It goes without saying slavery is the worst thing that ever happened in American history. It’s our original sin as a nation. And history doesn’t disappear. That sin is still with us in many ways. Confederate, in all of our minds, will be an alternative history show. It’s a science-fiction show. One of the strengths of science fiction is that it can show us how this history is still with us in a way no strictly realistic drama ever could, whether it was a historical drama or a contemporary drama.

In July 2017, HBO revealed that Game of Thrones show runners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss would be starting a new project after the show’s final season. Described as part alternative history and part science fiction, Confederate would be set in a future world where the Confederacy won the first and a second Civil War, and slavery exists below the Mason-Dixon “Demilitarized Zone.” Not surprisingly, after the announcement, the network and the writing-producing team faced widespread outrage, ranging from concern that the show’s creators and most of the staff would be overwhelmingly white—though the pair will work closely with Nichelle Tramble Spellman and Malcolm Spellman—to accusations that the project is blind to the risks of such a show within the current political and social climate in the United States. Moreover, the creators seem to be unaware that such speculative histories already exist, including Kevin Willmont’s mockumentary, CSA: The Confederate States of America (2004) and the science fiction novels of author Octavia Butler, especially Kindred (1988).

Although it’s not my intention to dissect the merits of HBO’s newest project—which may or may not be produced—Benioff and Weiss’s foregrounding of history, as suggested in the opening epigraph, aligns with larger questions regarding the historiographical consequences of the industry’s continuing fascination with black history in either slavery or Civil Rights narratives. Over the last decade, for example, a number of historical dramas, including Selma (Ava DuVernay, 2014), Twelve Years a Slave (Steve McQueen, 2013), and The Birth of a Nation (Nate Parker, 2016), have been the recipients of numerous accolades, screening at festivals and winning prestigious awards. The films are linked by a focus on the past, particularly the antebellum and Civil Rights eras, and a shared commitment to providing historical narratives from African American perspectives. In many ways, they continue in the tradition of the slave narrative/abolitionist melodrama, with Twelve Years a Slave perhaps the closest embodiment of the genre and Selma, despite its more contemporary setting, a close second.

At first glance, the green-lighting of such historical films, particularly those that capitalize on the genre’s melodramatic aspects, can be interpreted as signaling the industry’s belief that antiblack racism is a thing of the past, or perhaps a conviction that American society is ready to face its “original sin” of slavery. A more generous interpretation might suggest a genuine media interest in African American history. Regardless, the continuing engagement with such narratives raises important questions about the longstanding relationship between cinema and history, and the former’s capacity to relate African American stories within a medium that has its own troubled representational past as a birthright, one memorialized in D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915). Films such as Parker’s The Birth of a Nation and DuVernay’s Selma reflect upon and refract many pasts and presents, prompting considerations of what’s changed, and, more importantly, what hasn’t. They also raise questions about the feasibility of the historical genre’s ability to convey black history, especially when the form is overdetermined by contemporary expectations of historical accuracy. If Hollywood’s plantation/Civil Rights formula no longer works, then productive alternatives can be created, either in fiction or nonfiction film, that cannot only relate the past but also link that past to the ongoing effects of antiblack racism in the twenty-first century.

In her essay “I’m So Damn Tired of Slave Movies,” Kara Brown expressed her mixed feelings over the Sundance success of Nate Parker’s The Birth of a Nation. While she
appraised the film’s accomplishments, she notes that its focus on the antebellum period inevitably results in yet another film about black history that features brutality enacted upon black bodies:

When movies about slavery or, more broadly, other types of violence against black people are the only types of films regularly deemed “important” and “good” by white people, you wonder if white audiences are only capable of lauding a story where black people are subservient.4

Despite Brown’s misgivings, Parker’s film was predicted to be a strong Oscar contender, given its genre, its status as a prestige picture, and the previous year’s #OscarsSoWhite controversy. It was surely the sort of film the members of the Academy were bound to like.

Birth was picked up at Sundance for a record $17.5 million following a bidding war between emergent web (Netflix) and prestige studio (Fox Searchlight) players, with Parker opting for the latter’s ability to give the film a wide theatrical release and Oscar exposure.5 The film’s production history further enriched its appeal: Parker, an actor perhaps best known for his roles in The Great Debaters (Denzel Washington, 2007) and Red Tails (Anthony Hemingway, 2012), wrote, directed, produced, and starred in the film, which was financed through a combination of personal and independent funding. Parker was a skilled and charismatic spokesperson capable of bringing Birth’s cinematic and historical pasts into the present by connecting the film’s namesake, D. W. Griffith’s pro-South, antiblack film, with contemporary politics. As he suggested before Birth’s release, “I honestly think this is a film that could start a conversation that can promote healing and systemic change in our country. There’s [sic] so many things that are happening right now in 2015—100 years after the original Birth of a Nation film, here we are. I’d say that is what I hope sets my film apart, is that it’s relevant now—that people will talk about this film with the specific intention of change.”6

Elsewhere Parker directly linked his film to the Black Lives Matter movement, which he credited as providing “a platform to bring race back into public discourse and remind the nation that racism is very much with us.”7 For Parker, “the truth is, we have never healed from slavery, because [we] have been unwilling to confront it honestly. When a nation refuses [to] admit its wrongs and its citizens aren’t able to discuss their shared histories and injuries, it cannot and will not heal.”8

In short, here was a director with a historical point of view who managed to make a prestige picture about a strong black hero. Birth would be a necessary story of black agency at a time of police violence and the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others. The film, it appeared, was the result of “not so much coincidence as karma. [It] was truly a movie of its moment.”9

By the summer prior to Birth’s October 2016 release, however, much of the film’s hype had been replaced by the revelations of Parker’s 1999 arrest, trial, and acquittal on rape charges. While Parker was adept at discussing the past as it related to American social, political, and cinematic history, he was far less adroit when it came to his personal history. His multiple public relations missteps and his tone-deaf responses to queries about his and the film’s gender politics became a distraction that eventually derailed Birth’s success.

To place the blame solely on Parker’s past for the film’s failure overlooks the significance of Birth’s other pasts, because the film also became mired in debates over its inaccuracies in telling the story of Turner’s life and the events surrounding the insurrection.10 While some of these criticisms may be a result of the film’s status as a historical drama—and the expectations that it represent historical truth rather than speculations—it also points to culturally embedded anxieties about who can narrate black history and how it can be told.

In considering the limitations of and the expectations placed on the historical drama, it may be useful to consider Ava DuVernay’s Selma, which came to the screen with far fewer distractions than Birth. Selma was released two years before Birth and was also a festival favorite, earning DuVernay a Golden Globe nomination for best director and the film an Oscar nomination in the Best Film category. Set during the Civil Rights era, Selma narrates the story of the 1965 march, led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., from Selma to Montgomery to protest Alabama’s systematic and violent suppression of African American voting rights. The story focuses on the political, legal, and personal difficulties undergone by King, his advisors and supporters, and the residents of Selma in order to force the U.S. federal government to intervene in the state’s openly illegal behavior. It provides an inspiring narrative of political and religious leaders working together with community members to make positive change, and in this it doesn’t stray far from the generic foundations of the historical melodrama, one in which spectators are taken on an emotional roller coaster ride before a final, satisfying conclusion.

And yet Selma shifts from historical narratives that “strengthen[ed] the misguided notion that those [slavery and the Civil Rights era] were the only ‘bad times’ for black people in America.”11 The film’s drama, for instance, is focused on the practical and tactical maneuvers of King and President Lyndon B. Johnson and their advisors, supporters, and detractors. Here, the film offers a narrative of resistance that, while focusing on Martin Luther King, Jr., extends to local
and national communities and acknowledges multiple heroes. Moreover, Selma reframes what has become a Civil Rights trope—that nothing could be accomplished without the efforts of powerful white politicians—by documenting the enormous amount of tactical planning and politicking that went into the entire process.

While much of the film’s power derives from its detailed presentation of the personalities and events leading up to the march, Selma’s real drama is located in the story of the nascent Voting Rights Act. The legislation functions as a chimera throughout the narrative, first as an unformulated plan early in the film, then as the focus of Lyndon B. Johnson’s speech to the joint chambers of Congress, and finally as the film’s epilogue, with its text revealing the Act’s passage. This coda, however, is both celebratory and deeply poignant. On the one hand, audiences can momentarily celebrate the success of the protests, which helped to ensure voting rights for millions of people over the years. On the other hand, it’s hard to escape the shadow of decades of legal and political dismantling of the very same rights guaranteed by the Act. The film was released to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the march. Shortly afterward, in 2013, the Supreme Court struck down the law’s provision requiring states to seek federal approval to change local voting laws. Functioning as Selma’s extradiegetic shadow, such political reversals offer a bitter irony to the uplifting conclusion and a dire warning against political complacency.

Despite Selma’s focus on the work of activism rather than individual heroics, DuVernay was not exempt from accusations of historical inaccuracy directed toward the film, illustrating, once again, the dangers inherent in making a historical drama, especially one examining structural antiblack racism. Most of the critiques focused on maintaining, if not enriching, LBJ’s Civil Rights legacy. In essays published in the New York Times, The Washington Post, and elsewhere, authors criticized the film’s presentation of the former president, and particularly the suggestion that Johnson gave the FBI permission to blackmail King. Just as quickly, however, articles appeared that questioned the intent of such accusations. Mark Harris, for example, suggests that part of the motivation behind such attacks was a desire, conscious or not, to insert Johnson into a “rare movie about Civil Rights told from the perspective of the oppressed rather than from that of their putative benefactors.” Indeed, it seemed the naysayers were using one politically motivated version of the truth to switch the narrative from the activists to the politicians, an assertion that was rejected by many, including DuVernay, who responded to critics with a simple assertion: Selma “is not a documentary. I’m not a historian. I’m a storyteller.”

What are the stakes, then, of producing a historical drama about African American history? Are there greater expectations of historical accuracy, especially when such films are made by black directors? And how might such expectations be related to larger assumptions, often themselves fueled by
implicit bias, about black film’s relationship to truth more broadly? Do black filmmakers bear the responsibility of dismantling past cinematic and historical untruths with one authentic truth? If so, what form does that truth-telling take? And, finally, can fiction film in the form of the historical drama ever break with such expectations? In other words, is there only one way of telling history?

Historical dramas are often subject to questions of veracity, despite being fiction films. And while directors are becoming more adroit at addressing criticism—as DuVernay’s response illustrates—such historical nitpicking continues to undermine the genre’s freedom to explore the past whenever sensitive issues are at stake. Documentaries, counterintuitively, have more flexibility with subject matter, perhaps because since the mid-twentieth century nonfiction directors have been experimenting with form. In the last decade, documentary films focusing on key elements of the nation’s racist history have faced far less anxiety over accuracy. Sam Pollard’s Slavery By Another Name (2012), for example, traces the remnants of slavery in the forms of forced labor (peonage, tenant farming, the penal system) that developed in the years between the end of the Civil War and the end of World War II. Ava DuVernay’s 13th (2016) extends such historiographic work by examining the links between the Thirteenth Amendment and the disproportionate number of incarcerated black Americans, mostly male, in contemporary prisons. Both films use a relatively conventional combination of interviews and archival footage to connect antebellum and Reconstruction-era antiblack racism to the present. Raoul Peck’s I Am Not Your Negro (2016) follows this historical trend, too, with notable differences of style. Such variations may indicate the ability of nonfiction film to simultaneously explore the past and hold the present accountable for the continuation of antiblack racism, and suggest ways for fiction filmmakers to break from the aesthetic and narrative clichés of historical drama.

I Am Not Your Negro focuses on James Baldwin, but it is neither a biography nor a conventional documentary detailing the author’s role as either a writer or as a Civil Rights–era cultural commentator. Instead, it takes the form of an essay, using Baldwin’s written texts—the unfinished Remember This House and his extended essay, The Devil Finds Work...
(1976)—and his audiovisual archive as the foundational texts for what Warren Crichlow calls a “bricolage” that “project[s] not only Baldwin’s image, but his words, too, unapologetically and reflexively into the present.”

Baldwin began Remember This House, a planned book of remembrances of his deceased friends, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 1970s, and while incomplete, it offers further insight into the author’s thoughts on the Civil Rights era. The excerpts, in combination with Baldwin’s recorded interviews and lectures from the time, illustrate his keen observance of the effects and affects of antiblack racism and the politics of white supremacy on both blacks and whites.

The film also incorporates passages from The Devil Finds Work, Baldwin’s exegesis on American race relations at mid-century, as experienced through film. Peck draws liberally from this text, particularly its observations on the role of Hollywood in reifying racial caricature as a means of social control. Clips from classic Hollywood productions are interspersed with Baldwin’s words, providing a reflexive dialogue between word and image, linking fictional scenes with historical moments in a “relational dyad” illustrating Baldwin’s and Peck’s understanding of the cyclical nature of oppression.

The effect is a combination of nonfiction filmmaking and speculative fiction, whereby Peck completes what Baldwin began years ago.

Peck is seasoned as both a documentarian and a fiction filmmaker, and that background may have contributed to the film’s shape; for example, his Lumumba: Death of a Prophet (1990) offers a similar multilayered and impressionistic view of its historical subject, assassinated Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Peck, originally from Haiti and New York, lives in Paris and often works on international co-productions outside of the American film industry. These factors contribute to an imaginative structural design in which past and present intermingle freely. Eschewing conventional talking heads or the familiar pairing of archival footage with voiceover testimony from experts, Peck’s sound and image design provides viewers with greater interpretive flexibility.

It also frees the film from the same expectations of veracity directed toward more conventional documentaries or historical fictions.

When at one point in I Am Not Your Negro Baldwin states, “History is not in the past. It is in the present,” it becomes clear how seriously Peck took his subject’s words. Much of the film features fictional and nonfictional archival footage—including Baldwin’s media appearances and clips from Hollywood films—along with photographs of protestors, lynching victims, and more recent portraits of everyday people. There is also an abundance of footage of Evers, King, and Malcolm X.

Peck knits images of victims of modern-day police violence together with footage of contemporary protests in a spacetime polyphony. The message of this audio-visual mélange is clear: antiblack violence is just as much a present as a historical phenomenon. Following Baldwin, Peck argues that the nation cannot move forward without acknowledging there is little difference between lynching and the recent state-sanctioned police violence toward black people. I Am Not Your Negro, gathering up such evidence, posits a continuity of protest over unchanging social, political, and economic circumstances.

In comparison to I Am Not Your Negro’s sophisticated dialogue between past and present, HBO’s plan to make a “past-future” slave drama presents as disturbingly dated and aesthetically tone deaf, especially given that many critics and spectators are asking, as does Roxane Gay, why are “people expending the energy to imagine that slavery continues to thrive when we are still dealing with the vestiges of slavery in very tangible ways?” Indeed, why create a futuristic cinematic history that’s still mired in specific generic versions of the past? Perhaps the answer lies in a shift away from the historical drama toward alternative models of filmmaking that approach history as a living entity, capable of reflection and dialogue. Historical dramas such as The Birth of a Nation and Selma are attempts to do the same, but the historical often gets in the way of the drama, and vice versa, and reflection is too often received with suspicion.

Contemporary black filmmakers are struggling to create a different sort of cinematic historiography, one that breaks free of generic and aesthetic conventions in order to proclaim the ways in which the past is in the present. Indeed, filmmakers must continue pushing the boundaries of how this is communicated on screen.
Notes


2. Butler’s Dawn (1877) has recently been picked up by Ava DuVernay and will be adapted into a television series. Another “Alternate Universe” series will be helmed by producer Aaron McGruder (Girls Trip [Malcolm D. Lee, 2017], Jacob’s Ladder [Adrian Lyne, 1990]) and show runner Will Packer (The Boondocks [Adult Swim, 2005–2014], Black Jesus [Adult Swim, 2014–]) for Amazon. Julie Dash has also tried for years to get the rights to film Butler’s work; see Karmel Holmes, “Invisible Scratch Lines: An Interview with Julie Dash,” Film Quarterly 70:2 (Winter 2016): 49–57.

3. There have been some questions about what confers prestige upon these films: their genre, their epic scale, or their use of non-American actors for African American roles.


5. Many sources, from The Hollywood Reporter to Buzzfeed reported on the bidding war for the film, one that also included Sony and The Weinstein Company.


8. Ibid.


12. Mark Harris, “How Selma Got Smeared: On Historical Drama and Its Malcontents,” Grantland, January 28, 2015, http://grantland.com/features/selma-oscars-academy-awards-historical-accuracy-controversy/. Elsewhere Harris criticizes former Johnson aide Joseph A. Califano, Jr., for the assertion that “Selma was LBJ’s idea.” For Harris, such claims present a “great-white-father view of Civil Rights history,” one which DuVernay was trying to avoid with a film focusing on multiple historical figures.


15. Ibid, 15.

16. In comparison, DuVernay’s 13th, which was also nominated for an Oscar the same year as Peck’s film, takes a more conventional approach to its subject.

17. The film has received criticism in a number of quarters for its failure to acknowledge Baldwin’s sexuality.

18. Gay, “I Don’t Want to Watch Slavery Fan Fiction.”