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VISCERAL WHITENESS: PUBLIC MEMORY AND (DIS)COMFORT IN 'POST-RACIAL'
NARRATIVES ABOUT SLAVERY AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA

by

JOHN CLYDE RUSSELL

Under the Direction of Patricia Davis, PhD

ABSTRACT

A prominent aspect of whiteness has always been and continues to be a matter of White people's comfort and discomfort. Feelings associated with whiteness are indicative of its ideology that work to preserve whiteness, in part, by being ignorant and dismissive of its very existence and power. I argue that (dis)comfort is so central to the ideology of whiteness, so much a part of its history, that it is intuitive to whiteness. It's not fear or hate that dominates whiteness's reactions. Rather, the (dis)comfort is visceral as the moderate White person is consumed with attending to their comfort surrounding racial issues. Attention to the visceral nature of whiteness transcends time and cultural movements, has been used to challenge whiteness's hegemonic structures, and is ubiquitous in past and contemporary rhetoric about race

in the U.S. This dissertation takes the dynamic of White (dis)comfort—evident throughout American history, media, and popular culture—as the starting point for an examination of whiteness. Specifically, I examine the ways the U.S. remembers its racial history through popular narratives within film and theatre. This project drops in on three key moments of American history: *Hamilton: An American Musical* for the founding era; *12 Years a Slave* for the Civil War era; and *The Help* for the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. The texts are read as the contemporary culture’s projections of race and history, which reveal present day concerns, issues, and anxieties. From a working understanding of public memory, I emphasize its role in determining conceptions about history and how examining the visceral nature of whiteness illuminates its ideology. This project locates whiteness and critiques narratives within the so-called “post-racial” era about America’s racial past, thereby better understanding the present. I combine rhetorical history with whiteness studies and public memory to better understand the complexities of whiteness and its hidden function in American history, politics, and discourse. I conclude by articulating whiteness’s relation to White people and antiracism. I also suggest future implications and call for an expansion of critiquing and theorizing whiteness in rhetorical studies.

INDEX WORDS: Public memory, Whiteness, (Dis)comfort, Post-racial, Slavery, Civil rights,
Popular culture

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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NARRATIVES ABOUT SLAVERY AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA

by

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Nicole, who was always supportive of my passion, always generous with her time, and always willing to help ease the burden I too often placed on myself. This project and the work of the past five years would not have been possible without you.

To my three sons, Dawit, Marley, and Elliott. I thank you for your inspiration. Dawit and Marley, I thank you for your patience as I took up a good portion of the summer to finish writing. And I thank you for your interest in my work. You asked good questions, and you celebrated with me as I finished each chapter. My hope is that you grow into a future that reflects your beautiful conceptions of humanity.

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REFERENCES.....ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1 VISCERAL WHITENESS AND PUBLIC MEMORY

There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought.

-Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation.

-Toni Morrison

A prominent aspect of whiteness has always been and continues to be a matter of White people's comfort and discomfort.¹ (Dis)comfort is the marrow of whiteness. It is a vital force within the racist legal and cultural apparatuses that comprise slavery, Jim Crow, the civil rights era, and contemporary systemic issues. In fact, we can trace the invention of race itself to White comfort. W.E.B. Du Bois explains, "The social sciences from the beginning were deliberately used as instruments to prove the inferiority of [those] who were being used as slaves for the comfort and culture of the masters."² He adds, "White Western Europe has long been united in a determination to make the colored worlds contribute to its comfort."³ Du Bois is describing how two influential yet somewhat opposing foundations in Europe and then in the U.S., religion and science, unified to create racial categories to legitimize White superiority and substantiate

¹ I use "(dis)comfort" hereafter when referring to the comfort/discomfort dynamic. Also, I've chosen to use the capital "W" when referring to White people. It is important, I think, to do this because it signifies "White" as a race. Whereas whiteness has so often tried to separate itself from racial categorization by being the "norm" or place from which others become raced, making White a proper noun indicates a racial identity. This also signifies an ideology that relies on skin color.

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *On Asia: Crossing the World Color Line*. Bill V. Mullen and Cathryn Watson, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 138.

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," In *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, Alain Locke, ed. (New York: Touchstone 1997), 410.

atrocities such as slavery and Manifest Destiny—both of which advanced the lives and prosperity of White people at the expense of people of color.⁴

Since the foundational structures, the guts and bones of American life are comprised of White (dis)comfort, publicly addressing it has been an appropriate method for challenging whiteness and promoting equality. Consider Frederick Douglass’s open letter to his former slave master, which put White comfort on notice. The letter ends with a declaration that Douglass intends to use the slaver as “a means of concentrating public attention on the system, and deepening their horror of trafficking in the souls and bodies of men. I shall make use of you as a means of exposing the character of the American church and clergy—and as a means of bringing this guilty nation with yourself to repentance.”⁵ Douglass writes that while he is “dragging” his former master before the public, creating physical and psychological discomfort, Douglass means him no physical harm. He writes that he would happily share the comfort of his home with his former master, which stands in stark contrast to their prior “long and intimate, though by no means friendly” relationship.⁶

Also consider that two watershed moments of the civil rights era addressed White (dis)comfort. Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat—to sacrifice her comfort for that of a White person—was inspired by Emmett Till’s open casket, which invited the White world to see, to experience, to face the uncomfortable reality of racism.⁷ Underscoring why these tactics were necessary, Martin Luther King, Jr. writes in “Letter From Birmingham Jail” about the “white

⁴ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

⁵ Frederick Douglass, September 3, 1848, Letter. To Thomas Auld. Foner, Philip (ed.). *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, p. 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

moderate, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”⁸ In this instance King, as he often did elsewhere, correlates comfort and inaction. He places them in direct opposition to progress’s requirement of discomfort and action. Furthermore, King identifies the “white moderate” as the primary agent whose comfort is at stake. Whereas whiteness is obvious at the extreme ends of anti-Black racists, disrupting the comfort at the moderate level does more to promote change because it locates whiteness at the level where it can hide. This is significant because whiteness maintains its advantage when it is invisible and therefore deniable.

From abolitionists to civil rights leaders, challenging White comfort has carried over into the contemporary discourse about race. Following in the footsteps of athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Arthur Ashe, and inspired by Colin Kaepernick’s protest of police brutality, Michael Bennett, who plays professional football, wrote a book titled, *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable*.⁹ It is a personal account for the ways racism is present in all areas of American life, and the title reflects how engaging in that discussion alone makes whiteness uncomfortable. Furthermore, as homage to James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son in *Between the World and Me* to reject a false narrative that excuses or gives purpose to the sins of the past: “to resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law.”¹⁰ Thinking there is an “irrepressible justice” to our history is comforting but it also means forgetting the humanity and struggle of history. Throughout the book, Coates echoes King in making struggle analogous to discomfort insisting, “The Dreamers

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, pp. 9-10.
http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf

⁹ Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018).

¹⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 70.

[those benefiting from racism] will have to learn to struggle themselves.”¹¹ The path to progress, Coates tells his audience, is to reject comforting narratives and embrace the discomfort necessary for growth.

However effective challenging White comfort as a measure for legal and social change may have been or however persistent it may still be, the feelings of deserved comfort ingrained in whiteness remain. Recently, a Fox News commentator, on the verge of tears, said she was uncomfortable with the conversation about race and the White supremacist events in Charlottesville.¹² Discussing and labeling White people as racist produced a feeling of discomfort too great for her to continue the segment. This is an example of what Robin DiAngelo has termed “white fragility” in which “the smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable” for White people.¹³ Thus, a comforting tactic of whiteness is to assert that race is meaningless, that it once mattered but no more determines policy or social interactions. There is a function of (dis)comfort and white fragility within the vernacular when a White person laments, “Why does everything have to be about race?”¹⁴ This question and the news anchor’s defeated tone stem from the notion that America has conquered its race problem—beginning with the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Amendments to the Civil Rights Act to affirmative action and, finally, the election of Barack Obama. Such questions rooted in white fragility sidestep or

¹¹ Ibid., 151.

¹² Carla Herrera, “Fox News Host Cries Because Conversation on Race Makes Her ‘Uncomfortable,’” *Huffington Post*, August 16, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fox-news-melissa-francis-race_us_5994d26ce4b0d0d2cc841dbf

¹³ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁴ Emma Gray and Jessica Samakow, “11 Things White People Need To Realize About Race,” *The Huffington Post*, July 23, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/11-things-white-people-need-to-realize-about-race_us_55b0009be4b07af29d576702

ignore the role race plays in American culture in a desperate search for more comforting answers.

Discourse seeking comfort signals that racism belongs to history and has an insignificant or no effect on contemporary problems of inequality. It also highlights whiteness's refusal to recognize itself; the news anchor felt judged and reasons other than racism divert attention away from race, and therefore, her whiteness. It is also entirely possible—even likely—that this was a performance for the network's predominately white conservative audience, a means of signaling to them that their own biases (and racial narcissism) have support. The consequence is what bell hooks describes when she writes that “white people can ‘safely’ imagine that they are invisible to black people” and any discourse or event in which whiteness loses “the right to control the black gaze” is strange and uncomfortable.¹⁵ Just as discomfort challenges whiteness, comfort sustains its invisibility and survival and, therefore, its position of control. The comfortable feelings associated with whiteness—feelings that are indicative of its ideology—work to preserve whiteness, in part, by being ignorant and dismissive of whiteness's very existence and power.

To explore (dis)comfort in whiteness, some explication of terminology will be helpful. Throughout this dissertation I use the term “racism” to signal the tangible and explicit policies, effects, or expression of ideas about the meanings of race. “Racist” is the description of those policies, effects or ideas. “Whiteness” is the enabler and benefiter of racism. As Ibram X. Kendi explains, racism is a verb. It is action, and whiteness is created through those actions of racism and whiteness acts to create racism to maintain its hierarchical status above all others. I argue acts of maintaining whiteness can be identified in revealing its comfort in racial discourse.

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 168.

This study investigates the rhetorical ways racial narratives in popular culture challenge or protect whiteness. In particular, I focus on historical narratives in which race and racism are featured because in those remembrances whiteness is either invisible and therefore controlling, or it is visible, and therefore susceptible. This dissertation takes the dynamic of White comfort and discomfort—evident throughout U.S. history, media, and popular culture—as the starting point for an examination of whiteness. Specifically, I examine the ways the U.S. remembers its racial history through entertaining narratives within film and theatre. I argue that (dis)comfort is so central to the ideology of whiteness, so much a part of its history, that it is intuitive to whiteness. I argue that whiteness is instilled in White people explicitly such as through history textbooks, and implicitly through the structural and cultural hegemony of American society. White people receive training in whiteness with coded language of “normal,” “neutral,” and “regular.” Whiteness becomes calcified within White people as an understanding that “that’s just the way it is.” And this calcified understanding, sometimes verbalized as right/wrong or good/bad, gets lodged deep into White people as an innate feeling. I argue that it’s not fear or hate that dominates whiteness’s reactions. Rather, the (dis)comfort is visceral as the moderate White is consumed with attending to their comfort surrounding racial issues.

It goes deeper than an understanding or perception of the “natural” order of things; it is a viscerally guided understanding. Its effect is maintaining an ideology that values, protects, advances, normalizes, standardizes, and privileges whiteness. It is ingrained and is a powerful force in how White people maneuver within racial discourse or remember the racial past of the U.S. More than thinking their way through racial discourse, White people feel their way, and this visceral nature of whiteness is rhetorical, particularly in the historical narratives we celebrate about race, because it persuades, creates identities, and shapes ideas about people and their

material and discursive interactions. In short, the rhetoric of race creates, sustains, and sometimes challenges ideologies of race.

As with many ideologies, collective memory and public memory are important to sustaining or reconstituting itself. Memory, like ideology, is rhetorically constructed. As Kendall Phillips puts it, “the ways memories attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories are essentially rhetorical.”¹⁶ The ways a public remembers its racial history and what that history looks like is indicative of its contemporary attitudes, discursive nature, and hegemonic structures. The rhetorical relationship between memory and whiteness and what that relationship means for contemporary racial discourse is of particular interest here. For example, my goal is to uncover what rhetorical memories about race do or say about a present-day society that is deeply enthralled in racism while the majority of that society either denies race or claims to have transcended it.

The definition of rhetoric I ground this dissertation in comes from Kevin DeLuca’s explanation of articulation theory, which seems to have particular significance to the ideology of whiteness constituted through rhetorical practices that shape society and the relationships therein. DeLuca defines rhetoric as the “mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures.”¹⁷ This study intersects whiteness and public memory to explore the ways narratives about race constitute or challenge whiteness through feelings of comfort or discomfort. In sum, how do narratives about race address whiteness and its (dis)comfort and what do varying methods of addressing them—the mobilization of signs—suggest?

¹⁶ Kendall R. Phillips, *Framing Public Memory*, Kendall R. Phillips, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁷ Kevin DeLuca, “Articulation Theory: A Discursive Grounding for Rhetorical Practice,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 32 (4), 1999, 346.

Attention to the visceral nature of whiteness transcends time and cultural movements, has been used to challenge whiteness's hegemonic structures, and is ubiquitous in past and contemporary rhetoric about race in the U.S. This project drops in on three key moments of American history: the founding era, the Civil War era, and the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. These eras tend to dominate America's racial story.¹⁸ These eras will serve as a guide for studying the rhetoric and public memory that informs visceral whiteness. Each era offers a unique vantage point for uncovering contemporary whiteness. Slavery and civil rights are the predominate stories about Black people in U.S. popular culture. These three eras offer an incomplete narrative of race and blackness; however, that they dominate the context in which we tell such stories implies a certain construction—to borrow from DeLuca—of identity, ideology, consciousness, public, and culture. My approach is to focus on how each era contributes to the contemporary ideology of whiteness, and I use public memory as a tool for making whiteness visible, by bringing to the surface its imbedded rhetorical devices.

The remaining portion of this introduction details the historical construction of whiteness that informs the contemporary iteration that this project examines. To locate whiteness, to analyze it in historical narratives, first requires an understanding of its manifestations. Next, I discuss memory and why I distinguish public memory as appropriate for this study, and its functions in creating, sustaining, and challenging whiteness. In doing so, I identify popular culture as a powerful resource for public memory's role in shaping understanding of history and

¹⁸ Two notes here: First, an era that I considered including is the "Jim Crow" era. I think this era would've stretched from the end of Reconstruction and the creation of the Black codes until the end of World War II. Ultimately, I didn't include this era because it is grossly underrepresented in popular culture, and when films are set in this time period the (dis)comfort of whiteness in the narratives either thematically lean back to the Civil War era or forward to the civil rights era. Second, throughout this dissertation I'll use quotation marks around "post-racial" to indicate its supposed nature. I do not assert that we are in fact in a post-racial era but that implicit with whiteness and the Obama era is the notion of being post-racial.

its ultimate effect on U.S. racial discourse. I conclude with a description of the methodology and artifacts I use in the subsequent chapters.

1.1 Whiteness: A Historical Construction

European royal societies, explorers, and colonizers created whiteness almost as soon as they encountered people whose skin was a different color from their own. In the early sixteenth century, explanations such as climate theories joined the religious explanations such as the curse of Ham and polygenesis to explain darker skin color.¹⁹ These theories persisted and culminated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as naturalistic science developed racial categories.²⁰ Scientific studies during this period classified people according to skin color, hair texture, cranial size, and other bodily markers that placed Whites at the top of an “intrinsically hierarchical order” as the “last and most developed,” effectively providing rationality and evidence for an inherent superiority of White people.²¹ Up to this point in history, religion had been the dominant reason for subjugation—it was God’s will for Africans to be enslaved and the natural right of Whites to be the enslavers. Then naturalistic scientists established a race theory so White people and the U.S. economy could continue benefiting from slavery. Religion and science worked in tandem across the Western world, as Du Bois wrote, to justify whiteness’s superiority and colonial policies that substantiated slavery.

The end of slavery did not, however, mean the end of such characterizations and capitalistic advantages for whiteness. Once the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the U.S., religion and science maintained their race theories to rationalize the “separate but equal”

¹⁹ Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*.

²⁰ Philip C. Wander, Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K. Nakayama, “Whiteness and Beyond: Sociohistorical Foundations of Whiteness and Contemporary Challenges” in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999),15; Also see, Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

²¹ Wander et al., “Whiteness and Beyond,” 15.

laws of segregation.²² They still defined White people against what they perceived, labeled, and needed Black people to be. They coupled blackness with characteristics such as bestial, lazy, ignorant, uncivilized, and as sexual deviants.²³ Therefore, human, hardworking, civilized, and loving must be characteristics of whiteness. These constructions of blackness were effective, in part, because they made whiteness's superiority seem natural. In other words, there was innateness assigned to blackness that provided whiteness with an inherent continued right to be the producer and beneficiary of societal laws and customs.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Du Bois was a prominent voice challenging the concept of race as a biological, natural matter and described the “color line” as an invention by and for the sole benefit of White people.²⁴ The color line has been a part of America since its inception, and it created an experience for White people that helped shape the concept of what it means to be White into a seemingly organic, legitimate, and normal way of being. A long history of privilege for Whites and the many religious and scientific theories to subjugate Blacks instilled a sense of normalcy of place for whiteness. For instance, the commonality for wealth and status to be signified by owning slaves has a reinforcing effect on the perceived naturalness of racial hierarchies. The *constructions* of race went unnoticed—became invisible—to White people as the *results* of race were what mattered.

²² For analysis on the origins of Jim Crow see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1955]); Leslie V. Tischauer, *Jim Crow Laws* (Denver: Greenwood, 2012); For analysis on the continuing effects and adaption of Jim Crow see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010)

²³ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. P. Mondia (London: Arnold, 1996), 110-121; Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

²⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903); Kirt H. Wilson, “towards a Discursive Theory of Racial Identity: *The Souls of Black Folk* as a Response to Nineteenth-Century Biological Determinism,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63 (1999): 193-215.

Thanks to persistent work and sacrifice to make such constructions and inequality visible, laws changed throughout the twentieth century and race theory was rebuked constitutionally. But there are deep-rooted effects of the invention of whiteness that are still present. White people still benefit today “from a history of law, job opportunities, and extension and denial of credit to life expectancy and quality of health care and education.”²⁵ George Lipsitz provides a thorough explanation of how these material realities persist as the “possessive investment in whiteness.”²⁶ Whiteness considers its advantages as deserved or earned and denies race as a factor, yet White people make nearly all decisions in life—from real estate to school choice to career choice to political affiliation—with racial consideration. This, as Lipsitz shows, perpetuates whiteness and its privilege.²⁷ The hegemonic structures of the U.S.—from federal and state powers to ideological state (cultural) apparatuses²⁸—favor whiteness through a sustained effort by whiteness. It’s a complicated but effective strategy: benefiting from whiteness while ignoring whiteness protects whiteness while reveling in whiteness. This adds to Ruth Frankenburg’s definition of whiteness as a “location of structural advantage, of race privilege” because there are more layers to consider.²⁹ One cannot critique whiteness without acknowledging the material benefits that accompany it, but one must also acknowledge the ways those benefits materialize through discourse and socialization.

²⁵Gust A. Yep, “Pedagogy of the Opaque: The Subject of Whiteness in Communication and Diversity Courses” in *Whiteness, Pedagogy, Performance: Dis/Placing Race*. Leda M. Cooks and Jennifer S. Simpson, eds. (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 97.

²⁶ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), revised and expanded ed.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (New York: Verso, 2014).

²⁹ Ruth Frankenburg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

For a rhetorical analysis of whiteness, this first means that my study is based on the assumption that whiteness is inseparable from U.S. history, and it is a principle influence on American discourse, collective imagination, and political policy. Whiteness exerts “influence over everyday life” while “eluding analysis” as the center and norm, the *de facto* American culture.³⁰ This means that whiteness and White superiority are synonymous. Whiteness operates from the point at which all others are judged. When I say that whiteness is comfortable as the “center,” I’m defining the center in hierarchical terms in which whiteness is the standard, the point from which all others get measured. This means that whiteness and White supremacy are synonymous. Although we define racism as a power with structural support, and although we can point to laws designed to mitigate that power, racism persists. As Kevin M. Kruse argues, this is due to the changing nature of racist policies that move from the obvious to the obscure but are by no means less effective.³¹ In fact, by making the policies obscure, by moving from an overt anti-Black policy such as housing segregation to one of a “de facto segregation” in the creation of the suburbs that denied race’s involvement, the forces that were created to justify racism persist.³² To put it simply, whereas racism once required race to exist, racism now survives by denying race. Locating whiteness is then necessary to uncovering the ways racism and race still dominate American life.

Locating whiteness requires an understanding of racism that has always been grounded in structural, deliberate systems of power. Laws, customs, and traditions are specifically applied to and drawn from the race theory discussed above; the advantage of whiteness is “discursively constructed through an oppositional construction of black identity, in particular historical

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³² Ibid., p. 8.

contexts of domination and subjugation.”³³ That discursive construction meant that whiteness was not subjugated, not dehumanized, and not in need of control. These characterizations persist in all factors of contemporary policy and discourse. From overt judicial actions that are disproportionate in sentencing to language that describes what “urban” means or a “good school” looks like.³⁴

Modern conceptualizations of race in America are informed by a long history in which *race* was invented—the subjugation of Black people predicated a need to define blackness. Race is the product of racism, not vice versa.³⁵ To justify subjugation and segregation, blackness was invented and characterized in dehumanizing ways, but this meant whiteness was invented and characterized as well. As Kenneth Burke explains, all language is a selection, reflection, and a deflection.³⁶ Whiteness as a reflection and deflection of blackness has lingering consequences in contemporary rhetoric that, with the end of slavery and the passing of the Civil Rights Act, are not readily recognized but remain intact. The original need to invent blackness may no longer be a factor, but the original constructions of race remain. The laws to deconstruct racism have not deconstructed or redefined whiteness. This is partly what makes locating and analyzing it so difficult.

A second assumption is that whiteness may be difficult to locate but is nevertheless omnipresent. In other words, we tend to not readily recognize whiteness at work although it is always at work. For example, we can look to American classical literature and whiteness’s hidden influence. Toni Morrison argues that the creation of “an Africanist persona” in the

³³ Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999), 137-138.

³⁴ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*

³⁵ Ta Nahasi Coates does an excellent job explaining this concept in his book, *Between the World and Me*

³⁶ Kenneth Burke, “Terministic Screens” in *On Symbols and Society*, Joseph R. Gusfield ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

“literary imagination” of White authors is reflexive, “an extraordinary meditation on the self,” used to distinguish White characters, advance the narrative, or establish a setting or mood.³⁷ In other words, the ways blackness is portrayed in American literature—sometimes in the most seemingly irrelevant way—is reflective of whiteness and informs its designed virtues, characteristics, and importance *and* has established particular conceptualizations and memories of America.

In revealing these constructions, Morrison describes whiteness with a beautifully simple metaphor of a fishbowl. She likens whiteness to the “bowl, the structure that transparently (and visibly) permits” the details and occurrences that are inside the fishbowl, culture and society.³⁸ This is helpful to understanding how something so influential can go unnoticed. It allows a conceptualization and way to locate the manifestations of whiteness so ingrained in our discourse and culture that it shapes the American existence yet remains invisible.³⁹ We look at a society

³⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ There are two notes I wish to address here. The first has to do with how I frame my overall argument in relation to White versus “other.” As constructed and maintained, whiteness views itself as the center and as not raced; therefore, all other races lie outside whiteness with blackness (especially dark skinned Black people) representing the complete opposite of whiteness—the negation. Throughout U.S. history the question of who is White or not has fluctuated for some groups: Irish, Jewish, German, and Italian have all shifted along the whiteness spectrum. Native Americans, while definitely not White, were perceived by founders such as Thomas Jefferson to be closer to White than African slaves, and thus, in their view, more likely to assimilate to White European culture. My project will pay particular attention to the Black / White binary because whiteness is a historical construction and an ideology directly tied to the construction of blackness. Racist ideology directed at Native Americans, Chinese, Hispanics, Muslims, and so on, stems from the whiteness that was invented to justify slavery, as I explain in this dissertation. In short, whiteness as the negation of blackness informed whiteness as the negation of “other.”

The second note addresses my whiteness. Lisa Corrigan has argued (“Blackness in the Rhetorical Imaginary,” *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no.4 (2016): 189-191) that we should acknowledge how “Whiteness *shapes* what we consider ‘knowledge,’” about race and whiteness. Not only does this mean that we need to pay particular attention to whether what we “know” as coming from whiteness, but it means that I ask how my whiteness informs my critique. My answer is twofold. First, rather than ignore it, I approach this study knowing that I cannot escape my whiteness, and I don’t pretend to. To write about race as if I’m somehow outside whiteness would be disingenuous. Indeed, my own feelings about what has made me uncomfortable or comfortable in areas of race and what I’ve observed about other White people led to an interest in race and rhetorical studies. So much of

structured in racial policy; yet, we fail to see the whiteness that is structuring it. The power of being invisible lies in the ability to act without being caught. Whiteness has power when it is unseen, untouchable. This informs my argument that being made uncomfortable means being made visible. Feeling discomfort is the result of being made aware *to* others and opens a space for locating and analyzing ideologies of whiteness. On the other hand, being made comfortable means remaining undisturbed. This preserves whiteness by maintaining its ideological tenets and protecting its visceral nature.

As we understand how whiteness maintains its power with invisibility, we must recognize that it gains its identity through negation. Manning Marable writes that whiteness is the “negation of something else,” and this definition is powerful because *negation* is manifested in concepts of race that purport White superiority.⁴⁰ Whiteness is constructed out of what it is not. It is *not* Black, *not* Asian, *not* Native American; it is “white, *non*-Hispanic.”⁴¹ This works as a deflection to make White non-racial, as Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek describe as a strategy of whiteness whereby White people “see white as meaning that they lack any other

what informs my argument about race stems from a critical look inward and my personal experiences as a White, heterosexual male growing up in the South. My goal has been to start there and then through an application of my rhetorical training, further what I know about race, whiteness, and rhetoric. Second, as I discuss in the concluding chapter, while there are rhetorical scholars who have contributed to whiteness studies, there is a great need for more. My argument about whiteness is predominantly informed by scholarship in sociology and history. I also lean heavily on the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Cornel West, Toni Morrison, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Whether they are works of fiction or academia, it is through their inspection of whiteness that I take my cues about its function, ideology, and effect. Blending what I’ve learned from writers such as these with my training as a rhetorician helps me examine the discourse surrounding the ways whiteness maintains its comfort. Last, the “black gaze,” explained by bell hooks and Frantz Fanon, is critical to my analysis of whiteness. See David R. Roediger, ed. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).

⁴⁰ Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006),

⁴¹ Pew Research Center, *Social & Demographic Trends*. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/chapter-1-race-and-multiracial-americans-in-the-u-s-census/>; Also, see Pew Research Center, “What Census Calls Us: A Historical Timeline, June 10, 2015. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/interactives/multiracial-timeline/>

racial or ethnic features.”⁴² By assigning distinction out of what whiteness isn’t, it becomes nameless; it is able to exist outside of race. Since white skin is not raced, its position as the absence or negation of race marks it as “regular” or “normal” in racial descriptions. It informs self-awareness and identity; it establishes White as the norm in possession of inherent attributes. And it is these attributes that provide reasoning for whiteness’s expectation of comfort.

Whiteness is grounded in race but is not limited by it. There is obviously a relationship between skin color and whiteness, but there is also a distinction. White skin signifies whiteness, but we can conceptualize it because it is an invention, and we can study the rhetorical nature of whiteness because it is whiteness that gives meaning to white skin. There is a difference between whiteness and White people, between locating whiteness and locating White people, between opposing whiteness and opposing White people. In explaining the racial contract, Charles Mills describes the difference as being white (skin color) or being White (ideology).⁴³ Represented yet another way, “being white” refers to physical traits, while “being whitely” refers to “a deeply ingrained way of being in the world.”⁴⁴ I contend that these deeply ingrained ways of being have become intuitive to White people and can be realized through the feelings of (dis)comfort. So visceral whiteness is informed, in part, not just because of white skin but because of what White means.

Rhetoric creates meaning and shapes identities. Determining what white skin means through discursive studies means uncovering its ideology. It is the understanding of making white skin White. Stuart Hall defines ideology as “mental frameworks—the languages, the

⁴² Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed. Carl R. Burghardt ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010), 634.

⁴³ Mills, *The Racial Contract*.

⁴⁴ Marilyn Frye, “White Woman Feminist,” in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, ed. Linda A. Bell and David Blumenfeld (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1995), 117.

concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”⁴⁵ Ideologies associated with whiteness are created and sustained through rhetoric as a way of preserving its supposed superiority, and significant to the rhetoric and ideology of whiteness are the feelings of (dis)comfort. Visceral whiteness can be understood as a mechanism used for establishing or confirming ideologies of whiteness because it shapes the mental frameworks for how White people perceive themselves as they engage or dismiss racial issues.

My approach to whiteness as visceral adds to whiteness studies by examining it from the inside out perspective rather than the outside in perspective. In other words, the literature in whiteness studies has largely studied whiteness by looking at the ways it is rhetorically constructed as Ruth Frankenburg and Thomas K. Nakayama articulate. Or it has looked at the relationship between whiteness and identification as Krista Ratcliffe and Steve Garner demonstrate. The work of David R. Roediger, David Gillborn, and George Lipsitz look at the effects or benefits of whiteness in societal aspects such as education, labor, and as an investment. Paula S. Rothenberg literally looks at whiteness as racial imagery in an effort to make whiteness visible. *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, edited by Mike Hill provides ample scholarship that fits within these approaches to studying whiteness. Throughout this dissertation I cite the above scholars and others to show the differing definitions of whiteness and to make connections to its ideological tenets. This scholarship adds to whiteness studies by approaching whiteness from within by locating whiteness as it looks at itself to acknowledge the ideological aspects of why racial discourse is either comforting or discomfoting.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 25-26.

White skin has traditionally been defined as a marker of identity or as part of an identity that is accompanied with advantage.⁴⁶ Although I argue there is a lot more to be done, rhetorical critics have contributed to the understanding of what whiteness is, what it does, and about how whiteness is discursively constructed. This project adds to whiteness studies by investigating its relation to public memory and developing an understanding of whiteness ideology as viscerally possessed by White people who otherwise think of themselves as moderate and not racist. Such an analysis contributes to our understanding of whiteness by exploring the feelings associated with our racial history as a means of seeing whiteness and exposing our contemporary memory about race, which has material consequences. With an understanding of whiteness's historical construction and how it persists despite its overt proclamations in religion, science, and law now largely hidden, I turn to public memory as a site of inquiry for investigating the rhetorical nature of whiteness.

1.2 Public Memory

The multiple facets of memory studies—public, collective, social, and cultural being the most prominent—requires that I provide a clear definition of the type of memory I use in this project. Public memory, in my analysis, relies on Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott's description in which memory is “an activity of collectivity rather than (or in addition to) individuated, cognitive work” whereby “constituted audiences [are] positioned in some kind of relationship of mutuality that implicates their common interests, investments, or destinies.”⁴⁷

This means that public memory is an action and requires some type of material force such as a

⁴⁶ See Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed. Carl R. Burghardt ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁷ *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, eds. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 5-6.

monument, parade, or a film or musical. “Public” is a designator that implies “rhetoric’s emphasis upon concepts of publicity”⁴⁸ but draws from other designators such as “collective” and “cultural.”

Dickinson et al.’s examination of memory centers on six “consensual” assumptions scholars agree upon, and there are four that are particularly relevant to my project. First, it’s the acknowledgment that memory is “activated by present concerns, issues, and anxieties.”⁴⁹ I address this throughout the dissertation, but it signifies why I’ve chosen contemporary narratives about history. The present dictates what we choose to remember about the past. In a sense, we use the past to understand or address present concerns. The second is that memory is “animated by affect.”⁵⁰ We are emotionally tied to our histories and, thus, the narratives that preserve them. This is where (dis)comfort factors as a feeling that sustains or challenges whiteness. The third and fourth assumptions are so closely related that I’ll place them together: memory is “partial, partisan, and often contested” and “relies on material and/or symbolic supports.”⁵¹ The ways we remember our racial history has always been contested with certain aspects that are included or excluded based on the present need or source of the memory. The “material and/or symbolic supports” in my analysis are the musical and films that are consumed as a collective in a public manner. These artifacts of popular culture are entertainment, but they draw from and rely on a certain degree of historical knowledge. They also teach a version of history at the same time, thus their material and symbolic nature for memory.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

In addition to Dickinson et al., my application of memory studies draws from Edward Casey's distinction of four kinds or "forms" of memory.⁵² It is important to note that none of these forms of memory is fixed; memory in any form is fluid and constantly changing. The first is individual memory. Perhaps self-explanatory, it is the memory each person has of herself and her experience. The second kind of memory is social memory, which includes a collective type of memory but only with people who know one another. A person's family or friends from college, for example, share a social memory. The third kind is collective memory, which is similar to social memory, but it includes people who don't necessarily know one another but share memories about something or someone. This might include events such as 9/11 or when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. This leads us to the fourth kind of memory, public memory. It is comprised of the previous three but has a notable caveat: memory becomes public memory when it is enacted, memorialized, celebrated, or expressed. Like Dickinson et al.'s description, this pertains to any public ceremony, acknowledgment, or popular culture productions such as the artifacts I feature in this analysis. As Maurice Halbwachs notes, collective memory depends on people helping one another remember—this is the role of public memory; thus, it seems the best designator for this study.⁵³

From the working understanding of public memory described above, I emphasize its role in determining conceptions about history and the visceral nature of whiteness. Victoria Gallagher argues that memory and history are tied together; if an event is not remembered, then it didn't happen.⁵⁴ A large part of memory studies grapples with the irony that remembering does not

⁵² Edward S. Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," in *Framing Public Memory*, Kendall R. Phillips, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004).

⁵³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ Victoria J. Gallagher, "Memory and Reconciliation in the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1999): 303-320.

happen without forgetting.⁵⁵ Certain memories negate others; new memories replace old ones; differing versions of history contain different key components. But *how* history is remembered—what is remembered and what is not—is important because it’s indicative of an ideology. For example, a common tactic of visceral whiteness is the ability to remember an event differently by reframing the narrative—this is what the Lost Cause narrative has always tried to do.⁵⁶

Remembering the Civil War as a states’ rights issue rather than a slavery issue reframes the narrative as rights of self-government rather than racism for economic profit. Integration and the changing of socially accepted norms regarding race has forced whiteness to adapt. One way it has done this is to ignore unsavory historical aspects and redefine the image and characteristics of who is considered racist. Examples of this include the “heritage not hate” slogan used to promote flying the Confederate battle flag or to frame slave owners as benevolent and the enslaved as grateful to the “good” slave owners. It takes a concerted rhetorical effort and skill to characterize anyone who owned others as good. The point for my examination is to acknowledge that history is fungible, and whiteness’s ability to adapt depends on this fact. Rhetoric is about choices; so in many ways, the stories we tell and celebrate indicate our preferred thinking on those subjects.

There are numerous vehicles for communicating preferred memories and present thinking on race; however, popular culture is unique and significant in shaping public memory. Textbooks and history courses, religious sermons, family histories and genealogy, holidays, statues,

⁵⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* Trans. By Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ Gary W. Gallagher, “Introduction,” in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000);

H.E. Gullett, “Women and the Lost Cause: Preserving a Confederate Identity in the American Deep South,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 19, no. 2 (1993): 125-141;

Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003).

parades, and many other forms of remembering are influential in our collective knowledge of history. But there is a case to be made that popular culture has the broadest range and impact for declaring which histories are important and in shaping how publics perceive those histories.

1.3 Popular Culture

Although (dis)comfort and whiteness are observable in history, politics, media, and the vernacular, a good place to focus our attention is in popular culture because it encompasses all those other areas. Stuart Hall underscores this when he professes the popular as a key place where conflict over hegemony is waged. In fact, this is the central importance of why popular culture is a necessary site of study. He writes, “That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.”⁵⁷ And Alan Grossberg describes the popular as what “organizes the *lived-ness* of life.”⁵⁸ In other words, the popular is where the hegemonic struggle within or between publics occurs and is the structure for the vitality of those publics.

For this dissertation, I invoke popular culture not just as the “things” American society produces but also as a source for *how* and *why* society uses those things. John Fiske makes this distinction when he defines “mass culture” as the “products” of a culture and “popular culture” as how people use those products.⁵⁹ Studying popular culture in this way can tell us something about a society’s values and ideology. There is an “intimate link” between popular culture and politics; popular culture influences “individual behavior”; and popular culture is a site for people to negotiate identity and power.⁶⁰ For these reasons, popular culture is a constructive place to

⁵⁷ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular.’” In *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Ralph Samuel. (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 239.

⁵⁸ Grossberg, “Affect’s Future,” 328.

⁵⁹ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Second Edition. (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁰ Tim Nieguth and Shauna Wilton, “Popular Culture and the Study of Politics” In *The Politics of Popular Culture: Negotiating Power, Identity, and Place* Edited by Tim Nieguth. (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 4.

look for ways whiteness sustains and recreates its ideology and control. What exists in popular culture in many ways indicates what is possible in law or politics and it reshapes the ways we think about our history.⁶¹

Understanding whiteness, Parker C. Johnson argues, “means that the challenge of whiteness studies lies not in any individual attempting to change her or his communication patterns; rather we need to understand the ways that communication about whiteness is embedded in our social fabric.”⁶² Major contributors to this social fabric are film, theatre, and other forms of popular culture. They signify public memory because narratives about race draw from and add to our collective memory about racial equality. Popular culture reveals and indicates the rhetoric surrounding social meaning, and as Barry Brummett explains, “rhetoric is that part of an act or object that influences how social meanings are created, maintained, or opposed.”⁶³ This project examines cultural productions in the social fabric to locate whiteness that is rhetorically addressed and reflexively addresses those artifacts in popular culture.

Popular culture is a powerful resource for locating whiteness for many reasons. First, popular culture represents a snapshot of the contemporary moment. It provides information in “real time” as opposed to any reconstruction of the past. In other words, contemporary pop culture allows us to examine society as it is *remembering* rather than as it is *remembered*. Second, popular culture, by definition, is of the “popular” and studying the artifacts that have broad influence is useful for gauging any predominant ideology. Third, and closely related to the

⁶¹ Here I’m thinking about the arguments made about race in the 1960s and 1970s on television and in film such as *Roots* and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. I’m also thinking about the relatively rapid acceptance of same sex marriage after a myriad of reality television and situation comedies featured and somewhat “normalized” (or at least made visible) gay and lesbians.

⁶² Parker C. Johnson, “Reflections on Critical White(ness) Studies ” in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999), 5.

⁶³ Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991), 38.

previous point, is the power of entertainment within popular culture to teach. Musicals and films are produced to entertain and by doing so create lasting impressions of history and historical figures for audiences. Film, in particular, is a major influence on collective and social memory. For example, the films *JFK* (1991) and *Braveheart* (1995) were instrumental in shaping the public's knowledge and perception of their respective historical subjects.⁶⁴ Such films elicit emotions, which are also powerful tools of memory. Popular film has become “central to the mediation of memory in modern cultural life.”⁶⁵ The public act of going to the movies and experiencing history together creates a unified conception of the past, which then informs and gets used in the present.

1.4 Method and Outline of Chapters

This dissertation adds to whiteness studies by analyzing public memory's role in reconstituting or challenging whiteness. Through close textual analysis I hope to explain the ways rhetoric invents and reinvents whiteness—the ways history is used or how discourse perpetuates whiteness's purpose and current function, its ideology. Textual analysis of a racial narrative can discover its rhetorical elements to expose the “invisibility of whiteness” to “help us understand the ways that White domination continues.”⁶⁶ My contention is that one way to do this is through an examination of the ways the visceral (dis)comfort rhetorically develops in contemporary narratives about race. I use public memory, ideology, and popular culture as intersecting areas of study that provide an analysis for locating whiteness, add to our

⁶⁴ Tim Edensor, “National Identity and the Politics of Memory: Remembering Bruce and Wallace in Symbolic Space,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15(2), 175-194. 1997.; Paul Grainge, “Introduction: Memory and Popular Film,” In *Memory and Popular Film*. Edited by Paul Grainge. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ Paul Grainge, “Introduction: Memory and Popular Film,” In *Memory and Popular Film*, 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

understanding of whiteness in rhetorical studies, and provide insight into contemporary issues of race in America.

All of the texts I examine are contemporary representations. Along with the public memory assumption described above, I've chosen contemporary interpretations because I want to focus on the ways race and (dis)comfort appear in the supposed post-racial but hyper-polarized racial climate, and there are a few reasons associated with this. First, since the election of Barack Obama, social issues and formal legal equality are present in ways, discursive and otherwise, that most White people in particular aren't used to. Also, past representations can be easily dismissed as products of their time or praised for being "before their time," either of which complicates our understanding of where we are now. Last, I want to show how White (dis)comfort remains a central trope in popular culture across literary or narrative genre no matter the efforts to define the present as having transcended race.

I've identified popular culture as a valuable source for studying whiteness because it encompasses areas of history, politics, and media, but the question now is where in popular culture to look. I've chosen three texts: *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015 -), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *The Help* (2009: novel; 2011: film). These texts include creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, and historical fiction. The difference in form is useful because I show how various genres or storytelling techniques contribute to a consistent and identifiable public memory. Race and whiteness are common factors in these texts, and (dis)comfort is an important marker in each, but there are three additional reasons for choosing these texts.

The first is that each represents a prominent place in popular culture. These texts share a common and important factor in that they are all financial and critical successes. This means they have been recognized for their entertainment value, artistry, and subject matter. The popularity

and subject matter cannot be understated because it reflects and instructs current understandings and attitudes about race. Additionally, each text has been praised for its commentary on race. This matters because it points to the current attitudes and thinking about race that are considered appropriate in a “post-racial” society; the texts can be read as the contemporary culture’s projections of race and history, which reveal present day concerns, issues, and anxieties. The third and final reason is that each text represents a particular moment for race in the U.S. that I’ve identified as dominating eras of racial discourse. *Hamilton* represents the birth of America. It was a crucial time when “all men are created equal” afforded a perfect opportunity to end the system of enslaving people, but failed to do so. While the characters are historically White, they are performed by actors who are Black, Latinx, and Asian. *12 Years*, set in the years preceding the Civil War, represents slavery as a particular era rather than a two hundred year old system. The Civil War era also reminds us of the end of slavery. Finally, *The Help* is set within the heart of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and in the South, which is traditional for the bulk of civil rights narratives.

Choosing artifacts to locate whiteness through the presence of non-White characters raises important questions. What are the implications of locating and exposing whiteness as a negation of blackness while my method uses narratives involving Black people? One could argue that my method and analysis itself is replicating the ways whiteness is constructed. An answer I offer is that there is no way to separate whiteness and blackness. Another answer is that my dissertation exposes and explains the ways whiteness reconstitutes itself in narratives that may appear to be doing the opposite. In other words, I locate whiteness and the ways its ideology is sustained, used, or confronted in narratives that celebrate, honor, memorialize, or contemplate African American equality. Some texts produce comfort to reconstitute whiteness, some produce

discomfort as a way of addressing whiteness, and some produce comfort or discomfort to highlight the larger narrative or theme of a production. My goal is not to center whiteness but to expose it—to detail its visceral nature.

The following chapters are arranged in such a manner as to take us from the beginning of America to its present. This allows us to see over time how whiteness has been constructed and reconstructed, how it has been reified and reinforced, and how it has acted and reacted as the nation made strides in racial equality. The next three chapters are separated accordingly by the three eras detailed above. Each chapter begins with a brief history of whiteness and popular culture within that particular era and offers insight into what the public memory of each period can tell us about whiteness in the so-called post-racial era. These historical briefings precede an analysis of an artifact that I think best represents its era because of its popular and critical success.

2 THE FOUNDING ERA: *HAMILTON*, HUMANIZATION, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Because, no matter how “fictional” the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory.

—Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory”

In 2009 Lin-Manuel Miranda first publicly performed a song that he said he was working on for an album about someone who embodies hip-hop, “Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.” The audience, gathered at the White House for “An Evening of Poetry, Music & the Spoken Word” and included President Obama, laughed.⁶⁷ “You laugh! But it’s true” Miranda exclaimed. He’d been invited to perform something from his hit musical, *In the Heights*. Instead, he decided the situation and setting at the White House would be a perfect opportunity to test out his next project. Miranda would develop that album over the next few years into a musical he describes as “the story of America then, told by America now.”⁶⁸ By the time it debuted on Broadway in 2015, rather than laugh, audiences erupted with cheers as Alexander Hamilton declared his name in the opening number—the refined song that once garnered disbelief and smiles at that first performance.

Hamilton: An American Musical is an award-winning and financially record-setting production. Adapted from Ron Chernow’s biography and historian Joanne Freeman’s edited volume of Hamilton’s writings, the show now extends beyond Broadway with a touring

⁶⁷ Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016). The following is a clip of that moment. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNFf7nMIGnE>

⁶⁸ Edward Delman, “How Lin-Manuel Miranda Shapes History,” *The Atlantic*, September 29, 2015. http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/lin-manuel-miranda-hamilton/408019/?utm_source=SFTwitter

company, best-selling book, and triple platinum album.⁶⁹ The musical has won 11 Tony Awards, a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a Grammy, and a “first-of-its-kind Kennedy Center honor” for a “transformative work that defies category.”⁷⁰ People love it. Blacks and Whites, liberals and conservatives, Broadway experts and those who’ve never been to a Broadway play extol the musical and all things associated with it. Its circulation within popular culture is so wide that “Weird Al” Yankovic’s “The Hamilton Polka” debuted on the Billboard charts at number one, which preceded the popular track reprise, “One Last Time” featuring former president Barack Obama.⁷¹ These are two songs of what Miranda calls “Hamildrops,” songs released each month in 2018 that were originally planned for a second volume of the *Hamilton Mixtape*—a collection of covers and revised songs from the musical that features artists such as Nas, John Legend, Alisha Keys, The Roots, Ben Folds, Wiz Khalifa, Ashanti, and Busta Rhymes.⁷² Through these releases, *Hamilton* was used and adapted to tell new but related stories as well as celebrate the original songs and story Miranda created.

The musical thrives outside the Broadway production in an unprecedented way. It lives in streaming playlists and YouTube views and history classes and has become part of the American lexicon. It permeates popular culture, politics, and academia. A *New York Times* review calls

⁶⁹ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004); *Hamilton: Writings*, ed. Joanne Freeman (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001).

⁷⁰ Gwen Aviles, “Lin-Manuel Miranda, Hamilton Creators Awarded First-of-Its-Kind Kennedy Center Honor,” NBC News, December 3, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/lin-manuel-miranda-hamilton-creators-awarded-first-its-kind-kennedy-n943171>

⁷¹ Ed Mazza, “‘Weird Al’ Yankovic Just Made History In the Weirdest Way Possible,” March 16, 2018, *Huffington Post* https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/weird-al-hamilton-polka-billboard_us_5aab475ee4b05b2217fd8f62

⁷² Gil Kaufman, “Lin-Manuel Miranda Announces ‘Hamildrops’ Series, Promising New Monthly ‘Hamilton’ Content for the Next Year,” December 14, 2017. *Billboard* <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/8070565/lin-manuel-miranda-hamildrops-monthly-series-decemberists-ben-franklin-song>; Alissa Wilkinson, “The Hamilton Mixtape Feels Like the Original Album that Hamilton Was Always Covering,” December 8, 2016, *Vox* <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/6/13843722/hamilton-mixtape-lin-manuel-miranda>

Hamilton “the rarest of theatrical phenomena” because it is “not only a hit, but a turning point for the art form and a cultural conversation piece.”⁷³ Much of what makes it a “cultural conversation piece” is that it is a musical about Hamilton and other U.S. founders including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Aaron Burr, but its cast is primarily African American and Latinx, and the music genre is hip-hop and rap. Miranda is of Puerto Rican descent, and in addition to being the musical’s creator and writer, played Alexander Hamilton in the original runs Off- and on Broadway.⁷⁴

That people of color are portraying these White historical figures has been part of its success, but it has also been a focal point for criticism. The critical view of *Hamilton* is that despite its casting, the musical celebrates wealthy, White, slave-owning men. Although people of color portray all the main characters except King George III, the musical is devoid of characters of color such as those who were enslaved, Native Americans, Black abolitionists, or free African Americans.⁷⁵ There is legitimate criticism that *Hamilton* is simply another whitewashed retelling of history.⁷⁶

Hamilton is a complicated text that positively and negatively raises issues of race. David Glassberg explains that “audiences actively reinterpret what they see and hear by placing it in alternative contexts derived from their diverse social backgrounds.”⁷⁷ If we associate race with “diverse social background,” it becomes easier to understand why both Black and White

⁷³ Michael Paulson, “Hamilton’ Heads to Broadway in a Hip-Hop Retelling,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/13/theater/hamilton-heads-to-broadway-in-a-hip-hop-retelling.html>

⁷⁴ *Hamilton*, “Cast & Creative,” Broadway.com. <http://www.broadway.com/shows/hamilton-broadway/cast/>.

Miranda also returned to the role in January 2019 in a three week run in Puerto Rico. The shows raised money for the arts in Puerto Rico.

⁷⁵ To read about such stories see Ray Raphael, *A People’s History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

⁷⁶ Lyra D. Monteiro, “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” *The Public Historian* 38, no. 1 (2016): 89-98.

⁷⁷ David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18, no.2, 1996, 10.

audiences both praise and criticize the musical's casting. *Hamilton* is a polysemic text that renders more than one interpretation—that is, as Leah Ceccarelli argues, “distinct meanings exist” within the text, which are “identifiable by the critic, the rhetor, or the audience.”⁷⁸ One reading is that the casting allows “the creators to comment on America’s fractured present through its past, and vice versa,”⁷⁹ and another reading is that the casting is “misleading and actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America.”⁸⁰ One reading, as the musical itself declares, recognizes that *who* tells the story matters. Those who create the narrative shape the narrative. For *Hamilton*, it’s a powerful endeavor to feature people of color in the story and creation of a nation that has historically denied their citizenship and humanity. In a sense, they are taking ownership of the American identity. Another reading, however, recognizes that presence alone does not mean equality or diversity. Patricia Herrera succinctly writes, “these historical erasures in *Hamilton* put into question how we can practice diversity without actually being inclusive.”⁸¹ Simply putting Black and brown bodies in a space is not what racializes or diversifies a space.

Part of pecking away at the normative structure—to dissect whiteness’s discomfort—is to recognize White as raced and not simply the “neutral” or “normal” point from which others get raced. The idea that spaces only become raced when a non-White body is present is false—particularly where U.S. historical narratives are concerned. All spaces in the U.S. are already raced. The dialectical irony to this is that narratives do not simply become unraced (diverse) just

⁷⁸ Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4. (1998), 398.

⁷⁹ Paulson, “Hamilton’ Heads to Broadway”

⁸⁰ Monteiro, “Race-Conscious Casting,” 93.

⁸¹ Patricia Herrera, “Reckoning with America’s Racial Past, Present, and Future in *Hamilton*,” in *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America’s Past*, Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter, Eds. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 272.

because there are White and Black people occupying the same space. As Kenneth Burke explains, there is a difference between bodies moving in a space and bodies acting in a space.⁸² Joseph R. Gusfield summarizes it this way: action “implies reflection upon one’s interests, sentiments, purposes, and those of others.”⁸³ Agency matters. We must investigate what actions the bodies are taking and to what end. Black bodies moving rather than acting while White bodies act has just as detrimental an effect on equality as no Black bodies present at all. To expose whiteness we have to go beyond presence and examine what those bodies are doing within that space. This chapter examines what the acting presence of Black and brown bodies in *Hamilton* communicates rhetorically and then locates whiteness through a suggested (dis)comfort that it produces.

The musical recently grossed over \$4 million in one week, setting another record, so its popularity and acclaim may have never been higher.⁸⁴ Yet, poignant criticisms of erasing characters of color and whitewashing history remain. My analysis places the praise and criticism in a dialectical relationship. This relationship, or tension, is not intended to be a taxonomy of “both sides” but rather to locate and examine the (dis)comfort of whiteness and its relationship to public memory and national identity. In a time when slavery is finally being recognized in museums and tours of Monticello, Mount Vernon, and Montpelier, it seems unlikely—and rightfully so—that an all-White production of a musical such as *Hamilton* that glosses over slavery would become a cultural phenomenon and suffice the contemporary movement toward honoring those who were enslaved. If *Hamilton* is another whitewashed retelling of history that erases people of color, how does the casting and music genre help that reading rather than hinder

⁸² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945).

⁸³ Joseph R. Gusfield, *Kenneth Burke: On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 9.

⁸⁴ Nina Zipkin, “‘Hamilton’ Makes History With More Than \$4 Million Holiday Week,” *Entrepreneur*, January 3, 2019 <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/325682>

it? If the musical connects Americans to their history in extraordinary ways, how does the casting and music hinder that reading rather than help it? To answer these questions, I'll explain the ways the visceral nature of whiteness is addressed in the context of a reimagined telling of America's founding that features contemporary music and "post-racial" casting.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I describe the founding era as it relates to whiteness, public memory, and popular narrative. This bolsters our understanding and appreciation of *Hamilton*'s distinct storytelling that exists inside and outside the casting and music. Next, I begin the textual analysis of the musical and the ways visceral whiteness is addressed through humanization as part of whiteness ideology. I argue that whiteness is so calcified in America's story telling tropes that the casting makes sense and is symptomatic of the "post-racial era" misnomer. This analysis continues by segueing into public memory and national identity. I'll explain that there is a correlative relationship among visceral whiteness, its ideology, and national identity in *Hamilton*. I conclude by illuminating the rhetorical implications for public memory and whiteness and how the founding era bridges to the Civil War era that, in contrast, places slavery at the forefront of the American narrative.

2.1 The Founding Era and Whiteness: "Will they tell my story? Will they tell your story?"

The founding and the founders of the U.S. are mythic. Americans celebrate and deify the people (almost exclusively men) and the events of the Revolution in popular culture and politics. Tales of the war and of its revolutionaries are revered in popular movies whether it's Nicholas Cage following a hidden map on the back of the Declaration of Independence or Mel Gibson, the "caring" slaveholder who avenges his son's death by leading a colonial militia in South

Carolina.⁸⁵ Both of these films suggest a particular responsibility of sorts for the protagonists. They are bound to uphold or defend their country's ideals, which in turn, has a positive outcome for the country and the main characters. Reinhold Niebuhr writes in *The Irony of American History* that Americans perceive their beginning not only as divine but also as just and innocent.⁸⁶ Outside popular culture, these characteristics endure in the collective imagination as rhetorical devices in the succeeding eras. Lincoln's first words at Gettysburg call back to the founding; Martin Luther King, Jr. makes use of metaphor and the founding at the March on Washington; and Obama often refers to the U.S. as on a perpetual quest toward "a more perfect union." These are effective storytelling devices and rhetorical maneuvers, in part, because public memory of the founding is associated with freedom, fairness, newness, and righteousness. Such ideals are not, however, associated with slavery, which contrary to popular narratives was prevalent in the revolution and founding.

Niebuhr prompts us to consider how such misperceptions of innocence inform what we think about the founding fathers and the time period, especially in depictions of slavery. Depictions of slavery in founding narratives are limited to debates about the "peculiar institution" and do not feature or realistically consider the humanity of those enslaved. This places slavery outside the American narrative rather than fully immersed in it. Retellings of the founding place the institution that produced prosperity for *all* of the colonies as an unresolved problem for some White people some day.⁸⁷ They frame slavery as an enigma or conundrum that can only be solved in the future. This is best exemplified in the 2008 mini-series about John

⁸⁵ *National Treasure*, directed by Jon Turteltaub (2004); *The Patriot*, directed by Roland Emmerich (2000).

⁸⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952).

⁸⁷ For a detailed explanation of slavery's importance to the U.S. economy and rise of capitalism see Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Adams when Adams, Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin discuss slavery and the wording of the Declaration of Independence. Franklin wonders why Jefferson wrote about slavery and King George III but “nothing of slavery itself” in the colonies. Jefferson replies, “slavery is an abomination and must be loudly proclaimed as such, but I own that neither I nor any man has any, uh, immediate solution to the problem.”⁸⁸ The discussion ends with that. This typical treatment is a comforting place for whiteness to place slavery. It is a “problem” without a solution. This, too, is a myth.

Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* was among the first prominently published writings to offer race theory to excuse slavery in a country that espoused equality and inalienable rights.⁸⁹ Jefferson was a prolific writer who we prefer to remember for “all men are created equal” rather than his musings on White supremacy because those specific racist ideas do not conform to the present memories of revolution for the sake of freedom. Also, we tend to associate slavery and the founders in personal failings rather than in political or structural terms. For example, consider the redeeming stories about the founders and their struggle with a necessary evil of slavery that will eventually die out; or the romanticization of Jefferson and Sally Hemmings portrayed by Nick Nolte and Thandie Newton in *Jefferson in Paris* (1995); or the comforting stories about clauses in founders’ wills for freeing their slaves.

These selected memories allow Jefferson and other presidents who enslaved people to be revered in government and the Bill of Rights but shamed in personal failings and slavery. This reinforces the myth of slavery as outside the founding and revolution and solely as part of a particular moral failure of the founders. Such narratives frame the founders and slavery as a

⁸⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0_3KzuYuh0

⁸⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: Stockdale, 1787); Merrill D. Peterson, “Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*.” In *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 7, ed. Roseann Runte. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

puzzle of contradiction, but we forget slavery's institutional role. Jefferson's *Notes* or Madison's Federalist Paper 54 and the Three-fifths Compromise were how slavery was explained and built into the structural aspects of the U.S. Slavery is better remembered as personal failings of some founders and less remembered as practical problems for the new government negotiated amongst all the founders. This allows the present to place slavery as particular failings indicative of the era rather than essential to it.

The irony of the founding narratives is that the founders defeated, against all odds, the world's greatest empire to gain their freedom—that they conceived and realized a truly revolutionary government. Yet, they couldn't muster an idea about how to *not* enslave others. Of course they could, but the reality lies with motivation rather than conception. Later—as I address in chapter three—slavery emerges as an evil and existential threat to the U.S. that is ultimately eradicated by White people. Both of these treatments of slavery in the American narrative are mythic, yet are powerful for reconstituting whiteness and national identity. They endure in public memory because they neatly conceive of slavery as outside the American founding and resolved through American tragedy.

They also serve as an indicator of White innocence.⁹⁰ Cecil J. Hunt II identifies four “principal ways in which Whiteness reflects and reinscribes notions of innocence.”⁹¹ First, whiteness is innocent of race. As noted in chapter one, whiteness “others” and names people of color as raced while maintaining a “normal” or “regular” status for itself. White people see themselves as “just people” rather than in any racialized conception. The second way whiteness

⁹⁰ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* Translated by Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Thomas Ross, “The Rhetorical Tapestry of Race: White Innocence and Black Abstraction,” *William and Mary Law Review*, 32, no. 1, 1990.

⁹¹ Cecil J. Hunt II. “The Color of Perspective: Affirmative Action and the Constitutional Rhetoric of White Innocence,” *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, 2005, vol. 11 no. 2, 499.

reflects innocence is connected to the first in that whiteness is innocent of “racial perspective.”⁹² Since whiteness is the norm, those who are raced deviate from the norm. This means White people’s perspectives on race are innocent because they are “unraced and objective.”⁹³ This leads to the third principal way whiteness is innocent: an innocence of racism. The end of slavery means the end of racism; White people cannot be “guilty” of racism since they can no longer enslave others. Lastly, whiteness is innocent from privilege. Since racism ended with slavery, whiteness does not provide any sort of benefit. Any inequality or difference in social or economic status is the result of “individual merit and hard work.”⁹⁴ These four principal ways of ascribing White innocence, by definition and association, also suggest a national innocence.

While the founding era is mythically bound to innocence and righteousness, the Civil War is presented and remembered as morose and tragic. Consider the differing and often contradictory ways slavery in the Civil War era and in the Revolutionary War era are portrayed. Robert Penn Warren explains that the Civil War is remembered differently from the Revolutionary War because the Revolutionary War is “too simple. That is, it comes to our imagination as white against black, good against bad. It is comfortable, of course, to think that way of the Revolution, even if unhistorical.”⁹⁵ Perhaps this is why popular narratives about the founding very rarely acknowledge slavery. If slavery is present in the story, it is aesthetically different from the “slave” narratives that tend to be set closer to the Civil War than the founding. The costumes in films about the Revolution are cleaner and fancier than the Civil War; the landscapes are more majestic. One can easily conjure up images of President Washington versus President Lincoln or the aesthetically contrasting Revolutionary War versus Civil War battlefield

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 504.

⁹⁴ 513

⁹⁵ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 82-83.

scenes to illustrate this point. For public memory, the cleanness of the founding era reflects its innocence, and the dirtiness of the Civil War reflects its calamity. The depictions of slavery, or lack thereof, in the Revolutionary imagination follow this logic.

The point is that public memory of the founding era and slavery do not coexist outside the mythic realm. In this way, *Hamilton* adheres to the myths that endure about the founders and slavery's place in the revolution narrative. It reassures whiteness, and so the deeply ingrained understandings of the U.S. founding and its relation to slavery endure. *Hamilton's* storyline regarding slavery fits in nicely with the mythical characteristics of innocence, justice, and desired-but-delayed abolition. The founding and slavery myth helps sustain whiteness ideology and whiteness helps sustain the myth. The diverse casting of *Hamilton* suggests a new way of telling the story of the founders, but the narrative suggests compliance with traditional renderings and popular memory that comfort whiteness. *Hamilton* sustains the founding era's traditional narrative, so now the non-traditional casting invites us to consider how people of color portraying historical figures who owned people of color factors in the public memory and myths of the founding.

2.2 Humanization through Black Bodies: “Embellishin’ my elegance and eloquence, But the elephant is in the room.”

In what has become a landmark text for critical whiteness studies, Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* that Black characters, named the “Africanist presence,” functions as a metaphor used in early American literature to define whiteness and create a White American identity.⁹⁶ Morrison explains how the imaginary writings

⁹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

of White authors such as Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, and Ernest Hemingway use what she terms “American Africanism” to conceptualize the U.S. as White by defining it through a negation of blackness.⁹⁷ For example, Morrison asks us to consider Africanism as “the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”⁹⁸ In short, an influential way White Americans came to know themselves was through the American African characters or tropes in popular literature. Many of these works have since been declared classics and remain influential, especially in high schools and higher education classes as students are conceptualizing the American identity.

Morrison suggests four areas for literary critics to investigate the ways the Africanist presence or blackness influences the American narrative and the effects those understandings render. The four areas are as follows: one, “Africanist character as surrogate and enabler” for White characters; two, “the way an Africanist idiom is used to establish difference...or to signal modernity”; three, “the technical ways in which an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness”; and finally, “the manipulation of the Africanist narrative...as a means of meditation—both safe and risky—on one’s own humanity.”⁹⁹ These suggestions provide an effective means for locating whiteness and its contrived influence in the American identity and imagination—sometimes literal and other times allegoric. They are also useful as we consider the ways popular racial narratives inform

⁹⁷ Here I use Manning Marable’s phrasing, “negation,” to describe the way whiteness gets defined by what it isn’t. See Manning Marable,

⁹⁸ Morrison, 52.

⁹⁹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 51-53.

collective memory. As far as this analysis is concerned, I adopt Morrison's suggestions as an aggregate method for a rhetorical criticism of *Hamilton's* song lyrics, libretto, and narrative themes through the Black body as a means to sustain or reconstitute whiteness.

The musical as a cultural phenomenon—as an act of public memory—is shaping collective memory about the founding fathers, the era, and slavery. There is an element of theatre performance that is particularly powerful in building memory. Live performances resonate with audiences rhetorically differently than film does. Jill Dolan explores the emotional and social connections that people experience during live performances.¹⁰⁰ Live performances create a sense of something happening in the present in a way that film does not. Theatre suggests action happening rather than action recorded. This instills a memory from witnessing rather than from seeing. Furthermore, Dolan suggests live performance as a social practice that provides a forum where people come together. Theatre represents a witnessing and it invites participation as audience, which further connects story to audience.

Hamilton connects modern audiences with the founding era, in part, because the musical uses contemporary music, language, and a diverse cast. And this is good because it's a smart way to tell an old story to a new audience. But, as explained earlier, *Hamilton* also is problematic because presence doesn't necessarily signal diversity. A lot of the discourse about the musical centers around the right/wrong aspect or the added value/harm the casting causes. Namely, the musical's cast presents problems about historically racial identities and agency, and it presents new opportunities regarding diversity and inclusion of non-White people in the formative structures of the U.S. Either way, the cast, the bodies on stage acting in the narrative, is a rhetorical choice that invites an audience to interpret the narrative in certain ways.

¹⁰⁰ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008).

Carla L. Peterson explains, “When invoking the term ‘body,’ we tend to think first of its materiality—its composition as flesh and bone, its outline and contours, its outgrowth of nail and hair. But the body, as we well know, is never simply matter, for it is never divorced from perception and interpretation.”¹⁰¹ The body is rhetorical and invites interpretation, so also consider the implications for choice and include Alan Gross’s examination of presence as argument. He writes that presence, as defined by Chaim Perelman, is a rhetorical effect in which speakers and writers focus the attention of their audiences on certain aspects of their subjects that they think are most likely to promote the case they want to make.¹⁰² In other words, we can consider the casting as bodies for interpretation and their presence as a major contributor to the musical’s narrative. *Hamilton*’s casting of people of color—their presence in this telling of the founding—immediately speaks to Miranda’s goal to tell of America then by America now. While separating from traditionally visual portrayals of the founders, the bodies on stage also make the story relatable. Using contemporary vernacular and music creates a sense of realness to the story because the past becomes accessible.

The trope in American literature to define whiteness through the use of Black bodies, the “Africanist presence,” to propel White narratives and characters relates to what Manning Marable argues when he explains that the invention of blackness generated the construction of whiteness.¹⁰³ Whiteness becomes the negation of blackness: whiteness is civilized because blackness is not, whiteness controls because blackness needs controlling, et cetera. One

¹⁰¹ Carla L. Peterson, “Forward: Eccentric Bodies” in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, eds. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), ix.

¹⁰² Alan G. Gross, “Presence As Argument In the Public Sphere,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 2, 2005, 5-21.

¹⁰³ Manning Marable,

significant ramification of this is that whiteness humanizes and individualizes White people while de-humanizing and grouping Blacks.

Hamilton's brilliance as a narrative of the founding fathers is to tell personal and relatable stories. Up to this point, depictions of the founding fathers might as well have been walking oil paintings. They were stiff, with perfect posture, and had jaws that lifted forward as if they always knew how things were going and would proceed. Of course, this isn't an honest portrayal. The mini-series *John Adams* breaks this mold somewhat with the lead character showing doubt, emotion, a physique, and body language that do not lend itself to a portrait. I'd argue, however, that Adams is the only founding father portrayed this way in the mini-series, and it speaks to the series' plot. Adams is the main character. Audiences are meant to connect with him and his story. What's different about *Hamilton* is that it celebrates and exposes each character in their humanity, their faults as well as their strengths.

The musical depicts Hamilton favorably in his rise from a penniless orphan to the first Treasury Secretary; his importance to the revolution as Washington's "right hand man"; and as the main Constitutional proponent because of his writing domination in the Federalist Papers. But the musical also depicts his arrogance, rush to judgment, infidelity, and combativeness. Thomas Jefferson wins a rap battle and is introduced in a celebrity fashion in his opening number "What'd I Miss?" He's a fun and likeable character but in a "lovable jerk" kind of way. He is also exposed in his hypocrisy regarding slavery and his absence in the war. George Washington is perhaps the closest to the mythical conception we get of the founders, but Hamilton describes him as "despondent" and the musical suggests Washington's reliance on Hamilton, suggesting he was "in dire need of assistance."

This portrayal of the founders as admirable *and* flawed humanizes them. They no longer stand stiff in statues or paintings or are the stoic faces on money. They are relatable in their interpersonal relationships, their mistakes, and their choices. There are a number of songs that humanize them in specific ways. “My Shot” illustrates Hamilton’s ambition. In traditional founding narratives, the founders appear to be already within the thralls of revolution and resolve. “Give me liberty or give me death” is an example. Here Hamilton and Burr exhibit and debate their strategic differences of path for their futures—particularly how they can use the revolution to benefit themselves rather than their participation as some selfless act for America. “Helpless” and “Satisfied” epitomize a motif of agency and perspective in the musical. They tell of Eliza falling in love with Hamilton and her sister Angelica’s regrettably restrained love for Hamilton. These two songs communicate viewpoints of the same event that involve choice, need, doubt, regret, and desire.

“Dear Theodosia” is a mix between a lullaby and a dedication that shows Hamilton’s and Burr’s affections for their children. This song also shows the otherwise resolved men in their insecurity and selflessness: both sing “I’ll make a million mistakes” and “When you smile I fall apart, and I thought I was so smart.” These are words of new fathers who are in awe of their children but who are almost willing into existence their desire to be good fathers. It represents the complexity and happiness and worry that parenthood brings.

“Say No To This” is Hamilton’s conscience wrestling with his desires and loneliness as he begins his affair with Maria Reynolds. “Hurricane” reveals Hamilton’s faulty logic and selfish motive to explain the affair, while “Burn” is Eliza’s pain as a heart-wrenching response and notice that she’s taking control of the narrative. “It’s Quiet Uptown” is heartbreaking empathy for the reconciliation of their relationship and the mourning of their deceased child. The song

opens with “There are moments that the words don’t reach. There is suffering too terrible to name.” These two lines brilliantly describe the incomprehension and silence that accompany personal tragedy.

All of these songs draw the audience into a human narrative with relatable, personal experiences. Founding fathers and their families become people we know; they become like us. Our memories of the founders transform from names of rigid figures in history lessons into people with relatable intimacy. But because slavery is mythical in the narrative, it’s easy to forget that some of the personal experiences were only privileged to whiteness. The song “One Last Time” is at once beautiful, inspiring, ironic, and awful. It tells the story of George Washington explaining that he will not seek a third term as president, and by doing so he hopes the country appreciates his service that he affirms “outlives me when I’m gone.” Arguably the most eloquent and influential act as first president, to encourage and exemplify a peaceful transfer of power, is captured in the song. Also captured is Washington’s desire to go home and rest. “Everyone should sit under his own vine and fig tree,” he sings. This humanizes him; it shows us that he’s tired and wants to “rest in the nation we’ve made.” Washington is no longer the vigorous general heading a boat across the Delaware. He’s given his best to his new country, and he wants to retire to enjoy it.

While conveying all these humanizing and relatable aspects, the song is also expressing something by what it is not saying. Going home to Mount Vernon and looking out over the rolling hills means that on those hills are people he’s enslaved who will never get to rest—never get to enjoy the freedom of the new country they’ve built. As *Hamilton* emotionally describes Washington’s retirement, his deserved rest, and opportunity to reflect on his choices, I’m reminded of Frederick Douglass’s autobiography in which he describes what happens to women

who are slaves and become too old to work or care for the children. Douglass explains how they are unceremoniously taken to a shack in the woods and left to die. So Washington quoting the Bible, “everyone should sit under his own vine and fig tree,” is only relatable to whiteness in this context. Washington gets to realize the fruits of his labor while those he and others have enslaved do not. “One Last Time” communicates something different if the slaves who would’ve served Washington are represented on stage. The presence of an enslaved Black body would be discomfiting in its acknowledgement of the difference between bodies who act and bodies that move. In sum, the musical humanizes the characters on stage, and the lack of historical people of color on stage allows audiences to forget *their* humanity. The founders are relatable as human; slavery remains an abstract issue.

Another example is a scene in the musical that does not appear on the soundtrack. It’s titled “Tomorrow There’ll Be More of Us,” and it takes place between “Dear Theodosia” and “Non-Stop.” Still sitting, Hamilton is smiling and in amazement of his son as Eliza slowly approaches with a letter. Hamilton brushes it off, saying it’s from John Laurens and he’ll read it later. Eliza replies that the letter is actually from John’s father. She then reads the letter aloud, which reveals John has been killed in battle. The significance of this portion of the musical to this analysis is that Eliza goes on to read that John’s dream of “emancipating and recruiting 3,000 men for the first all-black military regiment...dies with him.” Laurens’ character is positioned stage right to Hamilton and Eliza and sings a reprise of “The Story of Tonight” ending in an elevated volume: “tomorrow they’ll be more of us!” The first two renditions of “Story of Tonight” are hopeful and then playful. This final reprise is declarative—almost defiant. It’s a powerful moment that suggests a budding abolitionist movement and the Black soldiers in the Civil War and both World Wars that are to come. The scene focuses attention on the failures to

“solve” slavery. But again, without Black soldiers acting on stage, there isn’t a chance for the scene to humanize them. Hamilton’s shock and grief and Laurens’ admirable abolitionism are the humanized aspects acting on stage. And this reluctantly but effectively pushes freedom into the future.

Throughout *Hamilton* the characters on stage are relatable; the founders’ mythic narrative becomes more real as the story showcases their humanity. Drawing from Morrison, I want to factor into this analysis the presence of Black bodies humanizing White historical people. How might whiteness be comforted? The answer begins by acknowledging that ideologies of whiteness are consequential and seldom compete. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, the “frames” White people use to explain away racism are used in “combination rather than in pure form.”¹⁰⁴ Ideology is like a mosaic; each piece works in tandem with another, any two pieces may seem conflicting, but they simply represent different parts of the same image. All of the bodies in the narrative are acting, and those bodies are Black and brown. Furthermore, the Black and brown bodies acting are portraying White historical people. Taking into consideration the explanation above about the humanization of those people, I argue that *Hamilton* humanizes White characters through Black bodies. *Hamilton* is reconstituting whiteness by telling a story that humanizes White people through Black bodies.

Whiteness is accustomed to using Black people to define itself. *Hamilton* represents an evolved way of doing so that comforts contemporary whiteness. Historical narrative is more about the present than it is the past. Instead of defining what whiteness is by defining what blackness is, whiteness uses and co-opts what blackness is into its own being. Morrison describes the way American identity was created narratively by defining whiteness as the negation of

¹⁰⁴ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 29.

blackness. As overt racism by Whites who consider themselves not racist is denounced, some of the explicit definitions of blackness are antiquated—or at the very least become easily denounced even though traces of those definitions linger. This creates an evolved way of thinking for whiteness in which being overtly racist is the sole definition of racism while being implicitly racist takes on new form. In other words, the old whiteness would shun and exclude Blacks while the new whiteness likes to welcome and include Blacks. This is with a caveat of course, which is that whiteness remains comfortable when blackness is at its service. *Hamilton* uses Black bodies to enhance whiteness. Black actors are portraying White, historical figures, and the audience is aware of this. Historical people of color are not on stage.

Hamilton represents contemporary whiteness through its treatment of slavery. Criticisms of erasing Black people from the narrative are valid because it invites an audience to reside in the comforting myth that suggests slavery wasn't critical to the founding and that the founders were reluctant purveyors of the necessary evil. The musical, however, doesn't altogether ignore slavery. In fact, Miranda and other original cast members point to the lines referencing the need to end slavery or mocking Jefferson for "who's really doing the planting." This is consistent with whiteness ideology in that slavery is dealt with on a surface level that doesn't propel or suppress the story. Although people of color dominate the stage and connect with audiences in telling—effectively participating in—American history, whiteness is front and center rhetorically. It is a comforting inclusion that reminds whiteness that it is still essential and still what is being celebrated.

American writers defined White characters with possessed agency and attained autonomy by describing the negation of those attributes in the Black characters. As racism has morphed over time in America, and as White America appropriates other cultures, *Hamilton* represents

whiteness defining itself through blackness as if it's *with* blackness. Hip-hop and the presence of people of color help humanize and make cool the founding fathers. It allows instances in the musical for the founders to dance or respond to affairs with “oh shit.” Moreover, it allows the genre of music to sound and appear authentic. Cabinet meetings become entertaining as rap battles. Whiteness is able to use blackness; *Hamilton* humanizes whiteness through an actual Africanist presence.

It is worth asking if the opposite is also happening. Are mythic memories of White historical people humanizing Black bodies for whiteness? George Yancy writes, “As the transcendental norm, the Black body is framed through white ontological assumptions about Black bodies.”¹⁰⁵ How might portraying White people, who are framed through ontological assumptions that include American identity and mythic characteristics of the founding, frame Black bodies? The question here flips what assumptions are being transferred from the Black actors onto their historical counterparts into what assumptions are transferred from their historical counterparts onto the Black actors. The collective memory of Washington, for example, includes the general fearlessly heading a boat that is crossing the Delaware.¹⁰⁶ He is statuesque and resolved, an embodiment of the American spirit. When Washington is introduced in *Hamilton*, he is no less brave or prominent, but the presence of a Black body that is suddenly associated with all that Washington exemplifies in the collective imagination powerfully changes the relationship the audience has with Washington. The question for whiteness is whether it changes its relationship with Black or brown bodies.

¹⁰⁵ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 3.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417>

2.3 Humanized Black Bodies and National Identity: “Every action’s an act of creation!”

Present issues and anxieties mobilize public memory. This leads us to consider what contemporary racial tensions *Hamilton* could be responding to, and discovering at least part of what is (dis)comforting whiteness. I think national identity is the key. President Obama was constantly addressing accusations of being un-American—this included a multitude of issues from lapel pins to his religion to his name to his father to his gaffes to his comments on race to his foreign policy. Well into his second term he felt it necessary to produce his long-form birth certificate to quiet the accusations from the so-called birthers. The loudest voice of this group was Donald Trump, who also questioned Obama’s enrollment in Harvard and his grades. These questions of citizenship, intelligence, and meritocracy are grounded in the racist assumption that a Black person could not really represent the United States and could not be more intelligent than a White person. These criticisms were designed to discredit the first African American president—to delegitimize his presidency and deny his policies by defining them as un-American as well. This rhetorical strategy culminated at the conclusion of Obama’s tenure when the U.S. Senate denied a hearing for a nominated Supreme Court justice.

It follows, then, that attacks on the president’s citizenship and identity spreads out for all African Americans. Actually, the attacks on Obama reflect the deeply rooted sentiments whiteness holds for blackness and American identity. It’s in the middle of Obama’s tenure as president that Black Lives Matter arises to combat police brutality in an effort to recognize Black people as worthy of protection under the law. It’s in Obama’s tenure when states organized to suppress Black voters and dismantle the Voting Rights Act. How whiteness has responded throughout U.S. history to Black advancement is well documented in Carol Anderson’s book about “white rage” that is triggered not by the “mere presence of black people” but “blackness

with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship.”¹⁰⁷ The election of the first Black president sparked White rage, which, in turn, sparked an elevated struggle for recognition of citizenship and national identity for Black people. The arguments for such recognition get expressed in politics, protest, and in popular culture.

Whiteness promotes and reinforces the idea that White is synonymous with “American.” A cycle exists in which America invents a race theory to excuse racist policy, which creates whiteness, which informs and is informed by the stories we tell about America, which defines “American.” The question for *Hamilton* is whether it suggests people of color as American or that people of color are American as they become associated with historical figures such as the founding fathers. If *Hamilton* erases historical figures of color from its narrative and we celebrate the musical for its cast, a particular—White—identity for people of color as American solidifies in public memory.

Hamilton’s power and potential—its response to racialized understandings of citizenship—is to help reimagine how U.S. presidents look. Reimagining how the founders looked, as people of color who express and assert themselves in familiar ways, creates possibilities for new conceptualizations of what it means to look and be “American.” By inserting into the popular imagination of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison as Black, the present influences memory to shape the future. “Hey yo, I’m just like my country. I’m young, scrappy, and hungry” is *Hamilton* connecting Black bodies to America and vice versa. It’s more than just stating a right of belonging; it’s reflecting America’s character as a result of Black bodies.

¹⁰⁷ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016),

Hamilton connects people to their country in new ways. There is a commonality that is established, a substance that is shared. Latinx and African Americans are connected to the founding of the U.S. in a popular narrative that before was largely non-existent. U.S. Representative Luis Gutierrez from Illinois, when asked to comment about Miranda winning the Pulitzer Prize for drama, said he is proud of the progress such American narratives have made. He's proud to live in "both the America in which a *West Side Story* showed us [Puerto Ricans] as gangbangers, as foreigners, as people that weren't from here, and someone [now] who writes about the history of the United States, *Hamilton*, in a way that all Americans celebrate."¹⁰⁸

Perhaps *Hamilton* begins to assuage the double consciousness that W.E.B. Du Bois explains is part of every Black American's experience in an American culture dominated by whiteness.¹⁰⁹

The double consciousness exists because African Americans have been placed outside the narrative of American identity. Du Bois describes the dual roles that black Americans experience: the U.S. was identified as a White world and to participate in the U.S. experience, Blacks had to acquire a different identity.

When Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. wrote about the genius of *e pluribus unum* and the United States' "creation of a brand-new national identity," he was explicitly referring to Europeans who had left old identities in search of new lives and new possibilities.¹¹⁰ Schlesinger explained that European settlers "saw America as a transforming nation, banishing dismal memories and developing a unique national character based on common political ideals and

¹⁰⁸ "Rep. Luis Gutierrez on 'Hamilton' Pulitzer: When We Get to Write, the Script is Very Different," *Democracy Now!* April 19, 2016. https://www.democracynow.org/2016/4/19/rep_luis_gutierrez_on_hamilton_when

¹⁰⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (

¹¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 17. See p. 15 as well where Schlesinger quotes an eighteenth-century French American farmer who "marveled at the astonishing diversity of the other settlers—'a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes.'"

shared experiences...to produce a new *American* culture.”¹¹¹ The new American culture or national identity has been well understood from a European, that is a White, perspective. This is especially relevant in popular narratives of the founding era. Although slavery was omnipresent in the founding and critical to the prosperity of the U.S., it has been treated as a system or institution that served the country rather than an oppressed group of people who had a hand, literally, in building it. Those enslaved were rarely recognized as human, much less citizens, and once they earned their freedom, it would take another 100 years to realize full, legal citizenship. But this is not what has inevitably and tragically complicated the association between Blacks and an American national identity. The ways we remember those who were enslaved, why, and their essential contributions to the American experiment has.

National identity is a construction. M. Lane Bruner begins his book on the rhetorical dimension of national identity stating, “Nations do not have stable or natural identities.”¹¹² The U.S.’s national identity has been evolving ever since the Declaration of Independence sought to frame its agency and purpose. Who constituted such agency, then defined as “all men,” has been constantly negotiated. “All men” originally only included white, land-owning males. Slowly, that identity would include women and people of color. Furthermore, Bruner asserts that nations continually negotiate national identity through discourse. Clear examples in the U.S. of when that discourse sought to include women and African Americans are found in Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman,” the work of Frederick Douglass, the rhetoric and art of the Harlem Renaissance, the “I Am a Man” slogan used during the Civil Rights Movement, nearly every speech by Malcolm X, and every civil rights protest.

¹¹¹ Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*, 17.

¹¹² M. Lane Bruner, *Strategies of Remembrance: The Rhetorical Dimensions of National Identity Construction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 1.

Identification, Stuart Hall reminds us, is a process, not an event; it is never stable.¹¹³ The construction of a national identity for people of color has been, like all identities, an ongoing process that cannot be pinned down to one era or any defining moment alone. What is unique about national identity for African Americans is the relation to how “identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of interesting discourses”¹¹⁴—from slavery to civil rights to labels that have included “negro,” “black,” “Afro-American,” “colored,” and “African American.” Identity has been emerging and shifting in the space of uncertainty in discourses about Black people and their presence in American history. *Hamilton* is the latest iteration, but its grip on cultural relevance and prominence is different. Hall claims that “identity is within discourse, within representation.”¹¹⁵ *Hamilton* represents a discourse and a representation of people of color that is fresh, inclusive, exciting, challenging, complicated, and centered on unresolved questions about American national identity.

If the narratives about the founding of the U.S. are White narratives with White characters and only concerned with White people, the African American national identity is unacknowledged. Cornel West defines identity as a “desire for recognition; quest for visibility; the sense of being acknowledged.”¹¹⁶ Ultimately, West argues for “strategies and tactics that cut across identity politics, cut across religion, and gender, race and class.”¹¹⁷ People of color were part of the founding, and *Hamilton* visualizes that—even if that visualization maintains myths related to slavery. The discursive elements, the tactics and strategies, involved in negotiating national identity for African Americans have been illuminated in studies of constitutive rhetoric.

¹¹³ Stuart Hall, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” *Radical America* 23, no. 4 (1989): 9-20.

¹¹⁴ Hall, “Ethnicity,” 10.

¹¹⁵ Hall, 16.

¹¹⁶ Cornel West, “A Matter of Life and Death,” in *The Identity in Question* ed. John Rajchman (New York: Routledge, 1995): 16.

¹¹⁷ West, 18.

According to Maurice Charland, constitutive rhetorics have power because they are oriented toward action.¹¹⁸ If a constitutive rhetoric includes as part of and instrumental in the founding of the United States, then African Americans are presented with “new perspectives and motives.”¹¹⁹ By claiming an American identity, Black and brown people are equipped toward action. This is discomforting to whiteness, however, which feels groups such as Black Lives Matter threatens and de-centers whiteness. Thus, whiteness declares “all lives” or “blue lives” matter in an effort to maintain control and dominance.

Henry Highland Garnet’s “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” negotiated “disjunctive logics...to fashion a *tertium quid*, a middle course of action capable of constituting a new mode of African American agency.”¹²⁰ What James Jasinski describes is a new identity for abolitionists and African Americans, a result of rhetoric that was directed toward action. Michael Leff and Ebony A. Utley use “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to show how Martin Luther King Jr. and “suppressed groups attempt to find rhetorical means to alter their circumstances” by developing a “complex and nuanced construction” of ethos.¹²¹ Leff and Utley argue constitutive rhetoric’s ability to establish ethos and agency to affect one’s circumstance.

Both Garnet’s address and King’s letter negotiate the complexities of African American national identity and are powerful examples of discourse’s role in identity construction and the action that results. This is important when considering *Hamilton* because Charland’s theory of constitutive rhetoric creates a “people” who can “act freely in the social world to affirm their

¹¹⁸ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric”

¹¹⁹ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 142.

¹²⁰ James Jasinski, “Constituting Antebellum African American Identity: Resistance, Violence, and Masculinity in Henry Highland Garnet’s (1843) ‘Address to the Slaves,’” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 1 (2007), 27.

¹²¹ Michael Leff and Ebony A. Utley, “Instrumental and Constitutive Rhetoric in Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 1 (2004): 37.

subject position.”¹²² Identification plus interpellation equals constitutive rhetoric. What is significant about constitutive rhetoric, as it applies here, is that it “positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world and it is in this positioning that the ideological character becomes significant.”¹²³ *Hamilton* positively raises issues about race as African Americans are constituted through the discourse of a musical and the discursive construction of identity that can lead to action. *Hamilton*’s multi-racial cast reframes and retells the founding of the U.S. in ways that are unprecedented. Instead of being separate from the founding and essence of the U.S., people of color are driving the American narrative.

2.4 Conclusion and Bridge to the Civil War Era: “America, you great unfinished symphony.”

The point of using contemporary narratives about America’s racial history is to illuminate some of the ways whiteness gets rhetorically protected or how it might be challenged through public memory. *Hamilton* is the first, other than fulfilling the happy coincidence of being first in the linear history I lay out, because it is unique in its use of race within the narrative. In other words, films about slavery or civil rights present obvious racial aspects. The structures within the story are not new; we expect certain things to happen and certain characters to act in particular, familiar ways. *Hamilton* both adheres to this familiarity and disrupts it. Although the musical barely scratches the surface on any racial plot or subplot, race is there. I argue that race is there because that is, in part, how the show is billed (“America then by America now”); it is a dominating discourse around the show and its popularity. It is whom the actors are portraying that brings attention to how the space is racialized. In one sense, *Hamilton* is humanizing

¹²² Charland, 141.

¹²³ Charland, 141.

whiteness through Black bodies. In another, it invites action as national identity is negotiated and claimed in new, exciting ways. The tension between those two lets us identify “the process whereby whiteness draws a line around itself.”¹²⁴ We can analyze whiteness and how it morphs, how it uses memory through its (dis)comfort.

Hamilton is an excellent artifact for public memory studies. This is partly because it is meta-public memory. And it’s not just that it’s an act of public memory that commentates on memory, it’s that being meta-public memory drives the narrative itself. As a trope that runs through the musical, temporality shapes the narrative while influencing memory. The lyrics and choreography are reminding audiences that the founders were acting in their present rather than the historical lens we tend to use to remember them. Our memories do work to make the past neat. We forget certain aspects that don’t fit and edit other aspects to make them suitable. We prefer the past to be consequential and for our past actions to have purpose: “I did this because of this.” We like to give purpose to past actions. When in actuality, we may have “done this” without much thought at all. Washington alludes to this when he sings, “let me tell you what I wish I’d known when I was young and dreamed of glory.” Here Washington is human, in the flesh, and not a figure of history with dates, battles, and accomplishments. “That would be enough” and “did I do enough?” are phrases of someone in the present because they reference the future and the past. We have a hard time reconciling Jefferson’s words with his actions, but it becomes easier to understand when we realize that memory, as flexible as it can be, doesn’t favor incongruences.

Perhaps this is the best way for us to understand our memories. Acts of public memory such as *Hamilton* encourages us to grapple with what memories are. We should be skeptical of

¹²⁴ Alessandra Raengo, *Critical Race Theory and Bamboozled* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 175.

linear and tidy memories. They should be experienced as imperfect reflections with complexity and contradiction. This way memory may actually serve the needs of the present by reminding us that complexity is normal. People “live in the past” because the narrative of the past they’ve constructed makes more sense than the present does. But if we recognize the past as just as complex as the present, the challenges of the present become more manageable. *Hamilton* reminds us of this.

The casting of *Hamilton* also invites us to contemplate the relationship between imagination and memory. How one remembers the founding and founders affects the imaginative possibilities for what could have happened or why and the characterizations of those who participated in what happened. As the *Hamilton* tome declares, “American history can be told and retold, claimed and reclaimed, even by people who don’t look like George Washington and Betsy Ross.”¹²⁵ While inspiring and true, it prompts us to challenge the myths that dominate the founding era and realize the lasting and contemporary racial ideologies that inform imagination and public memory.

Racial ideology, as defined by Bonilla-Silva, is “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo.”¹²⁶ Understanding the rhetorical choices and tropes in racial narratives is important if White people are to dismantle the former and embrace the latter. Ideologies are rhetorically produced and sustained—they are “formed, changed and reproduced largely through socially situated discourse.”¹²⁷ When these choices and tropes are comforting whiteness, that is the place for White people to begin a critical analysis of why such narratives are satisfying. I argue this is

¹²⁵ Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 95.

¹²⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 9.

¹²⁷ van Dijk, *Ideology*, vii.

necessary if American society is to take up Morrison's goal to "peck away at the powerful normative structure of whiteness."¹²⁸ The ideology of whiteness is exposed, and therefore susceptible, in its discomfort. Additionally, whiteness and ideology are paired in this chapter but are not meant to reflect individual beliefs or feelings. The next chapter exemplifies the conceptualization of ideology as more than personal belief or thought. Bonilla-Silva describes ideology as "a political instrument, not an exercise in personal logic."¹²⁹ Teun A. van Dijk explains that the "functions of ideologies are obviously not only cognitive but also social, political, cultural and historical."¹³⁰ The ideology of whiteness emerged from racist policy, and those policies have left fingerprints that implicate its role in creating racial ideology.

The beginning of this chapter noted that President Obama was in attendance for the first public performance from *Hamilton* at the White House in 2009. This dissertation narrows the time period for racial narratives to the Obama or "post-racial" era. *Hamilton* is the first artifact I examine because it represents the beginning of the U.S., but in many ways it also represents the beginning of the Obama era in which new racial possibilities and realities were affecting the way the U.S. thought about its racial past, present, and future.

As of writing this, the video of Miranda at the White House introducing to the world his vision for *Hamilton* has nearly seven million views. The irony of *Hamilton*, the musical with actors of color portraying presidents, being greeted with laughter by the first president of color is thick, but it is also poetic. The dialectical relationship of praise and critique, comfort and discomfort, bodies who act and bodies that move is extended to the significance and adaptability of the racial status quo. *Hamilton* is the story of America's beginning. That's important because

¹²⁸ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 172.

¹²⁹ Bonilla-Silva, 10.

¹³⁰ Teun A. van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998), vii.

just as “every act sets a precedent,” the stories that follow America’s beginning reflect or reject the tropes and rhetorical tools of the original.

3 THE CIVIL WAR ERA: *12 YEARS A SLAVE*, TEMPORALITY, AND RETRIBUTION

*These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics—or quietly, like suicides;
and the “God” that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone.*

-Cynthia J. Davis¹³¹

About three weeks before the Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter in 1861, Vice-President of the Confederate States of America, Alexander H. Stephens, declared that the “prevailing ideas” in the founding era about “the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature.”¹³² Conjuring up the popular memory of the founders, he claimed the “general opinion of the men of that day” was that the institution of slavery would “somehow or other in the order of providence...be evanescent and pass away.”¹³³ This, according to Stephens, was “an error” because it rested “upon the assumption of the equality of races.”¹³⁴ Having just returned from Montgomery, Alabama, where the Confederacy had ratified its Constitution, he continued, “our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.”¹³⁵ The crowd, gathered inside and outside the Athenaeum in Savannah, Georgia, applauded fervently as Stephens testified to the Confederacy’s justification in what he called a “great physical, philosophical, and

¹³¹ Cynthia J. Davis, “Speaking the Body’s Pain: Harriet Wilson’s ‘Our Nig.’” *African American Review*, 10624783, vol. 27, no. 3, 1993,

¹³² https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Cornerstone_Speech_by_Alexander_H_Stephens_March_21_1861

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

moral truth.”¹³⁶ At the cusp of the Civil War, we find in Stephens a perfect illustration for how slavery had evolved politically and historically in the United States.

Stephens’s famous speech also embodies how slavery evolved rhetorically. Slavery as an unsolvable problem in the founding became an essential element in the antebellum period. To preserve slavery—to defend it ideologically—Stephens split from the founding while celebrating its connection. For the split, the speech frames slavery’s mythic denial in the founding as a misunderstanding of White supremacy, and it announces the Confederacy’s righteous duty to preserve it. According to Stephens, the Confederacy was “obliged” to separate from the United States and must “triumph” to protect and exploit their slave society. The founders didn’t know how to deal with slavery, but now the South had come to understand the “truth.” Leading up to and during the Civil War, this discourse of divergence in the narrative about slavery for the South provided reasoning for secession.

Stephens’s speech, however, also wields a rhetorical connection to the founding, as he associates the new government with the old. He assures the crowd that the “great principle of religious liberty” and that “all the essentials of the old constitution...have been preserved and perpetuated.”¹³⁷ The new government, Stephens promises, would uphold the original intent of the old, including preserving the right to a religious freedom that embraces slavery. The speech suggests secession as an affirmation of the founding—exemplifying rebellion; and it suggests secession as a necessity—preserving freedom. Stephens had, with rhetorical mastery of combining divergence with connection, defined his new country by defining the old.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

We also see in Stephens's speech an example of how all sides of the slavery debate used the founding and founders to explain the present circumstances and favor their particular arguments. This was an especially common rhetorical tool of the period. Abolitionists, slavery proponents, and politicians often used the founders and the Declaration of Independence in ways that suited their present-day arguments.¹³⁸ Those against slavery cited "all men are created equal" and repeated the stories of the founders' desires to end slavery or prevent its spread in hopes of it dying out. Those in favor of slavery painted Lincoln's election as a threat to the original protections in the Constitution. The United States was changing, and the discourse surrounding that change manipulated the past to bolster their present arguments, which created differing memories of the founding and competing discourses that persist.

These competing discourses neatly place the North and South as opposites, but they also illustrate how history and memory change as present circumstances change. It's no surprise, then, that when it became apparent the South would lose, the narrative quickly adjusted to reshape memory of the Confederacy.¹³⁹ Defiant as ever, Stephens also pivoted and claimed that his Cornerstone Speech had been "grossly misinterpreted" and "imperfectly reported."¹⁴⁰ Stephens shifted from slavery as the cause of the war to a disagreement about the "General Government."¹⁴¹ Likewise, deviating from antebellum rhetoric, the Lost Cause myth emerged to position Confederates as heroes protecting their homes and to relegate slavery as inconsequential

¹³⁸ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

¹³⁹ *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Gary W. Gallagher & Alan T. Nolan, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Edwin Schott, *Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 335.

¹⁴¹ Alexander H. Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States; Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 10.

to the South's "real" values of state's rights.¹⁴² In the first few years of Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass astutely realized that "winning the fight over the memory of the war" was essential to winning the future.¹⁴³ All of this demonstrates two assumptions of public memory: one, that it is activated by present issues; and two, that it is partial, partisan, and contested. The Lost Cause narratives established a more comfortable memory and, thus, allowed a justification for present and future actions that could preserve whiteness. Others, like Douglass, worked hard to preserve memories of slavery for what it actually was and establish abolition as the justifiable legacy of the war.

The question for this chapter involves how the contested memory of slavery that arose from the conflicting discourses before, during, and after the war relates to the (dis)comfort of whiteness. Though slavery and the Civil War are bound together historically, they seldom share a single narrative in a consequential way. Furthermore, there are significantly fewer slave narratives in popular culture than there are Civil War narratives, which tend to minimize or ignore slavery altogether. All of this works to separate slavery from American history, diminish its relevance, and discount its realities.

Public memory in the "post-racial" era mythicizes and minimizes slavery in the founding era; public memory since Appomattox has struggled to correlate slavery and the Civil War era or to agree upon their nature. This presents problems for comprehending slavery's role in American history and for reckoning with its consequences. When acts of public memory within popular culture change slavery's realities and separate it from the Civil War—what many at the time and some historians often refer to as the second American revolution—slavery becomes not only less

¹⁴² Edward H. Bonekemper III, *The Myth of the Lost Cause: Why the South Fought the Civil War and Why the North Won* (New Jersey, Regnery History, 2015).

¹⁴³ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 530.

relevant to the past but to the present as well. If perhaps the most consequential period of the U.S., the Civil War era, is historically and politically bound to slavery but separate in memory, when else could it possibly be relevant? Conversely, if the Civil War is separate in memory from slavery, what else could possibly justify such a great, bloody, and destructive war? But most importantly, separating slavery from American memory denies those who were enslaved and their descendants their defining place in American history and rightful claims to its identity.

This chapter employs a close textual analysis of the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* to illustrate specific ways whiteness is made uncomfortable, thereby exposing elements of whiteness ideology that shape public memory of slavery. The reasons for choosing this slave narrative are twofold. First, I want to place slavery at the center of this investigation of memory. Part of what I hope this dissertation achieves is the recognition that whiteness and public memory are too synonymous and copacetic. Pecking away at the normative structures of whiteness requires public memory that is not White-centered yet understood to be mainstream. In other words, slave narratives aren't stories that happen *in* American history—they *are* American history. To achieve this, I think it's vital to examine slave narratives and in the process expose how they (dis)comfort whiteness and why. Second, the goal of this analysis is to go beyond a simple explanation that slavery is an uncomfortable topic for whiteness or to say that slavery and the Civil War era compete because whiteness would rather forget slavery than deal with it directly. I think it's a fair assumption that whiteness forgets slavery to maintain its centeredness, innocence, and comfort. But there's more to it than that; the *how* needs to be explained. I will, specifically, illustrate some of the rhetorical features within a slave narrative that discomfort whiteness and explain that discomfort's association to its ideology.

I argue that *12 Years a Slave* is discomfoting to whiteness because it de-centers it in two important ways. First, the film establishes a theme of temporality in specific ways that seizes control away from whiteness. It does this with an underlying tone throughout the film that amplifies in specific scenes of high emotional moments in the story. Whereas *Hamilton* takes oil paintings of the mythic founders and transforms them into relatable people and living history, *12 Years a Slave* takes the blanched memory of slavery as an aside to and unaccounted institution of the U.S. and slows the narrative down to an unflinching indictment of slavery and its justifications. Second, it exposes how whiteness uses Christianity to establish itself as a righteous power, and it exposes whiteness's denial of agency. The film makes obvious and renders the notion of righteousness as ridiculous in ways that reach the present. These themes may not seem like straightforward causes of producing discomfort for whiteness, but I'll show how the film accomplishes these discomfoting tasks through its narrative and technique and why they're discomfoting. I conclude with an analysis about what differing memories of slavery do or tell us about race in the Obama era of "post-racialism." As long as race informs and describes the American experience in contrasting ways for Whites and Blacks, whiteness will appropriate public memory of slavery and the Civil War for its comfort and sustained hegemony. To provide context for that analysis, I begin with a description of the history of slavery and the Civil War as depicted in film and television.

3.1 Slavery and the Civil War Narratives in Popular Culture: A History

Historians have overwhelmingly concluded from the events of the nearly 40 years before the war, the declarations of secession, speeches by Stephens, Jefferson Davis, and Lincoln, that slavery was *the* cause of the Civil War and, therefore, central to any honest narrative of the

era.¹⁴⁴ Although slavery and the Civil War are inextricably bound together in historical documents, their relationship in popular culture and public memory is more complicated. From the beginning of film-making in the U.S. to the present, narratives about slavery and the Civil War fall along a spectrum that I argue marks three distinct plot characteristics: slave-absent, slave-adjacent, and slave-centric.

Slave-absent productions include two types of narrative characteristics. The first represents retellings about the war itself such as *North and South* (1985; 1986; 1994), *Gettysburg* (1993) and *Gods and Generals* (2003). These narratives feature battles and strategy and contemplate war, but they do not consider slavery and do not proclaim slavery as the cause. They feature soldiers and generals but not those enslaved or those fighting for their freedom. For the North they typically acknowledge preserving the Union; for the South they typically acknowledge defending their homes or preserving their “way of life.”¹⁴⁵ Slave-absent narratives do not vilify the South, nor do they exalt the North. This reflects a Lost Cause sentiment in which both sides were right and allows honor and bravery to befall all the soldiers, North and South, and the causes for which they fought.

The slave-absent productions nearly always reflect the Lost Cause narrative, such as in *Gone With the Wind* (1940) and D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In 1997 the American Film Institute, coincidentally or not, listed both films in its “100 Greatest American Movies of All Time” at number four and forty-four respectively.¹⁴⁶ These two Lost Cause

¹⁴⁴ *Why the Civil War Came*, Gabor S. Boritt ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).

¹⁴⁵ An interesting note here that calls back to chapter two’s description of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Patriot*. In that film, Gibson plays a South Carolina farmer who is shown to be nice and even compensate his slaves. He only gets involved in the Revolutionary War as his home is attacked, and the English army kills his oldest son. This particular conceptualization of a Southerner fits the Lost Cause narrative, which illustrates the ways memory can pull from different eras and personas and myths to create a recognizable and comforting character for whiteness.

¹⁴⁶ “AFI’s 100 Greatest American Movies of All Time,” <https://www.afi.com/100Years/movies.aspx>

narratives persist in popular culture, if not for their narratives for their place in filmmaking history. Either way they signify the control and influence of whiteness's grip on American memory of the war and its causes.

The second type of slave-absent narratives are set in the Civil War but feature soldiers that are out of the battle and in some other type of circumstance. *Dances With Wolves* (1990) finds its main character, a Union soldier who leaves the “senseless” war in search of the American frontier, ultimately representing a White hero figure who witnesses the beginning of the end of indigenous peoples in America—in this case it's the Sioux. *Cold Mountain* (2003) portrays a Confederate soldier abandoning the fight because it's not something he believes in and his struggle to get back home to his wife, who is “left behind” to take care of and defend their home. *Sommersby* (1991) and *The Beguiled* (1971; 2017) tell stories of soldiers who prey upon women who have been left to defend their homes during the war. These are modern riffs on Scarlett O'Hara as strong Southern women who defend their homes, detest or don't understand the war, and want stability—their fighting men—to return. Also, these types of slave-absent narratives may or may not include people of color. If they do, those characters are either insignificant to the story or they're there to serve the White-character arcs. Being present doesn't equate presence.

Slave-adjacent narrative films feature the Civil War, as in *Glory* (1989) or *Free State of Jones* (2016), and though they may create a sense of sympathy for slaves in the story, slavery is a sub-plot and not explored with any depth. These types of stories likely feature a historical moment or event, and, again, slave-adjacent narratives usually feature a White hero of some type. *Glory* gives the sense that slavery is the cause of the war—at least for the freedmen who

AFI published an updated list in 2007 that saw *Gone With the Wind* fall to number six, and *Birth of a Nation* is not on the list.

are fighting—but it seems much of the plot is concerned with the White character development. Slave-adjacent films may have plots driven by slavery, but slavery is not really explored beyond its typical framing—through whiteness. *Lincoln* (2012) is an example. It is a story of passing the Thirteenth Amendment that does not feature slavery. The context of the film extends beyond those enslaved and those enslaving, and the Civil War or the White historical figures get attention. *Amistad* (1997), a film about a rebellion on a slave ship, is another historical interpretation. But even that film’s climax, which dramatizes John Quincy Adams’s role in a trial that frees the would-be slaves, alludes to slavery as the “lion that is threatening to rip our country in two” rather than an indictment of slavery itself. Rhetorically, slave-absent and slave-adjacent narratives emphasize, dramatize, and center whiteness.

The third type of narrative along the spectrum, the slave-centric narrative, does just the opposite. These have plots that focus on slavery and feature the humanity of those enslaved and expose the institution of slavery for its brutality as well as its political and economic purposes. Some examples include Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), which centers on Nathaniel Turner and the slave rebellion in 1831 or *Roots* (1977), the television mini-series based on Alex Haley’s novel, or the artifact for this chapter, *12 Years a Slave*. It is an award-winning and financially successful film adaptation of Solomon Northup’s autobiography, published in 1853.¹⁴⁷ Northup was a free Black man from New York. In 1841 slave traders abducted Northup, beat him into submission, gave him a new name, and sold him into slavery. The film chronicles the years Northup lived in slavery, the relationships he forged with other slaves, the relationships he managed with overseers and plantation owners, the everyday hardships he and others endured

¹⁴⁷ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853)

as slaves, the ways he coped with the separation from his family in New York, and his eventual return to freedom after an encounter with an abolitionist from Canada.

Northup's autobiography may relate well to a modern audience because it's a story about what it was like to be so vulnerable in a "free" society and the helpless experience of suddenly losing freedom. Northup was educated and was used to a certain amount of comfort. Perhaps audiences can identify with those things in ways they can't with other slave-narratives, which makes the whole story so intriguing and real. It's also a sobering reality. Although it is a story where a slave remarkably triumphs in regaining his freedom, the ending communicates tragic loss and reality rather than triumph. A critic, writing for *The New Yorker*, says the film "leaves us grieving for the thousands who never knew freedom, who were never able to tell their stories for future generations."¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, he writes that *12 Years a Slave* is "easily the greatest feature film ever made about American slavery. It shows up the plantation scenes of *Gone with the Wind* for the sentimental kitsch that they are, and, intentionally or not, it's an artist's rebuke to Quentin Tarantino's high-pitched, luridly extravagant *Django Unchained* [2012]."¹⁴⁹ Simply put, the film features reality and humanity, not mythical stories that comfort or thrill whiteness.

There is criticism that the film is too horrific and graphic. Armond White writes, "Brutality, violence and misery get confused with history."¹⁵⁰ White's argument can be easily construed, but for the purposes of this chapter, I take it to mean that *12 Years a Slave* is not as much a film depicting historical figures and events as it is a film depicting atrocities committed to the Black body. White provides context to his critique by stating, "*12 Years a Slave* appears at

¹⁴⁸ David Denby, "Fighting To Survive: *12 Years a Slave* and *All Is Lost*," *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/21/fighting-to-survive-2>

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Armond White, "Dude of the Week; *12 Years a Slave* Reviewed by Armond White for CityArts," *New York Film Critics Circle (NYFCC)*, October 16, 2013. <http://www.nyfcc.com/2013/10/3450/>

an opportune moment when film culture—five years into the Obama administration—indulges stories about Black victimization such as *Precious*, *The Help*, *The Butler*, *Fruitvale Station* and *Blue Caprice*.”¹⁵¹ White claims the movie “chronicles the conscious sufferance of unrelenting physical and psychological pain” while “depicting slavery as a horror show.”¹⁵² Its premise, according to this critique, of showcasing slavery through body horror does a disservice to those enslaved because it makes their physical suffering our entertainment. Rather than a non-fiction slave narrative, White says “*12 Years a Slave* belongs to the torture porn genre.” As such, the movie is “sold (and mistaken) as part of the recent spate of movies that pretend ‘a conversation about race,’” and “the only conversation this film inspires would contain howls of discomfort.”¹⁵³ This presents a unique question for the slave-centric narrative, which is how or whether to show body horror that slaves endured. Marcus Wood’s dense work on the visual representations of slavery points out that the attempts of art to provide Europe and America “with a record of slave experience is...a history fraught with irony, paradox, voyeurism and erasure.”¹⁵⁴ Wood emphasizes that the vast majority of visual representations of slavery don’t offer an honest description or story of those who endured the calculated institution.

Since *12 Years a Slave* the film is a close adaptation of Northup’s autobiography, it seems that eliminating or downplaying scenes of body horror would be disingenuous to the historical story. Communicating how the slave owner inflicts trauma onto the body of those enslaved and how they each deal with that—mentally, emotionally, and physically—shapes the conception of slavery. An act of public memory such as *12 Years a Slave* that depicts the trauma

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8.

is not voyeurism because it involves characters we care about. In fact, the film never depicts a whipping of an unnamed “slave”; it depicts the body and mind trauma that Solomon endured. There are scenes where you know what is about to happen to other slaves, but the film doesn’t actually feature those instances. Patsey, another main character, is the only other person the film shows who endures body trauma including whipping and rape. *Django Unchained*, for example, is voyeuristic because it shows every and any character on screen being tortured, shot, or killed. It is a fantastic glorification of violence. In showing the body trauma on the two main characters, *12 Years a Slave* invites the audience to understand the trauma for what it does to a person and not a character on screen. It makes real to memory the trauma on people rather than sensationalizing the trauma itself. And this distinction of violence affects the audience for this particular film by connecting viewers to the story.

Violent scenes may affect viewers differently, but the prevailing sentiment is that the violence in this slave-centric film reaches the audience in a physical way. *The New York Times* describes it as “a story that seizes you almost immediately with a visceral force” and declares the scenes are “hard to watch.”¹⁵⁵ Susan Wloszczyna calls watching the film “a punch to the gut.”¹⁵⁶ A review from *The Guardian* says the film is “almost unwatchably shocking and violent.”¹⁵⁷ Rolling Stone declares *12 Years* is a “cinematic gut punch” that “you bleed with” and “feel the wounds that may be beyond healing.”¹⁵⁸ There is a physical-ness included in critiques of the film: the film attacks the body of the viewer; watching slavery at work in this film assaults the

¹⁵⁵ Manohla Dargis, “The Blood and Tears, Not the Magnolias,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2013.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html>

¹⁵⁶ Susan Wloszczyna, “Reviews: 12 Years a Slave,” Rogerebert.com, October 18, 2013.

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/12-years-a-slave-2013>

¹⁵⁷ Peter Bradshaw, “12 Years a Slave—review,” *The Guardian*, January 9, 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/09/12-years-a-slave-review>

¹⁵⁸ Peter Travers, “12 Years a Slave,” *RollingStone*, October 17, 2013. <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/12-years-a-slave-113891/>

viewer. It produces a mental uneasiness by making it hard to watch in ways that can only be described as physical pain.

As I explained in chapter one, the mere presence of race or racism as a topic in conversations makes whiteness uncomfortable.¹⁵⁹ A mentally and physically palpable, slave-centric narrative may be the ultimate discomfoting topic for whiteness. Talking about race discomfots whiteness; a narrative that showcases the obviously wrong presumptions and excuses for White supremacy and the result on Black people—including the destruction of the body—is the amplification of that discomfort. Associating slavery with sheer discomfort shapes memory in particular ways that whiteness has to manage differently than it would by associating slavery with comfort. Slave narratives that are “hard to watch” create a vastly different memory than comforting narratives do.

Narratives in popular culture have consequences for political and social action. There are attempts in schools to reinforce comforting narratives. For example, Texas public school textbooks that refer to slaves as “workers” who immigrated and high school assignments that ask students to list a “balanced view” of slavery by listing the pros and cons creates a conception of slavery as “peculiar” but not necessarily bad enough to explain a civil war.¹⁶⁰ Labeling enslaved persons as “workers” rather than “slaves” and listing benefits of slavery allows whiteness to

¹⁵⁹ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

¹⁶⁰ Laura Isensee, “Why Calling Slaves ‘Workers’ Is More Than an Editing Error,” NPR, October 23, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/10/23/450826208/why-calling-slaves-workers-is-more-than-an-editing-error>; Emma Brown, “Texas Officials: Schools Should Teach that Slavery was ‘Side Issue’ to Civil War,” *The Washington Post*, July 5, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/150-years-later-schools-are-still-a-battlefield-for-interpreting-civil-war/2015/07/05/e8fbd57e-2001-11e5-bf41-c23f5d3face1_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7429deec9c4b
Annabelle Timsit & Annalisa Merelli, “For 10 Years, Students in Texas Have Used a History Textbook that Says Not All Slaves Were Unhappy,” *Quartz*, May 11, 2018. <https://qz.com/1273998/for-10-years-students-from-texas-have-been-using-a-history-textbook-that-says-not-all-slaves-were-unhappy/>

reimagine the realities of hundreds of years of an institution that directly benefited White people while dehumanizing Black people. *12 Years a Slave* directly disputes these attempts at reshaping memory, and it underscores discomfort as it tells an unflinching, true story about slavery. Such narratives clearly discomfort whiteness. Why and how they do this isn't so clear. The following connects whiteness ideology to ways *12 Years a Slave* discomforts whiteness.

3.2 Discomfort through Temporality

Time is a benefit to whiteness that is not afforded to blackness. In literal terms, White people have more time than Black people. Black men in America “continue to fare worse than...White Americans in life expectancy, infant health outcomes, age- and cause-specific morbidity and mortality.”¹⁶¹ And Black women in America are “three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women.”¹⁶² Aside from having more time, being White also means having more freedom and control over time. The disparity in time afforded to Black and White people begins in childhood, as “Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students.”¹⁶³ Black and White Americans “use drugs at similar rates, but the imprisonment rate of African Americans for drug charges is almost 6 times that of whites.”¹⁶⁴ From birth to life expectancy to healthcare to education to the justice system, time is an advantage to whiteness.

¹⁶¹ M. Jermaine Bond and Allen A. Herman, “Lagging Life Expectancy for Black Men: A Public Health Imperative,” *American Journal of Public Health* July 2016. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303251>
doi: [10.2105/AJPH.2016.303251](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303251)

¹⁶² American Heart Association News, “Why Are Black Women at Such High Risk of Dying from Pregnancy Complications?” *American Heart Association* February 20, 2019. <https://www.heart.org/en/news/2019/02/20/why-are-black-women-at-such-high-risk-of-dying-from-pregnancy-complications>

¹⁶³ U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, “Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot: School Discipline,” *Department of Education* March 2014. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>

¹⁶⁴ “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” *NAACP* <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

Time is important in its material sense, and it factors in its representational interconnectedness to African American history, narrative, and memory. Whiteness in Europe and America has controlled the historical narrative and placed blackness outside temporal significance. Georg Hegel famously lectured that Africa was not a historical part of the world—that it had no history worth considering.¹⁶⁵ Hegel’s philosophy is a perfect example of whiteness defining itself through negation. Blackness without history suggests whiteness with history. By relegating blackness as ahistorical Hegel is taking away its time in the world while signifying whiteness as historical, significant, and worth remembering. Changing textbooks or celebrating Lost Cause / slave-absent narratives controls the past. Controlling the past and denying a history to a people erases their culture, tradition, and humanity.

Malcolm Little changed his last name because it was the name slave masters had given to his family. “X” signified his unknown history and ancestry while freeing him from his identity with slaver owners. He was reclaiming his history. The Birmingham clergymen in 1963 attempted to retain control of time by labeling Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights protesters as impatient, saying the protests were “untimely.” Here, whiteness is attempting to control when freedom and rights are provided to blackness. King’s response was an understanding and recognition that whiteness intended to control time. He writes, “‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every negro with piercing familiarity” because “wait, most always means never.”¹⁶⁶ This is an oft-quoted line from King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” but we must recognize the power implied in that statement. Whiteness decides “when.” Fast-forward to the “post-racial” era and time is still a theme in the African American narrative. Ta-Nehisi Coates

¹⁶⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Trans. H.B. Nisbet. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹⁶⁶ King, “Letter From Birmingham Jail,”

http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf, 5, 7.

writes, “the defining feature about being drafted into the Black race” is the “inescapable robbery of time” with enduring effects.¹⁶⁷ A prevailing question during Obama’s first campaign for president asked, “Is America ready for a Black president?” In this instance, “America” is a substituting term for “White people.” It’s difficult to imagine why Black Americans wouldn’t be ready, so what this is really asking is whether White Americans were ready. Whether whiteness was *ready* indicates its control of time and progression. Controlling time is a power source.

Whiteness’s experience with time is different from blackness’s experience with time. It makes sense, then, to unpack the ways narratives about race feature temporality. Michael Leff’s close textual analysis of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural reveals how Lincoln uses time as a structural tool that “frames the action of the various argumentative and stylistic elements” and “blends them into a unified field of textual action.”¹⁶⁸ The “internal sequence” or temporality within the speech itself, Carl R. Burghardt explains, “prepares the listener for the thematic transition” of the speech.¹⁶⁹ Lincoln employs a theme of temporality as a rhetorical device to exert political action. I argue that temporality in *12 Years a Slave*—as a basic theme and within certain scenes—sets the tone of the film and affects the viewer in high-emotion scenes to de-center whiteness.

Although the title informs the audience of the time that Northup lived as a slave, there is no indication within the movie of how much time has elapsed from the moment he is abducted to the moment he is freed. As events unfold, the viewer is left wondering how much time has passed. This traps the audience within the narrative. The pace of the film seems slow and

¹⁶⁷ Coates, *Between the World and Me*,

¹⁶⁸ Michael Leff, “Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural,” *Communication Reports*, vol. 1, issue 1, 1988, 26.

¹⁶⁹ Carl R. Burghardt, “Chapter III: Close Textual Analysis,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed., Carl R. Burghardt ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010), 199.

methodical. Shots that linger throughout the film of moss hanging from trees or the stillness of a swamp add to the feeling of time standing still. “Slow temporal progression,” Matilda Mroz explains, “can serve to move viewers away from ‘actualized objects’...towards an attention to ‘the very flow of images’, and to the experience of passing time.”¹⁷⁰ For example, the film fixates several times on sunsets and sunrises. As beautiful as these images are, the slow temporal progress moves the viewer from the actual sunrise to an experience of another day of unknown but expected terror and hard work. Rather than nature being a comforting reassurance, the time spent stuck on particular landscapes encourages the viewer’s imagination with a transfixed gaze. The sunset marks the end of a day but not the end of despair; sunrises mark the beginning of labor but do not signify any new metaphorical beginning. The viewer feels helpless and stuck within the story.

Temporality discomforts whiteness in this film, in particular, because it doesn’t allow it to escape. Whiteness, used to shaping narrative and memory, gets trapped within this story of slavery and its realities. This is unique to whiteness because it flips the power structure. It loses the power that comes with anticipating outcomes and manipulating time, and whiteness is held captive to witness the traumas of slavery. And they are traumas that whiteness inflicts. Sarah Ahmed writes, “Whiteness is what white bodies do not have to face.”¹⁷¹ Ahmed argues a phenomenology of whiteness helps explain certain habits or expectations of White people such as those related to temporality and centeredness. In other words, whiteness expects to control time and does so without an awareness that it is a privilege it has taken from others. De-centering whiteness means a loss of control. Temporality is not ontological to whiteness, but it is the action

¹⁷⁰ Matilda Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2012), 168.

¹⁷¹ Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, 149, 2007, 156.

that takes place with whiteness as its unacknowledged presence. Exposing that and how whiteness lies behind controlling time is a powerful trope within *12 Years a Slave*.

The slow temporal progression of the film—when the camera is still on nature scenes—also creates a feeling of looming danger. Moss hangs but bodies could too; swamps appear calm but hidden danger lurks in the water. Hopelessness and agitation can overwhelm the viewer as the film progresses and depicts one atrocity after another between shots of annoyingly serene images of nature. This is a method of movie making that is “effective and subversive” because it creates a shared feeling between the narrative and the audience.¹⁷² When the film realizes the danger with scenes of body trauma, it does so with a fixed, still view as well. The audience sees the physical damage to the body, and it is an in-the-moment, experienced pain rather than a quickly sequenced scene.

Re-imagine a fast-paced scene in which the slave trader beats Solomon into submission. The camera shots might include the slave trader, then the paddle, then Solomon’s back, and then the paddle again. There would be multiple shots with various angles. This would keep the viewer’s mind occupied with changing visuals and imply progression. But this is not what the film does. Instead, it’s a still view with Solomon in the foreground and always in full view. As the slave trader strikes Solomon with the paddle and yells at him that he is a slave, we are forced to stay in that scene without distraction. The repetition of the strikes adds up with a still view rather than different blows from different angles. Eventually, the paddle breaks on Solomon’s back, but the scene continues as the slave trader gets a whip and continues beating Solomon. The slave trader wears himself out and stops beating Solomon, but the scene lingers still on Solomon as he writhes in pain.

¹⁷² Ibid.

This fixed gaze negates any implication of quick recovery that would provide relief for the viewer. Seeing a scar or imagining a whipping places the traumatic event in the past. Seeing the traumatic event unfold and holding the viewer's gaze as it happens puts the viewer squarely in the presence of trauma—though still helpless to stop it. This is the first scene in the film of physical violence, and it marks a change in tone and temporal progress in the film, as if to mark the change for Solomon. The following are two scenes in *12 Years a Slave* that illustrate how the aforementioned temporal progression creates discomfort that highly emotional scenes amplify, which causes the viewer to feel the helplessness and despair of the characters.

3.2.1 Amplification of Discomfort through Temporality

Despair is a feeling often cited in the film. It's communicated through scenes such as a woman incessantly crying because slave auctioneers separated her from her children or Solomon smashing to pieces his violin that was etched with his family's names or on the faces of those enslaved as they mourn, sing, and work. Despair is the loss of all hope, not just a diminishment of hope. Despair implies finality, and it has an inherent quality of temporality that the film amplifies in highly emotional scenes. What results is a narrative told through the enslaved perspective, Solomon's experience, rather than a White racial frame—another way slave-centric narratives de-center whiteness.

The first scene is perhaps the most difficult to watch and is set up by a character, Patsey, seeking comfort. She had sneaked away to the neighboring plantation to get a piece of soap to wash herself. Mistress Epps hates Patsey because she knows her husband has chosen Patsey as his target of "affection," so Mistress Epps denies Patsey soap. The plantation owner, Master Epps, notices she is missing, and he begins berating slaves as to Patsey's whereabouts. When Patsey returns, Epps does not believe her story—evidently jealous that Patsey prefers the

neighboring plantation owner—and unleashes his rage by ordering Patsey to be stripped of her clothes and strapped face-first to a whipping post. Ironically, Epps’s affection for Patsey prevents him from whipping her himself, so he forces Solomon to do it. Northup is reluctant at first, but then he is persuaded after Epps claims to do much worse than whip Patsey and holds a pistol under Northup’s chin. Patsey exclaims that she would rather have Solomon do it, so he hesitantly strikes Patsey a few times as Epps yells for the whips to be harder. Eventually, as he sobs, Northup’s lashes begin to break Patsey’s skin, and she screams in pain. Either riled by his wife’s dissatisfaction or irritated that Northup’s lashes are not hard enough, Epps takes the whip from Northup and begins whipping Patsey with traumatic and unrelenting force.

The majority of the scene squares the viewer’s gaze to a close-up of Patsey’s face while keeping the image of Epps whipping her in sight. The viewer is forced to see Patsey as she screams while flesh and blood fling from her back and the whip. *The Telegraph* reports, “That unflinching gaze is McQueen’s signature move,” and it is especially effective in scenes like this.¹⁷³ The gaze forces the viewer’s attention on Patsey receiving the blows we see Epps give. This creates the sense of being there with Patsey as the whip flings toward the viewer and strikes Patsey. The sound of the whip hitting her back and of her screams is intense and loud. The scene ends with Epps whipping Patsey to unconsciousness, as she falls to the ground and the bar of soap drops from her hands.

Here, discomfort is metaphorically and literally represented. Patsey sought comfort by trying to clean her body; she sought relief from the discomforting odor of her body and the ever-present stick of sweat on her skin. One reason that Epps shows Patsey “affection” is that she picks twice the cotton of any other slave. He calls her the “queen of the fields.” Her worth is tied

¹⁷³ Ibid.

to his economic benefit, and she's seeking comfort through washing her body after work. Before Epps whipped her, he attempted to take the soap from Patsey's hands but couldn't. Eventually, Epps beats Patsey's attempt at comfort from her, and he whips the symbol of comfort from her hands.

The viewer expects some unpleasantness or violent scenes, but the discomfort and high emotional moment of this scene is difficult for a viewer's body to handle. A film critic describes this well: "Of course the language and violence in *12 Years a Slave* makes you wince, but the brutality here is as sleek as a knitting needle, and slips between your ribs to get at you somewhere deep, beyond simple expressions of disgust or disbelief."¹⁷⁴ This is such a fitting description because it points to the effect temporality has in the film. The slow, methodical basis of the story combined with the fixed, unrelenting scene of body trauma amplifies the emotional weight of this scene and overtakes the viewer's body. There is extreme sadness and anger, but there is also such anxiousness that the whipping will never end—the viewer wants to escape. Once Epps stops whipping her, Patsey collapses. The viewer is exhausted from emotion and the prolonged tense feeling of wanting the scene to end is met with the realization of the brutal and inescapable torture of whipping that was so commonly used to control and motivate those who were enslaved.

The whipping, what Northup's autobiography calls "the inhuman flogging—flaying of Patsey," can be seen as the beginning of the climax of the film and the next scene would be its end.¹⁷⁵ First, some context is helpful before discussing the second scene. Earlier in the film, Epps

¹⁷⁴ Robbie Collin, "12 Years a Slave, Review: 'This, at last, Really Is History Written with Lightning,'" *The Telegraph*, June 4, 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/06/03/12-years-a-slave-review-this-at-last-really-is-history-written-w/>

¹⁷⁵ Solomon Northup, *The Autobiography of Solomon Northup: Twelve Years a Slave*, Sue Eakin ed. (Eakin Films & Publishing, 2017), 149.

hired a traveling carpenter from Canada called “Bass” to build a gazebo, and Northup was assigned to assist him. There is an exchange between Bass and Epps about the ills or divinity of slavery, and Northup learns that Bass is sympathetic to the abolitionist movement. The discussion between Bass and Epps produces a feeling of uneasiness and nervousness. Despite his experiences of being beaten for claiming his true identity and being betrayed after secretly asking for help, Northup decides to trust Bass and tells him his true name and the story of how he was a free man who was abducted, beaten, and sold into slavery. Northup asks for Bass’s help, who, after acknowledging the danger of doing so, agrees to alert Northup’s contacts back in New York who could prove his status as a free Black man.

The second scene I describe should be a scene of redemption and relief because it’s when the men from New York finally arrive to Epps’s plantation, verify Northup’s identity, and rescue him. But the viewer can’t be sure. There is no indication that this scene will be better than the others. This differs from horror or action films in which the pace quickens, and events escalate to a violent climax. *12 Years a Slave* is different because the unknown time is methodic and plodding with eventual, certain danger. The characters and the viewer get the sense that something awful will happen at any moment.

The scene in which Solomon is freed begins as nearly every other scene: it’s slow, music-less, attention on the work being done. A carriage arrives and a man asks to see a slave going by the name “Platt.” The man asks Platt what his name is, and Solomon is confused and weary about telling the truth, but he does. Solomon then names his wife and kids and where he’s from—all of which matches the information in the papers that proclaim Northup’s freedom. Solomon realizes Bass’s letter worked. In shock, with the help of the man, Solomon walks toward the carriage. Epps is enraged when the men tell him that “Platt” is actually a free man.

Epps demands “Platt” be returned to him. The men from New York hurry—with the measured protection of a sheriff—as they get the sense Epps will react violently.

The temporality of the film has created an ever-present uneasiness, so even when Northrup is being taken away from the plantation, the audience cannot relax. There are at least two other factors adding to this sense of dreaded alert. First, the rest of the slaves, namely Patsey, watch as Northrup rides away and are left behind to endure the wrath that is surely to accompany Epps’s rage at the release of Northrup. Second, the carriage rides away slowly as the plantation-owner vows to bring Northrup back. Discomfort has had such a heavy presence that there is emotional confusion. The viewer feels joy and relief, but there is also a feeling of dread. Although the audience is aware the period of slavery will end, there is no guarantee that this is that moment. The trope of temporality prevents the viewer from experiencing a single, gratifying emotion. As Patsey cries and watches Solomon ride away, she collapses to the ground. The viewer experiences both vantage points, Solomon’s of Patsey and the other slaves and Patsey’s of Solomon riding away. Despair is linked to both: Solomon can’t help Patsey; Patsey loses Solomon and is helplessly bound in slavery.

The result of such an underlying but building discomfort that results in high emotional moments that otherwise are not surprising nor out of place make *12 Years a Slave* exceptional among slave narratives. As *The New York Times* describes it: “What matters is what has often been missing among the economic, social and cultural explanations of American slavery and in many of its representations: human suffering.”¹⁷⁶ And it is a mental, emotional, and physical human suffering that is magnified for the audience because it is marked through time that

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

appears inescapable. Discomfort also creates a space in which the viewer feels a loss of control and expectation—subverting whiteness’s centeredness.

Expectation is part of how temporality works in *12 Years a Slave*. The film does not fulfill what we want emotionally as *Django Unchained* does because that story satisfies emotional cravings such as revenge, power, and release. *Free State of Jones* fulfills certain expectations by giving us a White hero and centering whiteness. *12 Years a Slave* does neither of these;¹⁷⁷ instead, expectation becomes a weapon. As I’ve argued in this section, this slave-centric narrative uses temporality to subvert expectation and place the viewer squarely in the moment, which encourages empathy. The following section links temporality to religion as a significant trope in *12 Years a Slave* that suggests certain arguments against whiteness ideology that proclaims its righteousness and, more importantly, it exposes a supposed lack of agency that whiteness relies on for comfort.

3.3 Religion and Retribution

Religion is useful in locating whiteness in a couple of ways. First, illustrating slave owners in the film as religious points to whiteness’s usurpation of Christianity to establish itself as a righteous power. In other words, it discomforts whiteness to recognize the intentionality of slavery, rather than being incidental, which whiteness prefers; the film’s focus on religion exposes whiteness as a deliberate creation. Edward J. Blum points out, when examining the history of whiteness in America, we find “religion at work deeply and widely. Whether discussing colonial interactions with Native Americans, the rise of chattel slavery, Irish Catholic immigration, the Civil War and the post-Civil War American nation, Jewish immigration, or

¹⁷⁷ There has been some criticism that there is a bit of White heroism in the film, as Northup’s rescuers are White—particularly Bass’s role; however, this is the case, historically and adheres to Northup’s biography. Whiteness is not centered.

visual imagery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religion played a significant role in race making.”¹⁷⁸ Likewise, when examining the history of religion in America, we find “that religious ideas and leaders, biblical interpretations and renderings, and spiritual artwork were central in the manufacturing, packaging, and distribution of whiteness.”¹⁷⁹ The interconnectedness of whiteness and religion with slavery makes sense when we understand that an ideological function of whiteness is to use Christianity to reify and assert control.

Reflecting the fight over Christianity’s stance on slavery at the time, literature in the nineteenth century is riddled with critiques of whiteness and Christianity. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) attempts to label slavery as adverse to Christian principles.

Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) illustrates the racial divide that whiteness assumes in its favor when considering the afterlife. Huck struggles and ultimately decides his fate is not in Heaven because he has committed the “sin” of protecting Jim, a runaway slave. Huck is challenging the righteousness of Christianity as he decides it can’t be good to do harm to another. And Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) “fictionalizes a black female heroine who boldly denounces Christianity for its seemingly blanket acceptance of whites as candidates for heaven.”¹⁸⁰ Frado is the protagonist and her story “suggests that for African Americans, the path to self-love and self-empowerment is intricately linked to dispelling not only racial myths about blackness, but also challenging dominant myths about whiteness.”¹⁸¹ These myths include the supposed good that Christianity bestows upon whiteness and its declared righteous control of blackness.

¹⁷⁸ Edward J. Blum, “The Spiritual Wage of Whiteness” in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 19, no. 1, 2009, p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Elizabeth J. West, “Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*,” *MELUS*, vol. 24, no. 2, Religion, Myth and Ritual, 1999, 18.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 26.

Second, religion locates whiteness by exposing its denial of agency. In Burkean terms, agency is the method the agent uses to act.¹⁸² Agency in this case would be religion. The film provides a critique of the legal and religious structures that propped the institution of slavery up. The film is not an indictment of individual hate prompted by ignorance. Rather, it is an indictment of those in power who used religion and laws to grow and sustain an economic system that was very profitable for them. A few times the film includes references to the legality of slavery. But it always does so under the valence of religion or what is “natural.” Christianity and the laws are the “evidence” for whiteness to justify and permit racism through its claim to naturalness, authority, absolute power, and sense of objectivity.

Religion is a significant element of the film just as it is intertwined in slavery and Civil War discourse. Slave narratives and spirituals, abolitionist indictments of slavery, and those defending it all testify to Christianity’s rhetorical power. Christianity was an equal partner to the propagation of the institution of slavery, the moral argument to its demise, and to the survival of those enslaved. Lincoln’s second inaugural describes religion’s dual role for the North and the South in the war: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” And just as slaveholders used Christianity as a justification for slavery, those enslaved used it as “a source of comfort” in the faith that their suffering would be rewarded in the afterlife. But those enslaved also used Christianity to defy their masters. Religion “could feed rebellion. In some form or other, whether through redemptive images from the Bible or Christian patterns of organization, Christian faith contributed to major slave revolts under Gabriel Prosser in Richmond (1800), Denmark Vesey in Charleston (1822), and Nat Turner in Virginia

¹⁸² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1945).

(1831).”¹⁸³ Support, opposition, refuge / redemption, and resistance: *12 Years a Slave* features each of these differing uses of Christianity and the Bible. Religion is a vehicle through which a theme of retribution develops in the film. All sides use religion. All sides imply retribution for either themselves or for others.

All four of these uses of Christianity have one thing in common: retribution. For support, the reward of whiteness is dominion over blackness. When “luxuriating” on how much cotton Patsey picks every day, Epps marvels at the slave among slaves and says, “God give her to me. A lesson in the rewards of righteous living.” Epps dominion over Patsey is “given” by God. Before whipping Patsey, Epps tells her, “You done this to yourself, Patsey.” Epps, again escaping responsibility, blames Patsey for what is about to happen—perhaps an unlearned lesson he tried to teach earlier about obeying the master.

The film shows each of the plantations where Solomon was enslaved conducting a church service for the slave masters and the slaves. Master Ford, representing the supposed benevolent slave master, has two scenes in which he is preaching to his family and slaves. The first time we meet Master Epps he is preaching to everyone on his plantation as well. He reads from his Bible: “And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.” Epps holds up the Bible and ends the sermon, “That’s scripture.” This is a literal interpretation of the Bible in which Epps positions himself as ruling over his “servants,” and God’s instruction to beat those whom Epps deems undisciplined or disobeying. The agency lies not with Epps but with God.

George A. Kennedy writes about the Christian tradition in rhetoric and explains the most important “form of Christian preaching was the homily” in which “the speaker simply tells the

¹⁸³ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity In the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 205.

congregation what they need to know to understand the text and apply it to their lives.”¹⁸⁴ The film makes a point to illustrate plantation owners using the homily to instruct, control, excuse their brutality, and assume their divine righteousness to enslave others. This use of the homily in this slave narrative highlights its absurdity and irony. The film has conditioned the viewer with discomfort and an expectation of terror. The homily scenes aesthetically match the other discomfoting scenes. Landscapes outside of this narrative that would otherwise be pleasing are not, and church gatherings outside of this narrative that would otherwise be harmless are not. The absurdity is also reflected when Epps believes a bountiful crop is because of his “righteous living” and upon witnessing a spoiled crop he asks, “what have I done that God hates me so?” His answer is that his slaves have caused a “biblical plague.”

All sides used Christianity to profess their cause or condition as righteous. But the film also features retribution as a threat to whiteness. The slave owners use religion to deny their own agency. Those who oppose, seek refuge, or resist use retribution as a way of combatting the slave owner’s false righteousness. Here temporality is a weapon and a threat. Retribution awaits; it is realized in time. Part of what makes retribution powerful as a rhetorical device is its assurance that it *will* come, whether soon or further into the future, whether in this life or the afterlife. The rhetoric of retribution is clothed in temporality. In other words, the effects for past actions require time and the reward or punishment is either fleeting or everlasting.

For opposition, resistance, and refuge, slavery and its methods are sins and there will be punishment. Near the end of Lincoln’s second inaugural he declares, “Every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”¹⁸⁵ The “scourge of war” is divine

¹⁸⁴ George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian & Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2nd ed (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 156.

¹⁸⁵ Abraham Lincoln, 2nd Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=38&page=transcript>

retribution for slavery. Bass, in his debate with Epps, points out there are unjust laws and declares “a day of reckoning yet” for the legality of slavery. Armsby is a White man and a hired hand on Epps’s plantation who relates to Solomon the position of overseer as self-destruction. He explains he and many overseers drink heavily because “no man of conscience can take lash to another day in and day out without shredding at his own self.” Hurting others hurts the self. And Solomon, exhausted physically and emotionally, shouts to Epps as he whips Patsey to unconsciousness, “thou shalt answer for this sin!” Using Epps’s righteousness against him.

For refuge or redemption, the reward of slavery in life is comfort in the afterlife. Alfre Woodard plays the slave mistress to a neighboring plantation owner who has gained status on the plantation by being the mistress. She, while taking comfort in her new role, acknowledges a Biblical reckoning for the perpetrators of slavery: “the pharaohs are a poor example for what awaits the plantation class.” “Take comfort, Patsey. The Lord will manage Epps. In His own time, the Lord will manage them all.” And, in perhaps a moment of Solomon recognizing his probable fate, he joins the other slaves in singing “Roll, Jordan, Roll.”

In sum, religion and retribution discomfort whiteness because they make obvious and render the notion of righteousness as ridiculous. In other words, the film shows slave owners using the Bible and God as reasoning and for their purposes. It alleviates the slave owner from responsibility and in so doing gives the lie to the slave owner’s claims to righteousness. It argues against a sense of objectivity and entitlement not of its own doing, but to that of an all-knowing being. The film illustrates how Christianity, once a tool in inventing whiteness, now becomes its resource or evidence for why whiteness exists. It’s a trick of agency. Christianity and the Bible deflect agency away from whiteness. It suggests an illusion that whiteness isn’t in control. Those who oppose, seek refuge, and resist slavery use retribution—use the slave owner’s rhetorical

device—against them. What the film is signaling over and over again is that retribution accompanies acts of righteousness. And those who were enslaved are reclaiming righteousness.

3.4 Conclusion

Considering the assumption that contemporary issues motivate public memory, it's worth examining why retribution factors so prominently in the film. As the 150th anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment approached, there was renewed interest in remembering slavery. There were also rising voices about its repercussions. Michelle Alexander explains that racism in the U.S. morphs from one institution to another. The prison system that is racially motivated and discriminatory rose “from the ashes of slavery.”¹⁸⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his “Case for Reparations,” writes, “until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.”¹⁸⁷ There were renewed debates about the Confederate flag in public spaces and on license plates, and New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu made national headlines when he explained his decision to remove Confederate monuments by stating, “these monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement and the terror that it actually stood for.” He’s noting whiteness’s agency. “To literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal in our most prominent places of honor is an inaccurate recitation of our full past. It is an affront to our present. And it is a bad prescription for our future.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Arnie Cooper, “America’s Drug War Has Led to a ‘New and Improved’ Racial Caste System, Argues Michelle Alexander,” *Vanderbilt Magazine*, December 2, 2013 <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/vanderbiltmagazine/strong-convictions/>; See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

¹⁸⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

¹⁸⁸ Time Staff, “Read: New Orleans Mayor on Removing Confederate Monuments,” *Time*, May 23, 2017 <http://time.com/4790674/mitch-landrieu-new-orleans-confederate-monuments-speech/>

A vast majority of the reviews make note that the film is set “pre-Civil War.” This is curious since it would be difficult to depict a slave narrative set post-Civil War. A postbellum setting would suggest a former-slave narrative. Furthermore, one finds it difficult to find a slave narrative set during the Civil War. Films set during the Civil War showcase Black soldiers, as in *Glory*, or as racist stereotypes, as in *Gone With the Wind*, but Black people are otherwise non-existent in popular culture productions of the war. Considering this, we are left to conclude that consistently pointing out *12 Years* as pre-Civil War suggests a collective imagination of slavery as separate from the Civil War. The first slave ship arrived in the new world about 250 years before the Civil War. Aside from the countless stories of Black humanity, there are untold stories of slave rebellions, abolitionist movements, and the missed opportunities to outlaw slavery (the least of which not being the drafting of the U.S. Constitution). The desire to tell the compelling stories surrounding the Civil War is understandable. That most of those stories abbreviate slavery and aggrandize battles, strategy, White soldiers and leaders, and notions of liberty or governmental ideology invites us to consider why. This is not to say all Civil War narratives must be slave-centric; but it does mean that Civil War narratives shouldn’t ignore slavery or reimagine the realities in comforting terms.

The power of persuasion in *12 Years a Slave* partly resides in its demand for the audience to see slavery. Toward the end of *12 Years a Slave*, between the scene when Bass assures Solomon that he’ll send a letter telling Solomon’s White friends in New York what has happened and the scene when those friends come to rescue him, there’s an up-close shot of Solomon. He is staring down, then he looks off to his right, and then he stares directly into the camera—for exactly 12 seconds—before looking down and to his left. He then looks just to his right, almost into the camera but not quite. His gaze is beyond the viewer as if you could shift your seat

slightly to meet his eyes. The quiet, slow scene when Solomon stares into the camera—one second for every year he was enslaved—seems like an eternity. He is making the contemporary audience face him. The discomfort of face-to-face, the eye contact for just 12 seconds, no words or music, no other action makes the audience sit in the space between hope and despair with Solomon. We are forced to see him as he has been asking to be seen the entire film—to have someone recognize him and his humanity.

This chapter began with Alexander H. Stephens using the past to explain the present. How might we explain the Obama era by using the past? How does the present dictate public memory of slavery? Manning Marable argues, “Historical narratives—the stories we teach about past events—become frameworks for understanding the past and for interpreting its meaning for our own time and in our individual lives.”¹⁸⁹ Slavery and the Civil War inextricably bound in history and memory reflects a different present moment than slavery and the Civil War as separate entities. One suggests the importance and legacy of race in America and the other suggests its insignificance. Race as insignificant in the present allows whiteness to operate with impunity. Marable discusses memory and its impact on America’s racial divide when he writes, “Ignorance of our shared history sustains our parallel racial universes.”¹⁹⁰ Slavery is a shared history in that it should not just live in the memories of Black people. It should live in public memory of American history and be understood as effecting whiteness. Whiteness doesn’t want to talk about race; it makes it uncomfortable. Whiteness prefers to let racism be something that is in the past. To remember slavery is to make it present. To deny it is to deny its ramifications.

¹⁸⁹ Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 19.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

Dana Stevens, writing for *The Movie Club*, explains her “problem with *12 Years a Slave*” and why the film “failed to make my 10-best list of the year.”¹⁹¹ Stevens concludes, “simply put, I’m just not sure I’m down with body horror as a directional approach for a movie on this subject.”¹⁹² A narrative about the capture, torture, and forced labor of Black bodies should not feature “body horror,” according to this critic. She writes, “McQueen ramps up the scale and the intensity of the suffering he aims to both depict and cause.”¹⁹³ Stevens adds that she would prefer “a different movie...about the hierarchies; rivalries; and tenuous, wary friendships among the enslaved characters themselves.”¹⁹⁴ It feels “exploitive” when the actor who portrays a plantation owner is “laying it on a little thick” as he “wanders his plantation with a bottle in hand, circling like a predator, looking for someone to humiliate and abuse.”¹⁹⁵ Stevens’s discomfort is evident in her critique, and it suggests she has either not read Northup’s autobiography in which Epps is described in detail, or she doesn’t want to see a movie about Northup or the other slaves whose experiences on the Epps plantation are told. This is where an evaluation of public memory and discomfort is helpful to understanding such an illogical critique. Whiteness, always in search of comfort, cannot face the realities of slavery. This is problematic for facing contemporary racism.

The questions I answer throughout this dissertation have to do with what memories do—particularly as they can either reconstitute or peck away at whiteness. Comforting memories suggest complacency in the present. Issues of controlling or benefitting from time, denying agency or proclaiming objectivity while benefitting from racism also define contemporary

¹⁹¹ Dana Stevens, “Entry 13: My Problem with *12 Years a Slave*,” *The Movie Club*, January 17, 2014. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/the_movie_club/features/2014/movie_club_2013/_12_years_a_slave_my_problem_with_steve_mcqueen_s_harrowing_film.html

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

whiteness. And usurping religion continues. The “post-racial” era is no different when “evangelical” is synonymous with “White” in our political imaginations. And evangelicals are the “least likely of religious groups” to support Black Lives Matter.¹⁹⁶ Obama’s name exacerbated the “concern” that he wasn’t a Christian; being Black and having a “funny” name did not equal Christian for so many Americans. Memory affects action. Marable concludes, “We must reconstruct America’s memory about itself, and our collective past, in order to reimagine its future.”¹⁹⁷ He’s suggesting that comforting whiteness preserves whiteness.

¹⁹⁶ Morgan Lee, “Where John Piper and Other Evangelicals Stand on Black Lives Matter,” *Christianity Today* May 13, 2016 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/where-john-piper-evangelicals-stand-black-lives-matter-blm.html>; Barna, “Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America,” *Barna.org* May 5, 2016 <http://barna.org/research/black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america/#.VzSUJoQrIdU>

¹⁹⁷ Marable, *Living Black History*, 29.

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But nobody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it.

Certainly not the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit at that very moment, pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting. Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach.

- Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*¹⁹⁸

The denial of racism is the heartbeat of racism.

- Ibram X. Kendi

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Eatonville, Florida, twenty-six years after Appomattox, and she died four years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She lived between slavery and the modern civil rights era, not quite identifying with either and, at times, at odds with both.¹⁹⁹

Hurston was vital as a Southern woman's voice of the Harlem Renaissance. She was, as Alice Walker put on her gravestone, "A Genius of the South."²⁰⁰ Hurston published four novels, two folklore books, an autobiography, and "more than fifty shorter works...when she was the dominant black woman writer in the United States."²⁰¹ Her writing de-centers whiteness, resists notions of assimilation, and excludes stereotypical characters. She centers blackness—especially Black women—in all their humanity, their virtues and their flaws. Walker describes Hurston's characters as "complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" (italics in original).²⁰² Her

¹⁹⁸ Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016), 116.

¹⁹⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks On a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, Inc., 1942).

²⁰⁰ Alice Walker, "Afterword: Looking for Zora," in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing...and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 307.

²⁰¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Afterword: Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying'," in Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 195-196.

²⁰² Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 85.

stories represent “racial health” and celebrate Black culture in the South, including its language.²⁰³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains Hurston’s writing strategy “was not calculated to please” in its rejection of the popular notion “that racism had reduced black people to mere ciphers, to beings who only react to an omnipresent racial oppression, whose culture is ‘deprived’ where different, and whose psyches are in the main ‘pathological’.”²⁰⁴ Hurston declared that her first novel was a “manifesto against the ‘arrogance’ of whites assuming that ‘black lives are only defensive reactions to white actions’.”²⁰⁵ She was declaring the humanization of Black people and the value of blackness not dependent on or accountable to whiteness.

Hurston wrote about Black people and Black Southern culture as she knew it to be, but that came with criticism—especially for some of her characterizations of men and that her characters spoke in “Black dialect.” The perception that her characters’ vernacular is negative is perceived through a lens of whiteness and its expectations. What people say and why they say it is indicative of agency; how they say it is indicative of culture. As for some of the negative depictions of men, humanizing Black people means recognizing that they are people, and people have positive attributes and negative attributes. As Langston Hughes wrote, “We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”²⁰⁶ Ibram X. Kendi writes, there’s a “razor-thin line between the racist portrayer of Black negativity and the antiracist portrayer of imperfect Black humanity.”²⁰⁷ Hurston’s characters and stories are antiracist because they represent whole people with agency.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Gates, “Afterword,” 199.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm, Accessed June 4, 2019.

²⁰⁷ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 419-420.

The positive and negative are neither confined to their skin color nor indicative of it. A legacy of Zora Neale Hurston's writing is her revolutionary portrayals of Black humanity, an influence to her literary "daughters" such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison who join Hurston to epitomize "a black woman's voice" in American literature and culture.²⁰⁸

These are important counter-voices and counter-memories to the voices and memories of Black people that whiteness had already established to fit a comforting memory of the antebellum South and to authorize a legacy that could define Southern society in the wake of defeat. Whiteness created a voice for Black people that would support these memories, and it was a voice that could serve multiple purposes. It could negate narratives about the horrors of slavery; it could justify the Black Codes, and it could downplay Jim Crow; it could glorify Southern society; and, significantly, it could maintain racial hierarchy. Whiteness's version of the Black voice was also versatile. Black men could be dangerous, or they could be entertaining fools. Black women could be seductive, or they could be loyal caretakers.²⁰⁹ One of these lasting and impactful voices for Black women is the mythical Mammy figure. Solidified into American popular imagination in *Gone With the Wind*, a Mammy represents Black women as faithful, hard-working servants who care for and love White people. Mammy is loyal and content in her servitude. She is asexual, a doting nanny of White children, and she is a friend of White mothers. The Mammy figure's history began with slavery, extended into Jim Crow, celebrated in throughout civil rights era, and remains popular in the contemporary social, political, and commercial imagination.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Afterword: Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying,'" 200.

²⁰⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

²¹⁰ Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1998).

This chapter uses Kathryn Stockett’s 2009 novel, *The Help* and the 2011 film adaptation to study the ways narratives can comfort whiteness and shape memory of Black people, the civil rights era, the South, and racism. I begin with a brief description of the film and its characters, and how the first-person narration racializes voices that echo persistent myths and stereotypes of Black people. Next, I show how the novel and film comfort whiteness through a production of collective nostalgia for a Southern culture that is grounded in the Lost Cause to define racism as an issue of interpersonal relationships rather than systemic oppression. Nostalgia is a form of memory that narrates particular shared identities that in this case redefines an era of racism. Under the umbrella of collective nostalgia I explain how Whiteness is reconstructed when “racist” assumes an individual phenomenon while blackness is secured in stereotypes and collectivity, most notably in the Mammy figure. I position the persistence of Lost Cause ideology in the “post-racial” era and race “conscious” narratives as a function of what Charles Mills’s calls “white ignorance.”²¹¹ These two rhetorical implications—collective nostalgia and reconstructed whiteness through racial ignorance—comfort and center whiteness in a story that claims to be doing the opposite. Ultimately, I argue *The Help* comforts whiteness because it reproduces ideas about what America is, what racism is, and what it means to be Black and to be White. I conclude with how such memories of the civil rights era reflect and inform the discursive nature of race and racism in the “post-racial” era by denying racism and claiming colorblindness.

4.1 The Help

Set in Jackson, Mississippi, beginning in 1962, *The Help* is a piece of historical fiction about Southern White women and the Black women who work for them. The plot centers on a

²¹¹ Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

White woman who intends to write a novel in which she interviews Black women who are “the help” so people can know “what it’s like” to care for White people and raise their children. There are three sets of character types. The first set of character type represents the help in the two Black main characters, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. The two are best friends and often work together. The story focuses on Aibileen and Minny and their stories as domestic workers, but the title and plot tell us that they represent the other workers and all Black domestic workers in the South at that time and before. They are happy to do their work and they love the White children they care for.

The second is the three White women who employ the help and their friend, the White protagonist. Each of these White women represents a caricatured version of a racist: Hilly Holbrook is overtly racist and dedicated to segregation; Elizabeth Leefolt is also racist but does so with a tinge of hesitancy or regret; and Celia Foote is the social outsider who represents the not racist character who needs and appreciates the help. Skeeter Phelan is the White hero, not racist, aspiring author who is working with the help to tell their stories. She represents the antiracist, feminist protagonist who was cared for by a nanny and returns home after college. Skeeter is heartbroken to learn that the woman who cared for her has left and been replaced by someone else. Skeeter is educated, not married nor seeking a relationship, doesn’t know anything about cleaning or cooking, has a job, and wants to move to New York to pursue a writing career and live independently. She is a clear, stark contrast to her cultural environment and friends. She is “ahead of her time” and therefore easily connects to modern audiences.

The third set of character type is the two mothers. Missus Walters is Hilly’s mother. She is not as racist as Hilly and, in key scenes, despises her daughter for the way she treats the help and blames it on the father. Missus Walters is also portrayed as senile and despises the way her

daughter treats her. Charlotte Phelan is Skeeter's mother. She represents a redemptive White person who commits a hateful act but then redeems herself by denouncing the racist Hilly. Charlotte is fighting cancer and is preoccupied with Skeeter finding a husband.

Although I rely primarily on the film, I'll pull examples from the novel as well. They both were enormously popular. The novel has sold over 11 million copies and NPR called it "one of the most important pieces of fiction since *To Kill a Mockingbird*."²¹² The film was a financial success and was nominated for four Academy Awards, winning one for Octavia Spencer's supporting role as Minny.²¹³ Additionally, while the film is true to the novel, there are descriptions in the novel that I think are important to this analysis. What sets *The Help* apart from other White hero narratives is its assertion that the story is told from the point of view of Black women—that it's them telling their story. Aibileen is the narrator of the film while the chapters in the novel are divided among Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter as narrators.

4.1.1 Racializing Voices: Narrators and Perspective

Kathryn Stockett, who is White, is the author of the novel. She writes in an afterword, "I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature."²¹⁴ It's unclear whether Stockett means the stereotype of the voice of a Black person or the relationship between a Black woman and a White child. She would be correct either way. Nevertheless, this quotation illuminates Stockett's whiteness in two ways. First, her race privilege grants her permission to

²¹² Penguin Random House, "The Help by Kathryn Stockett."

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/303357/the-help-by-kathryn-stockett/9780425232200/> accessed June 11, 2019.

²¹³ IMDB, "The Help." <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1454029/awards> Accessed June 11, 2019.

²¹⁴ Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (New York: Berkley Books, 2009), 450.

assume blackness. That is, she, the author, assumes a first-person narrative position in the novel with Aibileen and Minny. Stockett's proclaimed worry is not about assuming a fictional role but assuming a representative role of a Black person. Stockett is, in effect, speaking for Black people as a Black character.

A White author, Mark Twain for example, may write dialogue for a Black character. And that Black character may reflect certain stereotypes or negative characteristics associated with Black people, but Stockett's framing suggests a Black person speaking for herself and as a representative of Black people. If we recognize whiteness's position of privilege, and we understand whiteness as not-raced, we see whiteness assuming blackness as problematic. Stockett's whiteness does not preclude her from writing about Black people, but it does obscure her ability to assume blackness. The visceral nature of Stockett's whiteness informs how she understands race. So what we're left with as readers is whiteness describing what it thinks Black people feel and think about White people. Also problematic is that whiteness, as a raceless object, assumes race as a benefit—in Stockett's case to write a novel—and then returns to whiteness as a convenience. The changes in narrator from chapter to chapter materializes this as Stockett is Aibileen then Skeeter and then Minny.

Second, she's writing from the voice of a Black person to relate and center *her* life. Stockett isn't afraid of writing "in the voice of a black person" because she'll misrepresent the Black person; she's afraid she won't capture the relationship that was so influential and loving for *her* life. Ironically, Stockett is admitting that the story she tells is about herself and not the help. She is attempting to relate the relationship as she knows it. Aibileen and Minny's voices are what Stockett imagines them to be; they are what she needs them to be to define herself and parse who's racist and who's not. Ultimately, it's a story of how whiteness *thinks* about

blackness and remembers the civil rights era, which, as I show later, is consequential for public memory and indicative of contemporary racial discourse.

The Help's claim, the story is of the Black characters, makes whiteness invisible, and therefore controlling. Invisibility works when the narrative positions readers or viewers with Aibileen or Minny, inviting alliance and identification between audience and character. Assuming the point of view of the Black characters also suggests objectivity while simultaneously reaffirming White people as the focus. The narrative also separates “people” from “White people.” Nervous about talking to Skeeter, Aibileen asks, “What if you don’t like what I got to say about white people?” Skeeter replies, “It ain’t about me. It doesn’t matter what I think.” Since the audience is meant to identify with Skeeter, we can assume that what Aibileen has to say doesn’t apply to the White audience. Furthermore, it identifies the racist characters as “White people” and separates Skeeter or other not-racist characters from that identifier. Recalling Nakayama and Krizek, this signifies racial identity for whiteness that is racist while allowing not-racist White people to be “regular” or “normal” people.²¹⁵ In effect, by labeling themselves as not-racist they escape being raced, i.e. their whiteness.

4.2 Collective Nostalgia

In the “Acknowledgments” section of Stockett’s novel, she writes, “Thank you to Susan Tucker...whose beautiful oral accounts of domestics and white employers took me back to a time and place that is long gone.”²¹⁶ Tucker’s accounts revive Stockett’s memory of not just the help but of the “time and place.” The help are an important cue for Stockett’s memory. And it’s not necessarily of the woman who worked for the Stocketts and cared for Kathryn. It’s the idea

²¹⁵ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed. Carl R. Burghardt ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010).

²¹⁶ Stockett, 445.

of the help and the relationship between Black domestic workers and White employers. Remembering the help engenders a larger memory of a time and place that Stockett misses—she expresses nostalgia for the time and place. Nostalgia indicates a favorable and preferred past. Put another way, people who are nostalgic think of the past more favorably than those who are less nostalgic.²¹⁷ *The Help* reflects Stockett’s fondness for her past that is marked through Black women caring for White people.

The film elicits nostalgia for the audience. It is aesthetically pleasing. The classic cars are in bold colors, the White people’s houses are set in beautiful landscapes, the inside of their homes are quintessentially 1960s with attention to detail, the White women wear dresses and have perfect hair, and the White men wear suits. There is a 1950s “Leave It to Beaver” feel as the men go to work in the morning and read the paper at the dinner table, while the women care for the home and children. The weather is perfect and sunny except for two occasions: one time there’s a tornado at night and there’s another night scene when Medgar Evers is killed. The downtown area is clean, the parks are full of children playing and men sitting at picnic tables, and the coffee shop/eatery is pleasantly not crowded and reminiscent of the 1940s and 1950s. There’s a small town and good-old-days feel with gas station attendants and references to a community in which everyone knows everyone. And one last example is a comical moment when the editor of the Jackson Journal detests cigarette smoke and remarks, “one day they gonna figure out cigarettes will kill ya.” It illustrates the era’s innocence and naiveté. Aside from the few bad, racist people, things were perfect.

Remembering the past as better is a function of individual memory, but it’s also a function of collective memory. While a person can be nostalgic for her individual past, people

²¹⁷ Krystine Irene Batcho, “Personal Nostalgia, World View, Memory, and Emotionality,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* vol. 87 (2), 411-433. October 1998.

who share some sort of social identity can be nostalgic for a shared past.²¹⁸ The emotional reverence for the past of personal nostalgia and collective nostalgia is similar; however, a significant difference is that people can feel collective nostalgia for a past “that individuals have not experienced themselves, through the knowledge of a shared history.”²¹⁹ This means that Stockett’s personal nostalgia for her youth and the domestic workers her family employed is shared through a novel and film that can produce collective nostalgia for others who may or may not have been alive during the civil rights era or may or may not have had domestic workers in their homes. Maurice Halbwachs explains how individuals locate particular memories by “the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves.”²²⁰ For Stockett, it’s the Black domestic workers from her childhood. The landmarks for audiences of *The Help* may include classic cars, smoking in public, or something more abstract like the “feel and look” of the 1960s.²²¹ It doesn’t matter whether the audience experienced the 1960s; what they imagine the 1960s to be is what matters.

Collective nostalgia in *The Help* remembers the civil rights era in comforting terms for whiteness. To remember some things requires forgetting other things. Whiteness, especially when “speaking for” blackness is managing memory to fit within a narrative that benefits itself. In the course of civil rights and its necessary movement that sprung from slavery and the demise of Reconstruction, people choose which events and people to remember and thereby ignore others. People then piece these selected memories together to form a single coherent narrative that society then solidifies in textbooks, holidays, monuments, novels, and in film and television.

²¹⁸ Anouk Smeeke et al., “Regaining In-group Continuity In Times of Anxiety About the Group’s Future: A Study on the Role of Collective Nostalgia Across 27 Countries,” *Social Psychology* 49, 6, 2018. Pp. 311-329.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.

²²⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 175.

²²¹ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 175.

This is the socialization of memory that Halbwachs describes in which individual memory depends on others—society—to maintain.²²² But this is also how we privilege some memories over others that through materialization become taken for granted as historical fact rather than chosen, partial memories.

The chosen memories that create a single narrative signals and reflects a desired single identity. An assumption of public memory is that it narrates shared identities, so it follows that collective nostalgia narrates an ideal shared identity. These shared identities for the civil rights era include Whites *and* Blacks, who did not share civic or social identities but nevertheless whiteness combines because its identity is dependent upon the identity of blackness. Collective nostalgia in *The Help* is perfect-memory making for how Black and White people navigated such a tumultuous time of change in America. The following explains how collective nostalgia narrates the civil rights era in *The Help* with whiteness ideology that secures blackness in stereotypes and collectivity and defines racism and racist through interpersonal relationships.

4.2.1 *Stereotypes and Associations*

The Help's aesthetic and thematic nostalgia create a pleasing memory of the way 1962 was. Stereotypes and the associations of blackness to negativity and whiteness to positivity create conceptions of Black and White people that become part of the pleasing, nostalgic, and therefore preferred, memory. The stereotypes in the film and novel are sometimes cloaked in tragedy and sympathy for the characters and sometimes expressed with humor. The only information the film provides of the two main Black characters are that Aibileen's son is dead and her husband had abandoned them long ago, and Minny has several children and her husband

²²² Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*

is physically abusive. These are tragic moments but reflect some of the racist conceptions of the Black family as “broken” or Black men as absent or violent.

Many of the descriptions in the novel associate blackness with dark or terrible things; conversely other descriptions associate whiteness with bright and good things. For example, Minny asks, “Who do you think you talking to, Aibileen? A monkey?”²²³ A similar reference is made when Aibileen describes the “colored part of town” as “one big anthill.”²²⁴ This suggests overpopulation with people piled upon one another, and it compares “colored” people to insects. These may seem like harmless metaphors, but they’re rooted in racist conceptualizations of Black people that compared them to animals or pests that once excused slavery and segregation.

They’re also starkly different to the open spaces and big house descriptions of the White characters. Scenes at Aibileen’s or Minny’s house are less pleasing and usually the lighting is darker. When Skeeter comes to Aibileen’s house, Aibileen is wearing a nice yellow dress, which accentuates her skin and contrasts her surroundings. This works to separate Aibileen from her poor conditions *and* to remind us of them. Other descriptions use color to illustrate a contrast in blackness and whiteness such as when the novel tells us that Hilly’s hair is brown, and Skeeter’s hair is yellow. And Aibileen describes when her son died because of an accident at work saying, “That was the day my whole world went black. Air look black, sun look black. I laid up in bed and stared at the black walls a my house.”²²⁵ The film and novel associate bright colors with White characters and dark colors with Black characters.

These descriptions exemplify Richard Dyer’s examination of Western visual culture’s history of constructing whiteness through representations of color or lighting.²²⁶ *The Help*

²²³ Stockett, 17.

²²⁴ Stockett, 12.

²²⁵ Stockett, 2-3.

²²⁶ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

follows this pattern with associations steeped in stereotypes that the film and novel compound with more overt stereotypes. We learn in the novel that Aibileen and her son nicknamed his father, “who done run off on his family,” “Crisco” because he’s the “greasiest no-count you ever known.”²²⁷ And Minny loves fried chicken. This tries to pass as a staple of Southern cuisine and highlight Minny’s cooking, but in the film she says, “I love me some fried chicken” and eats a fried chicken leg in an uncivilized manner taking a hard bite and ripping the chicken from her mouth with wide eyes. It’s a racial caricature that uses stereotype for humor.

Let’s consider the flaws of the Black characters. Minny talks back and does the “terrible awful” to Miss Hilly, (which I’ll describe below). Minny sticks up for herself and fights back at the mean treatment she receives, which contrasts her ability to leave the abusive relationship at home. Aibileen’s flaw is absorbing the abuse of Miss Leefolt, but this flaw is negated as we see that Aibileen acts this way because she cares about Mae Mobley, which associates her with the mammy figure. The maid who asks to borrow money pawns the ring she found behind the couch. This applies the stereotype that when Black people aren’t helped, they will resort to dishonesty and thievery. An equally racist presumption is after the police use a billy club while arresting her, the next time we see her she is happy and laughing in jail as she reads the novel suggesting her contentment with imprisonment. When Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny are unable to get more maids to contribute, as the editor in New York demanded, Minny suggests using her stories but making up names for them to make it look like they have multiple sources. Skeeter replies that it wouldn’t be right. Her morals remain intact when faced with difficulty, whereas Minny’s do not.

In contrast, the flaws of Skeeter aren’t really flaws. She’s outspoken, somewhat naïve, and overeager. The film suggests her innocence as she’s stuck between girlhood and

²²⁷ Stockett, 5.

womanhood. She lives with her parents. She runs up and down stairs awkwardly, as an excited child would. She hides in the pantry while on the phone, as a teenager might. Her mother does her hair and has her try on a dress and has Skeeter take off “plain” shoes that a child might wear in turn for heels. Skeeter has never dated anyone, which suggests her virginity. The film contrasts all these childlike characterizations with Skeeter getting her first job and then taking on a dangerous task of telling the help’s stories. Her innocence bolsters her antiracist character. We get allusions to this when we see *Native Son* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* on Skeeter’s bookshelf. It’s an arc that illustrates her growth as a matter of the natural, normal maturation process. The help’s flaws are a matter of who they are.

Lastly, we have to consider the “terrible, awful,” which refers to Hilly eating the pie that Minny made with her feces. It is a major part of the story that influences so much of the plot and identities of the characters. The characters respond to this with disbelief but also with laughter. The focus is on Hilly—the revenge is warranted and funny to the other characters and presumably the audience. But if we focus on Minny and consider her, the “terrible, awful” is less amusing. To cook a pie with feces means Minny collected, handled in some capacity, and then put her feces in her oven. The fact that Hilly is enjoying the pie and gushes at how good it is invites us to consider how might Minny know the pie was any good? Are we to assume she tested it? We know she didn’t intend to tell Hilly, so she’d need the pie to taste so good as to conceal human feces. Does the incident change if it’s Skeeter or Celia who cook the pie? The point I’m making here is that Minny cooking the pie is immediately funny, and this assumes something about Minny that isn’t assumed with the White characters. There is an implicit association between Minny’s body, her personal character, and the “terrible, awful.”

These stereotypes and associations provide a context of who these people were, which creates a basis for how the audience interprets their interactions. Descriptions of people are powerful tools for predicting or understanding their behavior. *The Help*'s use of stereotypes and associations of blackness that reaffirm whiteness's conception of race are perhaps no more evident than in its veiled use of the mammy figure.

4.2.2 Mammy and Associations of Blackness to Negativity and Whiteness to Positivity

The narrative that denied slavery as the legacy of the Civil War and that ultimately persevered over Reconstruction also informed the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. The Lost Cause ideology, David Blight writes, provided a “foundation on which Southerners built the Jim Crow system” to sustain the hegemony of whiteness through forces of segregation.²²⁸ The South adapted and declared that although its “racially ordered civilization had been tragically crushed by Yankee invasion... ‘just’ causes can lose militarily but with time regain the moral and political high ground.”²²⁹ The Lost Cause's efforts to rebrand the South and slavery succeeded in cementing into the American imagination some stereotypical caricatures of slaves that suggest slavery as a mutually benevolent system. The narrative proclaimed that those enslaved loved their masters and the masters cared for their slaves. While resisting civic equality for African Americans and attempting to regain the “political high ground,” groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) were erecting statues and monuments that glorified Confederate leaders and soldiers. Regaining the “moral high ground” meant recasting slavery as a mutually beneficial way of life and “honoring” those enslaved as loyal and loved. These stereotypes survive in White memory as they are produced, repackaged, and reproduced.

²²⁸ David Blight, “The Battle for Memorial Day in New Orleans,” *The Atlantic*, May 29, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/the-battle-for-memorial-day-in-new-orleans/528423/>

²²⁹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 530.

The most enduring and “most visible character in the myth of the faithful slave” is the mammy figure.²³⁰ Mammy is “remembered as big, fat, soft, dark-skinned, and unfeminine,” and she was a “trusted adviser and confidante whose skills were used exclusively in service of the white families to which she was attached.”²³¹ Around 1911, White people in Athens, Georgia, began raising funds and planning the Black Mammy Memorial Institute, which would honor the mammies of slavery and teach Black people domestic service skills.²³² In the 1920s, the UDC lobbied to build a “Mammy memorial” to be placed on the National Mall and in memorial parks. The plan stalled in Congress when the NAACP lobbied against it. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders quotes a White Southerner who’d written, “The day will come when the South will build a monument to the good old black mammy of the South.”²³³ Hattie McDaniel’s Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* would eventually be that monument for the Lost Cause America. *The Help* is that monument for “post-racial” America.

In what appears to be an antiracist move, *The Help* claims to combat Hattie McDaniel’s Mammy role. Early in the story, Skeeter is persuading the editor in New York to greenlight a book about the help and says Margaret Mitchell wrote about the Mammy figure but that nobody ever asked her how she felt about it. This suggests a few things: first, asking Mammy how she felt about what? Caring for White people or being a slave? Second, it doesn’t proclaim that the Mammy figure is a mythical and racist stereotype created in minstrels and cemented through Lost Cause ideology. It simply proclaims that not asking Mammy how she felt about her position

²³⁰ McElya, *Clinging to Mammy*, 4.

²³¹ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 72-73.

²³² June O. Patton, J. Strickland and E.J. Crawford, “Moonlight and Magnolias in Southern Education: The Black Mammy Memorial Institute,” *The Journal of Negro History* 65, no. 2, 1980, pp. 149-155; Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, “Southern Memory, Southern Monuments, and the Subversive Black Mammy,” *Southern Spaces*, June 15, 2009. <https://southernspaces.org/2009/southern-memory-southern-monuments-and-subversive-black-mammy>

²³³ Wallace-Sanders, “Southern Memory,” Presentation.

was wrong. Third, the first two suggestions here serve to legitimize and connect the Mammy figure to Aibileen and Minny rather than dismiss Mammy as a racist creation of whiteness.

The novel and film echo the Mammy stereotypes circulated by groups such as the proposed Athens Institute and the UDC. The institute's ideology was that the best thing for Black people is to teach them skills of service. *The Help*'s message is that the best thing White people can do is to allow Black people to serve in friendly environments. The institute and UDC described Mammy as plump and loving of the White children. The first page of the novel lets us know that Aibileen is a natural at taking care of "white babies" who like fat and fat legs.²³⁴ Both the film and the novel have Skeeter repeat, "They raise our children. We love them and they love us." The help, just like Mammy, *love* the White children they care for. Aibileen tells Mae Mobley repeatedly: "you is kind, you is smart, and you is important." No matter how badly Hilly and Elizabeth treat Aibileen, Aibileen loves Mae Mobley. She is loyal to her. There's no sense that Aibileen would spite or rebuke Mae Mobley. This comforts whiteness in two ways: one, it shows that White people aren't inherently bad. They're individuals who are born good but may grow up to be bad without the proper guidance; two, Black—these Black people—are good because they want to take care of the White children. It also serves as a salve for the perpetual White fear of Black retribution—in whatever form that retribution may take.

Another theme that suggests loyalty is the possessive nature the White characters have and express for the help. Wallace-Sanders points out that we can trace the origin of such thinking to slavery when children were "gifted" an enslaved woman who would care for them.²³⁵ *The Help* reimagines this practice as the help work for mothers and then daughters. Stockett herself

²³⁴ Stockett, 1-2.

²³⁵ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2008).

mentions in the afterword the maid who cared for her had been “in her family” for 50 years. It suggests loyalty on the part of the help and benevolence on the part of whiteness.

The Help perpetuates the mammy figure by adhering to the myth that has existed since the antebellum period as a rebuke to abolitionism. Mammy figures provide comfort to whiteness and allow it to hide in an expressed admiration and love for Black people of whom White people depend. The following section shows how the stereotypes and associations help define racism and racist in interpersonal terms.

4.2.3 *Interpersonal Relationships Define Racism and Racist*

If *The Help* were a story about good people versus bad people and people being “kind, smart, and important,” then it would be terrific. But it’s a story about race, and it reframes racism as good people versus bad people—good White people versus bad White people. And this is problematic because it remembers racism as personal while forgetting its systemized, structural realities. Within the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the South, the framing suggests racism as bound to interpersonal relationships rather than systemic reinforcements of privilege. This comforts whiteness in a couple of ways. First, racism as an interpersonal issue rather than a structural one relieves whiteness from participating in and benefitting from racism as long as White people treat Black people well. Whiteness is able to separate itself from its privilege. Second, it allows whiteness to feel good about the civil rights era and remember it in nostalgic terms. The 1950s can be “the good old days” because any racism at the time was either being conquered through peaceful protest or was the fault of a few bad White people. Here is where whiteness must define “racist” as an obviously mean and prejudiced person who not just uses racist language but intentionally commits racist acts.

Mark L. McPhail explains that language can facilitate racism.²³⁶ Terminology is a way of seeing things, and it shapes our understandings of the world in which we live. Racism in terms of personal relationships and language that describes racism as hate or love defines racism incompletely, but it also comforts whiteness because it exempts White people from being or benefitting from racism. It provides an escape route in which a White person can escape culpability through personal actions. This also allows whiteness to elude racism through inaction. Not intentionally harming Black people is enough to deny racism.

Whiteness is afraid of being labeled racist. Doing so would not only label a person as bad, it would expose whiteness's supposed superiority and privilege. Thus, whiteness's definition of racist is so particular as to exclude nearly all White people, and it projects the label onto obvious forms of bigotry and prejudice, which nullifies accusations of racism that lie outside obvious, overt, and intentional actions. It also allows White people to separate themselves from the actions of other White people like their friends or family. This, another tenet of whiteness, reminds us that White people are not responsible for other White people in the same way Black people are responsible for other Black people. Remembering the discussion about separate bathrooms, Skeeter tells Aibileen, "I'm sorry you had to hear that." Skeeter doesn't speak up during the discussion and doesn't apologize for Hilly or for being Hilly's friend. She simply regrets that Aibileen heard it. No apology is needed if Aibileen never hears it.

Racism defined as interpersonal relationships exposes the whiteness under reconstruction in *The Help*—the reconstructed whiteness removes itself from racism by denying any racist accusations because a White person doesn't inhabit any racist identifier or characteristic.

Christopher Petrella and Justin Gomer write about the origination and the pervasive use of a

²³⁶ Mark Lawrence McPhail, *The Rhetoric of Racism Revisited: Reparations or Separation?* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).

White person denying being racist by asserting, I don't have "a racist bone in [my] body."²³⁷ The authors describe how declaring Reagan and others in his administration did not have any "racist bones" usually deflected their racist political policies. Similarly, when accused of being racist, a White person often responds that the accuser doesn't know what's in the accused's heart. These corporeal descriptions of racist detract from "racist" as ideas or actions that favor one race over another; instead, racist becomes abstract and only a part of a person we can't see but associate through metaphor. And they further confine racism to individuality and interpersonal. Bones represent the skeletal basis of a person, and the heart represents love or hate.

"Racist" as an individual phenomenon comforts whiteness through a reassurance that other White people will be taken care of and not harmed or lessened in any way. *The Help* reinforces this idea. The Black characters provide household "help" and they provide help through caring for the White individuals who are good. Constantine helps teenage Skeeter realize her inner beauty and worth and says, "you're gonna do something big. You'll see." Aibileen repeatedly tells Mae Mobley, "you is kind, you is smart, and you is important." Mae Mobley loves Aibileen in return and often touches her face. At one point in the film, Aibileen comes out of the bathroom the Leefolt's have built in the garage for her to use. The bathroom is small and hot; we see Aibileen sweat and struggle in the tiny makeshift bathroom. Elizabeth is leaving and Aibileen holds Mae Mobley. The little girl caresses Aibileen's face and says, "you're my real momma, Aiby." The scene illustrates the love Mae Mobley has for Aibileen. And it communicates why Aibileen endures the segregated, outside bathroom: she needs to care for

²³⁷ Christopher Petrella and Justin Gomer, "'Not a Racist Bone in His Body': The Origins of the Default Defense Against Racism," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/11/not-racist-bone-his-body-origins-default-defense-against-racism/?utm_term=.ccdd6e49245a

Mae Mobley. Minny takes particular care of Mrs. Walters and then helps Celia recover from her miscarriage.

The Help engages whiteness in its feelings about racism: not what racism *is* but how racism *feels*. This is perfect for connecting to visceral whiteness. I do not mean to belittle the point that creating empathy isn't valuable in combatting whiteness and racism. MLK's "Letter" specifically broaches the subject: "I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging facts of segregation to say, 'wait.'"²³⁸ But this quotation is followed with examples of segregation and the consequences on African Americans. An understanding of how racism feels becomes problematic when whiteness "corrects" racism or "isn't racist" simply through being nice or with a kind act. Racism survives when a culture and set of laws favor whiteness over blackness; an act of kindness can't undo that. This is why "benevolent slave holder" is oxymoronic. Whiteness is comforted if racism is easily erased through good deeds that produce positive feelings. Undoing the structural privilege is more difficult—and less appealing to whiteness.

The Help offers a comforting narrative because it affords whiteness an opportunity to identify itself with good people who acted courageously while maintaining its status. No introspection or change is required. Whiteness arms itself with the personal relationship model of antiracism. A personal relationship with a Black person excludes whiteness from racism. The "Black friend" evidence is a common defense. A White person who has a close relationship with a Black person does not erase racism. One reason for this is that in personal relationships whiteness grants individual status for the Black person in that relationship. The differentiation is a Black person versus Black people. The collectivity of blackness also works by assuring

²³⁸ http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf

whiteness that if a Black person appears to be exempt from racism, then all Black people must be exempt. Or at the very least, are capable of escaping racism just as this Black person apparently has.

The Help localizes civil rights and ignores a wider view of the historical, national, and global implications. This comforts whiteness because it can separate itself from racism through personal acts of kindness and generosity while denying systemic privilege. The Civil Rights Movement was largely about political and civic equality. *The Help* situates the CRM within the workplace for the maids but it is within a home and not in public. As the film states a few times, the help were like family. This further strips civil rights from a public domain and fixates it into a private one. The Civil Rights Movement, then, becomes a story set within personal attitudes and relationships rather than within the social, political, civic, and legal recognition and protection of full citizenship.

Racism as an interpersonal problem in *The Help* doesn't necessarily ignore the civic inequality altogether. It just reimagines it as cleanly achieved in key moments by individual people. Aibileen and the other maids ride the bus six days a week. Aibileen says that all the maids are "chatting and smiling" and they don't mind the White people on the bus "now thanks to Miss Parks."²³⁹ That Black people are free to sit where they please on the bus in 1962 makes Jackson special. Ninety-three miles north of Jackson is where Fannie Lou Hamer and nine other civil rights activists sat in the "White" section of a bus in 1963. The police department of Winona, Mississippi, arrested the protesters, beat them with blackjacks, clubs, and belts and then had a Black inmate beat Hamer until "he gave out."²⁴⁰ The novel depicts a civil rights victory

²³⁹ Stockett, 13.

²⁴⁰ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 171-172.

and honors Rosa Parks. This reinforces whiteness's memory of civil rights as clear, defining moments of victory for equality. *Brown v. Board of Education* integrates schools and Parks's protest desegregates buses. Single events or people neatly erode racism with this framing, but the reality is schools in Mississippi are still under order to desegregate, and public transportation was dangerous for Black people years after Parks was arrested.²⁴¹

Finally, the storyline and progression of the interpersonal relationships indicate that the treatment of the help was about to change for the better. Indeed, it did change for the three main characters, Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter; however, whiteness is centered. Skeeter goes to New York: she is rewarded for her good deed of courageously telling the story of the help. She represents what DiAngelo recognizes in whiteness ideology as “whites who are willing to save or otherwise help black people, at seemingly great personal cost, are noble, courageous, and morally superior to other whites.”²⁴² Minny has a job for life working for Celia Foote and her husband: their kindness and protection allow her to leave Leroy. Recalling DiAngelo: “white people are the saviors of black people.”²⁴³ Aibileen becomes a writer: she is able to do so as a matter of choice: “individual black people can overcome their circumstances, but usually only with the help of white people.”²⁴⁴

Thus far I've laid out how *The Help* racializes voices, stereotypes blackness, and redefines racism and racist—all in service to comforting whiteness in a narrative about race during the civil rights era, and doing all this under the pretense of telling and celebrating the

²⁴¹ Camila Domonoske, “After 50-Year Legal Struggle, Mississippi School District Ordered to Desegregate,” NPR, May 17, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/05/17/478389720/after-50-year-legal-struggle-mississippi-school-district-ordered-to-desegregate> accessed June 13, 2019.

²⁴² Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 98.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

story of the help. The civil rights era lives in individual memories of a lot of people alive today. Videos and documents are easily accessed through the Internet. It seems that so much information about civil rights and what it was like for Black people exists for whiteness to consider. So, why are narratives like *The Help* so popular and regarded as historically important to understanding racism in America? How do racial stereotypes persist in the very act of claiming to dismantle them? The answers are complicated, but they're rooted in visceral whiteness and the tendency toward comforting memories and understandings of racism.

4.3 Conclusion: The Implications of White Ignorance

Jim Crow, enforced through law and by ordinary White citizens, replaced chattel slavery. And, like slavery, was defended rhetorically through racial narratives in popular culture. The desire for slavery necessitated narratives and characterizations of Black people that explained or excused the system. To continue terrorizing and controlling Black people required a continuation of racist narratives and characterizations of Black people. As Michelle Alexander poignantly puts it, "After the death of slavery, the idea of race lived on."²⁴⁵ And those ideas of race, that justified Jim Crow, live on in popular culture of the "post-racial" era to help define blackness, while reassuring and comforting whiteness.

Overtly racist portrayals of Black people in the minstrel shows of the late nineteenth century and the Lost Cause films in the early twentieth century eventually gave way to civil rights and race "conscious" narratives such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), in which White people's prejudice is diminished through getting to know a Black person. Likewise, other films such as *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) show Blacks and

²⁴⁵ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 26.

Whites overcoming their perceived differences to become friends. They illustrate themes of equality, change, and reconciliation, and they suggest an end to racism. These are the narratives the civil rights era produced, but their themes and character arcs continue through the 1980s and 1990s. Either set within or explicitly about civil rights, films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) and *The Long Walk Home* (1990) repeat themes of White and Black characters struggling at first but eventually creating a meaningful relationship complete with mutual respect. These types of films suggest characters as “equal.” The White characters and the Black characters are both struggling; they each carry a burden of race to overcome. Narratives produced in the “post-racial” era follow this formula. *Green Book* (2018), for example, won the Academy Award for Best Picture for a film that once again illustrates an interpersonal relationship defining and then defeating racism. This film also equates racist with an individual’s ignorance, thereby suggesting knowledge of a Black person as a way out of being racist.

Race-conscious narratives, as anticipated, emphasize race. Whereas the Civil War era narratives tend to omit slavery and racism, civil rights era narratives tend to feature race and racism. The key to locating whiteness is to examine *how* the narratives do that. *The Butler* (2013) centers Black characters as it chronicles a White House butler’s time serving presidents and illustrating changes in civil rights. The film, however, does comfort whiteness with its ending affirming a type of “post-racial” celebration of Obama’s election. *Hidden Figures* (2016) celebrates and centers Black women who were instrumental in NASA’s success. The film, however, does take liberties to comfort whiteness by including scenes not in the book from which it is adapted, such as that featuring Kevin Costner’s character getting mad and changing the bathroom policy that forced the women to go to another building.

Like *The Help*, these types of racial narratives suggest antiracism, but they predominantly still favor, glorify, and sustain whiteness. This invites us to consider how comforting memories and stereotypes predominate and persist among counter-memories. Whiteness can avoid discomfort through ignorance. In order for collective nostalgia to shape the civil rights era, whiteness must ignore certain aspects—or, rather, forget them. Ignoring and forgetting discomfiting racial aspects is residing and functioning in what Charles Mills calls “white ignorance.”²⁴⁶ Although Mills spells out a broader theme of an epistemology of ignorance and whiteness, I want to use his suggestion that whiteness survives through collective memory and collective amnesia; it is the “management of memory.”²⁴⁷

Ignorance in this case means “false belief and the absence of true belief.”²⁴⁸ Mill’s explains, “The white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation.”²⁴⁹ Forgetting is essential to whiteness’s survival. Redefining racism and racist in a narrative that uses historical stereotypes requires forgetting. The “false belief” is legitimized through recognizing certain elements such as Mitchell’s Mammy. I argue that nostalgia fosters false belief by pandering to memories of the past that a group cherishes or prefers. Not only does nostalgia in *The Help* encourage forgetting of unpleasant parts of the past, it makes the past real through attention to detail and the materialization of memory.

Just as ideas and rhetoric about race and racism shift from slavery to Jim Crow, ideas and rhetoric about race and racism shift from the civil rights era to the “post-racial” era. Identities or markers of a nostalgic past, as preserved in present acts of public memory, inform the identities

²⁴⁶ Mills, “White Ignorance”

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

that people want for the present and future.²⁵⁰ Forgetting is comfortable because whiteness relieves itself from carrying around its racial history. Forgetting harsh realities of slavery has consequences in surviving stereotypes such as Mammy and other racist conceptualizations of Black people that whiteness created to suit their present needs and assuage fears of cultural and civic change. In narratives about the civil rights era, the systemic, pervasive, and structural racism are replaced with interpersonal relationships and the feeling of racism (as whiteness feels it to have felt, anyway). In many ways, ignoring the structural elements of racism then eliminates the structural elements of racism now. Remembering the feeling and personal racism is easier to control and, presumably, eliminate now. Nostalgia helps alleviate present concerns through assurances that the past was good and the future can be too—if it can be like the past.

Zora Neale Hurston wrote to Countee Cullen, “I have the nerve to walk my own way, however hard, in my search for reality, rather than climb upon the rattling wagon of wishful illusions.”²⁵¹ Collective nostalgia and White ignorance perpetuate whiteness because they are full of wishful illusions. They are realized through comfortable memory and epistemic ignorance. A vital element of collective nostalgia as it pertains to this analysis is that nostalgia tends to be “triggered in times of psychological discomfort and distress as it functions as a coping mechanism.”²⁵² The following chapter explores some of those discomforts and concludes with some implications of visceral whiteness for public memory, rhetoric, and the present and future.

²⁵⁰ Smeekes et al., “Regaining In-group Continuity”

²⁵¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Jump at the Sun*, PBS, August 26, 2008. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/zora-neale-hurston-jump-at-the-sun/93/>

²⁵² Mills, “White Ignorance”

5 CONCLUSION: VISCERAL WHITENESS PERMEATES: RHETORICAL STUDIES

The vision people hold of the world to come is but a reflection, with predictable wishful distortions, of the world in which they live.

-James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time

A sentimentalist is simply one who wants to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. We think we can have our emotions for nothing. We cannot...As soon as you have to pay for an emotion you will know its quality, and be the better for such knowledge.

- Oscar Wilde, De Profundis

I was first drawn to studying whiteness as something viscerally informed when I came across an article about disparities in pain management between Black and White children with

acute appendicitis.²⁵³ The study found that Black children were “significantly less likely” than White children to receive non-opioid treatment for moderate pain and opioid treatment for severe pain. Although there have been numerous arguments and examples of racism being an effect of power and economics, the popular discourse surrounding racism is different, namely that it’s the result of hate or ignorance. I thought the study could serve as a dialectical response to that popular notion. How could doctors in emergency rooms, well-educated and exposed to all races with the purpose of caring for all patients, exhibit racist policies toward children? Any effort to understand whiteness and its machinations has to exceed thinking and rationalization; it must include the feelings that presumably precede or coexist with what whiteness considers to be rational. The doctors are cognitive of the medical diagnosis and its effects; they think through the treatment necessary and provide care. The doctors, if confronted with the evidence, may not be able to explain it. They may find it difficult to comprehend their own act of racism. They are likely to deny it or be defensive. If there’s any ignorance on their part it’s probably a lack of understanding that American society engenders these feelings into people, calcifying whiteness in an invisible, denied, yet tended to manner. Implicit bias is often the reasoning behind explaining such incidents like when White children are given pain medication and Black children are not, but I contend that that implicitness must have roots we can identify.

Whiteness is difficult to study because it is so hidden, adaptable, changing, and yet a driving force of racial discourse, racist ideas, and racist actions. I have attempted in this dissertation to explore the rhetorical aspects of (dis)comfort that inform whiteness. If we understand that whiteness exceeds rationalization and thrives as a deep feeling state of

²⁵³ Monika K. Goyal, Nathan Kuppermann, and Sean D. Cleary, “Racial Disparities in Pain Management of Children With Appendicitis in Emergency Departments,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 169, no. 11, (2015), 996-1002.

(dis)comfort that doesn't present itself in obvious ways, it opens up avenues for locating whiteness, making real the effects of its construction. It also presents us with a way to meet the challenge of making whiteness—its deep roots and lasting influence in all aspects of society—visible to the White moderates who avoid racial discourse and deny their own racist conceptualizations.

To explore (dis)comfort in whiteness, I've provided some explication of terminology. Throughout this dissertation I used the term "racism" to signal the tangible and explicit policies, effects, or expression of ideas about the meanings of race. I used the term "racist" as the description of those policies, effects or ideas. "Whiteness," then, is the enabler and benefiter of racism. Racism is a verb and whiteness is the enabler of the action. I've argued that acts of maintaining whiteness can be identified in revealing its comfort in racial discourse.

What makes (dis)comfort unique to whiteness? Why describe whiteness as visceral? Why not just talk about public memory in "post-racial" America and how racial narratives in popular culture (dis)comfort White people? Therein lies the answer. (Dis)comfort is the visceral part, which is helpful to identifying components of whiteness ideology, not always expressed mindfully. Visceral whiteness signals deep, misinformed, instinctive feelings, and dealing with elemental emotions. Visceral whiteness is unforced, conditioned, automatic, deep-rooted, and entrenched. These descriptions of whiteness do not imply innocence. Whiteness is active as it chooses comfort within public memory, but it doesn't acknowledge this agency—and, in fact, denies it. (Dis)comfort and whiteness is unique for these reasons and because the ideology of whiteness instills such feelings that are prevalent, if not universal, for White people.

The big picture of the project is to locate and critique whiteness through the (dis)comfort produced in narratives about America's racial past, thereby better understanding the present. To

compose this picture, I have argued that acts of public memory within the “post-racial” era about slavery and civil rights either comfort or discomfort whiteness. The value in this dissertation, then, has been to thickly describe whiteness ideology as it moves and adjusts in narratives about slavery and civil rights. I have combined rhetorical history with whiteness studies and public memory in this project—each area with its own value but working together seamlessly to better understand the complexities of whiteness and America’s racial history. The case studies in this project demonstrate the different ways narratives produce (dis)comfort and the specific tenets of whiteness ideology they suggest.

5.1 Review of Chapters

The introduction chapter explained the history whiteness has with (dis)comfort. It defined visceral whiteness and the ways identifying (dis)comfort is useful to locating and examining whiteness. It also provided an overview of whiteness and public memory. I explained how this project covers three major moments in American history. My aim in illuminating those eras has been to better understand the rhetorical implications of whiteness as they existed in those eras while better understanding the racial discourse and historical moment of the Obama era.

Chapter two begins this process with a study about what the acting presence of Black and brown bodies in *Hamilton* communicates rhetorically and how we can then locate whiteness through the suggested (dis)comfort that it produces. Ultimately, I place the praise and criticism of the musical and its “post-racial” casting in a dialectical relationship to explain the ways the visceral nature of whiteness is addressed in the context of a reimagined telling of America’s founding that addresses and ignores racism and race. I explain there is a correlative relationship among visceral whiteness, its ideology, and national identity in *Hamilton*. This chapter

illuminates the ideologies of whiteness that humanize White people and its notions of national identity in America.

Chapter three's question asked how the contested memory of slavery that arose from the conflicting discourses before, during, and after the war relates to the (dis)comfort of whiteness. Public memory in the "post-racial" era mythicizes and minimizes slavery in the founding era; acts of public memory since Appomattox have not made a proper correlation between slavery and the Civil War era or to agree upon their nature. This presents problems for comprehending slavery's role in American history and for reckoning with its consequences. This chapter employed a close textual analysis of *12 Years a Slave* to illustrate specific ways whiteness is made uncomfortable, thereby exposing elements of whiteness ideology that shape public memory of slavery. I argued that *12 Years a Slave* is discomforting to whiteness because it de-centers it in two important ways. First, the film establishes a theme of temporality in specific ways that seizes control away from whiteness. Second, it exposes how whiteness uses Christianity to establish itself as a righteous power, and it exposes whiteness's denial of agency.

Chapter four used Kathryn Stockett's novel, *The Help* and the film adaptation to study the ways narratives can comfort whiteness and shape memory of Black people, the civil rights era, the South, and racism. I explained how the first-person narration racializes voices that echo persistent myths and stereotypes of Black people, especially the mammy figure. The novel and film comfort whiteness through a production of collective nostalgia for a Southern culture that is grounded in the Lost Cause to define racism as an issue of interpersonal relationships rather than systemic oppression. The persistence of Lost Cause ideology in the "post-racial" era and race "conscious" narratives is a function of what Charles Mills's calls "white ignorance."²⁵⁴ These two

²⁵⁴ Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

rhetorical implications—collective nostalgia and reconstructed whiteness through racial ignorance—comfort and center whiteness in a story that claims to be doing the opposite. An outcome of this chapter is the illustration of how whiteness reconstitutes itself through racial discourse that on the surface appears to be doing the opposite. Ultimately, *The Help* comforts whiteness because it reproduces ideas about what America is, what racism is, and what it means to be Black or to be White. The following expands on some of the broad themes these chapters investigate and their implications for the “post-racial” era.

5.2 Broad Themes – Implications

This project has identified public memory as an act or artifact that comments on, celebrates, or narrates a collective or social memory. James Baldwin’s words in the epigraph above, “predictable wishful distortions,” perfectly capture the importance of studying visceral whiteness. Baldwin was referring to the wishful distortions of the perceived future, but this project has shown how wishful distortions of the past reflect the present as well. Any study in public memory provides not just what’s being remembered, but why it’s being remembered in that particular moment. The following details some implications for whiteness studies, White people, and racism.

5.2.1 *Whiteness and White People*

A goal of this project is to consolidate the varying ways we understand whiteness into a definition and description that White people can recognize—for it is White people who are simultaneously ignorant about their whiteness and complicit in its maintenance, construction, and reification. According to Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, whiteness itself has

“no true essence” because it is constantly shifting to elude visibility and identity.²⁵⁵ This dissertation offers a way of grounding whiteness and identifying its essence with a visceral element, especially regarding racial discourse, that White people can recognize.

Richard Dyer discusses the phenomenon of White people not only not recognizing their whiteness but also the hostile reactions they often have when it is identified. He cites bell hooks, who notes “how amazed and angry white liberals become when attention is drawn to their whiteness.”²⁵⁶ Hooks explains that the amazement and anger result from a “deep emotional investment in the myth of ‘sameness,’ even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness.”²⁵⁷ Visceral whiteness is the feeling of (dis)comfort about issues of race, yet the anger hooks describes emerges when those feelings are challenged or questioned. Nakayama and Krizek provide examples of such actions as rhetorical strategies of whiteness by those who refuse to label themselves or who only label themselves as a majority.²⁵⁸ This presents a problem for racial reconciliation and the path toward the end of racism.

I’ve tried to explain whiteness as an entrenched force in how White people navigate issues of race and racism in historical narratives. Visceral whiteness can be so overwhelming that the majority of White people retreat from debate, lecture, or discourse about racism and race. My conclusion to this project of identifying (dis)comfort and then linking it to the ideology of whiteness is not to disregard feelings of (dis)comfort. Rather, I argue White people should recognize the comfort or discomfort, use it as an indicator, to then engage and identify the source of that particular (dis)comfort.

²⁵⁵ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed. Carl R. Burghardt ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010), 636.

²⁵⁶ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

²⁵⁷ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 167.

²⁵⁸ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed. Carl R. Burghardt ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010):

5.2.2 *Whiteness and Antiracism*

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “Racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth...the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”²⁵⁹ When whiteness escapes the discomfort of its visceral nature, it actually sustains racism by privileging its comfort over the visceral experiences Black people have had with racism. As I’ve shown, this extends into public memory of slavery and civil rights, which further disregards those who suffered, fought, and overcame oppression. Although the present marks the greatest equality the U.S. has ever attained, any advancement toward equality has relied more on the delicate intricacies of how it affects whiteness rather than how it affects those who are oppressed. Examining the rhetoric of (dis)comfort is a useful guide for locating, understanding, and reshaping whiteness, which is fundamental to correcting this problem.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains that the “central component of any dominant racial ideology is its frames or set paths for interpreting information.”²⁶⁰ By focusing on what rhetorical aspects comfort or discomfort whiteness, my intent has been to circumvent the moderate White person’s thinking that they are not racist and instead promote anti-racist thinking. This is another example of the ways studying (dis)comfort can expose the ways whiteness ideology permeates and influences racial discourse. Mark Lawrence McPhail’s work on rhetoric and race offers a theory of rhetoric as coherence in which there exists a resistance by Whites to adhere to a coherent discourse about racial issues.²⁶¹ For McPhail, the way to

²⁵⁹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 10.

²⁶⁰ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 26.

²⁶¹ Mark Lawrence McPhail, *The Rhetoric of Racism Revisited: Reparations or Separation?* (Lanham: New York University Press, 1999).

reconciliation for Whites and Blacks is to foster rhetorical cohesion about race issues. This simply cannot happen if whiteness rests in its comfort.

5.3 Future Directions and the Need for Rhetorical Scholarship

5.3.1 *Narratives Set within the “Post-Racial” Era*

After the political accomplishments of the civil rights era, the U.S. moved forward and left behind, openly at least, the idea of separate but equal. In 2008, the election of Barack Obama cemented the idea for many that the U.S. had achieved a post-racial society. Michelle Alexander calls it the “age of colorblindness” in her exposition of mass incarceration.²⁶² She calls out the ways society pretends racism is not linked to the present while providing evidence in policing and prison that suggests otherwise. While the presidential election of 2016 and the Donald Trump administration serve as the “white rage” backlash to Obama and social activists like Black Lives Matter, the denial of race and racism are still present. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s work on existing racial structures lists “limitations of mainstream and critical frameworks on racism,” in which “racism is treated as a static phenomenon.”²⁶³ Racism, and not coincidentally, whiteness are not static; they adjust as we see with the Trump presidency. As stated earlier, racism is tied to structures of society, and while some of those structures change, the ideas of racism persist and morph to fit the current need. The term “post racial,” however, is a misnomer. Whiteness is aware of race but unwilling to investigate the complexities of racism.

What does it mean to be post-racial? Maybe it implies a society in which race is not a determinant or a signifier of economic or political power. Maybe it implies a society that doesn’t

²⁶² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

²⁶³ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 33-34.

include racial categories on the census or on job applications. Maybe it implies that a society can no longer predetermine health, depression, life expectancy, class, or education status based on a newborn's race. Whatever the case, there's a reason "post-racial" is so attractive to whiteness. Eliminating policies that are designed to combat racism such as the Voting Rights Act becomes easier if the discourse about racism first eliminates race. Ignoring the disproportionate and growing prison population becomes easier if racism and race reside in narratives about the past. Reparations becomes an absurd or unfair topic if racism and race is dead and absent from contemporary rhetoric. It's somewhat ironic but makes perfect sense that racism created race and now to sustain racism we must deny race. Racial language that once was the enabler of racism now becomes the prohibitor of racism. In other words, slavery and Jim Crow needed racial discourse and "colorblindness" requires the opposite; it needs racial discourse to dissipate and remain a preferred and comfortable version of memory.

When we talk about the speciously titled "post-racial" era or when we push back against a colorblind ideology, we would be wise to consult W.J.T. Mitchell's argument that seeing race is important to combating racism; that making race visible is a way of fighting racism.²⁶⁴ Conversely, race blindness is an effective way to sustain racism. Popular culture and narratives, then, can combat the false notion of post-racialism by acknowledging race. This project has examined narratives about slavery and civil rights produced within the Obama era because I wanted to illustrate how whiteness still navigates racial discourse to remain in control, and that claiming "post-racial" status influences acts of public memory of America's racial history. A logical next step would be to examine narratives about racism and race produced and set within

²⁶⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

the “post-racial” era. Challenging whiteness in narratives about the history of racism and race can be foundational to challenging whiteness in narratives about contemporary racism and race.

Narratives in the “post-racial” era ignore race as a material problem or portray it in ways that define racism in extreme terms that are generally associated with slavery or the civil rights or in simplistic terms that are overcome through interpersonal relationships. This era may feature racist characters but they tend to be obviously and overtly racist—such characters are usually ignorant, poor, redneck stereotypes. These depictions of race narratives provide little insight into contemporary issues because the characters and acts of racism are stuck in slavery or civil rights conceptualizations. We need to look at whiteness as it has adapted from those renderings to remain powerful but invisible. For example, *Get Out* (2017) is a horror film that was financially successful and garnered critical praise for its nuanced take on contemporary issues of race.

5.3.2 *Get Out and the Monster of Racism*

Jordan Peele, who wrote and directed the film, calls it a contemporary *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* with a horror spin.²⁶⁵ In the film, a Black man, Chris, meets his White girlfriend’s “liberal” parents at their home in an affluent town. Peele describes it as a horror film that deals with the “monster of racism.”²⁶⁶ Chris is a photographer and through his character the audience suspects that the White family and their White friends are not being truthful about who they are and their intentions with Chris. There is little depiction of body horror—typical gore one might expect in a horror film—although *Get Out* portrays disturbing uses of Black bodies in

²⁶⁵ Jen Yamato, “Jordan Peele on ‘Get Out,’ the Horror Film About Racism that Obama Would Love” *Los Angeles Times*. February 25, 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-get-out-jordan-peeel-racism-horror-america-20170224-story.html>

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

service to White bodies. This invites strong associations to the past and suggests the present dangers and concern for racism are still prevalent.

The film illustrates racism in “post-racial” America. Daniel Kaluuya plays Chris and said, “This film is how racism feels. You get paranoid and you can’t talk about it. You can’t voice it. No one around you gets it, so you can’t speak about it. And in the end it just comes out in rage.”²⁶⁷ Aside from Kaluuya’s description of how the film could communicate to an audience about how racism feels, it is a profound commentary on Black bodies and racism in the Obama era. The Black body, how it is portrayed and used, should be a central theme in any examination of (dis)comfort and whiteness because it acknowledges the materialism of racism and its designed purpose of exploiting one race for the sake of another. There are, however, many other facets of whiteness ideology in films like *Get Out*, and there are many more ways whiteness reconstitutes itself in areas of popular culture, politics, or public address.

5.3.3 *Locating Whiteness Ideology*

There are numerous tenets of whiteness ideology that a rhetorical criticism could explore. For example, I think exploring what Toni Morrison describes as “newness versus difference” is exactly the work of rhetoric. Appropriation, in particular because of “post-racial” rhetoric, is another major tenet that needs attention. Assimilation and meritocracy are a big part of America’s history and are crucial to locating whiteness in an era marked with racial disparity. Finally, a tenet that ties directly to visceral whiteness is that life, socialization, and economic success, comprise a zero-sum game. The visceral aspect investigates areas in which blackness is comfortable and whiteness is uncomfortable; the “post-racial” aspect investigates how blackness must be the real racists, because whiteness doesn’t see color.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

Frederick Douglass described the zero-sum structure of whiteness in his autobiography. He tells of the cruelest overseer he'd known who had shot a slave in the head for refusing an order. The plantation owner wanted answers and reasons for the costly loss of one of his slaves. The overseer "argued that if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites."²⁶⁸ The idea that if blackness is free, whiteness is enslaved, if blackness succeeds, whiteness fails, if blackness is centered, whiteness is obscured, if blackness is humanized, whiteness is demonized, if blackness is powerful, whiteness is powerless is as old as slavery and as new as Donald Trump. George Yancy writes, "My sense is that to let go of these practices, white people will experience loss; they will undergo forms of trauma and crisis, especially as the process of un-suturing will require the troubling of their own identities as the axiological standard in terms of which Black people and people of color are negatively judged and brutally treated."²⁶⁹ Through this tenet, we begin to see how whiteness transcends time and how whiteness changes but remains ideologically grounded in its conception as the negation of blackness.

This is the great trick of whiteness and ideologies. Rhetoric and discourse develop and articulate ideologies, but they are made to seem self-evident. The tenets of whiteness ideology get expressed in popular culture, and popular history gets taught and fused into the American imagination through acts of public memory such as *Hamilton*, *12 Years a Slave*, and *The Help*. These narratives reflect key moments in America's racial history and they can either reassure and comfort whiteness, thereby sustaining it and the racial status quo, or they can challenge and

²⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2018), 25.

²⁶⁹ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 12.

discomfort it, thereby beginning the necessary process of pecking away at its calcified existence toward equality and an antiracist society.

This project has examined films, an autobiography, a novel, and a Broadway play as areas of popular culture that shape cultural memory about America's racial history. But there are areas within media studies that would add to our understanding of how that racial history and the ways we remember it is present in nearly every facet of contemporary American culture. Studies to reveal how whiteness influences commercials, print advertisements, prime-time or streaming television programming, or social media interactions on Twitter or Instagram and their coding are needed. Communication studies in general needs to recognize the ways whiteness *acts* and this must include the implicit nature in which it operates in American culture. In other words, media studies have a lot to offer on making race visible, to uncovering how whiteness hides within an omnipresent and critical influence of American life. This dissertation has shown how paying attention to (dis)comfort is an effective place to begin.

5.3.4 *Rhetorical Scholarship: Whiteness Consumes and Evades*

There is a problem of insularity in rhetorical scholarship when considering whiteness. This dissertation reflects a lack of scholarship in the field that would be of great added value to pecking away at whiteness. What is clear to me while working on this project is the lack of rhetorical histories or criticisms about whiteness, whether they include theory, affect, public address, art, or popular culture. This is not to say there is no work. Nakayama is a staple; Krista Ratcliffe and Lisa Flores, for example, have made excellent contributions. But this is not enough. There is ample work on race and rhetoric on slavery or civil rights or President Obama, but whiteness has received much less attention. To complete this analysis I had to lean heavily on scholarship in sociology, history, and on historical figures such as Douglass or Du Bois. Most of

the criticisms of whiteness I gathered was from authors such as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ta-Nehisi Coates—whose analyses of whiteness alone are fertile ground for rhetoricians. Rhetorical scholars would do well to study *The Fire Next Time*, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, or *Between the World and Me*.

My approach to whiteness has been to add the visceral aspect to whiteness studies by examining it from the inside out perspective rather than the outside in perspective. In other words, the literature has largely focused on whiteness as how it's rhetorically constructed or how it factors into identity. Throughout this dissertation I've cited scholars and others to show the differing definitions of whiteness and to make connections to its ideological tenets. This dissertation has added to whiteness studies by approaching whiteness from within by locating whiteness as it looks at itself to acknowledge the ideological aspects of why racial discourse is either comforting or discomfoting. My attempt has been to illustrate how whiteness can recognize itself rather than point to whiteness from an outside perspective.

While the existing sources of whiteness studies within rhetorical scholarship are the basis of this project, I felt, too often, like I was neglecting my field—or at the very least, like this project was better suited in a different field. But I realize now that what whiteness studies needs is rhetorical criticism. Simply put, the discipline's lack of attention to whiteness restricts projects like this. I'm forced to look outside the discipline. Annette Harris Powell writes, “public discourse has embraced neutrality, from color blindness to post-racialism,” which allows race to “be submerged so that any substantive or critical discussion of race is avoided.”²⁷⁰ By ignoring whiteness, the field of rhetoric is submerging important work on race within its discipline. Also,

²⁷⁰ Annette Harris Powell, “Postracial,” in *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education*. Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, & Krista Ratcliffe Eds. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), 19.

rhetorical criticisms of whiteness are valuable in uncovering the ways and the areas in which whiteness submerges race and promotes colorblind ideology in society and politics. When we only study people of color as “race scholarship,” we further the timeless notion of whiteness escaping race. In other words, critiquing whiteness is doing race scholarship, but this means White scholars can’t leave it to people of color alone to study whiteness. Too often, we place the burden of race scholarship on people of color, and we assume people of color study race. Doing so reveals the whiteness ideology alive and well in a field that largely claims to be progressive about racial issues and certainly understands the power of language and identity.

James Weldon Johnson once wrote, “colored people in this country know and understand white people better than the white people know and understand them.”²⁷¹ This is so because whiteness is not invisible to people of color, but it doesn’t mean it’s their job to make it visible. Perhaps the lack of whiteness criticism is a reflection of the field’s lack of diversity. Then again, it’s not fair to assume people of color want to study whiteness or race. And, furthermore, it’s extremely problematic that White scholars don’t study whiteness. Johnson’s quotation should serve as a wake-up call to a discipline that uncovers what’s beautiful or problematic or hidden or silent in various rhetorical forms of whiteness and what that means for humanity.

Ultimately, there is much to be done in rhetorical studies in regard to whiteness, and I hope this project is a valuable addition. Otherwise, our discipline, which has grown and contributed so much to our knowledge about the power of language in persuasion, identity, and ideology, will be complicit in sustaining whiteness through its silence.

²⁷¹ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), Dover Thrift Editions, 10.

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