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Era(c)ing the South: Modern Popular Culture Depictions of Southern History

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Abstract

There has been significant research on various interpretations of the American South, and the relationship between Southern and American identity. However, there has been little investigation into how modern popular culture depicts and constructs the Southern past and how this shapes Southern identity. This article interrogates the relationship between modern films, race, and Southern history to ask, has the challenge to codified Jim Crow segregation changed filmic portrayals of Southern history? How do these portrayals affect both Southern and American identity? Using race as a lens, the article argues that the end of the Civil Rights Movement has created a new period of Southern identity creation, with films exonerating the contemporary South for racism and consigning most depictions of racism to the historical South.

Keywords

Film, American South, Identity, Popular Culture, Civil Rights

The history and legacy of the American South are contested territory within American society, with popular culture often serving as the site of competing perspectives on race and the Southern past. Within the past few years, the Paula Deen and *Duck Dynasty* scandals, the controversy over the banal Brad Paisley/L.L. Cool J song *Accidental Racist*, blackface incidents on college campuses, and the defacing of a James Meredith statue at the University of Mississippi all made national headlines. At the same time, films interrogating issues of race and the Southern past—*12 Years a Slave* (2013), *The Help* (2011), and *Django Unchained* (2012)—all achieved critical and commercial acclaim. These feature films, and others from the post-Civil Rights Movement period, are an understudied window into

how the United States constructs its historical memory, especially around issues of race. The publicly recognized end of the Civil Rights Movement against codified Southern segregation offers a new opportunity to study the connections between race, popular culture, identity, and the Southern past.

Although there has been significant research on earlier creations of Southern identity in popular culture, it is imperative that scholars from various disciplines explore how modern popular culture constructs the Southern past and how this shapes Southern identity. (Graham, McPherson, Cobb, and Cox) As a historian, I focus my research on recent filmic depictions of the Southern past; by studying how modern films and other forms of popular culture portray the historical South, I hope to enhance our understanding of not only the South, but also of the United States. With the hopes of provoking discussion and encouraging further study, in this article, I would like to put forward some questions about the intersection of race, Southern history, identity, and popular culture. Although my purpose here is to present questions, not answers, ideally this piece will offer a context for further exploration of these issues.

In my ongoing research, I am using race as a lens to question how modern films, which I define as films produced after the Civil Rights Movement, interpret and portray Southern history. My interrogation of the relationship between modern films, race, Southern history, and identity leads me to ask, how has the challenge to, and elimination of, codified Jim Crow segregation changed how popular culture portrays Southern history, and how does this affect both Southern and American identity? Perhaps the end of the Civil Rights Movement has created a new period of Southern identity creation, with popular culture exonerating the contemporary South for racism and consigning most depictions of racism to the historical South. To many, the victories of the Civil Rights Movement (and the election of President Barack Obama) signaled a move to a "post-racial" America. Although there is vast evidence against such a move actually being true, the *desire* for this belief to be true is shaping how people think about our racial past.

Whether it is *The Andy Griffith Show*, Aunt Jemima, "reality" television, Southern-themed restaurants, or NASCAR, people have often understood

Southern identity through popular culture.[1] Film, with its ability to display iconic images to mass audiences, has been particularly powerful in creating the South in the American imagination and influencing both internal and external views of the South and Southern history. Because the South has been such a frequent Hollywood subject, and feature films reach such large audiences, films profoundly shape public discourse about Southern history and identity. Indelible Hollywood images like the Southern belle and loyal slaves of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), or the football team as embodiment of the Civil Rights Movement in *Remember the Titans* (2000), grow embedded in American culture and influence public understanding of Southern history. As Catherine Clinton, historian of the plantation South, states, "millions of Americans have had their vision of the South, race relations, and even the entire panorama of our past shaped if not wholly defined by the movie business." (204) In discussing *Gone with the Wind's* influence on the public's understanding of the war, Civil War historian Gary Gallagher observes that the epic romance "has shaped what people think about the Civil War probably more than everything we've written put together, or put together and squared." (Thompson C01)

Understanding filmic representations of the historical South is important because these representations are shaping current views of Southern identity, and Southern identity influences American identity. One of the foremost voices in examining Southern identity, James C. Cobb, argues that for most of United States history, the South served as a "negative reference point" against which the North (and therefore the United States) created an identity of liberty, democracy, and the pursuit of equality. (3) Larry Griffin persuasively argues that the rest of the United

1 *The Andy Griffith Show* was a television program about a small town, North Carolina sheriff in the 1960s. The program, still shown daily in reruns, features a nostalgic, sanitized portrait of the American South. Racism, violence, and problems of the outside world are virtually non-existent, and the program's lead character stands in stark contrast to the actual Southern sheriffs who were using violence against civil rights protesters. Over the years, other popular culture has trafficked in similar nostalgic images of the American South. Aunt Jemima pancake batter used to feature a "Mammy" figure as a spokesperson, and the Cracker Barrel chain of restaurants still appeals to people's wish for "down home, old-fashioned" cooking. In professional sports, NASCAR auto racing, with its Southern roots and Caucasian drivers and fan base, is often set in opposition to other sports, which are based in urban areas and feature many African American athletes.

States conceptualized the South as the antithesis of the United States, and used this creation of an oppositional South as a repository for American guilt, especially about the issue of race. (58-59) Edward Said's work on orientalism has been particularly effective in understanding the rest of the nation's relationship with the South and the creation of both American and Southern identity. (1-12) David Jansson (building on Said's work) employs the idea of "internal orientalism," arguing that the United States built and sustained a privileged national identity by consigning both undesirable traits and "exotic" positive traits to the imagined place called the South. Jansson notes that a significant difference between internal orientalism and orientalism is that internal orientalism allows the residents of the "othered region some degree of access to the national political, cultural, and economic institutions. As a result, it becomes more likely that negative representations of the othered region will be complemented by positive representations." (265-270) This duality is apparent when we examine popular culture representations of the American South.[2]

Because the South is more than just a geographic space—there are many "Souths" in the American imagination—the South can be viewed simultaneously as a place of great beauty, culture, and refinement, as the site of incredible cruelty and violence, and also as a place of nostalgia and simplicity in an increasingly complex and urbanized world. Historically, the tensions between various popular culture portrayals of the South are often illustrative of larger issues in American society, with the South serving as the canvas for exploration of these issues. As Michael Kammen argues, societies "reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and that they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind—manipulating the past in order to mold the present." (3)

The modern relationship between a contested national discussion of race and the creation of Southern identity in popular culture echoes the end of Reconstruction when, in the interest of reconciling North and South, the United States attempted to move beyond discussions of race. This move devastated the hopes of racial equality and the gains made by African Americans during Reconstruction. Historians Nina Silber and Karen L. Cox both argue that in the years after the Civil War, in a desire to reunite the nation psychologically as well as politically, the nation romanticized the

2 For an example of this image creation on a state-level, see Brent M. S. Campney, "'This is Not Dixie:' The Imagined South, the Kansas Free State Narrative, and the Rhetoric of Racist Violence," *Southern Spaces*. Web. 14 Sep. 2007.

South. (Silber 6) In this romanticizing, popular cultures ignored Southern racism or turned it inside out and reinforced white supremacy. Cox, in examining popular cultures ranging from advertising, to popular songs, to tourism literature of the early twentieth century, also argues that the South was used as "the antithesis of the modern urban-industrial world" within which many Americans lived their everyday lives. Both Northerners and Southerners created a nostalgic South in the American imagination, and although this creation included negative archetypes as well, these negative archetypes were often humorous rather than threatening and were a way of masking Southern problems. (33)

Like previous periods, modern popular cultures also define the Southern image, creating historical memory, and constructing Southern identity. In her book, *Framing the South*, Allison Graham argues that during the Civil Rights Movement, when filmmakers wanted to acknowledge racism in the South, they often used economic class as a marker for racism. In these films, the "cretinous redneck" villains would be a threat to not only African Americans but to American society in general. Of course, this displacement of racist guilt away from "respectable" white people onto marginalized white Southerners served the purpose of at least ignoring and at most exonerating society for structural racism. This approach has continued in films since the Civil Rights Movement, and although some films have moved away from this approach, most are still likely to ignore structural racism as a topic. (179-182)

For understanding both American and Southern identity as something created and imagined rather than strictly delineated by geographic features, Said's concepts and Benedict Anderson's framework of "imagined communities" have been especially helpful. Of course, in this context, "imagined," means something perceived rather than counterfeit or contrived. Anderson argues that communities are "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." According to Anderson, media (Anderson emphasizes print culture) plays an especially important role in the creation of communities, and historical narrative is fundamental to identity creation. Communicated multiple ways (demographically, politically, geographically, historically, and culturally), what it means to be "American," "Southern," "British," or a member of any other community is malleable. (6)

In her study of Southern identity, Tara McPherson echoes Anderson's work on imagined communities, arguing that, "the South today is as much a fiction, a story we tell and are told, as it is a fixed geographic space below the Mason Dixon Line." The idea of the South as a created place beyond the bounds of geography is gaining recognition; McPherson is part of a growing community of scholars who are making similar arguments about the creation of Southern identity in the American imagination. This exploration is part of a paradigm shift in Southern studies, as scholars have steadily moved away from simply documenting Southern distinctiveness. Instead, in this new approach, authors in numerous disciplines are investigating the sometimes contentious, sometimes complementary, but always dynamic relationship between the South and the rest of the United States and exploring the multi-layered dimensions of Southern identity. (1)

In the early days of the modern Civil Rights Movement, C. Vann Woodward was arguing that "if Southernism is allowed to become identified with a last ditch defense of segregation, it will increasingly lose its appeal among the younger generation." (12) Building on his pioneering work, and offering their own studies of Southern identity, historians W. Fitzhugh Brundage, David Goldfield, and Cobb argue to varying degrees that the passing of the Civil Rights Movement offered an opportunity for the creation of a new Southern identity. (Brundage, *Where*, Brundage *Southern*; Goldfield) Moving beyond resistance to integration and support for repressive institutions, this identity, unlike Woodward's initial formulation, also includes African Americans as Southerners. Cobb argues that this movement to create a new Southern identity has been complicated, that the oppositional mindset that white Southerners developed in defense of slavery and then segregation make it difficult to construct a more positive identity. The nation's long-time investment in the South as an aberrant region could also complicate this movement. (33)

Within days of each other in January 1977, two unrelated events signaled the possibility of a new era in the relationship between the American South and the rest of the United States. First, the United States inaugurated Jimmy Carter, a Southerner, to the presidency. To some people, the Georgia Democrat's victory was an indication of a desire for the United States to leave the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement in the past, and move toward a new future with a reformed South reintegrated back into American society. (Cobb 236-239, 310-312; Griffin 47-50) Secondly,

a few days after the ceremony, the groundbreaking miniseries *Roots* (1977) made its debut on ABC and became a seminal moment in television history. By putting enslaved people at the center of a story about Southern history, *Roots* introduced, to a large mainstream audience, something of a correction to the *Gone with the Wind* version of American slavery. The program's success, and Carter's election, indicated that American popular cultures (and the American public), might be ready to embrace a more complicated picture of the South and rethink notions of race and Southern history. The ensuing thirty-eight years have shown that the notion of the South as an aberrant region, though now contested, continues to have a long life and Southern history continues to be the site of competing visions of America's racial past.

If Cobb and others are correct, that the South has historically served as the repository of guilt about American racism, and the Civil Rights Movement offers new opportunities to create Southern identity, then how have the successes of the Civil Rights Movement changed film depictions of the Southern past? Perhaps the *historical* South (rather than the South in general) has become America's repository of guilt when it comes to race. In examining modern films, I question whether films responded to the end of the Civil Rights Movement by reimagining the relationship between Southern identity and racial inequality, creating a demarcation between a racist Southern past and a more egalitarian present South.[3]

Unlike many modern films that show a historically racist South, films such as *Steel Magnolias* (1989) and *Waitress* (2007) show a modern South that reinforces the positive attributes of the nostalgic South—hospitality, family, a connection to place, and old-fashioned values in the face of modernity—without acknowledging racist legacies, in essence creating a modern, "color blind" South. With a few exceptions, when modern films do confront racism, they often consign it to the past, to the historical South. In addition to limiting depictions of racism temporally to the historical South, films often limit depictions of racism socially. Consigned to the past, filmic racism is rarely structural or institutional. In its place, it is the racism of individuals, counterbalanced by Caucasian saviors and allies against racism. By consigning racism to the past, eliding race altogether, or

3 Examples of films with an internal demarcation between a historically racist South and modern, racially egalitarian South are *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) and *Forrest Gump* (1994).

placing the blame for racism on individual racists who are defeated, films can celebrate racial progress and ignore current racial issues.

Certainly, if the successes of the Civil Rights Movement are changing the South's role in American society, then some questions come to mind. Do films that show racism as a historical Southern phenomenon continue to shield the North from blame? Alternatively, why would there be a movement to de-emphasize issues of race in films about the contemporary South? For the latter, there are a few possible reasons for this trend. Many people have made the argument that since the 1960s, in politics, music, religion, food, and many other areas, Southern culture is becoming more prominent and powerful in American life. Writing of the South's "ascendance," journalist Peter Applebome, who traveled the South researching his book *Dixie Rising*, says the South is a place that manages "to maintain its identity while also putting its fingerprints on almost every aspect of the nation's soul, from race, to politics, to culture, to values." (19, 22) Applebome notes the rise of evangelical Christianity around the country, the dominance of conservative voters within Republican politics, the ubiquity of country music, and the decline of labor unions as examples of Southern influence on the rest of the country. (16) John Egerton, in his book *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, writes of the post Civil Rights Movement era, "the North, for its part, seems more overtly racist than it had been; shorn of its pretensions of moral innocence, it is exhibiting many of the attitudes that once were thought to be the exclusive possession of white Southerners." (19)

In a sense, Egerton and Applebome are arguing that the nation is becoming more culturally "Southern," with all that implies. If the rest of the nation is identifying more with the South, then showing the contemporary South as racism-free keeps the rest of the nation guilt-free. Conversely, featuring racism in films set in the contemporary South and indicting the region risks indicting the entire country. In addition, in a wish to live in a post-racial America, some see acknowledging current racism as dredging up the past rather than moving toward a more positive future. Furthermore, increased racial tension in the North in the twentieth century, as evidenced by riots, conflicts over school busing and housing segregation, and struggles over affirmative action have made it much more difficult to portray racism as a solely Southern problem. This shift could significantly change how the American imagination understands

both Southern identity and race in America. By consigning racism to the historical South rather than the contemporary South, a mythic national identity of liberty and equality remains intact.

In their groundbreaking essay, "Preface: Violence, the Body, and 'The South,'" Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson offer us a new paradigm for thinking about American identity, especially as constructed in relationship with "The South" around the issue of race. Rejecting the Manichean geography of North/good South/evil, and advocating a national examination of racism, Baker and Nelson argue for a revision of Southern and American studies. Their essay works to "render unavailable for all future use the sign 'South' as a state description and alibi for Northern whites [….] a persuasive deconstruction of the sign as a marker of convenience and preserver of what might be called 'white geographical innocence.'" Quoting novelist John O'Killens, who stated that the United States is three regions: "down south, up south, and out south," and Malcolm X's view that Mississippi is everything south of the Canadian border, Baker and Nelson reject the idea that white racism is contained in one "almost always entirely fictional" region, the American South. (231-236)

Other scholars have contributed to this argument and offered valuable ways of thinking about the South's place in the formation of American identity. Jennifer Rae Greeson, Jon Smith, and Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino have all effectively challenged the idea of Southern exceptionalism and Northern innocence in matters of racial prejudice. (Greeson, Smith, Lassiter and Crespino) Recognizing that Woodward found roots of Jim Crow segregation in the antebellum North, Lassiter and Crespino state, "the most insightful observers of southern history have always insisted that the region is inseparable from the nation, that the South is not the antithesis of a progressive America but, rather, has operated as a mirror that reveals its fundamental values and practices." As Lassiter and Crespino are quick to note, this rejection of Southern exceptionalism does not mean that there are "no variations among regions, or that political culture and political economy have become practically identical in every place in the nation." However, they do argue that the Southern exceptionalism framework "attributes episodes of racism and racial violence inside the South to the social and political structures of the region, while portraying similar events elsewhere as anomalous incidents that really should have happened down in Mississippi or Alabama." They

conclude the myth of Southern exceptionalism has distorted not just Southern history, but also "our understanding of American history." By challenging Southern exceptionalism, these scholars are not trying "to absolve the South but to implicate the nation." (7-12) Exploring if current popular cultures reflect this implication should garner the attention of scholars interested in understanding race and the United States.

The purpose of this article has been to open a conversation calling for scholars to investigate the interaction between modern popular culture and the Southern past. Popular culture can be a powerful lens for understanding how Southern and American identity is created and maintained, offering a fertile and important topic for interdisciplinary study. Since the end of the Civil Rights Movement, popular culture depictions of the South have often consigned racism to the historical South, exonerating the current South as well as the North from guilt. Scholars should study the intersection of race, Southern history, and popular culture to understand the construction of modern American identity.

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