hand, exemplifies “repeatable time: time without progress,” and as such, always stands for something that the nation-state must disavow for its identity to cohere. The films and Centennial celebrations that stumble into articulating the appeal of the Civil War fetish to the Vietnam-era nation suggest that the unfreedoms and taboo pleasures of slave society were not undone by the Civil War.

¹¹⁵ McClintock 175.

Rather they continue to exist and the nation continues to ruminate on them in altered form. Perhaps more damning of all, the Centennial celebrations, *The Beguiled*, *Slaves*, and *Two Thousand Maniacs* suggest the democratic national-North has not evolved toward a higher democratic ideal, but remains caught in an ideological loop

CHAPTER TWO

The Southern Revenge Film in the New Hollywood Era

I. Introduction: Southern Revenge Films and Strategic Separations

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, 1960s-70s audiences, filmmakers, and critics were primed to see the South as a place that bore little relationship to the democratic, modern nation. This separation carried strategic value for a nation desperately trying to shore up its identity during the unpopular Vietnam War, political controversies like Watergate, a spate of assassinations, and social movements from second wave feminism to Black Power. As in earlier eras, a separable South functioned as an imaginary elsewhere for artists. In that space, they and the public could articulate fears and feelings of resentment against the overwhelming socio-political changes of the 1970s. This phantasmagoric space had little bearing on one's own reality and was thus safe—it could be summoned and willed away as seen fit.

The Southern imaginary¹¹⁶ was also held separate from the exalted New Hollywood filmmaking movement spearheaded by college-age auteurs like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and Paul Schrader.¹¹⁷ This separation is less intuitive, as many New

¹¹⁶ Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee describe the Southern imaginary as: "... an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, practices, attitudes, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographical region and time." In this piece, the Southern imaginary refers to filmic representations and fantasies of the South. See Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, eds., *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 2.

¹¹⁷ The New Hollywood era is usually defined as ~1967-1974, a time in which a new generation of young, often university-trained, filmmakers were able to initiate an aesthetic and technical renaissance in American filmmaking. This was largely due to the weakening of the Hollywood studio system—as studios sought out young audiences, they increasingly turned to young, male filmmakers including Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich, Terrence Malick, Arthur Penn, Paul Schrader, and Steven Spielberg. New Hollywood films tended toward aesthetic experimentation, and used a variety of techniques to subvert Hollywood convention. For a fuller discussion of this movement, see the introduction to this dissertation. For overviews of the era, see also *The Last Great American Picture Show: New*

Hollywood films are set in the South.¹¹⁸ Holding the New Hollywood movement apart from the recalcitrant South was strategic in a Hollywood industry trying to redefine itself and attract young viewers to theaters. To convince these viewers that the industry had something to offer, filmmakers had to show they were creating something new. The experimental, left-leaning New Hollywood movement would only be harmed by an association with an allegedly backwards South. Despite these strategic separations, 1970s Hollywood and the Southern imaginary are deeply, intrinsically related. As this chapter argues, what is “Southern” about films like *Deliverance* (Dir. John Boorman, 1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Dir. Wes Craven, 1977) defines 1970s cinema more broadly: apocalyptic vision, the use of the grotesque artistic tradition (here, the horror film) to critique a corrupt ruling class, and a vision of America haunted by the marginalized people it has dispossessed. What viewers glimpse in these films is not Southernness, exactly, but compelling portraits of Northern fears of social collapse visualized in a Southern idiom. “Southern Revenge” films follow Northern or urban Southern protagonists—symbolic of the nation at large—who embark on sojourns through the South only to be tortured and

Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s, eds. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2004); David Cook, “The Auteur Cinema: Directors and Directions in the ‘Hollywood Renaissance,’” in *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Los Angeles: California UP, 2002), 67-159; and Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, vol. IV., eds. Cynthia A. Barto Lucia Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Hoboken, NJ: 2012) 409-24. The most infamous text about the New Hollywood era makes use of primary documents and personal recollections: Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

¹¹⁸ Southern-set New Hollywood films include *Days of Heaven* (Dir. Terrence Malick, 1978) *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Dir. Monte Hellman, 1971), and *Five Easy Pieces* (Dir. Bob Rafelson, 1970), *Bonnie and Clyde* (Dir. Arthur Penn, 1967), *Cockfighter* (Dir. Monte Hellman, 1974), *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (Dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1974), *Deliverance* (Dir. John Boorman, 1972), and *Easy Rider* (Dir. Dennis Hopper, 1969).

killed by rural hillbillies. This stock narrative speaks to collective anxieties surrounding the inviolability of the American body, particularly if scholars consider Northern and urban Southerners as equal residents of the “national-North.” Rather than refer to an exact location, the term refers to an ideological construct of nationhood in which subjects imagine themselves as part of a democratic, free “North.” This community of belonging stands in opposition to an imagined, recalcitrant American South. *Deliverance*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (TCM)*, and *The Hills Have Eyes (THHE)* visit a special kind of violence on national-Northerners who also are also white, male representatives of the American family.¹¹⁹ By undermining the defining institution of family and summarily deconstructing the authority of the symbolic head of that institution, these films visualize the latent anxiety of a nation whose identity as a superpower was deeply embattled. They suggest that the country may be impotent to stop the multiple threats to its bodily integrity. Drawing connections between the national-North and the Southern imaginary in these films also reveals the regionalized, gendered, racialized underpinnings of films largely considered the autonomous brainchildren of white, male directors. These filmmakers rarely mention the Southern imaginary; and yet, it is everywhere in the 1970s. Some films of the period were direct adaptations of Southern Gothic novels¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Narratives of national exceptionalism often rely on a potent, white male head of an American “family,” who acts as defender of common values. The films analyzed in this chapter disrupt that narrative—they are part of a larger archive that renders the United States as a body made potentially vulnerable by internal threats. Amy Kaplan offers a compelling analysis of imperialist narratives that disrupt national identity via unruly bodies (colonized or enslaved) stretching back to the 19th century. See Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002).

¹²⁰ As defined in the introduction to this dissertation, Southern Gothic literature mixes terror, absurdism, and grotesque images to shock or disturb. The deformed or extravagant bodies in the work of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O’Connor satirize real social conditions and anthropomorphize social anxieties.¹²⁰ The dysfunctional, poor white family in Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, for instance, epitomizes the moral and economic destitution of the region more generally. The Southern Gothic genre is

such as *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Dir. John Huston, 1967), *Hurry Sundown* (Dir. Otto Preminger, 1967), and *This Property is Condemned* (Dir. Sydney Pollack, 1967).

Hollywood hoped these remakes would bring a built-in audience, and would also allow the industry to capitalize on nostalgia for a bygone classical Hollywood era. These films were prestige productions with established directors such as John Huston and stars such as Marlon Brando, Katherine Hepburn, and Elizabeth Taylor. Prestige pictures of this sort contrasted with the B-films analyzed in this dissertation; the latter set of films exploited the sexual and emotional exaggeration inherent to the Southern Gothic genre to attract young audiences.¹²¹ Perhaps most formative for New Hollywood directors, B-movie Godfather Roger Corman crafted a number of Gothic works, with a particular fascination with Edgar Allen Poe (a closet Southerner).¹²² Corman trained numerous New Hollywood directors as filmmakers, and inspired many more.

Film historian Thomas Elsaesser notes that a number of New Hollywood directors were drawn to the region: “Significantly, Rafelson, Hellman, Spielberg and others choose a ‘rural’ America...As if, finally, only rural hamlets could explain urban ghettos and

built on a set of recurring icons that paint the South as a place not only obsessed with the past but stuck within it: deranged Southern belles born fifty years too late, poor whites who cannot adapt to industrialization, and perhaps most infamously, ruined plantations. For more on this genre, see Lucinda MacKethan, “Genres of Southern Literature,” *Southern Spaces*, 12 February 2017, <https://southernspaces.org/2004/genres-southern-literature> as well as Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” *Mysteries and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).

¹²¹ There are films that combine these two genres. *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte*, for instance, traded in the same unsavory material as B-film (incest, sexuality, blood ties) but starred former A-list stars Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland, and Joseph Cotton. There are also additional high-budget productions including *In the Heat of the Night* that attempted to capitalize on viewer interest in Southern racial strife.

¹²² Poe was from Baltimore, Maryland, a border state between South and North. Many of his stories vent Southern trauma in a Gothic register. When discussing the perception of the “Southern school” of writers, Flannery O’Connor in fact remarked, “Most of us are considered, I believe, to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell,” O’Connor, 28.

suburban hysteria.”¹²³ The “rural hamlets” of Corman’s work and others provided a lens through which America could confront its own national conflicts, askance: this became particularly useful when the optimism of the New Frontier era dissolved into the malaise-ridden 1970s and society seemed in steep decline, not unlike the twilight period of the Old South.¹²⁴ The Southern imaginary provided useful metaphors, artistic forms, and contexts through which Americans could reckon with the nation’s downward spiral. However, the South’s history of failure also threatened America’s civilized identity, which partially explains why obscuring its influence became as important as it was impossible. To disavow the South as an artistic influence (however unconsciously) while also employing its aesthetic traditions and history allowed the industry to capitalize on the region’s infamy in current events without tethering itself to the recalcitrant politics that in many cases produced the infamy in the first place.

If critics did not directly link the Southern imaginary and New Hollywood cinema, directors did trace substantial connections between Roger Corman’s films and their work. Corman’s independent *The Intruder* (1962) set the stage for the production and distribution of New Hollywood films as well as post-Civil Rights movement films that dealt with race and the South. Corman’s films also provided training grounds for New Hollywood directors like Dennis Hopper. As such, Corman provides one direct connection between the Southern Gothic and New Hollywood. Corman’s films may also

¹²³ Thomas Elsaesser, “American Auteur Cinema: The Last – or First – Great Picture Show,” *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2004), 38.

¹²⁴ Further, Noel King curiously takes the title for his formative account of the New Hollywood era, “The Last Good Time We Ever Had,” from *A Confederate General at Big Sur*. This 1964 novel follows a man who seeks to war with the status quo, and takes as his template the Confederates’ struggle against the Union.

be read as something of a template for how to use the South as a parallel universe. In *The Intruder*, the director employs an imagined South to comment on the problems of the national-North as previous science fiction directors' used alternate worlds to explore contemporary social problems. On the opposite side of the film industry spectrum, Hollywood's popular prestige film, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Dir. Robert Mulligan, 1962), prepared mainstream audiences to see the South as a separable, Gothic but "authentic" place. Considered together, these two films exemplify the conditions that created the films this chapter will examine in more detail: *TCM*, *THHE*, and *Deliverance*.

II. *The Intruder*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and American Identity

As film historian Eric Schaefer observes, Corman and Mulligan created their films in a period of social upheaval. The early 1960s saw New Frontier optimism inspired by the space race and the election of President John F. Kennedy. The Cold War matched this belief in technology with heightened worries over a possible nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Even after President Kennedy diffused the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (a stand-off between the USSR and the United States), fear of a world-ending, total warfare continued. National anxieties only escalated as Civil Rights activists clashed with authorities like George Wallace for equal rights at home. In the film industry, declining audience numbers heightened anxieties about another kind of "end of times" for Hollywood's entertainment factory.

To lure viewers back into movie theaters, Hollywood borrowed from current events, including the Civil Rights struggle.¹²⁵ *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*TKAM*) imported a topical storyline—a falsely accused black man standing trial for raping a young white girl—into a familiar genre of the “social problem film,”¹²⁶ or melodrama. The film’s literary pedigree combined with the casting of Gregory Peck ensured that audiences would receive *TKAM* as a prestige picture. Though the aesthetic of *TKAM* diverges sharply from televised images of the Civil Rights movement, the ubiquity of such images lent the film a kind of documentary realism for many audiences. Most network news coverage concentrated on Civil Rights activists’ efforts in Southern states, and *TKAM* heightened national identification of racism as a Southern issue. The film’s treatment of racism as a moral problem of closed minds in an insular small town further separated the film’s South from the “progressive” North and functioned to steer the film’s analysis of racism clear of one of racism’s key causes: economics. Watching *TKAM*, national-

¹²⁵ The film thus continues a longer trend of Hollywood borrowing from current events to capture audience attention. For more on this phenomenon, see Richard Maltby, “‘As Close to Real Life as Hollywood Ever Gets’: Headline Pictures, Topical Movies, Editorial Cinema, and Studio Realism in the 1930s,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, vol. II, eds. Cynthia A. Barto Lucia Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Hoboken, NJ: 2012), 76-112.

¹²⁶ Popularized by Warner Brothers in the 1930s, the “social problem” introduces a topical problem that is solved by a benevolent, individual intervention. Films like *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) deal with crime, adolescence, and gangs while later films like *TKAM* deal with racism. This genre is an appropriation of the earlier “race film,” genre crafted by black independent filmmakers in the early 20th century such as Oscar Micheaux. Another 1960s film that fits this mold is John Ford’s *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960). Ford’s film follows the trial of a black cavalry sergeant who is accused of raping and killing a white woman. The poster for *Sergeant Rutledge* explicitly exploits its topical premise and the taboo charge the film carries with the lines: “Forget all the suspense you have ever seen! Forget all the excitement you have ever known!” Actor Spencer Tracy is quoted on the poster as saying “Terrific! The kind of excitement motion pictures were invented for!” For the film poster, see “Sergeant York,” *Film Affinity.com*, accessed 01 March 2017, <http://www.filmaffinity.com/en/film213705.html>. For more on the social problem film, see Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London: British Film Institute, 1983); and “‘Got-to-See’: Teenpics and the Social Problem Picture,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, vol. II, eds. Cynthia A. Barto Lucia Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Hoboken, NJ: 2012) 220-41.

Northern audiences could marvel at the South's backwardness, cathartically purge their emotions, then leave the region (and the problem of racial prejudice) behind upon leaving the theater. The film's Southern Gothic aspects further distanced *TKAM* from most national-Northern viewers' everyday life.

While *TKAM* is not Southern Gothic in its entirety, the film's portrayal of Arthur "Boo" Radley, the town recluse, epitomizes the genre. Young protagonist Scout, her brother Jem, and their friend, Dill, are alternately terrified and fascinated by Radley. Gossip swirls around the mysterious figure and his familial history. Readers learn that after Radley got in trouble as a child, his parents kept him sequestered in their home. Radley is said to have stabbed his father with scissors, which leads many townspeople to believe he is a danger who is rightfully kept inside his family's large, dilapidated home. Key elements of the Southern Gothic figure into this portrayal: namely, the images of white familial strife and corrupt lineage in the ruined plantation home. In *TKAM*, cinematographer Russell Harlan played an important creative role by emphasizing the Southern Gothic elements of Radley's home and shadowy visage. As Eric Schaefer notes:

Harlan's black-and-white cinematography shifts between a hard-edged realism, reminiscent of Walker Evans's Depression photographs, and an expressionist sensibility that imbues the Radley house and the lonely nighttime gardens with menace.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ It is worth noting that in the film and the novel, these Southern Gothic aspects are red herrings. The children learn that Radley poses no danger to them when he protects them from harm late in the story. This episode, and the central trial of a wrongly accused black man, are meant to illustrate the importance of not trusting stereotypes. However, the nuances of this message as it relates to rural Southernness did not reach all viewers. Eric Schaefer, "1962: Movies and Deterioration," in *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Newark, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2008), 76-77.

Schafer precisely parses “realism” and “expressionism,” but the concepts actually come together in the American imagination, particularly in reactions to images of the South. Evans’ photos are social realist pieces whose composition is rife with expressionist, Southern Gothic elements such as extreme poverty, decrepit structures, and dirty white faces. These images emphasize Southern poverty as the underbelly of Northern prosperity; they are designed to encourage viewer sympathy, and with it federal intervention in the economically depressed region. The highly mediated nature of Evans’ images matters because these photographs paved the way for audiences to mistake Southern Gothic images, like those in *TKAM*, as real “slices of life.”

By 1962, the collusion of Southern Gothicism, Southern stereotype, and realism culminated in two popular Southern-set television shows including *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960-1968) and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-1971). These comedies focused on community-driven rural life to appeal to family audiences as well as Southern TV stations who often blocked other televised images of the South: those coming from the Civil Rights movement. As detailed in the introduction to this dissertation, the network news focus on the Southern aspects of the Civil Rights struggle functioned to paint racial oppression as a regional phenomenon—combined, Southern-focused sitcoms and Civil Rights images made the South appear separable from the New Frontier progressive vision. The success of *TKAM* in this context illustrates the degree to which a rural, backwards South had supplanted the realities of Southern life in the national-Northern imagination.

The nation's relationship to the region was also strained by the ripple effects of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that called for the desegregation of public schools. The 1963 assassination of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers by a member of the White Citizen's Council—a white supremacist group—showed how high anti-integrationist resistance remained well into the 1960s.¹²⁸ While *TKAM* provided a resolution to racial tension through middle-class, mild-mannered Atticus Finch, Corman's *The Intruder* touched the deeper, uglier nerve of persistent racial hostility and violence in the South after desegregation.

Protagonist Adam Cramer (William Shatner) is the racist inverse of Atticus Finch. Rather than strive for racial harmony, Cramer visits the Southern town of Caxton to encourage citizens to resist integration. In the process, he reveals the barely buried fascism, eugenic hysteria, and mob mentality that undergirds modern anti-integrationist sentiments. In opposition to *TKAM*, *The Intruder* positions integration as a national problem. Cramer does not represent a Southern organization like the White Citizen's Council but hails from the seat of federal power, Washington D.C. He connects the domestic issue of education to the nation's foreign policy agenda, arguing that integration is part of a Communist plot to weaken American society through miscegenation. At the end of the film, a deus-ex-machina forces citizens to see through Shatner's façade, but

¹²⁸ The White Citizen's Council formed in 1954 explicitly to block de-segregation of public schools. Evers was assassinated in 1963 after working to overturn segregation at the University of Mississippi. He was also a field officer for the NAACP who worked on broader civil rights issues including desegregating public facilities and voter registration. Evers's murderer was tried twice in cases with all-white juries who could not reach a unanimous verdict. The murderer was only convicted in 1994 (30 years after the crime) when new evidence was found.

not before he proves how easily the town—which thought itself a rational, moral place—is frothed into a lynch mob.

When Cramer gives an impassioned speech on the dangers presented when non-white people gain political power, the white townspeople are quickly won over. They cheer, whoop, and holler as Cramer declares he will give his life to “keep this country free, white, and American.”¹²⁹ Schaefer notes “Shots of the enthralled crowd watching Cramer cannot help but call to mind the rapt faces that gaze up at Adolf Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* (1935).”¹³⁰ The film does indeed discover a trapdoor between WWII European fascism and modern American conservatism.¹³¹ The strategies Cramer uses to make his point, including accusing a black man of rape, are time-worn, but his character is an epitome of the modern. He is not a Southern bully with police dogs but an intelligent charismatic speaker. This is to say that the modern face of racism is a handsome young Yankee. In his blindingly white suit, Cramer is a preview of the post-racial era replete with fewer brutish Bull Connors and more “dog whistle” neo-conservatives like Richard Nixon and Donald Trump.

Like the films analyzed in Chapter 1, *The Intruder* cut too close to the national quick and failed at the box office. Corman maintained that the film was the first he made “from a deep political and social conviction.” The film’s financial failure “was—and

¹²⁹ *The Intruder*, dir. Roger Corman (1962; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2007.), DVD.

¹³⁰ Schaefer 13.

¹³¹ For more on the connections between European fascism and Southern literature, see Robert Brinkmeyer Jr., *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana UP, 2009).

remains to this day...the greatest disappointment of my career.”¹³² After this film, Corman softened his social critique but his politics remain in future efforts, mainly in the form of allegory. The director also continued to make Southern-set films and Gothic adaptations throughout the 1960s.¹³³

It was while working on these films that Corman future New Hollywood filmmakers under his wing. Corman’s roster of apprentices included but was not limited to: Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Bogdonavich, Martin Scorsese, Monte Hellman and John Sayles. The actors who got their start with Corman included Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Robert DeNiro, Bruce Dern, Charles Bronson, and Dennis Hopper. The meandering road film that inaugurated the New Hollywood era, Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969), was actually inspired by Corman’s *The Wild Angels* (1966) and *The Trip* (1967). Both *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip* featured Peter Fonda, who would also star in *Easy Rider* alongside Dennis Hopper and Jack Nicholson. *Easy Rider* combines the biker genre of *The Wild Angels* with the psychedelia of *The Trip*. When younger directors like Hopper borrowed from Corman in their later work, they also took from the Gothic genre and its penchant for freakish main characters, meandering plot, extreme subjectivities, and nihilistic sense of humor. It is possible that Gothicism infused 1970s filmmaking without New Hollywood directors knowing that process was occurring. However, their films derive from the Southern Gothic, nonetheless. New Hollywood films screened in the same theaters as the explicitly Southern B-films that this chapter analyzes in more detail.

¹³² Roger Corman, *How I Made A Hundred Movies In Hollywood And Never Lost A Dime* (Boston: De Capo Press, 1990), 95.

¹³³ The best known of Corman’s Southern-set films is *Bloody Mama* (1970). His “Poe cycle,” includes *House of Usher* (1960), *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *The Raven* (1963), *The Masque of Red Death* (1964), and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964).

As analyzed in the introduction to this dissertation, European art cinema also flooded the market at this time. The interplay of the three genres, and not New Hollywood alone, defines the era's artistic output. Perhaps not surprisingly, Corman helped create and sustain this interplay as well. He not only inspired New Hollywood artists, he distributed B-films as well as European art cinema.

When major studios deserted urban theaters in the wake of white flight, Corman and other independent distributors filled the vacuum they left. Corman's Poe adaptations, low-budget horror films, soft-core pornography, and so-called "youth movies" played alongside European films from Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Francois Truffaut.¹³⁴ I would argue that these art films functioned as high culture cover for auteurs and film critics. As Elsaesser notes, "the US notion of the art house was of strategic importance for the 1970s auteur sector...because of a fruitful confusion between different kinds of transgression, taboo-breaking and deviancy." The titillation viewers felt came from the nudity in European films that often featured frank depictions of sex, but critics' emphasis on these films over lower, "body genres" is also of strategic importance. European films lent theaters and critics cultural cachet that Corman's *Bloody Mama* (1970), for instance, did not. It is perhaps not surprising then, that European films dominate the espoused influences of New Hollywood filmmakers. But, if Elsaesser is right that Corman "may be the closest the 1970s came to supplying an authentically American pedigree for the auteur theory," then Southern-set films were an equally

¹³⁴ Corman also distributed films from these directors, as well as Joseph Losey, Volker Schlöndorff, and Alain Resnais.

important component to the kind of “transgression, taboo-breaking, and deviancy” that typified 1960s-70s filmmaking.

Critical discussion of *TCM* epitomizes the era’s simultaneous courtship and disavowal of Southernness. The film’s apocalyptic vision, derelict plantation home, pervasive sense of anomie and deterioration all recall the Southern Gothic. However, critics have used metaphors of the frontier to explain the film’s deconstruction of the American family. *THHE* also showcases the fall of the American family and adds a racialized component that suggests the unutterable things that “going South” made visible. The final image of the film leaves its characters trapped in a reaction shot that reflects their total moral and psychological paralysis. As Christian Keathley has noted, this final shot features prominently in 1970s films like *The Parallax View* (Dir. Alan Pakula, 1974) and *The Conversation* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). Using Gilles Deleuze’s theory, Keathley terms this paralysis a “crisis of the action image,” and traces its influence to Italian neo-realism. However, the antecedents to the cinematic “crisis of the action image” lie not only in the European films that Keathley describes but in the Southern Gothic novels to which Southern-set films are indebted. This lineage is made explicit in *Deliverance*, a film that is adapted directly from a Southern Gothic work that itself can be read in terms of Deleuze’s phenomenon. Reading the “crisis of the action image” in the context of the South reveals the breakdown of racial and gender privilege that the phenomenon connotes in American cinema.

The all-male group of *Deliverance* highlights the loaded absence of women in the 1970s Southern imaginary. Female presence would continue to be a blind spot in the

Southern imaginary, a cinematic space that saw a pop culture renaissance in the 2000s. This later resurrection of the South came with the career resurgence of the Southern actor, Matthew McConaughey. Analyzing McConaughey's starring role in the fourth film of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise, however, reveals female invisibility is only part of the South's "woman problem." More pervasive are artists who conceptualize female subjectivity as male "symptom." Gender thus must be considered a key aspect of the crisis of the action image. Women, people of color, and poor Southerners continue to define the "Other" populations that haunt the Southern imaginary but are rarely admitted as full citizens. Understanding the role that McConaughey played in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* (Dir. Kim Henkel, 1994) requires first exploring the original film, its contemporaries, and the film's indebtedness to Texas as a specific kind of American, Gothic place.

III. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre (TCM)* and Apocalyptic Southernness

TCM's plot (or lack thereof) is the first way it evinces its Southern Gothic and New Hollywood lineages. Like the revisionist road film *Easy Rider*, *TCM* features protagonists who never say why they are traveling or where they intend to go. Southern Gothic protagonists often lack the drive or ability to progress. Like them, *TCM*'s siblings Sally and Franklin Hardesty and their friends, Kirk and Pam, are lost before they even begin. Viewers only know the teenagers detour from their vaguely-defined path when they hear the cemetery where their grandfather is buried has been vandalized. Near this property, three out of the four teens meet grisly ends. In his canonical article on *TCM*,

film scholar Christopher Sharrett notes that the film's apocalyptic tone, its refusal of causality, and its darkly comic violence differentiate *TCM* from other Texas-set tales, like the western.¹³⁵ Nonetheless, Sharrett cites the frontier hero narrative as *TCM*'s closest generic cousin, without acknowledging the film (or Texas's) Southern roots. As Chapter 3 discusses in more detail, Texas is the site of frontier heroism as well as plantations and slavery: it is as Southern as it is Western. To trace *TCM*'s inspirations, though, Sharrett goes North through James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Pioneers* and West through Sam Peckinpah's film *The Wild Bunch* (1969).¹³⁶ The contradictory courtship and disavowal of Southern material is thus at the heart of *TCM* and much criticism of it.

The film's opening image, however, combines New Hollywood's self-reflexivity and deconstructive impulses with Southern Gothic absurdism. Against a black screen, the audience first hears sounds of wretching, heavy breathing, and scraping, the source of which is unclear until a photograph of something flashes across the screen. The screen fades to black and rustling is heard again, which the audience now interprets as the noise of a photographer wrestling with his camera. This process repeats five times before the horrific revelation that the images being photographed are extreme close-ups of badly decomposed body parts of two people. The figures are contorted into a grisly work of art, with one cradling the other. Without any preparation or explanation, the viewer is

¹³⁵ I make use of Sharrett's piece to focus on *TCM*'s Southern lineage but additional compelling analyses of the film exist. Robin Wood's canonical article, for instance, argues that the Slaughterhouses—unemployed industrial workers—are the byproducts of late capitalism. See Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *The American Nightmare* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 19-22. For elaboration and critique of Wood's thesis, see Andrew Lowenstein, "A Reintroduction to the American Horror Film," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, vol. IV, eds. Roy Grundmann, Cynthia Lucia, Art Simon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 154-77.

¹³⁶ Christopher Sharrett, "The Idea of Apocalypse in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 255.

confronted with what Barbara Creed calls the ultimate in abjection: “the body without a soul.”¹³⁷

Cinematic violence is often the stuff of fast movement and spectacle. By slowing down the viewer’s introduction to gruesome images and giving them no explanation for their presence, *TCM* re-contextualizes cinematic violence as something lasting and grotesque. It highlights the camera’s penchant to dismember bodies (usually female ones) into face, thighs, and breasts as well as cinema’s root existence as a medium that embalms a dead moment, one that has already passed. The opening series of images deconstructs the cinematic apparatus in the style of New Hollywood cinema, but not to the distancing effect of the French New Wave. It is impossible to distance oneself from *TCM*’s images, in part because of how long they stay on the screen. The final photograph in this series of stills does not fade out but marks the transition from photograph to cinematic image. The camera pauses momentarily, then zooms out slowly from an extreme-close up of the badly burned corpse to a full shot of the sculpture mentioned earlier in a movement that lasts over a minute. The duration of the shot, a warped invocation of the Bazinian truth of the long take, continues the film’s dismantling of violence as spectacle. The ghastly image would be easy to render sensationally, as a shocking cut-away shot. Instead, *TCM* suggests that violence is not a display to be enjoyed: it is not a bodily shock erased quickly by the next scene, but something to be endured. The film implies that the viewer who eventually recognizes the image and continues to watch is culpable in its creation. The film will carry out its critique of the

¹³⁷ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

spectacle-style violence that categorizes American filmmaking and the viewer's responsibility in that violence on a larger scale.

The film's use of grotesque imagery in service of social critique places *TCM* in the longer history of Southern Gothic texts like Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Even more than Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Caldwell and Bourke-White's photo-text used extreme images of Southern depravity and poverty to compel national-Northern readers into action. The text confronts readers with the idea that the South's pitiable state and virulent racism are direct results of the North's strategic neglect in quotations like: "The Union tells itself it is so unsure of the South's loyalty that it does not attempt to enforce its hard-won amendment to the Constitution, and pretends to be looking in another direction when Southern legislatures pass conflicting Jim Crow law."¹³⁸ In the photo-book's introduction, Caldwell also specifies quite clearly that their work should be understood as part fiction, part ethnography, noting "The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons."¹³⁹ However, the author's words in other venues complicate the separation between "realism" and "the real," attesting that this book was proof that the conditions described in Caldwell's novels *God's Little Acre* and *Tobacco Road* existed. Reportedly, the author conceived *You Have Seen Their Faces* "to show that the fiction [he] was writing was authentically based on contemporary life in

¹³⁸ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 1995),

36.

¹³⁹ *Ibid* ii.

the South.”¹⁴⁰ Readers failed to discern between Caldwell’s image and actuality, in part due to Caldwell’s own ambivalence.

TCM’s opening montage satirizes the tendency to confuse Southern images with actuality, recalling audience response to *TKAM* and *You Have Seen Their Faces*. In effect, the film does what Caldwell wished to do: dismantle the separation between the civilized North and the backwards South, and show how national-Northern citizens actively participated in Southern atrocities. In *TCM*, audience members are contextualized as both viewer and perpetrator of acts that at one point seemed quite separate from their everyday lives. When working at its best, the Southern Gothic grotesque works exactly this way. As Leigh Anne Duck argues,

By definition, grotesque literature alienates readers by challenging their sense of human ontology. But ideally, it leads them to recognize a circumstance of their social surroundings that they might reflexively disavow when they encounter it in a more straightforward form...[the genre] seeks to wrench us out of the repose and distance of the ‘aesthetic.’¹⁴¹

The beginning of the film’s narrative attempts a similar maneuver, shocking the van full of teenagers into an intimate knowledge of violence.

The film proper begins when the four teenagers pick up the Hitchhiker, who viewers will later learn is part of the Slaughterhouse family. The oddball character uses a violent performance to take the teens through the same process that viewers endured in

¹⁴⁰ Ibid v.

¹⁴¹ Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 2006), 90-91.

the extra-diegetic opening montage: he reintroduces the van to the violence of the photographic medium. After showing sickening pictures of a slaughtered cow, the Hitchhiker cuts his own hand, takes a Polaroid of Franklin, then asks for payment. When Franklin refuses, the Hitchhiker drips some of his blood on the photo and sets it on fire. Before the group finally tosses the Hitchhiker out of the van, he cuts Franklin's arm. Essentially the Hitchhiker conditions the van by showing them a violent image, then a very rudimentary way, connecting that image to real, immediate violence. This "education" is enough for the rest of the van, but Franklin remains oddly impressed. He treats the Hitchhiker's knife as a collector's item. After Franklin uses the knife to cut up the inside of the van, Kirk declares "You're just as crazy as he was."¹⁴² Franklin confirms this in the next scene.

When left behind by his friends, Franklin vents his frustration by spitting and crying, just as the Hitchhiker did when kicked out of the van. Franklin is in no position to chase his friends, as he sits in a wheelchair trapped by high grass and soft soil. If Franklin is a surrogate for the kind of viewer who enjoys horror films, as Franklin enjoys the Hitchhiker's presentation, Hooper makes that surrogate utterly unlikeable. Franklin is not only "as crazy" as the Hitchhiker, but is whiny and childish until he is finally murdered. It would seem then that *TCM* does not just interrogate the classical Hollywood system that makes violence into spectacle, but also ridicules and punishes the viewer who enjoys the show—the exact kind of viewer who would be drawn to the film.

¹⁴² *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, dir. Tobe Hooper (1974; Los Angeles: New Line Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

The rest of the plot continues to create a frisson between modern spectacles of violence and their “civilized participants” through Southern Gothic idioms. Though not often acknowledged, *TCM*’s distinctly regional horror would define a new kind of film: the bloody “slasher” film. *TCM* comes complete with what Carol Clover refers to as a defining feature of the slasher: the “Terrible Place.” In *TCM*, the Terrible Place is the Hardesty ancestral home near where Sally and Franklin’s grandfather is buried. *TCM* elaborates on the idea of the “Terrible Place,” where wayward teens meet their demise, by exploiting the Southern history of the plantation system as part of its horror. The Hardesty plot includes acres of depleted soil, a crumbling mansion, dying cattle, and a despoiled graveyard. Each aspect illuminates a piece of the home’s former function as part plantation, part cattle ranch. These two industries powered national-Northern capitalism by supplying it with raw materials (cotton, tobacco, etc.) as well as Westward expansion through cattle drives.

Southern Gothic works are obsessed by the symbol of the decaying plantation as a particularly cinematic kind of “Terrible Place.” In traditional Southern literature, the visage of the plantation home is rendered melancholically; it is a place where characters long for the Old South, and the transparent social relations governed by legal white supremacy.¹⁴³ Readable in Southern Gothic literature is an opposing knowledge. In that literature, the plantation is an always already lost space that does not symbolize a valiant “lost world,” but rather epitomizes the South’s moral and social decline. This vision of

¹⁴³ See Elizabeth Christine Russ, *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).

Southernness is exactly what the Hardestys find on their grandfather's land. They are not surprised to see it, as Sharrett notes:

The ease with which Sally and her friends enter onto the landscape suggests the casual acceptance of a dead world. The crumbling mansion and defiled graveyard are curiosities to them, and the images privileged for the viewer (sick and dying cattle, a dead armadillo on the road, surrealist junk in the cannibals' backyard) pass the young people unnoticed.¹⁴⁴

Perhaps the reason the teens do not run when they find strange feathers and bone artifacts in their grandfather's home is that as urban Southerners, this rural South conforms exactly to the Southern Gothic vision that dominated American culture. The teenagers may be unable to see the danger the Hardesty homestead presents because they assume the plantation space and any potential inhabitants are long-dead.

In Southern Gothic literature and in *TCM*, however, labor relations between forgotten black slaves and white plantation owners vibrate through Terrible Places long after the inhabitants have died.¹⁴⁵ Audiences can see their presence (if the teenagers cannot) in the destroyed fields that line the property as well as the broken objects that slaves and owners would have once handled. All of these items indicate the fall of a decadent society, which Sharrett also describes by routing his discussion, ironically, through Poe, the Gothic Southerner who also inspired Roger Corman:

¹⁴⁴ Sharrett 269.

¹⁴⁵ Patricia Yaeger argues that Southern literature written by women captures similar labor relations: Patricia Yaeger, "Southern Women Writers: A Confederacy of Water Moccasins," *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000), 1-34.

...we are reminded of the moon in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' ...Like Poe, Hooper is concerned with showing how an edifice viewed from distance seems intact, but how a close inspection reveals not only numerous flaws but the general infirmity of the structure.¹⁴⁶

The ruined plantation sets the stage for the clash between the Hardesty clan and those disenfranchised by the flawed plantation system: the Slaughterhouses who likely lost their jobs when the Hardesty cattle ranch fell into disrepair. The first teen is murdered when she leaves the plantation home and wanders onto the Slaughterhouse's property. The meat-packing implements that the villain Leatherface uses to torture the teen further connect the Slaughterhouses and the Hardestys.¹⁴⁷

These connections are largely meta-textual. Characters never realize the implications of their confrontation, and the film itself seems devoid of motivation. Characters' attempts to escape literally bring them nowhere or, just as often, boomerang them back to the "Terrible Place." This is true for the killer Slaughterhouses and the victims attempting escape. The film's plot is often described as incoherent precisely because it is defined by frustrated movements, or violence that deflates into comic inaction (as when Franklin is abandoned by the side of the road). When their friend Jerry goes missing, Sally and Franklin decide to search for him. Because the wheels of Franklin's chair are meant for smooth sidewalks and streets, the siblings move in fits and starts through the rough terrain, until Leatherface appears and murders him. This is

¹⁴⁶ Sharrett 261.

¹⁴⁷ The film thus resituates those disenfranchised by the slave system as nominally white Others. Elided but just barely submerged in *TCM* are the enslaved Africans and African Americans who drove the plantation economy.

revealed to be a random impulse—Leatherface appears from nowhere, at a seemingly random instant (the siblings are nowhere near the Slaughterhouses’ property). Later, when Sally is held hostage during a bizarre Slaughterhouse family dinner, a decrepit Grandpa lifts a sledgehammer but cannot raise it high enough to kill Sally. The tension of the moment dissolves into dark comedy.

TCM is replete with moments that “go nowhere.” This is particularly odd in the road movie genre to which the film ostensibly belongs. As Mark Bould explains, in the that genre, “energy becomes the key metaphor,” with a plot’s success measured by how fast and far a protagonist can go. The genre is a neat metaphor for cinema itself, aesthetically structured on forward movement, cause-and-effect logic and industrially structured by factory-line styled production. Technological implements—cars, engines, etc.—are central to this conceit. The atrophy of that system in the 1960s-70s is epitomized in New Hollywood road movies like *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Five Easy Pieces*. These films have been critically lauded for their experimental form, but it is worth noting that these qualities also permeate *TCM*. All three films are set in the South, as if the region provided some unacknowledged template for understanding a society and an industry in free-fall.

According to director Tobe Hooper and writer Kim Henkel, *TCM* was intended to comment on the national “moral schizophrenia of the Watergate era.”¹⁴⁸ However, the formal devices that create *TCM*’s metaphorical, mirror reflection of the nation only work

¹⁴⁸ Tobe Hooper and Kim Henkel as qtd. in Sharrett 256.

if viewers see structural correspondences¹⁴⁹ between the South and the national-North: the Terrible Place as an inverted middle-class home and the Slaughterhouses as connected to, and perhaps even doppelgangers for, the Hardestys; the teenagers' trip as a family summer vacation; the cultish beliefs of the Slaughterhouses as a warped reflection of organized religious systems.¹⁵⁰ The film's metaphor deepens when read through a Southern Gothic lens. After the shocking opening image of two bodies recedes, audiences hear news of other, equally horrific and gothic calamities in the larger nation: the discovery of a body with genitals missing in another part of America, international terrorism, oil spills, wholesale arson in a major city. This film about the Southern imaginary indeed reveals a nation on the edge of social and ecological collapse.

IV. *The Hills Have Eyes*, Surveillance Culture, and the "Crisis of the Action Image"

Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (*THHE*) is styled on *TCM* and in many ways, elaborates on its central project: showing the underbelly of the American family in a set of wretched, destitute, violent doppelgangers. Craven's film follows a suburban family, the Carters, as they travel through the Texas desert. When their RV stalls and they are attacked by a band of cannibalistic "Hill People," the Carters reveal themselves to be as monstrous as their assailants. The Hill People live in the desolation of the Texas desert, and are an even more obvious, forgotten by-product of industrial society than *TCM*'s Slaughterhouses. *THHE*'s desert is a nuclear testing site that has produced profound

¹⁴⁹ D. N. Rodowick, "The Enemy Within: The Economy of Violence in *The Hills Have Eyes*," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 324.

¹⁵⁰ Sharrett 259.

deformities in the Hill People. When the film begins, the US Air Force is in the process of closing the nuclear base. This spells certain death for the Hill People, who survive by poaching items from government personnel and cannibalizing travelers passing through the area. It is unclear whether the government knows of the Hill People's existence, but through the Carters' interactions with the Hill People, *THHE* critiques a government and bourgeois class that are blind to the consequences of their actions. The collusion of guilt, governmental corruption, and moral failure also defines 1970s Hollywood "post-traumatic" films such as *Easy Rider*, *The Parallax View*, *The Conversation*, *The Candidate*, and *Dog Day Afternoon*. Film scholar Christian Keathley compellingly describes this genre but does not connect it to Southern horror film. However, *THHE* additionally illuminates a racialized aspect of post-traumatic film not normally discussed in films like *The Conversation*. The notion that America's moral collapse may have something to do with its abandonment of populations of color seems expressible only by "going South."

Both *THHE* and *TCM* code disenfranchised, Southern populations as nominally white (i.e. in the Hill People and *The Slaughterhouses*, respectively), a move that displaces people of color from the center of South's history of oppression. But, neither film successfully creates an all-white or racially unremarkable world. Rather, both films are structured by what Toni Morrison terms the "choked presence of blackness."¹⁵¹ The films reveal the way in which Western artists have empowered "whiteness" by casting it against "blackness," broadly conceived: any person who does not comply with Victorian,

¹⁵¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 17.

Judeo-Christian, heterosexual codes and have visibly light skin. In other words, viewing *TCM* and *THHE* askance allows audiences to see non-white subjectivity at the margins of both films. *TCM* is haunted by the slave labor that would have likely powered a plantation the size of the Hardestys' though this labor is never mentioned. In *THHE*, the white family of protagonists are pursued by an (initially) unknown powerful antagonist in a way that recalls tracking technologies used to track black bodies in the United States. The film thus makes the family's whiteness visible or remarkable while also defamiliarizing the surveillance technologies usually used to track non-white bodies.¹⁵² As Richard Dyer notes, to see the race of whites "is to dislodge them/us from the position of power...dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world."¹⁵³ While the film's articulation of its racial unconscious also remains vexed, *THHE* does highlight the racialized ideologies of "civilized" American life.

Glimpsing the film's racial unconscious begins with mapping the Carters' trip. They begin their journey in the center of middle-America, Cleveland, OH. Then, they travel through Texas to get to the epicenter of American myth-making, Los Angeles. The family envisions this trip as an escape from their suburban lives, but as the film makes clear from its opening moments, the trip South and West reveals the racialized kernel that

¹⁵² As Richard Dyer argues, "whiteness" maintains its power, in part, through its invisibility. As he notes, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just human.' The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity" Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1-2. "Non-white" is not synonymous "black." However, within the associative framework and the ideological racial underpinnings of *TCM* and *THHE*, "non-white" is used as a broad signifier of racial Otherness.

¹⁵³ Dyer 2.

structures suburban existence—an omnipresent, hard truth that is seemingly only representable in the uncanny South. As in *TCM*, *THHE*'s Texas locale means it can both engage and disavow Southernness and the oppressive history of the South/Western region. The Texas desert of *THHE* is littered with trash that indicates some of those dispossessed in the state's history of slavery, forced migration, and pioneer pushes West. After panning across this landscape of refuse, the film introduces viewers not to the Carters but a young girl, Ruby. Audiences learn she is one of the Hill People who is effectively kept enslaved by her family. Wearing dirty, torn clothes, she begs for a ride to freedom from an older white gas station owner, Fred, who also lives on the land. Appearing to know her, Fred demands, "Do you think you could pass out there? You don't know the difference between a knife and a fork and you smell like a horse."¹⁵⁴

Although Ruby is white, Fred's comment about passing calls to mind the image of people of color living as white to access the privileges and opportunities that come with that racial category. His words also summon the broader fear of and hostility toward Others who "infiltrate" allegedly white, upper class spaces. The animus focused on African Americans during the Great Migration, for instance, was motivated by a fear that black achievement would imperil white power. The pseudo-science of physiognomy provided an ideological cover story for that fear. It allowed the bourgeoisie to argue that people of color could not perform the classed, raced rituals of civilized life (i.e. knowing the difference between a knife and a fork) due to a natural inferiority and inherent uncleanliness.

¹⁵⁴ *The Hills Have Eyes*, dir. Wes Craven, 1977, Arrow Video, Shenley, UK, 2016, DVD.

Through Ruby, viewers are reminded that when African Americans escaped the terrorist, post-Reconstruction South, they did so at great risk and with no guarantee of safe passage or a warm welcome in the allegedly democratic North. Our sympathies are immediately with one of the clan of “monsters,” whose identity is constructed in racialized terms. The film’s alignment of monster/sympathy and its veiled allegory of enslavement in the modern-day South disrupts our identification with the Carters from their first introduction. When the Carters’ RV barrels into the desolate landscape, it kicks up a cloud of dust and car exhaust. The family exits loudly without any knowledge of the intimate, desperate struggle for freedom they have interrupted.

When he hears the RV approach, Fred shoves Ruby into a cabinet and rushes to meet the family. Knowing that Ruby’s absence gives the Hill People an additional reason to kill passing travelers, Fred warns the Carters that they are “a long way from Hollywood” and to stay on paved roads.¹⁵⁵ As Fred self-reflexively notes, the Texas desert is a space where social conventions will not apply. A liminal guide, who moves in between the civilized world of commerce and the wild world of the Texas desert, Fred possesses special knowledge about how to navigate the uncanny South.¹⁵⁶ But authoritative patriarch, “Big Bob” Carter has come this way to pillage abandoned silver mines and will not be dissuaded. Soon after leaving the gas station, Bob leads his family down a dirt road in search of the mines before crashing the car when surprised by the roar of an army plane overhead. Blind greed and an entitlement to land he has just entered

¹⁵⁵ *The Hills Have Eyes*.

¹⁵⁶ Fred is not unlike the liminal guides that guide white travelers through Native American territory in films Westerns like *Ulzana’s Raid* (Dir. Robert Aldrich, 1970).

motivates Bob. In this way, he pathetically imitates the frontiersman who saw Texas as theirs for the conquering. He also makes the same miscalculation that led the South to lose the Civil War. Bob does not account for the subjugated people who populate this land—his disregard for this population will ultimately be his undoing.

The film's undermining of male authority is key to its creation of dread insofar as it indicates that *THHE*'s plot will not operate in the predictable patterns to which many viewers are accustomed. The American family will be dishonored; the patriarch's power will be dismantled. *THHE*'s Southern landscape also allows for the venting of tensions that Bob normally does not allow himself to express. Bob is a recently retired Cleveland cop whose escape into the Southern landscape has brought him closer to the racial baggage that accompanied that job, rather than further from it. When the RV crashes, Bob yells: "Got shot at by n---rs and by hillbillies, but I never got as close to getting killed than by my own family."¹⁵⁷ This line indicates how the film begins to paint the bourgeois Carter family as the "real" monsters.¹⁵⁸ Bob's use of a racial epithet also suggests he can neither leave marginalized people, nor his prejudices against them, behind.

Bob's authority is further undermined by the perspective of the camera. Films conventionally suture audience to protagonist by showing events through the lead character's eyes. This usually takes the form of mostly eye-level shots from the perspective of the protagonist so that viewer, lead character, and camera perceive as one.

¹⁵⁷ *The Hills Have Eyes*.

¹⁵⁸ As Rodowick notes, "What the film gradually reveals is that there is no comfortable distance between the Carter family and the monster family that threatens them," (Rodowick 323).

As the Carter family travels down the dirt road and audiences hear Bob's assertion that "We're not lost," a bird's eye shot pictures the van very much adrift in unfamiliar terrain. The film immediately casts doubt on Bob's perspective as limited and arrogant; it also separates camera from protagonist, and attaches viewers to another unseen character with a more expansive view. Most of the shots of the RV come from this overhead perspective so that viewers are trained to watch the family as objectified specimens, not active agents. Audiences learn to see the Carters as potential prey. By virtue of that suturing, viewers are produced as part of a larger surveillance apparatus. Although the Hill People are not shown until halfway through the film, the small universe of the film means viewers can safely assume they are aligned with the Hill People's viewpoint. The indigenous people watch, fetishize,¹⁵⁹ and seek to violently regulate the behavior of the bourgeois family in a neat inversion of the way white society has historically sought to patrol black bodies.

As Simone Browne notes, texts that emphasize a predator/prey dynamic, particularly those set in the South, speak to "the historical presence of surveillance technologies: organized slave patrols and bounty hunters for runaways" in the 17th-19th centuries.¹⁶⁰ The remains of the system that Browne describes can be seen throughout modern American life, but surveillance technologies made themselves particularly felt in the South after slavery ended. When the legal tracking of the slave system was

¹⁵⁹ When one of Hill People sees Brenda, he actually approximates the film's fetishization of female bodies. In a typical shot-reverse-shot pattern, audiences see the protagonist, then what the protagonist sees, and finally, the protagonist's reaction. In *THHE*, viewers see a Hill Person's hands, then a shot of Brenda. The final image of the sequence shows the hands drawing Brenda's form in sand, "groping" that form, then erasing it. This sequence makes tangible what is usually invisible—the way the cinematic apparatus summons the image of "woman," invites visual fetishization, and then erases that woman (and women generally) from view after demystifying her form.

¹⁶⁰ Simone Browne, "Everybody's God a Little Light Under the Sun: Black Luminosity and the Visual Culture of Surveillance," *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 4 (July 2012), 545.

dismantled, white Southerners replaced it with a diffused nexus of discriminatory laws and improvised systems of surveillance. These schemes of racial terrorism are epitomized in the vigilantism of the Ku Klux Klan. Such terrorism occurred when white Southerners felt an African American person had stepped “out of place.” The fear of such violence led some African Americans to develop what Richard Iton terms a “performative sensibility,” or an effort to behave with deliberation in the hopes of ensuring safety or at least, preventing a violent attack.¹⁶¹ Such performances were particularly important under the perpetual terrorism of the post-Reconstruction South, when black subjects did not know where or when surveillance would originate (i.e. who was watching, when, and why). The Carters refuse a performative sensibility. They feel themselves being watched and sense the danger accompanying that surveillance. And yet, they bicker, behave ego-centrally, and act impulsively. As Rodowick notes, their inability to work together is indeed a bitter indictment of American familial dynamics.¹⁶² It is also a damning indictment of whiteness and racist surveillance culture.

The Carters’ experience as white has conditioned them to being able to move without fear and without detection. They are thus thoroughly ill-equipped to deal with behaving as observed, endangered specimens. Few would expect that they should behave “well” under such extreme conditions although this is precisely what has been expected of black populations through the 19th-21st century. By uncannily switching traditional

¹⁶¹ Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post- Civil Rights Era* (New York, Oxford UP, 2009), 105.

¹⁶² Rodowick 324.

observer/observed, *THHE* defamiliarizes the state of perpetual surveillance that has defined much of black life.

The uncanny reversal reaches its apotheosis when the patriarch of the Hill People, Jupiter, kill Fred and Bob (both patriarchs) in ways that recall Southern oppression. After the RV crashes, Bob walks back to the gas station for help. When he arrives, he finds Fred about to hang himself. Bob prevents him from going through with the act, and Fred confesses he is responsible for the Hill People's tortured existence. He fathered a son, Jupiter, with one of the Hill People. Fred had rejected his son (born deformed as a result of his mother's exposure to radiation), who eventually retaliated by slaughtering cattle and killing his younger sister. Fred then tried to kill his son with a tire iron but was unsuccessful, at which point Jupiter escaped to the hills with a prostitute, Mama, and fathered four children of his own (Mars, Mercury, Pluto, and Ruby). Fred's story recalls cautionary tales of miscegenation that populate Southern Gothic fiction. Novels such as *Go Down, Moses* point to the moral bankruptcy of the white ruling class who sexually abuse those whom they subordinate, producing "mixed" children who are deemed socially or intellectually unfit. The white patriarch commits the original sin that stains his descendants, who repeat the same patterns of depravity and violence.

The film confirms its Southern Gothic lineage when Jupiter appears during Fred's confession and murders him with a tire iron, as Fred had attacked Jupiter many years earlier. Jupiter then pursues Bob. He could kill the Carter patriarch immediately, but instead drags him back to his family at the RV. While the Carters look on in horror, Jupiter immolates Bob on a cross. Bob's death specifically evokes popular images of

Klan vigilante violence that demanded an audience for its effect. Even given Bob's graphic death, *THHE* does not imply that the Carter family occupies an analogous position to black victims of surveillance society. Nor does it suggest that a reversal between white/black, predator/prey could abolish those binaries. Rather, Fred and Bob endure violence that members of their occupation/racial category might exact on others so that their suffering reads as retributive. At the moment of their deaths, Fred and Bob are at once civilized and savage, victim and oppressor, surveilled and surveiller. Their torture can only land as retribution because the reversal between white/black, predator/prey can never be complete.¹⁶³

At least one of the Carters understands the liminal world the family has entered just after her father is murdered. While the family is outside, Jupiter and Mars infiltrate the RV, the Carters' last vestige of familial domestic space. Teenager Bobby Carter chases them out but not before his sister, Brenda, is attacked. She spends much of the subsequent portion of the film catatonic, having had her initial fears terrifyingly fulfilled. A protagonist this psychologically paralyzed is rare in the context of mainstream cinema. That industry is structured by cause-and-effect logic and action: the idea that no matter the problem, the hero can do or say *something*. But the motif of a paralysis recurs often in

¹⁶³ Without a Southern Gothic framework in place, viewers may read these episodes as "reverse racism," moments when racial Others jealously punish a white family for attaining privileged status. There is danger in such readings. A belief in reverse racism justifies white racial hostility, and viewers may act on that feeling outside of the theater. However, I would argue that in this case, such readings come from preconceived biases and not from the text itself. In other words, and in contrast to films like the documentary, *Black Like Me* (Dir. Carl Lerner, 1964), *THHE* provides a "knowing" rendition of such a reversal, thus exposing it as the projective fantasy it really is.

what Keathley refers to as a cycle of “post-traumatic” films in the 1970s. As Keathley describes:

these films represent and replay...the onset of trauma resulting from a realisation of powerlessness in the face of a world whose systems of organization—both moral and political—have broken down. Or, to use a different set of terms, this cycle of films exemplifies what Gilles Deleuze has described as a ‘crisis of the action-image.’¹⁶⁴

As Deleuze elaborates, in the “crisis of the action image” such as the one Brenda experiences, “The situation [that the protagonist] is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action...He records rather than reacts.”¹⁶⁵ As Deleuze argues, Brenda becomes a set of eyes dissociated from a mind. In effect, she becomes the cinematic apparatus, an inarticulate camera destined to see but powerless to organize her own reality.

What she sees and experiences, then, is particularly noteworthy. She has witnessed her family’s destruction in terms that would be unimaginable in the suburban world she knew. Her entrapment in a reaction shot also reveals a racialized, gendered dimension to the “crisis of the action image” that Keathley and Deleuze’s treatment cannot account for. Brenda’s loss of identity is also a loss of privilege that white supremacy promises: protection from violence, particularly for white women. The people and the systems that would normally offer sanctuary have utterly broken down in the

¹⁶⁴ Christian Keathley, “Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood’s Post-Traumatic Cycle (1970-1976),” in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2004), 293.

¹⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3.

Southern imaginary. Brenda will carry that trauma back into the civilized world, much as Sally does at the end of *TCM* when she screams in inarticulate madness as she escapes the Slaughterhouses in the back of a pick-up truck.¹⁶⁶

When the racialized logic of the “crisis of the action image” emerges, it brings with it a more expansive network of influence. Southern Gothic novels also use the “crisis of the action image,” to portray the disorienting experience of living through overwhelming social change. These narratives are particularly interested in race and its relation to social dissolution. To describe a plantation mistress’s total psychological and cultural disorientation in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner writes:

Ellen the butterfly, from beneath whom without warning the very sunbowed air had been withdrawn, leaving her now with the plump hands folded on the coverlet in the darkened room and the eyes above them now probably not even suffering but merely filled with baffled incomprehension...¹⁶⁷

This passage deeply resonates with Brenda’s breakdown—it not only narrates Ellen’s traumatic witnessing and final incomprehension but also uses the trope of bodily stratification (the separation of hands, eyes, and mind) to recount her mental dissociation as a ripple effect of sweeping social change.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ This analysis of the crisis of the action image is at odds with Carol Clover’s assessment of “the final girl” in slasher films. However, Sally’s physical survival is no guarantee of psychic recovery. See Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015).

¹⁶⁷ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom* (1936; New York: Modern Library, 1993), 63.

¹⁶⁸ *THHE*’s “crisis of the action image” has one additional component that brings the film closer to the Southern Gothic—Brenda and Faulkner’s Ellen are both reacting to a specific, traumatic plot event. These events specifically disrupt their racial or social status. In their reactions, we can thus see the ways that larger social changes are felt on an emotive, personal level. The “crisis of the action image” functions differently in the Italian neo-realist films that Deleuze describes. In Roberto Rossellini’s *Stromboli* (1950), for instance, protagonist Irene Girard embodies the “crisis of the action image,” but is not reacting to a

Lest the viewer think the “crisis of the action image” is essentially an expression of female hysteria, *THHE* ends with Doug Wood, who has married into the Carter family, stuck in a similar void. After rescuing his baby daughter from the Hill People, Doug attacks her kidnapper, Jupiter. Long after Jupiter dies, Doug continues to punch him. This marks his final descent into barbarism of “the monster.” This episode also represents a meaningless repetition of movement, one that is devoid of purpose since Jupiter is already dead. The film ends on this image before fading to a red background, leaving open a host of questions: with no RV, how will the Carter family escape? Perhaps more pressing, what will their psychological state be if they do? What will become of the surviving Hill People like Ruby? There is no resolution to be found here, just the open possibility that, as in *TCM*, the American family has faced a mirror reflection of itself. In their Southern Gothic confrontation, they found an end-of-times where they expected to locate leisure and comfort. The apocalyptic narrative is a 1970s cinematic staple. Films like *Chinatown* capture the final expiation of a decadent universe, and explores themes of surveillance, dread, and cynicism. But, *THHE* is one of the few contemporary films to walk this combination back to its racialized beginnings in the Southern imagination. It makes those origins visible by turning them inside out.

V. *Deliverance*, White Masculinity, and Female Subjectivity

specific, traumatic event. For Deleuze, her face is rather a signifier of larger crises outside of the film: the end of WWII, the opening of Nazi labor camps, and the loss of certainty about the existence of God, the effectivity of art, and the validity of transcendental moral values. This is not to suggest that one version of the “crisis of the action image” is more effective than another but rather to highlight the continuity between *THHE* and its Southern Gothic antecedents.

The “crisis of the action image” that ends *The Hills Have Eyes* finds even more resonance in John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972). The four men at the center of the narrative—Ed, Lewis, Drew, and Bobby—are suburbanites who want to ride the Cahulawasee river one last time before it is dammed to make way for new construction. But the trip down the river irrevocably damages Lewis and Bobby and kills Drew. Midway through the film, stereotypical Southern rednecks rape Bobby as Ed looks on powerlessly. Lewis and Drew kill one of Bobby’s rapists, but soon after, a guilt-ridden Drew kills himself. The film’s paragon of masculinity, Lewis, eventually breaks his leg. The film’s final shot finds Ed staring blankly ahead, trapped in the “crisis of the action image” that seems an obvious product of witnessing his friends endure such violent assaults on their masculinity. The men’s domination—by the river itself and its hillbilly inhabitants—carries larger significance in an era of second wave feminism, civil rights, and gay liberation. And yet, the South’s economic and ecological role, as well as role of female subjectivity in *Deliverance*, remains undertheorized. First exploring the South’s environmental function in this nightmare, and then analyzing the workings of female subjectivity the text yields new insights into the position of women in *TCM* and *THHE*. Such an analysis also provides an entry-point to understanding current representations of the Southern imaginary.

Pamela Barnett compellingly argues that James Dickey’s novel version of *Deliverance* offers a “redemption of white masculinity” at a time when many white men felt “besieged by the empowerment of others long suppressed,” including women,

African Americans, and LGBTQ+ populations.¹⁶⁹ In effect, the trials that may seem threats to Ed's masculinity—nearly being raped by another man, riding rough rapids, shooting himself with an arrow in his attempt to kill a man who may have raped Bobby—are merely “close calls.” Ed uses these tests to certify that his masculine toughness has not been dulled by years of suburban living. In the worldview of the book, women are associated with the civilizing influence of domestic life, which has an emasculating effect on men. However, the “more pressing problem is femininity categorically, as it insidiously resides in the male self.”¹⁷⁰ The punishment Ed undergoes allows him to vanquish this inner softness: both the female and the homosexual within. His trials include a good deal of self-inflicted injury (what Kaja Silverman refers to as “reflexive masochism”), which would seem to indicate a will to masochism. However, Barnett argues that the novel re-contains male desire for masochistic pleasure when Ed survives. As is likely evident even in this brief summary of Barnett's argument, male crisis and queerness play a significant role in readings of *Deliverance*, a text which seeks to redeem the tough “Iron John” masculinity that asserted itself in the backlash against feminism.

The film version of *Deliverance*, however, exhibits more ambivalence toward white masculine imperviousness in its final shot. Ed's entrapment in the “crisis of the action image” suggests that his physical survival is no guarantee of psychological wholeness. If the impenetrability of his masculinity remains in doubt, so too does his presumed will to resist masochism and queerness. The last image prompts reflection on

¹⁶⁹ Pamela Barnett, “Rape and Repudiation: Masochism and Masculinity in *Deliverance*,” *James Dickey Newsletter* 22, no. 1 (Fall 2005), 1-19.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid* 1.

the rest of the film's attitude toward masculinity. If *Deliverance* is Ed's "close call," it marks the end for Drew, Lewis, and Bobby. Bobby's violation will endure, as will Lewis's traumatic knowledge that he is not the "Iron John" he thought he was. Drew has died, but the last image of the film (which shows either his hand or the hillbilly rapist's rising from the water) suggests that the crisis he represents will live on.

As in *TCM* and *THHE*, the protagonists of *Deliverance* are warned that terrible fates may await them. They have multiple opportunities to turn back, to leave the threatful Southern landscape. But, also as in *TCM* and *THHE*, the men choose to stay. The decision to ignore advice of the locals like *THHE*'s Fred is a mainstay of the horror genre that can be read as urban hubris or blindness to the danger that the rural presents. But it is equally possible that the anticipation of danger constitutes the attraction to the rural in *Deliverance*. The country is a place where masculinity finds its cover story ("a will to conquer the river") and the fulfillment of a taboo desire ("a will to be conquered by the river"). The downriver journey allows men to wear the mask of the conqueror when they know they are not. As explored in the previous chapter's discussion of *The Beguiled*, the opportunity to be dominated while wearing the mask of the dominator carried special currency for those national-Northern viewers whose identity was under threat from all sides: the war in Vietnam, social rights movements, and a declining economy. Mainstream viewers may not have seen the independently produced *TCM* but could watch *Deliverance* both because it was more widely distributed and because its literary cachet provided a "cover story." Audiences could express interest in the film for its social realist value as a literary text, or they could simply enjoy it as an action film.

Using the suburban protagonists as surrogates, these viewers could also encounter an extremity of experience not present in their everyday lives: with nature, with being dominated, and with the Southern sublime of the Cahulawasee River.

The economic context enhances the men's attraction to region and its threatfulness. Lewis cynically tells Ed that the river is being dammed to pump air conditioning into Atlanta, which makes this trip one of the final opportunities to ride the untamed river. This reality also implicates the men in the river's damming. As Atlanta residents, they are also part of a larger change: the economic, industrial rise of the Sunbelt South. The South's transition from a primarily agrarian economy to an industrial one took place over decades. These efforts ramped up after WWII, prompting William Faulkner to note in 1956 that "Our economy is no longer agricultural. Our economy is the Federal Government."¹⁷¹ In the 1960-70s, this transformation peaked thanks to the South's anti-union bent and deregulatory state laws designed to attract business enterprise and military contracts. The region's cities launched widespread public relations operations to transform their image from anti-interventionist, recalcitrant places into racially progressive (or at least, moderately tolerant) spaces. When combined with a business-friendly atmosphere, campaigns like Atlanta's "The City Too Busy to Hate" slogan worked. As historian Bruce Schulman notes: "While never approaching the national norm in many indices, between 1959-1980, the South led all American regions

¹⁷¹ William Faulkner, "On Fear," in *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters by William Faulkner*, ed James Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965), 98 as qtd. in Bruce Schulman. *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Cary, NC: Oxford UP, 1991). 135.

in economic growth.”¹⁷² Northerners moved South in record numbers. By the 1970s, the region that once saw the Great Migration north attracted twice as many in-immigrants as any other region, including the West. This migration reveals the uncanny reversal of North-South relations taking place in the 1970s.¹⁷³ For the first time in nearly one hundred years, the South was a capitalist, technological threat. Industrial development also profoundly affected local cultures in the South, exacerbating the divide between the “haves” (transplanted Northerners and urban Southerners) and the “have nots” (rural Southerners).

Deliverance's Lewis is right to note that the dam on the Cahulawasee would transform the region; rural Southerners would bear the brunt of that change. Jobs in the burgeoning cities went primarily to the college-educated, while opportunities for unskilled labor declined. The rise of defense contracts also increased the wage gap between working class and the middle class, contributing to the historically uneven development of the region. Cities may have felt themselves modernizing, but rural economies stalled as a direct result of urban development. What seems a reversal of a Southern political bias against federal intervention actually reflects “the South’s traditional desire to control federal activity, to steer the benefits of federal aid toward the region’s leadership and away from its dispossessed people.”¹⁷⁴

The confrontation between these “two Souths” plays out in *Deliverance*'s rape scene. After a day of canoeing, Ed and Bobby pull over to the side of the river where they

¹⁷² Schulman 152.

¹⁷³ Ibid 160. As Schulman suggests: “The South’s participation in the sunbelt boom altered its course of development. It transformed southern economic development from a program of catch-up to one of follow-the-leader” (Schulman 138).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 146.

find two men. The two unshaven, overall-clad “hicks” threaten both men before tying Ed to a tree and forcing Bobby to strip to his underwear. The men chase Bobby and demean him by making him squeal like a pig before raping him. Carol Clover and others have fruitfully mined the scene for its singularly effective Southern Gothic, queer content and the connections between that content and urban life. Clover refers to this scene specifically as an expression of “urbanoia,” the fear that suburban men have lost the primitive thing that makes them men: the ability to fight, man-to-man. The scene does indeed speak to that fear through the fictive creation of hillbillies that seem a Northern fever-dream of Southern stereotypes. One man is toothless and both are dirty, mentally dim, and angry. They emerge out of the ether on a singular mission to violate Northerners, and make them pay for an unnamed wrong. However, there is a way in which the spectacular queerness and Southern Gothicism of this scene obscures the function of place and money.

As in *TCM* and *THHE*, palpable in *Deliverance* is the ruling class’s economic guilt, particularly when a financial exchange is involved. The infamous rape scene in *Deliverance* actually begins with Ed offering the hillbillies money when he sees they are agitated by his and Bobby’s presence. Ed assumes the rural men are upset because they are making moonshine and fear the location of their still has been discovered. To assure them that he and Bobby are on their side and are not “rats,” Ed offers to buy some of their whiskey. He tries to convince the men they are all the same as white Southerners, but fails to see that his offer of money as well as his assumption that these men are illegally making moonshine are stereotypical insults. They are patronizing attempts to keep rural

residents quiet and under the thumb of those with means. It is entirely possible that this insult motivates the hillbillies' next actions, or rather, that this fictive interaction vents a larger social fear of an impending classed confrontation.

Deliverance's inciting incident, in fact, begins with another offer of money. The scene ends with a spiral downward after both parties glimpse the Zizekian kernel of class inequality that anchors their interaction and defines their difference. The film begins when Lewis makes an error similar to Ed's. After careening carelessly through the river region, Lewis wanders onto a rural homestead and asks the residents to drive his truck to the landing where the four men will end their canoe journey. His request carries many assumptions: that he is entitled to trespass on another person's land, that the residents will have time and inclination to drive his truck, and that he can underpay them for that work. The rural man and Lewis negotiate, and Lewis launches more insults. While his friends warn him to change his tone, Lewis speaks as though these rural men are a means to an end, not equals. He assumes that his money will buy the hillbillies' compliance even if does not buy their respect.

Structures of feeling do not matter to the masculinist Lewis, but they are important to understanding *Deliverance*'s revenge fantasy. The palpable unease already in the air when Bobby and Ed pull their canoe over suggests their subsequent attack may be retribution for Lewis's callousness. Both scenes can be read as a projection of the substantial role that money played in the relationship between the new urban South and the rural South. Flushed to the surface in these unequal exchanges of money is the

bourgeois fear that the working class would rise and seek revenge. Ed's final thought is of the now-dammed river and his culpability in the deaths of the men buried beneath it.

The Cahulawasee River finally conquers the men. Part of what haunts Ed is the sense that he and his friends courted their own domination. When the four men arrive, Lewis feminizes the river, "This is the one—there she is. In a couple months, she'll be all gone." Later, when Bobby thinks they've "beaten" the river after riding a powerful rapid, Lewis retorts "You don't beat this river, you don't beat it."¹⁷⁵ Lewis's observation carries Freudian significance as water powerfully symbolizes sexuality in psychoanalytic theory: its forceful flows are often rendered as explicitly feminine in this discourse. This is the only role that "the feminine" plays in *Deliverance*. There are no significant female characters in the film. In all of the films analyzed, women are invisible except as extensions of men, catalysts for their actions, or as objects that illustrate the limits of male-centered institutions: the American family, the federal government, etc.

TCM, for instance, gives Sally little interiority and ends when a pick-up truck happens to pass by and see her screaming. In other words, she escapes through no act of her own. As in *The Beguiled*, Sally's escape is meant to signify she is on her way to infect the rest of the national-North with her psychopathy as part of a larger, looming apocalypse. The same could be said of Brenda in *THHE*. Initially, she proves resourceful, brainstorming the idea to use her mother's dead body in a trap for the Hill People. This moment suggests the film will grant her some agency and inner life. However, when her life is truly threatened, *THHE* retreats into a familiar division of labor. Her brother,

¹⁷⁵ *Deliverance*.

Bobby, and brother in law, Doug, drive the fight against the Hill People, while Brenda collapses into hysteria. Women are almost totally absent in *Deliverance*. In the film's final shot, Ed's wife cradles him in the classic mold of civilizing, maternal role that women often play in frontier narratives. The only other women pictured is a working-class Southerner who cooks dinner for Ed near the end of the film. Her question "Are you all right?" provokes Ed's flight from the table and into his final mental breakdown so that again, women catalyze male behavior.¹⁷⁶

As *TCM*, *THHE*, and *Deliverance* suggest, 1970s films are irrevocably raced, sexed, classed, and gendered with the South supplying definitive aesthetic influences: an apocalyptic, failure-ridden tone, a critique of the corruption at the center of American life, experimental aesthetic forms (i.e. "crisis of the action image"), and the reordering of temporality analyzed in chapter 1. The loaded absence of marginalized people—women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ populations—persisted in filmic depictions of the Southern imaginary throughout the neo-conservative 1980s and 90s. As analyzed in the next chapter, this present absence also defines the current Southern renaissance in television and film.

VI. The *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* Franchise and the Next Generation

¹⁷⁶ The erasure of women in Southern Revenge films is part of a larger trend in the New Hollywood era. The Southern imaginary, where many New Hollywood films were set, was one of the few spaces that could be plausibly constructed as a conservative place where traditional gender roles still applied, without explanation: it was one of a very few places a director could avoid the impact of second-wave feminism. This had value for New Hollywood artists not primarily concerned with identity politics, but rather, in film as an art form. Their conception of art, however was obviously political, with female erasure as a constituent feature.

The current resurgence in Southern-set texts owes much to one actor and the industrial apparatus that sprung to meet him: Matthew McConaughey. The actor embarked on a rebranding process in 2011 that culminated in an Oscar-winning turn in *Dallas Buyer's Club* in 2013. But, McConaughey's efforts to shape his persona go back much further, coincidentally beginning with the *TCM* franchise. The actor's first starring role was in the fourth installment of the series, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* (*TCM 4*, 1994), opposite another actor with Southern roots, Renee Zellweger. McConaughey's character, Vilmer, combined the role of the Hitchhiker from the original film with a revitalized version of the Slaughterhouse patriarch (in the original film, the patriarch is near death). Vilmer can pass as normal enough to leave the property and draw in new victims, but he also enjoys chaos and homicidal violence. As such, this early role evinces McConaughey's desire to brand himself as a handsome "good ol' boy" with a barely submerged taboo side. In this performance, scholars can also see the film industry's effort to capitalize on that persona. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, *TCM 4* incorporates a woman as a central character in the Slaughterhouse clan. Paradoxically, this inclusion retroactively proves that the visual absence of women in Southern Revenge films was only part of its "woman problem." More enduring in these films is the lack of female subjectivity and the utilization of the South as a conservative space in which this lack is allegedly permissible. The ending of *TCM 4* suggests how producers would reconfigure the spectacles of the Southern Revenge film for the national-North in the post-feminist era.

A full analysis of *TCM 4* is beyond the scope of this chapter but I will end my discussion with an analysis of two key points: the injection of a career-driven, modern woman into the *TCM* universe and Vilmer's relationship to her and the larger film. Like the original, *TCM 4* begins when four teenagers (this time fresh from senior prom) crash their car on a dirt road. The first time Jenny (Zellweger) escapes from the new clan of Slaughterhouses, she finds a decidedly out-of-place, up-to-date mobile home and desperately bangs on the front door. The woman who answers, Darla, wears a smart, grey blazer and mini-skirt. She has a computer and assures Jenny that she has nothing to fear, shouting from her door for the men to "cut it out," and offering to call someone in town for help. In opposition to the frantic men, Darla projects confidence and control. To a 1990s teenager with a touch of urbanoia, Darla's modern attire, dexterity with technology, and apparent power over men make her trustworthy. Unfortunately, Darla turns out to be Vilmer's partner, happily in the thralls of his control. She kidnaps Jenny and while Jenny attempts to appeal to their shared status as women, Darla remains unmoved. Instead of freeing Jenny, Darla attempts to dress her, bond with her, and educate her in the ways of men. These conversations pass the Bechtel test¹⁷⁷ with flying colors and speak volumes about the film's engagement with feminism

Through Darla, *TCM 4* acknowledges the impact of feminism (a necessary gesture to expand the franchise in a "girl power" era) and summarily trivializes it as a dangerous sham. "Feminist" acts in this film are vaguely defined female bonding sessions that are

¹⁷⁷ The Bechtel test was created by Alison Bechtel in the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. It is a tongue-in-cheek metric that gauges female representation. To pass the test, a work of fiction must have at least two female characters who speak to each other for more than a minute, about something other than a man. Though the test is sometimes employed by feminists, it measures only whether women are present onscreen. As *TCM 4* demonstrates, a film can still pass and contain sexist content.

necessarily uncoupled from Jenny's emancipation. Darla's power is ephemeral, derived from her relationship to Vilmer, and at its root about increasing their personal wealth. It would be easy to dismiss the film as profoundly misogynistic (which it is), but it is more precisely a primer on neoliberal "empowerment feminism." *TCM 4*, like that movement, understands feminism's aims not as transforming social structures in an equitable way but rather as sisterhood-rhetoric that women use to increase their individual sense of self-worth and purchasing power. In the final analysis, adding a woman in a position of power changes nothing in the *TCM* universe. As if to solidify this point, the film concludes with shot of actress Marilyn Burns, who played Sally in the original film, prostrate on a gurney. Twenty years after escaping the Slaughterhouses, she is still in the hospital, still catatonic, with the film offering no exit from its profoundly conservative, self-reflexive universe.

McConaughey would exploit the potent combination of conservative core and progressive veneer to much greater effect than *TCM 4* was able to do. Audiences can see the seeds of this effort already germinating in *TCM 4*, shot near the time of McConaughey's film debut as an ancillary character in Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*. Like the Hitchhiker in the first *TCM* film, Vilmer is something of a liminal figure. McConaughey's classic handsomeness plays against the eccentricities of Vilmer's character to create a compelling tension. McConaughey's ability to simultaneously embody the taboo and the alluring comes out during a Slaughterhouse family dinner. Vilmer shouts, rolls around the room, and gives expansive monologues stopping only to threaten violence and passionately kiss Darla. His acts would disgust many viewers but

that reaction is tempered by McConaughey's charisma and the fact that the actor appears to be having a great deal of fun. In the middle of the scene, he screams the line that was his catchphrase in *Dazed and Confused*, "Alright, alright, alright!"

McConaughey's persona branding process would attract attention in the 2010s, but this moment shows the actor shaping his own persona from its earliest stages. The line must be an ad-lib from McConaughey, because there is no way the director of *TCM 4* could have seen *Dazed and Confused* with enough time to script it. But the decision to leave the line in the final cut of *TCM 4* indicates a potentially unplanned collaboration between the actor and filmmaker to shape the McConaughey character. His role in *TCM 4* carries the charge of the weird while the actor is articulate enough for that weirdness to have a kind of dog-whistle effect. His persona hails female viewers and those looking to exploit "the queer" for profit, without being so weird as to be utterly repulsive or alienating. The Southern Revenge films analyzed here provided the template for McConaughey persona and elucidate the pleasure it provides. These films, like numerous McConaughey vehicles, allow national-Northerners to engage in taboo pleasures that they could not discuss in polite society while also confronting things they could only glimpse when "staring over the fence" into the separable Southern imaginary. As seen in the following chapter, that potent blend continues to hold sway for national-Northern audiences.

CHAPTER THREE

Queering the “McConaissance”:

Matthew McConaughey and Hollywood’s Conditional Courting of Diversity

Lupita Nyong’o’s Academy Award acceptance speech for her role in *12 Years a Slave* began, “It doesn’t escape me for one moment that so much joy in my life is thanks to so much pain in someone else’s. And so I want to salute the spirit of Patsey for her guidance. And for Solomon, thank you for telling her story and your own.”¹⁷⁸ Nyong’o acknowledged enslaved populations at stake in her performance as crucially important to her artistry. Matthew McConaughey narrated his success in his Oscar acceptance speech that year for his role in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2012) very differently, and showcased the strategies behind his recent career rebirth, phenomenal enough to garner its own title: “the McConaissance.” McConaughey made no mention of the man he played, Ron Woodroof, or the community of AIDS and gay rights activists that created the conditions in which he could win, but rather celebrated his personal hero: himself. Like a true Texan showman, the actor expertly narrated an unlikely journey to self-respect, before collapsing that rhetoric into a neoliberal celebration of himself as the epitome of individualism, industriousness, and fearless exploration of new actorly territory. With the help of a Hollywood industry eager to show itself as a diverse space, McConaughey put a handsome face on the increasing marketability of certain kinds of

¹⁷⁸ “Lupita Nyong’o Winning Best Supporting Actress,” YouTube video, 3:33, from The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards Show televised by ABC on March 2, 2014, posted by “Oscars,” March 11, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73fz_uK-vhs.

queer stories, while appropriating those stories to profitable ends. As such, McConaughey's speech and larger career renaissance mark a shift in queer and Southern representation. The marketability he embodies corresponds with a paradoxical erasure of the actual people at stake in Hollywood's films: LGBTQ+ populations, people of color, and rural Southerners.

McConaughey's transition from romantic comedy lead to Oscar winner in films like *Dallas Buyers Club* may seem sudden, but the eccentricities that would blossom into a palpable queerness in that film always inhered to his persona. The texts of the McConaissance—*Killer Joe* (William Friedkin, 2011), *The Paperboy* (Lee Daniels, 2012), *Magic Mike* (Steven Soderbergh, 2012), *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013) and *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–)—build on McConaughey's idiosyncratic performances in films like *Dazed and Confused* (Richard Linklater, 1993) and the perpetual shirtless-ness that covertly hails gay male viewers as well as straight female audiences.¹⁷⁹ McConaughey's recent films turn the subtext of the actor's earlier roles into text, and find the actor playing men who are hailed as queer by others. McConaughey's rebirth also came at a fortuitous time when playing “queer,” brought critical cachet instead of stigma. Crucially, though, McConaughey rarely played gay men that is, men interested in same-sex intimacy, so that neither he nor audiences were compelled to acknowledge LGBTQ+ populations in any direct way. The contradictory operations at work in McConaughey's recent films drive the actor's current allure. His films deliver a taste of the exotic and a pleasurable feeling of tolerance combined with a

¹⁷⁹ A comprehensive list would also include *Bernie* (Richard Linklater, 2011) and *Mud* (Jeff Nichols, 2012), which merit analysis in other ways, but submerge potential queer content.

partial or total expurgation of actual LGBTQ+ populations, whose politics or mere existence Hollywood deems unsettling to some viewer demographics. Examining Hollywood's marketing of the McConaughey brand reveals the interrelatedness of three seemingly disparate industrial trends: the industry's attempts to sell diversity, the development of a new golden era of scripted television¹⁸⁰ and the popularity of certain queer narratives during and after the fight for equal marriage.

While critics rarely analyze McConaughey as a queer figure, *New Yorker* writer Rachel Smye, who coined the term “the McConaissance,” does illustrate America's continuing yet submerged fascination with the star's Southernness. When she ruminates on the small group of actors able to pull off a “second act” reinvention, such as McConaughey and Sandra Bullock, she muses that “maybe the magic is in Texas.”¹⁸¹ McConaughey's Southernness is a crucial mechanism in his contradictory appeal. It is part of what has always made him exotic to national-Northern audiences and also what makes his courting of taboo alluring and palatable for heteronormative viewers. McConaughey articulates the unmentionable things we desire but can only abide when staring over the fence, into the South: a region at once part of and apart from the nation. Filmmakers found avenues for the actor to bask in increasingly queer, Southern Gothic character eccentricities—whether the sexual showmanship of the male stripper in *Magic*

¹⁸⁰ This term refers to a period in the 2000s-2010s that saw a rise in critically acclaimed, scripted dramas helmed largely by white, male auteurs about white, male anti-heroes. Arguably beginning with *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), this category also includes shows like *The Shield* (FX, 2002–2008), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008), and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015).

¹⁸¹ Rachel Smye, “The McConaissance,” *New Yorker*, January 16, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-mcconaissance>.

Mike or the use of a piece of fried chicken as a dildo in *Killer Joe*—so that such scenes would become his trademark.

The McConaissance therefore is self-created in name only. What seems one man's artistic renaissance shows a much larger process by which Hollywood has responded to and cultivated audiences in a climate that purports to celebrate difference. In the independent film *Dallas Buyers Club* McConaughey provided the star power needed for wide distribution. Jean Mark Vallée, in turn, garnered McConaughey critical acclaim and utilized his persona in such a way to make queerness and AIDS narratives palatable for two groups with often opposing tastes: young, liberal audiences and mainstream viewers. The actor's newly respectable but still eccentric reputation allowed producers on another major project, HBO's *True Detective*, to delve into the weird, territory of the rural Southern Gothic under the mantle of quality TV. In between these projects, *The Paperboy* showed the underbelly of McConaughey's persona and the darker things it portended—namely, McConaughey's contradictory investiture in homosexuality as well as blackness. Like McConaughey's Oscar performance, *The Paperboy* and his commercial endorsements with the Lincoln car company and Wild Turkey bourbon suggest just how the culture industry has taken the opportunity of the McConaissance to appropriate marginal, excluded identities precisely in order to redraw the boundaries of "Americanness" around those who need not apply for inclusion.

II. Queer Monstrosity, The Southern Imaginary,¹⁸² and *Dallas Buyers Club*

Before *Dallas Buyers Club*, Matthew McConaughey was best known for romantic comedies and action adventure fare. Roles in *Surfer Dude* (S.R. Bindler, 2008) and *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (Connor Mead, 2009) carried his persona to its logical extreme. Perhaps too close to self-parody, both films flopped, and McConaughey began a self-imposed hiatus during which he looked for more dramatic material.¹⁸³ In 2010-2011, a group of small roles and lower-budget films gave the actor vehicles to diversify his image from heartthrob to artist just as Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio, and others had before him. *Dallas Buyers Club* was the most popular film of McConaughey's career rebirth and had one additional element that Depp's films lacked—direct representations of the reality of AIDS and of queer people.¹⁸⁴ The edginess of these inclusions heightened McConaughey's appeal as an actor who would take artistic risks. *Dallas Buyers Club* was also key to Vallée's establishment as a filmmaker capable of handling full-scale projects and weighty material. In short, *Dallas Buyers Club* demonstrated anew the dividends that playing queer could have for an actor, as well as for content creators.

¹⁸² Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee describe the Southern imaginary as: "... an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, practices, attitudes, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographical region and time." In this piece, the Southern imaginary refers to filmic representations and fantasies of the South. See Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, eds., *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁸³ Brett Martin, interview with Matthew McConaughey, "Just Keep McConaugheying," *GQ*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.gq.com/story/matthew-mcconaughey-career>.

¹⁸⁴ Johnny Depp's early films with John Waters and Tim Burton (*Cry-Baby*, 1990 and *Edward Scissorhands*, 1990, respectively) would appear to complicate this statement, as they perform similar cultural work for viewers as does McConaughey's recent work: they are queer and campy, but not in any register that would offend mainstream sensibilities. However, while other of Waters' films feature LGBTQ+ life prominently, his films made with Depp are designed for mainstream consumption and as such, make no mention of homosexuality.

Dallas Buyers Club's co-opting of queerness embodies the homonormativity that recent queer theorists like Jasbir Puar, Lisa Duggan, and Michael Warner have critiqued.¹⁸⁵ Puar claims that to thrive in a post-queer global market, the United States no longer rejects all deviant citizens, but rather judiciously incorporates some queer subjects whose interests align with state interests. This process heightens America's economic strength by harnessing the purchasing power of increasingly visible, middle-class, heteronormative gay subjects. Once these subjects are acknowledged as "true" Americans worthy of the same protections afforded to heterosexual citizens (i.e., the right to marry), the nation can also leverage and regulate their political clout and, in so doing, heighten its own global political reputation as a free state. This process of selective inclusion—what Puar terms "homonationalism"—provides an alibi for the United States to lionize itself as a site of liberty, to justify foreign interventions, and to abject global subjects who are judged incongruent with our definition of basic freedom. *Dallas Buyers Club* exemplifies this precarious dynamic, providing what appears to be a progressive, profitable "queer uplift" narrative, but one that in fact leverages queer representations to certify America as an enlightened, open-minded place.

Following the middle-class, handsome, white, straight Ron Woodroof after he is diagnosed with HIV, *Dallas Buyers Club* deploys queerness and Southernness as exotic, alternative identity categories before it ultimately reasserts dominant norms. In this way, the film recalls earlier portrayals of homosexuality, but where those were defined by

¹⁸⁵ See Lisa Duggan, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004); Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

repression and monstrosity, *Dallas Buyers Club* differentiates itself with a rhetoric of tolerance and progress. The film's use of queer subject matter requires briefly historicizing the transition from stereotypical, pre-Stonewall representations of homosexuality to updated representations of gay subjects in the late 1980s, early 1990s, at the peak of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. I will briefly consider another film about AIDS, *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), as the protagonist in *Dallas Buyers Club* is drawn from a much longer history of the "undead homosexual" in film and literature.

As described by Robert Reid-Pharr and Diana Fuss, the undead homosexual who continually reappeared on American screens, even and especially in the face of the worst degradation, is absolutely necessary to the production of "normal" heterosexual identity: "The distinction between normalcy and chaos is maintained precisely through the mediation of the sexually liminal character, that is to say, the homosexual."¹⁸⁶ Fuss adds, "Those inhabiting the inside...can only comprehend the outside through the incorporation of a negative image. This process of negative interiorization involves turning homosexuality inside out, exposing not the homosexual's abject insides but the homosexual as the abject, as the contaminated and expurgated insides of the heterosexual subject."¹⁸⁷ Classical cinema often renders the innate abjection of the homosexual in quite literal terms by casting "the queer" in the role of monster (e.g., *Nosferatu*, F.W. Murnau, 1922) or villain (e.g., Peter Lorre's Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon*, John Huston, 1941)

¹⁸⁶ Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of a Late-Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 353.

¹⁸⁷ Diana Fuss, "Inside/Out," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3, quoted in Reid-Pharr, 353.

whom the protagonist must successfully confront and overcome. These films actually produce the heterosexual subject twice over: once via the confrontation that certifies the hero's morality, and again via the successful heterosexual coupling that ends most classical-era films and reinforces his hetero-masculinity.

Philadelphia updates the formula with once-homophobic lawyer Joe Miller's (Denzel Washington) increasing tolerance of the gay, AIDS-positive Andy Beckett (Tom Hanks) serving as a marker of Miller's mature masculinity. Centering on Beckett's wrongful termination lawsuit, *Philadelphia*'s portrayal of homosexuality also reaffirms the larger capitalistic social structure within which American heterosexuality is situated. Before Beckett is fired due to his AIDS-positive status, he passionately defends a large construction company's right to build in, and thereby gentrify, a neighborhood. This opening scene ostensibly proves Beckett's skill as a lawyer before his bosses call his fitness into question while it also reassures even more conservative viewers that homosexuality does not necessarily undermine the social order as they know it; this gay man is also a corporate lawyer who demonstrates an inalienable stake in existing economic structures, at least within his practice of the law. In this vision of homosexuality as well as in earlier portrayals, the gay subject does not exist for himself but rather for the maintenance of the larger social order. But it also serves as an index of Joe Miller's development, and both functions are inextricably linked to heterosexuality. The tone of *Philadelphia* may seem progressive, but the gay subject remains the consistent, undead negative against which the life-bound subject defines himself. Notwithstanding Hanks's Oscar win and *Philadelphia*'s box office success,

representations of AIDS in U.S. mainstream cinema have remained scarce and are consistently more conservative than those in independent film and on cable television. As evinced by miniseries like *Angels in America* (HBO, 2003), pay cable television has included more diverse representations of sexual difference: cable channels do this to differentiate their product from network television, and also *can* do this because they do not have to satisfy advertisers in the same way that network television does. But even on HBO, viewers can glimpse the persistent dialectic between queerness and the maintenance of heteronormativity as well as the way that dialectic shapes itself to fit hegemonic needs.

Recent television shows like HBO's Southern-set *True Blood* (HBO, 2008–2014) provide fantasies of social justice for the Othered and suggest that progressiveness now reigns where repression was once practiced. In the Southern imaginary of *True Blood*, for instance, LGBTQ+ lead characters triumph over bigotry, live autonomously, and perhaps most importantly, create families. The re-envisioning of the South as a progressive place is pleasurable to national-Northern audiences, in part because it testifies to national progress toward a democratic ideal. In narratives like *True Blood*, both queer and Southern subjects, previously connected to death, are absorbed into the sphere of bio-power¹⁸⁸ as potential (re)productive individuals.¹⁸⁹ As defined by Michel Foucault, bio-power refers to the ways modern governments seek to regulate the reproduction of their

¹⁸⁸ Michel Foucault describes bio-power as an “anatomy-politics... whose highest function was no longer to kill [i.e. as monarchies ensured loyalty with threats of capital punishment], but to invest life” via public institutions (i.e. the school, the army, etc.) that seek to optimize the body as a means to optimize capital accumulation. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139–45.

¹⁸⁹ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), xii.

citizenry to maximize their productivity. The more subjects that can be recruited into a citizenry, the more productive a society can become. In a post-marriage-equality world, subjects once central to bio-power by virtue of their deathly uncanniness are now crucial under the rubric of life-bound normativity.

Audiences can see the dynamics of bio-power as they play themselves out in the South particularly clearly in *Dallas Buyers Club*. Jean Marc Vallée's film rewrites the archetypal story of the deathly homosexual, the AIDS narrative, in the vein of the liberal *Philadelphia*. Like that film and *True Blood*, *Dallas Buyers Club* is a profitable, ostensibly progressive text, produced without the stereotyping of classical cinema. Indeed, Woodroof's place in popular culture suggests the monumental transformation from the time of his tale—an era in which President Reagan refused to speak the disease's name—to the time of the telling. This transformation was brought about by activists and those living with AIDS, whose efforts ushered in new treatments, and changed the perception of the disease and gay rights more generally. These leaders made the fight for LGBTQ+ civil rights urgent and representable in popular culture, and the sheer effectiveness of their advocacy, especially on the issues of AIDS and the right to marry, has extended the practical benefits of the state (tax deductions, health care, childcare costs) in ways that are hard to overestimate for populations so malignantly ignored or actively persecuted. But, as Michael Warner has noted, increased visibility and the sometimes-myopic focus on same-sex marriage has not been solely beneficent for all

LGBTQ+ populations.¹⁹⁰ Warner argues that activists have traded wide-ranging goals for an assimilationist agenda that encourages middle-class respectability. His assessment highlights the gay rights movement's position relative to the mainstream in such a way that we can no longer assume films with queer content carry an oppositional agenda (and might lead us to question if we ever could).

Far from radical, but like other films in McConaughey's oeuvre, *Dallas Buyers Club* encourages viewers to disengage politically while investing emotionally in a narrative that appropriates LGBTQ+ history and queer codes to reify traditional ideologies like bio-power and a "purpose-driven life" in a deceptively self-effacing way. If Woodroof does not participate in actual reproductive coupling, the film ensures he can at least uphold the ideologies that undergird bio-power and speak to traditional American values: heterosexuality, capitalism, and individualism. After the film shows Woodroof taking drugs, making racist and homophobic remarks, and sleeping with multiple women, viewers watch as he discovers his HIV-positive status. When his doctor delivers a bleak prognosis, Woodroof finds alternative treatments and eventually launches a booming members-only "buyer's club" that enables him and others to purchase those treatments. He rebels against an FDA that is slow to approve new treatments but always as a straight man looking to stay alive, not as an advocate for gay populations disproportionately affected by the disease. The film makes this abundantly clear by adding a romance plot between Woodroof and his physician, played by Jennifer Garner. In his business venture, Woodroof also meets and eventually defends the transgender Rayon (Jared Leto) when a

¹⁹⁰ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

former co-worker yells a homophobic epithet; this defense marks his character's increasingly open-minded worldview and is a correlative to Joe Miller's gradual empathy for Andy Beckett in *Philadelphia*.

By emphasizing a change in Woodroof's personal worldview, *Dallas Buyers Club* also de-politicizes his story into cathartic growth narrative. Upon the film's release, multiple sources including Woodroof's ex-wife and primary care physician asserted he was bisexual or gay.¹⁹¹ These sources also contested the film's portrayal of Woodroof as homophobic and racist. These claims are fascinating for their implications on *Dallas Buyers Club* insofar as they suggest that filmmakers may have amplified the parts of Woodroof's biography that aligned with heteronormativity—even its racialized and homophobic aspects—and deemphasized homosexuality, strategically allowing multiple mainstream entry points into the film. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, studio executives found a “queer, but not too queer” formula that later McConaughey vehicles would replicate to lure two audiences whose desires typically contradict: young liberal audiences, including LGBTQ+ viewers, and mainstream viewers. The film is carefully calibrated to court (or at the very least not offend) the former, while also leaving space for the latter, who may desire only a melodramatic “overcoming” narrative devoid of politics.

In essence, viewers uninterested in the realities of the AIDS crisis or LGBTQ+ life could still engage with *Dallas Buyers Club* through the conceit of personal transformation; Woodroof is victim and then underdog enough that viewers attuned to melodrama can be broadly sympathetic to his plight, while they can divest that story from

¹⁹¹ Arnold Wayne Jones, “King of Clubs,” *Dallasvoice.com*, 08 Nov 2013, <http://www.dallasvoice.com/king-clubs-10161057.html>.

sexual or leftist attitudes. The film dramatizes homophobia as an internal, individual struggle so that systemic inequalities that derive from it, like continuing uneven distribution of health care benefits to LGBTQ+ populations, go uninterrogated while personal growth is championed as a solution to discrimination. Box office returns for this film and others such as *Philadelphia* where AIDS is transformed into a narrative of uplift, suggest that these films' alignment with traditional American values constitutes their appeal for a large section of viewers.

As McConaughey himself describes, Vallée's film further appropriates Woodroof's scramble to circumvent medical, scientific, and legal systems and delay certain death into a search for a goal-driven life:

The hard truth that I could see, and the way I approached it, was him getting HIV is what gave him his purpose in life. That's the first time that he had something that he grabbed ahold of for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day, until he was here no longer. That's where he found a real identity. That's where he found a purpose.¹⁹²

Here, McConaughey resolves the tension of incorporating a body queered by AIDS into the sphere of American bio-power by promising that Woodroof's queerness instructs us on the optimization of life, is congruent with middle-class values (i.e., achievement through hard work and a sense of "purpose"), and is congenial with neoliberal individualism.¹⁹³ He provides an insidiously emotionally satisfying, simple resolution to

¹⁹² Jones, "King of Clubs."

¹⁹³ *Dallas Buyers Club* places bio-power and heterosexuality at the center in other ways, casting two straight men, McConaughey and Leto, in the lead roles, launching a meta-textual rebirth for both.

the complicated, ongoing AIDS epidemic that obscures his conviction that Woodroof was “born to die,” and in that death, to provide meaning for others who are allowed to remain wedded to hegemonic social conditions. McConaughey’s updating of the queer/heteronormative dialectic that haunted *Philadelphia*—Woodroof is still “the undead homosexual” who exists pedagogically, for others—illustrates that the inclusion of some queer representations into the mainstream and the fantasies of tolerance, purposefulness, and meaning that films like *Dallas Buyers Club* uphold are fraught and fragile even for those subjects (like Woodroof) that Hollywood purports to embrace.

Luxuriating in fantasies of acceptance like *Dallas Buyers Club* also virtually ensures that exclusionary representational practices will continue. As Puar charges, “...benevolence toward sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity.”¹⁹⁴ She continues by noting that the cultivation of these homosexual subjects is paralleled by a rise in the targeting of “queerly raced” bodies for dying before asking, “If we feel things are calm, what must we forget to inhabit such a restful feeling?”¹⁹⁵ The inclusion of certain imaginary subjects like McConaughey comes with the exclusion or “forgetting” of other subjects who cannot meaningfully participate in a market economy. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, and in the McConaughey films that follow, exclusions comprise those interested in same-sex intimacy, people of color, the rural poor, and queer women who are utterly disposable (when they appear at all). These

¹⁹⁴ Puar xii.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid xvii.

categories often overlap, and their joint expendability makes possible the kind of queer fantasy that supports not only heteronormativity but also normative whiteness.

McConaughey's films demonstrate the process by which Hollywood has absorbed queerness into the "statistical fold that produces appropriate digits and facts towards the population's optimization of life and the ascendancy of whiteness."¹⁹⁶ It does so at a moment when white populations are poised to become the statistical minority. From 2014 to 2060, the non-Hispanic white population is projected to decrease by 8.2%. By 2044, more than half of all Americans are projected to belong to a minority group (any group other than non-Hispanic white alone).¹⁹⁷ As seen in earlier periods in American history, one way to combat this perceived threat is to provisionally recruit new groups into the statistical fold of whiteness: in this case, middle-class, queer populations. Though Puar does not mention the South, her analysis of attempts to incorporate queer subjects and preserve "white ascendancy" recall a similar process during the post-Civil Rights era. In the late 1960s and 1970s, conservative politicians courted once-repudiated middle-class Southern whites and their "law and order" politics into the national public sphere to counteract the tide of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and to consolidate the votes of what President Nixon called the "silent majority," working-class whites and middle-class suburbanites outraged by contemporary protest movements.

The McConaissance's marginalization of people of color, poor whites, and queer women similarly paves the way for McConaughey's Southern, queer characters to be

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, U.S. Census Bureau, "Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060," March 2015, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>.

absorbed by heteronormative audiences. His films spend much energy looking backward, using the 1960s New South as a model. But these films also paranoically look forward, guarding against impending minoritization. This forward gaze, as Puar notes, constitutes “the ghosts of the future that we can already sniff, ghosts that are waiting for us, that usher us into futurities. Haunting in this sense defuses a binary between past and present—because indeed the becoming-future is haunting us.”¹⁹⁸ McConaughey’s representation of queerness attempts to secure white representation against uncertain futurities, while reassuring us we are indeed moving toward a more progressive, comfortably diverse future.

But, as in the 1960s and 70s, attempts to consolidate whiteness and the normativity that comes with it are destined to remain lacking, wanting—and, indeed, wanton, because they beckon the racial and sexual Other with each attempt to suppress its influence. This is true even when suppression speaks the language of tolerance, as in *Dallas Buyers Club*. As Michael Bronski maintains, homosexuality fascinates the heterosexual imagination because of the sexual license it offers, a vision of sexual pleasure divorced from procreation as well as the Puritan ethos that suggests desire be indulged in small doses:

Homosexuality and homosexuals present attractive alternatives to the restrictions that reproductive heterosexuality and its social structures have placed on heterosexuals. The real issue is not that heterosexuals will be tempted to engage in

¹⁹⁸ Puar xx.

homosexual activity, but that they will be drawn to more flexible norms that would upend the social order.¹⁹⁹

Dallas Buyers Club treats Woodroof and Rayon to the exact kinds of hedonism Bronski describes before imposing censoring mechanisms—physical harm, remorse, and death—to speak to the risk that homosexuality, alternative sexual practices, and non-normative gender identification present to the status quo. The danger and the forbiddenness of homosexuality can itself be appealing, as Bronski notes: “...the attraction to queerness arises from the imaginations of heterosexuals who find homosexuality—and everything it signifies—both frighteningly lurid and very titillating.”²⁰⁰ McConaughey’s Southernness only adds to his taboo appeal, as the region’s indulgence of excess has been notoriously repulsive and attractive to national-Northern audiences.

Together with *Magic Mike*, *Dallas Buyers Club* reunited McConaughey with his roots in Texas in the public eye. This aspect figures prominently in personal accounts of his life and in early films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* (Kim Henkel, 1994) but was less prominent in romantic comedies that placed him on California beaches or in the Sahara Desert. By contrast, most of McConaughey’s recent films specifically reference Texas as McConaughey’s character’s birthplace and are often also set there. All indulge female desire for the Texas cowboy to some degree, as seen most obviously in *Magic Mike*, which finds McConaughey playing Dallas, an emcee and dancer in an all-male strip club. Only Lee Daniels’s *The Paperboy*, ironically set in

¹⁹⁹ Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 9.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid* 15–16.

Florida, takes an outsider perspective on the way that the longer history of the Texas cowboy infused McConaughey's persona and its appeal. The film foregrounds the role that blackness and queerness figure into Texan identity and in turn, how Southernness constitutes the exoticism of McConaughey's persona. Coming before *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Magic Mike*, *The Paperboy* articulates the qualities that those mainstream films would appropriate for mass consumption. Compared to those films, however, *The Paperboy* offers a radically biting critique of McConaughey's Texas cowboy persona.

III. Blackness, Texas, and *The Paperboy*

Geographically, Texas sits on the border between the South and the West. In the national imagination, it also marks the border between the civilized, industrial nation and the frontier. In the nineteenth century, the state was composed of both plantations and the wide open spaces that figured so prominently in Manifest Destiny-era discourses. It was a slave state and, as cultural critic Jane Tompkins suggests, a “symbol of freedom...It seem[ed] to offer escape from the conditions of modern industrial society: from mechanized existence, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice.”²⁰¹ Texas was, therefore, a contradictory space that promised a psychological escape from slave society and industrial labor for white citizens even while perpetuating and benefitting from human bondage. The cowboy, as an archetype, smoothed the contradictions of frontier identity. He lived beyond civilization and so was untainted by social hypocrisies but nonetheless lived by a moral code consonant with civil society. He

²⁰¹ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 4.

was forever moving west toward liberty, so that Texas's position as a slave state could recede into the background of its historical narrative. His conflict was not with black populations, but with Native Americans who blocked his path. Nonetheless, the cowboy remained bound to blackness via his locale, animating impulse—in part, to outrun the plantation system—and because the qualities that defined slave life (entrapment, industry, abusive power etc.) were what the cowboy defined his free self against.

The intimate ties between conceptions of the white cowboy and of black enslaved peoples are rarely articulated in Westerns, but they are prominent in narratives about the Southern cavalier. This other pillar of Southern masculinity combines the horsemanship, bravery, and moral code of the cowboy with the aristocracy, and often a dandified dressing style, of the planter class. Archetypal encounters in texts like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* find Southern cavaliers confirming their masculinity by controlling and punishing black male bodies made to signify corporeality, via aggression or more often licentiousness. This encounter is staged repeatedly and across diverse cultural settings and media so that whiteness remains intimately yoked to blackness, even in late Civil Rights-era films like *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) that take the Texan into new environs. That film fuses the character of the Southern cavalier with the Texas cowboy, providing an industrial and aesthetic template for many of McConaughey's films, including *The Paperboy*.

The opening of *Midnight Cowboy* follows aspiring hustler Joe Buck (Jon Voigt) as he dresses himself in mannered cowboy attire. His brand new Western garb recalls the rough-and-tumble cowboys Buck seeks to reference. But this Western garb is overtly

performed. Its ostentatiousness brings it in line with the self-conscious sartorialism of Southern dandies like *My Darling Clementine*'s Doc Holliday (John Ford, 1941). When Buck arrives from Texas in New York City, he is dismayed to find that his cowboy persona primarily appeals to gay men. The instability at the core of Buck's identity is sexualized in obvious ways, but it is also racialized in his lone sexual conquest of an aging female Manhattan socialite who manipulates Buck to pay *her*. As the two characters roll over the television remote, they prompt the TV to change channels with each thrust. The images rotate through displays of muscle-bound men doing lunges, a man in blackface, and finally end on a laundry detergent commercial that proclaims that it "even gets blacks whiter."²⁰² The images build and climax on the screen while Joe does on the bed, which suggests that they be read as a racially charged, unconscious catalogue of narratives of domination that Joe taps into so as to define himself, both within and outside of the sexual encounter. In this moment, Joe thinks himself a conquering cowboy, but the rapidly shifting stream of images suggests the volatility at the core of his identity, which is reliant on a haunting blackness to define itself.

Forty-five years after *Midnight Cowboy*'s release, Lee Daniels's *The Paperboy* thematizes the link between queerness and race that the former film can only imply. The plot follows brothers Jack (Zac Efron) and Ward Jansen (McConaughey), along with black reporter Yardley (David Oyelowo), as they attempt to free alleged murderer Hillary Van Wetter (John Cusack). The film is a frame narrative told from the perspective of Anita Chester (Macy Gray), who works as a maid for the Jansens. As in other frame

²⁰² *Midnight Cowboy*, dir. John Schlesinger (1969; Beverly Hills, CA: MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

narratives, Chester's position as an inside-outsider allows her unique insights on the family at the center of the text. Her narration is mainly a voiceover spoken outside of the diegetic world, which ensures audiences understand her distance from the Jansens. This narration also highlights privileged knowledge that could only come from close experience with them. She is the only one to see Jack's sexual obsessions and to notice the faint scars that trace Ward's body. Before the climax we expect—the freeing of Hillary—the film turns on itself, climaxing when Jack discovers Ward in a pool of blood, knocked unconscious during a sadomasochistic encounter with a black man. His scars are finally explained when we learn that Ward frequents black male sex workers and has come to the brink of death more than once. This revelation brings important elements of McConaughey's appeal into focus: his cowboy persona's investment in blackness and homosexuality, the racial tension between Ward and Yardley, and by extension, the contemporary political implications of the intimate, queer relations glimpsed in sidelong fashion in *Midnight Cowboy*.

Frankly acknowledging same-sex intimacy and interracial desire as well as non-mainstream sexual practices, *The Paperboy* is in many ways an aberration in McConaughey's oeuvre. But the way the film negotiates these elements remains consistent with the actor's recent films and their cultural logic and ideological maneuvers—the film merely turns up the volume on qualities that his mainstream films whisper. The camera's focused attention on the actor as a naked body is a logical extension of his perpetually shirtless off-screen persona. Ward's interest in alternative sex

practices is not so different than his exhibition as a leather-bound cowboy stripper in *Magic Mike*.

As such, *The Paperboy* also speaks to the under analyzed, taboo etiology of McConaughey's appeal: his imbrication in uncanny pleasures that audiences disavow but continue to find attractive, including exhibitionism, raced longings, and sadomasochistic sex practices. McConaughey's willingness to display his body in *The Paperboy* and in other films like *Magic Mike* and *Killer Joe* is still relatively unusual among Hollywood leading men because male nudity courts gay male audiences as well as straight female audiences. The uniqueness of McConaughey and the critical silence around *The Paperboy* illustrates the degree to which acknowledging these audiences as desirous remains risky, even fifty years after the sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s. As the film demonstrates, appeals particularly to gay male audiences still need to be coded as plausibly deniable to be palatable in mainstream cinema.

Ward is also part of a hidden archive of white men enmeshed in the Southern imaginary whose guilt or covert investment in black masculinity transmogrifies into sexual flagellation. Roy Grundmann analyzes another piece from this archive, Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro." In Mailer's infamous parallel between listening to jazz and the "pinch, scream, despair, lust" of orgasm, Grundmann identifies an ultimately "masochistic infatuation with black culture."²⁰³ After the passage on orgasm, Mailer fantasizes about an actual, but momentary, black uprising that would lead to "the temporary but nonetheless certain spiritual enslavement of the Southern white

²⁰³ Roy Grundmann, *Andy Warhol's Blow Job* (Philadelphia, Temple UP: 2003), 172.

which...ought to be nourishing for both races—not to mention the moral justice of it.”²⁰⁴

This fantasy constitutes a

guilt-ridden wish to ‘make up’ for history through a masochistic invitation to...counter-enslavement...Mailer’s guilt over the historical importation and enslavement of blacks produces psychosexual fantasies of the white self’s subordination to blacks. Mailer’s liberation of blacks is predominantly an intra-psychic phenomenon that has little to do with black liberation as a political cause.²⁰⁵

Of course, in *The Paperboy* Ward literalizes masochistic infatuation into actual encounter, and invokes a racialized aspect of S&M culture; two common names for the male “top” are Domme (i.e., “Dominator”) and, more evocatively, Master.

Unlike Mailer, though, Ward never mistakes sexual infatuation for political engagement. Mailer constructs a romanticized Other, then injects himself into the center of that racialized construction to bolster his own sense of himself as an “enlightened” subject. Ward lacks such romanticist illusions. His masochistic sexual practices in no way preclude racist acts in the public world, as he remains unmoved by Black Power discourses that would have been contemporarily circulating in 1969. In fact, the distance between sexual interest and possible ethical interests causes substantial tension between Ward and Yardley, who knows his race motivated Ward to choose him as a reporting partner but does not compel Ward to treat him as an equal.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid 173.

In contrast to Ward, Jack is deeply compassionate toward Yardley and Anita. Ulterior motives pervade *The Paperboy*, but Jack is characterized as the kind of open-minded young man who would soon become a socially conscious journalist or activist, any liberal film's moral conscience. He thereby functions as an obvious audience surrogate. His character speaks as eloquently to current post-racial fantasies as it would have to liberal 1960s–1970s audiences; Jack implicitly claims to see past race, into the humanity of others in ways that Ward cannot. The film also acknowledges desirous gay male audiences and straight female viewers through Jack, who is often only partially clothed and objectified by the camera's gaze. Like McConaughey, dreamy Disney teen star Zac Efron walks the line between queerness and heterosexuality as a fetish object, which heightens his appeal. But just like Ward, Jack fantasizes about blackness in private moments, which makes strange our identification with the younger brother. In an odd revision of *Midnight Cowboy*'s racialized fantasy, Jack has a dream that cycles through a chain of images, ending on his domination at the hands of a black man.

In a liberal reading, Jack's dream might be intuition about his brother's sexuality. He demonstrates sensitivity to others in his kindness to Anita but remains divided by his public wish for fairness and private fantasies of domination and submission. His sensitivity and naiveté are fetishes that helps mask the otherwise glaring obviousness of the contradiction between Jack's phantasmic structure and the social reality that engulfs him. His kindness toward Anita is a fantasy of emotional equity that supports their social interactions: it is a mode Jack can escape into in order to make unjust conditions more bearable, but that is the inverse of challenging the conditions themselves. What might be

termed Jack's private queer, racist fantasy of blackness and his public compassion are two sides of the same coin that, together, support the normative reality of racism. By fully visualizing Ward's sexual acts and thereby pandering to audience desire for lurid sex, and then defamiliarizing that desire by showing the cultural mechanisms that motivate his as well as Jack's behavior, *The Paperboy* links itself to film noir. As film noirs "get at" the underbelly of urban life, *The Paperboy* lays bare an internal contradiction of American culture that prestige films like *Dallas Buyers Club* seek to resolve: the nation's purported acceptance of difference accompanied by a general unwillingness to confront oppressive biases or cultural practices.

The Paperboy suggests that neither fantasies nor queer sex acts automatically disrupt structures of power. Ward's desires remain closeted and his public life reifies the unequal power structure that typifies the Southern imaginary. Jack's identity, too, requires the constant reinforcement of racial, social, and economic inequality. *The Paperboy* offers no utopic solution to the dynamics it unearths, but it does trouble the very doing of social reality. Its explosive deconstruction also shows which subjects are reclaimable by social reality—vaguely queer men like Jack—and which are not—black men, sex workers, and those interested in sado-masochism. Ward's sexuality marks him for dying because it makes social terms, the intimate ties between white and black men, too visible. Importantly, it also corresponds with a disinterest in reproduction and moral responsibility that nullify him as a potential "good" citizen. Jack, by contrast, embodies heterosexual desire and an immutable stake in social stratification; in the end, he lives to become a productive, heteronormative citizen, but in the best film noir manner, *The*

Paperboy leaves viewers with a nagging sense that Jack will always embody social contradictions. Together, Ward and Jack illustrate that a gesture queer in content may not be oppositional in politics, or perhaps more importantly, may not be politically emancipatory for all.

As the film progresses, Yardley and Anita become increasingly vocal and mobile while Jack and Ward unravel. Ward is eventually eaten alive by the abject Florida swamps and the white Walker Evans characters who dwell there (on film, at least), while Jack just barely escapes. The “white trash” man the Jansens freed, Hillary Van Wetter, turns on the brothers when they discover his murdered girlfriend, Charlotte Bless (Nicole Kidman), and attempts to kill them both. Ward’s death allows Jack to get away and become a reporter, but one forever changed by his encounter with the Southern backcountry. As the final line of the novel on which the film was based tells us, “There are no intact men.”²⁰⁶ This story—the decline of white Southern civilization, embodied by prominent families like the Jansens, destroyed by the weird, subjugated, or impoverished populations it produced in its entropic drive to reproduce its compromised vision—is a Southern Gothic staple. It describes the genre’s key plot, from literary texts like William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* to filmic texts like *True Detective*, as well as the pleasures such texts afford; they allow for social critique, nihilistic humor, and experience with the grotesque. While *The Paperboy*’s “deliriously tawdry” exploitation aesthetic was unpopular at the Cannes Film Festival, it mirrors the construction of the Erskine

²⁰⁶ Pete Dexter, *The Paperboy*, (New York: Random House, 1995), 307.

Caldwell, Flannery O'Connor, and William Faulkner texts it channels.²⁰⁷ And, as the most biting Southern Gothic/ film noir texts do, *The Paperboy* disrupts social reality by showing its invisible terms and thereby opens up space to critique them.

V. *True Detective*, Abjection, and Quality Television

The concept of abjection looms large in Southern Gothic works like *The Paperboy* and also informs McConaughey's later role in the HBO anthology series *True Detective*. Julia Kristeva's definition readily fits Ward's body and its effects as "...an aspect of human physicality or experience that individuals wish to disavow, a substance or image that disrupts the psyche's sense of 'identity, system, order.'"²⁰⁸ By the film's end, Ward is ejected into the deep, unknowable Florida backwoods, a space that constitutes absolute alterity in the American cultural imagination.²⁰⁹ In Southern Gothic texts like *The Paperboy*, abjection is a problem that cannot be solved, and that is its *raison d'être*: like opening a festering wound, Ward's exile as an abject creature reveals uncomfortable contents in American life (who is excluded and why) and forces audiences to contemplate those contents. *True Detective* flirts with similar concerns, but to very different ends.

Protagonist Rust Cohle (McConaughey) initially carries a similar air of abjection to Ward Jansen. He is made strange by his autistic intelligence, a near mental breakdown,

²⁰⁷ Michael Schulman, "Why *The Paperboy* is a Camp Classic," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-the-paperboy-is-a-camp-classic>.

²⁰⁸ Julia Kristeva as qtd. in Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 93.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid* 95.

his Texas origins, and a homosocial relationship with his partner, Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson). But in contrast to Ward, Rust Cohle retains enough of the heteronormative to ultimately be reincorporated back into society in the first season's final moments. Cohle's descent into sex, violence, and obsession exemplifies HBO's use of controversial content to differentiate itself from network television, but the character's rehabilitation shows the pay cable giant policing another boundary: between fee-based sexploitation and quality television. McConaughey's roles in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Paperboy* (which taken together show McConaughey as vaguely dangerous, yet anodyne) made the actor a perfect vehicle through which HBO could push into more illicit material to court audiences back from increasingly shocking basic cable shows like *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013). *True Detective* shifts viewer attention away from Cohle's queerness (and ensures that viewers remain sutured to him) by ultimately positioning the murderous redneck Errol Childress (Glenn Fleshler) as the truly weird, monstrous figure. Cohle's final confrontation, in which he kills Childress, shows how imperative it is for HBO to contain its illicit material to maintain its position as a quality content provider.

The first season of the series follows Cohle and Hart as they attempt to solve ritualistic, serial murders of Louisiana women. In the opening scene, the detectives investigate a murdered woman who has been tied to a tree. She has been left naked, tattooed, and adorned with antlers and is surrounded by trinkets made of trash and pagan symbols. The shocking image is the exact kind HBO is known for. Part of the pleasure in HBO's programming like *True Detective* comes from how hard the show works to tell

viewers that the channel is pushing the boundaries of what is culturally permissible.²¹⁰ As Janet McCabe and Kim Akass argue, HBO solicits this content from industry-recognized artists like *The Soprano*'s David Chase, which enables the channel to assert its the courting of controversy as a “distinctive feature of its cultural cachet, its quality brand label and (until recently) its leading market position.”²¹¹ As McCabe and Akass go on to note though HBO's creative autonomy “reveals a continual struggle for institutional leadership and market leadership.”²¹²

Basic cable channels like AMC have threatened HBO's dominance in recent years with edgy programming like *Mad Men* (2007–2015). If HBO wished to continue to promote its original programming as truly singular, it needed a hook that basic cable could not easily replicate. *True Detective*'s anthology format provided one such hook. A series that features a different cast of A-list actors and a new plot each year is logistically tricky and financially improbable for most networks and basic cable channels. An HBO series with a limited run would provide amenable working conditions for film actors, who could make the series in between other projects. These conditions were precisely what attracted Matthew McConaughey to *True Detective*. The actor's “dirty prettiness” was, in turn, the perfect complement to HBO's industrial strategy.²¹³ His character Rust Cohle makes the seedy pleasures of the Louisiana landscape even more alluring. The success of

²¹⁰ Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, “Sex, Swearing, and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming, and Producing Quality TV,” in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 66.

²¹¹ Ibid 63–66.

²¹² Ibid 67.

²¹³ “Ellen DeGeneres' 86th Oscars Opening,” YouTube video, 8.55, from The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards Show televised by ABC on March 2, 2014, posted by “Oscars,” March 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUmX6CiMoFk>.

Dallas Buyers Club assured creators that McConaughey also brought a meta-textual respectability that ensured audiences knew they were not watching smut, but sophisticated programming. McConaughey's all-American appeal led producers to want to cast him as the normative Marty Hart. McConaughey, however, lobbied to play the weirder Cohle. The creation of Cohle's character further developed into a collaborative effort when McConaughey suggested that Woody Harrelson play his partner, detective Hart.²¹⁴

The show's central homosocial pairing between Hart and Cohle enhances the show's taboo, meta-textual pleasure. As defined by Eve Sedgwick, homosocial relations are intense, same-sex bonds. These relationships are often triangulated through a third party to avoid suspicion of homosexuality.²¹⁵ In the first season of *True Detective*, McConaughey and Harrelson's characters bicker incessantly, which creates constant, intimate friction. Hart and Cohle both sleep with Hart's wife, Maggie, and communicate emotionally through her. She functions exactly as Sedgwick describes, becoming a screen through which the men interact and barely ward off homosexual anxieties. Sedgwick posits homosexuality and homosociality as mutually exclusive, but erotic *True Detective* fan fiction fascinatingly confuses the two.²¹⁶ The relationship of Harrelson and McConaughey aids in the public's romanticizing of Hart and Cohle's relationship.

²¹⁴ Damon Martin, "True Detective Creators Originally Wanted Matthew McConaughey to Play Marty Hart," June 5, 2014, <http://www.nerdcoremovement.com/true-detective-creators-originally-wanted-matthew-mcconaughey-play-marty-hart/>.

²¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

²¹⁶ See fan fiction, including "Love Poems for Men Who Aren't in Love," *FanFiction.net*, 24 May 2015, <https://www.fanfiction.net/tv/True-Detective/> and *ArchiveofOurOwn.org*, 24 May 2015, <http://archiveofourown.org/tags/True%20Detective/works>.

McConaughey played Harrelson's brother in *EdTV* (Ron Howard, 1999), and reunited with him in *Surfer, Dude*. Both men have reputations as Southern, offbeat bon vivants with shades of existentialism and no shortage of peccadillos. McConaughey seems like Harrelson's younger, more handsome, less controversial double.²¹⁷ *True Detective* avoids insinuating any sexual attraction between the two partners, and Hart is heteronormative to a fault.²¹⁸ But while the show may resist "fan-service" storylines, it also benefits from the pleasurable repetition that keeps viewers coming back to the show's central couple. Their relationship carries the aura of the actors' public bond—equal parts brotherhood and spiritual soul mates—that continually flirts with incestuous attraction.

Cohle's queerness figures prominently in this fan fiction and in the show proper. This too is in keeping with HBO's prerogative to support programming that embraces the transgressive. His existential monologues, enigmatic nature, and murky past all mark Cohle as different from his pragmatic partner, whose past and motivations are utterly transparent. As the show progresses, he increasingly resembles a film noir anti-hero who undermines traditional notions of "intact" American masculinity. As scholar Christopher Lirette states of *True Detective's* opening credits,

²¹⁷ Woody Harrelson also hails from Texas but has a more checkered past than McConaughey. His father, Charles Voyde Harrelson, was involved in organized crime and convicted to two life sentences for killing a federal judge. *Natural Born Killers*, in which Harrelson starred, is in part a postmodern riff on the actor's past. Harrelson has a reputation for eccentricity but does not possess the same Grecian good looks as McConaughey, which may explain why the younger actor's star rose exponentially while Harrelson's did not after *EdTV* and again following *True Detective*. Interestingly, Woody Harrelson was considered to play Ron Woodroof in *Dallas Buyers Club* in the mid-1990s, early in the project's development. See Tim Appelo, "Dallas Buyers Club Director Wasn't Sold on Matthew McConaughey," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 8, 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/dallas-buyers-club-director-wasnt-653354>.

²¹⁸ Hart is married with two children when the series begins. Although he has extramarital affairs, his family life validates for him that he is one of the "good" men, the good citizens.

...a ghosted image of McConaughey's character, Rust Cohle, fades into the photo of the refinery and canefield...The faces of people—mostly characters from the show—break apart, joining traces of maps and machinery, becoming hybrid people-in-places. In one particular image, Rust's head appears in outline, but only the area below his nose retains photographic density, the top half of his head fading to nothing.²¹⁹

This opening roots Cohle and others firmly within the Southern imaginary but sketches them as shadow “people-in-places.” The show takes inspiration from Southern writers like Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, who often create emblems for racial anxiety in shattered images of whiteness like “scenes of partial bodies, cotton lint, flour dust, displaced snow, or facial masking.”²²⁰ Cohle's ambiguous, semi-spectral presence foreshadows his psychological collapse and casts it in racialized and sexualized terms.

Throughout the show, Cohle seems perpetually on the verge of dissociating as a direct consequence of interacting with abject Louisiana populations. The opening of the show implies that Cohle's continual unraveling might not be because poor white Louisianans are strange to him, as Hart claims, but because they become more and more familiar. All of the characters in the opening—Cohle, murdered white women, and poor whites that cast into doubt the superiority of that racial category—are equally rendered as ghostly inhabitants of a landscape that is as much composed of memories as it is of refineries and canefields. As an outsider from Texas, Cohle does not have access to the

²¹⁹ Christopher Lirette, “Something True about Louisiana: HBO's *True Detective* and the Petrochemical America Aesthetic,” *Southern Spaces*, August 8, 2014, <https://southernspaces.org/2014/something-true-about-louisiana-hbos-true-detective-and-petrochemical-america-aesthetic>.

²²⁰ Yaegar xii.

regional knowledge that would help him make sense of this new world. His theories about the show's central crime along with the monologues that once had an existential intelligence become increasingly incoherent, as his control—on a knowable world, as a detective, as a man—dissolves. Each murdered woman reflects back his own disempowered status at him in a mean irony that threatens to undo the core of his being. Noir heroes like this (a category that also includes *The Paperboy's* Ward) are rarely recuperated in that genre: their exclusion marks them as unfit for civilized society and signifies their imbrication in the seedy underworld of “bad men” they keep from the door.

The integration of such a damaged figure back into the social fold would require a spectacular Other to exclude instead. *True Detective* provides that figure in poor, white Errol and Betty Childress, whose total strangeness draws our attention away from Cohle's and dwarfs it by comparison. By placing Errol and Betty in a Southern bayou even more strange than Cohle's Texas, *True Detective* shows how HBO's apparent subversiveness belies a cautious internal regulation around material that truly falls outside of what is culturally permissible. Through incestuous sex, a penchant for pedophilic violence, and mental deficiencies, the Childresses act as a kind of mop for obscene material, “absorbing the illicit,”²²¹ by repackaging it into a form that viewers are comfortable discarding: “white trash.” When Cohle kills Errol in the final episode of Season 1, Hart hypothesizes that this slaying is evidence that maybe the good in the world, or “the light,” is winning, before wrapping an arm around Cohle and symbolically

²²¹ McCabe and Akass 73.

taking him back into the social world.²²² This moment of recuperation is only possible after Hart and Cohle have confronted (and implicitly been contrasted against) the even more ostentatious “Other” couple of Errol and Betty Childress. By lingering on this “white trash” couple as a distorted mirror image of Cohle and Hart, *True Detective* establishes a contrast that legitimizes the police partners.

The finale emplaces the Childresses with a long tracking shot first of the woods, and then the cabin where Errol keeps his dead father’s body. Finally, the camera follows Errol to the isolated, dilapidated plantation house he shares with his sister/lover. After glimpsing *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) on television, Errol extemporizes much like Cohle does, but in an accent mixed between classic American actor and British aristocrat. This affectation links Errol to Cohle and satirizes Childress’s classed, media-saturated roots: his Southern ancestors who modeled plantation society on the British aristocracy as well as classic American films on which he has modeled his faux pretension. Betty appears mentally challenged and childishly asks Errol to “make flowers” on her. Errol agrees, but only if she narrates an earlier molestation at the hands of their grandfather while he pleasures her. Her request that Errol “make flowers” on her suggests their sex is primarily non-procreative, symptomatic of the entropic ecosystem they inhabit. Although *True Detective* is set in the 1990s–2000s, the Childresses’ shockingly stereotypical representation mirrors the depiction of “white trash” in 1970s horror films and serves the same basic function. They demarcate assimilatable Southerners, like Cohle, from true white detritus.

²²² Cary Joji Fukunaga and Nic Pizolatto, “Form and Void,” *True Detective*, season 1, episode 8, directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, aired March 9, 2014 (New York: HBO, 2015), DVD.

As Kristine Taylor claims, in a post–Civil Rights South eager to reinvent itself, persons stigmatized as “white trash” were the ultimate figures of retrogressive white violence: the real threat to a moderate-minded South ready for national inclusion. This cultural narrative was launched in an attempt to exonerate the New South from its history of white supremacy and smooth the influx of northern capital into southern economies booming from military contracts and private investments.²²³ This “No True Southerner” reinvention redirected criticism away from systems of power and toward the rural poor who inadvertently contributed to their portrayal by often refuting class interests with black and other non-white workers for the psychological wage that white supremacy granted.²²⁴ Similarly, *True Detective* resurrects “white trash” as violent, abject creatures to smooth Cohle’s integration. With that integration, the show obfuscates the heteronormative, national–Northern systems of privilege that undergird his being; it also codifies a stereotype of rurality at the expense of living Southern populations who are in fact quite heterogeneous. The show has this effect despite its implication of powerful Southern politicians: the ending of season one is anticlimactic in part because the audience knows Cohle and Hart have caught only the least powerful figure in an extensive network of corruption that spreads to the uppermost echelons of Southern society.

However, by regularly informing the audience that Louisiana is unlike most viewers’ everyday lives and can only be interpreted from the inside, *True Detective* faces

²²³ Kristine Taylor, “Untimely Subjects: White Trash and the Making of Racial Innocence in the Postwar South,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (March 2015), 57.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

a representational problem similar to those encountered by other Southern Gothic grotesques, such as Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*. Such texts are meant to provoke readers to challenge divisions like North/South and to recognize instead their complicity in those constructed divisions and the uneven cultural development that results from them. However, what literary scholar Leigh Anne Duck observes of Caldwell's novel *Tobacco Road* applies also to *True Detective*. The HBO show allows its audience to "avoid the sort of self-reflection otherwise encouraged by the grotesque, which implicates the viewer in shameful or exciting frisson...[Viewers] who might otherwise feel uncomfortable about seeking out sensational entertainments could assert that they valued these representations for their social realism."²²⁵ The televisual vehicle meant to provide social critique in fact provided opportunities for audiences to "slum" in a rural, tawdry world while providing a built-in cover story for doing so. *True Detective* is able to further cultivate artistic refinement through its media platform on pay cable.

In addition to programming explicit content, HBO has separated itself from network television through expensive subscription fees that often box out lower-income audiences.²²⁶ The viewers that the channel claims to attract are all-important to its standing as a quality content provider. Asserting an elite, intellectual niche audience allows HBO to protect itself from traditional-values coalitions. Upper-class audiences are assumed to be less morally corruptible and have chosen to bring the network into their homes (as opposed to "free" network TV, which is conceptualized as a guest in the

²²⁵ Duck 93.

²²⁶ See Deborah Jaramillo, "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26 (January 2002): 59–75.

home).²²⁷ This social group is also assumed to be more discerning, so that by their viewing habits, they further HBO's propriety and sanction the channel to continue to produce "risky" content in a reciprocally beneficial arrangement.

In effect, and unlike pulp novels like *Tobacco Road*, *True Detective*'s position on HBO authorizes viewers to consume "sensational entertainments" while proclaiming discerning aesthetic tastes. Further, the show's demystification of Cohle's queer, Texas persona is never as total as *The Paperboy*'s, in part because McConaughey's enigmatic, beguiling charisma is key to *True Detective*'s "quality TV" appeal. For viewers to buy into HBO as a quality channel, its original programming must differentiate from other fee-based texts like pornography and sexploitation. By promoting shows like *True Detective* (as opposed to other original programs like *Real Sex, 1990-*, which subverts network standards but also edges closer to pornography) and carefully containing its explicit content away from A-list actors like McConaughey, HBO seeks to maintain its preeminent position in a rapidly evolving media landscape. If *The Paperboy* succeeds as a Southern Gothic social critique, it is because it is willing to encourage viewers to suture themselves to McConaughey and then to summarily interrogate his persona in the best tradition of low art. *True Detective* does not commit to interrogation in the same way, which does not make it a less compelling text, but rather connects it back to its literary antecedents and forward to TV's latest golden era.

VI. The McConaissance as Neoliberal Phenomenon

²²⁷ McCabe and Akass 73–74.

The radical potential of the Southern Gothic for social and racial critique is entirely foreclosed by the rest of the films of the McConaissance. *Mud* (Jeff Nichols, 2012), *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Bernie* (Richard Linklater, 2011), *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and *Magic Mike* warrant deeper analysis in other ways, but all summarily disavow the racial/social dimension of queerness that *The Paperboy* unearths, instead taking the most dubious lesson of *Dallas Buyers Club* and *True Detective*'s reception to heart—that a text queer in content can reap cultural cachet and financial returns, particularly when it only superficially explores the realities of homosexuality and makes no mention of racial difference. *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Magic Mike* picture powerfully homosocial bonds that acknowledge gay male audiences to varying degrees but feature no characters who identify as LGBTQ+. *Mud* perhaps submerges its queer content most of all, following McConaughey's relationship with two boys on a coming-of-age journey. The most popular films of the McConaissance, then, hold a strategic double-value as old as cinema itself. They neither carry enough queer content to risk alienating viewers invested in McConaughey's heterosexual availability, nor do they raise prohibitive objections from those invested in issues of LGBTQ+ representation. The actor and the corporate players he works with can thereby benefit from the respectability as well as the residual edginess of queerness without having to commit to an alternative politics or preclude future popularity with mainstream audiences.

Judged by McConaughey's Oscar win, his endorsement deals with Lincoln and Wild Turkey, and his largely well-received performance in *Free State of Jones* (Gary Ross, 2016), the McConaissance is working as Hollywood producers, directors, and the

actor himself had hoped. In interviews, McConaughey reveals the amount of labor required to craft his persona. He has stressed that he took on his recent roles in an effort to re-brand, or as he claims, to “un-brand” himself.²²⁸ Evidence of McConaughey’s desire to shape his un-brand for public consumption further abounded in his Oscar speech, which ended with his trademark “Alright, alright, alright” and his less well-known “just keep livin’.” McConaughey’s acceptance speech at every major award show in 2013–2014 began or ended with one of those phrases, and sometimes used both, demonstrating his remarkable awareness of the commodifying impulse. “Just keep livin’” is not only the name of his charitable organization but is also a commoditized product, a line from his breakout role in *Dazed and Confused*. “Alright, alright, alright” also draws inspiration from that breakout role.²²⁹ It is a fairly straight line from McConaughey’s stoner persona in *Dazed and Confused* to his current contemplative iteration, made respectable by its detour through queerness.

One need only look to the self-referential Lincoln car commercials to see the industrial dividends of the actor’s un-branding. Perhaps not surprisingly, these commercials came after a 2011 film, *The Lincoln Lawyer* (Brad Furman, 2011), in which McConaughey practiced law from the backseat of his Town Car. The Lincoln commercials show an amalgam of Cohle/McConaughey pontificating. In one memorable spot, the actor communes with a bull from his car before driving away. In another, he sermonizes that buying a hybrid car “isn’t about hugging trees. It’s not about being

²²⁸ See Martin, “Just Keep McConaughey-ing.”

²²⁹ “The Origin of Matthew McConaughey’s ‘Alright, Alright, Alright,’” YouTube Video, 1:54, posted by “Strombo,” March 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0BduqxmEqA>.

wasteful either. It's about finding that balance...Taking care of yourself is more than taking care of yourself."²³⁰ These commercials incorporate a degree of parody within themselves, enhancing their market appeal by letting viewers in on the joke of his contemplative persona. They also provide a kind of corporate, meditative consciousness as the perfect alibi for conspicuous consumption and neoliberal individualism.

After Lincoln reaped substantial financial returns, the liquor company Wild Turkey appointed McConaughey as a creative director in 2016. He will not only appear in commercials for Wild Turkey bourbon, but will also write and direct them as part of a multi-year contract. The relationship between corporations and McConaughey may seem separable from his Hollywood roles, but in actuality it is a mere streamlining of the symbiotic relationship McConaughey and the culture industry have already nurtured. In his Wild Turkey partnership and in the concurrently released Civil War epic *The Free State of Jones*, McConaughey's trademark tool—his Southernness—has had a kind of domino effect, bringing Southern audiences into theaters and national-Northern hipsters to a brand traditionally associated with older, Southern, white men. In *The Free State of Jones*, McConaughey played real Mississippian Newton Knight, who fought against the Confederacy alongside freedmen, escaped slaves, and poor white farmers. As film critic Rebecca Onion argues, the film offers an antidote to Old South nostalgia while giving Southern whites a hero for a new, purportedly progressive era.²³¹ While, like *Dallas*

²³⁰ "'Balance' Matthew McConaughey and the Lincoln MKZ Hybrid: Official Commercial," YouTube Video, .30, posted by "Lincoln Motor Co," December 28, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtTeg3sj-wA>.

²³¹ Rebecca Onion, "Why Free State of Jones Isn't Just Another White Savior Movie," *Slate*, June 23, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2016/06/free_state_of_jones_isn_t_just_another_white_savior

Buyers Club, the film avoids any obviously offensive scenarios, it cannot sidestep the reality that a story about Knight would find McConaughey at the center, thereby displacing people of color to the margins of the Civil War. The marketing of the film fits Hollywood's larger use of McConaughey's persona to both court and disavow controversial material, as well as the populations implicated in that material. The notion of redefining Southern rebelliousness nonetheless appealed to McConaughey, who recently noted, "I've said this before, but that's what I've been choosing...Characters that live on the fringe — they're all a little bit on the outskirts of civilization. I find a certain ownership and freedom in that."²³²

Wild Turkey used McConaughey as a marketing tool to attract millennials in advertisements that showcase his Southernness as a new kind of rebelliousness. For this demographic, consuming McConaughey's Southern roguishness is a way to demonstrate their alt credibility. But for these appeals to work, they must be self-effacing. As McConaughey notes: "They can smell it...Millennials, and I know this for a fact, can smell solicitation. And it's a turnoff. The best ads are not solicitous."²³³ Coded appeals are, of course, McConaughey's specialty, as is disguising an explicitly curated image as real and unpretentious. As he goes on to say, "The great news is that Wild Turkey hasn't changed in all these years — it's totally authentic. And that appeals to millennials.

[r_movie.html](#). See also Nina Silber, "Black and White in the *Free State of Jones*," *Process: A Blog for American History*, July 14, 2016, <http://www.processhistory.org/free-state-of-jones-2/>.

²³² Jonathan Ringen, "Matthew McConaughey on *True Detective*, His Pal Woody, McConaissance," *Rolling Stone*, March 3, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/q-a-matthew-mcconaughey-talks-true-detective-20140303>.

²³³ Brooks Barnes, "A Face for Wild Turkey? Matthew McConaughey Writes the Ads, Too," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/business/media/a-face-for-wild-turkey-matthew-mcconaughey-writes-the-ads-too.html>.

Because they can smell fake. Some manicured, bearded hipster soliciting them? No, thanks.”²³⁴ A short film produced by Wild Turkey finds McConaughey discussing bourbon as an all-American, family-produced product. As bourbon aficionados have been quick to point out, however, Wild Turkey certainly has changed—it is no longer a family-run company but, like most bourbon brands, is now owned by a global corporation, Campari.

If, as he notes in the short film, McConaughey “found a story” in Wild Turkey bourbon, it was because its parent company had already set the basic script.²³⁵ Among bourbon drinkers, Wild Turkey has a reputation as a cheaper drink consumed by older, often Southern, white men with less-than-discriminating tastes. Upon acquiring the company, Campari endeavored to rebrand. Employing McConaughey as an “idea man” was part of the company’s strategy to expand beyond the “bourbon belt” into younger demographics while maintaining its Southern bite. Millennials not familiar with the brand could be introduced to it as a craft bourbon with McConaughey as a representative of how Campari wished Wild Turkey to be seen: “authentically” Southern but without socio-political baggage; masculine but not coiffed; wild and working-class, but not so wild that it intimidated middle-class hipsters. The traditional masculine appeal McConaughey embodies in Wild Turkey advertisements carries its own political baggage. As suggested by the spike in bourbon’s popularity²³⁶ after being featured on

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ See “Wild Turkey Bourbon: Matthew McConaughey Short Film,” YouTube Video, 6.14, posted by “Wild Turkey Bourbon,” July 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmZZNbUsyt8>.

²³⁶ Clay Risen, “The Billion Dollar Bourbon Boom,” *Fortune*, February 6, 2014, <http://fortune.com/2014/02/06/the-billion-dollar-bourbon-boom/>.

shows like *Mad Men*, centered on the devilishly handsome, alcoholic, misogynistic but perennially popular Don Draper, the problematic aspects of white masculinity are a covert part of whiskey's current popularity.

When some millennial and LGBTQ+ populations are summoned into the logic of homonationalism and folded into the sphere of bio-power via stars like McConaughey, companies like Lincoln and Wild Turkey can harness new, suddenly reputable market segments and reap economic benefits. The boundaries that exclude subjects unable to participate in this market economy are also redrawn. The Other subjects excluded from Wild Turkey's and Lincoln's neoliberal embrace and the gendered, raced, and sexual exceptionalisms that alternately produce included subjects are the "unthought knowns" of American culture. To borrow from Slavoj Žižek, many know the hostility facing unruly queer people, people of color, and the working class, but basking in the inclusion of the most respectable—as the McConaissance encourages us to do—lessens the sting of that knowledge.²³⁷ The McConaissance is a phantasm that allows viewers to act as if we do not know that the freedom of some queer people is wholly contingent on the unfreedom of others. The benefits of homonationalism, citizenship, and consumption come with the kind of exclusion that pits groups against each other. Further, as the ever-changing position of the South relative to the nation cements, the favors visited on the lucky few by the state and the culture industry are temporary.

In the final analysis, McConaughey's reinvention has left viewers with a raw deal and might provoke them to question other actors currently seeking their own

²³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

McConaissance, like Ryan Reynolds, James Franco, or Taylor Kitsch, because while McConaughey's films signal the degree to which LGBTQ+ populations have become representable in the last thirty years, the moment is not the counterhegemonic victory many would hope for. His visibility has not equaled enduring empowerment for the groups he represents. Rather, the ease with which McConaughey and the industry that supports him have seized upon LGBTQ+ identity and Southernness as tools for their reinvention suggests how devastatingly elastic hegemony can be.

CHAPTER FOUR

Illegibility and the Southern Imaginary: *Nothing but a Man, Beasts of the Southern Wild*, and *Moonlight*

I. Introduction: Authority and Blackness

Two kinds of shots pervade Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016): close-ups of protagonist Chiron's²³⁸ face and over-the-shoulder shots in which characters face away from the camera. Both shots effect the same feeling although they may appear to oppose one another (i.e. one shot shows every curve and scar of his face while the other forecloses the viewer's gaze). Chiron is perpetually stoic so that even when he is shot in close-up, the character refuses easy interpretation. In the over-the-shoulder shots, viewers simply cannot see Chiron's face to know how to interpret his feelings. In both shots, then, he remains impenetrable (Fig. 4.1 & 4.2). Black, poor, Southern children are not often granted the authority to lead a film. Instead, the concerns of which adults typically subordinate the knowledge that Southern children possess. This reality makes Chiron's consciousness even more difficult for many viewers to immediately comprehend. And yet, there is something powerfully compelling about a tiny figure who is able to refuse the objectifying gaze of the camera.

Moonlight's over-the-shoulder shots recalls Lorna Simpson's *Waterbearer* (Fig. 4.3), a photograph that features a black woman with her back to the camera. Analyzing this image in the context of black female representation, bell hooks notes that women such as the one in Simpson's photograph (similar to black boys) are often "refused that

²³⁸ Chiron is played by three actors. As a boy, he is played by Alex R. Hibbert; Ashton Sanders plays teenage Chiron, while adult Chiron is played by Trevante Rhodes.

place of authority and voice that would allow her to be a subject in history.”²³⁹ However, she also notes that in the case of *Waterbearer* “This refusal is interrogated by the intensity of the image, and by the woman’s defiant stance. By turning her back on those who cannot hear her subjugated knowledge speak, she creates by her own gaze an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining.”²⁴⁰ The subject of *Waterbearer* and *Moonlight*’s Chiron both remain illegible to the camera. They also encourage viewers to gaze with them into alternative, radically different worlds.

This chapter will argue that a black character’s illegibility—which I define as a cinematic subject remaining somehow incomprehensible even when in full view of the camera—is an unlikely source of power. The refusal to be known carries particular importance in a culture that often makes black people hypervisible in damaging, reductive ways (ex. as criminal, licentious or otherwise excessive). Although illegibility may seem irreconcilable with cinema, a medium in which visibility is a foregone conclusion, the illegible can complement cinema’s visual and enunciative imperatives. A robust archive of films that deal with race in the American South—including *Nothing but a Man* (Dir. Michael Roemer, 1965), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (*Beasts*, Dir. Benh Zeitlin, 2012), and *Moonlight*—offers protagonists whose illegibility is deliberate and protective. Such moves carry crucial weight within a national imaginary that continues to seek to deny or delimit black agency.

²³⁹ bell hooks, “Facing Difference: The Black Female Body,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 94.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Illegibility takes many forms in the films under analysis, but it always involves an audience to whom a subject makes him/herself inscrutable or unknowable. The plasticity of illegibility is its strength. Subjects who remain unknowable can protect themselves from penetrating eyes and may even avoid the government's punitive gaze. In *Nothing but a Man*, protagonist Josie (Abbey Lincoln) remains illegible even to her romantic partner, Duff (Ivan Dixon) through silence that is itself expressive. At times, her gaze into Duff's eyes coupled with a loaded lack of speech is playful, while at times it is emphatic: it is a quiet assertion that she need not explain herself but rather exists without the external validation that comes with speaking one's identity to another person. *Nothing but a Man* glimpses pockets of illegibility through Josie, while *Beasts* takes place entirely within an illegible world. The directing collective that crafted *Beasts*, led by filmmaker Benh Zeitlin, constructs the post-Katrina Louisiana bayou as a modern-day maroon society whose hiddenness to the state allows its inhabitants to live an improvisational, autonomous mode of life. As this chapter will detail, the community of *Beasts* is no longer defined by racial solidarity (as maroon societies were historically were). At the center of *Beasts*'s heterogeneous community and the final film that this chapter will analyze, *Moonlight*, is a traumatized black child. The final section of this chapter will ascertain if remaining visually illegible or refusing to speak, as Chiron often does, is a self-determinative or at least protective gesture. As Kevin Everod Quashie has argued, a "politics of black quiet," can be useful to vulnerable subjects, who are forced to interact with others, and are otherwise unable to set the terms for that interaction.

In *Nothing but a Man*, *Beasts*, and *Moonlight*, the Southern imaginary is in equal parts a threatening and paradoxically fertile site for constructing inscrutable lives.²⁴¹ The South is itself something of an illegible outlier, just beyond America's geographical eye, understood as part of the nation but fundamentally different from it. In the national gaze, Southern spaces are represented as so allegedly retrograde and pre-modern that they defy rational comprehension. Artists from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur to Edgar Allen Poe have marked such spaces as unknowable. In practice, America's fear of looking deeply into the South, or inability to penetrate that landscape has meant that deviant subjects could move through the Southern rural world undetected. Subjects living in maroon societies, for instance, could form working definitions of selfhood and community, but also dissolve those forms once they outwore their utility.

As will be explored in relation to *Beasts*, the existence of a maroon society indicates how marginalized groups can rupture an allegedly ordered, modern world to create alternative lives. The project of this chapter is to explore the alternative worlds that are conveyed in quiet, opaque moments. These moments demonstrate how directors, filmic subjects, and actors have used a combination of quiet, visual obscurity, and the idea of illegibility to deepen the viewer's conception of what blackness can signify on film. As scholars such as Quashie have argued, viewers can use these moments to elaborate a political meaning that moves beyond the subordination and resistance binary often used to categorize narratives featuring people of color. To understand how subjects

²⁴¹ Black independent films including Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) could also easily be included in the archive assembled here. I plan to include analyses of these films when I revise this dissertation into a book.

construct illegible identities within the Southern imaginary requires setting one additional context: the panoptic power of the camera to make black bodies hypervisible as criminal and therefore in need of surveillance, demystification, and control.

II. Black Luminosity and Synopticism

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the transformation of corporal punishment from a spectacle in which many watched the punishment of one criminal, to a closed system of surveillance in which one prison guard watches many prisoners.²⁴² This system of surveillance—the few watching the many—defines institutions such as schools and hospitals as well as police activity in modern society. This system of panopticism does not create power, but amplifies its operation so that subjects regulate themselves.²⁴³ In effect, the few at the center of the panopticon need not even exist; the idea that agents of surveillance might be watching produces the law-abiding citizen. As Foucault describes:

... in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attendants ever on the alert.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

²⁴³ Foucault 214.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

What Foucault actually depicts is the synopticon, in which many watch the few. As Thomas Mathieson asserts, the panoptic and synoptic gazes work together to create the feeling of omnipresent surveillance. These gazes also preclude the subject from knowing with certainty when he or she is being watched.²⁴⁵ As Foucault further elucidates, illumination is all-important: “The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and recognize immediately ... Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.”²⁴⁶ Like the trap of legibility, the trap of visibility has been the peculiar inheritance of African Americans. “Lantern laws” kept black bodies in constant illumination as early as 16th century New York.²⁴⁷ Similarly, runaway slave advertisements assumed a white public

... consuming at once the black subject imagined unfree and producing the reader as part of the apparatus of surveillance, the eyes and ears of face-to-face watching, observing and regulating. Through the detailing of physical descriptions, the surveillance technology of fugitive slave advertisement was put to use to make the already hypervisible black subject legible as ... objectified corporeality.²⁴⁸

White populations here are imagined as extensions of a viewing apparatus used to watch and construct black bodies as criminal; the Fugitive Slave Laws put action to this

²⁴⁵ Thomas Mathieson, “The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault’s ‘Panopticon’ Revised,” *Theoretical Criminology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 215-34.

²⁴⁶ Foucault 200.

²⁴⁷ See Simone Browne, “Everybody’s Got a Little Light Under the Sun: Black Luminosity and the Visual Culture of Surveillance,” *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 4 (July 2012).

²⁴⁸ *Ibid* 548.

surveillance, requiring all American citizens to aid in the apprehension of escaped slaves.²⁴⁹ It is not difficult to see the implications of the white, surveilling gaze on the cinematic apparatus, which also figures humans as extensions of itself. As Browne charges, the vestiges of “legibility by illumination” follows black bodies through history: “I use the term ‘black luminosity’ to refer to a form of boundary maintenance occurring at the site of the racial body whether by candlelight, flaming torch, or the camera flashbulb that documents the ritualized terror of a lynch mob.”²⁵⁰ The camera flashbulb continues to make black bodies hyper-legible in damaging ways by equating them with corporeality, criminality, and licentiousness. The subject is constituted from afar. In that overdetermined context, maintaining one’s illegibility or preserving some part of one’s identity in an unseen, internal reservoir can constitute a remarkable gesture of self-preservation.²⁵¹

III. *Nothing but a Man*, the Regulatory Gaze, and “The Politics of Black Quiet”

²⁴⁹ The first Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1793, was not uniformly enforced. Some state legislatures in the North actively resisted the law and refused to enforce it. This led to a tougher 1850 law that compelled citizens to help capture runaway slaves.

²⁵⁰ Ibid 546.

²⁵¹ It is important to differentiate black illegibility from the black invisibility that defines much of American cinema. As Richard Dyer argues, cinematic lighting technologies were developed to capture light skin, meaning that the faces of dark skinned actors were inadequately lit. In effect, this rendered them invisible as subjects. This is a problem that persists to the present day, and functions to keep actors with dark skin as objectified Others whose expressions cannot be read. In this context, lighting black skin well, as Ava DuVernay has done, is an act that counters the biases built into the cinematic apparatus. In essence, DuVernay’s films resist black invisibility on the level of form and content. While this chapter centers on black illegibility, I do not believe that choosing to remain inaccessible to the camera is incommensurate with an aesthetic like DuVernay’s. Rather, there is room for both approaches without hierarchizing their relative value. In both cases, the very apparatus of illumination reveals itself to be an inadequate instrument in need of redress. For more on the racialized nature of the cinematic apparatus, see Richard Dyer, “The Light of the World,” *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 82-144.

Nothing but a Man follows Duff (Ivan Dixon), a black railroad worker, as he seeks work and finds a romantic partner, Josie (Abbey Lincoln). The film dramatizes the violent, regulatory functions of hypervisibility when two white teenagers harass Duff and Josie at a popular kissing spot. The self-appointed deputies yell at the couple not to “make trouble,” before they can see more than the skin color of the couple inside the car. Here, the film makes clear that the white gaze has already constituted Duff and Josie before these two youths could actually see their activity. One teenager does approach the car and shines a flashlight inside, first on Duff’s face and then on Josie’s chest, illustrating how black luminosity produces black bodies as objectified corporeality: Duff as antagonist whose face needs to be read for malice, and Josie as sexuality personified. When the second teenager calls out “Are they doing anything?”, the first teenager responds with a disappointed “No.” His response testifies to the objectifying, fetishizing component of the white gaze. The teenagers have, in one moment, interpolated Josie and Duff as a source of vicarious erotic excitement and as criminals for that perceived activity.

Duff and Josie remain silent to keep themselves safe while the teenagers reenact classic strategies of identifying, tracking, and terrorizing black subjects who attempt the audacious act of mobility. The couple lives long after fugitive slave laws would have sent them back to a plantation with promise of punishment or death, but their mobility is policed with the added dread that they never know when they are being watched and are therefore perpetually subject to racialized violence. This encounter suggests how tracking

technologies became increasingly sophisticated at the same time that African Americans ostensibly gained more freedom to move in the Civil Rights era.

The confrontation between the young, extralegal arms of the state and African Americans is an archetypically Southern encounter, and Southern Studies scholarship has been attentive to how white power swirls around couples such as Duff and Josie. In *Nothing but a Man*, the couple's silence is a deeply charged indicator of just how heavily synoptic/panoptic systems depend on denying black humanity and on emphasizing subjects' legibility as icons instead. While Duff and Josie's assailants may believe that the couple's silence indicates an absence of thought, their tense gazes at one another likely indicate an unspoken negotiation about how to keep themselves safe. This moment is the first of a number in the film in which Duff is subjected to discrimination and violence and must silently formulate a response. In his story, viewers glimpse how larger institutional biases get enacted on an individual level.

While working at a gas station, Duff is called to tow a car that has crashed into a tree. The scene is tense from the opening moments in which the white car owner both expects friendliness from Duff, and continually refers to him as "boy." This white man does not think himself prejudiced, but rather demonstrates authentic compassion by speaking to Duff kindly. However, this man is produced by and tethered to unequal systems of power. This comes through in the way that the white man speaks to Duff, and what he expects in return. As Duff works to fix the car the driver says, "Most folks around here got no use for n---s. Can't understand em', that's all."²⁵² He implies here that

²⁵² *Nothing But a Man*.

he is a different sort of white man, who is nice to black people and is doing Duff a favor by speaking to him without disdain. Inherent in his magnanimity is the belief that Duff does not deserve that treatment as an equal human being. The white man's actions are a "gift" that reveals that the men are in fact, not equal. In spite of this treatment, Duff is cordial. He is not a talkative man but he responds to the motorist's questions politely and with a smile. But, Duff's one-word responses do not satisfy what the motorist feels entitled to: broad friendliness that bolsters his self-image as a "good white man." When Duff does not perform on cue as the driver wishes, the motorist grows suspicious. Duff says he does not need to the white man's help, and when the towing mechanism briefly fails the driver's racism flashes to the surface, "That's what's wrong with you boys. Don't listen when a man tells you something."²⁵³ Duff, to the motorist, is not a man but a lesser being who needs to demonstrate his obeisance in order to receive the driver's "kindness."

The encounter escalates when, later that evening, the white man returns to the gas station with four friends. They demand an apology from Duff and provoke him by talking about his wife. When the white gas station owner intervenes, the white men demand that Duff be fired or assert that they will burn the business to the ground. The gas station owner feels for Duff but is not prepared to sacrifice his livelihood or personal safety for him. A moment that began as an imagined slight based entirely on white privilege, guilt, and entitlement culminates in Duff's termination. Scenes such as this recur each time Duff is employed—it becomes increasingly difficult for him and audience members to

²⁵³ Ibid.

imagine how he could remain gainfully employed without bowing his head in subordination.

Duff's relationship with Josie helps him survive these indignities and envision a future. Their relationship is built on mutual respect and equal partnership, and thus provides an important counter-narrative to contemporary assaults on the black family such as the Moynihan Report. However, there are dangers to focusing only on the couple's love. It is possible to over-emphasize romantic love's importance to a narrative that, director Michael Roemer attests, centers on "how the economic system, the social system, destroyed the most intimate relationships."²⁵⁴ Judith Smith asserts that the film illustrates the importance of male-female sexual partnerships as "a critical source for sustaining resistance to white supremacy."²⁵⁵ Lisa Doris Alexander confirms Smith's reading in her review. She notes that while the film does not end on a saccharine note, it does close with the couple embracing and Duff telling Josie, "It ain't gonna be easy, but it will be ok. I feel so free inside."²⁵⁶ For Alexander, this moment signals that Duff has found a romantic mode he can use to resist his dead-end social world.

²⁵⁴ Michael Roemer as qtd. in Emma Brockes, "Director Michael Roemer on his Seminal 60s Drama *Nothing but a Man*," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/oct/01/director-michael-roemer-nothing-but>. Roemer saw an immediate affinity between fascist Europe and the American South. Describing his visit to Alabama in the 1960s he reported, "I recognized everything. It was immediate. I said, 'Oh, I know this. I know what this feels like.'" His full reflection on connections between his experience and Duff's, partially quoted above is: "[The film] was showing how the economic system, the social system, destroyed the most intimate relationships. I saw it happen. It happened to Jews. It happened to my grandfather. He came from a very assimilated family, and they were interrelated with the Prussian aristocracy. Nonetheless, my grandfather was destroyed by everything he had taken away from him. He was a wonderful man. He shriveled up and lost his identity."

²⁵⁵ Judith Smith, "Close-Up: Civil Rights, Labor, and Sexual Politics on Screen in *Nothing but a Man*," *Black Camera* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 177.

²⁵⁶ Lisa Doris Alexander, "*Nothing but a Man* Revisited," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 41, no. 3 (2013): 143.

Alexander's reading reflects a larger scholarly problematic, the tendency to interpret black actions exclusively in terms of subordination or resistance. The ending of *Nothing but a Man* is more ambiguous than her reading can account for. Duff's full reflection as he embraces Josie is: "I won't let them run me out of town. I'll chop cotton if I have to...it ain't gonna be easy, but it will be ok. I feel so free inside."²⁵⁷ The mention of chopping cotton, which previously represented total self-abnegation for Duff suggests a degree of resignation, irony, or possibly acceptance. Moreover, to imply romantic love as a salve for the film's central conflict—racism—is entirely consistent with the logic of neoliberalism. Among other ideological tenets, neoliberalism poses individual choice as freedom.²⁵⁸ This is precisely the system that the film challenges by showing the very narrow range of options, many barely-disguised traps, available to Duff.

As Saba Mahmood has contended, readings that can only acknowledge the kinds of resistance that are in line with neoliberal ideologies such as individual choice, or, alternately, subordination implicitly also argue the only way a subject can express agency is by subverting norms.²⁵⁹ To read *Nothing but a Man*'s ending as triumphantly resistant because Duff maintains his self-worth (as if self-worth can be easily extricated from economic inequality by positive thinking), or alternately, as the moment when Duff relents to social expectation is to foreclose analysis of his complex identity negotiations. As if to confirm this complexity, Duff buries his face in Josie's shoulder while speaking his final line, so viewers cannot read his affect. The film thus prevents viewers from

²⁵⁷ *Nothing but a Man*, dir. Michael Roemer, perf. by Ivan Dixon, Abbey Lincoln, Julius Harris, Gloria Foster, and Stanley Greene, Cinema V, 1964.

²⁵⁸ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

²⁵⁹ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 211.

demystifying Duff any more than they already have. The meta-textual gesture alludes to the depth of his inner life without penetrating it. Instead of imposing legibility—i.e. Duff either submits to or resists social norms—the film follows a strategy that postcolonial scholars such as Mahmood have advocated for in a larger context of resisting neo-colonialism: they ask us to pay attention to subjects and regions that confound our gaze, and listen to the expressive possibilities between two overdetermined poles.

In contrast to Duff, who is consistently subject to and weighed down by the discriminatory white gaze, Josie continuously finds new ways to remain illegible to the outside world. She regularly does the unexpected—including standing up to her father by dating the working-class Duff—and is repeatedly told: “You must be plumb out of your mind.” Josie seems most at peace in moments where she receives this response. In this inscrutable state, she exists for herself, without explanation. Like Duff, Josie speaks sparingly. In her sly smiles, she epitomizes the potential of what Kevin Everod Quashie terms a “politics of black quiet.”

Quashie argues that many theories of black liberation focus on the public sphere, assuming that: “...since the black subject is made, misnamed and violated in the public sphere, it is through the public sphere that she can be liberated.”²⁶⁰ Public expressions have been crucial at each stage of the fight for civil rights. However, Quashie argues that an exclusive focus on public, verbal expressiveness as the defining characteristic of black subjectivity can obscure other kinds of expressiveness: it has also made resistance “the

²⁶⁰ Kevin Everod Quashie, “The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet,” *African American Review* 43, no., 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2009), 331.

dominant idiom for reading and describing black culture.”²⁶¹ He points to the way that silence can itself be expressive. Embracing silence allows artists to move away from “caricatures of racial subjectivity that are either racist or intended to counter racism”²⁶² and instead, gesture toward an inner life that is expansive, creative, and not subject to another’s control. Theorist Lokeilani Kaimana adds that moments where a character is just allowed to be quiet, without justification, can be moments of “sonic sovereignty ... where Blackness may take up space, may pause, may recede from the knowable.”²⁶³ Throughout *Nothing but a Man*, Josie’s meaningful gazes hint at her deep inner life. From this reservoir, she constructs a rich psychological life as seen in two key scenes: when Duff leaves town and earlier in the film when the two go on their first date.

When Duff boards a bus to a nearby city, he see Josie and believes she has followed him. After sitting down next to him, Josie remains quiet for a moment before telling him she is just taking the bus to the store. He asks her if she’s crazy, and her answer is a coy smile. What appears mere teasing is a strategy for remaining elusive to any attempts to penetrate her. While notions of normative or proper behavior circumscribe other characters in the film, Josie’s brand of illegibility is by definition, unscripted and elastic. This flexibility allows Josie to play and develop ever-evolving, productive ways of relating to the world. She is not naïve to the threat of physical violence, but argues “They can’t touch me inside.” When Duff responds with disbelief to the claim that she can protect herself psychologically, she responds “Not if you see them

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Lokeilani Kaimana, “Close-Up: Black Film and Black Visual Culture,” *Black Camera* 8, no., 1 (Fall 2016), 333-34.

for what they are.”²⁶⁴ Josie has demystified the white supremacist position that presents itself as both superior and normative. She powerfully articulates how remaining illegible to white authorities works for her—it allows her to preserve something intrinsic and internal to herself, to construct her own psychic reality. This is not to suggest that she transcends racism or that her psychic strength inures her to the barbs of the outside world. However, reading her in light of a politics of black quiet allows scholars to understand how she exists “for herself,” rather than as a mere symbol of the racist, white world.

Her worldview is most evident on Duff and Josie’s first date. Duff notes their class difference, and wonders out loud if she is “slumming.” Josie responds, “You don’t think too much of yourself, do you?”²⁶⁵ Duff may carry class prejudices but she does not. As Smith argues “Josie insists on her own subjectivity and sexual desire. From her first encounter with Duff, she rejects his efforts to pigeonhole her as somebody shaped by middle-class standards or respectability . . . On their first date, in a crowded bar with dance music in the background, Josie won’t let Duff define her as a naïve and inexperienced good girl.”²⁶⁶ Neither will she be coerced into “proving herself.” She turns down his offer to have more than one drink. In other words, Josie will not even make herself legible for Duff’s comfort. He acknowledges this when he says, “I can’t figure you out” at the end of their date.²⁶⁷ Her illegibility constitutes her appeal to him and her uniqueness as a character. It is the reserve she draws on to construct herself.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Smith 178.

²⁶⁷ *Nothing but a Man*.

Even Josie's definition of family confounds Duff: it also troubles the norms of respectability and heteronormativity synonymous with her middle-class upbringing. When Duff has trouble finding a job, Josie offers to continue to work even after they have their first child. Duff imagines she will have to work in a white home and prohibits her to do so in one of the couple's only fights. The fight suggests his own adherence to middle class norms, despite his protestations otherwise, and signals the limits of his understanding of Josie. She already works as an elementary school teacher, not a maid, and does not view that job as incommensurate with her ability to raise a family. She even encourages Duff to retrieve his son from a relative's home, and convinces him that they can raise the young boy together.

Lest audiences still think *Nothing but a Man* ends in a heteronormative fantasy of family, when Duff does retrieve his son, he is not automatically welcomed. His son does not know him, so when Duff places him in the car, the small child turns away from Duff as well as the camera (Fig. 4.4 & 4.5). As with Chiron in *Moonlight*, we get no cues on how to read this child's psychological state. As when Duff turns away, the viewer cannot know any of the child's emotions with certainty because we cannot see his face. This scene reminds viewers that children can be the ultimate illegible creatures. It also reveals an alternative, troubling meaning to "illegibility." Josie's choice to remain silence is a powerful, tactical choice, but Duff's son's silence is not. Remaining illegible is a desperate protective gesture that likely belies deep trauma. As will be discussed in reference to *Beasts*, keeping damaged subjects silenced on a grander scale actually benefits nations such as the United States that wish to imagine themselves as rich in

resources. Illegibility can refer to a powerful refusal to be known as well as its opposite, a problematic status tantamount to invisibility.

IV. The Illegible Child's Southern Legacy

Much of the Western world's planning efforts have been based on an allegedly knowable being, the Child. Laws such as the Defense of Marriage Act were crafted in the "name of children." On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Dustin Lance Black recently noted that he created his television miniseries on the fight for LGBTQ+ civil rights, *When We Rise*, for future generations.²⁶⁸ The Child's centrality in mainstream life ignores the some basic illegibilities. The subjectivity of a child is inaccessible to the adult, and yet much psychology is based on unraveling the traumas of childhood. The West's predominant mode for understanding ourselves ignores the "...inevitable aporias occurring when adult subjects treat as ultimately knowable a position they have both internalized and forsaken."²⁶⁹ As Kathryn Bond Stockton observes, this may help explain why "Even if we meet them in our lives and reading (inside an Anglo-American frame), [children] are not in History."²⁷⁰ Stockton contemplates the Child as a particular blind

²⁶⁸ The Defense of Marriage Act sought to block the right of same-sex couples to marry. It notes, "At bottom, civil society has an interest in maintaining and protecting the institution of heterosexual marriage because it has a deep and abiding interest in encouraging responsible procreation and childrearing. Simply put, government has an interest in marriage because it has an interest in children." U.S. Congress, "H.R. 3396 — 104th Congress: Defense of Marriage Act." (Calendar Day, July 9) 1996, 104th Congress, 2nd sess., 1996, Report 104-664, 14. Dustin Lance Black has argued that his miniseries "shines a light and passes a baton to a new generation." See "Dustin Lance Black Talks About *When We Rise*," 2.42, posted by *TV Guide Magazine*, February 26, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JtVoBWjp7g>.

²⁶⁹ Virginia L. Blum, *Hide and Seek: The Child between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 8. I capitalize the Child only when referring to ideological construct Edelman and Blum describe.

²⁷⁰ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009), 181.

spot in Western history with additional racialized implications: “What a child ‘is’ is a darkening question. The question of the child makes us climb inside a cloud—‘a shadowy spot on a field of light’ ... ”²⁷¹ All children in are thusly queer for Stockton, but her formulation has obvious deeper implications for children of color. She argues that these children’s excess knowledge (they know too much pain, too much about the adult world) excludes them from a state of innocence and thereby makes them doubly illegible to adults.²⁷²

Stockton builds on and critiques Lee Edelman’s theorization of the Child. Despite these critiques, both scholars argue that “the image of the child ... not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse.’ Politics is only done now in the name of, and for the sake of, ‘our children’s future.’”²⁷³ However, The Child who Americans have planned for, the one with the bright future, is unavoidably white and middle-class. Edelman’s theory in particular leaves undisturbed the notion that some specific historical children are already enshrined in his formulation while others are disavowed. *Beasts’* child protagonist, Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) and *Moonlight’s* Chiron emerge from a long line of unseen children that stretches back far past into the plantation-era South.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Ibid., 2.

²⁷² See Ibid, “Oedipus Raced, or the Child Queered by Color: Birthing Your Parents via Intrusions,” *The Queer Child*, 183-219. Stockton recalls the language of black luminosity in the central trope and goal of her text, which is to “shed light in two directions: on the corners that some famous theorists haven’t looked into; an on corners that some famous theorists (Freud, Lacan, Deleuze Guattari, Mulvey, Metz, and Bataille to name a few) haven’t explored” by reading, in particular children of color (Ibid 2).

²⁷³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005), 13.

²⁷⁴ As texts from the photojournalist *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, to the television show *The Wire* demonstrate, children of color, poor children, and rural children have been associated with blight and decay. If they are excluded from history, these texts suggest the ways that children are conditionally included in mainstream representation.

Hortense Spillers has described abandonment and the making of illegible children as one of slavery's most devastating impacts. In its destruction of families, the plantation system made orphans as a point of practice:

under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, *and*, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony ... the offspring of the enslaved, 'being unrelated both to their begetters and to their owners ... find themselves in the situation of being orphans.'²⁷⁵

Africans and African Americans formed powerful bonds despite the plantation system's enforced kinlessness. However, in the eyes of the state the child was "the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status...had yet to be defined."²⁷⁶

The lack of boundaries was purposeful as it allowed black bodies, particularly vulnerable bodies of children, to be legally constituted as property. Spillers connects the slave system to the modern era by arguing that cultural logics such as the Moynihan Report, which argued that black matriarchy had displaced normative forms of patriarchy, are false, in part, because black mothers have never been fully allowed to "claim their children."²⁷⁷ It is worth noting that children were not just taken from mothers on the plantation, but also from fathers. Enslaved men were ineligible to participate in the vertical relations of patronymics that allowed white fathers to pass funds, property, and a

²⁷⁵ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2, *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection* (Summer 1987): 74.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Spillers as qtd. in Stockton 195.

last name to heirs. The continuing destruction of black patronymic relations is evinced in modern stereotypes such as the “deadbeat dad” who does not want to participate in his child’s life. Readable, then, in the tale of Southern orphaning are unseen children as well as mothers and fathers without children.

V. “I Want to Be Cohesive:” Maroon Societies and The Bathtub in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Beasts seeks a language and history for these ignored populations, as evinced in its most famous line: “In 100 years, when kids go to school, they’re gonna know: once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub [the Louisiana bayou].”²⁷⁸ But Patricia Yaeger highlights the film’s central problem: “how does one make a body matter in a world in which it did not matter?”²⁷⁹ Put another way, how can a history possibly be written for what Yaeger calls the “throwaway body,”²⁸⁰ whose illegibility is already understood not to matter, and is in fact, advantageous to a nation that would like to imagine itself as modern, progressive, and abundant with resources? How could a politics of illegibility possibly help small, vulnerable subjects already suspended in invisibility like Hushpuppy? These politics can be helpful only if viewers redefine the boundaries of illegibility and the purpose of watching characters like Hushpuppy struggle.

²⁷⁸ *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, dir. Benh Zeitlin, perf. Quvenzhané Wallis and Dwight Henry. Fox Searchlight, 2012.

²⁷⁹ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000), 77.

²⁸⁰ See Yaeger, “‘And Every Baby... Was Floating Round in the Water, Drowned’: Throwaway Bodies in Southern Fiction,” in *Dirt and Desire*.

Due to an unnamed illness that resembles leukemia, Hushpuppy's father, Wink (Dwight Henry), repeatedly abandons her in the Louisiana bayou. Watching a seven-year-old without reliable shelter or full set of clothes survive this harsh environment is incredibly difficult. The film conveys the full weight of Hushpuppy's emotional abandonment when she reflects that, "I can count the number of times I've been lifted [held or hugged] on two fingers."²⁸¹ Scholar Jayna Brown movingly reflects on her viewing experience, noting

I had a compelling conversation with a colleague who insisted that the film was self-aware, posing such pain and chronic catastrophe of poverty as unresolvable, and that the film showed a triumph of the disenfranchised to create community. I don't grant the film that complexity. I just wanted to give Hushpuppy a bath, and take her in my arms.²⁸²

Part of the challenge Brown and her colleague encounter is making meaning of *Beasts* after having internalized Hushpuppy as a metonym or stand-in for "real" children and social conditions. However, symbolizing the whole of abandoned children is itself a burden. Hushpuppy is not these children; she is a construction and if she is understood as a fictional piece of a larger fantasy that is connected to but not fully commensurate with the "real" world, there are alternate meanings to be found in her story.

It is possible that, rather than making a statement on the general ability of the disenfranchised to create community, the film attempts to write a Southern origin story

²⁸¹ *Beasts*.

²⁸² Jayna Brown, "Beasts of the Southern Wild—The Romance of Precarity II," *SocialText Online*, September 27, 2013, <http://socialtextjournal.org/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-the-romance-of-precarity-ii/>.

that acknowledges the legacy of white supremacy/neglect. This story is launched (perhaps paradoxically) from a white gaze. Brown and bell hooks forcefully articulate the problems with a white directing collective resurrecting the image of a resourceful, precocious “noble savage,” in *Hushpuppy* and profiting from telling her story. Appropriation is at the heart of this film’s mode of production.²⁸³ However, the director is not the only one in charge of meaning-making.

Co-created with a large cast of non-professional actors from the Louisiana bayou, *Beasts* also reflects that community’s shaping hand. The film, shot in and around the clean-up of 2010’s BP oil spill, gives viewers a peek at a region in the process of recovery. That region’s process of self-creation (many actors were from the region being filmed) is intertwined with Zeitlin’s myth-making. While parsing individual contributions is impossible at this stage, examining the actors’ performances alongside the film’s construction of a modern maroon society allows viewers to see how illegibility works for the film’s bayou residents.

In the beginning of *Beasts*, Wink tells *Hushpuppy* that they are the last descendants of a powerful people who founded “the Bathtub.” What Wink describes is a maroon society, or a society of slaves who escape from the plantation and, rather than go to free territories or as part of their journey to those territories, create improvisational communities in Southern swamps and forests. As William Tynes Cowan argues, part of maroon societies’ subversive power was the challenge that their illegibility presented to the white supremacist power structure:

²⁸³ See bell hooks, “No Love in the Wild,” *NewBlackMan (InExile)*, September 2012, <http://newblackman.blogspot.com/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html>.

...when slaves escaped to the woods and swamps, they donned an intolerable invisibility; for though they could not be seen, their presence was still felt by the planters in the form of stolen goods from the plantation. Those maroons who made a life for themselves in the heart of the South evoked a sense of African American autonomy... They were outside the system of white control, yet their invisible presence signaled the potential for insurrection.²⁸⁴

It is worth wondering whether planters were more disturbed by the potential for intra-Southern insurrection or the identity-shattering realization of black autonomy. The illegible yet felt black presence disturbed the planter's assumption of panoptic power. If the South is the nation's Other, the maroon subject is thus the Other within, whose visage is utterly inscrutable to the powers-that-be as long as he/she remains hidden.

The Bathtub's maroon society has grown by the time of *Beasts* to include white men and women, vagrant musicians, alcoholics with no desire for sobriety, and children with vague parentage. Despite its heterogeneous composition, the community has retained its illegibility to the state and continues to benefit from its proximity to modern society in subversive ways.²⁸⁵ As in earlier eras, this maroon society repurposes refuse and takes material goods from the civilized world to construct its own. Wink's fishing

²⁸⁴ William Tynes Cowan, *The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15.

²⁸⁵ It is possible that this heterogeneity replaces the racial solidarity of maroon society. By attempting to remove race from the equation, director Zeitlin can more easily romanticize the region as primitive to the point of being pre-modern and therefore pre-racism. Of course, this move is perfectly in keeping with post-racial fantasies palpable in the United States after the election of President Barack Obama. This reality is just one of the complications and biases unearthed in this white director's attempt to write a new Southern myth.

boat is made from the bed of a pickup truck and homes in the Bathtub are an amalgamation of car parts, discarded roof shingles, and driftwood (Fig. 4.6 & 4.7).

Examining the filmic image of the Bathtub further reveals that a population's status as "throwaway bodies" is not absolute but conditional. Wink's disposability to the nation is signaled by his lineage and the fact that social welfare agents do not seek him out until halfway through the film. But, he also expands Yaeger's concept by showing its contingency—whether a body is disposable depends as much on the context of embodiment as the actual body itself. In narratives about the throwaway, an absence of mourning marks black bodies as extraneous. But, while Wink may be disposable in the context of mainstream culture, he holds a distinguished position in the Bathtub. When he dies, the community honors him with an elaborate funeral during which Hushpuppy lights a funeral pyre and pushes Wink out to sea. Successions of alloparents step in here and at earlier moments when Wink could not or would not provide parenting labor for Hushpuppy.

The Bathtub's illegibility to the state is crucial at these moments. Despite the fluid, flexible (and importantly, functional) relations of the Bathtub, the external world pictured in the film would impose heteronormative familial structures on these populations, as viewers learn when the group bombs a dam that is responsible for the flooding of their homes. Social welfare agents quickly infiltrate the Bathtub, removing the inhabitants to a refugee camp. This act is ostensibly humanitarian relief but feels punitive to the residents and is photographed as such. When, while hiding in the Bathtub, Hushpuppy hears a loud voice she believes to be her mother's, she runs outside. A

helicopter's spotlight floods her and Wink's small shack with light as the two are ripped apart by white aid workers. The two are immediately made legible as subjects of a panoptic, modern state. Wink is taken to a refugee hospital where Hushpuppy remarks, "When an animal gets sick here, they plug him into the wall."²⁸⁶ Hushpuppy is taken to a daycare center attached to the hospital. She is forced into a gingham dress, and has her hair roughly slicked into two French braids.

Contrasted against the glowing, textured world of the Bathtub, the refugee camp is awash in sickly, flickering blue light. The setting is clinical and the imposition of a heteronormative order is signaled by the splitting of the group into adult couples and children. The film thus critically reenacts another instance of orphaning insofar as no child is allowed to belong to the adults glimpsed. The swiftness of the governmental roundup of Bathtub residents makes clear that the community was never truly invisible to the state. It was only worth intervening in when the group threatened the operations of regional capitalism—the dam they dynamited was built by a power plant that exists within a mile of the Bathtub.

With the help of other Bathtub residents, Wink masterminds an escape back to the bayou. It is after this escape that viewers can fully appreciate the importance of illegibility (not just conditional invisibility) as well as the ways that alternative fantasies of life might enable viewers to imagine a radical "elsewhere." In this context, the Bathtub's voluntary segregation is not apolitical nor does it signal a retreat from the larger world. In addition to being enmeshed in the state structures previously described,

²⁸⁶ *Beasts*.

the Bathtub is powerfully affected by global climate change.²⁸⁷ The community is formed by the raced, classed political battles that exile some Americans from the bounds of true citizenship, including sex workers and other criminalized groups.

After Hushpuppy's escape from the refugee camp, the film widens its purview to dramatize one illegible, radical elsewhere where exiles find community. Searching for her lost mother as her father dies, Hushpuppy makes her way to a fishing barge and eventually, to a gentleman's club called Elysian Fields.²⁸⁸ As hooks argues, young girls on an all-male ship conjure fear of sexual abuse. This fear is only amplified when the audience learns the ship's destination. But, those fears are contingent on value judgments of the disposable people who populate the ship and the club.²⁸⁹ In the world of the Bathtub, the men present no danger to Hushpuppy. She tells the men that she is going to find her mother, to which one replies, "That's a good place to go."²⁹⁰ The fishermen do not tell her that she is too small to be there; they engage her in conversation to find out

²⁸⁷ Imagining herself as much more than a throwaway body, Hushpuppy sees her role as being one small part of a bigger world. Early in the film, she proclaims, "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the entire universe will get busted." As Hushpuppy, the smallest piece, utters the word "busts," an image of shattering polar ice caps flashes onscreen, followed by larvae shaking on a bayou leaf so that the bayou and Hushpuppy are intimately connected to the larger world. Hushpuppy imagines that melting polar ice caps directly led to the Bathtub flooding. Through her consciousness, the film mounts a critique that climate change destroyed the bayou. However, the Bathtub community also inescapably contributes to environmental desecration. The Anthropocene era, in which humans change, has produced the very nature they prefer. This is to suggest there is no way out to get fully beyond the reach of the state; there are only improvisational strategies communities such as the Bathtub use to determine how they participate in that system.

²⁸⁸ The film alludes to Greek myth and another famous New Orleans text, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Protagonist, Blanche, rides a streetcar through the "Cemetery" stop before getting off at "Elysian Fields," which is also the final resting place of heroic souls in Greek myth. Blanche's final exile in *Streetcar* seems connected to the dancers who populate the Elysian Fields of *Beasts*: all are ciphers of loss who are eventually expunged from polite society. Unlike Blanche though, and in keeping with *Beasts*' utopic vision, these women find community of like-minded souls on the fringes.

²⁸⁹ That this is a fantasy, and hooks' fear represents the reality for many, is devastating. hooks is correct to note, however, that *Beasts* is interested in serving the fantasy, not the statistically-supported fear.

²⁹⁰ *Beasts*.

where she wants to go, and take care of her. The ship captain takes particular interest in Hushpuppy. He tells her that he keeps the wrappers from his chicken biscuits—as the Bathtub keeps trash—because they make him feel “cohesive.” When Hushpuppy replies, “I want to be cohesive,” he reassures her that she will be, no doubt in his mind.

The women that Hushpuppy encounters at the Elysian Fields take equally compassionate care of her. Most appear poor and many are women of color. All seem mothers without children: the robbed women Spillers previously described. The women dote over the children, gaze at them lovingly, and holds them rather than the fishermen. These expressions of compassion counter social discourse about poor people’s capacity to love and care for each other but that is not the scene’s aim. Rather, it seeks to beautify and mythologize the inner life of a disenfranchised people in the tradition of a politics of black quiet. The film can only take this position because these communities are not legible to the state. In other words, it is only because these folks are not already corralled in refugee camps or jail cells that *Beasts* can fashion another life for them.

One woman holds Hushpuppy, feeds her, and gives her what appears a mean lesson: “Everyone tells children that everything is going to be wonderful, but I’m here to tell you it isn’t. No one will help you someday when everything falls apart, so smile. No one likes a pitying woman.”²⁹¹ For viewers who have grown attached to Hushpuppy, lines such as this, or earlier moments where her father shakes her and tells her she has to get used to life without him are incredibly difficult to hear. However, these lessons might just be reparative in a world Wink knows to be rough on poor, rural children such as

²⁹¹ Ibid.

Hushpuppy. He and the Elysian Fields dancer attempt to protect her by preparing her. Her loved ones do die, as Wink tells her they will. When they do, those people who society has deemed peripheral, criminal, deviant, etc., step in.

Wink and Hushpuppy may not matter to the larger world, but in this contextual region of the Bathtub, they matter very much. *Beasts* favorably assesses the ability of disposable characters to care for each other, and as such, is an experiment in illegibility as a choice. Bathtub neighbors are not pathologically unable to belong to civilized society. In Zeitlin's fantasy, they choose to segregate themselves to live what James C. Scott might call "unmanipulated lives." Zeitlin's fantasy may romanticize a primitive South and underplay the power of the state in suggesting that there is a place that exists beyond the state's control. Contrasted against *Beasts*, *Moonlight* more fully acknowledges the impossibility of total illegibility. *Moonlight*'s Chiron interacts daily with the modern, surveilling world. And yet, Jenkins' film mobilizes similar strategies to craft illegibility even with an allegedly mapped world.

VI. *In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue*: Surveillance and Illegibility in *Moonlight*

The above quotation comes from *Moonlight*'s source material²⁹², and suggests how the narrative will reframe the way many audiences view black masculinity. The film follows the maturation of Chiron. When audiences meet Chiron, he lives in Liberty City, a poor neighborhood of Miami, with his mother, Paula (Naomie Harris). *Moonlight* is divided into three parts, the first of which follows young Chiron (dismissively called

²⁹² *Moonlight* adapts Tarell Alvin McCraney's play, *In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue*.

“Little”) escaping bullies and finding refuge in the home of surrogate father figure, Juan (Mahershala Ali). On the level of plot, the first third recalls earlier portrayals of traumatized childhood, including Duff’s child and Hushpuppy, who, like Chiron use silence and stoic faces as masks to protect themselves. On the level of form, Jenkins uses a quiet moment in which Juan teaches Chiron to swim to show a close, tender bond between a black man and his surrogate son to which mainstream audiences are not often treated. This moment counters the hypervisibility of black men, but as in *Beasts* rendering of the Bathtub, this is not the scene’s primary goal. Rather, through long takes and by focusing on the way these characters touch one another, *Moonlight* allows us to glimpse their interior lives. The film also acknowledges their inner lives as their own, something we as viewers are not entitled to penetrate, demystify, or fetishize. The second third of the film finds Chiron fully coming to understand why he is bullied through a complicated relationship with another teenager Kevin.²⁹³ The two share Chiron’s first sexual experience on a beach near the one where Chiron learned to swim. Through this encounter and an argument between Chiron and his mother, the film articulates how the politics of black quiet can illuminate queer experience, based as that experience can be in reading gestures and glances on top of, or instead of, speech acts. The black, queer politics of quiet is fully articulated in the film’s last third, when Chiron and Kevin reconnect as adults. The film’s assertion of black humanity coupled with its refusal to objectify its leading characters carries expressive and political import in an era when black men’s right to exist is under assault.

²⁹³ Like Chiron, Kevin is also played by three actors: Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jerome, and André Holland.

Jenkins has said that his goal was to show how that environment shapes and changes black boys as they grow into black men.²⁹⁴ Chiron faces no shortage of difficult experiences from facing his mother's drug addiction, being beaten by his peers, and learning the meaning of the homophobic epithets that his schoolmates hurl his way. While the viewer may expect the film's cinematography to mirror the bleakness of those experiences, *Moonlight* is bathed in sun-bleached light or alternately, neon shades that epitomize Miami nightlife (Fig. 4.8). The film is utterly uninterested in the austere, grey lighting that suffuses previous generations of "hood" films such as *New Jack City* (1991). Instead, *Moonlight* redresses mainstream viewers' conception of what life in a poor part of Miami looks and feels like, as part of the film's larger humanizing goal. Liberty City is not defined by the dark interactions that take place there, or at least, not exclusively defined by those things. Together, the bright colors and vivid violence of Chiron's early life throw quiet scenes into sharp relief.

In the scene that has garnered significant critical attention, Juan takes Chiron to the beach to teach him how to swim. In contrast to the fast cuts that structure Chiron being bullied, this scene features long takes of Chiron bouncing in the waves. Juan cradles Chiron in the water, teaching him to float. Their dark skin sparkles against the teal water and sky as they look at each other in ways that communicate their love and compassion (Fig. 4.9). Juan is gentle and Chiron trusts him, and the film allows viewers to linger in their bond. Neither man feels the need to speak that intimacy—it is palpable and yet deeper than can be expressed in words. Quashie argues of moments like this, "it

²⁹⁴Jeffrey Brown, interview with Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney, *NPR News Hour*, November 4, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtYOCiUtvFA>.

is indeed the combination of the interior's expressiveness and the inability to articulate it fully, that makes interiority such a meaningful idiom for rethinking the nature of black expressiveness."²⁹⁵ Juan and Chiron's shared humanity is enough, though this is not to suggest that the film's employment of a politics of quiet always has the same cooling, relaxing effect.

Chiron's mother, Paula, works full-time and tenderly raises her son in much of the first third of the film. But, she is not available in the same way by the end of that sequence. As she descends into drug addiction, she becomes emotionally abusive. The film implies this is in part a projection of the turmoil she feels upon realizing her son is gay. Her anger boils over in a confrontation between the two of them. Their apartment, once bathed in pastel light, is in this scene cloaked in darkness punctuated by harsh neon light. Paula emerges from a back room, disheveled and screaming. Her mouth moves but audiences cannot hear what she says (Fig. 4.10). Instead, viewers hear an orchestral score, played over a shot-reverse-shot of Paula's wordless screams and a close-up of a still, frozen Chiron.

Understanding the power of choosing quiet to define this moment requires comparing this scene to others that walk similar terrain, such as Lee Daniels's *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2009). That film is crafted in the tradition of melodrama and seeks to mobilize sympathy through emotional appeals. Fights between poor, black protagonist, Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) and her abusive mother Mary (Mo'Nique) dissolve into histrionics, rendering the central figures as spectacles of

²⁹⁵ As qtd. in Kaimana 147.

excessive (excessively sexual, excessively angry) black femininity. The film's social realist visual aesthetic encourages viewers to understand these figures not as constructions but as representative of "the real." In contrast, Jenkins removes the sound of Paula's words while also slowing down her actions so the fight moves in slow motion. Both of these formal choices lead to distancing. Audiences are not permitted to engage with the scene cathartically or uncritically but rather to take a step back and endure the emotional violence of the moment along with Chiron. Jenkins does not exploit the confrontation as spectacle but rather asks the audience to bear witness. What Kaimana argues of the opening moments of Ava DuVernay's *Selma* could easily apply to *Moonlight*: "Through a visual aesthetic of quiet, DuVernay invites the viewer to bear witness to scenes of spectacular violence in such a way that the spectacle is surpassed and outlasted by the contemplation of the life, unknowable, yet intriguing..."²⁹⁶ Chiron does not function as a one-dimensional symbol of the poor child, just as Paula does not function as a stereotype of the crack-addicted single mother or welfare queen. When the film goes quiet, it forces viewers to recognize both characters' illegible, unknowable depths.

Midway through the film, *Moonlight* elucidates the utility of a politics of black quiet in portraying queer experience and adolescent sexuality in Chiron's first sexual encounter. After another fight with his mother, Chiron makes the long journey to the beach. It is afternoon when he leaves their apartment and night when he arrives on the beach—he must take multiple busses even though the coast is fewer than ten miles away.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 151.

He knows already that Kevin frequents this area of the beach and that, combined with the length of his journey, suggests his choice to go is not drawn from random impulse but a desire to see his friend. The audience (and Chiron's) knowledge that Kevin takes girls to this spot may even prompt speculation on whether Chiron hoped to share a similar experience with him. Chiron's attraction to Kevin is implied in earlier scenes, but Kevin's feelings for Chiron are left murky until the two cautiously begin to explore those feelings sitting on the beach. Viewers see Kevin kiss Chiron but the rest of their encounter, in which Kevin masturbates Chiron, is shot with metaphorical touches. In addition to over the shoulder shots that show the teenagers from behind, the camera focuses on the crashing of waves and close-ups of hands gripping sand and each other's clothing. Kevin drives Chiron back to his Liberty City apartment without embarrassment about their shared intimacy, and the sequence ends on their fingers lingering, slow-motion, after the two say good-bye.

The scene's metaphorical style works on multiple levels—it is a non-exploitative way to portray teenage sex as well as a way to avoid the exoticization that can come with showing “taboo” kinds of sex onscreen. Jenkins's approach also stays true to the idea of queerness as liminal category, one in which a subject exists beyond polarized conceptions of gay/straight. While exploring one's sexuality fully in the open may have been possible for adult men in 1980s Miami, Chiron has learned from his bullying peers that even appearing “queer” in his neighborhood is dangerous.²⁹⁷ To explore any kind of queer desire required Chiron and boys like him to rely on glances and gestures of other boys

²⁹⁷ This is of course not to elide the danger that came with being black and gay during the 1980s, in the climate of AIDS and homophobia, both of which disproportionately harmed people of color.

like Kevin, all of which are non-verbal or heavily coded. Queerness is in short, a “felt institution,”²⁹⁸ experienced through the reading of actions. An aesthetic that places the teenagers just out of view suits that experience. Keeping the boys slightly visibly illegible also allows the film to re-write narratives of “coming out.”²⁹⁹

Chiron and Kevin’s teenage cruising is neither shame-based nor closeted. Strict understandings of the closet imply coming out as a one-way, one-time, public movement. Such readings suggest that the failure to make this move necessarily circumscribes an LGBTQ+ person’s ability to live a “truthful” or full life. This narrative ignores the reality that there are good reasons why a subject may choose to express his sexuality selectively as well as the fact that it is possible to explore sexuality contextually. Kevin, for instance, sleeps with teenagers of both sexes and knows how to code-switch based on his environment. He does not appear to view either activity with shame or feel that he is lying when he moves through school without declaring his sexuality. The ability to code-switch keeps him safe but it also allows him to exist fully within all the institutions that structure his life.³⁰⁰ Kevin does not make himself legible for the benefit of categorization,

²⁹⁸ Phillip Brian Harper, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 4 (2000): 641-57.

²⁹⁹ Tarell Alvin McCraney discussed the fluidity involved in coming to terms with his sexuality, and its connection to Chiron and Kevin in a recent interview: Benjamin Lee, interview with Tarell Alvin McCraney, *The Guardian*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/21/moonlight-film-tarell-alvin-mccraney-interview>.

³⁰⁰ E. Patrick Johnson, for instance, elaborates on the ways that black gay men “draw upon the performance of ‘Southernness’ — for example, politeness, coded speech, religiosity — to instantiate themselves as ‘legitimate’ members of southern and black culture while at the same time, deploying these very codes to establish and build friendship networks and find life and/or sexual partners.” *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina UP, 2008), 1-2.

and when the film allows him to move freely between these worlds and retains his intrinsic illegibility by training its camera away, it also honors his choices.³⁰¹

The last third of the film finds Chiron dressed in full “tough guy drag,” complete with chains, a tricked-out car, prison record, muscles, and gold grillz that are unmistakable signifiers of late 2000s urban, black masculinity. This garb is ostentatious enough to appear as either a parody of itself or an over-compensation for Chiron’s insecurity. It highlights masculinity itself as a performance but is also counterweighted by the full hour and half audiences have spent with Chiron as a vulnerable, complex, loving person. This balance, the focused concentration on the inner life of a man exactly like Chiron, is in and of itself political in the era of Black Lives Matter. Jenkins reflects that while making his film

I kept thinking about the incident that involved Michael Brown...the conversation revolved around his characteristics as opposed to what happened to him. The same thing with Eric Garner, same thing with [John] Crawford in Ohio. As a black man, you’re either creating this performance or it’s being projected onto you.³⁰²

³⁰¹ The film is not naïve or utopic about Kevin’s choices—they are necessarily circumscribed by the phobic public sphere of his high school. The day after Kevin and Chiron’s beach encounter another student, Terrel (Patrick Decile), pushes Kevin to beat up Chiron for being a “fa---t.” Kevin complies to prove his masculinity, and the beating is a turning point in Chiron’s life. Soon after, Chiron hits Terrel with a chair, and is arrested for the first time. The scene dramatizes the “school to prison” pipeline with sensitivity but without softening its impact on Chiron’s life. By the next section of the film, Chiron has fully descended into a criminal life and the “hard” persona described in the next paragraph.

³⁰² Barry Jenkins as qtd. in David Fear, “*Moonlight*: How an Indie Filmmaker Made the Best Movie of 2016,” *Rolling Stone*, October 21, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/features/moonlight-the-best-movie-of-2016-w445621>.

Much of the public reaction around the videos that showed the deaths of these three men confirms Jenkins's reaction. None of the police officers involved in their deaths were convicted of wrongdoing and many mainstream Americans remained unmoved, or at least, publically inactive by films that show the end of another person's life. This is to say nothing of those who used the videos to find (or create) evidence that Brown, Garner, and Crawford did something to warrant the use of lethal force, in effect projecting criminality in the exact way Jenkins describes. Reactions such as these have lead scholars including Kaimana to state that "evidentiary realism isn't doing it," "it" being promoting deeper understanding and large-scale political action. She further argues that

...if realism is not what moves us (in the contemporary United States), and if sensational violence is not what haunts us, then it will be our imagination of the possibility that does. An aesthetics of Black quiet creates moments out of which we may imagine otherwise.³⁰³

This is precisely what *Nothing but a Man, Beast, and Moonlight* do, each finding space beyond black hypervisibility by paradoxically focusing on the unsaid and the unseen. However, it is worth noting that each of the films ends ambiguously. There is no promise of safety or fulfillment for even the youngest protagonists. This is the complicated world that illegibility entails. Happiness, comfort, and middle-class life are not goals promised to the hardworking or good-hearted, but the illegible worlds of *Beasts*, *Nothing but a Man*, and *Moonlight* dismantle the neoliberalist myth that suggests those things are equally available to everyone. The films powerfully illustrate the damage done when the

³⁰³ Kaimana 153.

synoptic and panoptic gazes inject themselves into the everyday lives of Duff, Josie, Hushpuppy, and Chiron. All three films also grant characters the space to explore slivers of illegibility that help them endure; the films indicate black humanity that viewers may not have been lucky enough to see.

The films do not transform the social conditions in which the characters live. However, expecting such films to exclusively present correctives places undue responsibility on individual filmmakers without discussion of the industrial institutions that created that responsibility in the first place. That expectation forces artists to solve problems, such as the pervasive stereotyping in the public sphere or complicated social dilemmas such as police brutality, that films cannot possibly solve. Further, this schema unintentionally limits the portrayals considered legitimate to overdetermined poles. Understood in this framework, the decision to remain illegible, to avoid following social imperatives is not an avoidance of political reality, but an embracing of an alternate, reparative political project.



Figure 4.1, Dir. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 2017



Figure 4.2, Dir. Barry Jenkin, *Moonlight*, 2017



SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.

Figure 4.3, Lorna Simpson, *The Waterbearer*, 1986



Figure 4.4, Dir. Michael Roemer, *Nothing but a Man*, 1964



Figure 4.5, Dir. Michael Roemer, *Nothing but a Man*, 1964



Figure 4.6, Dir. Ben Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 2012



Figure 4.7, Dir. Ben Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 2012



Figure 4.8, Dir. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 2016



Figure 4.9, Dir. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 2016

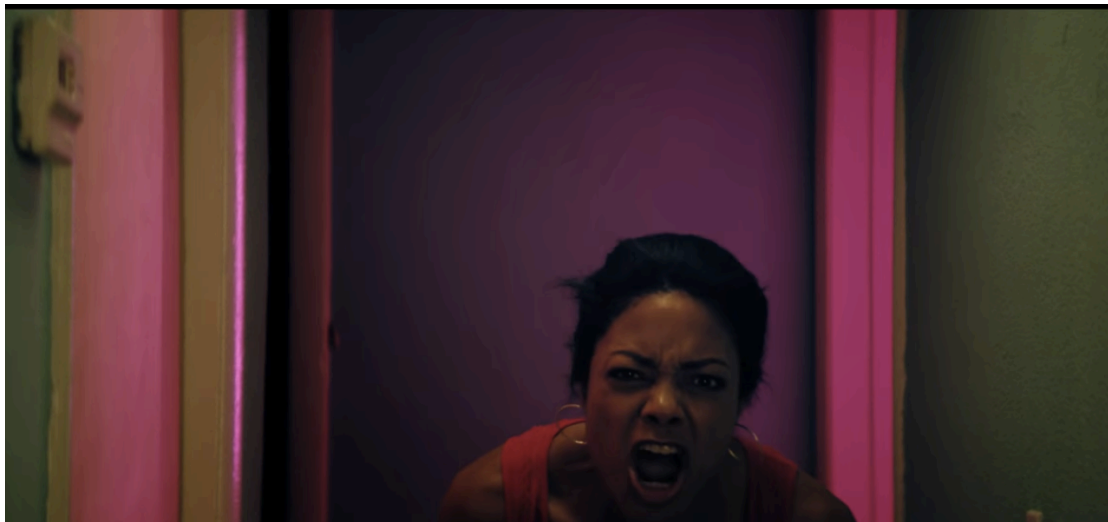


Figure 4.10, Dir. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 2016

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