

Freedom in an Age of Repression: The Role of Black Theology and Black-Produced Media in Forging Freedom

Wendy M. Arce*

ABSTRACT

*This paper will explore the role that black theology and black-produced films of 2016 play in creating a narrative that seeks freedom for African Americans in the United States during this age of brutality and mass incarceration. Starting with Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Duvernay's *13th*, this paper illustrates how the media and the legal system have worked together to create a culture of criminality still imposed on black youth. Theologians Cone and Brown Douglas rely on the concepts of God's freedom, God's revolutionary love and faithful action to resist such a hostile culture, but two black-produced films of 2016 also rely on the concept of freedom in the face of criminality. *Birth of a Nation* not only shows a positive portrayal of black men in the media, but *Moonlight* illustrates the complexity of growing up in communities that are repressed by this hostile culture.*

INTRODUCTION

D.W. Griffith's cinematic masterpiece *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a monumental feat of technical innovation and a transformational societal event.¹ The first film length of its kind, the technical prowess exhibited in Griffith's work revolutionized the film industry and created a permanent space for film in the U.S. cultural fabric. It cemented the permanence of film in our society, which in turn allows film to play a powerful role in society that not only entertains, but creates and perpetuates culture. This paper explores the way D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* reflected sentiments of the time, but ultimately concretized the figure of the criminalized African American in the U.S. cultural fabric, which is linked to mass incarceration, brutality and killing of African American bodies in our society. Against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement and awareness of #OscarsSoWhite, Nate Parker's passion project of 2016 *The Birth of a Nation*, 101 years after the original, is an attempt to make our nation's story about an interracial fight for freedom, and not an interracial fight that vindicates white supremacy. Parker's intent and limitations are both palpable, so this paper concludes with a look at Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*, which illustrates how any given social location constrains African American men because of how the notions of criminality and masculinity operate within a society, and ultimately within an individual's psyche.

Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, following suite from the novels and plays it was adapted from, was a reflection of a post Reconstruction, Jim Crow backlash and it cemented the criminal, animalistic, uncivilized image of African Americans – an image that required policing. According to scholars, intellectuals, artists and theologians, this image has been firmly rooted in the U.S. psyche since the end of slavery, morphing and finding new ways to imprison and subjugate the formerly enslaved in new ways. The concept of an elusive freedom permeates the texts of scholars Michelle Alexander, Carol Anderson, ethicist Kelly Brown Douglas, and theologian James Cone, as they each illustrate the ways that African Americans have been continually subjugated through legal means after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Amendments guaranteeing their freedom. The White Rage, as Carol Anderson defines it, consistently found ways to take the dehumanizing concept in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to a level of legality, restricting the freedom

of African Americans to thrive in a white society. This can be traced to the system of mass incarceration we have today.

Michelle Alexander's extensive history and analysis in *The New Jim Crow* draws a direct line from slavery to the modern-day mass incarceration system that makes up today's racial caste. The prison system indiscriminately targets poor people of color, confining them to cycles of oppressions that also strip them of their constitutional rights as citizens of the United States. Ava Duvernay's groundbreaking, well-crafted documentary *13th* released by Netflix last year similarly analyzes the history of mass incarceration, specifically connecting it to the thirteenth amendment loophole. The thirteenth amendment made slavery unconstitutional, but it does not extend freedom from slavery to criminals.² Thus, this particular loophole, according to Khalil G. Muhammad, could be used as a tool to strip the rights of criminals.³ Immediately following the Civil War, recently freed African Americans were the most criminalized, incarcerated and stripped of their newly found freedom. Alexander, Duvernay's film, Carol Anderson, Brown Douglas, Cone and many others have illustrated, time after time, that the perpetuation of this system is based on a culture of white supremacy that has always pegged bodies of color and specifically black bodies as unhuman, inferior and criminal. According to this culture of white supremacy, these bodies are not designed to be free and inhabit the spaces that white bodies can by their very nature. As a result, the free black body, as Brown Douglas powerfully puts it, poses a threat to white supremacy, and must be controlled through vigilante justice, law enforcement, and intimidation.⁴ Michelle Alexander illustrates how this entire system begins with elite planters needing to find a cheap and exploitable labor force even before the United States became an independent nation.

Slavery is the obvious starting point of the systematic exploitation, dehumanization and criminalization of bodies of color by white capitalist enterprises. Alexander notes that as plantations gained economic force, the growing need for land it up against the Native American resistance.⁵ In response to this new impediment, different forms of media disseminated the image of the "Savage Indian." Alexander reminds us that the dehumanization of Native Americans as savages created the moral leeway for their extermination.⁶ Coupled with a need for labor, these early landowners devised a system of enslavement for the most vulnerable new arrivals – those who could be pegged as lesser than white, like the Native Americans, but unable to defend themselves with a large enough community who knew the resources and land. Alexander specifically mentions the Bacon Rebellion as instrumental in creating the system where Africans specifically were perpetually enslaved, but notes that this move also served as a strategy to divide the economically poor along racial lines⁷ – a move that led to the election of 45. In doing so, the planter elite succeeded in securing their economic stronghold on this country. This "racial bribe," as Alexander notes, gave special considerations "to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves."⁸ Alexander continues, "Poor whites suddenly had a direct and personal stake in the existence of a race-based system of slavery. Their own plight had not improved by much, but at least they were not slaves."⁹ Any meager benefit that the planter elite afforded to poor whites gave them a palpable benefit over enslaved Africans, and through that, a false sense of power and importance in a society where they were still disenfranchised as poor.

This system not only built the US economy and secured the US a space as a burgeoning world power, but it also cemented ideas that are now firmly rooted in the US cultural landscape and psyche. White supremacy thrived on the enslavement of black people, which only further perpetuated the assumption that "the people of the African race were bestial, that whites were inherently superior, and that slavery was, in fact, for blacks' own good..."¹⁰ With this in mind, Alexander poignantly illustrates, the enslavement of black bodies was not counter intuitive to the universal democratic ideals that would later shape the U.S.'s founding documents.¹¹ After all, the rights and liberties afforded to white people were not applicable to those who inherently needed to be enslaved for their own good.¹² This cultural assumption did not come to an end with the

Emancipation Proclamation, but was instead intensified. Free black bodies created an extreme cognitive dissonance for white supremacist culture. As Brown Douglas illustrates in *Stand Your Ground*, black people were not only seen as inferior, but were also perceived as an inherent threat to whiteness. As soon as black bodies were granted freedom, they challenged the foundation of white supremacy.¹³ As Brown Douglas puts it, “a free black body and a dangerous black body are practically equivalent” because free black bodies run counter to their nature in a white supremacist order.¹⁴

Furthermore, without the institution of slavery to affirm the separation of races, Alexander shows how “the development of a new racial order became the consuming passion for most white Southerners”¹⁵ because they feared a massive insurrection of the uncontrolled black masses. Alexander asserts that “the current stereotype of black men as aggressive, unruly predators can be traced to this period, when whites feared that an angry mass of black men might rise up and attack them or rape their women.”¹⁶ Alongside this concern was the reality that many formerly enslaved simply left their plantations. A need for labor coupled with the assumption that black bodies needed to be controlled, several states in the Confederate south passed legislation written to specifically single out the newly freed to make sure they were properly employed. For example, Louisiana declared that “people of African American descent cannot be considered citizens of the United States.”¹⁷ Mississippi issued their infamous Black Codes, which required proof of gainful employment, made it illegal to hunt or fish for African Americans and criminalized anything that could be perceived as inappropriate behavior. These codes allowed for the regulation of their behavior at every level, creating another way to exploit African American labor and constrain freedom. Failure to meet these requirements turned African Americans into criminals, who could also be manipulated by the state because their criminality made them not subject to the thirteenth amendment. They were imprisoned and placed into forced labor.¹⁸

Despite the initial Black Codes after the emancipation of the enslaved, several of these codes were reversed by federal legislation.¹⁹ The Reconstruction Era brought a certain degree of respite to freed African Americans. Federal legislation and funding created opportunities for the formerly enslaved to become educated, create businesses, and hold political office. In fact, three years after the end of the Civil War, “15 percent of all Southern elected officials were black,” which was almost double the percentage of elected officials during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.²⁰ Even though the Reconstruction Era was flawed, the protection of federal troops, the Freedman’s Bureau and the ability to organize gave former slaves some integration into society as free individuals, so long as they had the means to use and enforce these protections.

However, as Alexander writes, “As W.E.B. Du Bois eloquently reminds us, former slaves had ‘a brief moment in the sun’ before they were returned to a status akin to slavery.”²¹ Even though African Americans were able to vote, were initially granted land and were protected by law, they found themselves becoming increasingly disenfranchised by unspecific language in the fifteenth amendment that allowed states to impose “educational, residential, or other qualifications for voting, thus leaving the door open to the states to impose poll taxes, literacy tests, and other devices to prevent blacks from voting.”²² In restricting voting through these specific targeted means, “white politicians could continue to ignore or, even worse, trample on African Americans and suffer absolutely no electoral consequences for doing so.”²³ In addition to qualifications for voting, Alexander asserts that most laws were a sign of “direct federal intervention into Southern affairs, because enforcement required African Americans to take their cases to federal courts, a costly and time-consuming procedure that was a practical impossibility for the vast majority of those who had claims.”²⁴ The freedoms officially espoused by the federal government were an imposed legality, not a cultural shift. In a culture that devalued black bodies, these laws were symbolic, what Alexander calls “largely illusory” because they were rarely enforced or enforceable without money and other social privileges.²⁵ Freed African Americans saw their legal

rights trampled through the interplay between federal regulations and local government, but the situation only worsened during Andrew Johnson's presidency.

Lincoln's democratic vice president and successor, Johnson further weakened the flawed Reconstruction by dismantling federal requirements for the protection of African Americans. According to Anderson, he threw "tens of thousands of freedpeople off" redistributed land, reinstalling the plantation owners and allowing state after state of the Confederacy back into the Union.²⁶ According to Anderson,

The reigning leaders of the Confederacy, who had rightfully expected to be tried and hung as traitors, now were not only poised to sail back into power in the federal government, but also, given Johnson's amnesty, allowed to regain control of their states and, as a consequence, of the millions of newly emancipated and landless black people there. As he welcomed one "niggers will catch hell" state after the next back into the Union with no mention whatsoever of black voting rights and, thus, no political protection, he effectively laid the groundwork for mass murder.²⁷

Anderson documents how the vigilante justice in the southern states was wreaking havoc on the lives, safety and security of the formerly enslaved – a reality that President Johnson responded to by choosing to "preside over...this slow-motioned genocide."²⁸ Johnson not only refused to send more federal troops to protect the rights of African Americans, but withdrew all federal presence designed to protect the "egalitarian racial order."²⁹ Furthermore, with increased voter restrictions and physical intimidation, resulting often in death, African Americans were unable to exert political power through their vote. The possibilities of Reconstruction died out with the establishment of the Jim Crow era.

The end of Reconstruction and the birth of Jim Crow were a reactionary response to the end of the civil war. Alexander describes the backlash to the Reconstruction as "swift and severe" because the factions who lost the Civil War felt shame and needed to redeem the South.³⁰ The lack of federal presence allowed for groups like the Ku Klux Klan to wreak havoc on any individual or group seeking to establish the lawfully guaranteed egalitarian society.³¹ The culture of hate that was fueled by the shame of defeat was now vindicated, giving the formerly enslaved no real recourse. Anderson describes their hatred as a "visceral contempt", still rooted in a disregard for African American personhood.³² Because the culture of white supremacy remained, the legal system gradually returned to the post Civil War legislation that targeted African Americans. Undoubtedly, the return of vagrancy laws and other forms of criminalization were a continuation of this culture that ultimately served rich business owners. As the persistent social force throughout this story, those with economic power used their influence to justify the enslavement of criminals, which brought back the reality of forced, free labor for prisoners who were, at times, imprisoned because they were not working.³³ Similar to the period after the Civil War, black bodies were seen as dangerous. In fact, the people living in the south "talk in such a way as to indicate that they are yet unable to conceive of the Negro as possessing any rights at all." He further explained how murder, rape, and robbery... were not seen as crimes at all so long as whites were the perpetrators and blacks the victims."³⁴ There is clear documentation proving that the sentiments of white supremacy not only criminalized black bodies, but became a justification for the inhumane treatment of African Americans. Within this new system, free or forced black laborers were treated with a dangerous degree of hostility. A free black body was not property, and therefore, was expendable.³⁵ Once they lost their value as owned property, any African American who seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time was subject to this self-motivated local justice.³⁶ It was a perfect way to control a population that was perceived as inferior, and resulted in the rapid creation of what Jelani Cobb called a "mythology of black criminality" that reinscribed the need for the KKK to self-police under a state that had failed them

during the Reconstruction. In their efforts to vindicate and redeem the south, in addition to creating a viable, controllable, virtually enslaved work force, the image of the African American criminal justified the use of extreme force to place them in line. This same type of hostility has remained throughout the generations and continues to be a cornerstone in our culture today, where poor people of color are mass incarcerated, stripped of their rights and indiscriminately killed. It began largely with the Ku Klux Klan's terrorist campaign of vigilante justice to defend their sacred space from the infiltration of freed African Americans. This envisioning of African Americans, the vigilante-ism of the KKK, and even the justice system were even further concretized in the U.S. psyche by D.W. Griffith's pivotal *The Birth of a Nation*.

Scholars agree that *The Birth of a Nation's* cinematic prowess was only part of its success. Many individuals lauded the film because it reaffirmed the growing assumptions in the culture about African Americans and showed how groups like the KKK were righting the wrong that the government perpetrated when they abolished slavery. It not only reflected the sentiment at the time, but illustrated the forms of vigilante justice that began in response to Reconstruction. Lynching was one such form of self-prescribed justice when a larger system fails a community. According to James Cone, "Lynching was not regarded an evil thing, but a necessity – the only way a community of people could protect itself from bad people out of the reach of the law."¹⁶ *Birth of a Nation* vindicated lynching as "an efficient and honorable act of justice," and united the country against a common enemy that was already being stereotyped in a particular light.¹⁷ Because of all of this, "whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence that was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of 'white over black.'"¹⁸ *Birth of a Nation* fed into the religious mythos of white supremacy, firmly etching the sacredness of whiteness over blackness in U.S. culture.

The Birth of a Nation (1915) was tremendously popular throughout the country and was the even privately screened in the White House for President Woodrow Wilson called it "History written in lightning." Kevin Gannon describes it as confirming "the story that many whites wanted to tell about the Civil War and its aftermath – to erase defeat and to take out of it [a sort of] martyrdom."¹⁹ This new form of blockbuster entertainment illustrated the tumultuous societal shifts that occurred after the Civil War, but also reaffirmed white supremacist ideas about the animalistic and uncontrollable nature of African Americans in that larger than life way. Because of this, as Cone describes, "Whites, especially in the South, loved Birth and regarded seeing it as a 'religious experience.'"²⁰ For many, *The Birth of a Nation* tapped into a natural order of life that was threatened by the abolition of slavery and Reconstruction, and that the new social order was no longer defending. This religious appeal is tied into a sacredness of whiteness that is supported by a grand narrative of white supremacy present during our country's founding. In *Stand your Ground*, Kelly Brown Douglas illustrates the interactions between a grand narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism that turns whiteness into cherished property and a theo-ideological construction of blackness that makes black bodies inherently guilty.²¹

Brown Douglas' *Stand Your Ground* explores the foundations of stand-your-ground culture in the United States, in a larger effort to understand how George Zimmerman, a civilian, was acquitted for pursuing and killing a seventeen-year-old African American Trayvon Martin. She uncovers the grand narrative of white supremacy and U.S. exceptionalism by tracing it back to the construction of whiteness to a mythologized and glorified Anglo-Saxon identity that inspired our country's founders to establish U.S. values of individual rights, love of freedom, respect for common law, a strong sense of morality and self-governance.²² The United States was founded on the pursuit of these ideals, but those who claim ownership of an Anglo-Saxon identity believed only they are able to fully live out these ideals. Brown Douglas illustrates how even when non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants who looked Anglo-Saxon were racialized as inferior, uncontrollable and

animalistic because of their blood was not pure. When German, Irish, Italian and other immigrants flowed into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even President Theodore Roosevelt was concerned that the “new stock” would amount to “race suicide.”²³ Within U.S. culture, language became a powerful tool to draw bright boundaries between the new and old:

As if to make clear the distinction between ‘old stock’ and ‘new stock,’ the narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism generated an obscene pejorative lexicon for identifying particular new stock ethnic groups.... The point of this derogatory language was to remind these non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants of their place in American.²⁴

The U.S. government also passed legislative measures in the 1920s to stem the flow of immigrants so that the new stock would not replace the old stock and jeopardize the “balanced” society made by and for Anglo-Saxons. They succeeded, and “Instead of the ‘new stock’ being lowered to the ways of ‘the old stock,’...the ‘new’ elevated the ‘old.’ Anglo-Saxon blood was able to stand it ground against the threat of contamination. It had the power to extinguish identities. It was exceptional.”²⁵ The assimilation of the white European ethnic minorities into the United States in the early twentieth century was evidence that all newcomers should bow to the exceptionalism of the Anglo-Saxon, adopting their language, religion, culture and way of life.

However, the relationship between Anglo-Saxon and the other carries a different weight when the other cannot pass for Anglo-Saxon. In this scenario, the exceptionalism of whiteness is also propped up by what Brown Douglas calls a theo-ideological understanding of black bodies as chattel to legitimize slavery. Any relationship between black and white went against the natural and moral order in our world. Alexander H. Stevens “Cornerstone Address” is Brown Douglas’ prime example for how slavery was the only way for black and white to be in right relationship. “The negro by nature, or by the Curse against Canaan...is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.... It is best, not only for the superior but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the Creator.”²⁶ Slavery reflected a divine, God-given natural order in the United States, but when the system was dismantled, members of the old order not only believed they were going against God’s will, but began associating the free black body as a guilty body because freedom was against the natural order.

The end of slavery brought into question this fragile theo-ideological justification for slavery, but laid the groundwork for a U.S. culture that is complacent with the imprisonment of predominately people of color and the indiscriminate death of unarmed black and brown bodies by white people. The theo-ideological legitimation posits that a free black body is goes against God’s will and nature. When black bodies enter into a free space, “They are guilty of trespassing into the white space. They are guilty of betraying their divine creation. Free black bodies transgress both natural law and eternal law.”²⁷ Therefore, a free black body is, by nature, a guilty body for two reasons. First, they are more likely to “revert to their more ‘savage’ nature and commit a crime.”²⁸ Second, and most importantly, because they are entering into a space that does not belong to them, “they do so as intruders, and thus they have created a dangerous situation because white people are compelled, by divine law nonetheless, to protect their space from intruders.”²⁹ Within this twisted system, white people are exonerated for their brutality against African Americans because “this theoideology makes it appear that the ideology of cherished white property is not an ethnocentric construct, but instead reflects an ontological truth. A natural law theo-ideology provides sacred legitimation for the deadly enforcement of stand-your-ground culture.”³⁰ African Americans being free and having agency is equal to guilt within this worldview, and as a result, these bodies still need to be regulated, controlled and policed legally and extra judicially. *The Birth of a Nation* vindicated this mentality on the silver screen, but fed into a larger culture that, today, massively imprisons black bodies, but also indiscriminately kills any black body that may only appear to be a threat.

As mentioned earlier, Brown Douglas wrote her book in trying to understand the culture that supports George Zimmerman's acquittal of murder charges for the killing of Trayvon Martin. During the writing of this book, countless other cases emerged, including the rather similar Jordan Davis case. Another seventeen-year-old teenager, Jordan Davis was killed over an argument about loud music in a gas station parking lot. Marc Silver's *3 1/2 Minutes, Ten Bullets* (2015) uses clips from the courtroom, audio from Michael Dunn's phone calls and interviews with Jordan Davis' friends and family to reconstruct how the theo-ideological argument functions in society.

Jordan Davis died in a gas station parking lot the day after Thanksgiving in 2013. Davis and three of his friends were driving around that evening in Jacksonville, FL when they pulled into the gas station for a bathroom break, cigarettes and gum. Driver, Tommie Stornes, went to use the restroom, and shortly after, Michael Dunn and his fiancée Rhonda Rouer pulled into the space next to Tommie Stornes' car. After Rouer steps into the store, Dunn asks the teenagers to turn their rap music down. One of the teens complies, but Jordan Davis says "Fuck that, turn the music back up." Dunn responded by saying, "Are you talking to me?" and when Davis said, "yes, I'm talking to you," a witness claims Dunn responded by saying, "No, you're not going to talk to me that way" and retrieved a large caliber pistol from the glove compartment. Dunn proceeded to fire ten shots during the span of three and a half minutes into Davis' door, even as Tommie Stornes tried to drive away.

According to Dunn's police interview and testimony, during the interaction with Davis, Dunn heard them say "Kill him." Dunn sees Davis bend down, retrieve what Dunn saw as the barrel of gun, heard Davis say, "You're dead, bitch." He also claimed that he saw Davis about to exit his car. Because of this perceived threat, Dunn felt it was necessary to fire ten bullets into the car of unarmed teenagers so that he could defend his life from a perceived threat. The Stand-Your-Ground defense allows someone to use lethal force when they feel their life is threatened. Brown Douglas explanation of the theo-ideological construction of blackness illustrates how Dunn's lethal force was justified because Davis had the audacity to inhabit a free, assertive space against Dunn's directives.

The culture that caused the death of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis and countless other African American bodies is the same culture that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) vindicated and that continues to justify the indiscriminate killing and brutalization of African American bodies. It was not the sole creator of the narrative, but it was the first media depiction and has fueled the harmful culture that continues in the media to this day. In 2016, Nate Parker's pet project of the same name was released against the backdrop of a steadily increased awareness of the treatment of African Americans in our society. This reclaiming of the name 101 years later seemed to be a step away from the legacy of the original, claiming the fight for freedom as foundational in our country's history.

When it was screened at the Sundance Film Festival at the height of the #OscarsSoWhite controversy of 2016, *The Birth of a Nation* was received with a standing ovation (from the largely white audience). The Oscar buzz began almost immediately – Nate Parker's film was going to be 2016's response to the mostly white Oscar nominations of the prior year. With writer, director and actor Nate Parker at the helm, the predominately African American cast and compelling story of Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1931 was the chance for actors and filmmakers of color to show their prowess. Nate Parker's choice to name his 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation*, a move to reclaim the name from DW Griffith's sorted yet seminal film, added to the symbolism and the frenzy surrounding the film. However, the controversies surrounding the co-writers Nate Parker and Jean McGianni Celestin at the film's release as well as a sharper, more critical viewing of the film at a different time unveiled what the film attempted and its many limitations.

As outlined earlier, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) concretized the image of a criminal African American male in the US psyche. Based on Dixon's play, it further solidified the dehumanizing

reduction of African American men to criminals, vagabonds and rapists that was already present in the U.S. cultural fabric. Therefore, instead of glorifying the birth of a nation from an interracial conflict that criminalizes and dehumanizes African Americans, Parker's film illustrates how a nation is born through the pursuit of freedom by and for the enslaved. The film's subject matter not only humanizes the enslaved African Americans by allowing the audience to see their stories and experiences, but it also relies on the most fundamental argument for the dignity and freedom of all human life – God's desire to see all humans free. Inspired by God, Nat Turner lead an early slave rebellion – another interracial conflict – that Nate Parker then connects to the advent of the Civil War. In other words, it encapsulates an imagining of our nation that is not linked with the criminalization of African American citizens, but illustrates how the United States comes to fruition only in the struggle for equality, equity and justice, inspired by a deep pursuit of freedom from the biblical text and connection with God. This powerful idea wonderfully reclaims the auspicious title from 1915. Despite these lofty intentions, Nate Parker's work as director, writer and star creates an interesting, yet lackluster storyline that reduces this historical and spiritual movement not to Turner's spiritual development, but to a revenge narrative after his wife is battered and assaulted by slave catchers.³¹

The film recounts the life and mission of Nat Turner. It begins with the mythology that Nat Turner was marked as a special, spiritual leader or prophet for his people. As a child, Nat also developed the ability to read, given special permission to read the bible specifically. The significance of this particular tool is palpable, since his reading of the scripture draws out the passages that both support and oppose the justifications for slavery. Nat Turner remarks to his comrades in the struggle, "I see now for every verse they use to support our bondage, there's another demanding our freedom. Every verse they use to justify our torture, there's another damning them to hell for those actions."³² His ability to read and interpret the text taught him of the freedom that all God's creatures should embody, and the ethical obligation to carry deliver freedom to the enslaved.

African American theologians and ethicists have used similar tools of understanding how slave owners once used the text to justify slavery, but how they can read the text with liberatory lenses. Earlier in this paper, I used Brown Douglas' work that presented a theo-ideological argument based on a natural order that envisioned black as inferior to white. The bible was a central tool in this endeavor – a reality that Parker used in his *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). However, like Nat Turner, those enslaved during that time used the biblical text in creative ways as they survived the atrocities of slavery.

Allen Dwight Callahan's contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* briefly outlines the myriad of ways in which African Americans have read, interpreted and utilized scripture throughout history. Citing Delores Williams' work, Callahan recounts how African American slaves created an oral text composed "by extracting from the Bible or adding to biblical content those phrases, stories, biblical personalities and moral prescriptions relevant to the character of their life-situation and pertinent to the aspirations of the slave community."³³ The oral history, transmitted through spirituals, were an amalgamation of their West African heritage and the biblical stories from the only written text they could access. ³⁴ The resulting spirituals combined the major figures of the bible with characters from their West African homeland and the type of songs their ancestors would sing. ³⁵ According to Vincent Wimbush, this way of reading and transmitting the text become a foundational way for African Americans to relate to the text – the importance of the vernacular tradition, the connection of the text to experience, the linkages with popular folklore and the use of biblical figures as inspirational even during desperate times have created a larger system for how to use the text in subsequent generations.³⁶

Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* had a real opportunity to illustrate the powerful role faith in God has in inspiring a rebellion for freedom, but we see more of an allusion to his spiritual

progression than a deliberate viewing of his transformation. According to historian Leslie Alexander, the prime, motivating factor for Turner was his faith: “By all accounts, Turner took up arms against slavery because he believed slavery was morally wrong and violated the law of God.”³⁷ Historical documents show “he reported receiving a series of visions and messages from God predicting a cataclysmic ‘race war’ that would destroy slavery....”³⁸ He believed himself to be God’s choice to lead this revolt. However, this also means that the fight for freedom had deep theological roots. As Alexander puts it, “...black people not only fought against slavery because of its extreme violence and brutality, but also because they knew in their hearts that slavery was an unjust, exploitative system that violated moral laws.”³⁹ Both the atrocities of slavery and the ontological fact that the injustice violated God’s intention for God’s creation inspired this rebellion.

Unfortunately, this missed opportunity turned Nate Parker’s tribute into what film critics have likened to *Braveheart*-type revenge narrative, where the brutal sexual assault of his women served as a primary motivator for the men to start their movement. Film critics and scholars alike have noted how the film’s narrative arc revolves on the rape of Cherry-Ann and Esther – the former Turner’s enslaved wife who was brutalized by slave catchers and later, the wife of another one of Samuel Turner’s slaves. Prior to these events, Nat Turner was progressing towards a spiritual awakening, but it isn’t until he sees his wife’s disfigured face that he is moved into action. In Tillet’s review of the film, she writes, “And though Turner’s political evolution is catalyzed when he travels to other plantations and witnesses slaves’ degradations, his conversion to insurrectionist is fully cemented when Cherry gives him permission to avenge her rape.”⁴⁰ The film’s purpose shifts away from a recounting of how religion inspired rebellion and instead illustrated how, in response to the rape of their wives, these “men emboldened enough to defy their master”⁴¹ when they are faced with the inability to protect the women they love. The primary difficulty with this dramatized version of Turner’s story is that “[t]hese incidents of rape are depicted entirely from their significance to men.”⁴² The exploitation of women’s bodies becomes a “carefully constructed” story line designed “to redeem black masculinity at black women’s expense.”⁴³ According to Alexander, this is a missed opportunity that glosses over the pivotal role that women played at the time, as well as their strength and dignity as enslaved women:

Enslaved women fought for their dignity and freedom, and they exercised agency over their lives, in spite of unimaginable horrors. This is a story that deserves to be told, not one that disseminates archaic and damaging myths that cast black men as courageous saviors and black women as helpless victims.⁴⁴

Instead of showcasing the role that women played in the rebellion and their strength despite their situation, focusing on a fabricated rape story line instead made the story about how enslaved men regain their masculinity when they cannot protect their wives from rape.

While the film glossed over Nat Turner’s scriptural interpretation and created allusions to his desire to see his people freed and treated with dignity, it further reinscribes harmful assumptions around gender roles and sexuality by relegating women into passive weak roles and men as their protectors by means of violence. It became less about spirituality and more about defending family through manhood. Nate Parker walked right into the gender tropes that rule our society and illustrates further layers of imprisonment for African American bodies. Esther and Cherry-Ann were not only imprisoned by their racial make-up, but also by their gender because they were used sexually by white men and valiantly defended by black men. But this also begs the question of how Nate Parker is imprisoned by his assumptions around manhood and sexuality. Barry Jenkins’s 2016 film *Moonlight* uncovers the nuanced and disturbing ways that African American men are constrained by societal expectation and perception, making us face, head-on, the gender tropes that Nate Parker took for granted. Barry Jenkins pushes us to how social forms of restriction and imprisonment lead to internalized structures that determine behavior. Little/Chiron/Black and

Kevin exemplify the effects of a social world that expects a specific narrative from young black men in Florida during the 1990s. The career options are limited, and they are also subject to the restriction of their sexuality and gender identity. What does freedom mean in a society that not only moves to imprison, brutalize and kill gender conforming black bodies, but also orchestrates how individuals see themselves as gendered beings? Little/Chiron/Black's story is motivated by the need to be loved and accepted as he determines his identity over time.

Set in Liberty City, Florida at the height of the crack epidemic, *Moonlight* presents a story in three stages of the life of Chiron, and how he is shaped by what his society expects of him as an African American male growing up in the projects. This film shows how difficult it is for young black men to come of age in a context that continuously tries to shape their potential in society as well as their identity. This film not only illustrates how societal notions shape African American male sexuality and masculinity, but it is also "a film conscious of how failing institutions destroy the black community..." because it illustrates the constraints placed on black men as drug dealers, criminals or addicts, and where "a surrogate father can only do so much good if he's also making a living by selling crack to a mother..."⁴⁵ *Moonlight's* layers of complexity illustrate the constraints faced by any sexual minority, but also "conditioned by the background weather of race and class,"⁴⁶ making it a truly complex and nuanced film that accounts for the myriad of ways that African American men are imprisoned by their social context.

In elementary school, Little/Chiron/Black is known as Little. He is a scrawny, little individual, who is bullied by his classmates, does not have a father figure, and is left by his mother to fend for himself, who quickly in the film, becomes a regular crack user and is neglectful of her son. One day, he crosses paths with a local drug dealer named Juan, who takes him in and becomes a protective, father figure for Little when he needs to escape his mother. The two share the most beautiful scene in the film, when Little shows up at Juan's doorstep unexpectedly. Juan takes him to the beach and teaches Little how to swim. Many film critics described the scene like a baptism – Jenkins himself says there is a "spiritual transference"⁴⁷ between the pair as Juan gives Little some tenderness, love and care during the swimming lesson. A child who is neglected, bullied, taught to fend for himself and always have his guard up is able to let go into Juan's fatherly embrace as he teaches him to float: "Give me your head. Let your head rest in my hand. Relax. I got you. I promise. I'm not going to let you go.... Feel that right there? You're in the middle of the world, man."⁴⁸ Juan's undivided attention to Little not only provides his character with some love and support, but gives the audience a glimpse into a beautiful, tender moment of fatherhood that is all too often fleeting with families broken by mass incarceration, violence and economic disparity.

After the swimming lesson, Juan shares some words of wisdom, what film critic Bhargava describes as "teaching [Little/Chiron] how to survive and how to thrive."⁴⁹ This next scene of them talking on the beach opens with Little playing in surf, his guard is completely down, and Juan's voice over: "Let me tell you something man. There are black people everywhere. You remember that, Okay? No place you can go in the world ain't got no black people. We was the first ones on this planet."⁵⁰ This message is Juan's way of telling Little that he'll never be alone and to reclaim a sacred space as the first inhabitants of the planet. He continues with a story from his past in Cuba, when an older woman told him, "In the moonlight, black boys look blue. That's what I'm gon call you – blue."⁵¹ Little innocently asks if Juan's name is Blue, to which Juan responds with a chuckle and says: "At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you."⁵² Juan does not want Little to be defined by some stereotype or limited socioeconomic opportunities that have constrained Juan – a decent human being who is also an opportunist and earns his living as a drug dealer. Instead, using Bhargava's analysis

through his words, Juan is urging Chiron to remain soft and to not let the world destroy his

softness. In saying that black boys turn blue, he's asserting that the color black (which traditionally represents fixity and adherence to binaries) is malleable, he's saying that masculinity and tenderness (represented by the color blue) do not have to be mutually exclusive.⁵³

Juan's message is about self-determination and remaining true to one's self. Using the malleability of blueness as opposed to the rigidity Bhargava finds in blackness, Juan attempts to create a safe space for Little to choose a path that goes beyond the limited constructs of masculinity for an African American boy in Liberty City.

However, at seven or eight years old, Little is becoming aware of the realities of his social location. He notices his mother is even more distant, not necessarily working late, but behaving more erratically, spending time with her boyfriend in the bedroom while Little waits in the living room, leaving him to tend for himself and selling some of their possessions, like the television set. Her drug addiction was getting much worse. He is also becoming cognizant of why the other boys at school pick on him – not only because he feels he might be different, but primarily because his mother called him a faggot during one of her crack-induced rages. Angry, hurt and confused, Little walks to Juan and Teresa's house, asks them what a faggot is and if he is a faggot.⁵⁴ This traumatizing moment, coupled with all of the negative reinforcement Little experiences in his neighborhood, creates a quiet, elusive and frightened teenager who is regularly picked on by his peers. It is also during this powerful scene that Little confronts Juan about being a drug dealer who sells to his mother. Little seems to understand that his mother is even more damaging and hurtful when she is high on crack, and sees the connection between Juan, her addiction and his pain. These moments were pivotal in shaping the way Little saw manhood and himself in society. He learns from his mother to not let his sexuality manifest in ways denoted negatively with the word faggot and he learns from Juan how to be an acceptable man, albeit a drug dealer, within his social space.

During his teenage years, which Jenkins titles as Chiron, the scrawny Little has grown into a lanky and awkward Chiron, who is still tormented by his peers and even teachers. The heartbreaking segment illustrates how difficult it is for Chiron to navigate his school, neighborhood and home because of how he is ostracized, bullied and neglected by most everyone in his social circles. The exceptions are Teresa, Juan's girlfriend and Kevin. Chiron continues to use Teresa's house as a safe haven when he simply does not want to deal with his mother. Juan has already passed on, but Teresa still provides an encouraging space for Chiron, where she reminds him to keep his head held high. We never find out what happened to Juan, but like so many other African American men, he was buried by his loved ones.

Kevin, a friend we met when they were children who has been a consistent ally for Little/Chiron and has helped him in develop how to behave in socially appropriate ways. In the "Little" segment, Kevin advises Little to not appear soft, telling him to claim his space and defend himself against the other boys if he wants to not be picked on. Kevin also appears to be his connection into the social network when he is young. During the "Chiron" segment, Kevin talks to Chiron as a human being – he does not bully or torment him. Chiron can let his guard down when talking with Kevin. The audience also finds out that Chiron spends most of his nights away from home, either sleeping at Teresa's house or riding the public transit system all night. On one such occasion, Kevin picks Chiron up and they spend time together on the beach, in the moonlight, where Juan taught Chiron to swim. During a time of immense vulnerability, they share a sexual encounter where Chiron allows himself to be pleased by Kevin. At school the next day, Chiron's tormentor convinces Kevin to beat Chiron up during a game of Knockdown. Chiron takes the punches from the person with whom he has been most intimate – an act that renders fatal blows to his psyche. Angered by this turn of events, Chiron uses a chair to beat his tormentor the next day at school. Having been hurt by the one he trusted, he showed he was no soft through physical

assault, and ultimately, played into what society expects of young, black men – uncontrollable, untrustworthy, violent. Chiron is arrested and physically removed from campus.

During the final segment, entitled “Black,” we catch up with Chiron as a strong, stocky man who mirrors Juan’s style, from the car, to the gold teeth and the rag. Even though Juan has been dead for many years and, in some ways, caused the rift between Chiron and his mother, Juan still represented Black’s only role model. Once he was sent to live with his uncle in Atlanta and served time for assault, Black found his space within his social context emulating the only father figure he knew. He reinvents himself as Black in part because of Juan, but also in response to the “rage, selfhate and jail time” that Chiron experiences. Chiron becomes Black because he of how his social context shaped him throughout his life – denying his sexuality and emulating the only masculinity he knew. Black comes into contact with two people when we re-enter his life: his mother, who leaves him messages and hopes for a visit and Kevin, who is calling to reconnect with Black for the first time since the high school incident. Black and his mother share a moving scene, where both come to terms with how his mother’s choices negatively affected Black’s life, but he also catches up with Kevin during this trip to Florida. As they catch up, Kevin confronts Black’s persona and lifestyle choices. Black was clearly set on this path after the fateful beating and assault in high school, but as they continue to catch up, Black was also compensating for his fear of his own sexuality with the mask of hypermasculinity. At the end of the film, when Black is, once again, expressing immense vulnerability, he confesses to Kevin that he has not been touched by someone since the night they shared in high school. The film closes with Chiron melting into Kevin’s embrace and a glimpse of Little facing the ocean in the moonlight. Jenkins ends with a reminder of Chiron at his most authentic self – when he was feeling loved and supported, not being bullied or neglected. *Moonlight* poignantly illustrates how African Americans are also imprisoned by social constraints that affect their own sense of self.

An analysis of *Moonlight* was a fundamentally important way to conclude a paper about the *Birth of a Nations* (1915, 2016) because of the way that the constructions of African American masculinity function throughout these three films and how these constructions lead to the death of Jordan Davis. Starting with the notion of the animalistic, hypersexual, uncontrollable male in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to the way masculinity limits Parker’s telling of Nat Turner’s story in 2016 to how Michael Dunn perceived Jordan Davis as dangerous to the way that masculinity delimits Chiron’s options as an African American youth in 1990s Liberty City, these notions of masculinity have far reaching consequences both in media and culture.⁵⁵ They end up constraining African Americans beyond the realities of mass incarceration, brutality and indiscriminate murder to the more delicate nuances of identity-construction and sense of self. In facing a reality that is oppressive physically, psychologically and emotionally, it is fit to turn to Brown Douglas’s exploration of faith and freedom in *Stand Your Ground*.

Brown Douglas is firmly rooted in a paradoxical, yet foundational faith and the notion that God’s love for all God’s sacred creation is not bound by oppressive constructions. The former, black faith, is key to continued pursuit of freedom for all of God’s creation. For Brown Douglas, this black faith “was always connected to the historical conditions of black life.”⁵⁶ Despite the “absurd realities,” black faith was a space to experience and affirm God’s desire for their liberation that they read in the biblical text, but also knew in their very souls from their African heritage of the Great High God whose creation “has sacred value because it is intrinsically connected to God.”⁵⁷ As a result, black faith reminds the black faithful that the condition of slavery or all the modern day iterations that restrict freedom, from mass incarceration, brutality and violence to the inner workings of gender expectations, create “an obligation to fight for the freedom that God intended for them.”⁵⁸ Anything that restricts, marginalizes and oppresses individuals is an affront to God’s intention. As a result, the black faithful and their allies must “strive relentlessly to make this world a place of freedom, and hence safety for our children.”⁵⁹ Brown Douglas illustrates the

theological necessity to pursue freedom for all of God's creation, because they are all imbued with sacred value. Pursuing freedom in an age of mass incarceration, brutality and death must also involve engaging with the complex ways in which Chiron, his mother, Kevin, Juan, Teresa and other characters in *Moonlight* are imprisoned in more subtle ways.

1 This film is considered a masterpiece because of its social impact and its technical innovation, not because of its content.

2 Kevin Gannon, Khalil G. Muhammad, Jelani Cobb, 13th.

3 Khalil G. Muhammad, 13th.

4 Brown Douglas, Ch 2

5 Alexander 23

6 Alexander 23

7 Alexander 24

8 Alexander 25

9 Alexander 25

10 Alexander 26

11 Alexander 26

12 Alexander 26

13 Brown Douglas 68

14 Brown Douglas 68

15 Alexander 28

16 Alexander 28

17 Anderson 18

18 Alexander 28

19 Alexander 29

20 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 29.

21 Alexander, 19.

22 Alexander, 30.

23 Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of our Racial Divide*, 13.

24 Alexander 30

25 Alexander 30

26 Anderson, 16.

27 Anderson 17.

28 Anderson 17.

29 Alexander 31

30 Alexander 30

31 Alexander 30

32 Anderson 13

33 Michelle Alexander, Jelani Cobb, 13th. Michelle Alexander's extensive work in *The New Jim Crow* outlines how legal justifications emerged in addition to the extra-judicial work of the Ku Klux Klan in policing African Americans. Segregation and Jim Crow became legal ways to police mostly African Americans, while the thirteenth amendment allowed their freedom to be stripped if they violated the inane laws that primarily targeted African Americans. Carol Anderson's *White Rage* touches upon how any step forward in freedom or civil rights for African Americans was often met with a white backlash that exerted the power of whites upon African Americans.

34 Anderson 13.

35 Alexander 31, Cone look up – intro?

- 36 James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* 4.
37 James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 4
38 Cone, 5-6
39 Cone 7
40 Kevin Gannon, 13th.
41 Cone 5
42 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand your Ground*, chapters one and two.
43 For more on the Anglo-Saxon myth, see Brown Douglas 4-11 and 11 ff for how it influences the U.S. founding fathers.
44 Brown Douglas 28
45 Brown Douglas 30
46 Brown Douglas 39
47 Brown Douglas 57
48 Brown Douglas 68
49 Brown Douglas 68
50 Brown Douglas 69
51 Brown Douglas 50
52 A.O. Scott, "In Nate Parker's 'The Birth of a Nation,' Must-See and Won't-see Collide," *The New York Times*, 10.6.2016 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/movies/the-birth-of-a-nation-review-nateparker.html>.)
53 Nate Parker, *The Birth of a Nation*, 2016.
54 Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, 28
55 Callahan 28
56 Callahan 28
57 Callahan 28
58 Leslie M. Alexander, "'The Birth of a Nation is an Epic Fail,'" *The Nation*, 10.6.2016, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-birth-of-a-nation-is-an-epic-fail>).
59 Leslie M. Alexander, "'The Birth of a Nation is an Epic Fail,'" *The Nation*, 10.6.2016, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-birth-of-a-nation-is-an-epic-fail>).
60 Leslie M. Alexander, "'The Birth of a Nation is an Epic Fail,'" *The Nation*, 10.6.2016, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-birth-of-a-nation-is-an-epic-fail>).
61 Salamishah Tillet, "How 'The Birth of a Nation' Silences Black Women," *The New York Times*, 10.12.2016 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/movies/how-the-birth-of-a-nation-silences-black-women.html>.)
62 Tillet.
63 Richard Brody, "The Cinematic Merits and Flaws of Nate Parker's 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *The New Yorker*, 10.9.2016, (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-cinematic-merits-and-flaws-of-nate-parkers-the-birth-of-a-nation>).
64 Leslie M. Alexander, "'The Birth of a Nation is an Epic Fail,'" *The Nation*, 10.6.2016, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-birth-of-a-nation-is-an-epic-fail>).
65 Leslie M. Alexander, "'The Birth of a Nation is an Epic Fail,'" *The Nation*, 10.6.2016, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-birth-of-a-nation-is-an-epic-fail>).
66 Brian Josephs, "Moonlight is a Stunning Deconstruction of Black Masculinity," *Spin.com*, 10.21.16, (<http://www.spin.com/featured/barry-jenkins-moonlight-review/>).
67 Peter Bradshaw, "Moonlight Review: A Visually Ravishing Portrait of Masculinity," *The Guardian*, 2.16.17, (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/16/moonlight-review-masculinity-naomie-harris>).
68 Mekado Murphy, "Barry Jenkins Narrates a Scene from 'Moonlight,'" *The New York Times*, 11.24.2016, (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/24/movies/barry-jenkins-narrates-a-scene-from-moonlight.html?_r=0).

69 Mahershala Ali, Moonlight.

70 Ananya Bhargava, "'Moonlight' is a Necessary Discourse on Black Masculinity and Queerness," Fem Magazine, 3.13.17, (<https://femmagazine.com/moonlight-is-a-necessary-discourse-on-black-masculinity-andqueerness/>).

71 Mahershala Ali, Moonlight.

72 Mahershala Ali, Moonlight.

73 Mahershala Ali, Moonlight.

74 Ananya Bhargava, "'Moonlight' is a Necessary Discourse on Black Masculinity and Queerness," Fem Magazine, 3.13.17, (<https://femmagazine.com/moonlight-is-a-necessary-discourse-on-black-masculinity-andqueerness/>).

75 Teresa is Juan's girlfriend.

76 With more time, I would explore downlow culture in African American men, and then discuss sexuality generally in African American culture and religion because these elements should be explored given my analysis of these films.

77 Brown Douglas 142

78 Brown Douglas 150

79 Brown Douglas 152

80 Brown Douglas 170

* Auth Wendy M. Arce is the Associate Dean of Students at The Graduate Theological Union.

© 2018 Author and Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.