



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue Moderne per la Comunicazione e la Cooperazione Internazionale
Classe LM-38

Tesi di Laurea

*Black Heroes in the United States:
the Representation of African Americans in
Contemporary American Culture*

Relatore
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Anno Accademico 2016 / 2017



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Preface

The present study analyzes how the representation of African Americans in the United States has changed from the years of slavery to the present. Initially perceived by vast parts of the white population as subhumans and economic goods, black people are nowadays considered equals the rest of the American population, and are granted the same rights of every other citizen of the US. However, the identification of African Americans as wild, uncultured, and reminiscent of animals is not a phenomenon belonging exclusively to the period of slavery, as it represents the basis of modern racial discrimination and intolerance. It is one of the objectives of this study to determine how racism still affects the contemporary popular culture of the US and to understand its effects on the modern representation of black identity. In order to provide a complete picture of the topic, each chapter of this research discusses the contemporary representation of blackness from different perspectives.

The first chapter of the study provides a general overview of the African American experience in the United States from slavery to contemporary years. The chapter analyzes the different perceptions of the American white population towards the phenomenon of slavery in the past, and how both the supporters and the detractors of this institution introduced their own portrayals of blackness in popular culture, defining the identity of African Americans in a time when the media were controlled exclusively by white people.

Despite being initially created as depictions of the behavior of black people during slavery, these depictions of African Americans continue to influence the general perception of blackness in the US in the present days. The latter sections of the chapter show how racial stereotypes that were created during the years of slavery represent the base of contemporary racism and discrimination towards the African American community in many parts of the country.

The topic of the second chapter is the representation of African Americans in contemporary cinema, specifically in the genre of black films. This part of the thesis focuses on determining how influential the racial stereotypes introduced in the previous chapter are in mainstream media, and how they are presented to audiences of all ethnicities. The plot of various movies is analyzed to establish how the African American experience is portrayed to popular culture, and whether films can successfully manage to contradict the credibility of racial tropes. The primary focus of the chapter is that of identifying black heroic characters in movies belonging to different genres and determining whether the personalities of these figures are created on the basis of popular tropes. The analysis also extends to the ways in which critics and the general public perceive these fictional characters, and highlights how media has become an important instrument to discuss the memory of slavery and the identity of African American slaves.

The last chapter of the thesis explores the events of the Southampton insurrection of 1831 led by the slave rebel Nat Turner. Very few documents of historical value provide a description of the facts of the uprising, and, to this day, the identity of Turner remains shrouded in mystery, because an accurate portrayal of the man has become impossible to

recreate. As a consequence, the memory of Nat Turner has become the subject of various different interpretations enacted by both black and white personalities. Because of the lack of sources of historical information, many of these interpretations of the slave leader are bound to be influenced by their author's perspective towards the subject and perception of black identity. While some have portrayed Turner as a mythical hero and representative of black resistance against the oppression of slavery, others have described him as a more credible figure whose role as a rebel leader was determined by his influence over other black slaves. This part of the study examines the various portrayals of Nat Turner in media and their differences, to illustrate the various ways in which the slave experience is depicted in the present and how relevant racial tropes and archetypes still are in these depictions.

The primary aim of this research is to determine how the modern representation of African Americans in the US is affected by the influence of racial stereotypes and tropes that have originated in the past. The thesis examines how relevant these tropes are today in mass media, and whether efforts are being made in mainstream culture to contrast their credibility and to provide a depiction of African American identity that is grounded in historical facts and memory.

Chapter One:

**The Western Victimization of African
Americans during and after Slavery**

The social identity of blacks in the United States has been affected by stereotypes since the early years of colonization to the present. Members of the African American race were generally judged by whites on the basis of prejudices originated from the depiction of African culture as primitive and ignorant of any morals that defined Western society. Archetypes aimed at influencing the perception on blacks and establishing their position in Western society as servants that were denied the rights of whites because of their supposed unintelligent and lazy nature. By depicting the members of the black race as simpleminded, white Americans were able to legitimize slavery as a necessary means for educating them to the standards of civilization. However, the apparently noble function of stereotypes served only as an excuse for exploiting the labor of entire generations of blacks and influencing their social status in a negative way even after the abolition of slavery was enacted.

I will begin this chapter by discussing the various ways in which stereotypes have been popularized prior and after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 and how they have affected American popular culture. I will also highlight how this biased representation of African Americans persists today in the form of discrimination and social inequalities. My main aim through the chapter will be highlighting how the emancipation process failed to identify blacks as equal to whites, and in explaining why black freedom does not provide African Americans with the same social status of whites.

1.1 - Visual Culture in Propaganda

Slavery became a legal institution in the United States from the early years of colonization, but was never a universal phenomenon to the entire territory of the country. Various states in the north of the country actively opposed it and the exploitation of black labor became mainly as a typical trait of southern plantations where land owners would force blacks to work to maximize production in the fields. Tensions between the states which were contrary to slavery and those which considered it a necessary part of their economies would culminate in the American Civil War in 1861, but the two sides engaged in a battle of propaganda much earlier. Both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists used visual culture and other media to promote their own depictions of the black slave in the effort of representing slavery as a good or bad aspect of American society.

Southerners would for the most part be interested in strengthening the credibility of African American stereotypes in order to convince the population that freeing the slaves and giving them the same rights guaranteed to whites was an unacceptable possibility because of their supposed immorality and occasionally violent behavior. Slavery was thus disguised as an educational institution, while in reality it involved the infliction of torture and physical pain on blacks in order to force them into total submission and convincing them that complete obedience and passivity would be the only means for survival¹.

As Koigi Wa Wamwere writes in his book "I Refuse To Die: My Journey for Freedom", where he narrates the experience of English colonialism in modern Kenya,

1

control of the body and the mind is crucial:

Having judged us as primitive, the white man proceeded to tell us, The reason I have killed and conquered you is not because I want to steal your land, minerals, timber and labor but because I want to civilize you (or turn you into what I am). In other words, I want to turn you into the one who kills you, transform you into your own enemy! [...] And how did the colonizing white man mean to civilize us? By destroying African civilizations, imposing slavery on Africa and claiming the slave house to be superior to African culture. [...] Once African civilizations had been axed, African societies were collected from the ground and grafted to the tree of European civilization. Although never fully included, their blood, sweat and resources were welcomed. So the white man did not come to Africa to develop us or make us his equal. He came to rob us. He came to enslave us. He came to eat us up.²

This passage exemplifies the true nature behind the educational façade of slavery: its purpose was not the social progress of a different people through the example of Western society, but their incorporation in Western society itself. This assimilation in a system dominated by whites would put Africans under the jurisdiction and laws of whites, thus stripping them of any chance of escaping from captivity.

Plantation life gave birth to specific tropes that became so popular among the

² Koigi Wa Wamwere, *I Refuse to Die: My Journey for Freedom*, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2003, p. 66-67

American population that some of them have survived to the present: the “Sambo” archetype stands out as the most powerful as it described slaves as naive and relatively happy with their submissive conditions, while at the same time it portrayed them as irresponsible, lazy and basically incapable of taking care of themselves. The black man supposedly shared very little with the typical morals and traits of the white man, so much so that the dominant member in the black family was actually a female, the “Mammy”. Mammy was yet another stereotype, directed at the black woman and depicting her as proud of their duties as domestic servant, and at the same time lacking the attractiveness of white women: Mammy was fat, strong, ugly and ultimately sexless. She was loyal to her white masters and mistresses and happy with her life as a slave, just like Sambo.

However, archetypes in the South were not created just to depict African Americans as willing to serve. Their general function was that of hiding the fact that slavery allowed the opportunistic exploitation of human beings since it labeled them as simple property. Archetypes existed to justify the actions of slaveholders or exonerate them of some of their actions while shifting their own immorality to their property. The “Jezebel” image is a clear example of this: Jezebel was yet another female stereotype that differentiated the black woman in every way from the typical white lady as she was promiscuous and lustful, with an excessive sexual appetite (which is stereotypically attributed to men). Slave owners used this image to justify their forced procreation among slaves and basically protect themselves from the accusation of abusing African American women, who could not defend themselves from rape.

While slaveholders generally portrayed slaves as happy with their conditions in plantation life, the actual treatment they reserved to their “black property” would lead some of them to rebel against their owners and shed the blood of white slavers. Slave

uprisings in the United States were a relatively rare phenomenon if compared to those that took place in the Caribbean colonies, but they still represented a clear proof of blacks evidently not being content with their status as slaves. However, these insurrections would be used as propagandistic material by southerners to generate negative tropes and atrocity literature, as they represented the perfect opportunity to depict blacks as potential savages with a thirst for the blood of whites.³ Southerners pushed the idea that the free black man was meant to be feared because he could act on impulse like any animal, and would therefore behave in potentially dangerous ways when given the chance. Because of this, leaders of rebellions such as Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and many others were demonized and made objects to future controversies in public memory instead of being recognized as freedom fighters.

On the other hand, abolitionist iconography adopted a series of symbols in a campaign opposing human trafficking and slavery. Northerners refused to perceive African Americans as subhumans and condemned slavery as an institution that destroyed the integrity of black communities and families for economic profit. Antislavery visual culture aimed at making the American public aware of the contradictory nature of slavery in a country that was born from principles of democracy and freedom. Unfortunately, as I will explain in the course of this chapter, the iconography used by the abolitionist movement created its own stereotypical interpretation of the African American slave, one which still proves problematic in the present.

One of the most powerful symbols in abolitionist iconography was that of slave

³ Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation*, Athens, Georgia Press, 2010, p. 169

ships. Slave ships were used by slavers to transport blacks from the shores of their homeland, Africa, to America. The white crew would imprison huge quantities of blacks in the interior decks and leave them there until the voyage ended. Navigating all the way from Africa to North America would take a very long period of time, during which a number of slaves would perish because of the unhealthy conditions in which they were left inside the ship. The message that abolitionists tried to convey through their propaganda involving slave ships was the notion that slaves were basically treated as any other goods during the journey through the Atlantic ocean. Abolitionist prints and engravings would usually portray diagrams of the interior decks of slave ships, where the whole space would be occupied by the silhouettes of hundreds of slaves arranged in rows, motionless and faceless. Each slave was shackled to another and any movement was made impossible by the lack of free space in the deck.

When in 1839 the slaves transported in the ship *Amistad* revolted against their white captors and successfully managed to take control of the ship and finally regain their freedom⁴, the event was celebrated by American northerners as it demonstrated that, contrarily to what southern propaganda affirmed, blacks actually cared for their freedom and they would resort to violence not for mere blood lust but in the pursuit of that same principle that was at the roots of the United States of America. The *Amistad* insurrection was one of the very few rebellions that abolitionists would make use of in their campaign against slavery, as in that situation the United States did not cover the role of slavers, but of saviors of slaves. The ship was commanded by a Spanish crew, but the transported blacks revolted and took control of it. The *Amistad* was then approached by an American

⁴ Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation*, Athens, Georgia Press, 2010, p. 166

brig, and while the Spanish government declared the ship and slaves to be its property, the United States, which had at that point banned African trade, argued that those slaves were actually free men.

Another important trope in abolitionist culture highlighting the fact that slavery treated African Americans as animals was that of the auction block, which usually represented the following step in the experience of black slaves after surviving the harshness of the Middle Passage. They would be exhibited in an auction block, where masters would view and buy them as property just as if slaves were nothing more than farm animals. Auction blocks dehumanized blacks and transformed them into goods. The commercialization of human beings represented maybe the most brutal aspect of slavery, as the treatment of slaves as property led to the use of violence on them for the purpose of erasing their identities as free men. The condemnation of the methods in which African Americans were “marked” as property was central to abolitionist polemic, and an example of such methods can be found in the words of English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson:

Numbers of them appear to have been branded with the initials of their owner's names, and other marks, on the naked flesh, with a heated iron, in the same manner as young horses or cattle are branded when they are turned into our forests. The operation, however, is probably much less painful when performed upon a brute, than when performed on one of the human species. Some of these brandmarks upon these slaves, consisting, as they often do, of several letters, must have tortured no inconsiderable portion of the flesh... Tom, again a Nago (African), is said to be 5 feet 2

*inches high, and marked apparently RG on the shoulders, and PYBD on the right, and apparently LB on the left breast. Thus we see in this instance one individual branded with no less than ten capital letters.*⁵

Branding the skin of slaves served the purpose of making them recognizable as belonging to a specific master if they happened to run away from the plantation in which they served. Whenever slaves ran away, masters wrote advertisements giving graphic descriptions of those who had escaped and offering rewards for their eventual recapture or killing. Slave advertisements, block auctions and slave branding all became part of abolitionist visual culture with the aim of showing how slavery dehumanized human beings in order to transform them into economic goods that could be sold or exchanged for profit.

Abolitionist tropes were supposed to sensitize Americans and push them into actively opposing the institution of slavery, and when the Civil War started it was viewed by many as the ultimate fight that would set African Americans free from the men who exploited them. Visual culture showed the inhuman violence to which slaves were exposed in the South. In newspapers and pamphlets, abolitionists published prints of ritual violence in what Karen Halttunen has defined “pornography of pain”⁶. The images of suffering black men and women would inspire white abolitionists to enlist in the Union Army to fight against the horrors of the South and put an end to an institution that betrayed the principles upon which the nation of the United States was born.

⁵ Quoted in Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory*, cit., p. 83

⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2169001?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>, 1995, accessed 11th May 2016

“The Scourged Back” photograph probably became the most influential image among all depictions of slave pain. The photograph shows the scarred back of a slave who had escaped from the plantation of his master to reach the forces of the Union Army during the Civil War and join them in fighting the Confederate States. The image of his back exhibited scars from an old whipping, and was distributed across the country as a documentation of the abuses of slavery. Unfortunately, Gordon's photograph focused on his scars and showed only parts of his face, so it did not actually tell his story, but only showed the tortures he had endured just like many others. Gordon's back represented thousands of other slaves, and the photograph dehumanized Gordon by not showing his face. Moreover, the story of Gordon was not limited to his scars. Before he could reach the Union forces when escaping, he had to outrun bloodhounds for over 40 miles over the course of 10 days. He managed to escape by rubbing his body with onions in order to throw the dogs off his scent, thus outwitting his master who was pursuing him.

Though it has become one of the most commonly revived tropes of antislavery culture, the image of the scourged back of Gordon does not restore his identity as a man, as the real focus of the photo are the scars he bears. This is very reminiscent of the way slave masters viewed their human “property”, depriving them of any individuality and branding their skins with letters and initials that would constitute all the biography they needed to be recognizable.

The image of Gordon's whipped back inspired many white northerners into participating in the Civil War and it continues to be referred to in contemporary antislavery visual culture⁷, but also failed to depict the slave as an individual. This also

⁷ Zoe Trodd, *Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest Memory in Contemporary Antislavery Visual Culture*, 2013, p. 5

applies to other abolitionist tropes, including those of the auction block and the slave ship. Visual culture in the northern United States did not tell the story of individual slaves as much as it focused on what they all experienced: first the hard voyage of the Middle Passage, then the auction block and the brandings, then the whippings. Rarely did northerners base their propaganda on the strength of the slaves that resisted the beatings and hard work of plantation life which constituted their daily routines. Authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe tried to depict the importance of this kind of black heroism through some of their literary characters such as the slave Dred (a revolutionary man that is very different from Uncle Tom, the main protagonist of Stowe's first novel), while former slaves such as Solomon Northup and Frederick Douglass testified their experiences through the writing of autobiographies in which they could tell the struggles of plantation life, but, for the most part, abolitionist propaganda portrayed African Americans as passive victims of a system that they could not possibly fight.

1.2 - African Americans as Victims of the System of Slavery

The tropes generated by abolitionist visual culture depicted the slave experience in a way that would convince northern Americans that it was their moral duty to help African Americans. The archetypes described above share some traits, above all those that pictured slaves in helpless conditions. The use of violence on blacks was always present in abolitionist imagery, so that the slave was shown as unable to defend himself from whips and chains and thus doomed to endure pain for the rest of his existence. The slave's only hope for freedom resided in the eventual intervention of the abolitionist white man, who would supposedly decide to act as a liberator out of pity, compassion and moral

principles.

The helplessness and impotency of slaves was also present in what was probably the most popular of tropes used in abolitionist visual culture, that of the supplicant slave, representing a chained kneeling figure with his hands raised as if begging for someone to free him from his shackles. This image became hugely popular among both British and American abolitionists and was reproduced in pamphlet frontispieces and medallions as well as on decorative objects. The position of the body of the supplicant slave communicated his complete inability to free himself, a duty that would consequently fall upon the abolitionist movement and its humanitarian mission. Along with the tropes previously described, the supplicant slave archetype portrayed blacks as passive and harmless subjects in popular culture, while for the most part ignoring the fact that African Americans could actually fight back and not just accept to be exploited through labor and physical abuse. While the abolitionist cause celebrated the *Amistad* mutiny led by Sengbe Pieh, it did not commemorate other revolts, which were instead used by southerners to push their own interpretation of the black man as a savage. This particular representation was designed to shock white viewers by showing blacks as devils or murderous conspirators who could not possibly coexist with whites in an equal environment.⁸ Shortly after the actual happening of insurrections and uprisings, southern propaganda would aim at terrifying the white population when the memory of such events was still vivid in their minds. Blacks were depicted as vengeful fiends with a thirst for white blood, and this portrayal empowered stereotypes of white fear which have in part survived to the present days.

⁸ Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, cit., p. 165-166

In order to counterbalance the southern stereotypes of blacks, abolitionists created the icon of the supplicant slave and conveyed a more idealistic representation of African Americans, but said representation was built on racialized tropes just as much as the one that had originated from southern ideology. It also attempted to nullify the memory of those slaves who stood up for themselves to actively resist against slavery and therefore popularized the notion that African Americans were passive subjects who could not recover their dignity as a free people by themselves. The supplicant slave icon in particular seems to be asking for pity and compassion. As observed by Zoe Trodd, this image “invites not solidarity with the enslaved but paternalistic association with the morally righteous abolitionists who will answer the helpless captive's question by releasing his chains.”⁹

Abolitionist tropes failed to recover the social identity that blacks had lost during slavery, as they did not highlight the memory of subjects who pursued freedom and risked their lives in rebellion to those who subjugated them. Leaders of rebellions such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey were considered too controversial to be included in public memory after they had already been demonized by the South. In other instances, black resistance in stories of enslavement tended to be erased in favor of narratives of domination and degradation. However, literary works from former slaves often gave a more authentic and dignified vision of slave agency in plantation life. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass and *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup

⁹ Zoe Trodd, *Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest Memory in Contemporary Antislavery Visual Culture*, 2013, p. 3

both include the recollection of acts of resistance perpetrated by the narrators against the abusive authority of plantation's overseers. The section in Douglass' autobiography where he speaks of his experience with the overseer Edward Covey is particularly powerful in this regard.

Covey was infamously defined by Douglass as a “first rate hand at breaking young negroes” through physical punishment. He beat Douglass several times when he was a slave, until he finally fought back. The two fought each other for two hours, but, while he could probably have killed his oppressor, Douglass just focused on defending himself until the overseer finally gave up and never came back to whip him to try and break his spirit.

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who

*expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.*¹⁰

According to his writings, Douglass was never whipped again after his fight with Covey, even though he remained a slave for four more years after the event had occurred. This transformation in his character demonstrates that the abolitionist belief that the only way to survive in slavery was that of complete obedience and submission was not universal to all slaves. Those who fought back did so to regain their dignity as human beings and not for the desire of vengeance against their white captors.

Contrarily to what the tropes of American popular culture believed, African Americans valued freedom as much as whites did, and some of them were prepared to die to defend it. A connection to the words of Douglass can be found in a quote by Harriet Tubman, another former slave who conquered her liberty by herself and then kept on fighting the institution of slavery in the South as a freedom fighter: "No one will take me back alive; I shall fight for my liberty, and when the time has come for me to go, the Lord will let them kill me."¹¹

Slave resistance was not limited to open revolt against the oppressor, though it was true that, in most situations, a slave would get himself killed if he decided to openly challenge his masters. Solomon Northup initially fought back during captivity, as he was not born a slave and became one after he was kidnapped and sold in the South by a trader. Prior to that, he was a free landowner in the state of New York. After being sold to a southern master and being abused by the local overseers, Northup refused his position as

¹⁰ Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960, p.104-105

¹¹ Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* By Sarah Hopkins Bradford, quoted in <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/quotes/>, 2016, accessed 12th May 2016

a slave and fought back, but nearly died from the consequences of this demonstration of free will. He soon realized that the only way not to get himself killed was silent resistance. Once he regained his freedom he immediately wrote and published his memoir and then gave public speeches on behalf of the abolitionist movement so that others might hear his story.

Even though the vast majority of African Americans did not openly revolt in order to obtain their freedom, other forms of rebellion existed. Some blacks fought their owners by poisoning their food, others destroyed the productivity of the plantations they worked in by killing the livestock or by burning wooden buildings during the nights. Actions such as these would likely be followed by harsh punishments or even death itself, but they represented the only way in which slaves could make themselves heard and voice their opposition to slavery. Some blacks would go as far as to physically mutilate or kill themselves to prevent landowners from exploiting them in the fields.¹²

Resistance also involved the preservation of African traditions in an environment where these were often ridiculed through minstrelsy by whites. Minstrelsy during and after slavery was often associated with the theatricalization of popular tropes that had generated around the native culture of blacks, which was often interpreted by whites as primitive and sometimes comic. As explained by Edward Thorpe, the aesthetics of some black activities such as dancing were completely alien to the white gazer:

In black dance the pelvic region is the epicentre of all movement. In most dances performed by white races [...] the torso is held comparatively erect if

¹² Yolanda Jones, "Slavery of Africans in the Americas: Resistance to Enslavement" in Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 2016 <<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1998/1/98.01.03.x.html>>, accessed May 2nd, 2016

*not rigid and so again and again, throughout the centuries, western observers, from missionaries to sea captains, anthropologists to consular officials, have referred to the tribal dances of West Africa as "lewd", "libidinous", "lascivious", "disgusting" and "hideous", imposing their own pre-determined ideas of what constitutes a socially acceptable vocabulary of movement on to an alien culture."*¹³

Dancing and other traditional activities such as singing, however, could put slaves in touch with the memory of their past as a free people, and thus empowered them in a system that was designed to strip them of any identity as individuals. In the movie *12 Years a Slave*, which is based on Northup's experience which I have mentioned above, a particular scene highlights this form of black resistance very well: Solomon and other slaves stand by the grave of a fellow man who has died out of exhaustion while working in the fields, and they sing a song that is part of African tradition and expresses the slave's hope for a better future and an eventual return to the homeland. This is the moment in the story when Solomon, who has so far emphasized his being not like the others, joins the slaves in singing and becomes a member of the slave community that, in its unity, fights for survival against the exploitation of plantation life.

Despite the existence of black freedom fighters during slavery, American public memory has remained for the most part dominated by stereotypes denying the agency of the enslaved. The predominant depiction of blacks in the North was always that of the supplicant slave icon, as it represented African Americans as helpless victims who could

¹³ Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, cit. p. 172

not fight for themselves and were bound to wait for white society to save them from their captivity, so they were not perceived as threatening. Unfortunately, the trope of the supplicant icon did not disappear after the events of the Civil War and remained central to public memory in the United States, thus preventing the recognition of black slaves as subjects who actively pursued freedom on their own.

1.3 - The Gift of Freedom

Slavery was abolished in 1865 after the American Parliament enacted the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution issued by President Lincoln. Though the Amendment was not immediately ratified by all states in the country, it immediately freed vast numbers of black slaves upon passage in Congress. African Americans became legal citizens of the United States and were given the basic rights they had been denied for more than a century of abuse and exploitation.

Freedom for blacks had been achieved through the passage of the Amendment and military victory by the Union on the Confederate States. Both these battles were primarily fought by white people (even though the Union included black soldiers among its ranks during the war), so that blacks were not recognized as the conquerors of their own freedom. This allowed the survival of abolitionist visual imagery that viewed African Americans as passive and helpless to survive, and the icon of the supplicant slave became part of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington D.C., a monument that was built the year after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment and celebrated Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator who put an end to slavery. Designed by sculptor Thomas Ball, the monument depicts the American president standing and in the act of freeing a slave on his

knees. The slave's position is slightly different from that of the supplicant slave trope, as his shackles are broken and his arms are not raised upwards in the act of begging. He is also still mostly naked, while Lincoln is wearing formal clothes and consequently looks more respectable and dignified. The slave is free, but still represented as inferior to the white man because he now acknowledges the moral superiority of whites and their merits in their fight for black freedom, and consequently owes Lincoln eternal gratitude for putting an end to slavery. Forced to rely on the benevolence of the white savior, the black man is still represented as kneeling as if asking for the permission to possess the most basic of human rights.¹⁴

The Emancipation Memorial summarized the main issue that generated when African American slaves were freed: because the figure of the grateful black man became central in popular imagery, it neglected the black figures of freedom fighters which I have previously analyzed, and thus had the effect of perpetrating the notion that blacks lacked any agency in the battle against the South, while at the same time redeeming white Americans from the moral guilt of slavery.

The predominance of white figures in public memory made it so that the American public space is still primarily controlled by whites. The perpetration of black stereotypes continued through social media and has even come to target political subjects such as the Obama family, by attacking not only the president's politics but also aspects of his private life such as personality, diet and religion. After being held under the leash of enslavement for entire generations, African Americans are still victims to white discrimination and stereotypes which affect their social status. In a way, the Thirteenth Amendment only

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 62

granted them an illusory freedom, in which they were still oppressed but now also unable to resist their oppressors. Historical and more recent stereotypes have come to affect many aspects of black culture and behavior just like during the times of slavery.

For example, the archetype of the black rapist is still very much alive in contemporary American culture. The myth of the black rapist represents African American males as sexually attracted to white women. The idea that a black man could have sexual intercourse with white women, which was popularized by visual media during the last century through films like *Birth of a Nation* and *King Kong*, has always terrorized white people. In the first, one of the main female characters is pursued by a black man who is clearly attracted to her, until she finally commits suicide so as to escape from him. In *King Kong*, the iconic giant ape of the story has been interpreted by some as a representation of a savage and very aggressive black man who kidnaps a white woman.

Maybe the best example that must be made to express how influent this particular stereotype can be is found in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe's first novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When Tom is taken to New Orleans by his master St. Clare, he relates to the young Eva because they both share a deep Christian faith, and the two start spending time together as Tom asks Eva to read the Bible for him, since he is not capable of doing it by himself. The relationship between Eva and Tom constitutes a vital sequence in the book, as Eva is represented as a pure and almost heavenly figure and it is thanks to her that Tom develops the strength of will that will allow him to die as a martyr at the end of the story, when he is killed by Simon Legree in his plantation in Louisiana. In many illustrations for the book Eva appeared often accompanied by Tom. Because of the vicinity of the two characters in these depictions, Tom was often depicted as an old man who could pose no threat to the young girl he was with. Only after he was tamed and desexualized could Old

Tom become a suitable and safe companion for Eva.¹⁵

The black rapist archetype has no scientific value, as blacks do not represent the majority of rape perpetrators in America, but it has been used as a justification for certain acts of violence and terror organized by whites against the black community. For example, in 1955, a fourteen-year-old black teenager by the name of Emmett Till was kidnapped and lynched by white men a few days after he supposedly flirted with a married white woman. The perpetrators of the crime were absolved by an entirely white jury after an extremely short trial. Media can influence the perception that the public has of blacks on the basis of white fantasies and through stereotypes, and it is the ongoing existence of these stereotypes that has led to anti-black racism.

The existence of stereotypes on black behavior has become deeply rooted in the society of the United States, and the recovery of a black identity that is not fabricated by the fantasies of whites has now become more important than ever. This process is proving particularly difficult as the memory of the slavery period is contested: many facts are not officially acknowledged because slave heritage is in some areas almost non-existent or irrecoverable. Slaves actively contributed to the construction of the United States, but they are for the most part remembered as passive victims to which almost no agency is attributed in the history of the country. It is however paradoxical to view them as weak-willed and feeble when entire black generations survived the years of enslavement to allow their descendants to live as free men and women. Michelle Obama, present First Lady of the United States, is a direct descendant of those generations, and the election of her husband Barack as the first black president of the United States in 2008 has

¹⁵ Jo-Ann Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin As Visual Culture*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2007, p.

encouraged multiple initiatives to revalue the past history of the country. These initiatives represent a fairly recent phenomenon and aim at recognizing the central role played by slave labor in the history of the United States and, even more importantly, at showing that African Americans are not like they are depicted by stereotypes and propaganda.¹⁶ Author Octavia Butler wrote the book that would become her bestseller in response to the way that younger African Americans felt ashamed of the older generations of subservient blacks who they believed had allowed whites to enslave them without ever fighting back. *Kindred* transports a contemporary African American to the years of American slavery to demonstrate how the only way for any black individual to survive in such a situation is submission. Just like the main character in *Kindred*, entire generations of black American slaves understood that obedience and an apparent acceptance of slavery would be their only means to not succumb to the cruelty of southern masters. They were simply not given a chance to fight back in a country that considered it legal for them to be considered property, so they endured oppression to survive and allow the children of their children to fight back. Passivity was not natural for them, and their resistance could only be a silent one of which very little can be retrieved. Yet current black generations know very little about their ancestors and their legacies.

The Emancipation Memorial monument in Lincoln Park depicts the white emancipator as a martyr and friend to the blacks who bow in front of him in gratitude for the gift of freedom, but as Frederick Douglass once observed, representing the negro “in a more manly attitude would have been indicative of freedom”.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ana Lucia Araujo, *Shadows of the Slave Past – Memory, Heritage and Slavery*, New York, Routledge, 2014

¹⁷ Quoted in Ana Lucia Araujo, cit., p. 157

The monument supposedly acts as a testament of democracy and liberalism, yet its two subjects stand on completely opposed levels of disparity because of the inferior position of the black figure. It is no wonder that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood in the proximity of another monument representing the figure of the Great Emancipator when he gave his "I have a Dream" speech in August 1963 manifesting the wish to replace Lincoln: the central figure in the public memory of the path to black freedom should not be that of a white emancipator but that of a black man fighting against the discrimination that affects him just like other African Americans. Lincoln's popularity among African Americans is constantly decreasing as slavery becomes a distant and confused memory of which too little can be recollected, and there is need for an alternative subject to replace the Great Emancipator, one that blacks would relate to in their fight against racial segregation in the United States. The centrality of the figure of Lincoln in the representation of the liberation of slaves prevents the emergence in public knowledge of other equally important men who had more in common with African American culture than Lincoln ever had. He cannot be considered a hero or an inspiration to blacks, because, as Douglass emphasized:

Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man. He was pre-eminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people, to

*promote the welfare of the white people of this country.*¹⁸

Efforts have been made towards the recognition of heroic blacks figures: Frederick Douglass appeared on the American 25 cent stamp of 1987, although Marcus Wood according to this depiction strips him of his intellectual force and makes him look like a white patriarch in disguise.¹⁹ On April 2016, the portrait of Harriet Tubman was chosen to substitute that of Andrew Jackson from the 20 dollars bill. Though the updated bill is not expected to be issued until 2030, Tubman, who will be the first woman to ever front a US banknote, was a freedom fighter who put her life at risk multiple times in the interest of black slaves only.

Since racial segregation and discrimination is a phenomenon that derives directly from slavery, many African Americans do not celebrate Lincoln as their liberator and some go as far as to define him a white supremacist who brought no contribution to the abolitionist cause prior to the Civil War and decided to emancipate blacks in the interest of whites. Also, since the contemporary generations of African Americans have never experienced the oppression of slavery in their lives, they are less likely to feel grateful to Lincoln for what he achieved through the Thirteenth Amendment. On the other hand, freedom fighters such as Tubman and Douglass and more recent emancipators such as King all share an experience of discrimination that is common to the vast majority of today's African Americans. Lincoln was never a slave or a target of segregation, so he could never become a model for blacks to look up to, but his central position in the US public memory impedes the appearance of a new emancipator above him. And until the

¹⁸ Quoted in Ana Lucia Araujo, cit., p. 158

¹⁹ Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, cit., p. 223

memory of Lincoln is that of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, black slaves will be remembered as passive victims who never opposed the white system of slavery.

Various contemporary examples in American popular culture depict emancipation of slaves as something that was actively pursued solely by white people, and one of these examples is the fairly recent movie *Lincoln* by Steven Spielberg. Despite the fact that an increasing degree of attention is being dedicated to the memory of freedom fighters and controversial black figures who have in the past been labeled as terrorists in the US, *Lincoln* celebrates the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment without mentioning the influence of Douglass and other African Americans on the abolitionist movement. Few marginal black characters appear throughout the film and none of them has any of the political agency of the white protagonists or is essential to the plot of the movie: none of them has a decisive role in determining the passage of the Amendment as most of them are servants, and no historical black freedom fighter is ever mentioned throughout the whole movie. While historians have demonstrated that slaves played a decisive role in the road to emancipation through rebellions, they are seen as exclusively passive subjects in Spielberg's movie, especially during one of the final scenes, in which after the passage of the Amendment, Thaddeus Stevens is joyfully received by his housekeeper Lydia Hamilton Smith when he gets home. The movie portrays Smith as the embodiment of African American gratitude to the white man for the gift of freedom, and that seems to be the only role she covers in the movie, which undeniably makes her look like a passive character. The historical Smith, though, was active in the Underground Railroad, a network of routes and secret passages extending through the United States during the period of slavery which were used by slaves to escape to the North of the country and out

of pro-slavery states with the help of free blacks and white abolitionists. Thousands of slaves were able to reach freedom through the Underground Railroad, so anyone who contributed to this is to be considered actively opposing and fighting slavery. Yet *Lincoln* does not represent Smith's agency, as in the movie she appears to just patiently wait for her white lover to free her from the shackles of a system that she cannot oppose.

Monuments and memorials can have great influence over the remembrance of the past history of countries. They highlight the memory of men and women whose agency defines a country for what it has become in contemporary times. Unfortunately, the United States has used monuments mainly in the celebration of whites, while black social actors are usually not represented in the public space if not through submissive archetypes like that of the supplicant slave. While memorials have been dedicated to several black heroes in African and Latin America countries for their struggles against white colonialism, the United States celebrates the memory of very few slaves. Between 1990 and 1992, a memorial has been built in honor of the Amistad mutiny in Connecticut, because that event is the only slave uprising where the United States acts as the protectors and liberators of slaves. Public memory for the most part includes "safe" African American figures who contributed to the abolitionist cause: Douglass is often seen in stamps and prints wearing clothes that belong to bourgeois fashion and make him respectable, but, as Marcus Wood argues, this representation strips him of his blackness.²⁰ On the other hand, the majority of slaves who participated in uprisings and violently fought for their freedom are excluded from public memory as they are still seen as controversial figures. The memory of black slave rebels could however constitute a legacy for the contemporary

²⁰ Ibidem, p.223

generations of blacks who feel distant from their ancestors who supposedly acted as passive victims during enslavement because, even though some of these figures may be considered terrorists and brutes, they contradict the popular depiction of slaves that is held up by stereotypes.

While the election of Barack Obama as President of the country has encouraged a number of initiatives to try and change this aspect of American public memory, the issue of a missing recognition of slave agency in America is one of the reasons why stereotypes are still used in depicting African American subjects. The problem lies within the gift of freedom itself: now that emancipation has been granted to blacks, none of them can any longer fight to conquer freedom from the white man, instead of waiting for him to grant it. The distinction between slaves and masters is gone, and so is the slave's struggle for freedom. Unable to oppose a system of exploitation that no longer exists, the slave can no longer obtain a sense of effective freedom towards the white man, because revolutionary violence as a form of resistance is no longer possible in a context that ultimately remains dominated by whites. As Frantz Fanon emphasizes in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, emancipation has not stopped western society from distorting the social identities of blacks.

Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself.

*His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.*²¹

Slavery first absorbed African Americans in western civilization, but emancipation later failed to equalize them with whites, while taking away from them the power to rebel and thus reinforcing the capacity of white citizens to control them in popular media and memory through color prejudice, which after emancipation has further grown as an issue affecting black citizens.

*As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated.*²²

Whatever African Americans may do today in the fight against segregation and discrimination, they can only do it through the rights that white emancipation has given them. Even their rights to protest, gather in numbers and speak as citizens have all been granted to them by whites, and for those rights they are bound to be eternally grateful to a master they can no longer rebel to. Through the revival of the slave past and an unbiased rediscovery of historical figures who were previously labeled as terrorists by pro-slavery

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London, Pluto Press, 1986, p. 110

²² Sir Alan Burns, *Colour Prejudice*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1948, p. 16, quoted in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, cit, p. 118

propaganda, blacks could recover their identity of men and women who survived the abuses of plantation life not through passivity but through silent resistance and the preservation of their dignity.

1.4 - The Influence of White Stereotypes on the Perception of Blacks

Since American society is mainly controlled by whites, it is them who determine which historical events and individuals are celebrated in public memory. By doing so, it has been possible to deny any agency to blacks in the pursuit of emancipation and obfuscate their past as slaves. What little heritage is left from the experience of blacks during slavery is often popularized or demonized through stereotypical interpretations.

Stereotypes therefore represent the main reason behind the low status that blacks often attain in society. Furthermore, the popularization of tropes has also come to affect the psychology of the contemporary generations of African Americans who are “tainted” by the color of their skin. Black skin relates them to those who resisted and survived enslavement, but so very little memory of their experience is left in popular culture, and that little is so distorted, that many among the younger generations of blacks cannot find a sense of identity and pride in their heritage.

The effects that stereotypes, prejudices and white social dominance have had on the psychology of African Americans have in multiple instances been demonstrated by dedicated research, experiments and civil right organizations. For example, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) has been active since the beginning of last century in delivering a first-hand perspective into issues such as

desegregation in different social contexts in order to fight racial hatred in the United States. Initiatives like the NAACP ones analyze the ways in which blackness is perceived as an issue in contemporary society: for example, because of their poverty, many blacks today have come to associate white skin to welfare and cleanliness, as in many parts of the United States whites are more likely to belong to the middle class than a black is. Therefore, the African American male living in a ghetto may end up feeling attracted by white women because of their high social standards and realize that marrying one of them represents a way out of poverty for himself as well as a demonstration of manhood and virility, of which blacks are often stripped because of their social impotence.

Whiteness represents an ideal of beauty and an opportunity for economic advancement, but, in some instances, black males have sexually assaulted white women as an act of defiance against white dominance and the notion of white women as “forbidden” to blacks. Such is the case of Eldridge Cleaver, an activist for the Black Panther movement, who believed in rape as a form of political protest against white society:

Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that i was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that i was defiling his women...i felt i was getting revenge. From the site of the act of rape, consternation spread outwardly in concentric circles. I wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race. I know that the black man's sick attitude toward the white woman is a revolutionary sickness: It keeps him perpetually out of harmony with the system that is oppressing him. Many whites flatter themselves with the idea that the negro male's lust and desire for the white dream girl is purely an esthetic

*attraction, but nothing could be further from the truth. His motivation is often of such a bloody, hateful, bitter, and malignant nature that whites would really be hard pressed to find it flattering.*²³

Cleaver's compulsion to assault white women as a form of revenge and insurrection against white institutions originated from the fact that the average white American is afraid of the black male as he tends to judge him through the depiction of stereotypes, and on the basis of these stereotypes then determines what aspects of white society is off-limits to blacks. Cleaver's radical approach to the matter does not represent the average behavior of blacks when interacting with white females, but still reflects a sense of frustration felt in a system where the "free" black is still considered sub-par when compared to whites. However, as argued by Fanon, the pursuit of interracial relationships is in most cases rooted in the black's desire to become white himself. He sees marriage to a white woman as an opportunity to escape from the ever-present oppression of racial stereotypes and, in a way, rejects blackness as an identity, because it represents an obstacle in the way to welfare and success.

Blackness is not, however, rejected only by men who see it as dangerous to their manhood; the same psychological sense of inferiority that is felt by males who compare themselves to the members of white society is also perceived by many black women. Fanon analyzes the case of Mayotte Capécia²⁴, who describes her experience with racial issues in her autobiography: when still a child, she tries to turn whites into blacks by

²³ John Knifer, *Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver on raping black and white women*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/us/eldridge-cleaver-black-panther-who-became-gop-conservative-is-dead-at-62.html?_r=0>, accessed 15th May 2016

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, cit., p. 42-47

literally covering their faces with ink, but soon realizes that such solutions cannot help her. Once she realizes she cannot blacken others, she resorts to turn white herself, because she is not interested in preserving her blackness as much as she is in nullifying all those differences that separate her from the wealth that apparently only whites have. Her experience has taught her that the color of her skin is primarily an obstacle to a better life, to the point that she feels happy when she learns that her grandmother was white.

I found that I was proud of it. I was certainly not the only one who had white blood, but a white grandmother was not so ordinary as a white grandfather. So my mother, then, was a mixture? I should have guessed it when I looked at her light color. I found her prettier than ever, and cleverer, and more refined. If she had married a white man, do you suppose I should have been completely white? [...] And life might not have been so hard for me? [...] I daydreamed about this grandmother whom I had never known and who had died because she had loved a colored man of Martinique... How could a Canadian woman have loved a man of Martinique? I could never stop thinking of our priest, and I made up my mind that I could never love anyone but a white man, a blue-eyed blonde, a Frenchman.²⁵

From the perspective of Capécia, there is no reason for a black woman like her to marry someone from the same race. Marriage with a white man would allow her to reach a higher economic and social status, and could perhaps contribute in making the skin of her children lighter, thus resulting in a more favorable life for them as well. If one adopts a

²⁵ Mayotte Capécia, *Je suis Martiniquaise*, Paris, Corr ea, 1948, p. 202, quoted in Frantz Fanon, cit. p. 46

similar perspective, the pursuit of whiteness almost seems like a responsibility towards the future generations, who will be bound to suffer from discrimination unless their skin is light enough. The mulatto children will then grow up to marry other white people so that the process of whitening the family may continue until its members are safe from color racism. And because American society is ruled by whites, Capécia's example may be followed by many, as they grow in an environment where blackness is often associated more with poverty than with African cultural roots. The contemporary African American is often left with no other identity than that established by white stereotypes, so the reasoning behind Capécia's choice to turn white is actually quite understandable.

By living from birth in a white context that constantly popularizes its prejudiced vision of blacks, the African American “does not understand his own race and the whites do not understand him”²⁶, so he is brought to see blackness more as an issue than as an essential part of his identity and he is willing to get rid of it so as to be “accepted” by white standards.

This phenomenon of self-loathing does not exclusively affect adult African Americans. It has been demonstrated that white standards of beauty influence the psyche of African Americans since their childhood. Two African American psychologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, conducted a series of experiments to investigate the development of racial identity in black children between the late 1930s and early 1940s. An experiment involved presenting black children with a pair of dolls that were completely identical aside from the color of their skin and hair: one of the dolls was white and blond, while the other had black skin and hair. The experiment consisted in asking

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 64

children a series of question on the dolls, with all questions revolving around which one was the prettiest in the pair.²⁷ The vast majority of the kids responded showing preference for the white doll. The final question in the test involved asking the interrogated child which one of the dolls looked more like him or her, and a worrisome percentage of kids responded by pointing at the white, and supposedly prettier, doll. Other kids refused to answer the question, apparently because they felt ashamed of their resemblance with the black doll. The experiment took place in segregated schools that were only attended by black students, and, through their initiative, Kenneth and Mamie Clark were able to demonstrate that the segregation of black kids in school affected their perception of themselves and made them feel uncomfortable with the color of their skin. The results of the test demonstrated that separating children of different races in school had negative effects on the black children that could influence their psyche in an irreversible manner, and ultimately contributed to the abolition of segregated schools in the United States.

The same experiment has been recreated by other scholars in different times, even many years after the abolition of segregated schools in the country, yet the results have not changed. Filmmaker Kiri Davis repeated the original experiment fairly recently, in 2005, and 15 out of the 21 children that were interrogated in her research believed the white doll looked more pleasant. The doll test shows that “internalized racism” is present in the psychology of contemporary black kids, and thus demonstrates that white standards of beauty can have an influence even on African Americans of very young age.

However, despite the fact that the experiment has shown similar results in its multiple recreations, the data that was gained from it was provided from children that

²⁷ Julian Abagond, *The Clark Doll Experiment*, <<https://abagond.wordpress.com/2009/05/29/the-clark-doll-experiment/>>, 2009, accessed 16th May 2016

might have given specific answers just because they thought that these were the correct ones, and not necessarily because they considered them to be an accurate representation of the way they felt. The same can be said about another initiative that the Clark couple experimented on kids, "The Coloring Test", where children were asked to color a drawing of themselves using colors of their choice, and a number of them chose lighter colors for their skin than they actually had.

A similar sense of shame to that felt by some of the children interrogated by Kenneth and Mamie Clark can be found in the main character of Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*: she is a poor black girl whose family is constantly fighting in the predominantly white environment they live in, and after her drunk father burns down her house, she is taken in the home of another family as a foster child. She convinces herself that it is because of her dark eyes and skin that she cannot have wealth and beauty, and she wishes she could have blue eyes so as to become beautiful and loved like white children. Her obsession eventually drives her insane, as she cannot possibly get rid of the blackness that has ruined her life. She even drinks a lot of milk in the desperate hope that it could turn her skin white and thus protect her from the prejudice and looks that make her feel like a "second-hand" child. While the narrative is more focused on her than on the other members of her original family, they are also victims of the same ideals of whiteness. Racial codes are present throughout the whole narrative of the book and influence the interaction that the children protagonists have with other minor characters: some of them are discriminatory, while others have been ostracized by society because of stereotypes. While these codes defining characters through their racial identities are present in Morrison's first novel, they are completely absent in a short story that the same author published 13 years later, "Recitatif". Here, most of the narrative revolves around the

interactions between two young girls, Twyla and Roberta, throughout five different encounters. The reader is told that one of the girls is dark-skinned while the other one is not, but the story does not provide the elements necessary to determine which girl is white and which is African American. The answer is debatable, as parts of the narrative do provide some hints in that regard, but no definitive solution can be found. Therefore, despite the fact that the two girls belong to different social classes and live their lives in different manners, in the end both characters can be linked to both experiences despite of their belonging to a race or another. The story of Twyla and Roberta can be effectively told even ignoring the color of their skin, as it does not define their identities. The fact that the reader cannot help but try to understand which girl belongs to which race is a grim testament to the influence that racial stereotypes still have on the US.

The examples and stories examined in the previous paragraph take into account diverse subjects and situations, but at their root is primarily the fact that American society was created by whites and extended citizenship to African Americans without ever recognizing that they also covered an essential role in the construction of the country. Blacks were relegated to an inferior social status first through the system of slavery and, after emancipation, through the popularization of a fabricated identity that stripped them of the memory of their past and consolidated the idea that they owe their freedom to whites. Because American society assimilated blacks in its system and still refuses to grant them the same social status of whites, it would take a complete restructuring of said system to put an end to discrimination and to the black's inferiority complex. This is however outside of the possibilities of the average African American, whose only way to achieve freedom from blackness is to behave on the example of Mayotte Capécia and thus

recognize white superiority in society.

1.5 - Racial Discrimination in Criminal Justice

Demographics in the US show that African Americans represent one of the largest ethnic groups in the overall population of the country. Blacks constitute almost half the population of the capital Washington D.C., and several districts of the city are renowned for their contributions to black history and culture. The same can be said for New York, which is regarded to be the most populous city in the country. In a country where a great number of ethnicities coexist, African Americans were estimated in 2014 to represent about 14% of the entire population of the United States.

A fairly big percentage of the black population lives in neighborhoods where the presence of other ethnicities is very scarce, so the lifestyle and issues of these particular areas end up representing the lifestyle and issues of modern African Americans. For example, due to the high presence of gangs in African American districts and the predominance of black artists in the rap and hip hop music scene, media representation suggests that blacks are more prone than whites to solve their problems through the use of violence in order to exhibit manhood and physical prowess.

This “street culture” has become increasingly popular in black neighborhoods because it originated from poverty, which is common to a vast majority of the local population. Black neighborhoods, or “ghettos”, are often characterized by low-quality infrastructures and community services, while most families cannot afford comfortable houses and instead live together in large apartments. Racial discrimination and the lack of a cultural and economic heritage often deny the welfare and privileges of whites to

blacks, so that many of them have found an identity in their constant struggle for survival in a world that has very little to offer to them in comparison to what it offers to whites. On the other hand, a vast part of the white population perceives African Americans as uncivilized brutes with little to no culture, with no past other than that which was created for them by archetypes. Whites do not acknowledge the poverty of black ghettos as the result of social discrimination, but as a testament of African American lack of intelligence and incapability of finding a place in high western society.

Because of poverty, unemployment and the weakness of educational institutions, blacks in big cities are likely to become involved in crime activities, and today represent a high percentage of the overall inmate population in the United States, with drug trafficking and possession being the cause of most arrests. Despite the fact that the vast majority of drug users in America today are whites, it is very rare for criminal news to feature the arrest of a white criminal dealing in drugs, while it is much more common for them to report about a black offender because of his intended association with poverty and, as a consequence, crime. The matter is analyzed by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow*, in which she demonstrates that the popular representation of crime in the United States is strongly biased against African Americans and views them as more likely than whites to perpetrate a crime.

A survey was conducted in 1995 asking the following question: "Would you close your eyes for a second, envision a drug user, and describe that person to me?" The startling results were published in the Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education. Ninety-five percent of respondents pictured a black drug user, while only 5 percent imagined other racial groups. These

results contrast sharply with the reality of drug crime in America. African Americans constituted only 15 percent of current drug users in 1995, and they constitute roughly the same percentage today. Whites constituted the vast majority of drug users then (and now), but almost no one pictured a white person when asked to imagine what a drug user looks like. The same group of respondents also perceived the typical drug trafficker as black. There is no reason to believe that the survey would have been any different if police officers or prosecutors – rather than the general public – had been the respondents.²⁸

While the crime of drug trafficking in the United States is committed by all ethnic groups, law enforcement primarily targets black individuals: despite the fact that they only represent 15% of drug users in the country, they are arrested and prosecuted for this crime 13 times more often than other races.

Alexander argues that the phenomenon of mass black incarceration cannot be analyzed on the basis of the black criminal male stereotype, as the trope is based on the notion that African Americans are prone to crime because of aggressive behavior. However, there is no logical connection between aggressiveness and exchanging drugs for money, as both parts involved in the act are, supposedly, present of their own volition. Therefore, the high numbers of blacks in prison cannot be justified by depicting them as stereotypically dangerous individuals.

When a violent crime or a robbery or a trespass occurs, someone usually

²⁸ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, New York, The New Press, 2010, p. 103

*calls the police. There is a clear victim and a perpetrator. Someone is hurt or harmed in some way and wants the offender punished. But with drug crime, neither the purchaser of the drugs nor the seller has any incentive to contact law enforcement, it is consensual activity. Equally important, it is popular.*²⁹

Already excluded from white society because of the color of his skin, the black male finds in imprisonment an additional barrier to further separate him from welfare and the end of his poverty. The black man is no more guilty than others for a crime that is nowadays frequently committed by members of all races in America, but his felony is the only one that is highlighted by mass media in the attempt to ostracize the black individual from society. Therefore, the depiction of African Americans as the principal perpetrators of crimes in the country, backed by their high numbers in prison, encourages the rest of the population to distrust them. Since the main source of information for the vast majority of the population are media outlets that constantly report about the arrest of black individuals, the common belief of many is that so many African Americans are regularly arrested because of their experience in the ghettos. The depiction of life in the ghettos is often delivered to whites through mainstream media such as fiction, music videos and rap, but, while none of these forms of entertainment provide an in-depth representation of life in black neighborhoods, they often view the African American street and gangsta cultures as clashing with the justice system. Therefore, many white Americans accept the fact that blacks represent a vast portion of the country's inmate population simply because they believe they are more prone to commit crime and felony than other races. This

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 101

supposed inclination to commit crimes is at the basis of the Myth of the Absent Black Father, which has originated from the belief that black fathers are unable to commit to their wives and children and take care of them. Once the black man is associated with irresponsibility towards his family, it becomes even more common for the rest of the population to despise and avoid him in society. What most white Americans ignore is the fact that blacks are, more often than not, imprisoned because of actions that are committed also by other ethnicities and not because of violent behavior derived from the exposure to street culture. The same crime that determines incarceration for a black man is often ignored by the authorities when it is committed by white individuals,³⁰ so the stereotype of irresponsible and lazy fathers is not a valid representation of black adults because it does not originate from their behavior but from that of police officers who deliberately choose to incarcerate them because of the color of their skin.

The arrest for a relatively minor crime like drug trafficking can result in a lifetime of sanctions for the black male in the form of discrimination: because of his criminal record, the male will suffer discrimination in various aspects of the social context. Once released from prison, African American individuals will face difficulty and discrimination in finding a job because they will now be permanently associated with crime by employers who will therefore be unwilling to hire them. They will also be unable to access public housing and might therefore be forced to spend their nights in the streets. Without a house, they will eventually also lose custody of their children. This experience contradicts the stereotype of the irresponsible black father who abandons his family because he's not willing to commit to it, as it is the general discrimination against black felons that actually disrupts the integrity of African American families and, in doing so, also punishes

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 173-176

younger generations by separating them from their fatherly figure. Furthermore, any individual who has spent time in prison also loses the right to vote for a minimum of five years. Since this affects all prison inmates regardless of the gravity of the crime they committed, hundreds of thousands of US citizens are not allowed to vote, and most of them are black.³¹

These consequences have a devastating impact on the lives of African American individuals: once imprisoned, the black man will be labeled a criminal for the rest of his life and relegated to the margins of society, where he will be subject to discrimination in employment, housing and public benefits. He will then struggle to provide for himself, but his conditions might lead him to the commitment of further crimes. It appears, in fact, that most former black prisoners do reoffend after they are released from prison; therefore, imprisonment does not rehabilitate blacks into better citizens, on the contrary, it instigates them to commit more crimes.

Some youths even decide to embrace criminality as a form of protest against the system of laws that discriminates them in an effort to regain their self esteem, but their behavior inevitably leads them to spend more time in prison and further lose any possibility of obtaining a respectable position in society. This attitude offers no possibility of redemption for blacks, yet it has been popularized by television so that its imagery has become familiar to many.

The depiction of racial disparities in law prosecution is not limited to the phenomenon of black mass incarceration: in addition to being more likely to be prosecuted

³¹ Ibidem, p. 154-155

for minor crimes such as drug traffic, recent events have highlighted that unarmed black people are also more likely to be shot by police officers in the occurrence of a crime. Police violence in the US causes the death of many people each year, and surveys report that the majority of them are, by far, African Americans individuals. The issue has been brought to the attention of global media by international activist organizations like Black Lives Matter and by the popular unrest of black communities in the aftermaths of police shootings. According to the reports, most blacks killed by law enforcers are shot even though they do not represent a threat to the officers, as they are not armed and are not committing any crime at the time of their deaths. Among the most well-known of these killings are those of Michael Brown and Trayvor Martin, who were both youngsters at the time of their killing and were not in possession of any weapons. Furthermore, while Brown was pursued because suspected of robbing from a market clerk, Martin was approached by a police officer because he was seen walking through a neighborhood where robberies had recently become a common occurrence. The officer who would then shoot Martin reported him for “suspicious behavior” even though he did not see him actually committing any felony. The agent then stated that he was forced to shoot Martin for self-defense but was later charged with the accusation of murder. The instance of the shooting of Trayvor Martin resembles that of many other African American individuals who have been killed by law enforcers who suspected them of committing crimes before actually gathering any evidence. The ongoing occurrence of these incidents and the fact that they predominantly involve black people have developed a national debate on racial profiling, as in the cases of Trayvor Martin and many others, race is one of the factors that cause the police to treat African Americans as suspects of a crime, arrest them or kill them when perceived as dangerous subjects. While the institution of law primarily targets people of color for minor

crimes like drug traffic, its enforcers are often not in any way penalized for fatally wounding blacks: in 2015, zero officers have been convicted of murder or have been held accountable for their actions despite the fact that, throughout the year, 1200 people have been killed by police violence.³²

Shortly after the death of Trayvor Martin, when asked to address the issue of police violence and the shooting of black citizens, President Obama said that the experience of contemporary black communities is influenced by the past history of the country and stereotypes. The white tendency to look at black men with suspicion caused the death of an unarmed boy who did not commit any crime, and similar incidents happen regularly to other members of the African American community, as it is through stereotyping that they are usually perceived by the white population. In this regard, Obama himself said that the same incident that killed Martin could have killed him too during his years as a teenager.³³ After the end of slavery, the struggles for emancipation and human rights, African Americans are still victimized in society by the popularity of racist stereotypes that view them as unfit for white society. Yet these stereotypes are contradictory: they define black fathers as irresponsible and immature, but it is white behavior that can prevent them from finding a decent job to provide for their families, as it is very common for blacks to be arrested for any crime. Eric Garner, who was shot and killed by a police officer in 2014, had been arrested 30 times prior to his death, which occurred while he was trying to sell untaxed cigarettes. Another victim of police violence, Oscar Grant, was shot in the back

³² Celisa Calacal, *This Is How Many People Police Have Killed So Far in 2015*, <<http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2016/07/05/3794553/police-killings-2016/>>, accessed 6th July 2016

³³ Rajakumar and Saiyed, "I am Trayvon Martin: Obama and the Black Male in Cinema", 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 108

while handcuffed and lying on the ground, and had committed no crimes prior to his detainment. A witness of this particular incident overheard Grant mentioning his 4 years old daughter to his shooter while asking to be released, thus demonstrating not to be in any way reminiscent of the figure of the absent father that is rooted in popular culture.³⁴

1.7 - Conclusion

This chapter retraced the African American experience in American society to expose how, through the span of centuries, they have always been victimized by whites in different ways. While the institution of slavery first relegated them to the condition of livestock, it also laid the groundwork for the creation of racial stereotyping that survived the Emancipation Proclamation and led to social discrimination: while today African Americans formally possess the same rights of white citizens, popular racism frequently causes the denigration of these rights in various contexts, such as law enforcement and job availability. The fact that blacks in the United States never managed to escape their condition as second-class citizens is, however, not simply caused by the presence of racism among some white population groups, but also by the evidence that the Emancipation process did not celebrate the declaration of black people as citizens of the country as much as it focused on the merits of white emancipators who put an end to slavery, because it contradicted the very principles of freedom upon which the United States were created. As a consequence, when members of the black community later became the agents of

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 109

African American emancipation, they were opposed by large parts of the country's population and institutions.

American society did not stop portraying its black communities as victims of a system they cannot control after the abolition of slavery: from the early history of the United States to contemporary years, blacks must be aware that the dark color of their skin is going to influence their lives in a negative way and expose them to danger in the form of exclusion from certain spheres of society or even death. Another victim of racism lost his life a few days prior to the writing of this conclusion, as yet another testament that the current situation of American society is one in which the formal recognition of citizenship and equal rights for the minorities does not correspond to the absence of discrimination and racism, and the lives of unarmed black citizens can be taken by those who swore to protect all members of the population, regardless of their race, from actual crime.

Chapter Two:

Black Heroism in Modern American Cinema

The election of Barack Obama as the first black President of the United States has been considered by many as the crowning achievement reached by the country in the path to social equality between different races. The fact that nowadays any African American individual is given the opportunity to ascend to the very top of American society apparently proves that the country has finally accepted its minorities as equals to the white population. Moreover, the results achieved by African Americans through the second half of the last century have not only put an end to legal discrimination in the United States, but also strongly questioned the veracity of stereotypical representations of black individuals as passive victims: the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, substituted Abraham Lincoln as Great Emancipator in the memory of many members of the African American community. Since Lincoln represented the emblematic incarnation of the white savior trope, the appearance in popular culture of a similar black figure contradicted the idea of blacks as passive individuals who are unable to achieve anything in society on their own. It is undeniable how the continuous social struggle of blacks for equality in American society has had a major role in influencing their representation in popular media. After the success of the Civil Rights Movement, the black scene in media such as cinema and literature has grown to the point that black artists have achieved international recognition in their use of different forms of media as means to discuss racial issues with a wider audience.

When it comes to cinema, the participation of black actors in films has drastically changed: in the past black actors were mostly relegated to background roles in plots that primarily told the stories of white characters. In other instances, black characters were symbolically caricatured in order for the film to endorse a vision of blackness as radically

different in both body and mind from the average white person, to the point that these representations were often considered comically repulsive by audiences.³⁵ *King Kong*, *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* stand out as examples of movies that relegate blackness to themes of savagery and repulsiveness. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* portrays African Americans as sexually attracted by white women and attempting to pursue and rape them: this image is clearly based on the black rapist stereotype, which dates back to the years of slavery and still influences some members of white American society who believe that blacks are primal and violent by nature. The same trope is referenced in *King Kong*, as the giant ape of the movie is reminiscent of African savages in its blackness and kidnaps a white woman because he is intrigued by her pale skin and blonde hair. Finally, *Gone with the Wind* takes place during the American Civil War and its story is told from the perspective of southerners, but the film largely ignores the issue of slavery and depicts black slaves as dutiful and content in their submissiveness. At the same time, similarly to what Griffith's epic drama does, *Gone with the Wind* also makes use of the black rapist stereotype in order to depict the Ku Klux Klan as an institution defending the white population against black savages.

During the course of the 20th century, black participation in cinema became increasingly relevant, to the point that black artists are now recognized as part of the industry as much as whites. The label of "black films" has been created to distinguish a certain genre of movies as somehow representing blackness in modern society. An actual definition of the label is although hard to find, and various interpretations have been given as to what makes a film part of "black cinema": some critics assert that this is

³⁵ Adilifu Nama, *Black Space – Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008 p. 70

determined by the presence of an African American director or of a predominantly black cast in a movie, yet this is not necessarily true: plenty of modern movies feature very popular black actors as protagonists (Will Smith and Samuel L. Jackson are primary examples), but the color of their skin does not always determine that they should be picked as the heroes of a particular story. Will Smith's presence in *After Earth* (2013) and Samuel Jackson's appearance in *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) were most assuredly determined more by their popularity rather than by their African American origins, because both *After Earth* and *Snakes on a Plane* are action-themed movies where the fact that the protagonists are black does not have any consequence on the plot. Therefore, such movies do not belong to black cinema. On the other hand, when somebody is chosen to act in a movie specifically because he or she is black, its because they represent their ethnic group in the plot; if the movie's objective is that of depicting the context of a black community, or the relations between African Americans and the rest of the US population, the movie will be labeled as belonging to black cinema. The blackness of a movie is not determined by the racial affinity of its director or producers, but by the presence of the theme of racial relations between one or more black protagonists and the context in which the plot of the film takes place.

Among the black artists involved in the medium of cinema, some focus on recreating the experiences of historical or fictional black characters in order to highlight racial issues and present them to the general public. Many directors have pushed the medium towards a revival of black history in the effort of providing audiences with accurate representations of the past that are told from the perspective of blacks: this supposedly allows the film to better highlight the struggles in which people of color engaged during the years of slavery

and, after the Emancipation Proclamation, of legal segregation.

Film also makes it possible to rediscover those historical figures that have been demonized by whites in a time when blacks could not influence popular culture. Through the choice of black characters as protagonists and heroes of the story, movies encourage the viewers to empathize with them by showing how racial stereotypes in no way can give an accurate depiction of their behavior and culture; on the contrary, both in the past and in the present, they have often represented an insurmountable barrier to welfare and equality for minorities. The election of Barack Obama as the first black President in the history of the United States is one of the reasons why black films are nowadays being produced in greater numbers than at any time in American history with the purpose of exploring the slave past and presenting it to the newer generations. Both the President and his wife Michelle have publicly stated that their ancestors were in different ways related to slavery in the South (the President's mother descends from a Virginia slave, and Michelle from an Irish slave owner from Georgia), and, on the course of an interview following the shooting of black church members in Charleston, the President addressed the fact that, despite the achievements accomplished towards racial equality, America still has not overcome racism.

Racism, we are not cured of it. And it's not just a matter of it not being polite to say "nigger" in public. That's not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It's not just a matter of overt discrimination. Societies don't, overnight, completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior.³⁶

³⁶ The Associated Press, *Obama Uses N-Word, Says Slavery Still "Casts a Long Shadow"*,

As suggested by the President, erasure of the past does not represent the answer to modern racial issues; coming to terms with slavery and racial segregation in the United States, however, can prove that negative stereotypes have survived into the present. This is why the subject has been extensively tackled by cinema during the latest years. Now more than ever, black films are addressing modern racial issues through the rediscovery of past events and by depicting both historical and fictional black figures in America not as passive victims of a system controlled by whites but as heroes and survivors who actively fought for their freedom.

This chapter analyzes a list of films based on the experiences of historical African Americans and on the tales of fictional characters in order to determine whether they belong or not to black cinema on the basis of how they portray their black characters and heroes. Unlike white heroes, historical black characters generally do not resort to machismo and wittiness to outsmart their antagonists, and often have to “fight” by resisting physical or psychical pain. Their inability to overcome any adversity through more direct means is often due to their lower positions in society. In order to explain how these issues can affect the freedom and choices made by black characters, films contextualize the problem of racial inequality in their plot and thus can demonstrate that the inability of blacks to “fight back” against whites is not determined by lack of agency, but by a system that treats them as second-class individuals and forces them in a position of submission. By viewing the events of a particular story from the perspective of its black

<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/charleston-church-shooting/obama-uses-n-word-says-slavery-still-casts-long-shadow-n379501>>, 2015, accessed 28th July 2016

characters, it becomes possible for a film to show how racial stereotyping can affect the everyday life of people regardless of who and where they are. This can be exemplified through films recreating the life of Martin Luther King, such as *Boycott* and *Selma*. Both show how King and his family are abused by white racists even when they are at home, where they are consistently harassed through death threatening phone calls and bombings. A more recent example, *Fruitvale Station* by director Ryan Coogler, explores the last day in the life of Oscar Grant before he was shot and killed by a police officer while laying on the ground with his hands handcuffed, so that the viewers can witness how white perception of male black youth in public spaces alone can lead to the death of people that, as the movie shows, behave just like all other citizens and are not committing any crime at the time of their killing. *Fruitvale Station* depicts Grant's experiences during the last day of his life, so that the spectator can see that, in his ordinary life, the young boy does not act like a criminal and is just a victim of white prejudice.³⁷

Similar experiences to that of Grant are commemorated in other black films that show how such events can happen quite frequently in the United States and sometimes affect men that are fathers and husbands: they do not abandon their families because they do not care for them like the stereotype of absent black fathers suggests, they are simply victims of the violence that American police enforces on minorities. The fact that Oscar Grant was killed by the same people that ought to protect all members of the population demonstrates how, as admitted by President Obama himself, American racial prejudice can affect any individual that is part of a minority. The President commented on the killings of African American by pointing out that he himself could have been the victim of

³⁷ Mohana Rajakumar and Alisha Saiyed, "I am Trayvon Martin: Obama and the Black Male in Cinema", 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 107-109

racial stereotypes during his youth:

Obama drew bold parallels between himself and Martin, comparing Trayvon to himself thirty-five years earlier. [...] In any situation in his youth, Obama could easily have been Oscar Grant or any other young black male who, without the benefit of context, may be seen as a malevolent threat and profiled on a daily basis. His remarks highlighted that even he would not have been exempt from experiencing racism and hinted that the nation is losing much of its potential in the senseless violence directed at purported perpetrators.³⁸

In their portrayal of this kind of events, films can challenge the circulations of the narrow definitions of black identity that are encouraged by racial archetypes and tropes. When the perspective of the viewer is centered on the actions and the psyche of a particular character, it also becomes possible to understand the reasoning that led said character to act in a particular way, and thus rediscover historical figures that were demonized in the past when they were labeled terrorists in their pursuit of freedom. To this end, contemporary artists are attempting to recover the memory of historical people by showing how it is not their actions that should be demonized but the context that caused them in the first place. One recent example of this would be that of black actor and director Nate Parker: with his movie *The Birth of a Nation*, Parker intends to reconstruct the life of rebel slave Nat Turner, who planned a slave insurrection in Virginia in 1831 that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people, and whose memory still represents a

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 108

controversial subject in American popular culture. The reenactment of historical events in an age where African Americans have the opportunity to participate in the debate on racial issues allows for a new interpretation of the role of blacks in the history and construction of the United States.

2.1 - Representing Racial Agency through Passive Characters

Through the rediscovery of the past of the country from an African American perspective, black films have the opportunity of telling stories that in the past were seldom introduced in popular culture since the media were controlled exclusively by whites. This was acknowledged by CNN after *The Butler* by black director Lee Daniels was distributed in national theaters, narrating a fictional story strongly inspired by the life of government waiter Eugene Allen to millions of viewers.

*Not only do the movies portray the African-American experience, but they're also created from the ground up by today's most prominent filmmakers and actors. Oscar-winner Forest Whitaker, who played the lead role in The Butler, says the trend in Hollywood allows for a more diverse storytelling. "There are so many projects where people are being able to have their voices heard," Whitaker said. "I think that's hopefully going to continue to expand in the African-American community... and all the voices can be heard in the tapestry of who we are as people."*³⁹

³⁹ Jane Caffrey, *Hollywood's African-American Film Renaissance*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/18/showbiz/movies/african-american-film-renaissance/>, 20th October 2013, accessed 31st July 2016

Whitaker's words highlight the importance of recovering a black legacy that was lost in the years of slavery and segregation. He interprets the main character in *The Butler* and, while the figure of Cecil Gaines is that of a submissive man who, for the most part of the film, does not directly participate in any form of political activism, the viewers of the film are brought to respect his servility once they see that his lack of political agency is what allows him to provide for his family. He is trying to survive, just like his ancestors before him. This is best expressed in one of the central scenes in the film, in which the butler and his family are having dinner together and an argument begins between the protagonist and his son, who has become a militant in the Black Panther movement after the murder of Martin Luther King. The son blatantly disrespects his father and treats him as a stereotypical Uncle Tom who avoids defying white privilege in society because he thinks that is what is better for himself, so his mother slaps him for his ungratefulness.

Though the butler's wife sometimes complains that he spends more time in the White House than in his own house as if he cared more for the well-being of white politicians than for that of his family, Cecil's servility represents his own means of survival in a society that is still affected by racial inequality long after the Emancipation Proclamation: despite working in the White House, Cecil and the other black butlers are paid less than their white coworkers, and episodes of violence against the black population often make their appearance in television broadcasts. Cecil's subservient attitude can be reminiscent of that of black slaves who worked in the fields without ever rebelling to their owners, accepting their condition in a struggle for survival. His own father is killed at the beginning of the movie after trying to protest when his wife is raped by a white landowner. Traumatized by the scene, Cecil avoids any sort of rebellion against whites

during most of his lifetime. The murdering of his father makes him realize how easily can blacks in America be subject to intolerance and racial violence, thus he worries when his son Louis travels to Fisk University and later joins peaceful protest initiatives against segregation in public places.

Despite having a political opinion of his own during his years at the White House and admiring John F. Kennedy for his proposal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Cecil decides to never publicly express his feelings, and prioritizes the safety of his family over the pursuit of equal rights for all races in the United States. The plot of the film is centered on the relationship between Cecil and his family, so viewers are shown two different dimensions of Cecil's character, and learn that aside from working at the White House he is also a caring father: in the privacy of his home, he is shown as a much different character from that of the passive butler who diligently serves the President. It is by following the interactions of Cecil with his family that the viewer is able to empathize with him, because those scenes in particular highlight how his job can affect his relations with the other members of his family, especially his son Louis when he decides to actively participate in the fight against racial injustices.

As actor Forest Whitaker stated in an interview with BBC, the story of Cecil Gaines represents that of many other black individuals that throughout history were labeled as passive individuals lacking any social agency and role in the history of their country.

There are hundreds and thousands who stand where he does. He represents this army of individuals who were trying to move forward their quality of life. He stands for a lot of the silent heroes. In some ways, he represents the

*head of the household and the sacrifices you will make in order to hold your family together through the tough times.*⁴⁰

While Cecil never engages in political activism until after quitting his job as a butler, his son Louis, on the other hand, actively participates in activities against segregation in the United States and, later on, Apartheid in South Africa. Though the character of Louis is determined to fight for the rights of colored people and might then be considered by some spectators as the real hero of the story, his father is bound to protect his family because that is his responsibility, so he tries to discourage his son from becoming an activist. More to the point, it is through the money earned by Cecil as a butler that Louis gets the opportunity to travel to Fisk where he begins his experience as a political activist.

The passive figure of Cecil represents all those African Americans who, during and after slavery, resisted silently in a context where blacks were almost exclusively relegated to the role of servants and whites were in charge, in order to allow for the survival of their children who would in time have their voices heard and fight for equality. *The Butler* aims at amending the stereotype of the black man lacking agency by demonstrating that, through their sacrifices and struggles, apparently passive subjects still have a role in the history of African American fight for freedom. Agency is depicted in *The Butler* through the context of Cecil's family and through the protagonist's efforts to keep his loved ones together, but if the movie only portrayed Cecil working at the White House without showing his private life and the moment where his father is shot in front of him, viewers of the movie would not be able to understand the depth of his character and his

⁴⁰ Tim Masters, *Forest Whitaker: The Butler stands for a lot of the silent heroes*, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-24938196>>, 2013, accessed 8th August 2016

motivations.

Distributed and screened in the same year as *The Butler*, *12 Years a Slave* by director Steve McQueen also features a submissive and passive protagonist, whose experience takes place during the years of slavery. The film begins in 1841 in the state of New York, where Solomon Northup lives as a free man and works as a violinist, until he is drugged, kidnapped and sold by two men as a slave. He is immediately stripped of his identity and shipped to Louisiana where he is bought by a local slaveholder. Forced from the condition of man to that of chattel property, at first Northup refuses to accept his fate as a slave and openly defies white overseers when they provoke him, demanding to be treated as a free US citizen and to be sent back to his family. However, he is not listened to, and instead, his behavior only causes the overseers to violently retaliate and almost kill him. Northup's fellow slaves who have more experience with the system advise him to forget his identity as a free man if he is willing to stay alive, and, during the funeral of a field hand that had died out of exhaustion Northup, finally resigns to his condition when he joins the other slaves in singing a song about the hope for a better future. In doing so, Northup accepts the role of victim that he initially resisted, yet does so because he realizes that open rebellion and defiance can only get him killed. In deciding to behave submissively like the other slaves, Northup's character is expressing his will to survive and silently resist the brutalities of slavery. Viewers of the movie realize that Northup wants to live because he still hopes to, one day, be able to reunite with his family in New York, despite the fact that he has no way to communicate with them and most people in the plantation do not believe him when he says that he is a free man. Just like the character of Cecil Gaines, his submissiveness to white people cannot be trivialized as simple resignation and lack of

agency. Only through his will to survive is Northup able to resist the dehumanizing life of southern plantations. Solomon's strength of will is particularly tested when his benevolent first master sells him to another slaver owner who is soon revealed to be vicious, pitiless, and a rapist. When he catches the victim of his sadistic lust with soap, he orders Solomon to whip her as a punishment. The hero does not risk losing his identity when he is punished as much as when he is ordered to punish other slaves: it is by inflicting pain on others, when he is forced to impersonate the torturer himself, that the hero is actually humiliated the most.⁴¹

In representing their main heroes as victims that never resort to violence, *The Butler* and *12 Years a Slave* have both been criticized for the way in which they attempt to influence the popular perceptions of slavery and people of color. As stated by professor of sociology Salvador Murguia in his discussion of the reception of movies recreating the African American experience in the US, these movies can be interpreted in different ways when viewed by members of different ethnic groups: white audiences may feel guilt or absolution depending on how they relate to the characters portrayed in the movie, while black viewers may view themselves as objects of entertainment or even objectification.⁴²

Murguia asserts that part of the viewers of a film on passive heroes will express sympathy for the main character out of pity for his condition; others will take a different approach on this kind of narrative and criticize it as a masochistic spectacle that prioritizes having an emotional impact on the audience over instructing people on the past history of the

⁴¹ Thomas Britt, "Passive Protagonists", 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, cit., p. 288

⁴² Salvador Murguia, "162 Years after 12 Years a Slave", 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, cit., p. 243

country. The phenomenon of “white guilt” that is often associated with movies recreating the history of victimized black people in the United States has been said to have influenced the critical reception of *12 Years a Slave*, and some sources even reported that this sentiment of pity and guilt has contributed to the movie winning the Oscar for Best Picture in 2014. According to John Horn of the *Los Angeles Times*:

*Two Oscar voters privately admitted that they didn't see “12 Years a Slave”, thinking it would be upsetting. But they also said they voted for it anyway because, given the film's social relevance, they felt obligated to do so.*⁴³

Horn provided no actual evidence supporting the veracity of his statement, yet even if all Oscar voters actually saw *12 Years a Slave* before the Award Ceremony and expressed an unbiased opinion of it, the fact that Horn reported the possibility that some voters did not watch the movie still demonstrates the presence of this sentiment among the members of the industry: Murguia describes this attitude as often present in the critical and popular receptions of films that are centered on slavery, as they inspire a sense of pity in white audiences who then express their sympathy towards the topic and bring it to national attention by, in this case, having it win a major prize.

Similar reactions surrounded the actress Lupita Nyong'o, who interprets the character of Patsey, the girl who is raped and punished by Northup's second owner.

⁴³ John Horn, *Twelve Years a Slave Puts Spotlight on Hollywood's Approach to Race*, *Los Angeles Times*, 2014, quoted in Murguia, cit., p. 245

Shortly after the film was distributed in national theaters, Nyong'o was widely praised by social media not just for her acting skills but, as various sources suggested, also for her exotic look and the way in which her body in the film exposes the realities of enslavement: a blogger for the *Motley News* website associated her success in social media to the fact that she is by far the most tormented character in the movie. What's at the center of the blogger's argument is that there is a direct connection between the way that Nyong'o was praised and the sense of pity that her character inspired in many viewers of the movie. Audiences "fetishized" the character of Patsey and made it the object of their compassion, and basically used it as a means to convey their sense of regret for the evils of slavery perpetrated by whites.⁴⁴

Just as some sources suggested that the voting of *12 Years a Slave* as Best Picture of the years was influenced by a subconscious sense of moral obligation, Murguia argues that the same could be said in the case of Nyong'o winning her Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. The way in which Nyong'o was acclaimed by audiences of the movie further reinforces the idea that positive reactions towards characters are the result of a sentiment of pity evoked by the representation of enslaved black men and women, and that, therefore, audiences do not sympathize with black passive characters because they perceive them as "survival heroes" but rather because they see them as mere victims in pain. While a distinction between these two definitions may be subtle in the context of passive protagonists, in identifying black characters as victims viewers of the movie are more likely to feel sympathetic towards them because of a sentiment of pity rather than perceiving their silent resistance as an heroic struggle. For this reason, *12 Years a Slave* has

⁴⁴ Salvador Murguia, "162 Years after 12 Years a Slave", 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, cit., p. 246

been criticized by those who interpreted its most gruesome scenes as provocative depictions of the horrors perpetrated by white Americans during slavery. In an opinion piece that he published in *The Guardian*, black Canadian essayist Orville Lloyd Douglass expressed his disregard for a movie that, to him, failed to convey any meaningful message:

*I'm convinced these black race films are created for a white, liberal film audience to engender white guilt and make them feel bad about themselves. Regardless of your race, these films are unlikely to teach you anything you don't already know. Frankly, why can't black people get over slavery? Or, at least, why doesn't anyone want to see more contemporary portrayals of black lives?*⁴⁵

Douglass criticizes movies like *12 Years a Slave* stating that they offer no solution to contemporary racial issues in the United States and are exclusively catered to white audiences. He insists that in order to address modern issues movies should be set in contemporary years, as if nothing could be gained from the recovery of the slave past. Furthermore, by stating that films on slavery are made exclusively for a white audience, Douglass also fails to identify the role of their main characters as that of heroes that struggle to resist their dehumanization, while instead viewing them as mere victims whose pain is only meant to convey a sense of guilt on white spectators.

2.2 - Django Unchained: the Frontier Hero in Black Cinema

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 248

The victimization of black heroes has become an increasingly popular trope in cinema in the latest years, and is opposed to a different representation of black characters that depicts them as violent in their struggle against white oppression. This constitutes one of the defining tropes of the blaxploitation genre. The blaxploitation genre emerged in American cinema in the early 70s, its films commonly featured black characters and were mostly set in poor urban neighborhoods. Blaxploitation films were initially made to appeal to black audiences, however they were criticized for making use of racial stereotypes in describing their main black characters. A common trope in blaxploitation films is the notion that only through physical prowess can the black hero retain his freedom. However, this particular representation of black men defying white society is rarely grounded in historical realism, and instead offers a sadistically gratifying spectacle where dialogue between different races is impossible, so that the only way to deal with prejudice and segregation is through retribution. Therefore, blaxploitation films do not display any plausible solution to present-day racial inequalities while providing light entertainment that depicts white Americans as evil and vain, while blacks are seen as more attractive and charismatic. Especially popular in the 1970s, the blaxploitation genre has today lost most of its relevance in black cinema, with some of its themes still featured, or parodied, in recent films.

The genre and its tropes were exposed in 2009 in the action movie *Black Dynamite*, which features a number of blaxploitation stereotypes and a black vigilante hero who openly defies white supremacists in an imperialist society where minorities are perpetually subject to abuse on the part of their white oppressors: a system that is in many aspects reminiscent of the slave system of the antebellum South. In order to prevent whites from exploiting minorities, the black hero “becomes the arbiter of a stock revenge

fantasy”⁴⁶ and physically fights against corrupted villains, as all the white society in *Black Dynamite* is a spectrum of negative stereotypes: even the President is parodied as a vicious two-faced opportunist, while the black hero is constantly flaunting his manliness to the audience. The hero is capable of overrunning the entirety of white society on his own through brute force alone, while all the other black characters are given marginal roles: women are excluded from the plot after the hero successfully seduces them and black militants are shown as infantile and incompetent rebels: their collectivism is trivialized while the hero's individualism is ludicrously celebrated, to the point that the movie eventually ends with *Black Dynamite* literally conquering the White House after forcing Richard Nixon to stop in his attempt to emasculate the black population of the country.

While *Black Dynamite* makes a comedic use of blaxploitation tropes to parody the genre, one more serious instance of a movie that takes some of its inspiration from blaxploitation movies is *Django Unchained* from director Quentin Tarantino. Though not directed by an African American director and despite the contrary opinion of the movie's detractors, *Django Unchained* is a black film, not because it borrows characteristic elements of blaxploitation movies but because the narrative follows a black main character whose life has been thoroughly influenced by other's perception of his blackness. From its very start, the film states that its primary aim is not that of giving an entirely accurate representation of history: the film's opening title states that the story is set in 1858, “two years before the Civil War”, even though the war actually started in 1861. While various sources have criticized the movie for this imprecision, others dismissed the importance of cinematic accuracy and defined the historical elasticity of the film as crucial in allowing

⁴⁶ Andrew Grossman, “Servility, Militancy, and the Meaning of Blaxploitation”, 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, cit., p. 77

Tarantino to focus on narrating a story on slavery that is not based on real events and having the spectator focus on the film's narrative. Scholars Heather Hayes and Gilbert Rodman have interpreted the opening title of the movie as Tarantino's means to indicate that the primary purpose of his movie is not that of being faithful to historical facts:

[...] Tarantino knew that the opening title was historically inaccurate in ways that millions of filmgoers would spot, and he chose to keep the mistake in place deliberately. From the very start, he is signaling that he's more interested in telling a good story than he is in showing rigid fealty to historical facts. There is historical precision to be found here, but it revolves more around Tarantino demonstrating how thoroughly he knows cinematic history than it does around capturing the realities of mid-nineteenth century Southern life.⁴⁷

Django Unchained delivers a story that is hardly grounded in reality and in which negative stereotypes are applied to most of the antagonist figures. Tarantino decides to focus the attention of the narrative on the characters of the story rather than on the general context of the slavery period, and it is in the analysis of these characters that a critical review of the movie is possible.

2.3 - Character Development in Django Unchained

⁴⁷ Heather Hayes and Gilbert Rodman, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Film", 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 196

The movie follows its main hero Django in his journey to reclaim his freedom and that of his wife in the antebellum South of the United States. In his adventure, Django is helped by Dr. King Schultz, a German bounty hunter. Schultz behaves much differently from most white characters in the movie, who are often represented as ignorant, evil and spoiled. While it is Django that initially assists Schultz in his job as a bounty hunter, the doctor later decides to help the hero of the story in his quest to find and free his wife from a cotton plantation in Mississippi after he tells him his story. Django's past reminds Schultz of the German legend of Siegfried and Broomhilda, and Schultz feels obliged to help him in his quest.

In assisting Django, Schultz embodies the cinematic trope of the Magical Negro, which, as the name suggests, was for the most part reserved to black actors in supporting roles in the past. The Magical Negro character in American cinema is a figure that comes in aid of the main hero of the film, and usually possesses uncommon abilities that allow him to help the white hero in any situation. The trope was included in many films in the past when white filmmakers would use it to attract white audiences⁴⁸ by creating a character reminiscent of stereotypes such as “Sambo” or the “good savage”. These black characters would therefore have to appeal to an audience that was sometimes strongly biased against African Americans, so they were stripped of any characteristic that could potentially offend white spectators of a movie: while aiding white protagonists, they would be subordinate to them, and if needed would go as far as to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the hero of the story.

This relationship between white heroes and their black assistants is inverted in

⁴⁸ Ryan Weaver and Nichole Kathol, “Stereotypes, Mythification, and White Redemption”, 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 254-255

Django Unchained, where the role of the Magical Negro is given to a white character, Schultz, that voluntarily decides to help a black man and ultimately sacrifice himself in his battle against slavery. Throughout the movie, Schultz outwits other characters multiple times and is also capable of disguising himself and Django to hide their real intentions to their enemies. Even when he first appears in the movie, his entrance immediately assumes a mysterious tone: Schultz silently emerges from the depths of the woods riding a rather bizarre-looking cab that looks completely out of place. His intentions and methods are unpredictable to both the other characters in the movie and to the spectator, who initially does not expect him to shoot the slavers escorting Django or the sheriff that he confidently kills in front of dozens of people without mentioning any reason.

While most white characters in the movie are slavers and racists, by embodying a black stereotype Schultz attempts to redeem himself and his race from the guilt of slavery. When he finally decides to kill the main slaver villain of the movie instead of shaking his hand, he is attempting to preserve his dignity as an abolitionist, even though in doing so he puts Django and his wife in danger. Schultz shoots Calvin Candie to redeem the white race from the guilt of slavery and to rid the world from the plight of slavery, but in doing so almost causes the deaths of Django and his wife. The heroic personality of Schultz, who first frees Django at the beginning of the movie and then shoots Candie knowing that in doing so he will inevitably get killed as well, has led many to interpret his character as inspired by the “white savior” cinematic archetype, which is a very common trope in Hollywood's movies dealing with the slave past and portrays white characters opposing the cruelties of slavery or exploitation and actively trying to grant freedom to oppressed minorities. The trope is not solely used in historical films, but is also central to movies like *Avatar* from director James Cameron, which belongs to the science fiction genre.

Django is a slave during the opening credits of the movie, where he is first seen chained to a group of fellow blacks: in this scene, the viewers are only able to distinguish him as the hero of the story because the camera focuses on him more than on the other slaves, but the fact that he is victimized strips him of any heroic trait. Even the whip marks on his back contribute to portray him as a victim. As soon as Schultz enters the scene and kills the slavers escorting Django and frees him to then progressively train him as a bounty hunter, the hero becomes more and more reminiscent of the stereotypical white cowboy. He quickly becomes an exceptional gunslinger and also proves capable of outwitting whites when required: after the death of Schultz, he is sent to work as a slave in the mines, but successfully persuades some henchmen to temporarily free him. Immediately after that, Django kills the henchmen and rides back to Candyland to save his wife. Despite being partially driven by a desire for vengeance against white slavers, Django dispenses justice with the pragmatism that characterizes any American cowboy. Most of his prowess does not derive from a formal education, but from surviving in the frontier among hostile animals and men.⁴⁹ He becomes so exceptional that the main villains express surprise when they look at him, calling him “that one in ten thousand niggers”. Furthermore, Tarantino's Django is based on Sergio Corbucci's frontier hero of the same name, a white cowboy whose adventures are recalled in some ways in the film.

Django's character is directly opposed to that of Stephen, a black slave living in Candyland that, when introduced in the movie, is immediately portrayed as a stereotypical “Uncle Tom”, faithful to his master and distrustful of other slaves who serve

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 250

in the mansion like him. Stephen overuses the n-word in a clearly derogatory tone, and represents the true main villain of the movie and Django's nemesis: it is Stephen that decides to lock Django's wife in a metal box after she attempts to escape; he also realizes that Django and Schultz have come to Candyland to free Broomhilda and not to purchase a Mandingo fighter as they want Candie to believe; finally, it is Stephen that decides to send Django to work in the mines after he is recaptured, so it almost seems as if he is the real master of Candyland after the death of Candie, though some spectators might feel that he was even before. Stephen is crippled and lacks the physical prowess that distinguishes Django, and is the only black character in the film that seems content with the place that his white masters have assigned to him in society. His characterization as an anti-hero highlights Django's qualities, and the spectator is brought to despise him from the first scene in which he appears, where he is seen interacting with Candie and protesting when told to prepare a bedroom in the mansion for another black man.

In line with other negative critiques of the movie, Stephen's character has been condemned as a caricaturization of house slaves instead of being recognized as “the power behind the throne” of Candyland. It is characters like Stephen that contribute in making *Django Unchained* an articulate condemnation of structural racism: Stephen actively participates in the hierarchy of racial oppression that is the plantation system, and thus he himself is the oppressor.⁵⁰

Contrary to what happens in most films recreating the slave experience in the United States, the hero Django is given the opportunity to actively fight for his freedom against a

⁵⁰ Heather Hayes and Gilbert Rodman, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Film”, 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 187-189

society that appears to be corrupted at its core. As Tarantino stated during an interview with Terry Gross:

I like the idea of telling these stories and taking stories that oftentimes – if played out the way that they're normally played out – just end up becoming soul-deadening, because you're just watching victimization all the time. And now you get a chance to put a spin on it and actually take a slave character and give him a heroic journey, make him heroic, make him give his payback, and actually show this epic journey and give it the kind of folkloric tale that it deserves – the kind of grand-opera stage it deserves.⁵¹

Through *Django*, Tarantino intended to create a liberating black hero in an industry where most movies with an antebellum setting portray black characters as passive victims that are unable to rise against their masters in their pursuit of freedom. However, David J. Leonard criticized Tarantino's vision of black agency by observing that, aside from *Django*, all other black characters in the movie are incapable of escaping their enslavement⁵² and, in fact, some of them even embrace it. Leonard's statement however omits that *Django* is not the only black character in the movie that actively resists against slavery: his wife is locked in a metal box after she tries to escape, D'Artagnan is killed by Calvin Candie's hounds because he refuses to keep on fighting his fellow slaves to death for the entertainment and profit of his master, and other nameless black characters openly

⁵¹ "Quentin Tarantino, 'Unchained and Unruly'" interview with National Public Radio's Terry Gross, <<http://npr.org/2013/01/02/168200139/quentin-tarantino-unchained-and-unruly>>, 2013, accessed 13th August 2016

⁵² David Leonard, "Whiteness and Hollywood's Continued Failures", 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, cit. p. 272

show they despise Django when he disguises himself as a black slaver. Despite their helplessness, the background of these characters grants heroic traits to each of them: Broomhilda probably attempts to escape to find her husband, which is exactly what Django is doing throughout the movie, while D'Artagnan feels so ashamed for hurting other slaves that in order to stop he is willing to put his own life at risk in angering his master. The only black character in the film who is actually content with his slave status is Stephen, because he is bound to represent the antithesis of everything Django stands for. Stephen has seemingly served the Candie family for generations, giving up his identity as a black man in the attempt to improve his status, and this has brought him to scorn other blacks as if he were a slaver himself. If any character in the movie should be accused of passivity and submissiveness towards white masters, it should be Stephen, and it is because of this that he plays the role of the main villain.

However, Leonard also mentions that the character of Broomhilda lacks any development throughout the story and might be viewed by audiences mainly as a “final reward” for the hero when his quest is over. The movie does in fact relegate most of its black characters to secondary roles, which brings the spectator to view the sole hero of the story as exceptional and different from other slaves; Candie himself defines him as an “exceptional nigger” during the movie. This fact that Django alone manages to defeat dozens of antagonists at the end of the film and symbolically end slavery by blowing up Candyland has led many to critique the movie as a “revenge fantasy” that lacks any historical value in the context of slavery representation in cinema. Action movies in American cinema are known to often exhibit individualistic heroes in their plots, and *Django Unchained* makes use of the same trope in his plot.

Django eventually manages to conquer his liberty by himself and does so through sheer violence, because all the antagonists in the movie are nonredeemable, and therefore, the movie encourages the hero's use of violence against them: when a black character is tortured or killed, violence is depicted as very gruesome, so as to give a realistic representation of the horrors of slavery to the viewers of the movie, but when violence is enacted on white racists and slavers it appears exaggerated and almost cartoonish, with "bullet wounds exploding and gushing geyser-like amounts of blood, and henchmen basically cut into pieces when Django shoots them."⁵³ The viewer can hardly feel any sympathy for the white henchmen when they are shot, because their deaths can hardly be taken seriously in their ridiculousness. Tarantino explained this use of both realistic and exaggerated violence in his movie in an interview with literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr.:

...on one hand I'm telling a historical story, and when it comes to nuts and bolts of the slave trade, I had to be real and tell it the right way. But when it comes to more thematic things and operatic view, I could actually have fun with stylization – because it is taking parts from a spaghetti Western. And I am taking the story of a slave narrative and blowing it up... to operatic proportions...⁵⁴

As he stated in his interview with Gates, Tarantino was interested in delivering a work

⁵³ Samuel Perry, "Recurrence of the Frontier Hero", 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, cit., p. 220

⁵⁴ Quoted in Perry, "Recurrence of the Frontier Hero", cit., p. 221

that, despite some historical inaccuracies, could still depict the cruelty of the slave system in the United States. This is conveyed primarily through two particular scenes: one in which Django's wife is whipped by the Brittle brothers, and one in which Candie, the main white antagonist of the movie, has his hounds eat a slave alive. Both scenes serve the purpose of portraying certain characters as evil and deserving to be punished for their actions by the hero of the story: for example, the whipping scene is shown as a flashback just before Django kills the Brittle brothers, so that the spectator is able to understand why the hero does not hesitate in shooting the men that tortured his wife. While the use of violence on black characters in *Django Unchained* is often a manifestation of sadism from the part of the villains, it also justifies the hero's violent agency against them, since all white characters in the movie (with few exceptions like that of Dr. Schultz) are either parodies of racist behavior or irredeemable in their evilness, so much so that their deaths can only be considered licit by the spectator.

Despite its attempt to introduce a non-victimized African American hero fighting against slavery in popular culture, Tarantino's take on black heroism has not only been criticized as historically inaccurate but also as trivializing the context of the antebellum South for the purpose of light entertainment. Part of the movie's detractors are black adults who feel that the figure of Django does not in any way resemble their ancestors who lived under slavery. Django is not simply trying to survive, and his heroism is expressed by his killing of white evil characters, yet he does not do so for the good of other slaves but only to succeed in his mission to save his wife. After the destruction of Candyland and the end of the movie, the viewer does not expect him to continue fighting slavers for the good of all African Americans. Schultz, on the other hand, is far more concerned by the violence perpetrated against slaves throughout the movie: while Django

is capable of watching a fellow black man being torn apart by dogs, the memory of the same event eventually leads Schultz to kill Calvin Candie after refusing to shake his hand. Therefore, in their opinion the real protagonist and hero of the film may be Schultz, because he is the emancipator who grants freedom to black slaves. Furthermore, his eloquent speech and eccentricity are likely to make him a more appealing character than Django in a pop context, and white audiences of the movie will identify with him, perceiving him as both a charismatic and morally superior man compared to most other characters in the movie. However, Django remains the actual protagonist of the film, because the plot focuses on his perspective and experience as a man that, though initially helpless and freed by Schultz, still has to fight until the very end of the movie to really retrieve his liberty.

The tale of Django follows the canonical rules of Hollywood's action cinema and is inspired by cinematic genres that are normally not used in the depiction of the slave past. For this reason, director Spike Lee refused to see the movie stating that he found it disrespectful to his ancestors that a spaghetti western could attempt to recreate American slavery, but, despite this criticism, this particular depiction of history was still well acclaimed in pop culture because of its vicinity to Hollywood's tropes. As observed by Weaver and Kathol, when compared to a movie such as *12 Years a Slave* in which the hero's agency is limited by his submissiveness, one can observe how *Django Unchained* attracted a wider audience because his rebellious depiction of people of color derives from images that are very common in modern cinema.⁵⁵ In fact, action-oriented settings aimed at

⁵⁵ Ryan Weaver and Nichole Kathol, "Stereotypes, Mythification, and White Redemption", 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 248

adolescents usually make the top entries in highest-grossing Hollywood films: in 2013, both *The Butler* and *12 Years a Slave* registered a much lower income than many other movies featuring no political subject matter, while, in 2012, *Django Unchained* made it among the top entries.

Negative criticism of *Django* revolved around its gratuitous violence, its exaggerate use of the word “nigger” (which is a very common and distinctive trait defining Tarantino's works) and the fact that its plot apparently minimizes its depiction of slavery and racism in the antebellum United States in favor of telling the story of an individual man who is not even a slave. The movie has been criticized for its political incorrectness and its vicinity to b-movie genres, while, on the same year, another movie centered on slavery was met with a much different reception: *Lincoln* by director Steven Spielberg delivers a very different perspective on the context of slavery and provides a more accurate depiction of historical events. While *Django Unchained* is considered too controversial to be taken seriously as a discourse on race politics, *Lincoln* was highly praised upon release even though it actually depicts very little of the slave experience and, instead, focuses on portraying the individual figure of Abraham Lincoln during his last year of presidency, when he put an end to chattel slavery in the United States through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. While *Django Unchained* was dismissed by many as a source of light entertainment, *Lincoln* was not only considered a major cinematic achievement, but also a significant political intervention that ought to inspire contemporary politics in their discussion of racial issues. Oprah Winfrey praised *Lincoln* on her television show and encouraged her audience to see it, while also treating *Django Unchained* with disregard in an interview with actor Jamie Foxx, going as far as to suggest

that such as movie “shouldn't have been made”.⁵⁶

The fact that *Django Unchained* was reviewed as offensive by black personalities such as Spike Lee and Oprah Winfrey is a reminder that, for to some critics, the experiences of black slaves should only be portrayed through the victimization of their black protagonists in order to provide a more striking and accurate depiction of their lives.

While it is true that the character of Django is not directly inspired by real events, it is incorrect to relegate Tarantino's movie to a genre of light entertainment, as the movie does, in fact, feature the themes of survival and endurance that are also present in most other movies exploring the setting of American slavery. As explained by Robert McParland when comparing *Django Unchained* to *Lincoln*:

*Django wishes to reclaim his wife from slavery, hardship, and the sadistic treatment by Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). Ingenuity and revenge are mixed with an effort to reclaim freedom and dignity. Jamie Foxx as Django is heroic, resourceful, and brutal when necessary. At the center is the issue of race, and like Daniel Day-Lewis's Lincoln, he is a screen onto which viewers may project their fantasies, needs, fears, and hopes.*⁵⁷

McParland highlights how the character of Django is still bound to the institution of slavery after Schultz saves him from the slavers at the beginning of the movie, as the key to his freedom is the reunion with his wife (and the symbolical destruction of Candyland):

⁵⁶ Heather Hayes and Gilbert Rodman, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Film”, 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 195

⁵⁷ Robert McParland, “If Django and Lincoln Could Talk” 2014, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, cit., p. 34

his character is thus in a way reminiscent of that of Solomon Northup and others who are forced into some form of submission. While contemporary viewers can feel compassion and sympathy for passive characters such as Northup who have no means to fight back or defend themselves, they identify Django and Schultz as emancipators who bring retribution to the people responsible for torturing slaves in the movie. Their use of violence is not gratuitous but often required in dire situations, and the spectacular nature of some scenes should not be trivialized as a mere attempt to entertain the viewers: when Django and Schultz succeed in finding the Brittle Brothers, Schultz shoots one of them who is riding a horse on a cotton field, and the framing suddenly changes to a close-up of cotton plants being sprayed with blood. This aesthetic choice cannot be trivialized as a mere attempt to glorify the death of a slaver, as cotton represents the emblem of the antebellum South and, when covered in blood, symbolizes the inhuman conditions in which black field slaves were treated. A similar metaphor can also be found at the very end of the movie, when Django uses dynamite to blow up the mansion of Candyland, symbolizing his role as his own emancipator and the beginning of a new life for him and his wife as free people.

Despite its use of symbolism to highlight the theme of racial issues, *Django Unchained* has been labeled a controversial project because of the provocative reputation of its director and because most contemporary versions of the “black experience” dealing with race are historical narratives that often depict black slave characters as victims whose suffering must sensitize the viewers to the issue of racism.

2.4 - The White Savior Narrative in Hollywood's Cinema

With the exception of Django and characters from comics, black action heroes with a desire for revenge against white people have been relegated to the sub genre of blaxploitation, and most Hollywood movies depicting the realities of Southern States prior to the Civil War often do so from the perspective of white characters (*Lincoln*, *Amistad*, *Amazing Grace*). Few works based on rebellious African American slaves actually exist, as Hollywood is yet to produce a film portraying the lives of, among the others, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, who was even excluded from Spielberg's *Lincoln* despite the role he played in the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Yet *Lincoln* is not Spielberg's only movie based on slavery that makes use of the white savior trope, as in 1997 the director worked on *Amistad*, which recreates the events surrounding a slave mutiny which occurred in 1839 on board of a Spanish slave ship. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Amistad* mutiny gained international attention as the slaves involved were granted freedom and allowed to return to Africa by the United States government, so that the event consequently became a major symbol in abolitionist propaganda prior to the Civil War.

The structure of the movie is similar to that of *Lincoln* in that the main protagonists are white people involved in the political scene of the United States, attempting to act on behalf of the slaves to promote their natural rights as men. Black characters in *Amistad* are marginal to the plot and the main purpose of their presence in the movie is to allow for whites to morally redeem themselves as emancipators. Yet, in favor of this “white savior narrative”, Spielberg sacrifices historical accuracy. Many academics have criticized the movie for its focus on the condemnation of slavery as an institution, even though in the actual *Amistad* case the Supreme Court only sentenced the Spanish trafficking of slaves from Africa to America: the law recognized the freedom of Cinqué and the other blacks

because they were born in Africa, but still viewed those that were born on American soil as human property. In the words of Columbia University professor Eric Foner:

Amistad presents a highly misleading account of the case's historical significance, in the process sugarcoating the relationship between the American judiciary and slavery. The film gives the distinct impression that the Supreme Court was convinced by Adams' plea to repudiate slavery in favor of the natural rights of man, thus taking a major step on the road to abolition. In fact, the Amistad case revolved around the Atlantic slave trade – by 1840 outlawed by international treaty – and had nothing to do with slavery as a domestic institution. Incongruous as it may seem, it was perfectly possible in the nineteenth century to condemn the importation of slaves from Africa while simultaneously defending slavery and the flourishing slave trade within the United States.⁵⁸

Both *Lincoln* and *Amistad* celebrate whites as heroic emancipators of African American victims and the triumph of liberal institutions over the system of slavery. Black characters only play marginal roles in both films, and even the figure of Joseph Cinqué, who was recognized as a hero for his role as leader during the Amistad mutiny, is almost reminiscent of the image of the supplicant slave when he repeatedly cries “Give us, us free!” in front of the Supreme Court as if begging for mercy. His character is presented as more reminiscent of an animal than a man, and this is underlined by the fact that nearly ten minutes pass from the beginning of the movie to a scene where he speaks, and English

⁵⁸ Eric Foner, *The Amistad Case in Fact and Film*, <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/74>>, 1998, accessed 18th August 2016

speaking audiences can only guess what he says, because he speaks Mende and no subtitles appear until much later in the film.⁵⁹ Much different from the animal-like hero depicted by Hollywood is the interpretation of Cinqué in the play *Amistad Kata-Kata* by Charlie Haffner, where the slave leader exhorts his fellow captives to take up arms against the Amistad crew under the fear that the white men are going to eat them.⁶⁰ While Spielberg's movie begins with the mutiny itself and makes it impossible for most spectators to understand what the slaves are saying afterwards, Haffner's play prefaces the revolt itself by establishing Cinqué's identity as the leader of the rebelling group. Furthermore, while in Spielberg's movie no subtitles ever accompany what the other slaves are saying, their speech is comprehensible in Haffner's play: this element contributes in depicting them as active participants of a revolt where Cinqué is not represented as the only heroic figure.

Neither *Lincoln* nor *Amistad* focus on portraying heroism on the part of African Americans who survived and actively fought against slavery. Instead, both films make use of the black victim trope to depict white saviors as compassionate and morally superior members of society. It is never the black slaves who are central to the narration, but the emancipators that must be celebrated for their contribution to the building of the country as we know it today. When it comes to the representation of the slave past, most Hollywood films make use of the white savior narrative even when the main protagonists are African Americans: in the conclusion of *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon is able to regain his freedom only thanks to a white Canadian laborer who listens to his story and then accepts to deliver a letter to Northup's relatives, even though in doing so he is risking his life. This

⁵⁹ Matthew J. Christensen, *Rebellious Histories*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2012, p. 87

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 68

event then leads to Northup's liberation and return to the state of New York. However, while the narrations of both *Amistad* and *Lincoln* highlight the heroism of their white characters by making them the protagonists of the events narrated, *12 Years a Slave* is entirely told from the perspective of Solomon, and the white savior only briefly appears towards the end of the movie. The narration is focused on Solomon and his experience as a slave, and the savior is introduced in the movie only to demonstrate how Northup could eventually be found and liberated from the plantation where he served. The centrality of Solomon in the story is what makes *12 Years a Slave* a black movie, and its primary purpose is not the glorification of the deeds of white abolitionists but, instead, the description of the experience of an African American slave.

The main issue with the white savior trope and the way in which Hollywood produces films about black culture and history is that these movies often celebrate the political achievements of American society and suggest that racial issues belong to the past⁶¹: even *The Butler*, despite being a black film, gives this impression when Cecil and his son Louis learn that Barack Obama has become the President of the United States. While listening to Obama's election night speech, Cecil breaks into tears and the viewer is led to believe that the election of a black President in America is a milestone that can finally put an end to the manifestations of racism that are portrayed within the movie. The movie ends leaving the impression that the United States have yet again grown morally past the issues depicted in the plot, which is very similar to what happens in the ending sequences of both *Amistad* and *Lincoln*. These movies portray past political experiences that are

⁶¹ Heather Hayes and Gilbert Rodman, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Film", 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 193

viewed as “moral lessons” upon which future generations ought to take inspiration. In her praising of *Lincoln*, Oprah defined it as a stellar achievement in cinematography, saying that “it will reach into the marrow of your soul... I can't remember when I've experienced anything like it... it is a masterpiece”⁶², despite the fact that the movie largely focuses on the individual figure of Lincoln and almost entirely excludes black characters from its narrative, oversimplifying their role in the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Very few African Americans can be seen throughout the movie, and they are shown as passively waiting for white men to liberate them.⁶³

While movies depicting the achievements of the country become the center of the national conversation, *Django Unchained* is pushed to its margins because it is considered too controversial in its violence and lacking any historical lesson or teaching. More importantly, the movie makes use of comedy and parody as tools to represent racism: the representation of slavery in Hollywood is so influenced by the tropes of black victims and white saviors that Django's story has been viewed by many as disrespectful to the past black generations of slaves. Django as a black hero is ridiculed as a fantasy that bears no resemblance to any other black personality in historical cinema because it rejects the trope of the victim while embodying that of the white cowboy and, as observed by Heather Ashley Hayes and Gilbert B. Rodman, that of white romance and sacrifice.

One of Hollywood's oldest and most popular tropes is the man (or, occasionally, the woman) who sacrifices everything – family, friends, career,

⁶² Ibidem, p. 195

⁶³ Kate Masur, *In Spielberg's Lincoln, Passive Black Characters*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/opinion/in-spielbergs-lincoln-passive-black-characters.html?pagewanted=1&r=0>, 2012, accessed 19th August 2016

home, etc. - for the sake of his one true love, because "love conquers all"... significantly, this trope only gets applied to white love. Hollywood rarely gives us stories about people of color at all, and it certainly doesn't give us any such tales where the love in question is celebrated for being selfish and all-consuming in the way that white love routinely is.⁶⁴

Django as a hero is criticized as lacking credibility because he can only be compared to white counterparts, which are, on their part, never labeled as controversial. The fact that films regularly provide plenty of white action heroes sometimes dealing with subjects that are reminiscent of contemporary issues suggests that the character of Django himself is not considered controversial or disrespectful because of the context of American slavery, but rather because it is a black character that defies the actual trend of Hollywood representation of blacks. Tarantino attempted to create a new representation of black masculinity through a "folkloric black hero" while also contradicting racial tropes through the use of the frontier hero archetype as an inspiration for his character.

2.5 - The Depiction of Black Agency in Hollywood's Cinema

Despite the controversial nature of the subject, efforts towards the recognition of black agency in cinematography are being made by independent directors: *The Birth of a*

⁶⁴ Heather Hayes and Gilbert Rodman, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Film", 2014, in Oliver C. Speck, *Django Unchained – The Continuation of Metacinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 199

Nation by Nate Parker attempts to recreate the events of the Virginia slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in 1831. The rebellion became notorious for its violence and eventually led to the passing of a law that prohibited the education of slaves. The uprising resulted in the death of at least fifty white people, and its leader Nat Turner was quickly demonized and remains, to this day, a controversial figure that has both been described as a freedom fighter and a terrorist.

Parker's movie follows the perspective of a slave fighting back against his masters, thus contradicting the stereotypical and popular image of slaves that cannot act on their own behalf and must rely on white saviors to free them. Both the passive and the rebellious slave were part of American history, and both contributed in their own ways to the construction of the United States, as the title that Parker has chosen for his movie suggests. Furthermore, the theatrical release poster for *The Birth of a Nation* also emphasizes the same concept, with the silhouettes of Turner and the rest of the rebelling slaves recreating the red stripes of the US national flag. The title also refers to Griffith's epic drama of the same name from 1915, which became a propaganda phenomenon for the KKK and depicted black people as unintelligent and highly aggressive towards white women. In choosing the name of such a film to title his own piece of work in black cinema, Parker defines his work as defying modern racial beliefs in society, and attempts to recreate the black experience during slavery without making use of any trope:

Not only did this film motivate the massive resurgence of the terror group the Ku Klux Klan and the carnage exacted against people of African descent, it served as the foundation of the film industry we know today. I've reclaimed this title and re-purposed it as a tool to challenge racism and

*white supremacy in America, to inspire a riotous disposition toward any and all injustice in this country (and abroad) and to promote the kind of honest confrontation that will galvanize our society toward healing and sustained systemic change.*⁶⁵

The Birth of a Nation will hopefully encourage more directors to provide a more diverse depiction of black agency and heroism in slavery, but the production process of Parker's project exemplifies how hard it can be for films based on “controversial” subjects to come to light, as Parker was advised by multiple sources not to direct a movie about Turner:

*[...] What he heard instead were all the reasons a movie about Nat Turner wouldn't work: Movies with black leads don't play internationally; a period film with big fight scenes would be too expensive; it was too violent; it wouldn't work without a big box-office star leading it; Turner was too controversial – after all, he was responsible for the deaths of dozens of well-off white landowners.*⁶⁶

The notion that movies with black main characters are of little interest to non-American audiences can be traced back to 2014, when *The Equalizer*, starring black actor Denzel Washington as its leading character, did not earn as much as expected outside of the

⁶⁵ Soheil Rezayazdy, *Five Questions with “The Birth of a Nation” Director Nate Parker*, <<http://filmmakermagazine.com/97103-five-questions-with-the-birth-of-a-nation-director-nate-parker/#.V7czefmLTIU>>, 2016, accessed 19th August 2016

⁶⁶ Rebecca Ford, *“Birth of a Nation”: The Slave Revolt Movie That Will Have Sundance Talking*, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/birth-a-nation-slave-revolt-857177>>, 2016, accessed 20th August 2016

United States. After financing the movie and not being satisfied with its box office results, Sony addressed the matter arguing that the overseas takings were not good enough because racist audiences disregarded the film as its main protagonist (and hero) was black.⁶⁷ Claiming that the reason why the movie failed outside of the United States was Washington's race is a provocative statement that can easily be refuted by looking at how well *Django Unchained* did in Europe with a black leading actor, yet Sony's belief that profits on a film can be limited by the fact that the hero of the story is black will inevitably influence their future politics in the financing of movies, and will thus have an impact on the career of African American actors too. Moreover, since Parker himself was advised multiple times not to make a movie with a black protagonist, it is clear that Sony's claims are shared by other members of the industry.

Parker was also warned against portraying violent and controversial subjects, yet Hollywood regularly produces violent movies often addressed to the genres of light entertainment, while the portrayal of controversial subjects is often praised as an insightful depiction of society: *A Clockwork Orange* by Stanley Kubrick features multiple instances of abuse, rape, and mindless violence, yet the movie is objectively considered a milestone in cinematography. Its disturbing representation of violence is justified as the satire of an imaginary utopian society that is reminiscent of totalitarian and immoral regimes. Another similar example of violence being used in cinema as a parody of society is given by *Natural Born Killers* by Oliver Stone, which discusses the ways in which mass media treat criminal behavior by glorifying mass murderers and transforming them into

⁶⁷ Jess Denham, *Sony Leak: Denzel Washington should not star in lead roles overseas because the world is racist*, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/sony-leak-denzel-washington-should-not-star-in-lead-roles-overseas-because-the-world-is-racist-9932507.html>>, 2014, accessed 20th August 2016

role models in popular culture.

Both *Natural Born Killers* and *A Clockwork Orange* are fictional works, yet both critique aspects of modern society and do not make gratuitous use of violence, but neither does Parker's film, which is based on reality and intends to recreate events of the past in order to provide a representation of American society that still has not been explored by the medium: the viewing of an uprising from the perspective of the slaves provides a description of the slave system that still has not been tackled by American cinema and will therefore allow to explore the historical setting in a new way. Moreover, a movie like *12 Years a Slave*, featuring multiple scenes where defenseless blacks are relentlessly beaten and tortured, is not considered controversial and has succeeded in being awarded the Oscar for Best Motion Picture of the Year; why should *The Birth of a Nation* be criticized for its depiction of slaves attacking their masters in the pursuit of both freedom and revenge? According to professor Celeste-Marie Bernier, Turner is a problematic figure for mainstream Hollywood because he enacted a violent revolution on United States soil, while Joseph Cinqué is not considered controversial in popular culture because his act of rebellion took place at sea, and therefore did not involve the killing of American civilians.⁶⁸ While the character of Cinqué has been portrayed in popular culture multiple times and in different media, projects surrounding other historical blacks are met with unpopularity by vast portion of the US population: actor and director Danny Glover has been trying for years to secure financial support for his epic film based on the life of Touissant Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, but to no avail. The historical film that Glover has now been trying to direct for three decades is currently locked in production issues, as its author has stated that the movie's producers have declined to finance it because of its lack of white

⁶⁸ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood – Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, cit. p. 87

heroes.

*[...] is it in fact a lie that Hollywood is motivated strictly by profit, and there are other unspoken rules that influence decision makers, and thus a story that highlights a monumental accomplishment by black people, absent of a white hero on horseback, just isn't of interest to, or will be suppressed by the predominantly white-run industry?*⁶⁹

Bernier's conclusion upon analyzing Glover's case and relating it to the lack of films based on other historical black rebels is that there is no market or audience for representations of African American heroic figures resisting white authority in modern Hollywood, unless, of course, the story is either fictional or celebrates white saviors.⁷⁰

The fact that movies recreating historical events can be subject to controversy because they connote black individuals as violent and reject the trope of the submissive slave to display black agency within national frontiers, ultimately demonstrates that Hollywood is primarily an industry that fails to value diversity in representation. A manifestation of this concern occurred during the 2016 Academy Awards: the announcement of the Oscar nominees included only white actors among the most important categories (similarly to what already happened in 2015) and, as a result, various celebrities boycotted the award ceremony as a sign of protest against Hollywood's lack of

⁶⁹ Tambay A. Obenson, *Danny Glover's Touissant Louverture Film that never was, but Could Still Be*, <<http://www.indiewire.com/2015/07/danny-glovers-toussaint-louverture-film-that-never-was-but-could-still-be-other-films-on-the-haitian-revolutionary-235064/>>, 2015, accessed 23rd August 2016

⁷⁰ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood – Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, cit., p. 88

diversity. President Barack Obama commented on the boycott situation and encouraged the industry to provide equal opportunities to everybody in order to allow for “better art and better entertainment”⁷¹. Actor George Clooney addressed the matter in a similar manner and emphasized that, to this day, the industry is still primarily ruled by white personalities and conventions:

*If you think back 10 years ago, the Academy was doing a better job. Think about how many more African Americans were nominated. I would also make the argument, I don't think it's a problem of who you're picking as much as it is: How many options are available to minorities in film, particularly in quality films?*⁷²

In his comment, Clooney asks whether the fact that black actors were not nominated for the Academy Awards is not to be interpreted as the result of a prejudiced choice on part of the Academy but, instead, as the consequence of the exclusion of blacks from high-budget films and genres. Movies centered around black history do in fact prioritize making political statements on racial issues in the country instead of providing a diversified depiction of all slave experiences: in their controversial nature, the representation of some of these experiences is not encouraged and, in the case of projects like that of Nate Parker, it can be openly discouraged. This is because white audiences are not going to feel any

⁷¹ Ben Child, *Barack Obama on Oscar diversity: are we giving everyone a fair shot?*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/28/barack-obama-speaks-oscars-diversity-academy-awards-2016>>, 2016, accessed 20th August 2016

⁷² Esther Lee, *Oscars 2016 Boycott: Every Celebrity Who's Weighed On in #OscarsSoWhite* <<http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/oscars-2016-boycott-a-timeline-of-the-controversy-w162120>> 2016, accessed 20th August 2016

empathy towards a black hero murdering white people in his struggle for freedom, unless this hero is inspired by white iconic tropes and acts like a cowboy. As Clooney suggested, there is no place in Hollywood for a black hero that does not behave like a white character. On the other hand, as was previously mentioned in this chapter, the Academy has awarded black artists in the recent past for movies like *12 Years a Slave*, which was nominated in nine categories and won three awards, but it was a movie that made use both of the victimized representation of slaves and the white savior trope, and critics even speculated that some voters had allowed the movie to win without seeing it because, as commented by talk show host Rush Limbaugh, “it had the magic word in the title, slave”⁷³. *12 Years a Slave* has white audiences feel empathy towards Northrup and later identify with the Canadian carpenter who helps him escape the plantation where he is forced to stay as a slave. On a similar note, they will identify with Schultz in *Django Unchained*, John Quincy Adams in *Amistad*, and Lincoln in *Lincoln*: white savior characters are almost always present in this type of movies, as the reconstruction of the slave past in Hollywood is, more often than not, used to convey a political statement on the achievements of American society on the topic of race.

With its complete rejection of white tropes, *The Birth of a Nation* attempts to create a new genre in Hollywood that recreates the black experience with the primary purpose of providing an accurate representation of historical facts that is not influenced by the popular perception of white spectators. To once again quote what President Barack Obama stated after the Charleston church shooting in 2015, racism is today still very much

⁷³ Salvador Murguía, “162 Years after 12 Years a Slave”, 2015, in David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama*, cit., p. 242

present in the country, and since the American popular culture about the past is still heavily influenced by negative stereotypes of African Americans, the correct way to tackle the issue is to rediscover the past from an unbiased point of view. As will be further discussed in the next chapter, the popular memory of Nat Turner in particular has been revisited multiple times by white personalities: some of these willingly pushed a prejudiced interpretation of his person that has led many to recognize him as a terrorist and a religious fanatic. No black presidency or social achievement towards the recognition of race equality can eradicate white bias against African Americans, as racial stereotypes were created during slavery and are grounded in the culture of the United States, but through the revival of the past, it becomes at least possible to tackle this issue.

2.6 - Conclusion

This chapter examined the different ways in which the medium of cinema can impact popular culture through the recreation of historical events. All the contemporary films that have been included in this analysis make use of black and white stereotypes to debate their veracity and importance in popular culture, and some of them do so by narrating their plots through the perspective of their black characters: for example, *12 Years a Slave* depicts the stereotypical passivity of black slaves as a behavior that, contrary to what many believed during the years of slavery and afterwards, is not a manifestation of submissiveness by the part of the “savage” who is happy to have some sort of master to serve, but is instead the only means of survival for the man that is valued as property by his owner. In his passiveness, the slave expresses his desire for a better future and the

silent will to survive. *Django Unchained*, on the other hand, characterizes its main black protagonist through archetypes that are traditionally associated with white characters to demonstrate that representation of black action heroes in the context of slavery is possible and suggests that nowadays cinema should not provide only passive depictions of blackness. Yet the fact that *Django Unchained* was in part met with criticisms surrounding its nature as a film belonging to a genre of light entertainment that “disrespects” the memory of the victims of slavery clearly demonstrates that Hollywood is currently unwilling to extend the representation of American slavery to action genres that value entertainment more than historical accuracy, as the industry still prioritizes the portrayal of victimized black characters, destined to gain their freedom by the hands of white characters. This kind of depiction is often used to celebrate white personalities and their role in the defense of America's liberal roots, but does not necessarily reconstruct historical events in an entirely accurate manner. In fact, both *Amistad* and *Lincoln* oversimplify their narration by focusing entirely on white characters and overlooking the role covered by blacks in the emancipation of racial minorities in the United States.

The lack of diversity in the genres representing the African American experience in the United States is also reflected in recent controversies surrounding Hollywood's tendency to award white artists more than blacks. Though many have interpreted this as a sign of the industry disregarding its minorities, what the issue really highlights is that the representation of minorities is confined to certain genres, and the filming of subjects that are considered offensive to the average white viewer is often discouraged, demonstrating Hollywood's unwillingness to portray the slave past unless it is seen through the established trope of the white savior.

In conclusion, the representation of black heroism in American cinema is still a fairly controversial subject reflecting racial issues of contemporary society. Black artists are technically granted the same opportunities of whites, yet in reality the main reason why historical recreations of the events surrounding the Haitian Revolution and Turner's rebellion are viewed as controversial is the fact that the population's memory of such events was biased by antebellum propaganda (Turner was widely demonized by southerners to demonstrate how the emancipation of slaves would allow extremely aggressive black people to freely wander the national territory). This process strongly increased the influence of stereotypes in popular culture in describing slave uprisings as acts of terror while also leaving no room for different interpretations on their nature.

Through cinema, filmmakers can explore similar historical events from the perspective of their black protagonists in order to provide new different interpretations of the subjects involved while debating the veracity of racial stereotypes that still influence the public opinion of part of the American population. Instead, as of now the industry has for the most part been focusing on celebrating the political achievements that have led the country to abolish slavery as a legal institution and recognize all American citizens as equal members of society sharing even opportunities. In short, Hollywood is much more comfortable with portraying white characters as heroic in any genre than it is with blacks, as their characters are usually meant to be commiserated by audiences. Obama's presidency has encouraged films to portray the increasing gaps in black society between the middle and lower classes in contemporary years through films like *Fruitvale Station*, which shows how blinding and dangerous white prejudice against minorities can be. Hollywood is definitely not avoiding the subject of racial issues, but while it addresses modern problems that in their newness are followed by the vast majority of the

population, it makes little effort to extend this kind of representation to the past. African American participation in cinema has come a long way from the time of Griffith's racist propaganda, yet until it refuses to promote a wide rediscovery of the slave past that includes subjects that are now considered controversial, the medium will remain unable to effectively provide a national dialogue about race that can encourage society to change.

Chapter Three:

The Different Interpretations of Nat Turner's Rebellion in Popular Culture

The events of the Southampton slave rebellion of 1831 have entered the collective memory of the United States, and to this day they are perceived in different manners by different groups of the population: the uprising has been both condemned as a brutal act of unprecedented savagery, but also saluted as also a cry for freedom that has inspired modern generations of African Americans in the pursuit of racial equality through violent means. The main reason why the uprising has been interpreted in so many different ways is the fact that there exists no historically accurate reconstruction of the occurrence, as the original document recollecting the actions committed by the slave rebels has been said to be in itself biased and attempting to provide its readers with a particular depiction of the rebellion and its leader, Nat Turner. As a consequence, very little is known about Turner as a historical figure.

Nat Turner was born into slavery in the plantation area of Southampton County, in Virginia, where he spent all of his life and served different masters. The details of his education are unclear, but he learned to read and write during his early youth, in a time when these talents were not mastered even by various members of the white community. Turner soon took an interest in the teachings of Christianity and became a fervent scholar of the Bible, which would influence his actions for the rest of his life. Turner decided to share his knowledge and belief in religion with other slaves and soon became known as a preacher and a prophet throughout the county. On one occasion, he ran away from his plantation and returned of his own volition one month later, stating that the voice of God had ordered him to do so. Such an event reinforced his reputation as a prophet among the slaves in the region, and increased his influence over them. Nat eventually convinced the slaves to join him in rebelling against the local slave owners, as he had apparently been

instructed to fight against white masters by a series of visions, which he witnessed and interpreted as messages that God had directed to him to induce him to act on behalf of the oppressed, and to punish all of white society for its continuous exploitation of blacks. When a solar eclipse obscured the sun, Turner interpreted the event as a sign indicating that the time to strike had finally come.

On the night of August 21, the rebels began moving from plantation to plantation murdering all white inhabitants and recruiting local slaves to increase their numbers. They initially met no organized resistance, until the county was finally alerted of their actions, at which point a local militia engaged the rebels in combat and successfully broke their ranks. While the insurrectionists had grown in numbers and had now equipped themselves with firearms and horses taken from raided plantations, a lack of proper organization led many members of Turner's army to get drunk after looting the houses of their murdered masters. Thus, once they met with armed resistance the slaves immediately panicked and were easily scattered. While most insurgents were soon captured, Turner managed to hide himself from everyone for nearly two months until, on October 30, he was eventually found and forced to surrender by a local farmer. Turner was then brought to the prison of Jerusalem where he was tried and sentenced to death by hanging. In the days preceding his execution, the now defeated leader of the rebellion was visited by a local attorney, Thomas Ruffin Gray, who convinced him to recollect the events that had led to the uprising so that they could be written down and archived.

Gray would later publish these memories for the public with the title of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which to this day represents the only available original text recreating Turner's experience. The document immediately rose to popularity in white

society, as it provided the summary of a phenomenon that was historically unprecedented in the United States, from the perspective of its main perpetrator. The rebellion quickly arose to national recognition for its high number of victims: no less than fifty-five white people were killed during the insurrection, including women and children. Even prior to the execution of Turner, the population reacted with fear and anger to the possibility of another similar occurrence, and militia groups in various Southern States retaliated by killing an estimated 200 black people, even though many of them were legally free men or had had nothing to do with the rebellion in Virginia. Turner was immediately made a symbol in Southern pro-slavery propaganda, and a grim reminder that African Americans were primal beasts capable of any savagery and even the killing of infants. Though through his actions Turner probably intended to contradict the southern notion that slaves could be happy and content under the yoke of slavery, he was quickly demonized as a fanatic preacher who did not fight for his freedom, but out of blood lust.

In this regard, Gray's publishing of Turner's confessions reinforced the general notion that Turner was a crazy and murderous zealot. In his introduction to the document, the attorney stated that he himself believed the black preacher to be a remorseless fanatic who, even after the failure of his mission and the death of all of those who had fought alongside him, showed no regret whatsoever for the deeds he committed and still believed in the divine righteousness of his work. According to Gray, the mere recollection of the events that preceded the insurrection was sufficient for Turner to be overcome with enthusiasm and passion, as if the man felt no guilt in knowing that hundreds of other slaves had died as a direct consequence of his actions:

He is a complete fanatic. [...] I shall not attempt to describe the effect of his

*narrative, as told and commented on by himself, in the condemned hole of the prison. The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of the helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked at him and my blood curdled in my veins.*⁷⁴

Gray described Turner as a remorseless madman who, if given the opportunity, would immediately attempt to foster another uprising, and at the same time stated that the final text of the published confessions was entirely faithful to the slave's own words. Although, several sources have doubted the veracity of Gray's assertion, suggesting that his own biased interpretation of Turner's personality possibly led him to edit the final text of the *Confessions* in order to highlight the more shocking parts of the narrative before making it available to the public. It was perhaps part of Gray's agenda to portray Turner as a religious extremist to push the notion that the education of slaves could not effectively make them more valuable and, instead, would potentially bring them to commit acts of terrorism against the white population. Turner's will to fight against slavery might have originated from his reading of the Exodus in the Bible, where he learned that the Christian God that he worshiped did not approve of the institution of slavery, despite the fact that slaves were taught the opposite by their masters. Shortly after the events of the

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Thomas Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>> 1999, accessed 4th September 2016

Southampton insurrection, the education of slaves became prohibited in various areas of the South, and laws were enacted to restrict the possibility for both free and slave African Americans to collect in groups to hold religious meetings unless these were directed by white preachers.⁷⁵ This was a direct consequence of Turner's rebellion and Gray's considerations on the matter.

The South collectively demonized the figure of Nat Turner and strategically used his memory to demonstrate the necessity of the system of slavery in society and the impossibility of emancipating people that, when given the chance, wouldn't hesitate to kill even babies and women. While Turner and his followers intended to contradict the popular belief that slaves and masters lived in harmony in the South and that all African Americans were content with their status in society, southern propaganda pushed the idea that the rebels did not kill their owners in revenge for years of submission but out of religious fanaticism. To further prove this, it was stressed that most African American slaves in Southampton had refused to join Turner's army and instead participated in taming the uprising alongside their masters, thus playing a decisive role in the defeat of the rebels. Additionally, in what he told Thomas Gray while in prison, Turner himself mentioned how his last master, Mr. Joseph Travis, had always been kind to him and had never given him any reason to complain about anything.⁷⁶ Yet the revolt started exactly in Travis's plantation, and he was its first victim.

Despite being depicted by southerners as a rampaging monster with no sense of morality, Turner also became a symbol of black agency and resistance against slavery: black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass expressed admiration for Turner's initiative

⁷⁵ Rudolph Lewis, *Up From Slavery: A Documentary History of Negro Education*, <http://www.nathanieltturner.com/educationhistorynegro6.htm>, 2008, accessed 4th September 2016

⁷⁶ Thomas Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, cit., p. 12

in Virginia, identifying him as a martyr who died for the cause of black freedom⁷⁷. In fact, though the insurrection took place in late August, Turner had initially planned to strike on the 4th of July, the American Independence Day during which American citizens celebrate the precepts upon which the United States were formed in 1776⁷⁸. Perhaps Turner meant to take advantage of the festivity to start his mission without initially being noticed by the authorities, but it is likely that he also intended to highlight how contradictory it was for a country to celebrate the values of liberty and freedom and, at the same time, consider the enslavement of black people to be legal. This perspective strongly clashes with that which views Turner and his followers as simply seeking a personal revenge against white society: as Turner himself admitted to Gray, the slaves were hoping that their battle would encourage other groups of blacks from other parts of the South to emulate their efforts. In such a scenario, it would supposedly have been impossible for whites to stop the growing numbers of armed rebels spreading across the entire national territory, and eventually the mass insurrection would have determined the end of chattel slavery.

In the immediate aftermath of the Southampton uprising, the figure of Nat Turner was both condemned and celebrated by the American population, as the only existing source of information about him lied in the *Confessions of Nat Turner*, which in itself could have been edited by Gray to promote a particular interpretation of the text. The *Confessions* are bound to remain the only available source of information about Turner's life and ideology, thus it is impossible to recreate his experience through media in an entirely realistic manner (the *Confessions* are a relatively short and often vague document),

⁷⁷ Charles Burnett, director, *Nat Turner – A Troublesome Property*, California Newsreel, 2003

⁷⁸ Thomas Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, cit., p. 11

and, while some attempts have been made in that regard, very few works have managed to become popular and enter mainstream culture. For the most part, the memory of Turner remains shrouded in mystery and subject to controversies, and the United States still remembers him both as a heroic freedom fighter and a murderous madman.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, Turner quickly became a symbol of resistance among African Americans, and his experience inspired black initiatives fighting segregation and white power through violent means during the second half of the twentieth century: in his autobiography, Malcolm X mentions the story of Turner among the inspirations that influenced him to become an activist in the American political scene:

I read about the slave preacher Nat Turner, who put the fear of God into the white slave master. Nat Turner wasn't going around preaching pie-in-the-sky and "non-violent" freedom for the black man. There in Virginia one night in 1831, Nat and seven other slaves started out at his master's home and through the night they went from one plantation "big house" to the next, killing until by the next morning 57 white people were dead and Nat had about 70 slaves following him. White people, terrified for their lives, fled from their homes, locked themselves up in public buildings, hid in the woods, and some even left the state.⁷⁹

The religious leader describes Turner by clearly opposing his methods to the non-violent resistance promoted by Martin Luther King, and underlines how the rebel's violent means

⁷⁹ Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, <<http://genius.com/Malcolm-x-chapter-11-saved-annotated>>, 1965, accessed 4th September 2016

led him to become a reference for future generations of freedom fighters. Malcolm X admired Turner for his ability to strike fear in the potent men that tormented his existence. In promoting violent means to fight against white society, Malcolm himself became a controversial figure in American culture, both admired as a human activist and at the same time condemned by others as a ruthless terrorist.

Furthermore, the majority of the American white population views violent historical black figures as unable to contribute to the national acknowledgment of racial equality: instead, their actions are bound to increase the presence of a sentiment of racism towards minorities and impede the advancement towards a society where everyone is granted equal rights. In the case of Nat Turner, many believe that his deeds brought no contribution to the cause of the emancipation of slaves, and the way in which they were presented to the public actually strengthened the overall credibility of stereotypical images of black individuals being violent and merciless savages. It may although be that part of the admiration felt by modern black personalities for Turner had nothing to do with his role in the enforcement of the natural rights of African Americans in the country, but is instead centered on the preacher's capacity to pay white oppressors back for years of inflicted torments. While the southern antebellum media used Turner to reinforce the veracity of racial archetypes in popular culture, his behavior contradicted other popular tropes such as that of the passive victim who sees no point in rebelling against a system that is entirely dominated by white people. In fact, the initial success of the Southampton rebellion was probably a direct result of the slave owners inability to realize that their servants would spend entire months before acting to gather a sufficient number of followers and organizing their movements to hit stealthily and without being noticed. According to Gray's *Confessions*, when Turner began his mission and attacked his master's

manor, he was only accompanied by seven other slaves. Indeed the preacher had recruited a greater number of followers, yet these were to join him only afterwards; when the group eventually became too big for the purpose of stealth action, Turner ordered his troops to split and attack various plantations simultaneously. These details shocked the readers of the *Confessions* and determined the rise of the rebellion to national attention: the event left a deep impression in the minds of members of the white community because slaves were not expected to be capable of organizing themselves to such a degree. Up to 1831, slave uprisings in the United States were considered a rare phenomenon (Gray himself defined the Southampton case as “the first instance in our [American] history of an open rebellion of the slaves”), and the possibility of such an occurrence was disregarded in the belief that all slaves were passive or content with the way they were treated. The newfound awareness that what was considered chattel property could plot to murder families and represent danger for the entire white society is what led armed militias to retaliate against innocent slaves that had had no part in the revolt. After Turner contradicted the veracity of popular tropes that supposedly described the behavior of all slaves for the first time in the history of slavery in the United States, white society became fearful of black individuals. Because of the problematic nature of his character, Turner has for the most part been excluded from being represented in white popular culture after the events of 1831 in Southampton County (with few exceptions) and today his name is relatively unfamiliar to many members of the younger generations of America, when compared to other historical black personalities who struggled against slavery, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman.

3.1 - Modern Interpretations of Turner's Experience: William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Resurrecting the story of Nat Turner and presenting it to a mainstream public is particularly hard in modern media due not only to controversial nature of the character but also because *The Confessions of Nat Turner* still represent the only source of material about the events of the Southampton rebellion of 1831. The document is fairly short (it is roughly twenty pages long) and leaves many details about both Turner's personality and the rebellion itself to the interpretation of the reader.

Starting from the second half of the twentieth century, both black and (to a lesser extent) white artists have attempted to present their own interpretations of Turner to the public via different media: Turner's experience has been portrayed in theatrical plays, novels, and films, yet every representation of the preaching leader of the most controversial among American slave rebellions depicts him as a different character: every medium allows for a different approach to his personality, sometimes providing an in-depth analysis of Turner's attitude towards religion and his mission. In this regard, perhaps the most renowned of works centered on Turner's figure is a novel by writer William Styron that shares its title with the document that provided its author with the only original material about the historical happenings in Southampton.

The Confessions of Nat Turner was published in 1967, in a time when African Americans struggled against racial laws and black power movements were becoming ever more popular. In a preface to the book, Styron anticipates how his book is but a work of fiction, as a realistic recreation of the life of Nat Turner is impossible due to the lack of

information available:

During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events – yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery.⁸⁰

In order to provide a credible depiction of Nat Turner, Styron makes use of a first person perspective throughout his narrative: the protagonist's perception of his surroundings is continuously portrayed to the reader, and the author hypothesizes which emotions and thoughts lead Turner to become a religious preacher and rebel against the entirety of white society. This is to allow readers to understand Turner's agenda and highlight how he was influenced by the context of slavery from his early years to 1831.

The original *Confessions* provide very few details regarding Turner's youth: as a child, he was a fast learner and soon became aware of his intellectual capacities, and was supposedly taught to read and write by his religious master, who influenced his interest towards Christian religion. Yet the text also mentions how Nat had no recollection of ever learning the alphabet, and was apparently aware of the happening of events that had preceded his own birth. This passage in the text of Gray's *Confessions* clearly states how early childhood experiences led Turner to eventually become a prophet. Styron divided

⁸⁰ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, New York, Random House, 1967, p. 3

his narrative in three main sections, dedicating the entirety of the second one in recounting Turner's youth and highlighting how Nat acquired literal knowledge both because he was taught but also through mere curiosity: he is seen stealing a book in an early passage and treating it with utter respect, feeling frustrated when realizing that he is not capable of reading it to access its contents. When the local master Samuel Turner eventually discovers that Nat is willing to learn skills that most slaves ignore for their entire lives he decides to educate the boy and exempts him from field work, making him a house servant and accentuating his distance from the other servants. For the entirety of his permanence with Samuel Turner, Nat is well-treated and spends most of his time with white people while scorning other African Americans for their ignorance and the lower quality of their lives. His alienation from other black characters lasts until his owner is finally obliged to sell all of his properties to another man: while waiting for his new master to come and collect him, the now grown-up boy seems to temporarily free himself of his blackness and find a new identity in looking at the plantation that he has learned to call home and does not want to leave:

[...] as I gazed down upon this wrecked backwater of time, I suddenly felt myself its possessor: in a twinkling I became white. [...] Now, looking down at the shops and barns and cabins and distant fields, I was no longer the grinning black boy in velvet pantaloons; for a fleeting moment instead I owned all, and so exercised the privilege of ownership by unlacing my fly and pissing loudly on the same worn stone where dainty tiptoeing feet had gained the veranda steps a short three years before. What a strange,

*demented ecstasy! How white I was! What wicked joy!*⁸¹

Styron depicted the young Nat Turner as a servile character that, in his admiration for those that cared for his education, fantasizes of becoming one of them, perhaps in the hope of being accepted in white society to be able to continue his studies. This representation of Turner's youth was entirely fabricated by the author of the book and is therefore a fictional portrayal that may or may not resemble the historical facts, yet from what little information can be drawn from Gray's original document it seems plausible that the historical Turner was effectively well-treated by his white owners and spent more time with them than with the other slaves in the plantation.

3.2 - The Styron Controversy: Black Intellectual Response to the Novel

However, this depiction of Nat Turner being sympathetic towards white people is one of the aspects of the book that have been widely criticized by black intellectuals as part of a biased re-interpretation of history enacted by Styron to propagate the idea that southern slaveholders were often benevolent towards their slaves, which suggests that Turner's decision to revolt against them was not provoked by years of continuous torture, but was rather the result of his religious fanaticism. In addition to that, black critics rejected the envisioning of a man that has come to represent a symbol of slave resistance and agency as a boot-licking Uncle Tom who despised other black slaves because they were forced to work in the fields and sleep in the dirt of their shacks. In fact, despite being acclaimed by white audiences and being awarded a Pulitzer prize, the book was also

⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 232

criticized by black writers that viewed it as an attack towards one of the historical personalities that defied the veracity of racial stereotypes that depicted slaves as passive and unwilling to fight.

The behavior of Styron's Turner has been interpreted as indicating submissiveness on his part, however it is only natural that the mind of a young man could be thoroughly influenced by the people that educated him and allowed him to study religious texts, of which Nat's character was very fond. More to the point, the original *Confessions* mention that Samuel Turner "belonged to the church", so it is plausible that the man covered an important role in the education of the historical Turner just as he does in Styron's book.

However, critiques surrounding Styron's work address many other aspects of the narrative. For example, black intellectuals rejected the idea that one of the motives leading to the insurrection's failure was the fact that a vast number of slaves refused to support Turner and instead sided with their masters in defending their plantations from the attacking rebels. Styron goes as far as to suggest that the loyalty of many slaves in Southampton towards white people was the element that mostly ruined Turner's plans and determined the suppression of the revolt: in the novel, while planning the details of his mission, the leader of the rebels feels confident that once rumors of the rising will spread outside of the county, the number of insurgents will reach the thousands, with more and more slaves flocking under Turner's banner each day. Instead, only a minimum of the county's slaves join his forces, so that his troops are immediately scattered when they face armed resistance.

Black writers and intellectuals objected to this aspect of Styron's narration, as it suggests that the vast majority of enslaved blacks in Southampton felt content with their current social status and had no desire to be set free by their masters. This characterization

of slaves in the South was perceived as problematic as it seemed to purposely reinforce the credibility of popular racial stereotypes that depicted African Americans as passive subjects who did not value their independence. Styron was accused of using his narrative to set up a biased representation of slave behavior, yet historians have come to his defense in regard to the matter. In fact, prior to the events of Southampton in 1831, slaves had already determined the failure of other uprisings in Virginia. In 1800, a literate black slave by the name of Gabriel Prosser planned an insurrection in many ways reminiscent of that enacted by Turner. Back in 1800, African Americans represented a third of the total population of Virginia, and Prosser plotted to take advantage of the high availability of potential recruits for his cause, enough to allow him to march on the State Capital of Richmond and siege it. He was however betrayed by two of his fellow conspirators, who revealed his plans to their owner. The local militia was immediately sent to capture Prosser, and in order to escape Prosser attempted to leave Virginia, but was yet again deceived by another slave who delivered him to the white authorities.⁸² Prosser and the rest of the slaves that had been captured refused to provide any answers when interrogated by the authorities, and were hanged.

Fifteen years later, a white abolitionist and former slaveholder, George Boxley, tried to organize and lead a mass insurrection of slaves. Like Turner, Boxley believed that the institution of slavery represented a scourge in Christian society, because God could not possibly approve of it. His experience was similar to that of Prosser: Boxley was confident he could recruit and arm a sufficient number of African American slaves to attack and seize Richmond, however his plan was foiled by a slave girl informing her master about

⁸² Herbert Aptheker, *The Gabriel Prosser Slave Revolt*,
<<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrng/spl/gabrielrevolt.html>>, 1974, accessed 6th September 2016

the conspiracy, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of the conspirators.⁸³ Boxley managed to escape from jail and successfully fled from the South to Ohio with his family, where he continued to support the abolitionist cause.

It is likely that the slaves who remained loyal to their masters played a decisive role in the Southampton uprising of 1831, just as their intervention was crucial in preventing the insurrections organized by both Prosser and Boxley, yet Styron was accused of historical revisionism because, among the book's detractors, many interpreted this narrative choice as an attempt to revitalize the southern racial archetype of the "Sambo" image by showing that the majority of slaves would voluntarily fight to defend the institution of slavery rather than fighting it.

3.3 - Sexual Longing for White Women in Styron's *Confessions*

With regard to the use of popular tropes made by Styron in his novel, the protagonist's relationship with white women is another aspect of the narration that was perceived as especially biased and influenced by the stereotype of the black rapist, which serves as one of Nat's motivations for starting the insurrection.

None of Turner's owners ever mistreat him with exceeding harshness in Styron's book, and rarely hit him. Even in the original *Confessions* the preacher repeatedly underlines that his masters were kind to him, and that his will to break free from them had nothing to do with their methods towards their slaves. Historians have debated which motivations eventually led the slave reverend to rebel aside from his belief that God

⁸³ Olivia Dalessandro, *George Boxley's Rebellion*, <<https://prezi.com/ouo6lsojqxy4/george-boxley/>>, 2013, accessed 6th September 2016

demanded him to do so. Styron suggests that the real motivation behind the uprising was a subconscious desire for retribution against one particular person living in the proximity of the plantation where Turner served, a young girl named Margaret Whitehead. In the afterword included to the Vintage edition of the book, Styron describes his will to use his work of fiction to explore the relationship between the main character and the only victim that the historical figure claimed to have directly killed during the uprising of 1831, hypothesizing that this person covered a central role in encouraging Turner to undertake his divine mission:

[...] as a novelist I couldn't abandon the relationship of Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead to the vacuum into which it had been cast in the Confessions. It was nearly inconceivable that in the tiny bucolic cosmos of Southampton the two had not known each other, or had not been acquainted in some way... Since she was his sole victim, could the entire rebellion have been conceived as his retribution against her? Had they been lovers? This seemed unlikely, given one's convictions about his basic asceticism. Perhaps, however, she had tempted him sexually, goaded him in some unknown way, and out of this situation had flowed his rage.⁸⁴

Margaret is only briefly mentioned by Turner in the original *Confessions* just like the rest of the white victims murdered during the event are, and no details about her are given in Gray's document. Styron rejects the idea that the fact that she was the only victim of the

⁸⁴ William Styron, quoted in Andrew J. Kunka, "Intertextuality and the Historical Graphic Narrative: Kyle Baker's Nat Turner and the Styron Controversy", *College Literature*, 38.3 (2011): 168-192, 183

insurrection that was killed by Turner himself was a coincidence. In Gray's report, Turner initially fails to kill other white people because he claims that his sword was dull and therefore unsuited for delivering fatal blows, but he does not admit to hesitating in striking his defenseless victims. Not once in the entire document does the historical character actually mention doubting the just nature of his mission. On the contrary, Gray states that the failure of the revolt conveyed no sense of pity or remorse whatsoever in Turner after his imprisonment.

However, Styron portrays the leader of the revolt very differently: from the moment when the rebels commence their attack at the plantation of Joseph Travis and effectively begin their onslaught of white people, Turner is almost immediately abandoned by all the fervor and enthusiasm that had accompanied him during the years spent planning every detail of the mission: he attempts to strike his targets, but often fails, until his supporters eventually intervene and hastily prevent their victims from escaping and sounding the alarm. The leader of the rebellion is soon overcome with fear and doubt while all of his allies become frenzied and unload their anger on their victims: even Hark, a benevolent character that Nat scolds in one of the early chapters of the book for his submissiveness to whites, now becomes much more determined than the protagonist in his will to rebel. As the uprising continues and the number of black insurgents increases, Turner's cowardice becomes evident to some of his followers, and one of them that Styron portrays as particularly violent almost manages to take the command of the insurrection from him, and is only stopped by another rebel that succeeds in reasoning with him.

When the rebels reach the Whitehead plantation, Nat is almost forced by the same character that almost took his place as leader to kill Margaret and prove his allegiance to the uprising. Murdering the girl is particularly difficult for Nat, and he is only able to

deliver a fatal blow after she begs him to do so to stop the pain of a bleeding wound. The relationship between Nat and Margaret created by Styron could perhaps be considered as the most controversial aspect of the whole book: the interactions between the two characters are often unilateral, as, though the girl trusts Nat and is very talkative, he does not pay much attention to her discourses because her vicinity makes him feel uncomfortable. Despite the fact that the protagonist perceives doubts and fears in anticipation of his divine mission throughout most sections of the book, his emotional confusion reaches a peak in the moments that he spends alone with Margaret. He feels the desire to rape her and at the same time kill her; he is attracted by her but also views her as a tempting devil trying to persuade him to abandon his righteous mission and overcome his sexual repression. His feelings towards the girl are a mixture of both love and hate, and black detractors of the book interpreted the relationship between the two characters as a reference to the stereotypical representation of black males as sexual predators harassing white women. It is true that Turner only feels attracted to white women in the book, yet his sentiments are always rather confused and cannot be interpreted as the manifestation of mere carnal lust.

In order to make the relation between Nat and Margaret possible, Styron completely excludes the character of Cherry Turner from the plot of his book. Cherry was the historical wife of Nat: the two both served at the plantation of Samuel Turner and were married there by him, but they were separated in 1823 when they were sold to different plantations. It is believed that she was subject to rape by her master, and, though the veracity of this belief is uncertain, it suggests a much different portrayal of Samuel Turner compared to that found in Styron's book. Cherry is never mentioned in Gray's *Confessions*, yet it is likely that Nat omitted to mention her to the attorney in order to protect her from

any involvement with the uprising. It is also believed that Nat consciously avoided to attack the plantation where she was serving in 1831 to prevent the possibility that she could accidentally be injured by one of the assailants. In order to justify the complete absence of Cherry's character in his novel, Styron pointed out that no reliable source ever spoke of Nat being married to another slave, yet this is false: in the months following the uprising, white authorities searched for Turner, who was missing and would later be found by a farmer. In order to locate the position where he might be hiding, the authorities tortured his wife supposing that she knew where to find him.

Cherry apparently confessed of having known the details of his husband's plans for the revolt. The event of her interrogation was briefly reported in an article on a local newspaper, the *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, where the author stated that Turner's wife had given up some papers regarding the plans for the Southampton insurrection. The *Whig* does not identify the name of the article's writer, but its authorship has been attributed to Thomas Gray himself, who purposely describes the papers provided by Cherry as the work of a fanatic:

Turner pretended to have conversations with the Holy Spirit; and was assured by it, that he was invulnerable. His escape, as he labored under that opinion, is much to be regretted. 'Tis true, that Nat has for some time, thought closely on this subject – for I have in my possession, some papers given up by his wife, under the lash – they are filled with hieroglyphical characters, conveying no definite meaning. The characters on the oldest paper appear to have been traced with blood; and on each paper, a crucifix

*and the sun, is distinctly visible; with the figures 6,000, 30,000, 80,000...*⁸⁵

This and more sources of information about Cherry Turner were available to Styron at the time of the writing of his book, and it has been speculated that the author simply ignored their existence to prioritize the subplot of the relationship between Nat and Margaret Whitehead in his book.

Black intellectuals rejected Styron's re-imagining of an heroic personality in the memory of slave resistance as sexually attracted by white women when the historical Turner was the husband of a slave girl and, moreover, the father of an unspecified number of children. While the existence of Cherry Turner can be seen as an acknowledgment of Nat's masculinity, Margaret Whitehead is, on the other hand, the element in Styron's book that mostly highlights the emotional weakness of the main protagonist: after the uprising is tamed, Nat spends the days before his execution overcome with doubt on whether his actions were righteous or not, which is a very different depiction of the character compared to that provided in Gray's *Confessions*. The preacher feels as if the voice of God has abandoned him to his destiny and is tormented by guilt towards the hundreds of slaves that have been executed after the revolt even though they took no part in it. Yet what mostly disturbs him is the thought of having murdered Margaret.⁸⁶ In a way, Turner feels more uncomfortable with his responsibility for the killing of a white woman than for the death of hundreds of black slaves. It is arguable that his character never really hated the white race to begin with, but was simply forced to turn against it because such was God's bidding. Perhaps he never really vows to become a symbol in slave resistance and

⁸⁵ Quoted in Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 80

⁸⁶ Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, cit., p.403

simply views himself as a pawn in God's greater design, and believes that his own emotions should not interfere with the pursuit of divine justice.

Despite the negative response of the black community towards the use made of the character of Margaret Whitehead, it can be argued that her presence in the book represents a means for Styron to explore the humane dimension of the main character: during his interactions with Margaret, Nat's strength of will and determination towards his duties are put to the test by his primordial desire to rape the girl, which is a result of his repressed sexuality and is also exposed in other sections of the narrative. In fact, the preacher perceives a similar desire when he observes a rich white woman interacting with a drunken black slave, and, prior to that, even engages in homosexual behavior with another male slave with whom he creates a particularly strong bond before he is sold to another master. None of these episodes should however be interpreted as a sign of weakness from the part of Turner: his repression and consequent desires are a natural result of his condition as a slave, and were likely to be also part of the experiences of many other African Americans.

3.4 - African American Works in Response to Styron's Narrative

The first person perspective of the narration constantly exposes the protagonist's fears and thoughts to the reader, yet the fact that Turner sometimes hesitates to act (even after the rebellion actually starts) should not be perceived as sign of weakness: it is the exploration of such thoughts that allows for a realistic and humane portrayal of Nat Turner that also highlights the preacher's complete devotion to God. If Styron had opted

to create a character that never questioned the righteousness of his divine mission and never found himself in situations of emotional distress when interacting with white people, he would have ended up portraying Turner as an immoral zealot, in a similar fashion to Gray's *Confessions*. The fact that he presented readers with a "psychologically weaker" version of Turner does not strip the character of his identity as a revolutionary and, on the contrary, underlines the struggles and difficulties of Turner's experience, thus allowing for a heroic representation of the protagonist of the book. At the same time, Nat's incapability to strike whites should not be perceived as cowardice but as a trait distinguishing him from the zealot described by Thomas Gray. While the original *Confessions* present readers with the stoic figure of a religious fundamentalist that even after being captured firmly believes to be God's messenger (analogies have been made between the spiritual violence of Nat Turner and modern jihads⁸⁷), Styron describes Turner during the final days of his life as a wretched man, mourning those that fought and fell by his side but also refusing to believe that their deaths were in vain, and still ready to commit to God's will.

Styron's take on Nat Turner failed to meet the expectations of those members of the black community that demanded a more masculine and authoritative recreation of the historical figure, but the negative reaction to the book came primarily from intellectuals that took part in black power initiatives and shared a mythical perception of Turner as a hero among slaves. Their own interpretation of Turner is bound to be biased, as it inevitably attempts to highlight what is heroism to their eyes while backed by little

⁸⁷ Vincent L. Wimbush, *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, New York, Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 83-85

historical evidence. Because of Gray's possible manipulation of Turner's admissions, it might not be possible to depict Nat Turner as a hero in modern popular culture while at the same time providing audiences with a completely historically accurate recreation of his personality.

American historian Eugene D. Genovese addressed the critiques directed at Styron's book by observing how most of the essays contained in the volume *William Styron's Nat Turner: 10 Black Writers Respond* share the belief that Styron's interpretation of Turner is racist, entirely rooted on racial stereotypes, and failing to acknowledge any redeeming traits in the main character:

Black writers have denounced the novel in essays and public statements; black actors have threatened to boycott the film version. "William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond" presents the essential points of the attack. It is a book that demands attention not so much because of the questions it raises about Styron's novel as for what it reveals about the thinking of intellectuals in the Black Power movement. [...] That the novel lends itself to historical or other criticism is true but irrelevant to this collection. What is at issue here is the ferocity and hysteria of the attack, which claims Styron to be a racist, a liar, an apologist for slavery, and a man who displays "moral cowardice" and "moral senility".⁸⁸

The radical attitude of black intellectuals towards Styron's novel is the result of two

⁸⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, "The Nat Turner Case", *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 11.4 (1968): 115 – 123, 115

entirely different readings of Turner's personality, which were made possible by the fact that the memory of the revolting reverend remains for the most part shrouded in mystery. Each of the three interpretations that have been presented up to this point describe Turner in different manners and through different forms of media to convey different messages to audiences. Thomas Gray took advantage of the complete lack of information on Turner to create a report of historical value that attempts to portray the preacher as a merciless criminal that used religion to influence the minds of other slaves. More recently, black activists have propagandized Turner reinventing him as a hero of the black community, someone to look up to in the struggle against racial inequality. Lastly, William Styron chose to present his own portrayal of the figure through a novel with a first-person perspective, as this particular medium allows audiences to delve into the mind of the narrating protagonist and hypothesizes how his imagination was affected by events and how his reactions to these events motivated him to lead the Southampton Uprising, creating a character that was rejected by some, but also accepted in the popular culture of both the white and black communities.

What Styron notes in the preface to his narration also applies to every other work of art based on Nat Turner: it is inevitable that an element of fiction is present in every recreation of Turner's experience, perhaps even in Gray's original report: there is no way to guarantee whether the attorney edited Turner's account of the events in Southampton, or whether Turner himself voluntarily omitted to speak about certain aspects of his life, like his relationship with Cherry. Nevertheless, because the original *Confessions* only offer a vague portrayal of the historical Turner, it is impossible to create a definitive recreation of his experience. Every illustration of the personality is bound, to some extent, to clash

against that presented by others. In a similar fashion to the essays contained in *Ten Black Writers Respond*, director and actor Nate Parker, through his upcoming movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which recreates the Southampton events of 1831, aims at contradicting Styron's interpretation of Turner by presenting popular culture with a more potent idealization of the character. During an interview with *Filmmaker* magazine, a reference to Styron's novel was made, and Parker expressed his opinion towards the subject and, with that, his will to depict Nat Turner under an entirely different perspective:

Let us be clear. Styron's book was a work of fiction; a falsified re-imagining he used to propagate his own misguided and paternalistic ideas of Nat Turner and his motives. By the time Styron's ink dried, no longer was Nat Turner the measured, self-determined man of faith, who's [sic] courage and sacrifice left him a martyr. He was now an impotent and cowardly, self-hating, Uncle Tom who's [sic] ambitions regarding rebellion had little to do with the rampant torture and degradation of his enslaved people, but instead was seeped in his desperate sexual desires of white women. The consequence of this defamation? A Pulitzer Prize.⁸⁹

Parker calls Styron's *Confessions* a “work of fiction” and a “falsified re-imagining” of an historical subject, but Styron did not contradict any of the information contained in Gray's report and Parker himself can only rely on that particular source for his gathering of

⁸⁹ Soheil Rezayadzi, Five Questions with The Birth of a Nation Director Nate Parker, <<http://filmmakermagazine.com/97103-five-questions-with-the-birth-of-a-nation-director-nate-parker/#.V9UFpfmLTIW>>, 2016, accessed 11th September 2016

historical data. His view of Styron's novel is similar to that of other black personalities, and he accuses the author of perpetrating the notion that Turner was a villainous embodiment of popular stereotypes who grew under the influence of white people. *The Birth of a Nation* has not yet been screened in theaters, but official trailers are already available for viewing on several websites and what they show already suggests in which ways this new reinterpretation of Nat Turner will differ from the one provided by Styron. The trailer presents Turner as a bold character, defying white authority without fearing the consequent punishments. When a white man threatens to hit him with his whip after he refuses to answer a question, Turner stops the whip with his hand and looks at the man directly in the eyes, which is something that the reverend in Styron's novel would never dare to do, not even with someone as harmless as Margaret Whitehead. The trailer shows that Turner is punished for his resistance against white authority, and the framing focuses once more on the expression of his face, and once again he does not appear to be as scared as Styron's character would. Not only does the trailer present Turner as a man who is unwilling to submit, but also depicts his white masters as much less permissive than their counterparts featured in Styron's novel: instead of caring for young Nat's education, a white girl is seen stopping him from grabbing a book from a shelf, explaining to the boy that his "kind" cannot possibly understand literature and is not permitted to access it. It is likely that, in the movie, Nat learns to read and write by himself and without the help of any white teacher. This would further separate Parker and Styron's representations of the preacher: in the novel, Turner's experience as a house slave greatly contributes in transforming him into what has been called an "Uncle Tom" by the book's detractors, and causing the character to eventually hesitate to kill white people during the revolt. Parker rejects this interpretation of Turner and instead portrays him as a somewhat mythical

figure that educates himself and is not afraid to be punished by his masters for misbehaving. He is a hero to all effects.

The trailer for *The Birth of a Nation* also reveals the presence of Cherry Turner among the characters of the movie; as yet another demonstration of Southern cruelty towards slaves, the trailer shows that Cherry is abused by her white masters, though it remains unclear whether she is beaten or perhaps also raped. Just as Styron made use of the character of Margaret to motivate Nat's final decision to guide the rebellion, Parker probably does the same through Cherry's character. After witnessing the torment inflicted by white masters to her, a desire for personal revenge drives Nat to decide to fight not only to obey God's will, but also because he seeks justice for his people. At the very end of the trailer, when the slaves in rebellion meet with white armed resistance (among the whites are the men responsible of abusing Cherry), Turner is seen leading his followers into charge after shouting a final cry for freedom.

Once released, the movie will be received by both favorable and negative criticism for its enactment of historical events, similarly to what has already happened with Styron's book and every other artistic reconstruction of the Southampton insurrection. The fact that there exists such a low amount of legitimate information on Nat Turner's rebellion makes it impossible for one work of fiction to stand out as more accurate and relevant among the others: when analyzed, all reinterpretations of Turner's experience seem to be biased. Judging by the statements he made during the *Filmmaker* interview and the available trailer for his work, Parker's movie will focus on contradicting the most controversial aspects of Styron's book, offering a completely different main character who will be identifiable as a proper hero. However, it is unlikely that *The Birth of a Nation* and other

future recreations of Nat Turner will have the capacity to provide popular culture with a definitive reading of the real motivations that led the slaves to rebel.

3.5 - Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*: the Absence of Written Text in the Portrayal of the Rebellion

In 2005, comic book writer and artist Kyle Baker published his own take on the story of Nat Turner in the form of a graphic novel. With the exception of a brief preface, where the author expresses his fascination towards the subject of Turner and justifies his choice in retelling historical events through a visual medium, the whole narration of the comic is told through images that are, for the most part, never accompanied by any text. Extracts from the original *Confessions* published by Gray are included in the narration and serve as guidelines for those viewers who are unfamiliar with the story of Nat Turner, but the absence of any other written text in most sections of the comic symbolizes the lack of general information available for artists when recreating the events of the rebellion, and expresses Baker's fascination with Turner as “a historical figure that is rarely discussed in public media while arguably being one of the most important men in American history”⁹⁰.

Baker creates his original recreation of Turner, but also includes some elements from other works of fiction based on the same subject in his narrative. For example, Thomas Gray's account of Turner is present in the comic book as Baker's work includes written extracts taken from the original *Confessions*; the influence of Styron is also partially present as Baker portrays Turner as an inept swordsman with little fighting skills who did not get

⁹⁰ Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner*, New York, Abrams, 2008, p. 6

other slaves to support him during the uprising as he hoped; at the same time, the cartoonist minimizes the role of Margaret Whitehead in his story, while granting fundamental importance to Cherry as possibly one of the main motivations that led Turner to revolt (which is supposedly also the case in Parker's movie): a segment of the narrative shows how Cherry and Nat meet while working in the fields and start a relationship out of which two children are born. Nat is then separated from his family when Cherry and the children are bought by another master who brings them to his own plantation.

Baker does not create his own interpretation of Turner to contradict that of other works of fiction that have been published before his own. As illustrated by professor Andrew Kunka in his study of Baker's work, the cartoonist embraces all the different representations of Turner's rebellion and rejects the notion that there exists one singular historical truth about the Southampton events that could contradict the others, because some degree of veracity is bound to be found in each different depiction of the rebellion:

Baker's graphic narrative depicts Turner in a variety of ways: as a traditional trickster figure, as a revolutionary leader, as a religious zealot, and as a cold-blooded murderer, all of which are versions of Turner featured in representations of the Southampton revolt since 1831. [...] There are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others' truths... frames which historiographical meta-fiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction

*and history.*⁹¹

Baker embraces multiple different interpretations of the story of Nat Turner, on the basis that it is impossible to clarify whether what has been said on the account of the slave reverend corresponds to historical truth and how much of it is simply fiction. When he defines Turner a “hero with super-human abilities” in the preface to his graphic novel⁹², Baker is making a reference to the preacher's ability to communicate with God, which is one of the main elements that stand at the basis of his story, but might also represent a fictional aspect of the rebellion introduced by Nat himself. According to Thomas Gray, Turner admitted that he was driven to rebel by his will of obeying God's will, yet all reenactments of his experience have suggested that the rebellion was perhaps the result of other motivations that had nothing to do with religion but still influenced Turner's mind and actions. There is no way to determine whether Nat was really devoted to God to the point that he believed that he had been chosen as his messenger or whether he simply used his reputation as a prophet primarily as a means to recruit followers and supporters. If even a central trait of Turner's personality like his ability to communicate with God can be considered fictional, then all reinterpretations of the Southampton events are bound to depict Turner differently from who he really was. Baker implies that it is impossible to create a definitive interpretation of Nat Turner to introduce in popular culture, and that some degree of veracity can be found in all works of fiction that portray his experience.

⁹¹ Andrew J. Kunka, “Intertextuality and the Historical Graphic Narrative: Kyle Baker's Nat Turner and the Styron Controversy”, cit., p. 175

⁹² Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner*, cit., p. 6

Baker includes some elements of the narratives of both Styron and Gray while also rejecting others: for example, due to the visual nature of the graphic novel and its complete lack of written text outside the extracts from Gray's *Confessions*, it is impossible for the author to depict the interior struggles that continuously torment the protagonist of Styron's novel. At the same time, Baker also ignores Styron's interest towards the relationship that existed between Nat and Margaret Whitehead. In fact, Baker treats her death as a marginal event in his depiction of the rebellion, and relegates its illustration to a minor picture.

With regard to Thomas Gray's depiction of Nat Turner, Baker provides a more detailed exploration of his role as a prophet among the slaves: in the *Confessions*, it is vaguely mentioned that, as a young boy, Nat was able to recollect events that had preceded his birth. No further information about these memories are given, so Baker creates a story out of them involving the Middle Passage. The entire first chapter of the novel is dedicated to representing the horrors of the slave trade. Nat's knowledge of such events and his will to share it with others suggest that even as a young boy he was aware of the cruelties committed by white men against black people: the events that he recollects depict the experience of an African woman who is captured by white slavers and then shipped to the US in a slave ship. The dramatic events of her story reach a climax when she decides to throw her infant child off the ship. She decides that it is better for the child to be eaten by the sharks than to live as a slave, and sacrifices him to preserve his dignity. The fact that such a story is narrated by the young Nat suggests that he is already willing to put his life at risk to try and conquer his freedom. While the same character in Styron's novel spends his youth admiring his master and despising other slaves, Baker

hypothesizes that the child was a a natural rebel, and never accepted his condition as a servant.

Baker also rejects Gray's description of Turner as a religious zealot and a madman. Instead, he clarifies from the preface of the novel that he views him as a hero and one of the most important black figures in the antebellum South. To demonstrate Turner's intellectual capacities, several segments of the volume are dedicated to highlighting his initiative in learning to read as a young boy while also hiding his intent to his masters. As is shown in the second chapter of the volume ("Education"), when a white overseer discovers Nat reading the Bible, the young boy proves his intelligence by outwitting the overseer and acting like he does not actually know how to read (he purposely turns the Bible upside down) and then starts dancing to exhibit a content behavior and act as a simpleton. Nat purposely makes use of racial stereotypes as masks to disguise himself to the eyes of the white man as a mindless and ignorant individual that could not possibly pose any threat to white society. When the overseer reacts amused and leaves him alone, the boy's face immediately changes expression, and the reader is shown that, despite his young age, Nat already feels scorn towards white people. He continues to study the Bible as he grows up, but he does not begin to actually use his reputation as a prophet to gather other slaves and convince them to rebel until he is separated from his family. The master's decision of selling Turner's wife and kids to another plantation seems to be what finally brings the slave preacher to rebel: he is shown angrily gazing at his white owners as they put their children to sleep one night and, shortly after that, he begins the preparations for the slave insurrection. The notion that Turner's will to rebel in the graphic novel is not derived from his devotion to God but is rather the result of his unhappiness with his

condition as a slave is reinforced by the title of the third chapter of the story, "Freedom". He uses his education to be recognized as a leader by his fellow slaves, but he is never pictured fasting or praying alone as Styron's character does when feeling in need of counsel from God. Furthermore, when the rebels attack the plantation of Joseph Travis and discuss whether they should murder the infant sleeping in his cradle, Turner is shown remembering the moment when his children were taken away from him. He then orders two of his followers to kill the infant, but he does so out of a selfish desire for revenge. As the rebellion progresses, its failure is determined by the same elements that characterize Styron's novel: despite being a firm leader, Turner is unable to stop most of the insurrectionists from getting drunk, and a number of other slaves remain loyal to their masters instead of joining his cause: it is in fact a black slave that gives a general alarm and determines the arrival of the mounted troops that quickly defeat the rebels and break up their ranks. After the alarm is sounded, the narration stops focusing solely on Turner's perspective and introduces a new white character as he rushes to fight the slaves. Baker presents this character not as an antagonist but as someone who is genuinely horrified by the raging fury of the slaves and decides to act before they can kill more defenseless people. After witnessing the brutal deeds committed by the rebels, readers of the novel will be aware that, unless a white character intervenes to stop Turner and his followers, the massacre will continue. Though the slaves are fighting and risking their lives for the just cause of freedom, many of them are drunk and acting primarily to take revenge on all white people indiscriminately. It becomes necessary to neutralize them before they take more innocent lives. As a consequence, some readers of the comic will view the white character intervening to stop the rebels with sympathy and recognize him as a hero.

This viewing of the character as a savior is also supported by Kunka, who observes how his physical traits clearly distinguish him from the rest of the white characters of the novel:

Baker draws Phipps not just as the epitome of white heroism – strong, handsome, romantic, but, in Phipps's first appearance, Baker has imbued him with traditional Christ-like features: he has long hair and a beard, and he is first shown being kind to both animals and children. In fact, Baker doesn't name Phipps, so to the casual reader unfamiliar with the Nat Turner story, this could very well be Christ. And to whites of the time of Turner's revolt, Phipps was a savior, and by association, Turner becomes the devil that the whites must defeat in order for their world to survive.⁹³

In addition to his physical similarity to Christ, the character is also portrayed by Baker as a martyr, as he is killed by the beast-like slave Will shortly before the end of the rebellion. While Turner flees and abandons his panicking allies to be captured by the county's militia, the white man stands to fight and protect the population even though this is what eventually determines his death. The presence of this character encourages readers to perceive Turner as the controversial personality that has historically been labeled both as a freedom fighter and a terrorist: Phipps is shown to react with horror when he witnesses the violence committed by the insurgents, and, at this point of the story, readers of the book will look with favor to the man's mission to stop the rebel onslaught before it extends

⁹³ Andrew J. Kunka, "Intertextuality and the Historical Graphic Narrative: Kyle Baker's Nat Turner and the Styron Controversy", cit., p. 186

to the rest of the county. While Turner is certainly not viewed as the zealot that Gray portrayed in the *Confessions*, it becomes clear that his rebellion is primarily motivated by the blood lust of his followers, who he fails to organize and act like brutes. The slave Will, for example, is drawn by Baker as a rampaging monster and the main perpetrator of the indiscriminate violence that characterizes the uprising. Michael A. Chaney even compares his gigantic body size to that of the Incredible Hulk, since both characters make use of brute force alone to overwhelm their enemies.⁹⁴

After the rebels are defeated and Nat is interrogated by Thomas Gray in prison, Baker's graphic novel concludes with the latest chapter of the book and the reverend's public execution. When Turner is hanged, Baker portrays him with a peaceful expression on his face, and the whole body of the preacher is illuminated so that he seems to resemble a saint-like figure. In death, he becomes the martyr that was celebrated by Frederick Douglass for his devotion to the cause of liberating African Americans from slavery.

Baker does not consider the revolt to have failed: the chapter's title is "Triumph", which describes the author's perception towards the Southampton events. In the preface to the book, Baker states that the US managed to limit the number of rebellions in the country by "destroying the slave's mind" and preventing their education. By using his intellect as a weapon against white society, Nat Turner contradicted the many stereotypes that constituted the foundations over which the system of slavery had been built. He knew that the reason why many slaves were content with their lives was because most of them were born into slavery, simply did not know any better and therefore avoided any form of resistance against their masters. They were the victims of a system that had been created to

⁹⁴ Michael A. Chaney, "Slave Memory Without Words in Kyle Baker's Nat Turner", *Callaloo*, vol. 36.2 (2013): 279 - 297, 282

suppress their individuality and reduce them to cattle. In order to destroy this system, Turner shared his knowledge with others and instilled in them the will to fight for their freedom; the final objective of the rebellion was that of bringing more African Americans to rise against their masters, until the phenomenon would eventually spread across the South. In fear that other slaves could emulate Turner's efforts, the propaganda that followed his execution portrayed him as a fanatic and a terrorist who did not actually fight for freedom but because he thought he was being ordered to do so by God. However, in the closure of his novel, Baker assumes that the demonization of Turner enacted by white people did not prevent his actions from influencing those of other blacks: shortly after the execution sequence, he shows a slave girl stealing a copy of Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and taking it with herself where she attempts to read it without being discovered.

Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* portrays the main author of the Southampton insurrection as a heroic figure, yet at the same time refuses to celebrate him as black power activists did when they depicted him as a mythical rebel figure: this is done by Baker when describing Turner as a highly intelligent individual lacking any fighting skills, and by counterpoising him to a strong and handsome white character that some readers might perceive as the real hero of the story. The format of comics makes it possible for Baker to narrate a story through pictures alone, and the absence of original written text allows for different interpretations of the story, which reflects the controversial history of the Southampton events.

3.6 - Conclusion

The events of the Southampton insurrection exemplify how difficult the popular representation of the experience of African Americans as slaves can be because of the different ways in which it is perceived by different parts of the population. The almost complete lack of original documents on the rebellion has been accompanied by the unwillingness of historians to analyze the subject: as observed by Kyle Baker, while it is easy to find historical information about less controversial black personalities such as Douglass and Tubman, much less material is available in the case of Nat Turner. Instead of being acknowledged as a fundamental example in the depiction of slave resistance, Turner has often been stripped of his defining traits by those who attempted to use his memory as a means to convey a stereotyped representation of African Americans. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the memory of Turner has been used as a tool of propaganda by both white and black personalities.

The analysis of the different reinterpretations of Turner's life in recent years shows how particular depictions of the figure of the slave leader have continuously been used to convey a determined portrayal of slave behavior in popular culture: the historical details surrounding the Southampton events of 1831 remain unknown, and have been fabricated by different artists in order for their fictional stories to convey a particular message to audiences. Turner represents an antithesis to many of the stereotypes portraying slaves which have been discussed throughout this thesis: his deeds refute the idea that all slaves in the South would live happily under the yoke of slavery, while also contesting the common visualization of African Americans as unwilling to fight for their emancipation. The present unwillingness by whites to debate these topics shows that the media prioritizes the representation of less controversial personalities and the nation has

ultimately not been able to come to terms with the legacy of slavery. Moreover, the fact that each interpretation of Nat Turner in media is regularly followed by another interpretation that attempts to contradict some elements of the previous one shows the presence of an ongoing lack of dialogue between the various artists that tackle the subject of Nat Turner. At the center of the discussion surrounding the memory of Turner, artists still debate whether he should be condemned or celebrated for his actions, but aside from being considered a freedom fighter or a terrorist he should mainly be seen as a demonstration of slave agency. A general acknowledgment in American culture of Turner as a non-controversial figure would represent a significant step towards the recognition of the notion that efforts towards racial emancipation were not made exclusively by white abolitionists. As long as the representation of the slave past will disregard historical personalities like Nat Turner in favor of the celebration of the less controversial figures of white saviors, their role in the story of the US will be minimized as if having no part in the advancement of equal rights for all races.

Conclusions

The topic of this research has highlighted that, despite the social victories achieved during the last century, the American slave past still represents a controversial theme in the social sphere of the country as well as in mainstream media. This final section of the thesis briefly summarizes the main problems that the three main chapters of my study have identified in the contemporary representation of African Americans in the United States.

The main issue underlined by my dissertation is the notion that the contemporary portrayal of blackness is still influenced by conventions that were first introduced in mass media during the nineteenth century and provided a discriminatory depiction of black individuals. Despite the radical changes that the American society has undergone since the years of slavery, racial archetypes and tropes are still very influential in modern popular culture, and this is exemplified by the mixed interpretations of the American population of historical figures like Nat Turner: some remember the rebel leader as a freedom fighter and an icon of slave resistance, while others have described him as a ruthless monster and a menace for civilization.

Another example of the influence that stereotypes can have over the popular interpretation of racial topics can be found in the critiques to William Styron's novel based on the events of the Southampton rebellion: the book was perceived by many African American intellectuals as racist, as the author was accused of making use of racial

archetypes to convey a particular rendition of the main protagonist of his story. In a similar way, black personalities criticized Tarantino's film *Django Unchained* because they believed that most of its characters had been written on the basis of racial tropes, and also felt that a white director could not possibly convey a faithful reenactment of the experiences of black slaves in America.

While *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Django Unchained* were both criticized for their respective portrayals of their main protagonists, one may argue that this kind of negative critiques was primarily encouraged by the fact that the authors of these works were white, and that neither of these works would have been criticized as much if they had been made by African American authors.

These controversies highlight that, when it comes to the recreation of the slave past, a lack of dialogue separates the black and white communities in the US. Black people do not trust white artists to provide an accurate reconstruction of the slave period and of black identity. Furthermore, while modern media have the potential to contradict the credibility of racial stereotypes, it can also boost the influence of other tropes like that of black victims whenever it abstains to discuss specific historical figures like Nat Turner to focus exclusively on other types of narratives. For example, whenever movies like *Lincoln* and *Amistad* relegate African Americans to marginal roles in their plots and instead center their attention on their white characters, they give the impression that black people brought little contribution to the reaching of the social achievements that have changed US society in the one that exists today. In fact, the majority of the films analyzed in the second chapter of this study primarily depict African Americans as passive and submissive subjects that are unable, or unwilling, to fight for their emancipation and rights. Their fate often relies entirely on the benevolence of other white subjects who decide to act on their

behalf and grant them freedom out of moral principles. In this regard, mainstream media tends to use the memory of the years of slavery primarily to celebrate the deeds and merits of white emancipators, while topics like slave resistance and agency are seldom discussed.

However, the rise of independent artists in the industry of cinema is encouraging authors like Nate Parker to use film to recreate aspects of black identity that have been widely ignored in the past and introduce them in mainstream culture to provide the public with the portrayal of historical characters and events that have until recently been ignored by the medium because of their controversial nature. The industry is also starting to expand its representation of the slave past to more genres: *Django Unchained*, with its representation of black heroism can be considered an innovative experiment that, despite being heavily criticized by many sources, is bound to encourage more diverse reenactments of the slave experience in the future.

In conclusion, the thesis exhibits how the topic of black identity is still a very controversial one due to the inability of the US to come to terms with the legacy of slavery: the debates surrounding many of the works of art analyzed in the previous chapters originate from the fact that there exist widely different interpretations of slave agency, and one representation of the slave experience can sometimes contradict the credibility of others. For example, white savior narratives often seem to suggest that slaves were passive individuals who played a very small part in the history of the country prior to the Civil War, but such a statement must confront the fact that the stories of black slaves such as Solomon Northup and Nat Turner are present in the contemporary memory of the antebellum. In addition to providing a depiction of slave identity that differs from that conveyed by white savior narratives, such stories show that the passive behavior of slaves

concealed different forms of resistance: Northup understood that confronting his white masters would inevitably lead to his killing and thus waited for the opportunity to contact someone who could help him return to his family; Turner kept on serving his owners while plotting a massive insurrection that would free himself and other African Americans from enslavement.

I conclude this research arguing that a more detailed reconstruction of all the aspects of the experience of slaves in the antebellum period could represent a solution to the modern tensions that currently divide the white and black communities in the US: these issues are often the result of prejudice from the part of white society towards racial minorities, as many still perceive black people on the basis of generalizations that were made popular during the nineteenth century. The relevance that racial stereotypes still have in contemporary years is one of the reasons why African American communities are often pushed to the margins of US society, and demonstrates that the nation has not yet learned to abide by the moral principles of freedom that constitute its roots.