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Elizabeth Greene April 13, 2020

Constructing Cultural Memory: The Cinematic Legacies of the Old South

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Abstract

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Since the birth of Hollywood, films have been a site for understanding the past. Audiences are swept up into sweeping period romances, grueling depictions of past wars, or the ordinary lives of famous historical figures. Films can be gateways to the past, transporting audiences to periods decades or centuries removed from the present. In doing so, films contribute to collective cultural memory, or a shared understanding of the past. But how does Hollywood choose to represent the past? What gets remembered and what gets forgotten? Previous scholarship on memory and film suggest that film can be a site of negotiation, where traditional historical narratives can be reasserted or challenged. Further, films about the past contribute not only to cultural memory but also to the creation of shared cultural identity. Therefore, films about the past have consequences outside the theater, affecting how we understand our history and how we reckon with the present. In this thesis, I aim to explore how Hollywood has treated films about the Antebellum Southern states, or the "Old South." The Old South is noteworthy because representations of this period have transformed over the past century. Audiences in the 1930s delighted in plantation romances such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), but audiences today bear witness to the cruel realities of plantation life in films such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013). I will examine three different films to evaluate how Hollywood's conception of the Old South has—and has not—changed. I argue that film was, and still is, a critical mechanism for the creation of cultural memory and cultural identity. Across three distinct periods, films about the Old South have contributed to cultural memory about the Antebellum period. By examining these films, I seek to understand how reconstructions of the past have changed over time—if they have changed much at all. Using a sociocultural approach, I will examine the cultural context of my selected films reflect on how cultural context shaped the films and their reception. By situating my work in the framework of memory studies, I seek to assess how Hollywood uses film as a mechanism for producing memories and constructing history.

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Introduction

> *To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present.*
> —Sally Mann

The Antebellum period in the United States has long been a popular setting for Hollywood films. The South as a place has consistently fascinated the American imagination, as a site for sentimentality and prosperity, or a site of one of the most violent, abhorrent institutions in the history of the nation. The Southern landscape itself is dotted with vestiges of this imagination and attempts at remembering the period. In the physical world, monuments celebrating the Confederacy stand guard over courthouses and restored plantations welcome thousands of tourists to walk their hallowed grounds. But our cultural memory of the Antebellum period or the "Old South" is also revealed in media, namely historical films. These films tell the story of a bygone era, using historical documents or fictions to reconstruct what the Old South might have looked like. Since we have no films capturing the era, we must rely on these historical films to clue us in on what life was like in the past. Therefore, these films have a fundamental effect on how we remember and how American culture understands the past.

When we remember our past, we can better understand our present selves. However, the films that help us remember our past are not objective. Memory films are unique in the stories of the past they tell and the memories they reconstruct, and this variation can have an influence in what we remember.

In this thesis, I aim to analyze the creation and continued construction of the cultural memory of the Antebellum South or "Old South" through film. I am interested in three films set in this period and the narrative and formal elements of these films that contribute to our collective remembrance of the past. In examining films about the Old South across three distinct

time periods, I aim to chronicle the cultural memory of the Old South since the 1930s and to illustrate the ways in which our representations of this period have, or have not, changed. On a broader lens, this thesis aims to contribute to our understanding of how we view and represent the past and how we reconcile a complex and traumatic period in our nation's history. Our past has implications for our present and our future, and I hope to chart how we have understood this past as we get further and further away from it temporally.

There are two major bodies of literature in which I engaged with for this thesis. One of these is the field of memory studies. The field is broad and multidisciplinary, engaging in subjects from media studies to psychology. For this thesis, I am interested in scholarship on media and memory and the creation of collective and group identity through media-mediated memory. The second body of work is film and media-focused scholarship on the filmic and cultural history of Old South and Antebellum media. I am particularly focused on scholarship detailing film and Hollywood's depiction of the South in the Antebellum period. I hope this thesis can fuse these two scholarly subjects, using the frameworks of memory studies to examine films set in the Old South through a fresh lens. As Aleida Assmann states in *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, "memory is a phenomenon no single discipline can call its own."[1] Though this thesis is rooted in film studies, I aim to use memory studies to analyze the chosen films through a new critical perspective.

Cultural Memory, Identity, and Media

A foundational text in the realm of memory studies, *Memory in Culture* by Astrid Erll is a summation of the history of memory studies, highlighting the major theories and scholars that

[1] Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

constructed the study of memory into its contemporary form — "a sociocultural, interdisciplinary, and international phenomenon."[2] She describes the popularity of memory in culture, specifically in the more recent past. She explains the phenomenon of memory and our interest in it through three major factors: historical transformations and our dependence on media-supported forms of remembrance, changes in media technology and the role of popular media, and developments within academia, wherein the humanities can apply theoretical instruments to reflect on cultural remembering[3]. Erll also argues that memory and history are distinct and serve different purposes. She writes of this distinction:

> Memories are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled. Re-membering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present ... individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present.[4]

This concept of subjective, selective reconstruction is key for understanding cultural memory, and Erll notes that they are based on the symbols and media that convey the past.

One of the preeminent memory scholars is Aleida Assmann, who covers the concept of cultural memory and its history, creation, and function in her book *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Assmann, quoting Wordswords and Milton, argues that artists shape our memory because it is they who give to the transitory and ephemeral "a local habitation and a name" (Wordsworth), thus creating what "the world will not willingly let die" (Milton.)" She also argues that media is one of the most important sites for negotiating cultural memory, writing that "The arts also provide a continuous discourse on the potentials and problems of cultural memory...in literary texts and artistic works we can discover the most lucid

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[2] Astrid Erll, *Memory in culture*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.
[3] Erll, *Memory in culture*, 5.
[4] Ibid., 8.

theory and criticism of memory." [5] In returning to the site of the Antebellum South, artists, like the filmmakers and their works I will explore, keep the past alive and continue to revise the discussion around it. These artists also do so a way distinct from the discipline of history. Assmann notes that artists can make the past feel "closer and more immediate than ever," arguing that "we are currently facing reconstructing, and discussing, new forms of memory that open up an access to the past that is distinct from and complementary to that which is provided by historical scholarship."[6]

Assmann also states in *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* that this mediated memory is crucial for individual and collective identity creation. Quoting feminist literary scholar Teresa de Laurentis, Assmann defines identity as "an active construction and a discursively mediated political interpretation of one's history."[7] However, this history is not one attached to objective scholarship, rather it derives from individual or collective understandings. Assmann clarifies this writing:

> The 'remembered past' is therefore not to be equated with the objectively detached study of the past we like to call 'history.' It is always mixed with projected identities, interpretations of the present, and the need for validation. That is why our study of memory has taken us into the depths of political motivation and the formation of national identity, for what we have here is all the raw material that goes to the making of identities, histories, and communities.[8]

This echoes Erll's understanding of memories as subjective and intrinsically tied to both the self and the collective. In my thesis, I will attempt to explore the subjectivities of these memories of the Old South and their potential bearings on how we (Americans) understand our history and identity.

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[5] A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, xii.
[6] Ibid., 6.
[7] Ibid., 53.
[8] Ibid., 73.

Though Aleida Assmann goes on in her book to describe "functional memory" and its potential to legitimize political memories, Jan Assmann's writings on *cultural memory* specifically are more useful to this thesis. In his essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," Assmann defines cultural memory as the body of texts, images, and rituals specific to a society "whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image."[9] Assmann's theory of cultural memory seeks to intertwine memory, culture, and society, noting that through cultural memory "a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society."[10] This concept of a cultural memory, sustained by media and contributing to a collective identity, is relevant for my exploration of the memory of the Antebellum period. As I will demonstrate, Hollywood has been a major factor in creating cinematic representations of the past. Over time, these films contributed (and continue to contribute) to our collective understanding of the Old South. I will use the term *cultural memory* throughout this thesis to refer to this concept.

A major recurring discussion in the field of memory studies is the role of media in the codification and distribution of memory to the general public. Aledia Assmann affirms that without media, "it is impossible to build a memory that can transcend generations and historical epochs."[11] Before Alison Landsberg defines her theory of prosthetic memory in *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, she gives a brief introduction to the origins of the relationship between media and memory. The history of media-mediated memory is long, dating back to the Middle Ages and the creation of religious art

[9] Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 132.
[10] J. Assmann and Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 133.
[11] A. Assmann, 10.

that reduced worshipper's "sense of temporal distance from the past."[12]. Later into the nineteenth century, monuments were the memory media du jour. The overwhelming size and presence of monuments re-emphasized the significance of historical events and aimed to "establish a recognizable and coherent past."[13] Landsberg goes on to describe the importance of film in conveying images of the past that create emotional responses and memory-making, something I will explore further in Chapter 3.

As technologies progress, so too do the abilities to spread and codify certain collective memories. Paul Grainge's collection of essays in *Memory and popular film* contribute to the argument that film is a significant realm for the propagation of memory. In his introduction to the book, Grainge writes that "rituals of remembrance have come to surround the culture of film," and "the memory of film scenes and movie screens, cinema and cinema-going, has become integral to the placement and location of film within the cultural imagination."[14] Using Grainge's understanding, films about the Old South are important to our cultural imagination about the history of the South and the people, places, and systems within it.

Erll describes the role of film in memory in her chapter "Media and Memory." In her discussion she describes the role of film, noting the concept of "memory productive films" that are "re-representations of history."[15] She claims that through different formal and aesthetic strategies, memory-productive films enable viewers to experience the past. She also notes that the films themselves are not singularly capable of memory-production: "What turns mere 'movies about the past' into veritable memory films is often to be found not *in* the movies

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[12] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 5.
[13] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory,* 7.
[14] Paul Grainge, "Introduction: memory and popular film," in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.
[15] Erll, 137.

themselves, but instead in what has been established *around* them."[16] For this thesis, I will also be interested in what has been established "around" films, such as audience reception, critical reactions, or effects on the industry. Classification as "memory films" according to Erll is also why I selected the three films for this thesis. *Jezebel* was created within a major industry concentration on the Old South. *Mandingo* was informed by the popular blaxploitation genre and received contrasting reception—critics hated it, but audiences were more receptive. *12 Years a Slave* was a profound cultural moment and found great critical success, while also cementing iconic actors of the contemporary period. I consider each film a memory film both because of their cultural impact and the cultural memories they convey in their narrative and imagery.

The South Onscreen

Now I want to turn to the legacy of the South onscreen and previous scholarship examining the iconography and themes seen in films set in the Antebellum South. Grainge notes that Hollywood both articulates and codifies the cultural past, and this is especially true of the Antebellum period. He writes that Hollywood "[reasserts] traditional narratives of nation, and, in others, [addresses] the 'recovered memory of the American nation-state—taking on traumas such as slavery…to express a reconfigured sense of American identity."[17] This thesis seeks to illustrate how Hollywood has articulated the cultural past related to the Old South and how these films reconfigure (or reassert) ideas of American identity.

In *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture*, Karen Cox explores the creation and proliferation of media about the Southern United States in the post-Civil War era up until World War II. Cox examines the variety of media that contributed to

[16] Erll, 138.
[17] Grainge, "Introduction: memory and popular film," *Memory and popular film,* 3.

the propagation of the Lost Cause, the plantation tradition, and the overall mythologizing of the American South through varying genres and stereotypes. Cox writes that the South was represented "as a region that upheld its links to the rural past and the one least spoiled by urbanization and industrialization."[18] The Antebellum South was imagined as "unspoiled," not only in the physical landscape but in its rigid social order. The mythology of the Lost Cause upheld gender and racial hierarchies, portraying a South where whiteness was privileged and often portrayed as wholly aristocratic, while black persons were happy in their enslavement. Further, this enslavement was muddled, as black persons in media about the Old South were often depicted as domestic servants or "mammy roles."[19] In *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth,* Edward D.C. Campbell describes the portrayal of slavery in Lost Cause media as "so pleasantly uncomplicated."[20] As Cox and Campbell both demonstrate, the Lost Cause and plantation mythology had a firm grip on depictions of the Antebellum South, coloring the cultural memory about the period. In this thesis, I will analyze the ways this mythology persists in the cultural memories produced in films.

Similar to Cox, Tara McPherson takes up the task of analyzing the South in popular culture in her book *Reconstructing Dixie: Race Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South.* In her introduction, "Dixie Here and Now," she argues that media about the South and our imagination of the history (and the present) of the South "serves as a point of condensation for various regional and national narratives of place, race, and gender."[21] In her analysis on how we imagine the South, she centers the intersections of these three factors, exploring how they

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[18] Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5.
[19] Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 97.
[20] Edward D. C. Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 18.
[21] Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 18.

function together to create our understandings of the past and the present. This thesis will take a closer look of the ways gender and race function in films set in the Antebellum period, using McPherson to further understand the creation of cultural memory about the Old South.

Reflecting on all of this scholarship—both on cultural memory and cultural representations of the South—I am most interested in how we have constructed cultural memory of the Antebellum period since the 1930s. From scholarship on cultural memory, I recognize the importance of media in the creation of cultural memories for individuals and collectives, though I am focused particularly on how the films I have selected create or revise collective cultural memory. Through scholarship I also recognize that these cultural memories are informed by the present, and I hope to explore the cultural and historical context of each film and its contribution to cultural memory. Additionally, scholars such as the Assmanns and Erll emphasize the tie between cultural memory and identity formation, and I want to recognize the bearings that cultural memory can have on our conceptions as individuals or as a society attempting to understand its past. As Aleida Assmann notes, though "memory looks backward through the veil of oblivion into the past; it follows long faded, long forgotten tracks, and reconstructs those elements that are considered important for the present."[22] This thesis will examine how three different films—*Jezebel, Mandingo,* and *12 Years a Slave*—constructs the cultural memory of the Antebellum South.

Chapter one, "Distracting with Romanticism in *Jezebel*," begins my exploration of cultural memory on film by examining a singular product of the notably popular "Deep South cycle" in Hollywood cinema during the 1930s. Through an analysis of Jezebel (Wyler, 1938), I will look at the influence of the Lost Cause and plantation tradition in Deep South cycle cinema.

[22] A. Assmann, 39.

I argue that Jezebel largely reasserts the iconography and the belief systems of the Lost Cause and plantation tradition myths, particularly through its lead Julie Marsden, played by Bette Davis. The film romanticizes Antebellum New Orleans and illustrates the plantation as a site for genteel femininity and masculinity, all while depicting black characters as "happy slaves" treated well by their enslavers. Specifically, I look at the cultural ramifications of Julie as a "Southern Belle" and the function of black characters in the film's narrative. I also will describe the cultural and historical context of the film and analyze why films in the Deep South cycle were so popular. I will draw on Cox's chapter "Dixie on Film," which provides a comprehensive history of the cycle, as well as Campbell, who asserts that "during the 30s the studios were ever more aware of their power to mold popular culture and of the monetary potential involved with it."[23] I hope to connect the context of the Deep South cycle to a filmic analysis of *Jezebel* to accurately describe the cultural memory the film constructed.

In chapter two, "*Mandingo*'s Violent, Complicated Truths," I will investigate the cultural memory of the Old South born out of the politically radical 1970s and derived from the blaxploitation genre. Through examination of *Mandingo* (Fleischer, 1975), I will analyze the use of blaxploitation as a genre to attempt to convey historical "truths" of the Antebellum period. *Mandingo* is notably different from *Jezebel* in its confrontation of the horror and violence of slavery, though the film also leans on leftover tropes of the plantation tradition, complicating the truth it seeks to convey. I will investigate how blaxploitation and the black power politics of the 1970s informed the cultural memory that *Mandingo* represents. I consider the portrayal of black characters in the film and the new voice they are given—a voice which was absent in Deep South cycle films. I also closely analyze depictions of black and white femininity in the film and

[23] Campbell, *The Celluloid South*, 73.

contrast them with depictions in *Jezebel.* Most notably, the film depicts the *sexual economy of slavery*, a term created by scholar Adrienne Davis to describe systemic sexual and reproductive abuse of enslaved black women. Overall, I argue that *Mandingo* is a notable revision of the cultural memory set out by the Deep South cycle films, though the film has some challenges in portraying fully fleshed out black characters.

In the third and final chapter, "*12 Years a Slave* and Foregrounding the Enslaved Experience," I will look at the most contemporary of the three films, *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen, 2013). By exploring this particular film, I seek to understand what our cultural memory of the Antebellum period looks like today. Though the film is now eight-years old, its popularity and critical success give insight into our current conceptions of the past and what we wish to take from it. In this chapter, I look at how director Steve McQueen uses violence to create *prosthetic memories*, a term coined by Alison Landsberg. Through unflinching scenes of violence against black characters, McQueen revises the cultural memory conveyed by films like *Jezebel*. Though *Mandingo* also portrayed violence against enslaved characters, McQueen's formal approach to depicting physical and sexual violence is distinct from the blaxploitation-esque depictions in *Mandingo.* I also explore the film's depiction of white and black femininity. Like *Mandingo*, the film subverts the Southern Belle trope and confronts the sexual economy of slavery. The cultural memory of *12 Years a Slave* privileges the experience of enslaved persons and their survival during the Antebellum period, rendering a cultural memory that centers the horror of slavery instead of the romanticized plantation mythology.

This thesis will trace the construction of the cultural memory of the Antebellum South from the 1930s to now. I aim to dissect the narrative and formal aspects of *Jezebel, Mandingo,* and *12 Years a Slave* to reveal how filmmakers have used objective histories and cultural

mythologies to construct films that convey unique memories of the Old South. Specifically, this thesis will look at how these films construct memories of femininity and race and their bearings on our collective understanding of the past. I argue that the cultural memory of the Old South has morphed over time, moving from reliance on racist mythologies to bold confrontations with America's violent past.

Chapter 1. Distracting with Romanticism in *Jezebel*

Despite the significant similarities to the other late 1930's sweeping historical melodrama of *Gone with the Wind,* director William Wyler's *Jezebel* is a more constrained, complex portrayal of the Old South. Though *Jezebel* was released a year prior to *Gone with the Wind*, the former is inextricably linked to the latter. Even in the original trailer for *Jezebel*, one might have had a difficult time discerning which film was being described: "From the picturesque glamour of the old south a great actress draws the scarlet portrait of a gorgeous spitfire who lived by the wild desires of her untamed heart." The use of "scarlet" in the trailer likely was not coincidental.

Both films belong to the to "Deep South" cycle, when melodramatic plantation epics captured white American audiences and swept them up in the nostalgic view of the Antebellum and Civil War-era American South. Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind* was a culmination of growing popularity surrounding the period. Following the success of her novel in 1936, studios were eager to cash in on the popularity of nostalgic portrayals of plantations, Deep South cities, and tragic Southern romance.

In playing on nostalgia, however, these films represented a history of the South that was inaccurate. The "Deep South" cycle films reconstructed a past that was incomplete, a past that privileged romance over reality, melodrama over truth. The characterizations portrayed in these films, and their posturing as the historical truth of the Old South, played into nostalgia and advanced a cultural memory of the Old South that aligned with white master narratives: slaves were docile and happy to serve, women were submissive to their male partners, and plantations were kingdoms of gentility and Southern prosperity.

In this chapter I will examine *Jezebel* as a unique product of the "Deep South" cycle. Much has been said about its successor *Gone With the Wind*, which comes as no surprise as it is

one of the most popular—if not *the* most popular—historical films of all time. In its wake, *Jezebel* has been mostly lost to history (it lacks the spectacular Technicolor and the ambitious runtime of its successor), but at the time the film was a major critical and box-office success. I will argue that *Jezebel* was a major part of the cultural memory-making of the Old South during the 1930s and into the 40s, even if the film is not as culturally relevant today. Further, it is worthy of our attention for being a more complex and constrained portrayal of the Old South. Whereas *Gone With the Wind* gets swept up in its own romanticism, *Jezebel* hints at underlying tensions and is not afraid to portray the South through a more critical lens.

Jezebel is a piece of cultural memory, situated in the broader context of sweeping Antebellum nostalgia during Hollywood's "Deep South" cycle. As a piece of cultural memory, the film portrays a version of the past informed by the present. Astrid Erll writes that cultural memories are "never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present."[24] In the case of *Jezebel,* the needs might have been primarily financial, as Warner Bros. cashed in on the popularity of plantation films. But the consequences of the film's reconstruction of the past extended into social and political life. Yes, the film was financially lucrative, but its retelling of the Antebellum period elided the horrors of the institution of slavery. In order to appeal to the interests of white audiences, the film distorts the past in such a way that it barely resembles the horrific reality of life in the Antebellum South.

I will begin my examination of *Jezebel* by looking at the history and context of its production before examining the film itself more closely. I will look specifically at the characterizations of race and gender in the film, exploring how they function within the narrative

[24] Erll, 8

and what they attempt to reveal about the real historical past—as well as reveal as the 1930s perception of the past. By examining the 1930s memory of the Antebellum period, I will consider the cultural impact of *Jezebel* and the film's contributions to the ongoing mythmaking and cultural memory-making of the Old South. I will argue that the surface-level feminist attributes of Julie and the portrayal of amicable relations between black and white characters obfuscated the dark reality of the period and furthered a white-dominant cultural memory.

From Stage to Screen

As previously discussed in the introduction, Deep South cycle films were incredibly popular among white American audiences, and incredibly lucrative for Hollywood studios. David O. Selznick's fifty-thousand-dollar purchase of the film rights for *Gone With the Wind* in 1936 is evidence of the significant investment from studios in these Deep South films.[25] Selznick's purchase, and the hefty price he paid, spawned major public anticipation in the years leading up to the film's release, capitalizing on a commercial and cultural market eager for more plantation epics. Recognizing the potential for a major cash cow, Warner Bros. moved quickly to stake claim in the plantation epic market. However, their choice of intellectual property was far less prestigious.

Owen Davis, a prolific American dramatist, wrote the play *Jezebel* in 1933. Though Davis won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama ten years prior, *Jezebel* was not one of his more successful works. The show closed on Broadway after only thirty-two performances.[26] Contrasted to *Gone with the Wind*, which had been read by millions of American readers at the

[25] Cox, 90.
[26] Gabriel Miller, "*Jezebel*," Index of Film Essays: National Film Preservation Board, Library of Congress, accessed November 21, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/Jezebel.pdf.

time, the original text of *Jezebel* was a flop. Further, Warner Bros. had previously rejected the film rights to the play. What made them reconsider *Jezebel* in 1937?

To begin with, the price was right. Warner Bros. paid twelve thousand dollars for the rights in 1937—a bargain compared to Selznick's *Gone With the Wind* purchase. The similarities between the two properties were clear: a major Southern city setting, a grand plantation, and melodramatic romance with a feisty lead heroine. For Warner Bros., *Jezebel*'s Julie was their answer to the iconic Scarlett O'Hara.

Warner Bros. announced the production of *Jezebel* in October 1937, and the completed film would be released a mere five months later. This rapid production period was due to competition with Selznick—Warner Bros. wanted to ensure that their film would come out before *Gone with the Wind*. Securing Oscar-winner Bette Davis in the leading role and William Wyler as director were further steps the studio took to guarantee the film's popularity. Davis' casting as the lead Julie Marsden was particularly notable, as Davis had been a known contender for the role of Scarlett O'Hara in the famous "Search for Scarlett."[27] The combination of Bette Davis, director William Wyler, and some of Warner Bros. top billed contract performers would help lead to the film's success, not to mention the hefty eight hundred-thousand-dollar budget attached to the project.

Largely, the film sees Hollywood torn between criticism of the Southern way of life and nostalgia for the old days. Though *Jezebel* seems to critique the outdated aristocratic practice of dueling and the antiquated Antebellum economy, it is simultaneously enveloped in the romanticism of the Southern gentlewoman and the tranquil way of life on a plantation. In *Jezebel,* we see a Hollywood that is struggling to reckon with their portrayal of the South. Can

[27] Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie,* 92.

they use the iconography of the Lost Cause mythology while subtlety critiquing a bygone era? In the end, *Jezebel* paints a sentimental portrait of the Antebellum south, furthering a cultural memory of the Antebellum period that centers on the Lost Cause mythology. To begin with, I will look at the portrayal of the Jezebel herself by Bette Davis, whose captivating fiery nature masquerades the reality of violent white femininity in the Antebellum period.

"*I'm thinking of a woman called Jezebel*": Southern Belles and Gender Norms

We hear about Miss Julie Marsden before we first see her on the screen. In the first scene of the film, we follow Julie's ex, Buck Cantrell (George Brent), and her fiancé's brother, Ted Dillard (Richard Cromwell), down into a stately gentleman's bar. While they order a drink, they are derided by De Lautruc (Georges Renavent), who teases Buck for losing the "lady of his heart." At the mention of Julie's name, Buck steps in, chiding De Lautruc for mentioning a lady's name in a barroom. De Lautruc threatens a duel and Ted steps in, eager to take on the duel for his brother's reputation. They promise to duel the following morning.

Why start the film with this seemingly random scene? We never even see the ensuing duel—though we can ascertain with Buck's later presence in the film that he prevailed. Still, beginning *Jezebel* with this mundane barroom encounter illustrates Julie's firm grasp over the men in her life. Even those on the periphery, like De Lautruc, can't keep her name out of their mouths. De Lautruc is a threat to her honor, her femininity, and Buck had to step in, even though they were no longer a couple. Julie's femininity is captivating—and men would be willing to fight to the death to honor it.

In *Jezebel*, Julie Marsden is a complex portrayal of white Southern femininity. More specifically, Julie exists at the tension between a traditional Southern belle and a more modern,

independent woman. These tensions are exacerbated by her relationship with Preston Dillard (Henry Fonda), who initially accepts her ambitious, modern flirtation but ultimately rejects her when she breaks the strict traditionally southern feminine norms. Following the rejection, it appears that Julie reverts to the ultimate Southern feminine ideal, but she is not as docile as she seems. In this section, I will track Julie's changes between the Southern female ideal and more modern notions of femininity. I will argue that these changes illustrate the inherent tensions in the stereotypical Southern woman conceptualized in the Old South mythology, and how Julie in *Jezebel* both advanced and contrasted the cultural image of a Southern Belle. The character of Julie, and Bette Davis' portrayal of her, highlight a new dimension to the role of white women in the cultural memory of the Old South.

Julie's character in *Jezebel* and Davis' portrayal of the iconic Southern Belle is situated in a broader history of women and stereotypical roles in Classical Hollywood cinema. In her book *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies,* Molly Haskell explores the role of women in the early decades of Hollywood cinema, dissecting the role of the movie heroine and the female stars that portrayed them. She also proposes two distinct roles for independent female characters in these early Hollywood films: the superwoman and the "superfemale."

By Haskell's definition, the superwoman is a woman who has a "high degree of intelligence of imagination, but instead of exploiting her femininity, adopts male characteristics in order to enjoy male prerogatives, or merely to survive."[28] The superwoman trope is exemplified by characters such as Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945). In contrast, the superfemale rejects male characteristics. The superfemale, Haskell writes, is "a woman who,

[28]Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 214.

while exceedingly 'feminine' and flirtatious, is too ambitious and intelligent for the docile role society has decreed she play."[29] Haskell describes the superfemale as someone who is uncomfortable with her role in traditional society and rebels by acting out on the people around her. Without any worthwhile projects or hobbies to channel her interests into, the superfemale tests the boundaries and acceptance of her own femininity, sometimes to tragic ends. Haskell identifies Bette Davis as a superfemale.[30]

According to Haskell, the stereotypical Southern Belle is an obvious example of a superfemale. The external conditioning of the Southern Belle creates this identity, as Haskell writes that "she is treated by men and her society with something close to veneration, a position she is not entirely willing to abandon for the barricades. Rather than rebel and lose her status, she plays on her assets, becomes a self-exploiter, uses her sex (without ever surrendering it) to gain power over men."[31] As we will explore in this section, Julie is a natural superfemale, venerated by society, but positioned on the edge of a delicate power play that could turn sour if pushed too far. What happens when the superfemale identity falls apart? What does the portrayal of Julie as a superfemale, and the challenges she faces because of her superfemale-ness, tell us about the portrayal of women in the Old South?

The engagement party scene, along with Julie's onscreen introduction, set up Julie's superfemale identity. Following the scene at the bar, we arrive at Julie and Preston's engagement party by way of mother-daughter duo Mrs. Kendrick (Spring Byington) and Stephanie (Margaret Early). We follow the two partygoers into the house, led into a lavish grand room with Southern belles in ornate hoop skirts and smiling black servants ready to take their parasols. An offhand

[29] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape,* 214.
[30] Ibid., 215.
[31] Ibid.

conversation between the two women foreshadows the gendered conflict to follow in the film. “Girls don’t curtsy anymore,” Stephanie bemoans. Mrs. Kendrick retorts, “They do in New Orleans. You have no cause to take up with Yankee manners.” Stephanie’s frustration with proper Southern manners hints at the tension between modernity and traditional southern femininity, as well as a generational difference between what old and young southern women find appropriate. Stephanie, like Julie will echo later in the film, yearns for a modern female independence, which she exhibits by breaking traditional norms.

Julie’s entrance is an even bolder disregard for traditional Southern manners than Stephanie boycotting the curtsy. As the partygoers discuss, Julie is noticeably late to her own engagement party. Rather than descend down the grand staircase in her mansion wearing some showstopping gown, Julie rides up to her party on horseback. We see her gallop up the street to the backdoor, her long riding dress trailing behind her as she wrangles her horse up to the door. As she enters the home, she is greeted by two other enslaved workers, Uncle Cato (Lou Payton) and Zette (Theresa Harris), who are exceedingly attentive to her arrival. Julie's introduction sets up her unique gender role as well as her relationship with her enslaved workers. Rather than arrive in a buggy à la Mrs. Kendrick and Stephanie, Julie rides up alone on her horse. She speaks to the enslaved characters as she might with her peers or family. Granted, they are serving her, and she is giving them orders, but she does so in an almost friendly way. Add to this the smiling reactions of the servants, and their relationship almost resembles friendship more than property ownership. This relationship also illustrates Julie’s superfemale-ness.

When Julie steps into the ballroom, the camera follows from behind so that we may see the partygoer’s reactions. They freeze when they see her enter, their eyes widening at the sight of her casual clothes. Aunt Belle, shocked, rushes up to Julie to embrace her, simultaneously

covering up her embarrassing dress. Older women stare her up and down, their ornate dresses clashing with her simple riding habit. At one point she picks up a hot toddy, to which Aunt Belle cuts in: "My dear, toddies are for the gentlemen."

Everything about Julie's engagement party entrance, from her plain dress to her sips of hot toddy, are overt disruptions of typical Southern belle behavior. Not only are they atypical, but they come off as rude and ill-mannered to the other older ladies such as Aunt Belle. Manners are a defining characteristic of the idealized Southern belle, as Tara McPherson describes in *Reconstructing Dixie*. Manners and their traditions of gendered decorum were a rigid structure in which the South organized society, and depictions of these manners were "repeatedly framed as the glue that binds the South together, distinguishing it from other regions."[32] Because manners were so important to the culture of the South, Julie's poor manners make it clear that she is unlike her female counterparts.

To be clear, though Julie acted out at the engagement party, she was not ignored or overtly admonished for her brash behavior. Instead, her boldness only made her stand out more—she is unique superfemale. It is not until the Olympus Ball when her boldness goes too far. Prior to the ball, Julie decides during a dress fitting to swap her white dress for a red dress, defying the traditional norm that unmarried women should wear white dresses. "This is 1852, not the dark ages," Julie asserts when Aunt Belle questions her choice. Once again, we see Julie's yearning to define herself as modern woman. It is the bold act of a superfemale that will eventually come back to bite her.

At the Olympus Ball, we see that Julie's dare to wear a red dress does not pay off. Upon her arrival and the removal of her coat, all eyes fall upon her. Couples turn to stare as Julie and

[32] McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie,* 150.

Pres walk down onto the dance floor. For once, Julie looks uncomfortable, her eyes scanning the room, looking up to Pres for reassurance. Instead of offering her comfort, Pres presses on, tightening his grip as he leads Julie through the middle of the dance floor. As they walk, the music drops out, leaving the couple to wade through an uncomfortable silence. Pres ignores Julie's protestations, leading her onto the floor. The camera follows couple as they spin around the room and simultaneously reveals the other couples moving away from them, as if their shame is contagious. When Pres and Julie are the only couple left dancing on the floor, Julie begs Pres to let her go and let her leave. All the while he stares straight ahead, ignoring her pleas. It is almost as though he is punishing her, forcing her to accept and reckon with her actions. The scene fades on the couple continuing to twirl around the floor, encircled by women in white dress looking on in horror. Finally, Julie has taken it too far. She is emotionally separate from Pres, and physically separated from the Southern society that once accepted her.

The scene illustrates a phenomenon that Molly Haskell describes in *From Reverence to Rape*. In her examination on the portrayal of women in film, she notes how a misstep outside of the traditional bounds of femininity could prove deadly for a woman's status in a film. She notes that in such moments, like that when Julie wears the red gown, a female character defies cultural expectations and in turn "becomes unfeminine and undesirable, she becomes, in short, a monster."[33] At the Olympus Ball, Julie has become a monster. No longer was her careful flirtation with Southern norms of femininity indulged by her aristocratic peers. Julie committed a most deadly social offense, willfully ignoring strict Antebellum custom. For that she is severely punished, both internally and externally.

[33] Haskell, 4.

Following the tragic ballroom scene, we cut straight to Julie's doorway as Pres bids her and Aunt Belle goodnight and a final goodbye. Julie has reached the bounds of her super-femaleness. In doing so, she lost her fiancé and her social status.

Julie recovers by deeply entrenching herself in the ways of a Southern gentlewoman. After Pres' departure, Julie quarantines herself in the home, becoming obsessed with cleaning. Instead of flirting with social norms, Julie sticks to the home, potentially making up for lost time or attempting to make good on the missteps of the past. If the red gown was Julie's mortal sin, her time in the home was her attempt at absolution. By locking herself away, she could finally become the ultimate Southern belle she needed to be in order to survive in Antebellum New Orleans.

Julie gets a chance to reveal her renewed, absolved self when the family decides to go to their plantation to escape the increasingly threatening yellow fever epidemic sweeping New Orleans. Pres also decides to come to the plantation following his move to the North. Pres' stay at the plantation is Julie's chance to win him back, to prove that she has moved on past the life where she dared to ignore traditional gender norms.

Rather than greeting Pres at the entrance of the plantation manor when he arrives as the other guests do, Julie surprises Pres after he is inside. She corners him in the drawing room while wearing a stunning white ballgown—the dress she would have (and should have) worn to the Olympus Ball. Before allowing Pres a word, she kneels at his feet, pleading for forgiveness. The camera stays hovered above her, putting her in a place of submission among a sea of white taffeta. "Pres I'm kneeling to you," she says, deadly serious. "Forgive me, and love me, as I love you," she begs, spilling her heart before him. The spell breaks, and the months of Julie's hard work fades away as Amy enters the room. Pres' introduction of Amy to Julie as his wife shatters

Julie's dreams. The camera holds on as Julie's face as it drains upon hearing the news. She pauses for a few seconds, as though she does not believe the reality before her. When she walks away from the room, we expect her to break, to show some emotional response. On the verge of tears, she catches herself, steeling herself and deciding to fight for Pres. For the rest of the film, Julie uses her new status as a Southern Belle to manipulate the people around her. The plantation is her playground, and she exploits the gender norms and expectations of the Antebellum South in order to get what she really wants—Pres.

Julie's quick character turns from a woman toeing the lines of gender norms, to a shut-in Southern Belle, to a more conniving Belle, could only be played convincingly by Bette Davis. Davis had a distinct star persona, as she was one of the few actresses willing to play roles that were unsexy or played against audience sympathy. Molly Haskell describes the attributes of Davis' persona as one with conflicting impulses: "the quicksilver shifts between distrust and loyalty, the darting, fearful eyes, and the bravura, the quick wit of the abruptly terminated sentences, the defensives and the throttled passion."[34] Davis' persona enabled her to sell the character of Julie as a Southern belle with underlying and ill-fated desires, drawing her to do things unacceptable by traditional standards of Southern women. Haskell describes this unique characterization as charm with a cutting edge. She writes, "Her charm, like her beauty, is something willed into being…Through sheer, driving guts she turns herself into a flower of the Old South, and in that one determined gesture reveals the only bedrock toughness of the superfemale…"[35]

But it is not only Julie's "sheer driving guts" that help her succeed as a Southern Belle. It is also her race. As a white woman, she is able to move through Antebellum New Orleans with

[34] Haskell, 215.
[35] Haskell, 217.

relative ease, despite stares and broken engagements when she wears something out of social norms. Julie is superfemale, seemingly untouchable, but she is also white women, able to traverse the boundaries of gender and sexuality with few consequences. This depiction is captivating, especially in the context of the Antebellum period. Davis' portrayal of an independent, fiery woman in a time period of strict gender norms is compelling. She flirts with the many men that fawn over her and she maintains friendly, familial relationships with the black characters she enslaves. But this is a false depiction of the reality of white women in the Antebellum period. White women were critical in upholding strict racial and gender hierarchies, a truth that will not come into focus in film until later in the twentieth century.

Further, though Julie is not as docile a Southern belle as other filmic depictions, she still succumbs to the gender norms of the Old South and uses gender traditions to get what she wants out of other people. Despite a sense of empowerment, Julie is still a Southern woman, through and through. The portrayal of a Southern Belle was somewhat empowered might have played particularly well with audiences during the late 1930s. The Deep South cycle in cinema was fully in swing at this point, with the forthcoming *Gone with the Wind* film adaptation lingering in the air. But Julie offered a new character to look up to, a new characterization of the Old South woman that was still enmeshed in tradition but had some sense of the independence that could have been interesting to audiences in the late 1930s as white American women also grew in social and economic status. Julie's independence might have made her attractive to modern audiences, but the tradition and memory of the Southern belle continued to be passed on.

Obscuring Reality: Whiteness and Blackness in *Jezebel*'s Antebellum South

The portrayal of whiteness and blackness in *Jezebel* continue the tradition of other Deep South cycle films: a strict racial hierarchy where the white characters are enviable aristocrats, and the black characters are (seemingly) happily enslaved. This portrayal of race relations was intentional: by erasing the strife of the past, white audiences could be comforted about racial strife in the present. In *Dreaming of Dixie*, Karen L. Cox describes this phenomenon:

> Before hillbillies emerged as a regional type, Hollywood offered American consumers a South in which whites were portrayed as elites and African Americans were there to serve or entertain them. For moviegoing audiences in the urban North, in cities to which southern blacks had migrated, motion pictures provided an ideal of race relations that was modeled on the Old South.[36]

In *Jezebel,* an ideal of race relations was achieved by severely limiting the characterizations and individual interiority of black characters. All the black characters portrayed in the film are enslaved, and they are used more as props or set dressing than actual characters with inner thoughts or feelings. Relationships between enslaved black characters and their white counterparts are consistently portrayed as familial and kind, continuing the myth of the benevolent enslaver.

Further, the enslaved status of the black characters is somewhat muddled. Though the black characters are subservient to the white characters, they are never portrayed working out on the field and are instead treated like necessary parts of the household.

The ambiguity of the enslaved status of the black characters in *Jezebel* furthers the myth that enslaved persons were happy and treated well on plantations, putting forth a false cultural memory that aided in the continued subjugation of black people in America.

The first instance of the muddling of the statuses and characterizations of black individuals in *Jezebel* comes in the first scene. The film opens on the streets of New Orleans, the

[36] Cox, 96

camera panning across the stalls of street vendors. Many of the vendors are black, happily selling their wares to other people on the street. Though this opening is a minor scene (the camera does not focus on any particular individual, nor do we see any of them later in the film) it sets up the characterization of black characters in Antebellum New Orleans. In *The Celluloid South*, Edward D.C. Campbell notes that street scenes such as the one at the beginning of *Jezebel* were common in other films set in the Antebellum South and the black vendors and city dwellers portrayed in these scenes were never given specific examination. Campbell notes that the presence of such characters raises questions about the status of black people during the time: "Were the blacks slave or free; how did the system permit their free access to such sections; were they craftsmen who made their own goods?"[37] The ramifications of this scene and its depiction of black vendors, though brief, set up the film's treatment of black characters and their status in society. Black characters exist in a sort of grey area. They can move freely on the street, speak conversationally with their white enslavers—even share a drink with them—but they are still enslaved. Still, their enslaved status is never explicitly referenced, but understood in the casual depictions of servitude. In *Jezebel,* slavery is a mild institution, an arm of a social hierarchy that supports the white aristocracy but is not overtly violent for enslaved persons. As Campbell describes, this depiction of slavery furthered the false myth and "only lent more credence to the concept of bondage as benign, well-meant, and with few restraints."[38]

Julie's interaction with the enslaved characters who work in her home and on the plantation are further evidence of the mild depiction of slavery and the presentation of kind, quasi-familial relationships between white and black characters in *Jezebel.* Julie's entrance scene, notable for how it sets her apart as a uniquely independent Southern woman, also

[37] Cox, 111.
[38] Campbell., 111.

illustrates her benevolent relationship with the enslaved black characters in her home. She greets the black characters by name, speaking to them conversationally without shouting or demanding orders at them. And they seem happily attuned to Julie's needs. Uncle Cato and Zette are shocked when she enters her engagement party in her riding habit, seemingly worried that she might commit such a social faux pas. Julie's humane treatment and their genuine concern for her wellbeing paint a picture of natural, easy relationship between enslaver and enslaved. Julie is not a cruel mistress who commands her property, she is rather their friend or even a family member, as Uncle Cato's name might suggest. Still, the black characters are never equal to the white characters. Though they might have screen time, have speaking lines and interactions with leading characters, they are always in subservient roles. Consequently, *Jezebel* depicts an Antebellum South with a strict social hierarchy, but one that feels natural, familial, and humane.

Campbell explores this portrayal of slavery across Deep South cycle films such as *Jezebel*, describing the films' representations of slavery as "so pleasantly uncomplicated."[39] This was particularly true for portrayals of enslaved persons who worked inside the home. Campbell writes, "house servants especially were sympathetic to whatever difficulties the master's family endured, and the whites in turn shared their joys with the servant."[40] The relationship between house servants and enslavers was portrayed as natural or familial, lending a false truth to the reality of life as an enslaved person. *Jezebel* might have audiences to believe that all masters treated their servants with kindness. According to the film, some white people were even generous to their black servants. When Julie decides to wear the red gown to the Olympus Ball, she promises her housemaid Zette that she can have the dress after she has worn it out. Later in the film, Pres offers Uncle Cato a drink, a gesture that illustrates Pres' consideration of Uncle

[39] Campbell, 18.
[40] Ibid., 17.

Cato as a friend or fellow gentleman, not a piece of property. These scenes and the portrayal of familial relationships between enslaver and enslaved obscured the reality of slavery, covering up a history of subjugation and suffering.

In addition to only being portrayed in subservient roles, the black characters of the film are never developed as individual characters with lives outside of their work. Instead, they are merely present to be used as tools or narrative devices for the film and for the white characters. This is true for the many scenes where black characters are servants, always present to hand white characters a drink or take their coats. By contrast, Julie is an intensely complex character, with a developed character arc and expressive dialogue and emotions. However, one scene in particular exaggerates characteristics of black people in the Antebellum South in order to illustrate Julie's own emotional turmoil.

Following Pres' departure from the planation to New Orleans, Julie toys with the men on the plantation, eventually sparking a fight between Buck and Ted. The fight escalates to Buck threatening a duel, to the horror of Julie. As she attempts to stop it, begging Buck and Ted to stop their plans, the sounds of singing begin to fill the plantation. Outside of the front porch, a group of black people, young and old, gather to sing "Susie Girl," an African American folk song. Their singing is the score to Julie's pleading and eventually, when she stoically accepts what she's done, Julie sits on the front porch and joins in with the chorus. She begins to lead them in a new song, "Raise a Ruckus Tonight," another African American folk song. Julie sits on the porch steps in her grand white gown, beckoning the young black children to sit down beside her. She sings along proudly with the group, raising up her hands as if she is conducting a choir. Amy and Aunt Belle look on, noticeably uncomfortable, to which Julie asserts, "We have such charming customs down here. That's why I wore my white dress tonight. I'm being baptized."

The juxtaposition of the preceding events—Buck and Ted's fight—with the black chorus is striking. Their presence seems unnatural and forced, and their status is also ambiguous. Are they all enslaved on the plantation? Does Julie's family own them all? Their status is unclear, but they are all portrayed as happy to be there, as if they are a group of Christmas carolers. They are also all well dressed in clean button-down shirts and dresses. If they are all enslaved on the plantation, the portrayal of their joyfulness in this scene gives a sense that Julie's slaves are well taken care of and happy.

Their singing and dancing were also evidence of their happiness. As Campbell notes, singing was a common and popular aspect of black characterization in Deep south cycle films: "audiences were happiest when the negroes sang and danced."[41] Though the songs used in the film were real songs, contributing to a truer image of black Antebellum culture,[42] they were used in a context that furthered the myth that enslaved persons were happy and free to engage in pastimes such as singing and dancing. In the film, the black characters are merely performing for Julie, and functioning as a narrative device to illustrate her tie to Antebellum Southern culture and it's "charming customs." The black characters are not celebrated for their vocal talent, they are merely reduced to props used as a spectacle. Still, this spectacle progressed an untrue reality about Antebellum life and the treatment of enslaved black persons.

There is also a specific class hierarchy inherent to the racial hierarchy portrayed in the film. The world of *Jezebel*—Antebellum New Orleans—is portrayed as wholly aristocratic. Campbell argues that the setting of *Jezebel,* with its stately manors, grand plantations, and lavish barrooms "provided a sense of wealth and ease which was vicariously experiences and eagerly

[41] Campbell, *The Celluloid South,* 18.
[42] Ibid., 18.

accepted as proof that the nation had its moments of prosperity."[43] But this prosperity was not shared by all Southern people. The white characters portrayed in Jezebel all belong to the upper class of Antebellum Southern folks, those that were able to enjoy grand balls, ride on private carriages, and flee to their rural plantations when urban life became unsafe. The urban society in *Jezebel*'s Antebellum New Orleans appears "devoid of any white class beneath the aristocracy…everyone seems well to do and cared for by a devoted slave class."[44] Absent from the film is any trace of poor white individuals. Instead, the racial and social hierarchy seems to be made up of only two classes: aristocratic whites and enslaved blacks.

While this unrealistic social hierarchy perpetuated a myth that all white Southerners were well off, it also likely appealed to early audiences because the reality they were living in. For audiences in 1939, when *Jezebel* was released, Deep South cycle films bolstered audience attitudes and feelings following the Great Depression. For early audiences, *Jezebel* was a piece of escapism, an hour and forty-five-minute glimpse into the past where whites lived lavishly at the top of the social food chain, with a league of devoted black servants to care for them. The reality of life for 1930's audiences might have been grim, but *Jezebel* could be a balm, a callback to a simpler time. Campbell notes that *Jezebel* and other films of the period "restored to the harried Depression ticket holder's imagination some semblance of uncomplicated order."[45] Instead of coming to terms with their own economic challengers or fretting over the social and economic advances of black people, white audiences could use *Jezebel* to return to a period where they had all the power. However, this focus on white aristocracy further covered up the

[43] Campbell., 74.
[44] Ibid., 111.
[45] Ibid., 83.

plight of black persons in the Antebellum South and prevented white Americans from critically understanding the history of the Antebellum period and the reality of life before the Civil War.

Jezebel was immensely popular with audiences—a commercial and critical success—but it was also taken seriously. More than a melodramatic, sweeping romance film, audiences and critics alike viewed the film as a piece of historical reality.[46] The film told of a world where women knew their place, black people were content with their enslaved status, and white people enjoyed a life of lavish luxury. Still, these cultural aspects presented about the Antebellum South were largely incorrect and furthered a false reality and cultural memory of America's past. Further, *Jezebel* existed in a period when Hollywood was continuously pumping out films about the Old South, with many of the false cultural aspects also present.

Through repetition, these false cultural aspects became believable and acceptable, shaping the cultural memory of the America's Antebellum South. Film was the perfect medium for this shaping, as audiences could get lost in the visual landscape of the extravagant plantation or the dramatic romance without realizing the underlying messages. Campbell writes:

> Produced for entertainment, the make-believe became believed. And as the familiar plots were repeated, the common reference point grew ever wider, forming part of the audiences' education. Together, the films were a collection of beliefs which influences views concerning not just the antebellum South by the economic, cultural, and racial problems of the nation as well.[47]

For audiences in 1939, shaken by the Great Depression and worried by shifting social hierarchies, *Jezebel* was a picture of an attractive, simpler past.

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[46] Campbell, 112. Campbell writes that a trade magazine published that *Jezebel* "gives full scope to the historical background...and draws substantial color therefrom."
[47] Campbell, 28.

Chapter 2. *Mandingo*'s Violent, Complicated Truths

"Expect the savage. The sensual. The shocking. The sad. The powerful. The shameful. Expect all that the motion picture never dared to show before. Expect the truth. Now you are ready for Mandingo." So read the promotional poster for *Mandingo,* Richard Fleischer's 1975 film based on the bestselling book of the same name by Kyle Onstott. The film promised a lot in terms of violence and sex—below the text on the poster the two interracial lead couples are nearly naked and each locked in embrace—but most of all it promised to deliver a telling of the Antebellum South that had never been seen in cinema prior. A so-called "truth" that had previously been hidden would finally come to light in *Mandingo.*

This "truth" ended up being a two-hour long blaxploitation-cum-historical-drama set on the fictional plantation Falconhurst, a plantation immersed in illicit interracial sex and racialized violence. *Mandingo* was a grave departure from the films of the Deep South cycle, and its inclusion of so much sex and violence affected its reception. Upon its release, *Mandingo* was railed by critics, many citing its over-the-top sexualization and violence as trashy. In *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, reviewer Scott Cain wrote "'Mandingo' is one of the best known trash novels of modern time and, Hollywood, having labored hard, hopes that it has come up with a movie of equally trashy popularity."[48] Roger Ebert was even more critical, slamming the film for its obscenity.

> *Mandingo* is racist trash, obscene in its manipulation of human beings and feelings, and excruciating to sit through . . . [It] has frontal nudity, flagellation, the auctioning of naked slaves and a fistfight in which heavyweight boxer Ken Norton [Mede] kills his opponent by tearing out his jugular with his teeth. . . This is a film I felt soiled by.[49]

[48] Scott Cain, "'Mandingo' Film More Popular Trash?" *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), May 4, 1975.
[49] Andrew DeVos, "'Expect the Truth': Exploiting History with Mandingo," *American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2013): 10.

White critics such as Cain and Ebert were shocked by the film and its portrayal of events that would have actually happened in the Antebellum period. Black critics similarly disparaged the film. Jacqueline Trescott of *The Washington Post* wrote, "The film is a racist and senseless exploration of human degradation in a whirl of slave auctions, hangings, whippings and fornication . . . [The] characters are emotionless and even for the pornography aficionado, *Mandingo* is a cheap three-ring circus."[50]

Though critical response to *Mandingo* was overwhelming negative, audiences generally responded positively to the film. In his essay "'Expect the Truth': Exploiting History with *Mandingo*," Andrew DeVos details a reception study of the film, noting that black audiences were particularly receptive to the film and its historical imagery. Citing an article from the *New Pittsburg Courier*, DeVos describes audience members who "dug the movie" and found it "factual and real," as well as a film that "told the truth and opened my eyes."[51] For some black audience members, *Mandingo* finally felt like real representation of the history of the Antebellum period in all of its violent and hypersexualized drama. The film could almost be considered educational, a piece of media that did not romanticize the plantation or inhabitants and rather showed the destruction and despair inherent in its existence.

Why was *Mandingo* such a touchstone? How could it affect some audiences so deeply, yet be simultaneously condemned by critics? Did the public just have bad taste? I do not think that audiences were attracted to *Mandingo* solely because of its violent and sexual content, though other popular films of the time similarly indulged in such shocking substance. Instead, I think that *Mandingo* struck some black audience members because the film finally displayed the inherent violence (physical, sexual, emotional) that was intentionally left out of Deep South

[50] DeVos, "'Expect the Truth': Exploiting History with Mandingo," 11.
[51] Ibid., 15.

cycle films. Though the Old South and the Antebellum period had been a part of the nation's collective imagination for decades, the memory of the period constructed through films did not represent the true trauma faced by individuals who lived through the period. *Mandingo* was one of the first films that felt like a more truthful historical representation, a more accurate cultural memory of this part of history. Even if this cultural memory was not wholly inclusive, it is notable in understanding how cultural memory of the Antebellum period has been built onscreen over time.

The cultural memory that *Mandingo* constructs is a unique one. Throughout the film, the suffering of enslaved black persons is obvious, revising the portrayals of slavery in *Jezebel*, where violence and hard labor was absent from the characterization of enslaved persons. Still, the film gives enslaved characters little opportunity to express their own voice and experience. Further, *Mandingo* is critical of the systems supporting the Antebellum South—the institution of slavery, the sexual economy of slavery, and the economy and controlled sexuality of white femininity. As I will describe in this chapter, the film is critical by showing the havoc these systems can wreak on human relationships and their environment. By being critical, *Mandingo* shatters the romantic memory of the Old South portrayed by Deep South cycle films such as *Jezebel.* Stripped of its romanticism and mysticism, the imagined Antebellum South in *Mandingo* is revised to be horrific.

In this chapter, I will explore the cultural memory of the Antebellum South that *Mandingo* constructs. Specifically, I hope to argue that *Mandingo* is notable for its use of sex and violence to portray the "truth" of the Old South. However, the film fails in its inability to give a fully developed voice to enslaved characters. The film illustrates a willingness to engage with the

destruction of white people in the Antebellum South, but an unwillingness to privilege the perspectives of black persons.

What to Expect When You're Expecting *Mandingo*

As with my discussion of *Jezebel*, it is important to place *Mandingo* in the context of its conception and release. The film is an adaptation of Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo* published in 1957. As the promotional poster for the film noted, the novel was a bestseller and sold over 4.5 million copies.[52] Though it does not crack one thousand pages like its obvious forebear *Gone with the Wind*, the novel is a packed 660 pages of plantation drama. Onstott himself was an unlikely author for the work. Onstott was born in the Midwest and spent his adult life in California judging dog shows and writing books on dogs and it was not until he was 65 when he decided to write *Mandingo.* Inspired by research into the West African kingdom of Mandingo, as well as his knowledge of dog breeding, *Mandingo* the novel was born. For all of its violent drama and sex, Rudy Maxa of *The Washington Post* said the book "made *Gone With The Wind* read like a nursery rhyme."[53]

DeVos notes that adapting Onstott's novel to the screen would have been impossible in the late 1950s due to the strict limits of the Production Code. Explicit sex, adultery, and gruesome murder—major plot points in the story of *Mandingo*—all would have been forbidden according to the conservative Code, which was eventually replaced with the MPPA Ratings System in 1968.[54]

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[52] DeVos, 8.
[53] Rudy Maxa, "The Master of MANDINGO: A Washington Publisher Helps Shatter the Myth of Moonlight and Magnolias," *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1975.
[54] DeVos, 8.

Concurrent with the new ratings system and *Mandingo*'s release in 1975, was the popularity of the "blaxploitation" genre. The genre was dominated by action films led by black actors, which were incredibly popular with black audiences. DeVos explains the origin of the name of the genre as follows: "Variety magazine coined the term "blaxploitation," a portmanteau of the words "black" and "exploitation," to capture how these gritty urban dramas exploited black audiences' desires to see themselves on screen and their apparent appetite for "sex, violence and 'super-cool' individualism."[55] Even though it did not take place in an urban setting, *Mandingo* existed in this genre of blaxploitation, though first it is helpful to contextualize the creation of the genre.

In his comprehensive analysis of African Americans in Hollywood cinema, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Ed Guerrero provides an important history of the blaxploitation genre. Guerrero links the economic failures of the Hollywood film industry at the end of the 1960s with the creation of the genre, as well as accelerated black political activism pressuring the industry to acknowledge black audiences. With these economic and social pressures in mind, Hollywood began targeting black audiences with "cheaply made, black-cast films" that were "marketed to a basically inner-city, black youth audience in anticipation of substantial box office profits."[56] Because of their marketing orientation to black audiences, blaxploitation films attempted to disrupt older stereotypes with "more assertive and multidimensional black characters, as well as black-focused themes and narratives," though Guerrero argues that instead the blaxploitation genre created new, subtle ways of debasing African Americans marked by an image of empowerment. Additionally, because of their cheap,

[55] DeVos, 8.
[56] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 69.

formulaic creation, blaxploitation films also set the expectations and tastes of black audiences at a low standard. The blaxploitation genre was relatively short lived, fizzling out in the mid-1970s as Hollywood recovered financially and black criticism against the genre's representation of African Americans increased. However, as DeVos notes, *Mandingo* is last great gasp of a declining genre,"[57] an attempt to refresh field with a return to one of the most violent, exploitative eras of American history.

Not only did *Mandingo* exist in the blaxploitation genre, but it's producers and directors approached the film with the intention of it being an educational effort. Dino De Laurentiis produced the film and avowed that the film intended to "reach beyond the sentimentalized South of other films with uncompromising honesty and realism to show the true brutalizing nature of slavery." Director Richard Fleischer echoed this sense of a moral mission to use *Mandingo* to revise cinema's understanding of history: "The whole slavery story has been lied about, covered up and romanticized so much I thought it really had to stop . . . The only way to stop was to be brutal as I could possibly be."[58]

There exists an interesting tension then, between the exploitative cheapness of the blaxploitation genre and the righteousness of its creators to honestly portray the Antebellum South. Understanding *Mandingo* as an exploitation film gives us important insight into its marketing and reception. As explored in the promotional poster, the film was advertised as salacious, recalling the blaxploitation genre's proclivity for violence and sexuality. Further, as a blaxploitation film *Mandingo* would have been targeted towards black audiences, as black characters were put at the forefront of the film, unlike in Deep South cycle films like *Jezebel.* However, as a big budget production, it also does not read as a typical cheap exploitation film.

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[57] DeVos, 9.
[58] Ibid.

So then, *Mandingo* can be understood as using the iconography of blaxploitation films to deliver its critique of the Old South. The marketing of the film and popularity with black audiences tells us that the film had a distinct impact in shaping a cultural memory of the Old South for a demographic that had previously been shut out from fully fleshed cinematic representations or films that catered to them specifically. Blaxploitation as a genre is critical for my analysis, especially related to cultural memory and identity creation from this memory. Erll argues that the conventionalized formats of genre help us understand and make meaning of events and experiences. She notes that drawing upon genre "[provides] familiar and meaningful patterns of representation for experiences that would otherwise be hard to interpret."[59] It is difficult to truly conceptualize the horrors of slavery or the exploitative system underpinning Antebellum life, so I will explore how genre, such as blaxploitation in *Mandingo,* helps audience makes sense of the historical memories they are witnessing.

From here, I will now analyze the film and its portrayal of the Antebellum South in order to explore the cultural memory it constructs. I argue that the film relies on the tropes of the blaxploitation genre, specifically grisly violence and sex, to convey a more historically accurate historical memory of the Antebellum period. However, reliance on exploitative violence and sexual content has a negative effect in fetishizing the events and the enslaved characters. Though the film makes dramatic revisions of the cultural memory of the romantic Antebellum period compared to what I explored in chapter one, it struggles to portray fully fleshed out enslaved characters.

[59] Erll, 148.

Reversing & Reconstructing Memories of Race

In the chapter "Hollywood's Inscription of Slavery," Guerrero argues that *Mandingo* is a notable for its "reversed point of view on slavery."[60] I agree that the film's portrayal of race and slavery in the Antebellum South is quite a reversal from the images of slavery represented in Deep South cycle films such as *Jezebel.* Right from the start of the film it is evident that the plantation and the plantation system are not romanticized, and the first few scenes in the film establish the treatment of enslaved persons and their relationship to their white enslavers. The first sequence of the film depicts a white buyer inspecting a line of enslaved persons that Warren Maxwell (James Mason) owns on his plantation, Falconhurst. The buyer inspects the individuals, the camera in a tight close up between his face and the face of the enslaved characters. The buyer is portrayed like an invader, occupying personal space and examining them as though they are animals. It is a jarring way to start the film, though it makes clear from the outset the casually cruel nature of the enslavers. The next scenes depict Doc Redfield (Roy Poole) prescribing that Big Pearl (Reda Wyatt) sleep with Warren's son, Hammond (Perry King), to get over her sickness, as well as Warren and other white men having a dinnertime discussion about how slaves do not have souls. From the outset, the unfeeling abuse of white characters is made clear in *Mandingo.*

Guerrero notes the importance of opening sequences, arguing that they are "used to express an ideological frame of orientation through which the spectator consumes the narrative."[61] In *Jezebel*, the opening depicted the image of happy, servile black characters in lockstep with Julie and her needs. The enslaved characters seemed content, establishing a cultural memory of slavery and "the relationship between white and black as a "natural" one

[60] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, 31.
[61] Guerrero, 32.

between superior and inferior."[62] *Mandingo*'s opening scenes depict the unnatural relationship between enslaver and enslaved, a relationship rooted in "coercion, production, and the ownership of black people as commodities from which labor, sport, and sex are extracted."[63] As the film progresses, depictions of these relationships are heightened through scenes of violence that reinforce the slavery's abnormality and horror. In this section, I will explore how the film revises the cultural memory of slavery in the Antebellum period as constructed in Deep South cycle films. I argue that through scenes of blaxploitation violence the film is able to achieve what Guerrero described as a "reversed point of view." However, I also argue that the functions and interiority of these black characters are restricted, limiting an inclusive cultural memory of the experience of enslaved persons in the Old South.

The Blaxploitation genre was typified by "sex, violence, and 'super-cool' individualism," though I want to discuss here the use of the genre's violence to reconstruct the cultural memory of slavery in the Old South. One of the first scenes of grisly violence in the film occurs after Agamemnon (Richard Ward), or Mem, is found reading the bible with Cicero (Ji-Tu Cumbuka). Warren wants to punish him by cutting out one of his eyes, but Ham insists he will "whup" him instead. The scene begins with Mem fully nude, being strung up to hang from his ankles. Ham does not begin flogging Mem himself, rather he hands the deed off to another enslaved man. In a wide shot, we see Mem hanging from the back as the other man begins to flog him directly on his bottom. As the paddle lands on Mem, Ham also jumps, shaken by the sound and Mem's muffled screams through a gag. The scene becomes increasingly difficult to watch, and the camera alternates between close-ups of Mem's face twisting in pain and his bottom growing red and wet with blood. Eventually Ham steps away from the gruesome scene and shortly after his

[62] Guerrero, 32.
[63] Ibid.

cousin Charles (Ben Masters) strides up to the barn, steps in, and begins flogging Mem. It is shocking that Charles so brazenly began whipping Mem, both because he does it so casually and because Mem is not even his property. Overall, the scene is a blatant revision of the relationship between master and slave that was portrayed in earlier memory films. Mem's flogging makes the violence inherent in the institution of slavery visible, opposing the plantation tradition and employing a new cultural memory of the Old South as violent and virulently racist.

There are many examples of violence as the film progresses—Mede (Ken Norton), Ham's coveted "Mandingo buck", is prized for his fighting ability. The gruesome fight scene between Mede and Topaz (Duane Allen) is also hard to watch, as the final blow (or bite) is fatal. Through the gruesomeness, the camera stays steady on Mede and Topaz's entangled bodies while the crowds of white spectators look on with glee and excitement. The contrast between the fight and the fight's audience is significant. Not only are enslaved persons in Antebellum period objectified and treated like animals, but they are also forced to fight to the death *while* being cheered at by white spectators. This scene drives home the complicity of white southerners in the oppression and physical torture of enslaved black persons in the Old South. In these scenes of violence, *Mandingo* recasts the relationship between white and black southerners in the Old South. Fleischer reveals that not only was the relationship between enslaver and enslaved unnatural, but it was also built on systemic cruelty and objectification. By adhering to the genre of blaxploitation and depicting scenes of violence focused on both physical body and spectator, Fleischer underscores the physical brutality of slavery and implicates white Southerners in their adherence to and celebration of an inherently inhumane institution.

Though these violent scenes aid in the construction of a cultural memory that centers the cruelty of slavery, I would argue that *Mandingo* still fails to portray black characters inclusively.

By this I mean that white characters are the leads of the film—particularly Ham and his wife Blanche (Susan George)—are the focal points and drive the narrative action. Ham and Blanche are complex characters with fleshed out interior lives.[64] By contrast, we see very little of the interiority of black characters. Though we hear Mem's screams as he is flogged, we hear nothing from him after the fact. As I will discuss in the next section, Ham's love interest Ellen (Brenda Sykes) is always in proximity to Ham. We never hear her side of the story or her approach to the relationship. We hear stirrings from Mem throughout the film, who expresses his discontent by haranguing Mede for his fatal fight. Largely, the enslaved characters in the film are either silent or mostly quiet. Though the film is radical in its overt depictions of violence, it does not succeed in creating fully fleshed out characters so that the audience may get a more inclusive cultural memory of the Old South through the enslaved perspective.

Still, the depictions of violence are significant as we trace the cultural memory of the Old South. In the 1970s, the violence of Mandingo seemed to resonate especially with black audiences. Though critics decried the film, DeVos finds that some audience members found the violent images important in understanding history. One viewer claimed that the film "told the truth and opened my eyes. There is no such thing as good whites."[65] In the context of the 70s, when the black power movement dominated social and political discourse, the portrayal of race relationships in the Old South was a way to revisit the past and retell the memory of a time that had often been covered up by Lost Cause and plantation mythology. Grainge writes that film has become such a vital place for the negotiation of memory because of the "plural and discontinuous histories that have challenged ideas about the singularity of American

[64] I will illustrate in the next section just how complex Blanche is as the white female lead in the film.
[65] DeVos, 15.

experience."[66] As the black power movement challenged social and political understandings of race relations in the 1970s, *Mandingo* harnessed a similar spirit to revisit race relations in the Old South.

Femininity & Sexuality on Falconhurst

Mandingo is largely a male-driven movie. The title itself is a reference to a type of enslaved man and we follow most of the film through Ham and his navigations of life in Antebellum Louisiana. This navigation includes his marriage to his cousin Blanche and his relationship with the enslaved woman Ellen. In this section, I want to explore how *Mandingo* constructs gender and sexuality in the Antebellum South through these two main female characters. I will argue that through the character of Blanche, the film portrays an image of white Southern femininity that is predominantly critical, revising the image of the well-loved Southern Belle from the Deep South cycle. In the character of Ellen, the film makes the sexual economy of slavery explicit, a first for the film industry at the time. Through both of these female characters, the film portrays the oppression of human ownership uniquely experienced by white women and black women in the Antebellum period. Influenced by the women's liberation movement of the 70s, the film chips away at the previous cultural memory of gender in the Antebellum period as constructed in Deep South cycle films.

I want to begin by exploring the character of Blanche, Ham's cousin and wife. We are first introduced to Blanche in a conversation between Ham and Warren. Warren tells Ham that Blanche's father, Captain Woodford is in need of money and Warren will consider giving him some if Ham considers Blanche as a wife. When Ham is resistant, Warren insists that Ham needs

[66] Grainge, 3.

to marry, saying "It's time for us to be a-thinkin' of an heir for Falconhurst. You need a white lady to give you a son with human blood—not them suckers of yours through wenches." Immediately Blanche is placed in a strict economic position. It is not time for Warren to marry for love or companionship, it is merely an economic relationship, with Blanche profitable through her ability to reproduce.

We meet Blanche on her family's plantation in an awkward drawing room scene. Blanche, her parents, and her brother Charles sit opposite of Ham, the intended couple stealing brief glimpses while the parents make heavy-handed comments about Ham's looks. Charles remarks that the couple is only wedding for money, sending Blanche into a dramatic crying fit. The scene cuts to Blanche cleaning herself up in a powder room when Charles walks in and insists that the two will not wed. As the two speak, Blanche stands in front of a mirror, her back to the camera but face visible in the reflection. This framing both emphasizes her vanity (a stereotype for women) and a sense of duality in her identity—a motif that will reappear throughout the film. She performs one identity to Ham and her family: pure, romantic, and eager to wed. The other side of her identity is one of assertiveness and determination, stemming from a desire to get away from her family to be with the rich, well-traveled Ham. Charles threatens to expose their incestuous relationship, though Blanche remains seemingly unfazed. The camera cuts away to from the mirror shot to face Blanche directly as she asserts that she is "getting out of this house…and this family."

Following the bathroom encounter, Blanche and Ham take a walk through the garden and discuss their intention to get married. The scene is devoid of any romance or tenderness. Blanche walks a step ahead of Ham, picking at leaves and looking anywhere but into Ham's eyes. Rather than discuss their relationship or any sense of intimacy, Ham tries to compensate for the disrepair

of Falconhurst by promising Blanche a new house. They stop walking when Ham says that he needs to "sire a son" and suggests he wants to propose, though he is unsure how. The scene ends as the two go in for an awkward, sloppy kiss. The shot does not linger on their kiss, and as the soundtrack starts up again the scene cuts promptly to Ham and Blanche on their honeymoon. The audience sees no traditional, down-on-one-knee proposal, no joyous marriage. Their relationship seems merely like a transaction, a convenient coupling. Gone is the melodramatic romance of Julie and Pres. In its place is a union with the sole intention of producing an heir to continue to hold up the plantation legacy.

Though Blanche desires to escape her family by marrying Ham, their relationship only ushers in more pain and suppression. The morning after their wedding night, Ham accuses her of being impure and lying about her virginity. Blanche vehemently refuses, begging Ham to believe her. As Ham storms out of their bedroom, the camera pans to a full-length mirror reflecting Blanche wailing on the bed as Ham leaves. This scene is a turning point, as Ham's trust in—and any sense of affection for—Blanche is destroyed. We the audience are left with an image of Blanche's reflected self struggling to hold together her pure identity.

From these early scenes with Blanche, we see she is not a traditional Southern Belle, the archetype so venerated in the Deep South cycle and the nostalgic iconography of the Old South. She is not virginal, though she plays into a false sense of purity in order to gain favor with Ham. She is also not overtly flirtatious. Her conversations with Ham skew mostly toward speaking of their home, her clothes, etc., casting her as materialistic. But, once she becomes the de-facto matriarch of Falconhurst, her purity dissolves into what looks like cruelty. She seems to become what Haskell identified as a "superwoman," who adopts male characteristics to get her way.[67]

[67] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 214.

She is verbally aggressive towards Ham, consistently accusing him sleeping with his "wenches" like Ellen. She takes to indulging heavily in toddies—an act Julie was criticized for in *Jezebel*. Drunk, she confronts Ham for not touching her and throws herself on him, begging to be touched. Ham pushes her away, calling her strange for a white lady.

Blanche's marriage to Ham and subsequent move to Falconhurst, while allowing her to escape her abusive brother, traps her in new rigid expectations and neglect. After she arrives on the plantation, she becomes withdrawn, turning to drinking and lashing out, almost as if she entered a depressive state. Her costuming reflects this state, as she is mostly seen in a white nightgown, her hair loose on her shoulders contrasting the first time we met her in a white gown and well-coiffed hair. Her transformation in character depicts an oppressed white femininity of the Antebellum South. Though Julie Marsden engaged in her fair share of plantation drama, Blanche's oppression is destructive. She is neglected by Ham, unable to express her sexuality or much agency. She is effectively another piece of property, another female object meant to produce children, nothing more. I want to emphasize that though she is objectified, it is in no way to the same degree to enslaved black women on Falconhurst, though her oppressive objectification is a dramatic difference from the cultural memory of white women as depicted in the Deep South cycle.

These early scenes depict Blanche trapped within a strict gender and sexual hierarchy. This was evident in *Jezebel*'s portrayal of the Antebellum South, with Julie trapped by rigid social practices and expectations. However, in *Jezebel*, Julie's environs were romantic—the aristocratic New Orleans and the languid Louisiana plantation. An aristocrat, she conveyed the enviable cultural memory icon of the Southern Belle. McPherson argues, as I also did in chapter one, that the Southern Belle and her romantic environs onscreen coded the cultural memory of

the Old South as "elegant and grand…[erasing] the history of oppression that such homes could just as easily symbolize and [encouraging] a nostalgic form of southern history."[68] In the context of the Deep South cycle, the Southern Belle was a nostalgic icon, recalling a past that was simpler and more comfortable than what audiences were facing in the 1930s Depression era. In *Mandingo,* Blanche and her new home at Falconhurst are not elegant and grand, stripping the Southern Belle of her sentimentality.

Though her depressive state and neglect might seem pitiful, Blanche's actions do not stir up sympathy. After Mede and Ham leave for the fight in New Orleans, Blanche calls Ellen to her bedroom. Drunk, she tells Ellen to strip. Tense (Deborah Ann Young), another enslaved woman, tells her that Ellen is "knocked" (pregnant), which only further enrages Blanche. She begins whipping Ellen, striking her directly on the stomach and calling her "dirty," a "dumb animal," and a "whore." The camera is disorienting, alternating between a close-up of Ellen curled on the ground and a medium shot of Blanche looming over Ellen's body, brandishing the whip. She whips her until Ellen falls on the ground, continuing to strike her until Lucrezia Borgia (Lillian Hayman) comes in and holds her back long enough for Ellen to stand up and attempt to leave. Blanche runs after her and goes on to push her down the stairs, the camera tracking Ellen as she falls, tumbling down each step. It is a vile act, and we later learn that this bout of cruelty caused Ellen to miscarry her child. This outburst of violence seems like a confluence of different factors: Blanche's repressed sexuality, Ham's neglect, and her own racism. It seems especially cruel that Blanche targets Ellen's stomach when she is aware that Ellen is pregnant. Blanche's attack is a show of her strength and her fury and yet again revises the cultural memory of the white Southern woman. Campbell described the Southern Belle as "a frail, delicate chalice to be

[68] McPherson, 44.

cherished and protected."[69] In this scene, Blanche is neither frail nor delicate. The cultural memory of the white Southern woman is amended through her character. Gentility is replaced with jealously and racist violence.

In another act of revenge later in the film, Blanche coerces Mede into sleeping with her. When Ham and Ellen leave for a slave market, Blanche calls Mede to her room. While Mede sits on her bed, Ellen spins a tale of Mede raping her, a false story which she threatens to tell Ham when he returns. Blanche is aware of their power dynamic and the fear of miscegenation that gripped the Old South. By exploiting this and threatening Mede, she coerces him into having sex with her. "Mede…ain't you ever craved a white lady before?" she prods, grasping his head in her hands. Blanche kisses Mede, though he does not react and keeps his eyes focused ahead. She hugs him and the camera tracks her hand as she traces down his shirt. The shot cuts to a close-up of the two looking into each other's eyes. They are the only things in the frame, their closeness heightened. Blanche slowly undresses Mede, slipping off his clothes until he is naked standing in front of her. The camera tracks from Mede's waist to his face, forcing the viewer to ogle his body simultaneously with Blanche. In the beginning, Mede resists Blanche's caresses but when he finally gives in and hugs her back, the shot cuts to a close-up of Blanche's face buried in Mede's chest, smiling. Once neglected by her husband, Blanche finds relief in finally receiving male affection, simultaneously expressing her sexuality and a sense of agency.

This scene captures the complex power systems between individuals on the plantation and the powerlessness of enslaved persons. It subverts the image of the pure, proper Southern Belle through sexuality, specifically interracial sex. Guerrero writes that the scene challenges "the white supremacist notion of the 'purity and sanctity of white womanhood' so specifically

[69] Campbell, 112.

idealized in the plantation genre."[70] The film is able to achieve this through such explicit representations of intercourse, leaning into the tropes of the blaxploitation genre. Though it shows the impurity of Blanche, Fleischer's focus on Mede's naked body during the scene is fetishistic. Rather than focus on his discomfort with Blanche's coercion, the camera highlights his physique. Thus, the scene comes off as more of an erotic sexual taboo rather than an assault.

Ultimately, Ham poisons Blanche upon her giving birth to a mixed-race baby. Her attempt at expressing her sexuality and agency is ultimately what kills her. Her tragic final words to Hammond, "I only done it 'cause of you and Ellen," are her final pleas for sympathy, as though it was a choice she was forced to make. Through her cruel death, Fleischer hammers home the point that life for white women on the plantation was neither romantic nor as luxurious as previous memory films convey. Blanche's depression, racialized violence, and eventual death revise the cultural memory of white femininity in the Antebellum period, creating a distinctly tragic characterization.

Whereas *Mandingo* revises the icon of the Southern Belle through Blanche, the film achieves something new in its portrayal of enslaved black women and their sexuality. In Deep South cycle films, enslaved women and men were little more than props and at most stereotypes that reinforced racist ideas of black Americans. In *Jezebel*, the most visible black female character is Zette, one of Julie's housemaids. Though Zette has a voice in the film, her only function is to serve Julie, as noted in the previous chapter. *Mandingo* is notable for making explicit the use and abuse of enslaved women, particularly in a sexual context. DeVos notes this as a unique first for the industry, noting that *Mandingo* was "the first film produced by a major studio to challenge centuries of secrecy over the racialized sexual exploitation that was a

[70] Guerrero, 34.

constituent component of American slavery."[71] The film made visible *the sexual economy of slavery*, a concept created by scholar Adrienne D. Davis in the book *Black Sexual Economies: Race and Sex in a Culture of Capital.* The film's portrayal of "wenches" and Ellen herself visualize the sexual economy of slavery. Before looking at the character of Ellen, I want to provide some background on Davis's concept.

Davis argues that the institution of American slavery was inherently exploitative, not only for physical labor but for sexuality and reproduction. As the only group who could give birth to children legally born with enslaved status, black women were at the center of this reproductive capacity and often faced sexual assault from male enslavers as they had no legal recourse to protect them. She writes of this structure as follows:

> …enslaved women, and only enslaved women, were forced to perform sexual and reproductive labor to satisfy the economic, political, and personal interests of white men of the elite class. Even more so than crossing gender boundaries in physical labor, this second distinguishing feature of their experience under slavery foregrounds their gender and demonstrates how embedded their sexuality was in slavery's economic markets.[72]

In *Mandingo*, this reproductive labor is depicted in what the white male characters refer to as "wenches." On Falconhurst, enslaved black women such as Big Pearl and Dite (Debbi Morgan) are available for Ham to sleep and are valued for their ability to reproduce. Later, when Big Pearl gives birth, Ham is overjoyed, describing the child as if it were a prized animal. These women have no other function in the film than to sleep with Ham or reproduce, aligning with Davis's description of the sexual economy of slavery.

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[71] DeVos, 12.
[72] Adrienne D. Davis, ""Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle": The Sexual Economy of American Slavery," in *Black Sexual Economies: Race and Sex in a Culture of Capital*, ed. Adrienne Davis. and The BSE Collective (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 19.

Through the sexual economy of slavery Davis also notes how black women's sexuality was othered from white women's sexuality. "Elite white women, represented as delicate and often asexual, found their own sexual relations closely guarded and monitored by these same men," she writes, "sexual access to enslaved women was central in the creation and maintenance of this repressive ideology of white femininity."[73] As I have already discussed, Blanche's sexuality was monitored and suppressed by Ham, though as I will describe with Ellen, Ham continued to seek out sexual relations with the black women he enslaved. Viewing Ham and Ellen's relationship through the sexual economy of slavery reveals the complexity with which the film handles their relationship. The film attempts to construct a cultural memory that recognized the sexual economy of slavery, though I argue that in doing so it also relied on previous depictions of enslaved persons in memory films.

As noted in my previous discussion of black characters in the film, black women are primarily characterized and referred to as "wenches" in *Mandingo*. These women are forced to have sex with Ham in hopes to have children, or "suckers," that can eventually be sold off for the Warren's financial gain. But the "wenches" also seem to exist in order to be used for white male pleasure. When Ham and Charles stop at Wallace's plantation, Wallace (Ray Spruell) brings them two enslaved girls—one of them being Ellen—as the two men get ready for bed. "I hope they'll be to your likin'," he remarks, indicating that the two are meant for pleasure. After Charles begins raping one of the girls in front of Ham, Ham takes Ellen into another room, Ellen noting how "strange" Ham is for his discomfort while watching Charles. Ham is taken with Ellen's comment and, in a moment of great tension, asks her to look at him in the eyes—a taboo act for enslaved women. "If *told* to do it, if *asked* to do it, you can do it," Ham implores,

[73] Davis, ""Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery," *Black Sexual Economies*, 27.

reinforcing his control over her actions. When she finally looks up at him, the music swells as though two lovers are meeting for the first time. As if she is overcome by some powerful force, tears roll down Ellen's face, to which Ham, sensing discomfort, offers her an opportunity to leave. "I like you, sir," she responds, "I want to please you." With this affirmation, Ham slowly kisses her and the scene dissolves.

Formally, this scene feels romantic: the sweeping music, the intense eye contact, the close-ups of each of their faces gazing at one another. There is a sense of taboo in their affection, something that previous film scholars have noted as being one of the driving interests in the scene. Andrew Britton describes a sense of beauty to the scene, writing,

> The beauty of the union lies essentially in its fragility. The love scene becomes the first, halting contact of two outsiders—the slave and the cripple—united in their horror at a sight which epitomizes the concept of slavery in the film: namely, the use of another human being for a personal satisfaction, specifically sexual, which denies and degrades their humanity.[74]

Britton further describes Ham kissing Ellen as a "desire transformed by tenderness and insight" and an expression of intimate humanity.[75] Wood echoes Britton's sentimentality toward the scene writing that the "sequence is notable for its delicacy" that counters the more brutal aspects of the film.[76] Though I agree that the scene feels romantic, even tender, I would argue that this tenderness between enslaver and enslaved is not progressive. Rather, the scene reinforces the memory of slavery portrayed by *Jezebel*, one in which enslaved persons were not only content, but they also had affectionate relationships with their enslavers. Using Campbell's phrasing, the cultural memory constructed in these films imagined slavery as "so pleasantly uncomplicated."[77]

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[74] Andrew Britton, *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 263-264.
[75] Britton, 264.
[76] Robin Wood, *Sexual politicis and narrative film: Hollywood and beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 276.
[77] Campbell, 18.

Ellen and Ham's relationship seems to take this a step further through the element of romance. Not only was Ellen content in her status opposite Ham (remember she was initially introduced as an object for him to sexually assault), but she wishes to pursue an intimate relationship with him.

Ham and Ellen's relationship bolsters the myth that enslaved persons were content in their position and that enslavers were caring to them. Of course, there are other scenes in the film where Ham is violent and cruel to enslaved persons—specifically enslaved men—so his relationship with Ellen seems like an even clearer affront to the reality of the sexual economy of slavery. Ellen's willingness to stay with Ham, to "please" him, obscures the truth of sexual assault of enslaved women. Davis writes that not consenting to sex was not an option for enslaved women. "Since the white male could rape the black female who did not willingly respond to his demands, passive submission on the part of the enslaved black women cannot be seen as complicity. Those women who did not willingly respond to the sexual overture of masters and overseers were brutalized and punished.," she clarifies.[78] Ellen's desire to stay with Ham could have been a mask, a survival tactic to avoid punishment if she said no. However, Fleisher does not give Ellen a voice to describe her own feelings to Ham. She is always portrayed alongside him, save for the scene of Blanche's attack. By not fully developing Ellen as a character, as an individual with thoughts and feelings, she functions merely to prop up Ham's character arc and serves as a fetishized object during the film's sex scenes.

Through their initial interaction, as well as Ellen's later excitement when Ham decides to buy her (thereby cementing her inability to say no), the film constructs a cultural memory of benevolent enslavers who are *so* compassionate they are willing to enter into loving relationships with the enslaved persons they own. This memory muddles the reality of the severe sexual

[78] Davis, 26.

economy of slavery and the systemic sexual abuse of enslaved women. However, in its final act, the film reveals the potential Ham's ability to shed his benevolence. In a fit of anger spurred by Blanche's newborn baby, Ellen crosses Ham, begging him to calm down and spare Mede. Gripping her face in his hands, Ham snaps, "Don't you tell me what to do. Don't think you get in my bed you anything but a [N-word]." Ham then pushes Ellen to the ground, a rejection of her humanity and their prior relationship. He also calls her one of the most degrading words used against enslaved persons. Though this change in treatment is dramatic, it raises further questions. Was this how Ham felt all along? Was he consciously suppressing his racism as he pursued his relationship with Ellen? Or was this just a spur of the moment attack, a fit of rage prompted by Blanche's child?

This moment between Ham and Ellen is one of many in the dramatic final act, which sees Ham spiral into destructive violence that results in the death of Blanche, Warren, and Mede. It is a final act that sees the devastation of a white man who at once seemed somewhat sympathetic to the plight of enslaved persons. Nevertheless, I would argue that Ham's dismissal of Ellen at the end of the film does not negate her fetishization in earlier scenes. Even more so, Ellen's lack of a voice and scenes separate from Ham force the audience to only understand her character in proximity to her relationship to Ham.

We are left then with a complicated cultural memory of black femininity in *Mandingo.* The film is progressive in its depiction of the sexual economy of slavery, which adds a new dimension to the cultural memory of the Antebellum period that was absent in earlier films. What Davis describes as the systematic exploitation of black women's sexuality and reproductive capacity is hard to ignore in the film. Still, Ellen functions only as Ham's coveted sexual object. The audience never hears from her directly or see her engage outside of their

relationship. As I asserted earlier, this lack of interiority of black characters does not provide an inclusive cultural memory of the enslaved experience. For Ellen, as Wood notes, "attraction to Hammond remains a 'given' and is never analyzed."[79] With this lack of interiority, the film fails to do justice for the black characters or more wholly represent blackness in the Antebellum period.

In this chapter I have explored the revisions and continuations *Mandingo* provides to the cultural memory of the Old South. A product of 1975, the film is situated in the black power era and is an entry into the blaxploitation genre. Though there was a distinct effort to foreground blackness in the 70s, whether that be politically or culturally in film, I argue that *Mandingo* does not center, nor does it fully develop, its black characters. In doing so, it fails to construct a radical new cinematic cultural memory of American slavery and enslaved individuals.

However, *Mandingo* succeeds greatly in deconstructing the veneration of the plantation seen in previous memory films such as *Jezebel*. The nostalgia and sentimentality are stripped away in the film to reveal a decaying, destructive plantation system. White southerners no longer lounge in luxury and romance, rather they participate in cruelty towards black bodies. Further, the icon of the Southern Belle, so engrained in the cultural memory products of the 1930s, is revised to be dejected, vain, and able to perform the same forms of brutality displayed by her husband. Through blaxploitation's focus on violence and sex, *Mandingo* reveals the historical truths of violence faced by enslaved black persons, both physically and within the sexual economy of slavery. *Mandingo* is nowhere near a "perfect" film in its reconstruction of the Antebellum period, but in the lineage of Old South memory films it is marks a moment of

[79] Wood, 282.

important change and shift to erase the mythologies of the past and construct a more progressive cultural memory.

Chapter 3. *12 Years a Slave* and Foregrounding the Enslaved Experience

When *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen) premiered in 2013, it was a near instant cultural phenomenon. Initially premiering in limited release, the film went on to wide release and earned nearly $190 million dollars in gross returns.[80] Despite its heavy historical subject matter, the film received endorsements from pop culture figures Kanye West and P. Diddy. It was also a critical darling, winning three Academy Awards including Best Picture and launching the career of Lupita Nyong'o, who won Best Supporting Actress for her role in the film. The film was a wild success, not only critically and among audiences, but also in telling a more accurate and historically truthful story about the Antebellum South and American slavery. The success of *12 Years a Slave* also points to a contemporary desire to deconstruct the Lost Cause imagery of the past and reconstruct historical narratives of memory grounded in the reality of the Antebellum period.

Unlike *Jezebel*, the film looks unflinchingly at the horrific truth of slavery, rather than obscuring it or distracting from it with the white aristocratic class. Unlike *Mandingo,* the film does not hypersexualize relationships between the enslaver and the enslaved, nor does it fail to genuinely develop or examine the interior lives of its black characters. *12 Years a Slave* stands apart for being a daring portrait of the Antebellum South that simultaneously exposes the terror of Southern white supremacy while also thoughtfully portraying the lived experiences of enslaved persons. By displaying scenes of violence, the film helps viewers experience the harsh reality of the past, developing a cultural memory of the South rooted in experience and historical reality, shedding the false myths of benevolence perpetuated in earlier historical films.

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[80] "12 Years a Slave," Box Office Mojo, accessed March 22, 2021, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl376866305/.

In this chapter, I will examine the cultural memory that *12 Years a Slave* constructs of the Antebellum period. I will consider the film's origination in Solomon Northup's personal slave narrative and how the genre of slave narratives informs the film and its impact as a piece of cultural memory. I will then look at the film itself, considering how the film portrays the past to engage audiences in "prosthetic memory," or the understanding of an unlived past through the filmic representation of individual experiences. I will argue that the close interior examination of enslaved persons lives, their emotions, and the violence inflicted upon them, helps to transfer prosthetic memories about the Antebellum South to all of the film's audiences. I will also consider the film's portrayal of a more nuanced white and Black Southern femininity than that of *Jezebel* and *Mandingo,* which functions to change the existing cultural memory of the Old South. Because *12 Years a Slave* is the most recent film considered in this thesis, the film and its reception can provide the most up-to-date understanding of contemporary cultural memory of the Antebellum South, and how this cultural memory has been built up to this point.

Slave Narratives and Slavery Cinema

Similar to the other two films examined in this thesis, *12 Years a Slave* is an adaptation. But, unlike the other two films, *12 Years a Slave* is tied to a real, historical memoir—the 1853 slave narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. In contrast, *Jezebel* is based on a theatrical work written by a non-Southerner, and *Mandingo* is an adaptation of a sensational novel by a Californian dog breeder. *Twelve Years a Slave* was published in 1853 and sold over thirty thousand copies, a best-seller. The book details Solomon's history from being a free man in New York, to his kidnapping and subsequent movement around plantations. The narrative

ends with Northup's rescue and liberation and return home to his family.[81] Culturally, Northup's slave narrative functioned differently than the texts that were eventually adapted into *Jezebel* and *Mandingo.* In fact, Rudyard J. Alcocer writes in the introductory essay to *Celluloid Chains: Slavery in the Americans through Film*, that there are seven distinct functions of slave narratives: to document the conditions of slavery; to persuade the reader of its evils; to impart religious inspiration; to affirm the narrator's personhood; to redefine what it means to be black; to earn money; and to delight or fascinate the reader.[82] Because the film *12 Years a Slave* is a direct adaptation of Northup's narrative, we can see it as a part of slave narrative cinema, or the cinematic retellings of slave narratives.[83]

Therefore, some of the functions of slave narratives are also transferred to their filmic adaptations. Specifically, Alcocer argues, the slave narrative film functions as an instructional tool for learning about slavery.[84] Through documenting the conditions of slavery the film can be an historically accurate text that instructs the way audiences should about history and the institution of American slavery. Further, the film might be able to achieve some of the other seven functions, such as affirming the narrator's personhood, redefining blackness, or persuading audiences of the evils of slavery.

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[81] "Summary of Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853," Documenting the American South, accessed March 3, 2021, https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/summary.html.

[82] Rudyard J. Alcocer, "The Broken Mirror of Memory: Reflections on the Power of Slavery Films," in *Celluloid Chains: Slavery in the Americans through Film,* ed. Rudyard J. Alcocer, Kristen Block, and Dawn Duke (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2018), xvii.

[83] There are some distinct differences between written slave narratives and slave narrative cinema, which Alcocer points out. Films are more collaborative than slave narratives, as more individuals are involved with production. Further, filmmakers are not formerly enslaved persons, nor do they have direct ties to one, so they lack shared perspectives and avoid the same level of threat or harm that authors of slave narratives faced. Still the function of slave narrative texts and their filmic versions function in similar ways.

[84] Alcocer, "The Broken Mirror of Memory: Reflections on the Power of Slavery Films," *Celluloid Chains,* xix.

12 Years a Slave, through its origins in the historical reality of Solomon Northup, is an act of memory. Through the lens of Northup's lived experience, the film remembers the past and plunges audiences' members into a period of history they did not experience. Alcocer writes that slavery films are so potent because they counter the visual absence of enslaved persons from the historical record. He writes that "slavery films take us back to the scene of the crime…slavery films allow viewers to actually see the crime (or to have the sensation of doing so) in a way that is closer to a real-life experience than reading about the same events in a book."[85]

By combining the real-life history of Northup's life with the visual experience of cinema, *12 Years a Slave* is a rich, often overwhelming viewing experience. The knowledge that the events of the film are historic truth, that they actually happened, give the film a weight and gravitas absent in *Jezebel* and *Mandingo.* Because the story is real, audiences understand that the events of the film truly happened, giving the story a historical meaning and an authenticity that is not present in fictional films.

Transferring Experiences: An Introduction to Prosthetic Memory

A major component of my analysis of *12 Years a Slave* and its function in creating cultural memory is Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory. In her book *Prosthetic Memory*, Landsberg outlines the central tenets of the theory and the attributes and functions of prosthetic memory in film. Landsberg argues that prosthetic memories emerge at the intersection between an individual person and a historical narrative about the past, occurring at an experiential site such as a movie theater. She writes of this intersection,

> In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history … the person does not simply apprehend a

[85] Alcocer, "The Broken Mirror of Memory," in *Celluloid Chains*, xxix.

> historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics. [86]

Prosthetic memories are made possible by the technologies of mass culture, which allow historical narratives such as those found in films to be widely shared and distributed. Their wide distribution and easy access allow anyone to acquire them. Landsberg also argues that prosthetic memories, because they are more personal and can be acquired by anyone, "challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, 'heritage,' and ownership."[87] Rather than rely on personal experiences, passed-down stories, or connection to one's heritage, prosthetic memory is broad and can exist between persons across space and time.

One of the most significant attributes and key distinctions of Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory and its broad reach is that it "does not, like many forms of memory that preceded it, simply reinforce a particular group's identity by sharing memories. Instead, it opens up those memories and identities to persons from radically different backgrounds."[88] This is a particularly relevant distinction of prosthetic memory that is important to keep in mind while I consider the films in this thesis and the memories they passed on. Earlier films, such as those during the Deep South cycle, functioned to reinforce group identity by establishing Antebellum racial hierarchies and gender roles. Rather than highlight individual lived experiences, these films portrayed larger-scale social systems. In *12 Years a Slave,* the focus on individual lived experiences allows for the transferal of prosthetic memories. Though the geographic and temporal distance between audiences and the characters of the film are vast, the focus on human experiences—both emotional and physical—transcend distances and help audiences connect

[86] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory,* 2.
[87] Landsberg, 3.
[88] Ibid., 11.

with the story and individuals onscreen. This connection leads to prosthetic memories and a deeper understanding of the past.

In the cultural and historic context of *12 Years a Slave*, the ability for the film to transfer prosthetic memories is significant. The film does not dwell on sweeping romances or hypersexualized drama. By focusing on individual experience, the film depicts the brutality of slavery and the cruelty of white enslavers in a more realistic way. Through the singular narrative focus on Solomon Northup, the film exposes the horrors of slavery, confronting the false cultural memory of previous films that portrayed slavery as a benevolent institution. Further, it centers the black experience. Instead of presenting a racial hierarchy of white aristocrats and a black slave class, the film privileges the experiences of enslaved black people and their personal experience. These stories were absent from earlier films, intentionally denied by representational convention that rested on racist mythologies about the Old South. However, *12 Years a Slave* is determined to portray their experiences to engage audience members in prosthetic memory making and put forth a more comprehensive cultural memory of the Antebellum South.

Precise and Unflinching: *12 Years a Slave* and the Body

In her essay "This Film Called My Back: Black Pain and Painful History in *12 Years a Slave*," Janell Hobson details the careful way director Steve McQueen handles violence in the film. She writes that McQueen "plunges to the depths of black pain and trauma" with a directorial approach that is "precise, unflinching, and fixated on the body in pain."[89] Throughout the film, McQueen focuses on the intimate ways in which human bodies are manipulated,

[89] Janell Hobson, "This Film Called My Back: Black Pain and Painful History in *12 Years a Slave*," in *Celluloid Chains: Slavery in the Americas through Film*, ed. Rudyard J. Alcocer, Kristen Block, and Dawn Duke (Knoxville: The University of Tennesse Press, 2018), 266.

violated, and exploited by white Southerners in the Antebellum South. Through close-ups, long takes, and barren soundscapes, *12 Years a Slave* forces viewers to focus on the human body. I argue that through this such great focus and attention, viewers recall their own bodies and their common humanity with the characters onscreen, activating prosthetic memories and deeper connection with the past.

Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is our entry point into the story, our guide through the horrific Antebellum landscape, even though we do not stay with his point of view the entire film. At times *12 Years a Slave* resembles a horror film, with heightened suspense and threats and acts of violence. The premise even feels like a horror story: a father kidnapped and forced into a terrifying landscape with the threat of death at every turn. Once such horror scene occurs on the transport ship following Solomon's initial kidnapping. The scene opens with an overhead shot of the blood-red rudder chopping through the waves, while a mechanized score alerts the viewer. It is a shocking change between earlier scenes of bright New York life accompanied by a violin-heavy score. On the ship, Solomon discusses the possibility of mutiny with two other men who believe they have enough strength to overpower the ship's crew. Once the decide their plan, the suspense begins. The scene is dark, with only patches of orange light provided by lanterns. Will their plot be successful? The viewer hangs in suspense until the moment of contact between a slave and a crewmate. The camera closely focused in on their faces, we hear the distinct sound of a stabbing and watch the enslaved man's horror and the crewmate's ease as he takes a life.

This scene also presents a distinct turning point for Solomon. A life is carelessly taken before him, and he realizes the callous nature in which white men will kill enslaved persons. The next morning, after Solomon tosses the body overboard, he remains, and the camera holds on him watching the ocean beneath. "Better off. Better than us," another man remarks offscreen to

Solomon. From this point forward, Solomon will be on a constant balance beam, both witnessing the disposability of black bodies around him and the terror that he could be disposed of as well.

Following Solomon's ship ride, he arrives in a slave market. As he enters the port, the camera establishes the other enslaved persons around the market, cutting to different shots of individuals. A pair stand in chains, their scar-laden backs facing the camera. A man stares blankly at the ground, the side of his face a mass of purple scarring. Another man, distinctly older with graying hair, looks straight ahead and rests his handless arm on his leg. This brief scene gives early insight into the brutal world that Solomon has been thrust into. The violence is not only quick and unflinching like the murder on the ship, but also deeply etched into the bodies within the institution of slavery. Violence and trauma are manifest in scarred black bodies in and are evidence of the longevity of such violence. It is a reminder to the audience of the long-lasting effects of slavery, as well as a warning to Solomon as he observes: if you do not submit, you will be subject to the horrific acts that produced such grisly scars.

Violence of all forms—physical, sexual, emotional—courses through the narrative, linking the enslaved characters in shared trauma and mutual understanding of pain. It is through McQueen's formal aspects of framing and editing that this violence is communicated to the audience in such a way that is able to produce prosthetic memories, to connect to the people of the present to the people of the past. Landsberg argues in *Prosthetic Memory* that film is an instrument with the capability to mediate these prosthetic memories. "The cinema, then, might be imagined as a site in which people experience a bodily, mimetic encounter with a past that is not theirs," she writes.[90] McQueen's use of violence creates such mimetic encounters that complicate the depictions of enslaved individuals in earlier Antebellum period films and constructs new

[90] Landsberg, 14.

cultural memories for contemporary audiences. Even more than simply constructing new cultural memories, *12 Years a Slave* reveals their inadequacy at retelling the historical truth of the period.

Scenes depicting violence against Solomon are most notable in conveying these prosthetic memories. Since Solomon is our formerly free narrative guide, violence against him reads as particularly tragic, and through formal techniques this violence is portrayed in a way that is hard to ignore. No more obfuscation—the violence of enslavers and the trauma of the enslaved is on full display. Rather than disorienting cuts, close-ups of Solomon's face and his body force viewers to confront physical pain. Excruciatingly long takes renders the agony nearly inescapable. Hobson notes that McQueen's approach to violence is direct. "The humiliation of slavery will be unwatchable, and yet McQueen's camera unflinchingly bears witness to this 'unspeakable' history," she writes.[91]

Solomon's near hanging on Ford's plantation is one scene that illustrates this unflinchingly portrayal of violence. Tibeats (Paul Dano), one of the overseers on Ford's plantation, criticizes Solomon's construction of a house. Solomon refutes Tibeats' claims and the two begin fighting. Solomon easily overpowers Tibeats and pins him to the ground, using Tibeats' own whip to lash him. Another overseer, Chapin (J.D. Evermore), stops them, though Tibeats warns that he "will have flesh." Tibeats returns later in the day with two other men and the three bind Solomon's arms and legs and begin to hang him on a tree. They string him up off the ground, Solomon gagging and writhing, before Chapin returns to force Tibeats away, asserting Solomon as Ford's property and dropping Solomon so his toes stay on the ground. But, once Tibeats leaves, Chapin does not help Solomon down. He leaves him on the edge—Solomon only supporting himself with his tiptoes.

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[91] Hobson, "This Film Called My Back: Black Pain and Painful History in *12 Years a Slave*," *Celluloid Chains*, 267.

Though the triangulation of property ownership and punishment between Ford, Chapin, and Tibeats is revealing of the dehumanization of enslaved persons in the Antebellum South, it is the scene of Solomon's near hanging that forces audiences to reckon with the careless violence of the time period. Once Chapin leaves, there is a high-angle close-up of Solomon's straining face and close-up of his shoes, saturated with mud and shifting to balance on his toes. Then, for nearly a minute and a half, we watch Solomon hang. Using a long shot, Solomon is positioned in the side of the frame, isolated from his environment. As Solomon had been our narrative center, his positioning at the edge of the frame is jarring. He moves slightly, continuously shifting his weight. There is no soundtrack, and the scene is largely silent save for Solomon's groans, insect noise, and the faint noises of other enslaved persons emerging from their cabins to get back to work. The scene continues for over a minute, the audience forced to sit and watch Solomon struggle. With few other sounds and no score or soundtrack, Solomon's violent situation is emphasized.

The scene is broken when a young girl runs up to Solomon to give him a drink of water. In a medium close up, we see the girl pour water into Solomon's mouth, his face white and cracking from dehydration. The next sequence shows Solomon continuing to hang as the day passes and life on the plantation goes on without him. In one shot, Solomon remains close in the edge of the frame, out of focus, while the camera focuses on a group of children playing and laughing behind him. In another, Solomon hangs just off-center, only his head framed and out of focus, while Mistress Ford (Liza J. Bennett) watches from the balcony. In another shot, the lighting has changed, with dark shadows cast over Solomon's body and a yellow glowing sky to indicate dusk and the passage of time. Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) eventually gallops up to the tree, hurries off his horse, and cuts the rope, dropping Solomon to the ground.

Through its extended runtime, Solomon's near hanging illustrates the casualness and carelessness of violence on a plantation. As Solomon struggles, other laborers go about their day, children play, and white people watch without doing anything. Meanwhile, we watch Solomon's body nearly deteriorate, his skin drying out and turning white. Solomon's positioning—his balancing act to avoid strangling—also symbolizes the violent experience of enslavement in the Antebellum period. Enslaved persons were constantly on the brink of death, always under constant threat of violence perpetuated by white Southerners. McQueen's use of long takes, close ups, and varying depth of field pulls viewers into the violence and to forces them to sit uncomfortably through it. Violence against enslaved persons is not fully obfuscated as it is in *Jezebel.* Though *Mandingo* depicts violence, it does so in a way that focuses on the action, with disorienting quick cuts. In *12 Years a Slave,* McQueen forces audiences to sit with the violence and to watch it all unfold, accentuating the bodily reaction by isolating the sounds of Solomon's grunting and gasping and highlighting his face as it slowly deforms from the near-strangulation. In this way, the film produces prosthetic memories of the Antebellum South as callously violent and deeply painful. These prosthetic memories stand in stark contrast to—and a rebuttal of—those collective memories propped up from films of the Deep South cycle or blaxploitation era. In contrast, they construct a cultural memory of the Antebellum period that recognizes the endlessly ruthless violence against enslaved black bodies.

As Rudyard J. Alcocer argues, "slavery films take us back to the scene of the crime, as it were: a crime that involved to a significant degree physical, visible transgression against the enslaved."[92] Film as a visual media is crucial here, as audience members can *see* the effects of slavery, not just read about them in a book. Crime scenes such as Solomon's hanging are not

[92] Rudyard J. Alcocer, "The Broken Mirror of Memory: Reflections.

only visible, but McQueen's long takes immerse the audience into the suffering. Alcocer adds that depictions of slavery on film "transcend mere voyeurism; instead, they allow viewers to inhabit and share in a visual way the 'world' of their ancestors."[93] In the case of *12 Years a Slave*, this world is cruel and often violent. The "world of the ancestors" was not *Jezebel*'s genial, languid Louisiana plantation, nor was it *Mandingo*'s pulpy, sexualized Falconhurst. Through unflinching and precise depictions of violence, *12 Years a Slave* exposes the harsh reality of life in the Antebellum South.

New Conceptions of Southern Femininity

In the Deep South cycle films of classical Hollywood, the main female archetype was the Southern belle, a white aristocratic woman exemplified by characters such as Julie in *Jezebel* and Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*. The Southern belle was passionate and knew her role as a white woman, understanding both the bounds of her race and her gender and the expectations that came with both. Still, the Southern Belle was rebellious and pushed the limits of social acceptance, as we saw with Julie's infamous ballgown. The Southern belle was a figure for audiences to look up to, a figure of lost womanhood that only existed in the Antebellum South and was lost with modernity.

However, the reality of Southern white women in the Antebellum period was far removed from their cultural depictions in films. *Mandingo* began to consider a more truthful representation of white female characters, though the nuance was tempered with pulpy action and hypersexuality. *12 Years a Slave* achieves a more accurate portrayal of a white Antebellum Southern woman in the character of Mrs. Epps. Played by Sarah Paulson, we are first introduced

[93] Alcocer, Block, and Duke, *Celluloid Chains*, pp.

to Mrs. Epps when Solomon first arrives at the Epps plantation. As Mr. Epps (Michael Fassbender) reads out scripture justifying the whipping of enslaved persons, the camera pans to Mrs. Epps, standing stoically behind her husband. Though she might not be the one whipping the enslaved persons on her plantation, she is still a silent witness to her husband's atrocities.

Mrs. Epp's major conflict in the film is with Patsey, played by Lupita Nyong'o. The young, enslaved girl is a dutiful laborer, regularly bringing in more pounds of cotton than any other enslaved worker on the plantation. This attracts the attention of Epps, who takes careful notice of Patsey and prizes and deifies her for her work. Mrs. Epps catches on to her husband's interest in Patsey, as she is shown keeping careful watch over the girl from the porch of her large manor. One night, Epps wakes up all his workers, drunkenly stirring them from their sleep to force them to come into his home and dance for him. The scene is an inversion of *Jezebel*'s depiction of the enslaved chorus gathering around Julie. While in *Jezebel* the enslaved characters were depicted as joyful and eager in their performance, the slaves on Epps' plantation are forced to perform under fear of punishment.

The scene cuts to inside the home, where Solomon and some other men play instruments while the women and boys dance in a circle, half asleep and dragging their feet across the floor. Epps claps along with the music, yelling at them to dance. All the while he stares at Patsey, dancing in her nightgown in the middle of the group. Mrs. Epps notices her husband staring and, without speaking, picks up a glass decanter of whiskey and chucks it directly at Patsey's face. She does so with a completely straight face, walking up to Epps afterward and demanding that he sell her. As Patsey cries out in the background, Mrs. Epps repeats her demand, telling Epps that if she does not sell Patsey she will leave him. Epps refuses and she eventually gives up, walking away from the violence she inflicted.

This scene illustrates white women's complicity and active participation in the suffering of enslaved persons on plantations in the Old South. White women were not kind, generous Southern belles who called their slaves "Uncle" and treated them like friends. White women could be just as violent and cruel as the male enslavers, especially when their relationship with their husband was threatened. Mrs. Epps notices her husband's attention towards Patsey, and she is perceptive enough to recognize her husband's power over Patsey that he could wield to sexually abuse her. Patsey threatens Mrs. Epps's femininity, sexuality, and her relationship with her husband, so Mrs. Epps violently lashes out.

In a later scene, Mrs. Epps pauses another performance by the workers for Mr. Epps, stepping in to give them all a baked good she made for them. This seems like a gesture of goodwill—finally the Southern belle is being generous to her servants—but she has another plan. As Patsey reaches to take a pastry, Mrs. Epps scolds her, telling her she is not allowed to take one. Without provocation, Mrs. Epps looks to her husband, telling him that Patsey looked at her with "hot, hateful scorn." Mr. Epps tries not to engage with her, telling her it was nothing, but she goes on to criticize his treatment of his slaves, claiming that he allows them to have "idle thoughts" and he is "manless" for not appropriately disciplining them. "If you won't stand for me, I pray that you'd at least be a credit to your own kind and beat every foul thought from 'em," she asserts before walking up to Patsey and scratching her from her eye down her cheek.

Once again, Mrs. Epps uses violence to assert her dominance over Patsey. The withholding of the pastry was mere bullying compared to the physical violence Mrs. Epps so nonchalantly exerted upon Patsey, focusing her wrath upon the most visible part of her body—her face. By scratching her eye and cheek, every time Mr. Epps looked at Patsey he would be reminded of his wife's violence—a permanent warning etched into her skin. Before her violent

outburst, Mrs. Epps also makes an inherently gendered attack on her husband, questioning his masculinity for not keeping slaves like Patsey under control. Rather than her earlier, more direct request that Mr. Epps sell Patsey, this insult hinges on affronting her husband's adherence to Southern gender roles. By insulting his masculinity, she hopes she could trick him into beating slaves like Patsey, which would reassert Mrs. Epps role as the object of her husband's affection.

Overall, Mrs. Epps is not a warm Southern belle like Julie. Underneath her lavish hoop-skirted dresses and expensive jewelry, she is cold, calculating, and unafraid of violently lashing out at the enslaved laborers that work on her plantation. Though she might try and give a false sense of welcoming femininity, she is threatened by the presence of female slaves like Patsey and attacks her in order to display her dominance. The portrayal of Mrs. Epps stands in direct contrast to the previous film portrayals of white women in the Antebellum South, and the character is a more truthful representation of the role that white women played on plantations and the complex web of relations between the enslaver, the enslaved, and the enslaver's wife. The character of Mrs. Epps seeks to adjust the cultural memory of the Southern Belle by revealing the violence and complicity of real white women in the Antebellum period. Though the cause of their violence is similar, Mrs. Epps is a step up from Blanche and her outburst in *Mandingo,* as Mrs. Epps tries to be active in the management of the slaves.

The cultural memory of lady-like white southern femininity is not the only gendered memory that is revised in *12 Years a Slave.* Through characters such as Patsey and Eliza, the film portrays black femininity that is trapped in the sexual economy of slavery. In *Jezebel,* enslaved black women like Zette were docile, with no interiority or evidence of the violence of slavery. In *Mandingo*, audiences finally got a more intricate look into the sexual economy of slavery and constructions of black femininity through characters such as Ellen. The sexual

economy of slavery and the intricate power relationships upholding this economy are not scrutinized in *Mandingo,* though McQueen is more critical in *12 Years a Slave* through Patsey's experiences on Epp's plantation. The portrayal of Patsey deconstructs the historical memory in *Mandingo* that enslaved women enjoyed sexual relations or were content to enter into sexual relations with them. Patsey is a more truthful representation of the traumatic and exploitative sexual economy of slavery, revising prior filmic representations and, by extension, cultural memory of the Antebellum period and the black women who survived it.

We are first introduced to Patsey through her labor on Epp's cotton plantation. A close up shot of her hands shows her gathering cotton, her fingers expertly picking the cotton bolls from the plant. Her speed and effortlessness are emphasized in the next shot, which shows a frustrated Solomon slowly pulling apart the plants. In the next scene we learn that Patsey picked five hundred and twelve pounds of cotton that day, exceeding the overseer's estimate of two hundred pounds a day on average. "You menfolk got no shame, letting Patsey out-pick you," Epps jests. The camera tracks his movement behind the enslaved men, who look down in shame as he passes. When he gets to Patsey he gazes upon her and grips her shoulders. "Queen of the fields, she is," Epps says in amazement. All the while, Patsey stares offscreen as if she is disassociating from the man behind her, who slowly begins to trace his finger up her neck. "And God gave her to me," he finishes, in disbelief of his own good fortune.

Patsey's title as "queen of the fields" is not noble. It commodifies her reduces her to her labor, her capacity for production that will ultimately benefit Epps. This scene not only foreshadows the sexual relationship between Patsey and Epps, but also Patsey's value to the economy of slavery and the financial fulfilment she provides for Epps. In his essay "Economies of Joy and Terror in *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*," Zachary Price considers the

representation of enslaved bodies and their portrayal as "commodities that perform economies of 'pleasure and terror'."[94] He writes of the bodily economy of slavery and Patsey's role within in as "an economy of bodies in which the full enjoyment of the slave as thing depends upon unbounded authority and the totalizing consumption of the body and its fungibility. Patsey as free laborer is queen of the field in her ability to barrel cotton as well as fulfilling Epps's sexual fetish."[95] Patsey's labor and her sexuality are on display, unlike the black women in *Jezebel* or *Mandingo*. In this early scene, *12 Years a Slave* is already beginning to portray a more nuanced history of the terrible position of black women in the Antebellum South, and their simultaneous economic and sexual objectification.

McQueen depicts Patsey's sexual objectification in a similar way to how he depicts violence against Solomon, as seen in the scene of his hanging. Rather than a wide shot that puts violence of Solomon on full display to the plantation, McQueen handles Epps rape of Patsey with tight isolation. The scene begins with a close-up of Epps and Patsey, standing face to face in the blue moonlight. Epps pushes Patsey down with his head and the camera moves with them as Patsey lies back and stares off into the distance behind Epps's shoulder. Again, there is no soundtrack, only the sounds of insects chirping and the grunting and heavy breathing of Epps as he thrusts himself into Patsey's seemingly lifeless body. It is an extremely disconcerting scene, and the shot continues for over one minute, forcing viewers to sit in their discomfort. The shot is broken when Epps suddenly strikes Patsey's face, a visual and auditory shock that reinforces Epps's power over Patsey and the inherent violence of their relationship.

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[94] Zachary Price, "Economies of Enjoyment and Terror in *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*," *The Postcolonialist* 2, no. 2 (2015): 1.
[95] Price, "Economies of Enjoyment and Terror in *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*," 11.

In a later scene, Patsey begs Solomon to kill her and end her life of misery. “How can you fall into such despair?” Solomon asks, dumbfounded that Patsey would ask him to commit such an ungodly act. “How can you not know?” Patsey replies. “I ain’t got no comfort in this life.” In Hobson’s essay, she argues that Patsey’s interiority is illegible in the film and that she only functions to be an object of the audience’s horror. “Indeed, the focal point for much of Patsey’s suffering…is on her body, from scarred back to disfigured eye (at the hands of her mistress),” she writes, “Patsey’s body is the object of our horror and pity, while her internal reflections remain hidden.”[96] Though I agree that Patsey’s body is often used throughout the film as a site for violence and suffering, scenes such as her conversation with Solomon give intimate details into her feelings. It is not a fully formed, nuanced interiority, but her confession to Solomon is radical in that she articulates her sufferings, something that the enslaved women in *Mandingo* were not given an opportunity to do. Her deepest, darkest internal reflections come out to Solomon and they illustrate the traumatic plight of enslaved black women, a plight only escapable in death. “There is God here,” she tells Solomon, the camera close on the scarred side of her face. “God is merciful, and he forgive merciful acts.” In her pleading, she shows that her suffering is so immense that killing her would be the righteous thing to do.

Patsey’s reflections further revise the role of enslaved black women in the filmic cultural memory of the Antebellum period. Previous depictions of enslaved women obfuscated the existence of a sexual economy of slavery at all, or they recognized the sexual power dynamics of a plantation and romanticized it. The commodification of Patsey’s labor and her body as a sexual object make clear the historical reality of the sexual economy of slavery and revise collective memories of black femininity in the Antebellum period.

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[96] Hobson, 269.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, *12 Years a Slave* was a major cultural phenomenon when it premiered in 2013. The film came at a time when conversations about race in the United States were prevalent, something that Hobson links to a "hypervisibility of successful African Americans," namely leaders such a President Barack Obama. McQueen said himself that the film "wouldn't have been made if Obama wasn't president,"[97] underscoring the relationship between the first black President and a new cinematic exploration of American slavery and the Antebellum period. Therefore, the visibility of black leaders enabled new, honest filmic representations of the terror once inflicted upon black Americans. This terror had been continuously obscured or glossed over in previous films set in the Antebellum period, but *12 Years a Slave* set out to reconstruct the collective memories and understanding of the past. Where Southern Belles once stood as bastions of refined white femininity, Mrs. Epps is manipulative, using her power to enact violence assert her authority. While the trauma of hard labor and physical and sexual violence within the institution of slavery was dramatized or left out completely from previous films, *12 Years a Slave* forces the viewer to sit with the suffering caused by enslavers. It is not an enjoyable watch, nor is it an escape to a romantic agrarian past. It is a brutally emotional viewing experience, and while it cannot possible equal the experience of its characters, through this experience we are able to empathize with real individuals from the past and use their own history to inform our cultural memories of the past. If we imagine *12 Years a Slave* in the timeline of cinematic constructions of cultural memory, the film virtually erases the myths proliferated in *Jezebel* and *Mandingo*.

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[97] Alcocer, Block, and Duke, *Celluloid Chains*, 265.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have touched on films from three distinct time periods, in sum spanning decades of American history and acknowledgement of the Antebellum period. *Jezebel, Mandingo,* and *12 Years a Slave* each illustrate a continued attempt to remember the past. It is a past that is incredibly fraught, and the action of remembering itself is political. Our cultural memory of the Antebellum period has morphed over time, shifting its focus from aristocratic whites and the luxuries of the plantation to the trauma and horror faced by black persons in the American institution of slavery. This is something uniquely seen in McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, the most contemporary film I analyzed. In her essay on the film, Hobson writes that through the film "slavery raises its horrific and ugly head and casts its long, eerie shadow onto history."[98]

Whether it be in these films, in our history textbooks, or our physical landscape of monument and memorials, it seems that we are still trying to define this cultural memory. We are still navigating the eerie shadow of slavery in our society and through our media. As Aleida Assmann describes, the process of cultural remembering is active, highly complex, and sometimes problematic as it can "bring together temporal extension with the threat of distortion, reduction, and manipulation that can only be averted through continuous public criticism, reflection, and discussion."[99] This thesis demonstrates how Hollywood has constructed cultural memory over time. I argued that past films have distorted and reduced elements of the historic reality of the Antebellum period and it has taken continued mediation to attempt to get closer to the truth. I agree with Assmann that it must take continuous collective reflection on the past to accurately reckon with it and determine how we remember and how we move forward.

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[98] Hobson, 273.
[99] A. Assmann, 6.

In 2019, Jeremy O. Harris' groundbreaking *Slave Play* premiered on Broadway. The play details three interracial couples participating in Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy. By reenacting Antebellum scenes and characters—all the way down to Southern dialects, costuming, and staging—the couples perform their racial differences and reconstruct a past they did not live through. In the last act, entitled "Exorcise," Kaneisha, a black woman, remembers her past visits to plantations and "meeting" her enslaved ancestors. It is an emotional sequence, an excavation of memory linked to the Antebellum period and an attempt to understand it and one's relationship to it. It is reminiscent of how Erll describe the creation of individual and collective memories. "Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past," she writes, "but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present."[100]

Though it is not a film, I bring up *Slave Play* as an important contemporary example of our continue negotiation of cultural memory about the Antebellum Period. It is an act of remembering that did not end with *12 Years a Slave*, radical and successful as it was. Remembering the Old South and the specificities of how and what we remember continues to play out in media such as *Slave Play* or in Southern state legislatures deciding what to do about Confederate monuments. I believe *Slave Play* offers something unique in its construction of memory. The action of the past is linked to the actors in the present, echoing Erll's statement that cultural memory "is oriented towards the needs and interests of the group in the present."[101] Perhaps *Slave Play* could help orient us towards a future of collective remembering about the Antebellum Period, one that recognizes the role of the present in its construction of the past and foregrounds the tension between the two.

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[100] Erll, 8.
[101] Erll, 17.

Until then, we are continuing to negotiate how remember the Old South. How does it function in our physical landscapes? How do we see the Old South onscreen? And who do we place at the foreground of our memories—who tells the stories of our past? In this thesis I have examined the failures and successes of individual films in conveying historically accurate cultural memory. Between 1938 and 2013 there has been *enormous* change, which I describe in relation to depictions of race and gender. However, there is still likely room to grow and learn, room for new voices to be heard and stories to be told. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, McPherson suggests new subjective understandings of the South that are removed from the iconography and tropes of the plantation. She writes out her goals:

> We need to think of the South as a dialectic between tradition and change, a relationship in process, in flux, in movement. We need models of southern mixedness less rooted in the abstractions of poststructuralism and the politics of difference and more rooted in the learned lessons of everyday life in the South, a life that is not finally reducible to the iconic status of certain southern symbols but is instead fluid and changeable.[102]

Our cinematic representations of the Old South and the cultural memory of the period have been in flux since the Deep South cycle. Though I cannot predict where Hollywood will go next, I am sure that it will eventually return to the South and to the symbols that have captured our imagination for so long.

[102] McPherson, 31.

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