

# Commercial Counterhistory: Remapping the Movement in *Lee Daniels' The Butler*

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*Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013) might seem an unlikely candidate for intervening in Hollywood's civil rights genre, given both its nationalistic ending and its recuperation of iconic styles and images. This paper argues, however, that the film's pastiche interrogates past cinematic tropes for race and space; in this sense, it proves *counterhistorical*, a term indicating not a lack of accuracy but a commitment to illuminating the role of visual media in shaping contemporary understandings of history and to encouraging fresh perspectives on the past. Examining the many forms of constraint produced by iconic images of black and gendered personhood, the film also takes on the spatial icon with which many of these figures are associated – the southern plantation. Both exposing and challenging the ways in which spectacular accounts of southern racism occlude the geographic and political reach of African American movements against oppression, the film inconsistently insists on the importance of thinking across conventional demarcations of space and time. At these moments, it suggests possibilities for how even commercial cinema might contribute to new conceptions of black political history and possibility.

We were right on the border: ten miles from Memphis and a million miles from the rest of the world.

FBI agent Rupert Anderson (played by Gene Hackman)  
on his previous career as a small-town sheriff  
in *Mississippi Burning* (1988)<sup>1</sup>

While *Mississippi Burning*, Alan Parker's action-packed account of an FBI investigation into the disappearance of three civil rights workers, was widely lauded for its technical achievements, it became notorious almost immediately upon release for "whitewashing" the fight for African American rights.<sup>2</sup> As critics have demonstrated, the film depicts a struggle between violent racist

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<sup>1</sup> *Mississippi Burning*, dir. Alan Parker, Orion (1988), MGM Home Entertainment (2013), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the actual search for the killers of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, the film was well represented at a variety of awards ceremonies, including the American Academy of Motion Pictures Association.

whites and a federal government eager to discipline them, occluding both the FBI's often oppositional stance toward the civil rights movement and, most disturbingly, the leadership and labor of African Americans themselves.<sup>3</sup> But as Agent Anderson's comment demonstrates, the film also depends on what Amy Lynn Corbin calls "a fundamentally place-based otherness": situating Mississippi simultaneously on a recognizable road map and in interplanetary space, it "safely insulate[s]" viewers elsewhere from the particular "intersection of race, gender, class, and history" associated with the Jim Crow South.<sup>4</sup> In these approaches to both race and space, the film proved typical of Hollywood's "civil rights genre," which, as Allison Graham explains, did not take clear form until the late twentieth-century.<sup>5</sup> Though Sharon Monteith has noted more varied representations of the civil rights movement in international, independent, and exploitation cinema,<sup>6</sup> major film releases have predominantly supported what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls the "dominant narrative" concerning this period, in which struggle is restricted "to the South" and also "to a single halcyon decade."<sup>7</sup>

In this way, cinema's civil rights genre not only creates images of race and space but also specifies the connections between them, such that the challenges and aims of the civil rights movement are linked insistently and solely to the chronotope of the Jim Crow South, with no apparent connections to struggles in other spaces and periods.<sup>8</sup> These narratives function to very different effect

<sup>3</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th edn (New York: Continuum, 2001), 302–4; Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 152–54; Sharon Monteith, "Civil Rights Movement Film," in Julie Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature*, Google e-book (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 123–42, 127–28.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Lynn Corbin, *Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America*, ProQuest e-book (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 57.

<sup>5</sup> Allison Graham, "'We Ain't Doin' Civil Rights': The Life and Times of a Genre, as Told in *The Help*," *Southern Cultures*, 20, 1 (2014), 51–64, 57, 55, doi:10.1353/scu.2014.0003. Ellen C. Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), describes the many forms of institutional regulation – including self-censorship – that prevented Hollywood films in previous decades from explicitly acknowledging African Americans' struggle for full citizenship. The few exceptions to this rule, in Graham's words ("We Ain't Doin' Civil Rights," 55), "sketched the outlines of a new sub-genre of social conscience film".

<sup>6</sup> Monteith, 126–27, 129–39.

<sup>7</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91, 4 (2005), 1233–63, 1234, doi:10.2307/3660172.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; Roopali Mukherjee, *The Racial Order of Things: Cultural Imaginaries of the Post-soul Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 147–88. The concept of the chronotope, used to explain how interpretation of a narrative is affected by the spatial and temporal qualities of its setting, is developed in M. M. Bakhtin's "Forms of Time

than the media and performances examined elsewhere in this issue; that is, the newspapers, journals, photographs, performance tours, political actions, and other interfaces through which African Americans imagined, forged, and contested relationships with people in other global spaces. But such images and interactions, like Hollywood cinema, demonstrate the role of media in constructing relationships between race and space: as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has argued, race and media are “used to construct connections between – and indeed construct the very concepts of – public and private, outside and inside.”<sup>9</sup> By defining both racial segregation and resistance to it as social forms relevant solely to the US South,<sup>10</sup> Hollywood’s civil rights genre further illustrates how, in Katherine McKittrick’s words, “existing cartographic rules ... unjustly organize human hierarchies *in place* and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways”; such films occlude not only the geographic and chronological expanses of US racial oppression and struggle but also the extent of African American geographic inquiry and organizing.<sup>11</sup> But as McKittrick and Chun link these mediated productions of race and space, they also suggest that such constructions, like genres, can be changed.<sup>12</sup>

Where other authors here explore the period of Jim Crow, I examine a contemporary film whose importance lies chiefly in how this period of US history is remembered. *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* (2013) might seem an unlikely candidate for intervening in Hollywood’s civil rights genre, given that its conclusion goes farther than any previous such film in promoting, in Valerie Smith’s words, “the fantasy that the United States has triumphed over and transcended its racial past.”<sup>13</sup> But on its path to this finale, this broadly popular film

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and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Introduction: Race and/as Technology; Or, How to Do Things to Race,” *Camera Obscura*, 24, 70 (Jan. 2009), 6–35, 9, doi:10.1215/02705346-2008-013.

<sup>10</sup> As historian Carl Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities*, Kindle e-book (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), loc. 315, 288, 367, argues, Jim Crow constituted one instantiation of a global “mania” for dividing populations “into separate, unequal, and compulsory residential zones for different races” with similarly differentiated levels of citizenship, effectively delimiting rights, privileges, and vulnerability to violence.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, ProQuest e-book (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x, original emphasis. The links between media – particularly cinema – and space are well established, involving not only production, distribution, and exhibition, but also content and iconic construction: “A film,” Tom Conley argues, “can be understood in a broad sense to be a ‘map’ that ... encourages its public to think of the world in concert with its own articulation of space.” Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>12</sup> McKittrick, x–xii; Chun, 22–23.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Smith, “Black Women’s Memories and *The Help*,” *Southern Cultures*, 20, 1 (2014), 26–37, 27, doi:10.1353/scu.2014.0000. For scholarly critiques or dismissals of *Lee Daniels’*

significantly revises the genre's map, placing plantation oppression at the core of the nation's history and attributing change not least to African Americans' engagement with global political struggles.<sup>14</sup> As I argue below, this remapping constitutes part of the film's visual method, which could be dismissed as pastiche, a nostalgic revisit of historical images, updated for a purportedly "postracial" era. Here, however, investigation of past visual styles functions to interrogate past cinematic tropes for race and space. In this film, as in historical relations discussed throughout this issue, while blackness is mobilized by governments as a technology for dividing a population and disenfranchising a labor force, it also serves to assemble people with experiences and memories that attune them to local and global injustice.

### "INSPIRED BY FILMS LIKE *GONE WITH THE WIND*": THE PARADOX OF BLACK EPIC CINEMA

For most of Hollywood's history, it has been notoriously difficult to accrue funding for films made by or even concerning African Americans, but the final quarter of 2013 seemed to mark a kind of watershed.<sup>15</sup> While some argued that election of the nation's first black President had reassured executives concerning the marketability of such films,<sup>16</sup> scholars warned against overstating the purported cinematic "Age of Obama."<sup>17</sup> But in the case of *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, this historic first was formative. The project was

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*The Butler* see Monteith, 145–47, 159; Scott, 192; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, EBSCO e-book (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 4; Bruce Baum, *The Post-liberal Imagination: Political Scenes from the American Cultural Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 138; and Andrew Grossman, "Between *The Butler* and *Black Dynamite*: Servility, Militancy, and the Meaning of Blaxploitation," in David Garrett Izzo, ed., *Movies in the Age of Obama: The Era of Post Racial and Neo-Racist Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2015), 67–84, 70–75.

<sup>14</sup> *The Butler* held the top position in US box office ratings for its first two weeks in circulation; it went on to earn over \$176 million. "Lee Daniels' *The Butler* (2013)," *Box Office Mojo*, at [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=butler.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=butler.htm), accessed 5 Oct. 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Cieply, "Coming Soon: A Breakout Year for Black Films," *New York Times*, 1 June 2013, at [www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/movies/coming-soon-a-breakout-for-black-filmmakers.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/movies/coming-soon-a-breakout-for-black-filmmakers.html?_r=0).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the comments of Steve McQueen, director of *12 Years a Slave* (2013), in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Steve McQueen, "Steve McQueen and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Talk 12 Years a Slave, Part 3," *The Root*, 26 Dec. 2013, at [www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/12/\\_12\\_years\\_a\\_slave\\_director\\_steve\\_mcqueen\\_interviewed\\_by\\_henry\\_louis\\_gates\\_1](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/12/_12_years_a_slave_director_steve_mcqueen_interviewed_by_henry_louis_gates_1).

<sup>17</sup> Anna Everett, "Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) in the Digital Media Ecology," *Cinema Journal*, 53, 4 (2014), 128–33, 128–30, doi:10.1353/cj.2014.0038; Monica Ndounou, Stephanie Larrieux, and Karen Bowdre, "What's Happening Now? Black Film and Genre in the Age of Obama," workshop,

inspired by Wil Haygood's *Washington Post* profile of Eugene Allen, an African American servant in the White House through eight different presidential administrations; appearing three days after Obama's victory, the article offers, in its own words, "a story from the back pages of history."<sup>18</sup> Sadly, Allen's wife Helene, also depicted in the profile, died the day before the election, and this combination of timely journalism and poignant circumstance yielded the perfect premise for melodrama – an enormously popular genre that, as Linda Williams argues, has long constituted "the fundamental mode by which American mass culture," especially cinema, "has 'talked to itself' about the enduring moral dilemma of race."<sup>19</sup> Fittingly, Amy Pascal, then co-chair of Sony Pictures Entertainment, immediately set about optioning the story for Laura Ziskin, producer of the *Spider-Man* franchise and other popular films.<sup>20</sup>

The story of the resulting film's development, like the film itself, illuminates a moment in which unyielding cultural and institutional patterns intermingle with signs of and efforts toward change. The figure of the black servant was, after all, foundational in cinematic representations of African Americans,<sup>21</sup> yet such a long-suffering female protagonist also featured in one of the best-selling novels of 2009 – Kathryn Stockett's controversial *The Help* – as well as Tate Taylor's 2011 film adaptation.<sup>22</sup> For collaborators on the Allen project, this new entry in the long tradition of representing African Americans as relatively passive in the social movement that led to their enfranchisement constituted a kind of warning.<sup>23</sup> Describing development of the film based on his article, African American journalist Haygood notes that Ziskin, a white producer, originally saw the story as an opportunity to increase the

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Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Seattle, Washington, 19 March 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Wil Haygood, "A Butler Well Served by This Election," *Washington Post*, 7 Nov. 2008, at [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-butler-well-served-by-this-election/2013/08/13/961d5d78-0456-11e3-9259-e2aaf525f84\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-butler-well-served-by-this-election/2013/08/13/961d5d78-0456-11e3-9259-e2aaf525f84_story.html).

<sup>19</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiv.

<sup>20</sup> John Hazelton, "In Service of *The Butler*," *Screen International*, 31 Jan. 2014, ProQuest Performing Arts Periodicals Database.

<sup>21</sup> Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> "Books: Best Sellers/Hardcover Fiction," *New York Times*, 29 March 2009, at [www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2009/03/29/hardcover-fiction](http://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2009/03/29/hardcover-fiction); "Books: Best Sellers/Paperback Trade Fiction," *New York Times*, 6 May 2012, at [www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2012/05/06/trade-fiction-paperback](http://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2012/05/06/trade-fiction-paperback).

<sup>23</sup> As Valerie Smith, "Black Women's Memories and *The Help*," 34, argues, both versions of *The Help* seek to avoid naturalizing Jim Crow hierarchies, but the maids are still rigidly constrained: their narratives, though shared in protest, can only be circulated via a white intermediary and are ultimately treated as gossip – restricted to the status of entertainment, as opposed to political speech. Graham, "We Ain't Doin' Civil Rights," 60–63.

limited racial diversity in Hollywood films.<sup>24</sup> To address the quality of these representations, however, white screenwriter Danny Strong and black director Lee Daniels determined to incorporate an “epic” narrative about African American activism by featuring the butler’s son.<sup>25</sup> But when confronted with the cost of such a project – \$15 million over the \$20 million originally planned – Sony backed out, leaving the white producers to seek funding from wealthy African Americans with ties to media industries.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the developers of this film consistently pursued strategies associated with popular cinema, the term “epic” calling to mind the sweeping historical spectacles of a previous Hollywood era;<sup>27</sup> in contrast, a combination of economic necessity and aesthetic vision (Daniels’s enthusiasm for the project) aligned the project with the scholarly category of black film. That classification is complex, involving not only the races of persons funding and working on a particular movie, but also the films’ style and social impact. Commercial cinema has earned particular skepticism in the latter regard: as Terri Francis explains, debates over black film involve “a complicated love-it-and-loathe-it relationship to popular culture,” which has often propagated insidious stereotypes, yet which also, as Stuart Hall argued in 1993, constitutes an important venue in “the struggle over cultural hegemony.”<sup>28</sup> This ambivalence is perhaps

<sup>24</sup> Wil Haygood, *The Butler: A Witness to History*, Google e-book (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 80–86. For a journalistic overview concerning the historic and ongoing lack of diversity in Hollywood films see Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott, “Hollywood, Separate and Unequal,” *New York Times*, 16 Sept. 2016, at [www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/movies/hollywood-separate-and-unequal.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/movies/hollywood-separate-and-unequal.html).

<sup>25</sup> Rsebecca Theodore-Vachon, “If You’ve Been Comparing ‘The Butler’ to ‘The Help’ ... Stop!,” *Urban Daily*, 9 Aug. 2013, Interactive One, at <http://theurbandaily.com/2013/08/09/the-butler-vs-the-help-interview>. Strong and Daniels each independently use the word “epic” (Haygood, *The Butler*, 80–86; Hazelton). According to Hazelton (11–12), Strong had finished the first draft of the screenplay when talks with Daniels began, but Daniels, in his foreword to Haygood’s *The Butler*, makes clear he was particularly taken with the possibilities of using the father–son relationship as the guiding framework of the film.

<sup>26</sup> Haygood, *The Butler*, 80–83; Hazelton; Pamela McClintock, “Why ‘Lee Daniels’ The Butler’ Has 41 Producers,” *Hollywood Reporter*, at [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/why-lee-daniels-butler-has-605011](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/why-lee-daniels-butler-has-605011), accessed 3 April 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “‘Surge and Splendor’: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic,” *Representations*, 29 (1990), 24–49, 24–26, doi:10.2307/2928417. In looking at the film’s relations to popular and to black cinema, it is worth noting that the producers (Ziskin and her associate Pam Williams) also explored the possibility of working with Steven Spielberg as director (Haygood, *The Butler*, 81; Hazelton). But Daniels’s version was no less “epic”: a *Variety* reviewer described the film as “at its root the kind of starry, old-fashioned prestige pic the studios used to make.” Scott Foundas, “Whitaker Serves ‘Butler’ Well,” *Variety*, 13 Aug. 2013, International Index to the Performing Arts, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Terri Francis, “Whose ‘Black Film’ Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship,” *Cinema Journal*, 53, 4 (2014), 146–50, 148, doi:10.1353/cj.2014.0047; Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice*, 20, 1–2 (1993), 104–14, 106.

particularly acute as African American filmmakers have made increasing inroads into Hollywood production and distribution. Where Anna Everett sees the successes of “BAMMs (black American media moguls)” as offering the potential for broad debate and exchange, Jared Sexton cautions that the “black directorial signature,” when applied to commercial media, may indicate creative constraint or complicity as black cultural workers are required to “orchestrate ... scenes of [their] own subjection.”<sup>29</sup>

Such concerns could be amplified when dealing with the work of Daniels, whose previous films as a director – including *Shadowboxer* (2005), *Precious* (2009), and *The Paperboy* (2012) – are stylistically and thematically daring but yield no sense of political consistency.<sup>30</sup> Further, his publicity efforts for *The Butler* suggested that, in his desire for an audience, he was willing to downplay political implications where helpful. He acknowledged, for example, that his racial identification could be useful for reassuring African American viewers skeptical of the film’s focus on a servant: he generally expressed displeasure over the official title *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* (the result of a copyright dispute with Warner Bros.), but in interviews with African American media he jokingly attributed the revised title to “God.”<sup>31</sup> In other venues, however, he resisted the label “black filmmaker” and described the film’s premise as “universal,” a strategy that could, as Mark Cunningham observes, fuel fantasies of American “postracialism.”<sup>32</sup> In fairness, these statements may also reflect frustration with how, as Kobena Mercer argued over a quarter of a century

<sup>29</sup> Everett, “Black Film,” 131–33; Anna Everett, “The ‘New’ New Black Film: Black Media Praxis in the Millennium,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, 28 March 2015, Montreal, Canada; Jared Sexton, “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing,” *American Quarterly*, 61, 1 (2009), 39–63, 47–48, doi:10.1353/aq.0.0057. Because Lee Daniels lacked “transmedia platforms” as of 2014, Everett described him in “Black Film” as an “emerging BAMM”; Oprah Winfrey, who plays the titular butler’s wife Gloria, is (probably still) “the most successful BAMM” (132). Daniels has since broken into television with *Empire* (Fox, 2015–present) and *Star* (Fox, 2016–present).

<sup>30</sup> For a journalistic overview of the vigorous debate concerning *Precious*’s cultural politics see Felicia R. Lee, “‘Precious’ Ignites a Debate on the Black Narrative,” *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2009, at [www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/movies/21precious.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/movies/21precious.html).

<sup>31</sup> Rachel Dodes, “‘The Butler’: A White House ‘Forrest Gump’; the African-American Man Who Served Presidents for 34 Years,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 Aug. 2013, ProQuest Performing Arts Periodicals Database; Theodore Vachon, “If You’ve Been Comparing.” From this point in this article, I will refer to Daniels’ film with the shortened title of *The Butler*.

<sup>32</sup> Dave Izkoff, “Lee Daniels: ‘I Am Not Here to Just Tell Black Stories,’” *New York Times*, 16 Aug. 2013, at [www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/magazine/lee-daniels-i-am-not-here-to-just-tell-black-stories.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/magazine/lee-daniels-i-am-not-here-to-just-tell-black-stories.html); Hazelton; Mark Cunningham, “No Getting around the Black,” *Cinema Journal*, 53, 4 (Summer 2014), 140–46, 140–41, doi:10.1353/cj.2014.0044. Grossman discusses a similar moment in Daniels’ publicity in “Between *The Butler* and *Black Dynamite*,” 73.

ago, black artists are “positioned in the margins of the institutional space of cultural production [and] burdened with the impossible role of speaking as ‘representatives,’” a problem Daniels experienced directly in responses to *Precious* (2009).<sup>33</sup> Still, in expressing enthusiasm for popular genres, he articulated no concern with how they might propagate racist stereotypes: in his foreword to Haygood’s book *The Butler*, he remarks that, upon reading Strong’s screenplay, he felt “inspired by films like *Gone with the Wind*” and hoped to “capture even half of what that film accomplished ... something magical.”<sup>34</sup>

In suggesting that he might emulate an epic devoted to celebrating and mourning the antebellum South’s plantation culture, Daniels surely implies his intention to apply equally potent cinematic magic to African Americans’ quest for citizenship: *Gone with the Wind*, released in 1939, is well known as the “most grand and excessive” of American “racial melodramas” and remains the highest-grossing film of all time when prices are adjusted for inflation.<sup>35</sup> But his statement also foregrounds, with disquieting frankness, the paradox of seeking greater diversity in popular historical film. For while subject matter can be changed, the very style of *Gone with the Wind* perfectly exemplifies, in Frank B. Wilderson III’s words, “how Black images can be degraded and White images can be monumentalized and made mythic.”<sup>36</sup> Any effort to generate that intensity of spectacle for the purposes of honoring African American achievements would require aesthetic transformation of the kind commercial cinema inherently resists. As Kara Keeling argues, films receive broad distribution only by “affirming aspects of common sense,” by which she means a preestablished way of perceiving and responding, shaped by an audiovisual environment suffused with corporate media; such productions generate, in Keeling’s argument, not only clichéd images but also, less directly, clichéd ways of responding to images. Both funding networks and audiences expect films, however much they differentiate themselves in certain respects, to adhere to these patterns.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text*, 4, 10 (1990), 61–78, 62, doi:10.1080/09528829008576253. Stephanie Li, *Signifying without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 165–75, demonstrates how Daniels’s complex representational strategies in *Precious* were often received as documentary-style realism.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Daniels, Foreword to Wil Haygood, *The Butler*, xi–xii, xi.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 190; “All Time Box Office Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed 6 Oct. 2016, at [www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm).

<sup>36</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>37</sup> Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4, 14–15, 17.



This paradox – between the desire for more broadly distributed black historical films and the concern that commercial aesthetics resist projects that challenge racial hierarchies – is arguably inescapable, given both the great imbalance in the histories currently represented in commercial cinema and the aesthetic constraints such projects face in production.<sup>38</sup> Diversity in such images matters, because they can influence understandings of the nation’s development: popular cinematic narratives make spectators “feel as if we are learning about the past by vicariously living through its moments,” in historian Robert Rosenstone’s words, or, in film scholar Allison Landsberg’s model, produce “prosthetic memories” of events in which viewers did not participate.<sup>39</sup> And while such films are unlikely to challenge capitalist precepts, even critics of commercial cinema note its occasional surprises. Keeling, for example, focusses on distinct images within films, arguing that, if cinema so influences how bodies interpret and respond to their world, it might at least momentarily “explode” that cycle, stimulating new ways to think about how political change occurs or how uses and understandings of race vary (or not) across time.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Monica White Ndounou, *Shaping the Future of African American Film: Color-Coded Economics and the Story behind the Numbers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 133–35.

<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2nd edn (New York: Pearson, 2012), 132–33; Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, ProQuest e-book (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 8 and *passim*. See also Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1–12; Mia Mask, “Introduction,” in Mask, ed., *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, ProQuest e-book (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–13, 4–5.

<sup>40</sup> Keeling, 6, 21, 40–44, 9–10. I am mindful here of Adolph Reed Jr.’s critiques of demands for more opportunities for black filmmakers and actors, which holds not that the medium is without ideological influence, but rather that it is inevitably hegemonic, “embedded in capitalist ... imperatives.” Adolph Reed Jr., “The Real Problem with *Selma*,” *Nonsite.org*, 26 Jan. 2015, at [http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-real-problem-with-selma#foot\\_1-8760](http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-real-problem-with-selma#foot_1-8760); Reed, “*Django Unchained*, Or, *The Help*: How ‘Cultural Politics’ Is Worse than No Politics at All, and Why,” *Nonsite.org*, 9, 25 Feb. 2013, at <http://nonsite.org/feature/django-unchained-or-the-help-how-cultural-politics-is-worse-than-no-politics-at-all-and-why>. While this point is essential, it may not encompass all the meanings conveyed by an individual film. Notably, Reed objects to films that appear to elide historical differences between previous eras and our own, on the principal that doing so acknowledges “no thinkable alternative to the ideological order under which we live.” Typical criticisms of civil rights films, in contrast, complain that they overstate historical difference, presenting the problem of racial injustice (as opposed to specifically *de jure* Jim Crow) as now, effectively, solved. To me, this very debate indicates what David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 6, calls the “sense of a stalled present,” in which simply positioning the past in a generative relationship to the present becomes arduous.

Still, Hollywood films are poorly suited to acknowledgment of how past conflicts are linked to continuing struggles, in part because they tend to present the past as beyond the scope of ordinary individuals, and also because their plots have long favored clear and thorough resolutions.<sup>41</sup> Such a critique perfectly fits *The Butler*'s conclusion, where, as the now elderly retired protagonist (played by Forrest Whitaker) walks slowly down the White House's elegant hallway on his way to meet the new African American President, viewers hear vocal clips attesting to the nation's slowly expanding recognition of black citizenship, from John F. Kennedy, to Lyndon B. Johnson, to Obama himself, all accompanied by grand orchestral chords that suggest the transcendence of both the long-laboring black body and the once white-supremacist nation – ostensibly a now perfect union.<sup>42</sup> But as I argue below, there are counterhegemonic approaches to history embedded within this film as well, a vacillation between contestation of and incorporation into dominant ideologies that exemplifies Stuart Hall's account of black popular culture.<sup>43</sup>

Approaching *The Butler* in this way acknowledges the diversity of forms and goals that emerge as African American directors begin to gather substantial budgets for historical film. Representing stories not only marginalized from but, in some ways, aesthetically unassimilable to the commercial cinema of preceding decades, such films may seek, at some level, to pursue “counter-history,” Marcia Landy's term for films that challenge “received views about historicizing.”<sup>44</sup> Far from being “antihistorical,” counterhistory promotes “an active and irreverent position ... in relation to the disciplines of history and popular culture,” stimulating audiences to contemplate the ways in which the past is visualized or understood more broadly.<sup>45</sup> This project aligns with

<sup>41</sup> Sobchack, “Surge and Splendor,” 32–43; David Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures,” in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17–34, 18–19; Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 55.

<sup>42</sup> *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, dir. Lee Daniels, Weinstein (2013), Anchor Bay (2014), DVD.

<sup>43</sup> Hall, “What Is This ‘Black,’” 106. Everett, “Black Film,” 129–31, argues that such approaches are particularly important in dealing with the work of contemporary “BAMMs.”

<sup>44</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinema and Counter-history*, Kindle e-book (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), loc. 72. See also Miriam Hansen, “Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the Public Sphere: The Construction Site of Counter-history,” *Discourse*, 6 (1983), 53–74.

<sup>45</sup> Landy, loc. 72. For example, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), though an outrageously biased account of abolitionism and especially Reconstruction, was not counterhistorical: on the contrary, it worked very hard, through captioned “facsimiles,” to persuade viewers of its fidelity to the historical accounts of the white-supremacist “Dunning School,” which dominated the discipline at that time (*Birth of a Nation*, Griffith Corp., Kino, 2002, DVD).

an aesthetic challenge that Michael Boyce Gillespie finds in “black film, and black art more broadly,” as this *oeuvre* necessarily “navigates the idea of race as constitutive, cultural fiction,” not simply to describe but to disrupt.<sup>46</sup> Such challenges to conventional representation are particularly important in dealing with the story of the civil rights movement, which has been reproduced in media from cinema to “heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture” in ways that, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues, mold understandings of race, history, and space into a nationalist frame – “a natural progression of American values ... a satisfying morality tale.”<sup>47</sup>

### ICONIC IMAGES: SEEING PAST AND SEEING THROUGH

*The Butler*'s approach to the relationship between history and counterhistory can be usefully contrasted to that of Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014). Where Strong transformed the historical figure of Eugene Allen into the fictional character of “Cecil Gaines,” enabling the filmmakers to design his personal life as they chose, *Selma* focusses on the interactions among actual activists, politicians, and police, as supporters of the civil rights movement gather in Alabama for a confrontation that would lead to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Critics promptly questioned *Selma*'s accuracy,<sup>48</sup> but DuVernay, while defending the factual basis of her film, emphasized her desire to change how viewers visualize the past. Like those involved in

<sup>46</sup> Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1–12.

<sup>47</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1239, 1235.

<sup>48</sup> Complaints that the film overstated Johnson's resistance to placing the VRA on his legislative agenda and his support for FBI surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr. erupted even before the film was widely released. Jennifer Schuessler, “Depiction of Lyndon B. Johnson in ‘Selma’ Raises Hackles,” *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 2014, at [www.nytimes.com/2015/01/01/movies/depiction-of-lyndon-b-johnson-in-selma-raises-hackles.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/01/movies/depiction-of-lyndon-b-johnson-in-selma-raises-hackles.html). While some accused the film of reckless disregard for history (see, for example, Maureen Dowd, “Not Just a Movie,” *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 2015, at [www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/opinion/sunday/not-just-a-movie.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/opinion/sunday/not-just-a-movie.html)), the more serious debate focussed on emphasis, tone, and/or implicit suggestion. For example, while most historians acknowledge that the film's assessment of Johnson's approach to the VRA's timing is not incorrect, several wish that Johnson had been portrayed as more generally supportive (Schuessler); Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists' objections to Southern Christian Leadership Conference methods are given little screen time and are portrayed as callow (Adolph Reed Jr., “The Real Problem with *Selma*”); and while the film is circumspect regarding what FBI actions Johnson actually supported, it “somewhat clumsily ... crams a decade's worth of murkiness” regarding J. Edgar Hoover's notorious disregard for both legality and executive order into a brief time period (Amy Davidson, “Why ‘Selma’ Is More than Fair to L.B.J.,” *New Yorker*, 22 Jan. 2015, at [www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/selma-fair-l-b-j](http://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/selma-fair-l-b-j)).

developing *The Butler*, she explicitly sought to counter previous Hollywood representations, saying, “I wasn’t interested in making a white-savior movie.”<sup>49</sup> But beyond that, she spoke of understanding the audience’s desire to see history “through their own lens” and explained, “this is how I see it”; early in the debate, she tweeted that “folks should interrogate history ... Let it come alive for yourself.”<sup>50</sup> Representing a vigorously encoded past, DuVernay encourages more active engagement with mediated history more broadly.

One aspect of her method is to incorporate an array of characters and moments not regularly seen in representations of the Selma conflict. Widely reproduced images tend, in Leigh Raiford’s account, to “tame memory”; as Nicole R. Fleetwood explains, their meanings have, for most viewers, long been cemented.<sup>51</sup> DuVernay does not avoid such moments altogether, which could risk alienating an audience accustomed to mainstream conventions, and she retains a central and iconic protagonist in the figure of Martin Luther King Jr. But DuVernay’s non-iconic sequences produce a sense of contingency, of uncertainty, and, in Fleetwood’s words, a “need for narrative unfolding” in order for viewers to understand their significance.<sup>52</sup> Scenes of Annie Lee Cooper (Oprah Winfrey) attempting to register to vote, for example, or of the Lee-Jackson family fleeing police violence in a diner demonstrate how enforcers of Jim Crow could render mundane public space cruel and even lethal, while scenes of movement leadership lunching and arguing point toward the everyday forms of cooperation and conflict intrinsic to political organizing.

Where DuVernay contests Hollywood’s civil rights genre through creating non-iconic images, *The Butler*, as its name suggests, interrogates a central cinematic icon of blackness, thematizing how the black butler has typically been relegated to the cinematic background.<sup>53</sup> In Cecil’s training, which begins

<sup>49</sup> Gavin Edwards, “We Shall Overcome: Ava DuVernay on Making ‘Selma,’” *Rolling Stone*, 5 Jan. 2015, at [www.rollingstone.com/movies/features/ava-duvernay-on-making-selma-20150105](http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/features/ava-duvernay-on-making-selma-20150105); Haygood, *The Butler*, 80–86.

<sup>50</sup> Gwen Ifill, “Director Ava DuVernay on Sharing the Story of ‘Selma,’” *PBS NewsHour*, 8 Jan. 2015, at [www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/director-ava-duvernay-sharing-story-selma-deconstructing-american-heroes](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/director-ava-duvernay-sharing-story-selma-deconstructing-american-heroes); Ava DuVernay, “Bottom Line Is Folks Should Interrogate History ...,” Twitter, 28 Dec. 2014, at <https://twitter.com/avaetc/status/549237321648705537>.

<sup>51</sup> Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 46.

<sup>52</sup> Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 9, 10, defines such figures as affectively “pulled between the intertwined forces of denigration and veneration,” conveying “the weight of history and the power of the present moment,” which is situated historically through an icon’s presence.

in his youth, he is repeatedly told, “the room should feel empty when you’re in it,” a demand to reassure white elites of a categorical difference between themselves and their servants. But Cecil’s mentor recognizes the performance of such difference as a professional challenge: “We got two faces – ours, and the ones that we gotta show the white folks.”<sup>54</sup> Much of the film highlights Cecil’s aesthetically rigorous performance, ensuring that, when his role is to remain in the background, the labor of occupying that space will be visible. For example, in one early shot, young Cecil (Aml Ameen) stands at the rear of a poolside scene, fully uniformed and holding a tray of refreshments in one hand, and the camera follows a white teenager as he approaches to take a soda. But as the boy turns and walks away, the camera continues to track toward Cecil, whose gaze and stance have not flinched. In spotlighting how this figure remains immobile on the edges of the frame, the film illuminates the visual style of the plantation romance – a combination of spatial arrangements and aesthetics that, in Nicholas Mirzoeff’s words, “separates and segregates,” determining and delimiting social roles.<sup>55</sup>

This attention to iconicity, however, yields a potentially problematic emphasis on spectacle in sections of the film devoted to the activism of Cecil’s son Louis. He appears at many of the most famous events in the civil rights movement, enabling the film to speed through archival citations and reproductions of the kind that, as Monteith and Graham each point out, are featured consistently in Hollywood’s civil rights genre.<sup>56</sup> Both

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I argue that, on the whole, *The Butler* explores this process, though Fleetwood, *ibid.*, 4, describes the film as “caricature.” In *Signifying without Specifying*, 165–75, Li argues that *Precious* includes a similar exploration of how icons are constructed and the experience of being viewed as such.

<sup>54</sup> While this reference to duality is reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous description of “double-consciousness” from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), this formulation, as it first appears in the film, is focussed clearly on performance, a form of role-playing that E. Patrick Johnson theorizes through the work of Franz Fanon, Michel de Certeau, and Patricia Williams, as well as the West African trickster figure of Esu. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 107–9.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3. Mirzoeff focusses on the plantation complex as a social form in which the overseer/owner’s arrangement of spaces and exercise of surveillance – techniques that can each, at some level, be understood as visual – established and sustained both racial hierarchy and more general understandings of how authority functions. *Ibid.*, 10–11. Cinematic plantation romances, including *Gone with the Wind*, appeared after slavery’s abolition (albeit alongside sharecropping) and acknowledged the US South’s antebellum culture as archaic, but continued to celebrate the essential “right[ness],” in Mirzoeff’s terms, of plantation visibility.

<sup>56</sup> Graham, “We Ain’t Doin’ Civil Rights,” 57–58; Monteith, “Civil Rights Movement Film,” 145–47. One particularly displeased reviewer described the film as “a pedagogical march through the Virtual African-American Trials and Tribulations Memorial Museum.”

Strong and Daniels note that these familiar scenes align *The Butler* with *Forrest Gump*, Robert Zemeckis's 1994 blockbuster, which also constitutes an extended flashback shaped by voice-over narration, mixing archival and created footage; more fundamentally, each of these films is epic in sweep, melodramatic in plot, and resolutely popular.<sup>57</sup> For many scholars and critics, however, such depictions of history as a series of set pieces with richly detailed production design suggest postmodern pastiche, which Fredric Jameson describes as "incompatib[le]" with "genuine historicity."<sup>58</sup>

The danger of such an approach is that it compresses complex historical dynamics into neatly commodifiable images,<sup>59</sup> and critics have noted this potential especially in *The Butler*'s representation of the Black Panthers.<sup>60</sup> While attentive to the party's diverse programs of community building and self-defense,<sup>61</sup> the melodramatic plot enfolds this historical movement in ways that highlight surface over substance. When Louis and his friend Carol (Yaya Alafia) dine with the Gaines family, conversation breaks down into a conflict over mores that cannot be separated from personal style and mannerisms: head-coverings (beret and Afro), the degree to which clothes hide the body, and whether it is acceptable to "belch at the table." In this way, the scene threatens to "reduce ... a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion," a tendency that, as Angela Davis argues, has been particularly egregious in depictions of African American radicalism.<sup>62</sup>

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Michael Atkinson, "The Butler" (review), *Sight and Sound*, Jan. 2014, 71, International Index to the Performing Arts.

<sup>57</sup> Dodes, "The Butler"; Foundas, "Whitaker Serves 'Butler' Well," 76; "The Unique Perspective of Lee Daniels' *The Butler*," *American Cinematographer: The International Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques*, Sept. 2013, International Index to the Performing Arts, A7.

<sup>58</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 19, 16–21.

<sup>59</sup> Monteith, 146, expresses such a critique in calling Louis "the *Forrest Gump* of the contemporary civil rights fiction film."

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Cedric Johnson, "Panther Nostalgia as History," review of *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, *New Labor Forum*, 23, 2 (May 2014), 113, doi:10.1177/1095796014526572; Peniel E. Joseph, "A Civil Rights Professor Reviews 'Lee Daniels' *The Butler*," *IndieWire*, 16 Sept. 2013, at [www.indie-wire.com/2013/09/a-civil-rights-professor-reviews-lee-daniels-the-butler-34974](http://www.indie-wire.com/2013/09/a-civil-rights-professor-reviews-lee-daniels-the-butler-34974).

<sup>61</sup> Ryan J. Kirkby notes that, until recently, even scholarship on the Panthers tended to emphasize either their "survival programs" or their stance on violence, rather than exploring the coexistence of the two. "'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised': Community Activism and the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 41, 1 (2011), 25–62, 26–30, doi:10.1353/crv.2011.0001.

<sup>62</sup> Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," in Deborah Willis, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994), 171–80, 171.

Some scholars suggest, however, that pastiche can encourage contemplation of how history has been mediated. Vera Dika and Stefan Sereda argue that many such works address viewers highly attuned to cinematic history, aware of conflicts in how contemporary understandings of the past are constructed, and thus able to recognize the subversion of conventional semiotic systems; in this regard, Vivian Sobchack sees even *Forrest Gump* as appealing to “historically (self-)conscious viewers who have been immersed in questions about the boundaries, meanings, and place of history in their daily lives, as well as about their own possible place in history.”<sup>63</sup> This logic is central to *The Butler*’s continuing focus on the construction, enactment, attractions, and critiques of iconic racial images, reaching a climax at that very dinner table scene. As the generations clash over apparel and manners, they also debate one of the period’s few black lead performances in Hollywood – Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs in Norman Jewison’s *In the Heat of the Night* (1965). Where Cecil lauds the actor’s accomplishments, which he believes to support civil rights, Louis dismisses Poitier as “nothing but a rich Uncle Tom,” and their ensuing fight crystalizes long-standing tensions in a relationship perpetually refracted through icons of blackness.

Exploring this problem, the film follows a pattern that Alessandro Raengo finds in Daniels’s earlier *Precious*, which “seeks to locate blackness not *in* bodies but *in between* them”;<sup>64</sup> *The Butler*, rendering this representational logic more explicit, also stages the ways in which such iconic versions of blackness are debated and contested. Years before the dinner scene, Carol attributes Louis’s criticism of Malcolm X to shame over Cecil, who in the former’s terms would be a “House Negro.” Though Louis may not understand his father solely in such reductive terms, neither he nor Cecil can evade the influence of this cliché, which sets the parameters for Cecil’s professional performance and for the ways in which others interpret him. (Notably, Cecil’s vivid social life includes chiefly his White House colleagues and their wives, a group in which the butlers enjoy performing as different icons: for example, Carter [Cuba Gooding Jr.] dons a wig and imitates James Brown.) Later, as Louis waits in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Memphis motel room, the civil rights

<sup>63</sup> Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3, 9–15; Stefan Sereda, “The Cinema of Simulation: Hyper-histories and (Un)Popular Memory in *The Good German* (2006) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009),” in Russell J. A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty, eds., *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 225–45, 225–29; Vivian Sobchack, “Introduction: History Happens,” in Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–14, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Alessandro Raengo, “Shadowboxing: Lee Daniels’ Nonrepresentational Cinema,” in Mask, *Contemporary Black American Cinema*, 200–16, 201, original emphasis.

leader (Nelsan Ellis) assures him that, while domestic servants may appear “subservient,” they quietly “defy racial stereotypes by being hardworking and trustworthy.” As he finishes speaking, however, we see Cecil openly request higher wages and greater opportunities for the black staff, only to be told not to “let that Martin Luther King shit fill [his] britches out.”

The film displays such disjunctions between concepts and experiences also in relation to other icons, as characters confront restrictive interpretations while seeking to define themselves. This process is most overt in relation to the Black Panthers: after the Gaines family dinner, viewers see party members insisting, against media reports, that they are not “terrorists” but “terrorized” by systemic racism and police violence; meanwhile, in parallel editing, we see Nixon plotting to claim the mantra of “Black Power” for his administration through promoting “black entrepreneurs” even as he plans to “gut” the BPP.<sup>65</sup> But the way in which iconic performance can express aspiration even while subjecting one to painful discipline is most poignantly demonstrated in Cecil’s wife Gloria, who met him while working as a hotel maid and, upon her marriage, becomes a homemaker, taking on the normative status and associated constrictions visualized in mid-century Hollywood melodramas. Situating this character in relation to an iconic film history, *The Butler* does not foreground the significance of race, but neither does it diminish race’s importance by simply inserting a black woman into a cinematic role previously occupied by white women.<sup>66</sup> Rather, by positioning Gloria in a distinctive ecology of icons, it explores how she is constrained by ideologies of both race and gender.

For example, the film’s images of other black maids highlight the spatial restrictions that have long governed representations of this figure: though Cecil’s colleagues at the White House, they are granted so much less prestige that his supervisor (played by Colman Domingo) insists he not speak to them.<sup>67</sup> Further, Gloria’s portrayal by Oprah Winfrey may remind viewers that this media mogul built her transracial audience in part by reassuring viewers of her domestic expertise, and was often, in Mia Mask’s words,

<sup>65</sup> For a historical account of how the Panthers, the media, and various agencies struggled over the meaning of their image see Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: New Press, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> For this tendency in Hollywood film see Robyn Wiegman, “Black Bodies/American Commodities: Gender, Race, and the Bourgeois Ideal in Contemporary Film,” in Lester D. Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 308–28, 319–22.

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Patton notes that such figures are far more constrained spatially on television than even on radio programs. Elizabeth Patton, “We All Have Our Jobs to Do! Maintaining Labor Relations in the Private Sphere on Postwar Television,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, 31 March 2016.



“interpreted as a metaphorical mammy.”<sup>68</sup> Recognized, as Mask continues, for her extraordinary and yet iconically American “narrative of success ... someone who has transcended abjection through self-realization and entrepreneurial spirit,” Winfrey’s extradiegetic persona, combined with her performance, underscores the pathos of Gloria’s quest to gratify her creativity.<sup>69</sup> An avid consumer of television, print sewing patterns, *Woman’s Day*, and *Jet* (which the film singles out as contributing to her insights on racial politics), this character exemplifies bourgeois gender norms but lacks the consuming public such an icon implicitly should have. For example, as she imparts the secret to her potato salad (a dish featured more than once in Winfrey’s media outlets), her friend (played by Adriane Lenox) responds with a long pause, conveying mystification at Gloria’s enthusiasm. This gap between Gloria’s efforts and impact may fuel her resentment of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, who, after retiring from her journalistic career to marry a promising male professional, became an icon of fashionable domesticity. Frustrated that Cecil devotes so much energy toward his job, Gloria angrily badgers him to reveal details of “Jackie’s” closet.

Fittingly, in exploring cinematic icons of blackness, the film also takes on the spatial icon with which many of them are associated – the southern plantation. Long configured in cinematic plantation romances as extraordinary space, these expansive landscapes and ornate “big houses” were once, in Edward Baptist’s words, “soaked into the way America publicly depicted slavery,” and while their associated white-supremacist convictions have been subjected to vigorous critique (though obviously not defeated), the belief that these labor camps functioned “separate from” the rest of the nation’s economy has remained obdurate.<sup>70</sup> In these representations, as in Hollywood’s civil rights genre, the very chronotope through which the US South is depicted impedes understanding of how past regional racial oppression relates to broader spatial histories or ongoing struggle. *The Butler* both highlights how such understandings are produced cinematically and challenges that process through portraying an African American community that persistently, albeit unevenly, explores experiential and conceptual links with diverse spaces.

## THE PALIMPSESTIC PLANTATION AND GLOBAL SPACES OF STRUGGLE

*The Butler* opens grandly: the opening chords of Robert Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A Minor (op. 54) accompany a black screen that fades to a

<sup>68</sup> Mia Mask, *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film*, ProQuest e-book (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 143.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.  
<sup>70</sup> Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Google e-book (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 5–6.

white hall with columns, chandeliers, and red trimmings. Amid this elegance, the film evokes both spatial and temporal boundaries. A black man stands as if guarding a door while another sits, and as the scene dissolves to a medium shot, we see that this man is disturbed. As his face turns upward, a second dissolve reveals the bodies of two lynched black men hung closely together, with a US flag waving behind them. This image echoes O. N. Pruitt's 1935 photograph of the lynching of Bert Moore and Dooley Morton, later reproduced in a 1965 SNCC poster labeled "MISSISSIPPI," where it indexed the violence of Jim Crow and testified to the urgency of activism.<sup>71</sup> In *The Butler*, as it indexes both racial violence and the movement against it, this image emerges from the dissolving curtains as if from a red mist, disrupting the space of what viewers soon understand to be the White House. Thus, from its opening shot, the film raises questions about space, time, and racial oppression – highlighting the relationship between the opulent, restricted space of the foyer and the violent racism enacted elsewhere in the nation, as well as the pressures raised by this memory in the diegetic present.

These slow dissolves create cinematic palimpsests, a term denoting reused recording surfaces where the traces of earlier writing or marking remain; in this case, the image of a public venue literally shares the frame with that of a personal memory. The trope of the palimpsest has proven particularly generative among writers and artists seeking to challenge triumphalist accounts of national or global modernity, in which advances would simply and utterly displace past oppression.<sup>72</sup> In *The Butler*, such dissolves work both temporally and spatially, insisting that contemporary spaces of governance can neither disregard the impact of past racist violence nor pretend isolation from locales where such acts occur. This spatial argument is developed further in the next dissolve, as the protagonist recalls his youth on a Georgia plantation in 1926; the connection between personal and national past is again emphasized by the curtains, which – dissolving into a white field of cotton – evoke a red stripe on the flag just shown. Alluding, through the image of black workers in cotton fields, to the oppressive source of the nation's early wealth and even the labor that built the White House, the film overlays these two

<sup>71</sup> Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, 23–24. Where Moore and Morton were positioned adjacent to each other – shoulder to shoulder – *The Butler*'s two bodies are face to face, almost as if embracing. Thus although this film is much more heteronormative than Daniels' previous work, this image conveys a continuum between racist and homophobic hate crime.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2014), 150, 155.

spaces in a way that contests the long cinematic tradition of representing the South in a chronotope categorically different from that of the nation.

While this sequence's editing incorporates the plantation into national space, its sound and images function differently, presenting this site as spectacularly idyllic *and* horrific. Schumann's concerto shifts into a succession of percussive chords, wistful winds and piano, and precipitous strings, suggesting the workings of fate or an unworldly setting. As Cecil begins the voice-over narration that sustains the film's extended flashback, he speaks of the pleasure – despite the hard work – of being with his family in the fields all day, but this nostalgia is quickly interrupted by brutality, as young Cecil hears his mother scream while being raped and sees his father shot for merely addressing the rapist. This shocking sequence echoes how cinema has typically either elided or contained representations of racial violence on the plantation, which is depicted as either too pastoral or too pathological to be readily mapped in relation to a functioning polity. What such linkage would entail is perhaps best illustrated through exceptions, such as the early *Birth of a Nation*, which complains that the US failed to value plantation structures, and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which insists, via the protagonist's abduction in the nation's capital and continued efforts to free himself via letters and the courts, that the nation is complicit in his suffering.<sup>73</sup> While these films differ diametrically in their assessment of the plantation form, each considers it a structure embedded in the nation, whereas films from *Gone with the Wind* to Richard Fleischer's *Mandingo* (1975) have suggested that either its beauty or its perversity could render it barely comprehensible by those not intimate with its cultures.

In contrast, *The Butler* approaches the question of the plantation's chronotope through young Cecil, newly traumatized and unfamiliar with any other social space: rather than treating this zone as ontologically distinctive, the film explores the kinds of awareness necessary to understand it properly. Cecil is initially resistant to such conceptual work, his insularity emerging from the loss he is not even permitted to mourn: immediately after his father is killed, the murderer's mother tells him to “stop crying,” as she is “gonna teach [him] how to be a house nigga,”<sup>74</sup> and he focusses on succeeding in this new role. While he recognizes this domestic sphere as dangerous, as he

<sup>73</sup> *12 Years a Slave*, dir. Steve McQueen, Fox Searchlight (2013), Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment (2014), DVD.

<sup>74</sup> I have reproduced this word phonetically, albeit anachronistically. The film does distinguish this pronunciation by the elderly plantation matriarch (played by Vanessa Redgrave) from that of epithets later hurled at Louis and his fellow activists. Shortly after this scene, a black mentor (Maynard, played by Clarence Williams III) slaps the teen-aged Cecil for using the matriarch's phrase, calling it “the white man's word ... filled with hate.”

must serve his parents' murderer/rapist at mealtimes, he explicitly considers the outside world even more frightening – and, indeed, he encounters both hunger and those lynched bodies upon his departure. Perfecting his professional demeanor and carefully delimiting his psychological and cartographic interrogations – enacting, in other words, the cinematic ideal of “the butler” – he is recruited for a position at the White House after a manager, having a drink off-duty at a nearby inn, hears him answer a customer's question about civil rights activism by saying he gives little thought to “American or European politics,” simultaneously disavowing political and global geographic awareness.

But Cecil clashes regularly with friends and family members concerning spatial connections, and his singularity is important: otherwise, the film would risk supporting what McKittrick describes as “discourses that erase and despatialize [black] sense[s] of place,” geographies shaped through a history of “contestation.”<sup>75</sup> Instead, *The Butler* foregrounds both dissent and investigation in African American spatial thought. Cecil is disturbed, for example, that Gloria and Louis are so interested in Mamie Till, a Chicagoan whose activism, following the murder of her son Emmett in Mississippi, demonstrated her conviction “that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.”<sup>76</sup> Conflict intensifies as Louis determines to attend Fisk University in Nashville, leading Cecil, fearful for his son, to attempt to persuade his family to ignore the South. Other characters, however, insist on the inviability of stark regional boundaries while pointing instead to transnational connections. Louis's training as an activist at Fisk is explicitly based on techniques honed in India and South Africa, and this challenge to US exceptionalism ultimately proves persuasive even in Cecil's workplace, as John F. Kennedy (James Marsden), watching the abuse of civil rights activists on television, admits he cannot “tell what country [he's] looking at.” The film makes clear that any serious consideration of African American life must attend also to transnational events, cutting directly from Cecil and Gloria's faces as they watch Johnson deliver the Voting Rights Act to Congress on television (images re-created for the film) to archival news footage of bombings in Vietnam and protests in Washington. This convergence, usually represented in separate film genres, proves devastating to the family, as the younger son Charlie dies in combat, and Louis, long opposed to the US presence in Vietnam, fulfills his promise not to attend the funeral, intensifying his conflict with his father.

<sup>75</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii, xix.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Jacqueline Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till,” *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 9, 2 (1996), 245–82, 245, doi:10.1353/yale.1996.0016.

Though these synchronic transnational connections are familiar to students of African American history, they are rarely seen on cinematic screens: even black independent films such as Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993) focus chiefly on heritage ties between diasporic subjects and African ancestors. *The Butler*, in contrast, promotes understanding of new or renewed connections based in the common need to oppose oppression; while that can yield pan-African or diasporic perspectives, it also highlights struggle against injustice more broadly.<sup>77</sup> Though the butlers talk frequently concerning national events, for example, one briefly criticizes his peers for "ignorance" of problems elsewhere: praising the refusal of Pablo Casals, who is performing for the Kennedys, to perform in any country that recognizes Franco's regime, James (Lenny Kravitz) is appalled that Carter doesn't know who Franco is. A moment of banter inserted in a section mainly devoted to Louis's experiences of brutality in the US South, this theme of geographic connection will nonetheless prove crucial to the film's resolution. The decades-long feud between Cecil and Louis only ends after Cecil contemplates his spatial relationships with that Georgia plantation, with the White House, and indirectly with South Africa.

The film suggests that Cecil is only able to recognize these connections once he has considered his professional performances in a political context – not as the experience of being a butler, which for him involves familiar forms of labor and friendship with colleagues, but as the projection of an icon.<sup>78</sup> This sequence begins when Cecil and Gloria are invited as guests to a Reagan administration state dinner, during which Cecil considers, in voice-over, the "two faces" worn by the butlers. Offered this invitation for persuading White House administrators to provide African American staff equal pay, he cannot escape the impression that his primary purpose, in the eyes of others, is "for show." Though in many ways constructed as a realistic character, Cecil suddenly becomes aware of himself as an icon of blackness whose "lived experience" cannot be recognized by the global governing class,<sup>79</sup> whose

<sup>77</sup> The film's emphasis on social and political struggle as opposed to solely cultural or racial commonality suggests a sensibility influenced by what is now called the "global South," as defined by Levander and Mignolo: "the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for independent thought and decolonial freedom." Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, "Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order," *Global South*, 5, 1 (2011), 1–11, 4, doi:10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.1.

<sup>78</sup> In *Red, White & Black*, 96, Wilderson asks, concerning black or, in his terms, "Slave cinema . . . : Can film tell the story of a sentient being whose story can be neither recognized nor incorporated into Human civil society?". In this sequence, the film seems to explore this question.

<sup>79</sup> Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism*, 50, 2 (2008), 177–218, 187, doi:10.1353/crt.0.0062. Moten, here, is exploring how one can understand the substance of black lives in a world unequipped, ontologically, even to recognize them.

concepts of race have both dictated and been sustained by his performances. Following this allegorical moment, Cecil has his first embedded flashback. From the margins of a meeting between Ronald Reagan (Alan Rickman) and some Republican senators, he hears the President insist, despite their warnings that apartheid constitutes a “human rights disaster,” the brutality of which makes it a “United States racial issue,” that he will veto any sanctions against it. Suddenly, Cecil sees his loving father, and then the snide cruelty of his father’s murderer. In the next shot, he wakes in the middle of the night and walks to his sons’ unoccupied room, where he finds Manning Marable’s *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, a volume that consistently situates conflicts over race in the US in a global context.<sup>80</sup> Proclaiming, in voice-over, that he feels “lost,” Cecil then takes Gloria to see his childhood home and to contemplate the space and time that so influenced his later life.

Comparing the brutality of US racial injustice to that of the Holocaust, Cecil’s voice-over, at this moment, aligns with rare anti-exceptionalist moments found in popular civil rights narrative;<sup>81</sup> this scene stands out most, however, for its contrast with the film’s initial images of the plantation. In early shots, bodies of both sharecroppers and elites are effectively embedded in cotton, which reaches to their torsos. Camera angles are either very low or situated amid such extensive growth that greenery dominates the frame; in many shots, plant life is also out of focus, simultaneously suffusing the image and evading scrutiny. Though this later scene is no less lush, it no longer comprises cotton production, and the extreme long shots of grass and forest also include swaths of open sky. While its initial presentation evoked both previous Hollywood epics and notorious brutality, rendering it difficult to connect to more mundane spaces, the land now appears merely rural – lacking the generic attributes, such as sound or conventional framing, that might determine its interpretation. Arriving by car, dressed in tracksuits that underscore the difference in era,<sup>82</sup> Cecil and Gloria survey this aesthetically unexceptional landscape from the road. In combining such non-iconic images with Cecil’s voice-over discussing how contemporary citizens understand historical brutality, this commercial melodrama surprisingly echoes the opening of Alain Resnais’s avant-garde documentary *Nuit et bruyard/Night and Fog* (1956): “Even a peaceful landscape ... even a meadow in harvest, with crows circling overhead and grass fires ... even a road where cars

<sup>80</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984).

<sup>81</sup> This comparison is implicit in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Warner, 1982; first published ), 245–47.

<sup>82</sup> Production designers relied heavily on eye-catching costumes created by Ruth E. Carter to convey chronological differences. “The Unique Perspective of Lee Daniels’ *The Butler*,” A6.

and peasants and couples pass ... can lead to a concentration camp.”<sup>83</sup> This generic transposition, like *The Butler*’s early dissolves, suggests the films’ shared goal of disrupting viewers’ desire, as argued by the screenwriter of *Night and Fog*, to believe that a brutal past can be contained in “a given time and place,” a conviction that might blind us to “the arrival of our new executioners.”

Rather as *Night and Fog* questions how and to what effect societies can continue after committing and being ravaged by violence, the protagonists of *The Butler*, at this moment, contemplate the relationships between their childhoods and their subsequent lives. For Gloria, this process is verbalized, as she notes that her “mama woulda been right proud” of her for “being with a man” who has taken “such good care” of her, a paradoxical form of praise from a character whose frustration in her containment led to alcoholism and an affair. Her delivery in this setting, however, suggests her conclusion that their partnership was pursued lovingly, even as it was inevitably shaped by destructive gender norms and limited career choices for African Americans. The results of Cecil’s thinking appear after his return, as he informs Reagan of his retirement before joining Louis in a protest at the South African embassy. Remarkably, the President expresses concern that his stance on “this whole civil rights issue” might be “just wrong,” and Cecil responds indirectly, “Sometimes I think I’m just scared of what it really means. I’m trying not to be so scared anymore.” Though the film depicts Reagan as kind in personal interactions,<sup>84</sup> Cecil’s empathy can only shock those familiar with this President’s racial policies – knowledge that the film immediately conveys, as Louis argues seconds later that Reagan “has attacked or dismantled every civil rights program that has ever been put in place.”<sup>85</sup> And yet Cecil’s statement echoes Gloria’s in its commitment to recognizing how past circumstances might distort one’s understanding of the

<sup>83</sup> *Nuit et bruillard/Night and Fog*, dir. Alain Resnais, Argos (1956), Criterion (2004), DVD.

<sup>84</sup> In this, the film nods to a prominent hagiographic tradition, which describes specific anti-racist acts in narrow contexts in order to argue that Reagan’s national policies and rhetoric were meant to promote racial equality. Steven F. Hayward et al., “What ‘The Butler’ Gets Wrong about Ronald Reagan and Race,” *Washington Post*, 29 Aug. 2013, at [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-the-butler-gets-wrong-about-ronald-reagan-and-race/2013/08/29/5f6aa21e-0e87-11e3-8cdd-bdcd09410972\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-the-butler-gets-wrong-about-ronald-reagan-and-race/2013/08/29/5f6aa21e-0e87-11e3-8cdd-bdcd09410972_story.html)). In contrast, *The Butler* distinguishes Reagan’s personal style from his political goals and impact.

<sup>85</sup> Even the first edition of Marable’s *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, published in 1984, articulated such concerns; more recent editions describe this process in detail. Marable, 193–208; Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–2006*, 3rd edn, Kindle e-book (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), loc. 2883–3131.

present. Thus he renounces his previous insularity immediately before he is shown being jailed for his activism against apartheid.

By incorporating the Reagan era into a civil rights narrative, *The Butler* highlights a dangerous fulcrum between the iconic movement and our contemporary era, a period that mobilized changes through which, as Ellen C. Scott argues, “an ultra neoliberalist state has transformed discourses of rights into the lexicon of the marketplace.”<sup>86</sup> The full citizenship that civil rights activists pursued has in effect been weakened as a political category: spearheaded by Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, the pursuit of global policies undermining both state social services and regulations on capitalist enterprise is now recognized as working to “remake the world around us in a totally different image,” such that “maximizing ... market transactions” is understood as the central principle in pursuit of “the social good.”<sup>87</sup> This upheaval proved devastating to radical movements across the globe, many of which sought to gain and mobilize state power for transformative ends only to find it increasingly constrained in relation to global capital; such was the fate, in fact, of the struggle against apartheid.<sup>88</sup> More than an attack on revolutionary movements, neoliberalism has battered the very principles through which they once imagined progressive futures, and the resulting “rupture,” in David Scott’s words, has led to a “sense of a stalled present,” one in which it is difficult to comprehend connections to either future or past.<sup>89</sup>

In US cinema, this challenge has been prominent in representations of southern racial history, in which the past is recognized less as a period of oppressions we have been and are working to overcome on the path to a different future than as a period of triumph or pain that determines contemporary meaning and experience. The celebratory endings of civil rights films, for example, present history, in Scott’s terms, as “a source of radiant wisdom and truth,” whereas post-1980s representations of plantation slavery position that past as a haunting trauma, a “wound that will not heal.”<sup>90</sup> The point here is not, of course, to deny that the civil rights movement bequeathed crucial ideals to the contemporary era or that slavery forged continuing structures of injustice and immiseration; the point, rather, is that cinema has rarely imagined a way that persons in its present could alter the

<sup>86</sup> Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, 190; see also Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 3rd edn, loc. 3027–3131.

<sup>87</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–3. Harvey also notes the centrality of Deng Xiaoping in transmuting the economic directives of the People’s Republic of China; Reagan and Thatcher were more immediately influential in the postcolonial contexts discussed below.

<sup>88</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 3–5, original emphasis; Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, rev. edn (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

<sup>89</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 6, 13. <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



contemporary import of those pasts, by building on civil rights ideals or finding a new way to fight old injustice. (This problem is central, for example, to both *Sankofa* and *12 Years a Slave*, in which free protagonists with strong memories of slavery stare into space with expressions of unmitigated pain; though *Daughters of the Dust* uses representations of haunting to convey a process of healing, that transformation is contained in the early twentieth century and distanced from the mainland US.<sup>91</sup>) In contrast, while diegetically placed within the very maelstrom leading to the moment in which *The Butler* circulates, Cecil revisits the past – both his and that of the plantation more broadly – as a period of meaningful but not absolute difference, a time that must be put in conversation with the present in order for him to participate in ongoing racial struggle; further, this approach to time enables him to look beyond his home, his city, and his nation, gaining insight into local and global politics simultaneously.

But if this sense of chronological connectedness contests the many representations of the civil rights movement that keep it “from speaking effectively to the challenges of *our* time,”<sup>92</sup> its manifestation proves evanescent. Even as Cecil, Louis, and other protestors wait in jail, a sound bridge – Cecil’s voice-over narration and the O’Jays’ “Family Reunion” – leads the narrative forward twenty years to a neighborhood rally for Barack Obama. For Cecil, these two events sharply punctuate the flow of time, with the second eclipsing the first: “After going to jail, I thought I’d seen it all, but I’d never imagined I’d see a black man be a real contender for the President of the United States.” But much as the O’Jays’ distinctly easy-going tune obscures the complexity of their lyrics, Cecil’s narration belies clear continuities between past and present: as the song emphasizes the family’s heteropatriarchal transcendence of time while implying a process of dispersal, Cecil introduces Obama’s campaign from the very space of the prison, a system that began expanding during the Reagan administration and has since developed into mass incarceration and is often described as the nation’s most acute contemporary civil rights crisis.<sup>93</sup> And if the film’s exploration of US racial conflicts is cut starkly short by its turn to the Obama campaign, its geographical imagination

<sup>91</sup> *Sankofa*, dir. Haile Gerima, Mypheduh (1993), DVD (2003); *Daughters of the Dust*, dir. Julie Dash, Geechee Girls (1991), Kino International, DVD (1999). Post-1980s cinematic representations of slavery are few, but Scott’s argument could readily be applied to Jonathan Demme’s *Beloved* (1998), Kevin Willmott’s *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (2004), and Lars von Trier’s *Manderlay* (2005), all of which challenge linear time in efforts to comprehend slavery’s impact.

<sup>92</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1234, added emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 3rd edn, loc. 2830–90. I thank Nicholas Grant for pointing to this connection.

narrows even more sharply – back to Cecil’s neighborhood (with his local polling place), to his home (where Gloria, sadly, dies just before the election), to the hallway outside the Oval Office, where Cecil appears to be finally enfolded into the nation with a thoroughness that resolves what Lauren Berlant calls “the tension between utopia and history.”<sup>94</sup>

### CONCLUSION: RACE, SPACE, AND CINEMATIC RELATIONS

Describing US racial politics of the early twenty-first century in his third edition of *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (2007), Marable continues to feature an interplay of global and local dynamics, including African Americans’ continued transnational organizing and concerns over rising US xenophobia, as well as a focus on African Americans in New Orleans, who experienced particularly catastrophic effects from governmental failures to prepare for and respond to Hurricane Katrina. He concludes, “Justice arrives slowly, for oppressed people.”<sup>95</sup> But commercial cinema notoriously resists such timelines, seeking instead a plot that builds with palpable momentum and concludes with a sense of accomplishment.<sup>96</sup> Thus *The Butler*, filmed chiefly in New Orleans, celebrates Obama’s victory as if it constituted a conclusion to racial injustice, rather than a “gratifying” event alongside long-standing problems.<sup>97</sup> Ironically, however, while this most clichéd element of the film’s approach to politics responds to concerns readily associated with marketing, one could say the same of *The Butler*’s far more innovative approach to space.

<sup>94</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 29. Berlant here is describing the trope of the “infantile citizen,” whose “naïveté” and “faith in the nation-state’s capacity to provide the wisdom and justice it promises” promises to “transcend . . . the fractures and hierarchies of national life.” *Ibid.*, 29, 27. An elderly citizen who has shown skepticism toward his nation, Cecil’s consistent respect for his presidential employers and now diminished physical capacity nonetheless align him with this figure to a degree.

<sup>95</sup> Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 3rd edn, loc. 3801.

<sup>96</sup> Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema,” 18–19.

<sup>97</sup> I take the term “gratifying” from Waldo E. Martin Jr., who wrote after the election – much as Cecil says in the film – “Given my personal history, as both a citizen and a historian, I could not possibly have imagined that in my lifetime our nation would elect an African American president.” Waldo E. Martin Jr., “Precious African American Memories, Post-racial Dreams and the American Nation,” *Daedalus*, 140, 1 (2011), 67–78, 71, doi:10.1162/DAED\_a\_00059). Martin goes on to distinguish, however, the affective qualities of this moment from its impact on “material and structural inequalities.” *Ibid.*, 71, 73. Daniels has described Obama’s election as having extraordinary impact on his own performances and sense of identity, which may have influenced his potent mobilization of affect in the film’s conclusion. See Lynn Hirschberg, “The Audacity of ‘Precious,’” *New York Times Magazine*, 21 Oct. 2009, at [www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/magazine/25precious-t.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/magazine/25precious-t.html).

Today, one of the greatest impediments to funding for major releases with largely African American casts is the long-standing and effectively untested preconception that they cannot draw global audiences.<sup>98</sup> In this respect, the film's productive and insistent dismantling of Hollywood's previous maps of racial oppression and struggle could also be read, at least in part, as an effort to position itself as a suitable commodity for the global film marketplace. Certainly, this widely cited challenge was on filmmakers' minds: producer Pam Williams noted her particular pleasure that, in earning approximately one-third of its revenues from foreign ticket sales, the film debunked "the myth that African-American and American political stories aren't of interest overseas."<sup>99</sup> The global circulation of US commercial cinema is, of course, rarely described as a means of conveying progressive narratives and ideas: rather, it is rightly recognized as a form of cultural imperialism and, more recently, neo-liberalism – an economic system in which cultural production is conducted by corporations with global aspirations and operations.<sup>100</sup> Nor is *The Butler* a film to which one would generally turn for geographic contemplation, given that it was shot largely on soundstages in New Orleans and uses even its "location" shots on Louisiana plantations to suggest a setting labeled "Macon, Georgia." The film participates in a system described as "dispersed" or even "runaway" production, in which high-cost US releases, previously centered in Hollywood studios, are shot in locales whose governments provide substantial financial incentives,<sup>101</sup> and such films are notorious for effacing local cultures and scenes, sometimes altering their image in postproduction to ensure they can be mistaken for other places.<sup>102</sup> But even critics of such filmmaking

<sup>98</sup> Ndounou, *Shaping the Future of African American Film*, 2–5, 9–10, 14–15; Michael Cieply, "Hollywood Works to Maintain Its World Dominance," *New York Times*, 3 Nov. 2014, at [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/business/media/hollywood-works-to-maintain-its-world-dominance.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/business/media/hollywood-works-to-maintain-its-world-dominance.html).

<sup>99</sup> Hazelton, "In Service of *The Butler*."

<sup>100</sup> For a substantial overview of this argument see Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2* (London: BFI Pub., 2005).

<sup>101</sup> In 2012, Louisiana offered film productions transferable tax credits equal to 30 percent of in-state expenditures, plus further credits for employment of Louisiana residents. Loren C. Scott & Associates, Inc., "The Economic Impact of Louisiana's Entertainment Tax Credit Programs" (Louisiana Department of Economic Development, April 2013), at [http://louisianaentertainment.gov/assets/ENT/docs/2013\\_OEID\\_Program\\_Impact\\_Report%20\\_FINAL.pdf](http://louisianaentertainment.gov/assets/ENT/docs/2013_OEID_Program_Impact_Report%20_FINAL.pdf); Georgia offered a 30 percent transferable credit without additional credits for local employees. Oronde Small and Laura Wheeler, "Policy Brief: A Description of the Film TaxCredit and Film Industry in Georgia" (Fiscal Research Center, 23 Feb. 2016), at <http://frc.gsu.edu/files/2016/02/Georgia-Film-Tax-Credit-February-2016.pdf>. In these arrangements, tax credits typically exceed tax liabilities and should be recognized as subsidies.

<sup>102</sup> Greg Elmer and Mike Gasher, "Introduction: Catching Up to Runaway Productions," in Elmer and Gasher, eds., *Contracting Out Hollywood: Runaway Productions and Foreign Location Shooting* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 1–18.

strategies acknowledge that the “wander[ing]” induced by the extraordinary mobility of contemporary cinematic capital can, in some instances, yield complex “cosmopolitan” thought.<sup>103</sup>

If, as Fredric Jameson theorizes, representations of the local amid global transformation necessarily serve as allegorical figures through which to conceptualize spatial relations,<sup>104</sup> filmmakers engaged in dispersed production have expanded incentive (which many forgo, at least at the narrative level) to contemplate relationships among geographies, politics, and narrative production. For the developers of *The Butler*, economic motivations to consider global connections aligned productively with the history they sought to narrate. In circulating images of this history of transnational racial politics, the film arguably offers one example in support of Herman Gray’s argument that the interactions of US media with global markets and cultures might offer “as many possibilities as ... pitfalls” for “black cultural politics in the U.S.”<sup>105</sup> Its insistence on the value of transnational political thought may be particularly useful for a moment when the traditions of leftist internationalism have been somewhat eclipsed by alarm over global capital:<sup>106</sup> while challenges to this system have certainly involved transnational cooperation and exchange, local and national politics in the US – when not directly supportive of neoliberal policies – often emphasize protectionist or anti-immigrant stances.

Meanwhile, as studios relentlessly pursue blockbusters developed for consumption anywhere and with little consideration of particular locales, critical independent films often value vigorously “locative” aesthetics, which seek to incorporate or explore specific local histories, communities, and spatial relations.<sup>107</sup> Such is the strategy, for example, of Tanya Hamilton’s *Night Catches Us* (2010) and Ryan Coogler’s *Fruitvale Station* (2013), which Ellen C. Scott rightly describes as distinctly powerful civil-rights-themed

<sup>103</sup> Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, “The Ice Storm: Ang Lee, Cosmopolitanism, and the Global Audience,” in Elmer and Gasher, *Contracting Out Hollywood*, 140–56, 143.

<sup>104</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995; first published ), 2–4.

<sup>105</sup> Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Kazin cites several additional factors for diminishing internationalism among US leftists in “Let’s Not Change the World after All: The Decline of Left Internationalism,” *Dissent*, 63, 2 (Spring 2016), 85–91, doi:10.1353/dss.2016.0033.

<sup>107</sup> For a discussion of “locative” cinema see R. Barton Palmer, *Shot on Location: Postwar American Cinema and the Exploration of Real Place* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), x, 48–50. Sherry Ortner, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 29–40, 53–57, without focussing on space per se, notes the extent to which US independent filmmakers tend to define their work against Hollywood aesthetics and in favor of “real” circumstances.

directorial debuts.<sup>108</sup> Seeking to capture memories and experiences of police violence and political organizing in changing urban neighborhoods (Philadelphia and the Oakland/San Francisco area respectively), these films do not advertise their global relevance, which is nonetheless evident from broad geographic echoes and support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the US.<sup>109</sup> But such contexts are also implied, cinematically, by *The Butler* – an unabashedly commercial film that nonetheless deconstructs familiar racial images, associating blackness with a history of broad geopolitical thought and action. In these ways, though the film is in many respects anything but revolutionary, it contributes to the contemporary possibilities of “film blackness,” Gillespie’s term for emphasizing “the radical capacity of black visual and expressive culture” as opposed to a more narrowly defined and restricted “black film.”<sup>110</sup> *The Butler* suggests that such “resistances, capacities, and variables” currently operate,<sup>111</sup> albeit inconsistently, across industry sectors and shooting practices, in a way that could ultimately enable a rich and broad cinematic mapping of black and progressive political geographies.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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<sup>108</sup> Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, 193–95.

<sup>109</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “Black Lives Matter Is a Global Cause,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2016, at [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/12/black-lives-matter-is-a-global-cause](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/12/black-lives-matter-is-a-global-cause). *Night Catches Us* visually acknowledges the BPP’s transnational thought through images members have preserved, including a photograph of Fidel Castro (SimonSays, 2010, Amazon streaming).

<sup>110</sup> Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 12, 1–12.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.