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***Race and Racism in the Historical Imagination:
Slavery and Civil Rights in Popular Culture****

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ABSTRACT

Because Hollywood films often lack black representation, films on slavery and civil rights often fail to recognize the roles that black Americans have played in their own emancipation from slavery and in the civil rights movement. Our contention is that historically inaccurate films perpetuate inaccurate understandings of Black history and thus inform contemporary race relations. We selected a more and a less accurate film about slavery and about the civil rights movement, discussing these four films in terms of their historical context.

We also conducted an experiment. After watching one of the four movies, or after viewing no movie, participants answered questions about their perceptions of slavery or the civil rights movement. Our hypotheses were that films with inaccurate depictions of race would (1) encourage viewers to believe that white Americans were the primary actors in emancipation and civil rights, (2) promote the idea that white America has progressed beyond problems of racism, and (3) reinforce the postracial colorblind complex that views racism as a black American problem. Less-accurate movies resulted in less-accurate knowledge about these eras. More-accurate movies left viewers with a greater perception of black empowerment.

KEY WORDS White Savior Complex; Colorblind Racism; Slavery; Civil Rights

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This project revolves around the question *Does mass media change perceptions of race and civil rights in America?* Racial theorists have come to recognize a disturbing trend in contemporary racial thought: a belief among Americans that racism is a thing of the past and that the United States has evolved into a postracial society, thus meaning that institutional racism can be ignored and dismissed as minorities' inability to compete successfully with white America because of innate cultural deficiencies. This "colorblind racism" allows Americans to dismiss racism in the past, as well as black America's present relationship with white supremacy.

This study considers how the issue of colorblind racism is perpetuated in film depictions of race and how these films allow Americans to see race and racism as historical problems that no longer affect the United States. This paradigm supports research on colorblind racism and a so-called meritocracy in which all people are afforded equal opportunities in society and all are rewarded equally for their hard work. Major studies have proven that postracial thinking promotes the idea of the colorblind meritocracy, promotes racism, and supports white privilege by negating historic and contemporary racial inequality.

Our contention is that historically inaccurate films perpetuate inaccurate understandings of black history and thus inform contemporary race relations. Our hypotheses are that films with inaccurate depictions of race (1) encourage viewers to believe that white Americans were the primary actors in emancipation and civil rights, (2) promote the idea that white America has progressed beyond problems of racism, and (3) reinforce the postracial colorblind complex that views racism as a black American problem.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 97 people participated in this study, including 31 men and 52 women. The average age was 19.88 years ($SD = 3.10$). Around 75 percent of the sample was Caucasian, 12 percent African American, and 12 percent of Asian or Hispanic descent.

Design

We conducted a between-subjects experiment. The independent variable was movie condition, including historically more-accurate movies, which included *Twelve Years a Slave* ($N = 20$) and *Selma* ($N = 21$); less-accurate movies, including *Amistad* ($N = 24$) and *Mississippi Burning* ($N = 17$); and a no-movie control condition ($N = 15$). We asked participants open-ended questions about either the civil rights era or slavery, then coded their answers for historical accuracy, perceptions of Black empowerment, and perceptions of the white-savior paradigm. (The white-savior paradigm describes the propensity of Hollywood to repeatedly exaggerate the role of white Americans and underestimate the role of black Americans in struggles of race and civil rights.)

Measures

In the postmovie survey, we asked open-ended questions about the role of white people in preventing blacks from obtaining their freedoms or civil rights. We also asked questions about the role of black people in obtaining their freedoms or civil rights. In addition, we asked questions about the role of religion during these eras, and about the use of violence as justification to obtain freedoms/rights. Lastly, we asked how these events influenced race relations today. Those who watched *Amistad* or *Twelve Years a Slave* answered questions about slavery, and participants who watch *Mississippi Burning* or *Selma* answered questions about civil rights. Participants in the no-movie control condition were randomly assigned to either the slavery or civil rights questions. Participants then answered a subset of nine questions from the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville et al. 2000).

Procedure

This project was approved by our institutional review board. All three researchers first watched and evaluated the movies in terms of accuracy and time given for dialogue for white and black characters. Participants were recruited through fliers around campus, word of mouth, and an online recruiting system. Participants were age 18 or older. Those who watched a movie received either (1) \$15 or (2) \$5 and research credit that counted toward extra credit or course requirements. Participants in the no-movie condition received \$5. Upon arrival, each participant signed an informed-consent document and watched the movie that their group was assigned to. Groups contained between three and seven people. After the movie was over, participants were administered the survey.

Coding

Survey responses were given unique identification numbers, and the movie that they were associated with was kept separate. All three researchers blind-coded responses to six open-ended questions for (1) historical accuracy, (2) acknowledgement of black empowerment, and (3) the white-savior paradigm, using a scale from 0 (no comments) to 3. We first practiced on a subset of randomly selected responses not used in the final analyses, discussing conflicting answers. We then coded all essays individually. In cases of coder disagreement, we used the modal response.

Stimulus Movies: Slavery

Choosing an historically accurate film on slavery in the United States presented a challenge. Every movie from the last generation or so that was set in the antebellum period shares a similar story arc: Whatever the story, however heroic or persevering the black characters are, a messianic white character eventually comes along, shows that not all white people are bad, and somehow rescues the black characters. A subplot often involves a white father-type figure teaching a black character some life-changing or crucial skill. Less

noticed are some white characterizations that relate to the African American experience and the loss of black agency in film for generations. This trope is so ubiquitous, it was impossible to find a Hollywood film set in the antebellum period in which the final hero of the movie—the person who saved the day—was not a white person—no matter how big or small the role. The white-savior complex in film created another trope of blacks in film: those sitting around and waiting for help, guidance, or to be somehow fixed. This “waiting room” black character may be driven by noble emotions, but it is the white man who ultimately shows the black character the way to freedom.

The film *Amistad* is representative of the white-savior paradigm. The movie is about Joseph Cinque, a man from Sierra Leone who in 1839 was kidnapped by Portuguese slave traders. He and about five hundred men, women, and children traversed the treacherous Middle Passage on the ship *Tecora* to the waters off the coast of Cuba. The British abolished the slave trade; thus, the captain of *Tecora* waited until nightfall to transport his kidnapped human cargo to land, where they waited to be sold at market in Cuba, where the domestic slave trade was alive and well. At market, Cinque, along with 53 other people, was bought by two Spanish men, Ruiz and Montes. The Spanish men loaded their human cargo onto their ship, the *Amistad*, and headed to Puerto Principe (Horne 2007; Jones 1987).

The journey to Puerto Principe did not go as planned, however. In the dark bowels of the ship’s hull, Cinque freed himself. He then freed the other men, and together, they took over the *Amistad*, killing all the crew members except for Montes and Ruiz, who promised to take them back to West Africa. Ruiz and Montes had no intention of going back to Africa, though, and secretly steered the ship toward Long Island, where they were spotted by American military personnel who commandeered the ship and took the ship to Connecticut, a slave state. The Africans were taken to jail, and thus began a complicated legal fight between several parties. Montes and Ruiz claimed that they were the rightful owners of the Africans because they had purchased them in Cuba, but the Africans themselves, aided by American abolitionists, claimed that they should be free because they had been kidnapped from their homes and illegally sold in Cuba. What followed was a two-year legal battle that went from the lower courts in Connecticut all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. Cinque and the others won their freedom because they were illegally brought from Africa to Cuba and then sold. According to treaties from 1817 and 1819, they were to be released and sent home (Jones 1987:50-51).

The 1997 Stephen Spielberg film *Amistad* gets several major points of Cinque’s travails right, but in the process does great harm to history and does a disservice to viewers who believe they are watching an historically accurate film. Instead of focusing on the heroic acts of the rebellion, Spielberg et al. made a movie about white saviors and their personal and emotional journeys to self-awareness. In the end, the film dehumanizes black characters and aggrandizes white characters and made abolitionists out to be capricious and naïve fundamentalists who will do anything to aid their ideological cause.

The black characters are generally silenced throughout the movie. They do speak, but in the West African language of Mende. There are some subtitles in the movie, but often, there are none. Indeed, Cinque is the only one of the group of Africans who has a name; the rest of the group is a mass of victims either waiting to be freed or expressing

anger in Mende through song or yelling. Their time in the United States is seen to civilize Cinque and the other Africans, turning them to noble savages. Cinque and the Africans yell a lot and are inappropriately dressed at first, but over the course of the film, they learn when to sit and to be quiet, and they are dressed in American clothes. Perhaps the most compelling civilizing moment is when one African man is converted to Christianity after he studies a bible and correctly interprets Jesus as a savior figure.

A second major disservice to viewers and to the telling of history is the portrayal of abolitionists. Though in reality they were largely responsible for winning the freedom for those aboard the *Amistad*, abolitionists are portrayed in the film as untrustworthy idealists who will do anything to further their cause. At one point in the film, the famous abolitionist Lewis Tappan suggests that the people of the *Amistad* be allowed to be martyrs for the cause. Whether Tappan ever said this is debatable, but the scene serves the purpose of making the abolitionists seem capricious. The only black abolitionist in the film, played by Morgan Freeman, is a fictional character. It is a questionable decision of the filmmakers to create a black abolitionist rather than use a real black abolitionist from history. This choice serves as another silencing of black people.

Finally, *Amistad* is a film that relies on the white-savior paradigm couched in white men's journeys to self-discovery and moral growth. In the film, abolitionists who want to work on behalf of the Africans reluctantly hire Roger Baldwin, portrayed in the movie as a young, low-level lawyer. Baldwin was a forty-something abolitionist at the time of the *Amistad* trial. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the movie, Baldwin sees the Africans only as property and asserts that this is a simple case of property. At one point when he wants one of the African men to move, he grabs and pulls the chains around the African man's neck until the man complies. As he works to find out Cinque's story and argue the case, however, Baldwin finds that he has abolitionist sentiments and he sees at least Cinque as a true human being. In a scene that would have never happened in reality because Cinque was not in the Supreme Court at the time of the decision, Baldwin shakes Cinque's hand as an equal.

A second white savior who experiences moral growth due to his involvement in the case is none other than John Quincy Adams. He is initially reluctant to aid the people of the *Amistad* but later successfully argues for their freedom in front of the Supreme Court. In this way, the Africans of the *Amistad* are foils for self-discovery for the important white men.

The film *Amistad* gets a lot of history wrong. It falsely insinuates that the case was a step in the direction toward civil war and the freeing of enslaved people in the United States. In fact, the several references to civil war, including an actual battle scene, are anachronistic, as no politician in 1839 would have been talking about a war more than twenty years in the future. Indeed, the case was not even about the morality of slavery. The *Amistad* case revolved around the Atlantic slave trade and had nothing to do with slavery in the United States. The United States had banned the Atlantic slave trade in 1808, which did not slow down slavery, as the number of enslaved people more than doubled between the ban on the transatlantic trade and the start of the Civil War. In the film, because of John Quincy Adams's inspiring closing remarks, the courts see the light and admit the humanity of the people of the *Amistad*; however, in reality, the majority of

Amistad justices were still on the Court in 1857 when it ruled in the Dred Scott case, a decision that asserted that blacks could never be citizens and had no rights that a white man was bound to respect (Foner 1998).

Though not quite as invested in the white-savior paradigm as *Amistad* is, the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* is plagued by many of the same limitations as *Amistad*. To its credit, the film, directed by Steve McQueen, does not shy away from the brutality of the South's curious institution, and it proceeds very closely to the original narrative (Dargis 2013). The film is based on the 1853 book by the same name, which was written by Solomon Northrup and edited by David Wilson. In the narrative, Northrup chronicles how he, a free man, was kidnapped in 1841, taken south, and brutally enslaved for 12 years.

Northrup was born free in Saratoga, New York, and made his livelihood as a carpenter and violinist. While his wife was away working for another family, two circus agents offered Northrup a lucrative engagement playing his violin. He traveled with the agents to Washington, DC, and woke one day to find that he had been drugged and was in shackles in a slave pen. Northrup protested, attesting that he was a free man, but slavers gave him a vicious beating and told him never to mention this again. They said that he should relinquish hope of ever being free again, and they threatened further beatings if he did not comply. In the end, Northrup was sent to New Orleans, into slavery, via boat.

In the film, while Northrup is on the vessel, a slave trader attempts to rape an enslaved woman. Another enslaved man comes to her defense, only to be murdered by the slaver. Although this scene was not in Northrup's original narrative, it serves an important historical fact: enslaved women were at risk of both physical and sexual abuse. Furthermore, black men were nearly helpless to do anything about the assaults. This reality devastated families and communities, both physically and psychologically, as people had no idea when violence was imminent, and they could do anything about such violence without fear of the ultimate punishment, death.

Northrup endured and witnessed incredible cruelty in the 12 years he was enslaved. He moved to several plantations while in the South, but his most notorious owner was a man named Edwin Epps. Northrup lived on Epps's plantation for about 10 years. During this time, Epps assigned Northrup to different jobs, including cotton picker. Northrup wrote both about the horrendous treatment and the perseverance of body and spirit of himself and other enslaved people on the plantation. Weigh-in times, for example, were exceptionally brutal. If an enslaved person picked less than the plantation quota or less than their personal load on the previous day, the person would be beaten mercilessly. Northrup's account goes into detail about the young enslaved woman Patsey to illustrate the brutality of cotton plantation life, describing Patsey as a "joyous creature, a laughing lighthearted girl" (Northrup [1853] 2016). Patsey routinely held the record for picking the heaviest load of cotton each day. On the rare occasion that she did not meet the cotton-picking standards, Epps beat Patsey. In fact, Patsey sustained multiple beatings for arbitrary reasons, as well as regular sexual assault.

Again, *12 Years a Slave* is unflinching in its portrayal of violence, including sexual violence. This is an important part of history and a formative piece of the African

American experience. Patsey endures the back-breaking labor forced upon her, as well as beatings, psychological terror, and rape by her master. Other films and television shows have explored these topics, but not to the extent seen in *12 Years*. This film, like Northrup's narrative, intimately links the ruthlessness of the institution of slavery with the sexual abuse that so many women endured at the hands of their masters.

Violence was not a habit of only the man of the house, however. Northrup wrote about the sadism of Epps's wife, who was enraged by Epps's sexual attraction to Patsey. In the film, Mistress Epps treats Patsey just as cruelly as an overseer on the plantation would. She beats Patsey, scratches her face, hits her with a glass object, and encourages her husband to whip Patsey when her only offense was to find soap for bathing. This treatment from the plantation mistress diverges greatly from the ubiquitous trope of the Southern lady who either remains a background character or garners sympathy from the audience as she tries to lighten the burden on the enslaved people on the plantation. (Even the 2012 film *Django Unchained*, which emphasizes slave masters' cruelty, shows the lady of the plantation as gentle and as following her brother's wishes.)

Northrup endured psychological trauma, as well. Epps was frequently inebriated and made sport of whipping and beating the enslaved people on his plantation. On the occasion that Patsey left the plantation to find a bar of soap, Epps became enraged that he could not find her. When Patsey returned to the plantation, Epps was furious and was ready to beat her. He demanded that Northrup take over and lash Patsey, who was Northrup's friend. After forcing Northrup to brutally whip Patsey, Epps took the whip himself. Northrup wrote that he watched as Epps flayed Patsey's body over and over again. This horrific event left Patsey within inches of her life and psychologically scarred Northrup for the rest of his.

After hiding his identity for nearly 10 years on the Epps plantation, Northrup confided in a white Canadian man named Samuel Bass whom Epps had hired to do some carpentry. Bass secretly sent letters to Northrup's wife and friends in Saratoga, New York. Eventually, the letters found Henry Northrup, the white lawyer whose family had owned and manumitted Solomon Northrup's family. New York state gave financial help to Henry Northrup to travel to Louisiana, and Henry went through the many steps necessary to find Solomon, force Epps to release him, and return Solomon home to Saratoga.

The film *12 Years a Slave* was more historically accurate than *Amistad*, proceeding quite closely to the narrative by Solomon Northrup, with few Hollywood embellishments. Despite these accomplishments, it also sticks to the white-savior paradigm. The story ends, historically, with a white Canadian deciding to help Northrup connect to his white friends in New York, who force Northrup's sadistic master to release him from bondage. The perpetuation of the white savior removes agency from a black man who is so very persevering throughout the film. Because the film is primarily historically accurate, a question then arises: Why was a slave narrative with a white savior given screen time, when so many other slave narratives exist that show more black agency? The answer is that white saviorhood and the taking away of black agency sell (Vera and Gordon 2003). This setup is so ingrained in American culture that even when choosing a true slave narrative, movie makers decided on one with a white savior. For generations, African Americans

have found their voices to be muzzled and silenced because of the ubiquitous and profit-making story of the white savior. When will the story of Frederick Douglass get the Hollywood treatment? Douglass, with the help of free blacks, escaped slavery in Maryland, escaped to New York, remained a freeman, and became a vocal abolitionist (Douglass 1881). This is a story of black perseverance, determination, intellect, and ingenuity that Hollywood is perhaps still not ready to acknowledge.

Stimulus Movies: Civil Rights

Civil rights historian William Chafe has described the film *Mississippi Burning* as an “atrocious distortion of history” that makes the incidents during Freedom Summer (1964) appear to be a fight between “local white racists” and the “heroic FBI agents” who were sent to Mississippi to rescue the “submissive, illiterate, quaking black people,” who were depicted as “unable and unwilling to stand up for themselves. The film is set during Freedom Summer, one of the most pivotal civil rights episodes in American history, yet unless you are familiar with that history, you would never know it from watching the movie (Chafe 1996).

Freedom Summer’s goal was to get thousands of activists to come to Mississippi and volunteer their summer to registering black Mississippi voters and to promoting voter education. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) trained volunteers and helped organize the summer campaign. The SNCC expected violence and urged the Department of Justice and Lyndon Johnson to provide protection for the Freedom Summer volunteers. The committee received no response. At 3:00 a.m. on 20 June 1964, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney, both trained Congress of Racial Equality fieldworkers, along with Andrew Goodman and four other volunteers, drove from the SNCC training site in Ohio for Meridian, Mississippi. Chaney, who had long worked in Neshoba County, encouraging voter registration, along with Michael Schwerner, who had been in Mississippi preparing for Freedom Summer since January, had recruited Andrew Goodman in Ohio. The three men left Meridian after dropping off the other volunteers, then went to investigate a church bombing in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The three men were never seen alive again. Their bodies were not discovered for six weeks.

The film *Mississippi Burning* depicts law-enforcement efforts to locate the men during those six weeks, and though the film is obviously based on the events of that summer, Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman are never once referred to by name. The massive voting-rights efforts initiated by the SNCC and the Council of Federated Organization (COFO) are neither part of the narrative nor seen as a motivation for the brutal murder of the three men. The men’s civil rights credentials alone are meant to be an explanation for the reaction by the local KKK and law enforcement. There is also no mention in the film of the efforts on the part of Mississippi blacks to vote in the face of racist terrorism.

The heroes of the movie are two white agents of the FBI, which was no friend to the civil rights movement and whose leadership under J. Edgar Hoover did all it could to thwart the efforts of civil rights leaders. Kenneth O’Reilly has argued that the progress made in the 1960s toward civil rights was done without the cooperation of the FBI. To

make two white FBI agents the hero of a film about civil rights in the heart of 1964 Mississippi is an egregious example of offensive misrepresentation and demonstrates the white-savior paradigm used in films of black history (O'Reilly 1988).

The film's focus is entirely on the heroic FBI agents Allan Ward, who displays liberal racial egalitarianism and is played by Willem Dafoe, and Rupert Anderson, who is played by Gene Hackman and uses Southern charm, quick wit, and occasional violence to get the locals to let down their guard. Dafoe's character, Ward, is obnoxiously altruistic, having been in the heat of the civil rights movement, helping James Meredith integrate the University of Mississippi, for which he sustained a bullet wound. Ward makes waves in the little Mississippi town immediately when he "integrates" the "colored section" of the local diner; this leads to the one black man he talks to being badly beaten and dumped in the middle of town. Though Ward and Anderson refer to the work of the missing "boys," and the efforts at voter registration and the agents are regularly looking at images from King's 1963 Birmingham campaign, lynchings, and the KKK, there is not a single civil rights activist, let alone a black person, with any meaningful role in the film. Anderson asks, "Don't they know they could end up dead?" Of course they did know, because it was part of their training, but as the sympathetic Ward claims, "some things are worth dying for."

The local population unleashes its own form of justice on the black population, presumably in retaliation for the FBI investigation. It was not just locals feeling the heat that summer, however; the hundreds of trained civil rights activists and volunteers, and the violence they confronted, are never mentioned. The film gets distracted from its focus on the FBI investigation and becomes about the white FBI trying its best to protect local blacks from the KKK in the face of Southern intransigence and desperate attempts of the white working class to preserve white supremacy with terrorism. The participation of local law enforcement in KKK activity makes it appear more essential that the FBI swoop in. The only anger on the part of the black community in the film is at the funeral of James Chaney, who is not allowed to be buried with Goodman and Schwerner as the men's families requested, because gravesites were segregated—but you would not know it is Chaney's funeral, as his name is never mentioned in the film.

What happened to the three men—often referred to in the film as boys—was not the focus of the film, but what did happen to them turned out to be perhaps more dramatic than was depicted. On 23 June, the car they were driving was discovered near Bogue Chitto Creek. The interior of the car was completely burned out. The FBI then began trying to locate the bodies, assuming the men were dead, while 200 sailors dredged the nearby swamps, looking for bodies.

What the film fails to show is the desperate efforts on the part of civil rights workers, including Stokely Carmichael, Charlie Cobb, James Farmer, and John Lewis, to locate the missing men. When Carmichael, Cobb, Farmer, and Lewis volunteered their services to local law enforcement, they were denied, allegedly for their own safety. Undeterred, however, they searched in the dark of the night without permission, until the KKK got wind of what they were doing.

There is no mention whatsoever in the film of the continued efforts of Freedom Summer volunteers to work on the project after hearing of the disappearance and likely

murder of their colleagues, or of the harassment and violence meted out through the summer. Just in the period after the burnt-out car was located, COFO gathered reports of shots fired at a black minister's home and at a black cafe, the firebombing of a meeting hall, and reporters being chased out of Ruleville by Molotov cocktails (Watson 2010).

The FBI eventually obtained a confession from James Johnson, one of the murderers. He told the FBI that Goodman had been pulled out of the car after Schwerner but had been shot first in the chest. Schwerner had also been shot in the chest. Chaney had been the last to be pulled from the car, and he had been shot in the back, stomach, and head.

Johnson's confession led the FBI to the bodies on 4 August 1964 at an earthen dam on the property of Olen Burrage that was known as the Old Jolly Farm. Goodman's body was clutching soil from the dam, which suggests he was still alive when he and the others were buried (Barnette 1964:1-9; King 1988; "Report" 1964:419).

Film reviews in 1988 were quick to point out the problems in the film regarding the misrepresentation of the civil rights movement. The author of one *New York Times* editorial claimed that although artistic license is to be expected in historical films, there are moral issues at play when exploring issues as important as civil rights. More importantly, the author took issue with the failure of the movie to acknowledge Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, claiming that they were worse than forgotten and were instead "defamed" ("Civil Rights, Burned" 1988).

The movie did show some level of historical accuracy regarding who found the car, the role of local law enforcement in the murder, and the informants who helped the FBI locate the murderers, but the desires of white moviegoers to be forgiven for the racist sins of the past and to congratulate themselves for racial progress today trumps the agency and activity of black Americans who sacrificed their time, energy, and sometimes lives for the movement. *Mississippi Burning* is not just historically inaccurate; it is a miscarriage of the entire civil rights movement.

Although *Mississippi Burning* dominated civil rights films for years because of its box-office successes, the 2014 release of *Selma* finally introduced mainstream audiences to an authentic representation of black people in the civil rights movement. Critics of the film, however, immediately distracted from its emancipatory potential to cry foul about the inaccurate representation of Lyndon Johnson as an opponent of black voting rights. Some have claimed that the filmmaker, Ava Duvernay, took creative license but in so doing misrepresented some major historical moments. The film portrays King and Johnson as "antagonists" when they were "cautious and cordial allies." Julian Zelizer fears that for Americans who generally get their history from the movies, the representation of Johnson is a "missed opportunity" to understand the complexity of Johnson and the "contentious and transformative period in American history" (Zelizer 2015).

To be fair to Johnson, the evidence suggests that he was firmly behind expanding voting rights to Southern blacks well before the events in Selma. Focus on the misleading characterization of Johnson has distracted from a more important conversation about the film, however. The film represents the first time a major motion picture depicted the American civil rights movement with black protagonists in the lead roles. Historian

Jonathan Scott Holloway takes issue with critics whose sole focus has been on the representation of Lyndon Johnson, arguing that what “raised the hackles” of these critics was the “African American experience and ... African American accomplishment” that has been routinely “diminished, ignored and erased.” Holloway is convinced that much of the rancor against Johnson’s representation is because those complaining are hysterical at watching “*their* history disappearing” and that looking specifically at the black past has become “fundamentally destabilizing” to the white historical narrative (Holloway 2015).

Perhaps a more damning reflection of the discomfort around facing black history for white folks is that although *Mississippi Burning* won four Oscar awards, including Best Picture, and was nominated for three other awards, *Selma* was nominated for only two and won only one, for Best Achievement in Music for Motion Pictures, Original Song. One academy voter was offended when the film’s cast wore “I can’t breathe” T-shirts, referring to Eric Garner’s strangulation death at the hands of police. As David Oyelowo, the actor who played Martin Luther King Jr. in the film, pointed out, “We, as black people, have been celebrated more for when we are subservient, when we are not being leaders or kings or being at the center of our own narrative.” White America remains uncomfortable with both black civil rights history and present (Anderson 2016).

Historian Emilye Crosby has criticized *Selma* for its top-down perspective ignoring the work of locals who had been organizing for voter registration under the aegis of the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) since its founding in the 1930s. It was the work of SNCC and local activists such as Amelia Boynton that prepared the community and the activists for the later campaign. As in many other civil rights actions, locals put their bodies on the line. Under Sheriff Jim Clark and the watchful eye of the local White Citizen’s Council, local blacks faced seemingly insurmountable barriers to voting. They often faced violence for their efforts long before the infamous events on Bloody Sunday. The FBI offered no help despite the violence, and later, the agency orchestrated a smear campaign against the white activist Viola Liuzzo, who was killed as she traveled back from Montgomery to Selma after the march. Despite abuses and clear violations of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the Justice Department did not intervene (Crosby 2015; Holsaert et al. 2010; Zinn 2014).

The Selma-to-Montgomery march was conceived after Jimmy Lee Jackson, a local activist, was murdered by police during a civil rights march in nearby Marion, Alabama. As the film depicts, at the first march attempt, marchers were set on by police with tear gas and bully clubs. That day is known as Bloody Sunday. SNCC as an organization did not officially participate in the march, but it also did not restrict its members from participation. As James Foreman claimed, the group opposed the march because of threats of police brutality, limited resources, and difficulty working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. SNCC activists such as John Lewis and Robert Mants were present at Bloody Sunday, and hundreds more came to support the second attempt at the march (Garrow 2015).

There are, of course, basic historical inaccuracies. For example, King did not decide to go to Selma after frustration with Johnson’s refusals to push federal legislation; he was invited there by the DCVL. King wanted to find a community to highlight the barriers to black voting, and Selma, with its violent racist sheriff and its

decades-long effort to organize, fit the bill. Though James Bevel, played by Common, says briefly, “A lot of groundwork has already been made by the people here,” these are not the folks who get credit, and not much credit is given to the work SNCC had been doing. As is usually the case, women who did much of the groundwork get virtually no credit. Amelia Boynton (played by Lorraine Touissant), the Selma schoolteacher who played a leading role in the local movement working with SNCC, plays a background role in the film. Diane Nash, played by Tessa Thompson, is present and has a minimal speaking role that downplays her important work as an organizer and leader in Selma and beyond (Garrow 2015).

Despite the film’s inconsistencies and historical inaccuracies, it is an important historical narrative. While *Mississippi Burning* fails despicably to represent a fair, let alone accurate, portrayal of the civil rights movement, *Selma*, with its black-led cast, gives names to some of the most important and influential civil rights activists of the time. In many ways, *Selma* is a biopic of Martin Luther King Jr., arguably the most well-known and beloved civil rights hero, but James Farmer, John Lewis, and Diane Nash, among others, were influential and important leaders in their own right. It is significant that the movie introduces them, perhaps for the first time, to American audiences. This movie is an important part of black history and does a good job at introducing audiences to this history. More importantly, it is American history, and it is significant that it is available to a wider audience.

RESULTS

We were first interested in whether watching more-accurate movies (in this case *Selma* and *12 Years a Slave*) resulted in more-accurate knowledge about the era involved. To test this, we tallied the number of historically accurate responses across the six questions regarding historical events and conducted a one-way ANOVA to compare responses between the three movie conditions (more accurate, less accurate, no-movie control). We found a significant effect of movie type on number of historically accurate responses: $F(2, 74) = 5.58, p = .006, \eta^2 = .13$. Although the effect size was small, we successfully established that historically more- accurate movies resulted in significantly more-accurate responses ($M = 7.62, SD = 2.23$) than either the less-accurate movies ($M = 5.82, SD = 2.51$) or the no-movie control ($M = 5.42, SD = 3.45$).

Qualitatively, *Amistad* and *Mississippi Burning* did indeed promote less-accurate ideas of the roles of whites and blacks in these eras, by eliminating the voices of black characters. An analysis of screen time given to dialogue for white vs. black characters supported this hypothesis. Of 117 minutes of dialogue in *Amistad*, black actors spoke approximately 26 percent of the time, whereas white characters spoke 74 percent of the time. In contrast, *12 Years a Slave* gave 65 percent of the 118 minutes of talk time to black characters, and 34 percent to white characters. Similarly, *Mississippi Burning* gave only around 6 percent of dialogue to black characters, whereas *Selma* gave more than 67 percent of dialogue to black characters. The discrepancy in dialogue shows that in some historical depictions, black voices are indeed silenced, which may reinforce perceptions of the white-savior paradigm.

We thought that watching more-accurate movies would result in greater viewer recognition of the roles that black people played in obtaining their own freedoms and rights. Two specific questions asked about this topic. We compiled the total number of related comments across the two questions and used a one-way ANOVA to compare responses between the three movie conditions. Again, we found a significant effect of movie type on the number of comments about black empowerment: $F(2, 76) = 6.75, p = .002, \eta^2 = .15$. Historically more-accurate movies resulted in significantly more responses about black empowerment ($M = 2.60, SD = 1.67$) than did less-accurate movies ($M = 1.21, SD = .90$). The control condition fell somewhere in the middle ($M = 2.23, SD = 2.17$). Similarly, we examined whether viewing less-accurate movies led to more spontaneous responses reflecting the white-savior paradigm. We compiled spontaneous responses across the six open-ended questions regarding historical events but found no differences in responses related to the white-savior paradigm across movie types: $F(2, 74) = 1.81, p = .17, \eta^2 = .05$.

We next investigated whether less-accurate movies promoted the idea that white America has progressed beyond problems of racism. We did so by comparing scores on the CoBRAS between the movie types. Using a one-way ANOVA, we found no significant differences in color-blind racism across movie types: $F(2, 80) = .68, p = .51, \eta^2 = .016$.

Finally, we believed that people who viewed less-accurate movies about race would be more likely to view racism as a black American problem. One question asked how participants thought America's history affected current race relations in the United States. Participants were coded as perceiving a negative impact leading to current prejudices, no impact, or a negative effect perceived by black Americans only. Most participants who answered this question ($N = 84$) responded that there were still effects of historical events that negatively affected treatment of black Americans ($N = 66$), and 18 participants responded in such a way that made it seem as if any negative effects were only perceived by black Americans. We compared responses across the three movie conditions using a chi-square test of independence but found that movie type was not related to responses about racism: $\chi^2(2) = .89, p = .642$.

DISCUSSION

Our perceptions of history are altered by the media we use. In this study, we found that older movies such as *Amistad* and *Mississippi Burning* (often shown in history classes or otherwise seen as historically accurate) resulted in less-accurate understanding of historical events. When inaccurate representations of history are depicted, this affects more than our understanding of those historical events. Media use contributes to people's understandings of their social world. Research conducted on the impact of media use on societal issues demonstrates that the mass media does influence perceptions of gender roles (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009) and racial stereotypes (Ford 1997). There is evidence that media use also contributes to our understanding of history, often wrongly. Many times, the only exposure to an historical topic that people may have is through film. On the one hand, this can have positive effects: "Engagement with film can expand

discussion and may support the development of historical empathy” (Marcus 2005:65). On the other hand, Hollywood films, although engaging and entertaining, can and do frame narratives from modern perspectives, as well as sacrifice accuracy for entertainment. In one study, researchers showed clips of films with historical themes. When clips mirrored history textbook material, participants correctly recalled more information. In contrast, when clips did not accurately reflect historical texts, participants often recalled the false information, even when warned of possible inaccuracies in the movies (Butler et al. 2009). We replicated these findings in our study.

More specifically, we found that more-accurate movies about black rights resulted in greater understanding of the role that blacks played in these historical events. We did not find that less-accurate movies resulted in a greater promotion of the white-savior paradigm. The lack of variability in this response is likely because we asked no specific questions about how white people aided in the fight to end slavery or to gain civil rights for black Americans. We chose not to do so because asking this type of question directly would have overly focused participants on the role of whites, and thus affected discussion of black empowerment.

We did not find any differences in color-blind racism depending upon movie condition. This is unsurprising, because internalized racism is unlikely to be changed by viewing a single movie. Similarly, we did not find that people who viewed the less-accurate movies were more likely to comment that current racial issues were merely perceived by black Americans, rather than factual. It is likely that a lifetime of experiences in addition to media consumption shape both racist beliefs and perceived current race relations. It is interesting to note that color-blind racism score predicted responses about current race relations. More specifically, those who did comment that any current race-relations issues were only perceived black problems held more color-blind racist beliefs ($M = 3.32$, $SD = .79$) than did participants indicating that current race relations were the result of historical events ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .84$): $t(70) = 2.06$, $p = .043$, $d = .60$. This indicates that racist views should be accounted for when conducting similar research. Because we had small sample sizes for each movie condition, it is possible that preexisting racism influenced how the movies were processed and how participants related the movies to current events.

CONCLUSION

Black representation in films about American history is severely lacking and perpetuates the belief that black history is apart from the larger American historical narrative. Our study supports the contention that people who watch historically inaccurate films hold historically inaccurate views of black American history. This is significant in larger conversations about how white Americans understand black oppression and thus dismiss civil rights demands, how historical experiences with oppression perpetuate racist ideas, and the ways in which Americans can work to correct these historical abuses. Indeed, Americans are reluctant to even acknowledge our slave past, let alone the continual uphill battle for civil rights. Movies, television shows, and other popular-culture outlets are not value-neutral, and work needs to be done to encourage accurate historical narratives to an

American public that, more often than not, consumes American history in these formats rather than in the classroom.

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