BLACK AGENCY IN *AMISTAD*, *12 YEARS A SLAVE* AND *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (2016) IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY RACIAL TENSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an influx of movies that deal with the history of slavery in the United States. Recent movies such as *Django Unchained* (2012), *Freedom* (2013), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) played into the renewed interest in the history of slavery in the past few decades. The focus on slavery in recent movies also reflects contemporary racial tensions in the United States. With the recent election of Donald Trump and his anti-immigration policies and the public commotion about the disproportionate rate of police killing of African Americans, in 2015 at 7.13 per million compared to 2.91 white (Swaine et al. 1), racism has come to fore as still one of the main social issues the United States has to deal with. The fact that the mass media and in particular the movie industry have recently turned their attention to slavery can be seen as a way to engage with the racial debate within the United States and to give a voice to African American communities.

On March 3, 1991, George Holliday made history by capturing the savage beating of the African American Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers on video. The news coverage and the trial and subsequent acquittal of the offending police officers caused Los Angeles to be engulfed in riots in 1992 (Lawrence 141-142). Five years later, Steven Spielberg released the courtroom drama movie *Amistad*. The movie, which is based on historical events, is set in the antebellum United States. It is about a group of Africans who rose up against their Spanish captors on the ship *Amistad.* They succeeded and took control over the ship and murdered most of the crew, with the notable exception of two Spaniards who were to steer the ship home to Africa. The two helmsmen deceived the mutineers, however, and steered the ship towards US waters instead of Africa. After a few months of sailing up North, the ship was captured by US authorities and the mutineers were put to trial. As a reaction to these events, the abolitionist movement, which pleaded for the

end of slavery, came to the defense of the Africans and after several trials, the Africans were freed.

Spielberg's movie *Amistad* came out in a time when race relations were tense in the wake of the Rodney King trials in 1992 and the OJ Simpson trials in 1995. The narrative of *Amistad* has parallels to the Rodney King trials in that there is a central theme of injustice against African Americans. Whereas this injustice is corrected in *Amistad* through the Supreme Court granting the Africans freedom, the inverse is true for the Rodney King trials in which the white policemen were acquitted of violently beating the African American Rodney King. Furthermore, the 1997 movie is a response to the racial divide between black and white Americans that had become apparent after the conclusion of the OJ Simpson trials in 1995 (Kille, "Popular Memory" 119). This racial divide was best illustrated by the divergent reactions of black and white Americans: "Black Americans were reported [by the media] to have responded to the verdict with unmitigated glee whereas White Americans were said to be at once incredulous, outraged, and demoralized" (Tucker 315). It is not a coincidence that this movie was released at a time that race relations were tense. Steven Spielberg had earlier taken a clear stance on racial and minority issues in movies like *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Schindler's List* (1993).

Although it is about a historical event more than 150 years earlier, *Amistad* indirectly also confronts the viewer with the issue of racial inequality in contemporary American society that was exposed by the Rodney King trials. In recent years, racial profiling and police brutality have become central to public discourse again owing to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement emerged online in the summer of 2013 under the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in response to a similar occurrence of social injustice as the Rodney King trials, namely the 2013 trial in which the white neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing the black teenager Trayvon Martin in a gated

community in Stanford, Florida, in February 2012, despite the fact that there was evidence that Trayvon was unarmed and posed little threat (Wellington 21, Florini 440. Anderson and Hitlin). Furthermore, while the unique footage of the Rodney King incident, made with a handheld video recorder, made it possible for the first time to spread the images of police brutality around the world, the social media (in particular Twitter) played a similarly pivotal role in the propagation of Black Lives Matter, which started out as only a hashtag (Florini 451).

Shortly before and during the time where the Black Lives Matter movement became a widespread movement in 2014 in response to the killing of another young black man by the police in Ferguson, Missouri, two movies by black directors that deal with the institution of slavery came out: Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), both of which are based on historical events. The former of these was released before the movement was founded, while the latter was released at the BLM movement's height. Both these movies tell the story of a slave who tries to (re)gain his freedom from slavery. This fight against racial injustice is similar to the main ideology of the Black Lives Matter movement, which attempts to fight against the ways in which "Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity" ("About the Black Lives Matter" 1).

Both movies are set in slavery times, but clearly also address (racial) issues or (racial) tensions in the United States today. This thesis deals with the question to what extent and how these three movies address the debate about race relations in the United States between the Rodney King trials in 1993 and the BLM movement in 2016.

The method by which I will explore the movies' message about race is to analyze the characters and the degree of agency these characters have. Giving agency to the characters is a way of giving a voice to them, which in turn can be related to the contemporary context, as

these characters, I will argue, function as spokesmen for the black community within an unjust society. Before we can illuminate the degree of agency of a single character, we need to investigate how this character relates to or stands out within the community he or she belongs to in the movie. For this purpose, we will look at how blacks and whites are portrayed in the movies as a whole and what cinematographic techniques were used to represent them and the divisions between the two groups.

Furthermore, each of the movies is based on a historical account or event and one way to measure the degree of agency is by looking at changes made in the movies compared with the original account(s) upon which the movies were based and putting these changes into perspective. Taking liberties with the original text, I will show, allows the directors to give agency to characters who have none or little in the original work or vice versa. Rather than pointing out the existence of historical inaccuracies, the analysis in this thesis aims to shed a light on why these changes were made with respect to the agency given to the characters.

Agency is a complex concept which requires some elaboration. Agency has been defined as "a source of planful action. Thus, agency presupposes internal states of an actor such as intent, belief, and desire. There is also an external aspect of agency, which refers to action overcoming external constraints, or autonomy" (Morris, Menon and Ames 170). In the present thesis, the term "agency" will refer to the degree an individual (i.e., an *agent*) has a purposely active and determinative role within the community he or she belongs to.

The theme of agency is not limited to the movies alone; it is also an equally important topic in the public debates at the time the movies were produced. Nicole Maurantonio argues that the Rodney King trial "strip[ped]" black people of agency (Maurantonio 741). Rodney King appeared on national television and said with a trembling voice: "People, I just want to

say, can we all get along? Can we get along? Can we stop making it horrible for the older people and the kids?" (CNN "LA Riot Facts"). Indeed, as Maurantonio points out, the "hapless" nature of Rodney King completely robbed him, and the community for which he was an icon, of agency and made him a victim of circumstance (Maurantonio 747).

Similarly, the social circumstances in which *12 Years a Slave* and *The Birth of a Nation* were released involve the issue of agency within the sphere of African American civil rights. The Black Lives Matter movement is rooted in resistance against the same kind of police brutality that Rodney King was a victim of. Black Lives Matter developed from a hashtag into a resistance movement (which received worldwide attention) during the protest demonstrations that followed the shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 26, 2014 (Hooker 449). Michael Brown is seen as a *victim* of police brutality, a character with no power, with no agency (Hooker 449). The Black Lives Matter movement was created with the aim to take back black (and LBGT) agency within a mostly white-dominated society. Events such as the Rodney King incident and shootings of unarmed African Americans like Michael Brown or Treyvon Martin are similar in that they are manifestations of institutional racial violence against African Americans.

Amistad, 12 Years a Slave and *Birth of a Nation*, which all deal with slavery in one way or another, are fundamentally outcries by African Americans (represented by the black protagonists), against the persistence of racial injustice within contemporary American society.

Methodology

In each chapter I will look at how and to what degree the (main) characters have agency and compare this degree of agency to other actors within the (white or black) fictional

communities they are part of. I will do this by investigating the (degree of) agency granted to the characters in the movies relative to the (degree of) agency their historical counterparts have in the original account(s). Then I will compare the agent with other agents within the movie. In this way, I will determine who the agents are, how they fit within their own community and how they compare to other agents from inside and outside their own community.

I will conclude the individual chapters by relating the agency of the slave protagonist of each movie to the Rodney King trials and the Black Lives Matters movement respectively and discuss the ideological messages the movies convey about the present-day race relations that are the subtext of these movies. In my contextual interpretation of the movies I hope to answer the question in what ways the agency and voice of the black slave protagonist are used to criticize the persistence of racial injustice in the United States in the mid- to late 90s and recent years.

Chapter 1 – Black and White Agency in *Amistad* (1997) in the context of the Rodney King and OJ Simpson Trials

Amistad (1997) is a compelling movie about the abolitionist movement's struggle to free a group of enslaved Africans. Set in 1839, it tells us the story of Joseph Cinqué (played by Djimon Hounsou), an African snatched away in front of friends and family and forced into slavery. During the voyage to Cuba, he leads a mutiny on the ship the *Amistad*, which succeeds. Unable to steer a schooner himself, he leaves a skeleton crew of his Spanish ex-captors alive to lead them back to Africa. The Spanish manage to steer the ship into US waters, where they are swiftly captured and put to trial. The abolitionist movement takes the opportunity and arranges the defense of the Africans in the court of law, at which they eventually, and against all odds, succeed.

The movie was released in the wake of the Rodney King trials and the OJ Simpson trials, which both led to escalations of the racial debate in the United States, exposing the apparent divide between the African American community and white mainstream society. The question to answer in this chapter, is how and to what extent the agency of the black protagonist is shown in the movie and how we can relate this agency to race relations in the contemporary United States.

Amistad was directed by Steven Spielberg, a director whose oeuvre should be considered when trying to investigate this movie and understand the directional decisions made in *Amistad*. Spielberg is known for movies such as the plantation drama *The Color Purple* (1985) and the Second World War historical drama *Schindler's List* (1993). This latter movie is especially relevant as Spielberg has compared *Amistad* with *Schindler's List* by stating that the movie achieves "for the American experience of slavery what *Schindler's List* did for the Holocaust" (qtd. in Jeffrey 77). Spielberg was born and raised in a Jewish family and is himself a practicing Jew (Pogrebin 25). Furthermore, he had relatives who were killed

in Poland and Ukraine during the Second World War (Weinraub 1). This direct connection with the Holocaust explains the director's investment in *Schindler's List,* as he said himself during an interview with the *New York Times* (Weinraub 1).

Another personal reason for directing *Amistad* can be found as well. Spielberg has adopted two African American children and during the shooting of *Amistad* he said. "I am making this movie for my black children and my white children" (qtd. in McBride 8, Jeffrey 80). Coupled with Spielberg's interest in the civil rights movement during his youth (McBride 8), this gives an indication of Spielberg's moral compass and his reason for the creation of movies which advocate social justice. I will argue that Spielberg tries to address the contemporary racial tensions by giving the African characters in *Amistad* a degree of agency.

The present chapter will focus on two different, albeit related, elements in *Amistad* and give a comprehensive analysis of these two elements. The first element to be investigated is the depiction of slavery in *Amistad.* What kind of cinematographic techniques does the director use to represent the transatlantic slave trade and the treatment of Africans and African Americans? Examining this depiction of slavery will act as a backdrop for the second question, namely the way in which the African characters are portrayed. Do these characters fulfill an active or passive role in the movie; in other words, are the Africans given agency in the movie and, if so, how does the agency of the Africans compare with that of the white characters?

Patricia Roberts-Miller argues that "slavery [is] a notoriously schizophrenic institution that simultaneously describes slaves as people who are property, as property with no agency, and as property whose very potential for agency is threatening" (Roberts-Miller 10). Roberts-Miller points out the complex dynamic between slavery and agency: slavery relies on the fact

that slaves are property and property normally has no agency. Therefore, slaves are by definition deprived of agency. However, at the same time paradoxically they are treated as if they are capable of agency, which is perceived as a threat. The movie attempts to address this paradox by giving agency to the slaves. It does so by showing more moderate white agency and more outspoken black agency than the original historical accounts do. In this chapter I will argue that addressing this paradox by changing the agency of the characters is a way to address the racial division in the contemporary United States in the wake of the Rodney King and OJ Simpson trials.

The scholarly debate on the movie *Amistad* is mostly centered on the inaccuracies of the movie compared with the historical accounts. The movie is based on a book by the historian Howard Jones, who has intensively researched the original historical documents in archives in Spain and the United States regarding the incident of the mutiny of the *Amistad* and the subsequent trial. Reviewers and scholars alike argue that the problem of the movie is that *Amistad* departs from the historical accounts, while at the same time being distributed as teaching material to schools for the purpose of educating middle and high school children about the history of slavery (Jeffrey 91-92). Teaching pseudo-history is obviously problematic; however, in this chapter I will not judge the movie on its historical merits, but explore what ideological message the movie conveys and in what way it is shown.

Another point of critical debate is the representation of black agency or more precisely, the lack thereof. Most reviewers and critics who address this usually criticize the movie for not giving the Africans any substantial agency. In this chapter I will argue against, or at least complicate, this critique and show that when one perceives the agency of the characters in relation to their race, strong indicators of relative agency can be found in the African characters, whereas the agency of white characters is moderated. I will first look at the way the races are depicted in relation to each other, focusing on the way the contrast

between black and white communities is represented in the movie. As I will show, in order to emphasize the humanity of the Africans, the movie dwells on the inhumanity of the white rulers.

The historian Jesse Lemisch argues that the Africans in *Amistad* lack agency (Lemisch 60-61). However, he gives agency an *absolute* measure by looking at tangible accomplishments by African (American) characters in the *Amistad* movie, instead of giving agency a *relative* measure based on the accomplishments of African (American) characters relative to the historical account of the case and to the other characters.

To measure the relative agency of the African characters in the movie, I will compare their actions with those of the abolitionists. Are the Africans in *Amistad* given a way to personally influence or direct the court proceedings? Are the abolitionists given particular character tropes to make them less active? These dynamics can only be fully considered by looking at what was omitted from the original historical accounts or changed. The focus of this analysis will not be on the historical accuracy of the adaptation, but on the perceived purpose of these changes. As I will argue, these changes further a sense of agency of the Africans in *Amistad* by limiting the agency of the abolitionists in the movie in comparison with their historical counterparts.

From the opening scene, the movie emphasizes the agency of the leader of the mutiny with a vivid account of the mutiny on the *Amistad*. The first two minutes are intense shots of close-ups of Cinqué during a thunderstorm, where he desperately tries to remove a nail from the flooring to use it as a lock pick. The scenes are a loose interpretation of a few lines in the historical account of the *Amistad* by Howard Jones, according to whom Cinqué simply finds a nail after returning from the kitchen (H. Jones 24). Prying a nail loose from a board with nothing else but one's bare hands paints a different image than finding it. For one, removing

a nail in such a way requires diligence and hard work and is a far more active endeavor than simply finding a nail. Furthermore, the intensity of the scene and the desperation shown gives the audience a first impression of the experience of the Middle Passage and the treatment of enslaved Africans. Indeed, Cinqué has to resort to clawing out a nail from a board to escape the hardship of enslavement.

After Cinqué frees himself from his bonds to start the mutiny aboard the ship, he frees a few other Africans and storms the deck with the intent to take over the ship and steer it back to Africa. The mutiny is successful and we are immediately introduced to a rather realistic element of the movie: the languages the characters speak in. Rather than using broken English or Spanish, the African characters in the movie speak in several different African languages of which Mende, an African language spoken in Sierra Leone, is the most prominent one (H. Jones 15, B. Newman 2). As Henry Louis Gates points out in an interview with Bruce Newman,

> "Instead of forcing Cinqué and his people to speak in broken English, like, 'Hel-lo de white man,' the way Hollywood typically does," Gates says, "they let them speak in their own languages. And these are not dialects, they're beautiful, complex languages. Using subtitles, just as they would do with people speaking French or German, is important. That's showing that the men who were captured in West Africa weren't Africans in their own sense of identity. They were Ebo, Mende, Yorba[sic], Congo--the names of a people." (qtd. in B. Newman 2)

The significance of the use of real African languages is that it gives the Africans a variety of cultural identities. Additionally, while established actors were chosen for most of the main roles, Spielberg made sure that all the African captives were cast and played by Africans, which meant they had to take a crash course in Mende, since only a few of them could speak the language (Jeffrey 83). Having the characters speak in their mother tongues humanizes the Africans. This sense of identity and humanity is also shown visually in the movie. Having the Africans walk on the deck in different kinds of African garments gives each of the Africans a

unique identity, rather than all of them being bare-chested or being in rags. Additionally, right after the mutiny takes place, the movie shows a few of the Africans being visually upset by the slaughter of most of the Spanish crew, further humanizing them.

During the scenes leading up to the mutineers being captured by the US navy, the audience is presented with a concrete example of Cinque's agency. Despite not being able to steer a ship himself (indicated by him sparing the few Spanish to lead them to Africa), he is sufficiently aware of the sciences of astronomy and cartography to be able to notice that the Spanish drive them away from Africa during the night. He removes his Spanish captives from the steering wheel and tries to steer the ship in the right direction. While this does not change the plot in any significant way, it does give some agency to Cinqué.

It is then that we suddenly come to one of the more curious and unexplained scenes of the movies, which is also not in the original account either. The Africans are all huddled together on the deck of the ship in their African clothing, singing songs and celebrating their release from their captors. Cinqué urges the whole ship into silence as he spots another ship. The music is stopped, the lights dimmed and everyone on the ship anxiously holds his breath. Then another ship closely passes by with violins playing, laughter and guests in formal clothing. The scene on the other ship sharply contrasts with the *Amistad* mutineers, represented as exotic, anxious figures clouded in darkness, while the passengers on the passing ship are represented as civilized, mirthful figures bathing in light (Jeffrey 86). The scene is meant to emphasize the difference in the status between the two parties: one of which is free, while the other is (soon to be) bound.

The problem of race and status is complicated by the trip to the courtroom where the troupe encounters an African American coach driver, dressed in a suit. The troupe tries to appeal to him as if he is a chief based on his external features. However, Cinqué is quick to

point out that the coach driver is not one of them, but instead "a white man". Cinqué's observation is interesting in that he looks past the color of the driver's skin and categorizes him in terms of his social status. Indeed, "a white man" should rather be interpreted as Cinqué meaning "a free man", while "a black man" (namely, himself and the other mutineers) is "a bound man". Ironically, the coach driver might not actually have the same social status as a free white man, but at least he is not enslaved. Hence, I suggest that to Cinqué, the coach driver is "an unbound man". Cinqué looks beyond the color of his skin and instead considers whether he is free or not in his appraisal of a person. In short, Cinqué conveys to the audience that the color of the skin does not matter, but the degree of freedom one has when appraising a person. This particular appraisal of a person puts Cinqué in a position where he is able to appraise a person without adhering to the social construction of race. In this regard, Cinqué differs from his peers, who see the coach driver for what he looks like (black), not for what he is (unbound).

Another way the movie distributes agency is through the race dynamics within the abolitionist movement. After the mutineers are captured and they are brought to the penitentiary, we are introduced to the abolitionists Lewis Tappan (played by Stellan Skarsgård) and Theodore Joadson (played by Morgan Freeman). The latter, a black abolitionist, is an interesting character because he is entirely fictional and not based on a historical figure (R. Newman 219, Jeffrey 82). The fact that he is played by the top-billed actor in the cast though he plays a relatively minor role raises the question why this character was added to the movie. Historian Richard Newman argues that the addition of this character should not be judged by its historical accuracy; rather, he points out that Joadson is a representation of African American advocates for freedom such as James Forten, who was an active player in the abolitionist movement, albeit elsewhere (R. Newman 235). The effect of adding a character, played a by prominent actor, who is representative of the abolitionist

activities of some African Americans during that time, is that it makes explicit the agency of African Americans in the debates and discussions against slavery.

However, Joadson is not the main player in defending the African mutineers and takes on a relatively minor role during the court proceedings. The main role is played by the defense attorney Roger Sherman Baldwin (played by Matthew McConaughey), who can be considered to be the white protagonist during the courtroom scenes in the movie. In his historical account, Jones describes Baldwin as "a lawyer from New Haven who had already become known as a defender of justice for the less fortunate" (H. Jones 36). In the movie, however, Baldwin is "self-seeking, pedestrian, vulgar, though shrewd. He is interested in the case for the financial rewards it could bring" (Jeffrey 89). This difference in portrayal moderates the role of Baldwin in the movie. The movie actually diminishes his status from a well-established lawyer with a clear moral compass to a rookie lawyer seeking financial gain and he loses a degree of agency as a result. After all, rather than being an experienced lawyer, he still has to prove himself. The result of this cut in effective agency is that it raises the relative agency of Cinqué in that the difference in power between the two is smaller than in the historical accounts.

Further diminishment of the abolitionist characters relative to the African actors takes place when Joadson, Baldwin and linguistics professor Josiah W. Gibbs (played by Austin Pendleton) visit the African mutineers to figure out where they are from, a point important for winning the court case. If it could be proven that the captives were from Africa and therefore illegally enslaved because the international slave trade was prohibited by international law, the mutiny could be seen as self-defense (H. Jones 36). The language barrier was a huge obstacle and hence a linguistics professor was asked to assist in finding ways to communicate with the Africans. In the scene where Gibbs is introduced, his small stature and slightly anxious way of looking around the penitentiary mark him as insecure and

unprofessional. This insecurity is visually enhanced as he sits down on a chair and gets looked down upon by the African captives. Additionally, in his role as make-shift translator, he misinterprets literally everything during the exchange, which puts into question the character's professionalism.

In the historical accounts, by contrast, Gibbs plays an instrumental role in finding a translator for the communication with the Africans. The historical Gibbs learned the numbers of the Mende language and started searching the waterfronts for an African American who could speak the language (H. Jones 43). This scene does occur in the movie, but the one doing the searching is the fictional African American abolitionist Joadson. Although accompanied by Baldwin, Joadson is successful in finding a translator, James Covey (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor). This change of roles gives Joadson and the abolitionist cause he represents more agency at the cost of the agency of the professor and makes for a less pronounced contrast in agency between whites and blacks by moderating the extent of white agency and increasing the agency of the Africans and African Americans compared with the historical account.

While the white agency is moderated, the agency of the Africans is enhanced in the scene in another way as well. Despite the Africans being contained, they are the ones dictating the terms of the exchange. When the abolitionists enter the confined area and place a table near the Africans, one of them hurries to the table and says, "This is Temne land. You want to sit? Sit over there in Mende land." He then picks up the table and moves it to the other side of the area. The fact that this character is allowed to do so in a prison indicates the agency of the Africans. Furthermore, the scene emphasizes that the Africans have different cultural identities since they cordon the area off, based on the ethnic group they belong to. This emphasis on cultural difference shows that not all Africans are the same and humanizes them. Within the confines of the prison, the Africans exert some power.

As the legal battle for the Africans' freedom starts, two of the abolitionists come to the defense of the slaves: Lewis Tappan and Theodore Joadson. The main legal method of freeing the Africans was by proving that they are not property (i.e., slaves from birth) but free men (H. Jones 11). In order to find evidence to prove that the slaves were captured in mainland Africa and resold in Cuba, the two abolitionists search the *Amistad* to uncover proof regarding the Africans' status as illegal slaves. While Joadson investigates below deck, he "finds himself ensnared by ropes, cobwebs, and human cargo holds. Thus, like the *Amistad* captives, he too is enslaved by the lingering effects of the middle passage" (R. Newman 221). It links the abolitionist cause and the court case of the Africans. The scene also connects the memory of the intercontinental slave trade to the status of blacks in the contemporary United States. The fact that it is Joadson and not Tappan being tangled in this web shows that a character who represents African American agency within the abolitionist movement is even now hindered by the effects of the intercontinental slave trade: as a free black person, he still has a lower status than his white peers.

The lower status of the captive Africans to white peers is made explicit through a flashback to Cinqué's experience when being kidnapped in Africa and during the middle passage. The scenes during the flashback are not in the original historical accounts and were added to give an idea of what the middle passage was like. In the flashback, we see Cinqué being violently dragged away by other Africans, who are rewarded with guns for their efforts. All the Africans are then taken to a slave fortress and crammed into a ship where they are mistreated extensively. The slavers take pleasure in whipping, sexually abusing and generally maltreating the enslaved Africans. In one of the most brutal scenes in this flashback, the slavers start throwing slaves overboard to lessen the burden on the ship's provisions. In the original historical accounts of the court proceedings, it was sickness due to "inadequate provisions and unsanitary conditions," rather than being thrown overboard alive, that caused

so many to pass away (H. Jones 15). The movie slightly departs from the original accounts and makes the maltreatment of the slaves more excessive in the movie. The purpose of this change from the historical *Amistad* case is to emphasize the inequality between black and white. This social inequality is made explicit in the last few scenes of the flashback where a group of well-dressed white people look down from a high balcony on the captured Africans to appraise and buy them. Similar to the scene with the boat passing the *Amistad* earlier in the movie, the juxtaposition of the two different racial groups shows the stark contrast between the two races in terms of social status.

The contents of this flashback are conveyed to the judge during the trial via a translator and backed up by a British navy captain in charge of patrolling for illegal slave traders. During the discussion of the reason for the loss of human cargo, Cinqué takes charge and stands up, raises his hands to both the audience in the movie and the audience watching the movie and starts to repeatedly and in increasing volume and intensity state "give us free" (Jeffrey 85). This is not in the original account of the court proceedings, but what is historically accurate is that Cinqué managed to learn to write and speak basic English as the legal battle waged on (H. Jones 158). Cinqué did eventually speak in court, but as Jones points out, this was done in the Mende language and in a different case, after the Africans had already been declared free by the final Supreme Court decision in the *Amistad* case (H. Jones 201). Obviously, Cinqué's rapid acquisition of the English language is highlighted in the movie to give the character more agency and control.

In a similar trend, more agency is given to Cinqué when the case is appealed to the Supreme Court. In the scene where John Quincy Adams (played by Anthony Hopkins) is recruited for the Supreme Court case, Cinqué, from his cell, asks questions regarding treaties in place and types of jurisdiction which could help the Africans' case. These questions, as posed in the movie, are extremely specific and not representative of the historical Cinqué in

captivity. In the historical accounts, there is no mention of Cinqué directly assisting in the juridical process in the Supreme Court (McCrisken and Pepper 48). Spielberg's decision to give Cinqué the ability to contribute to the case is another way to give more agency to the character.

Up to this point in the movie, Lewis Tappan had been an active force within the abolitionist movement and instrumental in setting up the court case by recruiting Baldwin for the Africans' defense and garnering media attention for the case. It is around the time of John Quincy Adams's appearance in the movie that Tappan disappears after insinuating that it might be better for the Africans to be executed and act as martyrs (Lemisch 67, Jeffrey 91). This is completely opposite to the role of Tappan in the movie up to this point as well as the historical Tappan, who went to great lengths to secure the freedom and civil rights of African Americans, even when receiving death threats (Linder 2). Gary Rosen argues that the reason for removing Tappan from the movie is to get an even distribution of black (Joadson and Cinqué) and white actors (Baldwin and Adams). The directive decision to have Tappan propose making martyrs out of the Africans (Rosen 48) is blatantly ahistorical, for "the most rudimentary research into Tappan's involvement in the case and his abolitionist commitment suggests that he would never have uttered such a statement" (Jeffrey 91). Moreover, as Jeffrey points out, "[h]is shiftiness is suggested by his habit of whispering and the limitations of his convictions by exaggerated, abstract, and clumsy dialogue" (Jeffrey 89). In any case, the way Tappan is portrayed throughout the movie and his eventual disappearance diminish the agency of the white abolitionists.

In conclusion, although the contrast in social status between whites and blacks is emphasized and sometimes exaggerated in some of the scenes, such as the two ships passing in the night, the contrast between the agency of representatives of the two races is far less pronounced. The abolitionists and the Africans are both representative of diverse groups, and

they have individual and distinct cultural identities. In terms of agency, on the other hand, the contrast is lessened by giving the abolitionists less agency and the Africans more agency than one would expect from educated and professional white men and African natives in captivity respectively and the Africans have more agency than was the case in the historical event.

The movie lowered the differences between whites and blacks in terms of agency and Spielberg tries to invoke the idea of equality. In American society, after Rodney King and the OJ Simpson trials, the racial division in the United States was exposed. The division is exposed by the injustice of the acquittal of the police officers in the Rodney King trials, as well as the different reactions of white and black communities to OJ Simpson's acquittal. In terms of outcome, the OJ Simpson trial might be more comparable with the *Amistad* trial. Comparing the two cases, John Kille argues that the trials resulted in "visual illusions of freedom" as neither OJ Simpson as Cinqué was truly free afterwards (Kille, "Popular Memory" 129). Cinqué returned to Sierra Leone, but was unable to find his family and arrived in a country beset by civil war, while OJ Simpson was unable to return home because of his "mediated reputation as a murderer" (Kille, "Popular Memory" 128-129). Though both OJ Simpson and Cinqué regained their freedom, their stories did not exactly give a message of hope or encouragement. In short, the movie gives conflicting messages.

Furthermore, the critical reception of the movie was mixed due to the perceived lack of agency of the Africans; to viewers and critics who do not realize that the characters' agency in the movie differs from that of the historical figures, the movie is mostly a courtroom drama about white lawyers who try to free black slaves (Foner 1, Jeffrey 85-86). Spielberg tried to redraw the lines within the limits of the original historical event to give Cinqué more agency and reduce the agency of the white abolitionists. If we look at the movie with the original account in mind, the movie tries to give a critique of the racial division of the United States in the 1990s. However, the subtle changes in agency compared with the

original historical account are mostly inefficient for mainstream audiences in the contemporary United States. Instead, the main points the movie succeeds at, is giving an indication of the social divide between the two races through showing the differences in social status between black and white in the movie. Indeed, the fact that the movie is mostly a courtroom drama where white characters try to free black characters is a manifestation of the difference in social status between the black and white. In this regard, rather than a catalyst for addressing the issue of social injustice suffered by African Americans in the United States, the movie (only) succeeds at giving a minor critique of the race relations of the contemporary United States.

Chapter 2 – Race Dynamics in *12 Years a Slave* (2013): Raising Awareness of the Contemporary Implications of Slavery

This chapter looks into the representation of slavery in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), focusing on the theme of black agency. I will do so by looking at how the agency of African American characters is portrayed relative to the original slave narrative by Solomon Northup. Similar to the first chapter on *Amistad*, we will consider the race relations and the relative agency between the characters rather than the absolute agency of these characters. Through this investigation, the agency of the characters (or lack thereof) in *12 Years a Slave* will be related to contemporary race relations in the United States in the period between the Rodney King trials in 1992-93 and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013-2014.

The movie was released at a time where there was not a clearly identifiable event which shook the race relations within the United States such as the Rodney King or the OJ Simpson trials did before *Amistad* or the Black Lives Matter movement did while *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) was in production. Indeed, *12 Years a Slave* was released shortly before the Black Lives Matter movement emerged. Nevertheless, the movie was intended to lay bare the racial injustice within contemporary United States society and its roots in slavery.

For the movie to be considered effective in raising awareness within society, it needs to be a hit with audiences. *12 Years a Slave* succeeded in making a splash. The movie was universally praised and received three Oscars, one of which for Best Motion Picture of the Year. It is also the first movie made by an African American director (Steve McQueen) to receive this prestigious reward. The other Oscars were for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role (Lupita Nyong'o, who plays Patsey) and Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay (John Ridley). Indeed, the movie was viewed and praised by many mainly because it is a story told from the perspective of a slave to whom injustice was done by being

robbed of his freedom and forced into slavery, yet who in the end is triumphant over these injustices.

Based on a historical slave narrative by the same title published in 1853, *12 Years a Slave* (2013) is a movie about a free African American called Solomon Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) who was kidnapped and taken to Washington, where he was sold to a slave trader, who took him further south to Louisiana and sold him into slavery. After severe punishment for asserting that he is a free man, Northup decides to hide this past in order to survive and waits for an opportunity to escape his captivity. Held by several slave owners such as the kind William Ford (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) and the cruel Edwin Epps (played by Michael Fassbender), he endures the hardship of slavery together with the other slaves on the plantations. After being held as a slave for twelve years, he comes into contact with the carpenter Bass (played by Brad Pitt), through whose efforts Northup is finally freed.

The opening scene immediately sets the tone of the movie and reveals the main topic of slavery, yet departs from the original account in terms of chronology. *12 Years a Slave* starts with an overseer explaining how sugarcane is harvested to a group of slaves. The director decided to show this as the first scene of the movie. Not everything in the original narrative can be translated to the medium of cinema and still retain a proper "narrative discourse" (Cartmell and Whelehan 10). Northup explains the process of sugarcane harvesting and processing into sugar in detail, but later in the narrative (Northup 108-109). The opening scene can be seen as a creative way of explaining how work on a cane plantation is done and it is a fair way of dealing with expressing how plantation work was done by skipping the details and the method of processing. The scene creates an oppressive atmosphere of a group of silent slaves listening meekly to the instructions and commands given by an overseer. The effect of starting the movie with an explanation of sugar cane harvesting is that it plunges the audience immediately into the life of a slave and shows the

difference in agency between overseer and slaves. This scene sets the tone for the rest of the movie.

This scene of sugar cane harvesting is followed by a remarkable scene in which one unnamed female slave makes sexual advances to Solomon and never appears again in the movie. In an interview, the director of the movie explained this scene as follows:

> Slaves are working all day. Their lives are owned, but those moments, they have to themselves. I just wanted a bit of tenderness — the idea of this woman reaching out for sexual healing in a way, to quote Marvin Gaye. She takes control of her own body. Then after she's climaxed, she's back where she was. She's back in hell, and that's when she turns and cries. (McQueen, qtd in George 7)

Taking control of one's own body is a very explicit way of obtaining some agency over one's self even if it is lost afterwards. The movie early on strongly emphasizes the lack of agency of both free and enslaved African Americans and this scene is complex in this regard in that it gives Northup only little sexual agency by satisfying the woman, but not engaging in intercourse in the usual meaning and visibly pained by the situation. While Northup's refusal to enjoy the sexual encounter could be because he wishes to be faithful to his wife, the purpose of the scene this early in the movie is mainly to convey a sense of desperation and depression caused by the condition of enslavement. On the other hand, in terms of agency, the female slave expresses her agency sexually by initiating the sexual encounter. However, because the purpose of the scene is to convey a sense of life as a slave (and a contrast to freedom), the effect of her agency is lost as she disappears from the movie altogether after this scene.

Like *Amistad*, then, *12 Years a Slave* contrasts the institution of slavery with freedom. After the aforementioned scene, there is a flashback to the point where Solomon still lives in the state New York. These scenes are vibrant and bright, an exposition of the happiness he, his wife and his children share. In these scenes, Northup is represented as equal to middle-

class whites: he and his family have the same kind of clothes and are treated respectfully by the storeowner from whom they are buying a suitcase. These scenes, which show the happiness and relative affluence of the Northup family, contrast sharply with the depictions of slavery we saw in the preceding scenes.

Cinematographically, the introduction and first twenty minutes of the movie are a sequence of short scenes that visually are starkly contrasted with each other. This contrast is achieved by the movie showing alternating scenes shot in vibrant colors and showing happy family life and scenes depicting darkness and depression. This sequence makes very explicit the divide between freedom and slavery. These alternating scenes deviate from the original narrative in terms of chronology. Solomon Northup's original slave narrative is chronological, whereas the first part of the movie is not. The effect is that it immediately brings slavery and the inherent injustice to the foreground in the movie and the way these scenes are interwoven might show that the memory of slavery and its inherent injustice have a connection to the injustice many African Americans face in daily life at the time of the movie's release.

Slavery is the central topic but it is represented slightly differently in the movie than in the slave narrative. The historical Solomon Northup was critical of the institution of slavery rather than of the individual slaveholders: "It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives" (Northup 106). He fully puts the blame on the system and not directly on the agents of this institution (i.e., the slaveholders). As Sam Worley points out, "of course, many others, black and white, who wrote about slavery mentioned the deleterious effects it had upon the moral character of whites. Northup certainly repeats these observations, but, more remarkably, he makes us see the moral blindness of slaveholders as itself the result of environment rather than innate evil or irrationality" (Worley 254). This critique of the system (environment) rather than the agent (slaveholder) does not explicitly appear in the movie and one possible explanation is that

from a cinematic perspective, it is difficult to translate such an exposition into an audiovisual medium. As I will argue, even relatively positive descriptions of the slaveholder William Ford (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) in the original narrative are transformed to a more negative one in the movie to emphasize that slavery is a deplorable institution, which has no redeeming qualities at all.

When William Ford is introduced in both the movie and the original narrative, he is depicted as a gentle master. As Northup writes in his narrative when he introduces him, "he [William Ford] was a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession. Were all men such as he, Slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness" (Northup 53). The movie echoes this image of Ford. However, in the movie, Solomon's fellow slave Eliza (played by Adepero Oduye), who traveled with Northup and was separated from her children, points out to Northup that Ford full well knows that Northup is more than the slave he appears to be, but does not act on it. Furthermore, the movie suggests his hypocrisy when Ford continues delivering a sermon over the wails of Eliza and her grief over her children (Kellner 33). These aspects show a negative side of Ford which is not made explicit in the original narrative. By adding this critical comment, McQueen emphasizes that Ford puts more value in his own profit from the institution of slavery than in the well-being of his slaves, despite his piety and his relatively gentle treatment of his fellow slaves. Thus, the movie exposes him as a hypocrite; in the movie, the individual slaveholders are also held accountable.

The depiction of slavery as an inherent evil is made more complex with the addition of Harriet Shaw (played by Alfre Woodard). This woman was described in only a few sentences in Northup's slave narrative as the African American wife of a white plantation owner, but the character is given a whole scene in the movie. In an interview with *The New York Times*, McQueen explains that he "'need[ed] a scene with this woman. I want[ed] her to

have tea'. It was very simple. Give her a voice" (George 6). By giving Harriet Shaw a voice where she had none in the original narrative, the scene gives agency to at least one former slave, who was granted freedom by entering into a romantic relationship with her owner. Indeed, there are two ways to interpret this character. On one hand Harriet Shaw explicitly states that rather than serving a master herself, she has slaves serving her. The status of this character is in this regard that of a black slaveholder and it reinforces Northup's idea that the institution rather than the persons being warped by it that is to blame. The way in which she communicates with Patsey and Northup is not as equals, but as a character who stands above them. In the movie, Northup is openly apprehensive of speaking out of line and Shaw commands Northup to sit as well as addressing him as "nigger Platt". The movie does not put Shaw on an equal level as Patsey and Northup, but above them, which shows Shaw is changed by the institution of slavery.

In the movie, the Harriet Shaw character is given even more agency than in the original slave narrative. As Stephanie Li points out, Shaw is given lines very reminiscent of lines spoken by Master Bass in the original narrative (Li 330). Master Bass, Li argues, is an exemplary character, showing the moral superiority of abolitionist thought, and he is a vital actor in facilitating Solomon's release from slavery (Li 330). When discussing the evils of the institution of slavery in the original narrative, Bass says to the slaveholder Epps: "There is a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever. There will be a reckoning yet – yes, Epps, there's a day coming that will burn as an oven. It may be sooner or it may be later, but it's a coming as sure as the Lord is just" (Northup 137). In the movie, as Li points out, Harriet Shaw states: "The Good Lord will manage Epps. In His own time the Good Lord will manage dem all. Yes, Lordy, there's a day comin' that will burn as an oven. It comin' as sure as the Lord is just" (qtd. in Li 329). The similarities between these monologues are obvious, but, as Li points out, there is a minor linguistic detail which should

not be overlooked. Bass damns the nation and the institution of slavery, while Shaw's retribution is aimed at the persons representing the evils of slavery. In order to understand the significance of this difference, one needs to look at the characters these lines are spoken to. Li observes that Bass addresses Epps, who hires him as a carpenter, whereas Shaw addresses Patsey and Northup, a former slave addressing two slaves (Li 330). There is a distinct difference in interest, but the situation of the two characters is different as well. Shaw is an active participant in the institution of slavery as a slave mistress herself and personally benefits from (and to a limited extent, as the wife of a slaveholder, has an investment in) the business of slavery, whereas Bass is a Northerner who is opposed to slavery. In this regard, as a former slave, Shaw has more *moral* authority and has more agency than Bass when saying these words, since she has personal experience of both aspects of slavery.

This agency is not so much portrayed by Solomon as he turns passive in order to survive; however, his turn towards passivity can be interpreted as paradoxically a form of agency. During his forced transportation by ship to the slave states, one of his fellow slaves gets stabbed and thrown overboard. One slave bitterly notices: "Better off. Better than us." As John Stauffer points out, "survivalism" is a main theme throughout the movie (Stauffer 319). When Elisa can't stop crying over her lost children and questions whether Solomon does not feel the same, Solomon loudly proclaims: "I survive." The complexity, as Stauffer explains, is that right after being captured and being told by other captured African Americans to stay low, he replies: "You're telling me that's how to survive? I don't want to survive; I want to *live*" (qtd. in Stauffer 319; emphasis in original). These two statements show a significant change in Solomon's perception of the circumstances he finds himself in. Northup initially tried to argue with his captors that he was a free man, but is forced to give this up as he gets mercilessly beaten when he brings it up. As a result, Solomon takes on the guise of someone who is explicitly passive, but his passivity is depicted as a survival strategy.

Solomon's decision to make his main purpose survival is, albeit limited, another form of agency.

The concept of survival is also extended to other characters in the movie, such as the slaves on the slave ship, but more prominently, survivalism is a key to the conduct of Patsey (played by Lupita Nyong'o). Patsey is described by Northup in his narrative as a paradoxical character. She is both "a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence" (Northup 99) and "[t]he enslaved victim of lust and hate; Patsey had no comfort of her life" (Northup 100). She dares not flee, despite being the target of Mistress Epps's ire and Master Epps's lechery. The acting in these scenes by the Oscar winning actress is compelling; however, there is one scene which ties in with the concept of survivalism that is criticized by several scholars. Patsey approaches Solomon in the night and tries to bribe him to end her life. In the original narrative, however, it is not Patsey but Mistress Epps, who tries to convince Solomon to kill her (Li 328). In the movie, the agency is squarely in the hands of Patsey, as it implies that she tries to take control over her own life, even when her suicide fails due to Solomon's refusal to assist her.

One thing that is very similar in this movie compared with *Amistad* is the agency of the abolitionists. In a similar way as in *Amistad,* the agency of the abolitionists is diminished. Master Bass, who only shows up in the last fifteen minutes of the two-and-a-half-hour movie, has a minor role. In the original text, Bass was pivotal in ensuring Solomon's release, together with the son of Solomon's former master, Henry B. Northup (Northup 151-152). The difficulties in finding Solomon and connecting Bass and Henry B. Northup are very apparent in the narrative, but not at all in the movie. Because the movie does not show the events leading up to the successful release of Solomon and transfer some of the lines spoken by Bass to Mistress Shaw, the few allies Solomon has are robbed of some of their agency.

Finally, the endings of the narrative and the movie are different. Patsey is shown saying her farewells to Solomon differently in the movie than in the book. In the original text, Patsey clearly rejoices in Solomon's return to his own family and escape from captivity, despite ending with an expression of her own despair:

> On my way back to the carriage, Patsey ran from behind a cabin and threw her arms about my neck. "'Oh! Platt,"' she cried, tears streaming down her face, "you're goin' to be free—you're goin' way off yonder where we'll neber see ye any more. You've saved me a good many whippins, Platt; I'm glad you're goin' to be free—but oh! de Lord, de Lord! what'll become of me?" (Northup 157)

In the movie adaptation, however, we see a wholly different Patsey. Rather than Patsey running to Solomon to embrace him and wishing him all the best, it is Solomon who approaches Patsey and hugs her tightly. This embrace symbolizes Northup taking agency, while leaving Patsey to be a victim. He then glumly returns to the carriage and is anything but joyous about his freedom. Even when he returns home to see his family, there is mostly sadness and crying and Solomon apologizes for his absence rather than being overcome with joy. Indeed, it shows that there can be no joy from slavery.

Released in 2013, *12 Years a Slave* lays bare points of tension in current race relations in American society caused by the ongoing discrimination against African Americans and other minorities (Richardson and Goff 117). The movie cannot be easily associated with a specific event representing current racial tensions like *Amistad*, which was created in the wake of the Rodney King trials and violent aftermath, and the OJ Simpson trials, which laid bare the racial divisions in American society. Neither can it be directly linked to the Black Lives Matter movement which was founded after the release of the movie and to which *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) responds as we will see in the next chapter. Rather, the movie remembers the trauma of slavery and shows the cruelty of the institution of slavery in an unadulterated form.

The movie was pushed to the foreground with several Oscar nominees and wins, garnering more media attention and scholarly debate than *Amistad.* Like *Amistad*, *12 Years a Slave* is based on a historical account, but the movies differ in many ways. Where *Amistad* is mostly a courtroom drama, *12 Years a Slave* is centered on one black protagonist and an "up-close" account of the everyday life of a slave (Cameron and Belau 214). Both movies end with the liberation of the black captives, but the agency of the African (American) protagonists is different. Joseph Cinqué, despite having more agency than his historical counterpart, is freed almost exclusively at the hand of the white abolitionists, whereas Solomon Northup is more actively involved in his own rescue. Both movies do reduce the agency of white allies. In *12 Years a Slave*, this agency is almost wholly taken away from the white characters who historically brought about Northup's liberation. Main examples of this agency being taken away from white characters are not only the transfer of moral authority away from Bass to Harriet Shaw, but also the absence of 'the efforts Bass went through to convey a message north, the efforts of the son of Northup's former master to track down and free Northup, and the trial against Epps for Northup's freedom. The full focus of the story on the black perspective and the fact that the movie was directed by a black director with slavery as the main topic allowed scholars such as Valerie Smith to find "meaning for contemporary people" in the form of a critique of persistent racial injustice in the United States (qtd. in Ernest 273).

One perspective which has appeared in the scholarly debate is the link to contemporary racial issues. Some critics argue that the movie is linked to the public debate about police brutality (Lewis 1, Richardson and Goff 117). Lewis argues that the movie's release "coincided with the killing of an unarmed black teenager Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri" (Lewis 1); however, apart from the fact that this incident took place more than a year after the release of the movie, Lewis does not go further into detail what

kind of relationship this exactly is, merely noting that the release of the movie coincided with a case of police brutality and the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Lewis argues that police brutality against African Americans (or extra-judicial killing, as he calls it) is a modern form of lynching (Lewis 2), but he does not return to *12 Years a Slave* to explain the link, such as the scene in which escaped slaves are being lynched. The problem with this comparison is that lynching is different in that it is done in a mob context, whereas police brutality is often limited to a small group of trained professional law enforcement officers. Furthermore, the intent of a lynching is explicitly racial, whereas some extra-judicial killings can be considered racial violence, but the main use of the term "extra-judicial killings" is to indicate injustice by killing someone of any race without a proper trial.

Richardson and Goff offer a more compelling argument for connecting *12 Years a Slave* to contemporary police violence, arguing that police brutality is rooted in a form of unconscious racial profiling. They argue that in *12 Years a Slave*, the scene where Epps nearly kills Northup after suspecting that "Patsey, an enslaved black woman for whom he has conflicting feelings of ownership and intimacy, is involved with another white man" is also an example of an "unconscious racial bias" (Richardson and Goff 117). Rather than hatred for blacks being the main reason for turning to violence towards one of his slaves, Epps "externaliz[es] his insecurity by attacking Northup" (Richardson and Goff 117). Richardson and Goff argue that, just as in *12 Years a Slave*, the racial bias present in law enforcement "has become normalized" (Richardson and Goff 145).

Just as the movie shows the normalization of this racial bias in slavery, so too does it point out racial bias against African Americans in contemporary American society. One scene in *12 Years a Slave* that encapsulates the normalization of racial bias is the scene in which Solomon Northup is left dangling from a noose after nearly being lynched by John Tibeats (played by Paul Dano). This is one of the longest shots in the movie, where we see

Northup desperately trying to avoid losing consciousness by standing on his tiptoes as the daily life on the plantation continues right behind him (Stauffer 317). John Stauffer points out that this scene 'in which Northup "dangles between life and ('social') death" is the movie's central metaphor for living in slavery (Stauffer 318). Indeed, the black characters in the movie do not live, but merely survive (Stauffer 218, Britt 259). However, Stauffer does not try to relate this scene to its implications for contemporary US society.

One way to read this scene metaphorically is by not focusing on Northup's being suspended between life and death. Instead, the whole scene with everyday slave life continuing can be seen as a metaphor for the racial tension within the United States before the Black Lives Matter movement. Within the frame of an unchanging and largely uncaring social environment, Northup, as a character stuck in captivity while at the same time being legally a free man, is desperately trying to find ground and stay conscious, while every slave in this scene (except one woman, who gives him water) does not give him even a second glance and Mrs. Ford watches him dangle on the edge of consciousness without lifting a finger. Here, Northup's desperate situation is symbolic for many contemporary African Americans' struggle for economic survival and an attempt to find a space for themselves in a white-dominated society.

In conclusion, the movie takes on the difficult subject of the slavery past head on with a personal account, where the slaves are shown as victimized characters. The inequality of the races is blurred in the movie with the character of Harriet Shaw, who can be considered an intermediary between the world of the slavers and that of the slave owners. The strong message of the injustice of slavery and the pictures of the cruelty of slavery make for fertile ground for discussion of the issue of race to sprout and grow. In this regard, then, the movie is a catalyst for the debate on race in the contemporary United States.

Chapter 3 – Pursuing Masculinity in *The Birth of a Nation* (2016): The Disconnect with the Black Lives Matter Movement

The last movie I will discuss is African American director Nate Parker's recently released movie *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). Parker's debut movie as a director has not received as much acclaim as *Amistad* and *12 Years a Slave*. It was not nominated for an Oscar, but did receive the Audience Award and Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Movie Festival and earned a 6th place in the Top 10 movies of the African-American Film Critics Association (AAFCA).[1] The movie has received both positive and negative reviews, but had less broad popular appeal than the movies discussed earlier. However, it is very popular with black audiences. This chapter will look at how agency is portrayed in the movie and how this relates to the contemporary racial debate and particularly to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States.

The first thing to consider is the title of the movie and the choice of the subject matter. In the tie-in book titled *The Birth of a Nation: Nat Turner and the Making of a Movement* (2016), director Nate Parker elaborates on his reasons for picking the same title as D.W. Griffith's movie, which came out in 1915. Griffith's movie was one of the most expensive and profitable movies of its time and has a "lasting legacy as one of the most notoriously racist works of art" (Dimitrovska 57). It was used as a recruitment movie for the Ku Klux Klan due to its virulent racist depictions of the slaves as violent rapists (Dimitrovska 57-58). The reason for choosing the identical title is to "rewire" the movie as a statement against such racism today (Parker 12-13). Nate Parker' chose the Nat Turner rebellion because "[he] wanted a story in which the hero clearly sees resistance as an option to overcoming his oppression" (Parker 13).

[1] See http://www.sundance.org/projects/grand-jury-prize-dramatic-winner-the-birth-of-a-nation (accessed 3-2-2017) for the Grand Jury Price, http://www.sundance.org/projects/best-of-fest-the-birth-of-a-nation (accessed 3-2-2017) for the Audience Award, and http://www.aafca.com/2017-aafca-awards for the AAFCA awards (accessed 3-2-2017).

The Birth of a Nation is a critical rewriting of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), in which Nat Turner described the rebellion in detail to a white man named Thomas R. Gray, who wrote down and published the account. Another source often mentioned in the reviews of the movie is William Clark Styron's controversial novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Novel* (2010). As Nate Parker explains in the tie-in book, the movie rewrites the white-authored accounts of the Nat Turner revolt by taking Nat Turner's—that is, a black—perspective (Parker 13). I will first focus on the way in which the movie deviates from Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to give more agency to the character of Nat Turner.

The Birth of a Nation tells the story of the events leading up to and including the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner (played by Nate Parker, who also directed and wrote the movie) in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. Turner and the slaves who joined him in the uprising freed slaves, gathered weapons and other resources, and went from plantation to plantation killing a total of 55 whites (Gray and Turner 23). After a little less than a day the revolt was quelled and all African Americans involved were executed, but also hundreds of African Americans not involved were killed (Greenberg xi). Less than half of the movie deals with the rebellion; the build-up to the rebellion takes more than half of the movie and will be the focus of my analysis to get a better idea how the agency is distributed among the characters in this movie. Afterwards, I will investigate the representation of the violent uprising.

The movie begins with a ritualistic ceremony in which several African characters sit and chant around a fire. The audience cannot immediately tell where this scene is set, as the clothes of the Africans do not betray any western influence. Only when young Nat Turner is introduced, his mother's and his own clothes give away that he is likely a slave. Director Nate Parker explains the addition of these scenes as follows:

> I […] sought to create images that challenged Christian norms. I achieved this by starting the script with an African prologue, scripting a scene that would introduce African spirituality into Nat's life at an early age. Nat comes to know Christianity but only after he's embraced his African culture and heritage, which history tells us was revealed to him by his mother and grandmother, who maintained ties to their African traditions. As a result, Nat has the ability to see his faith, not as "the white man's religion," but as the pre-European, pre-colonial form of Christianity it has always been. (Parker 22)

The purpose of this addition was to transform Christianity from being the religion of the "white man" and suggest that Nat Turner's faith was rooted in African religious practices. Rather than Nat Turner finding the Christian faith by himself, in the movie a bible is given to him by the slaveholder's wife Elizabeth Turner (played by Penelope Ann Miller), who more importantly also teaches him to read. In this way, he was able to interpret the bible for himself, which enabled him later to incorporate African elements. While he did create his own Christian beliefs, he did need the help of a white person to achieve this goal.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Nat Turner describes his religious conversion and the role it played in the rebellion. During his confession, he claimed that a spirit spoke to him and guided him. Upon being questioned by his interrogator about this spirit, Turner claimed that it was "[t]he Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days" (Gray and Turner 7). Turner believed he had direct contact with the Spirit that instructed the prophets in the Old Testament. While Turner does affirm his spiritual African roots, he never makes a connection to his African beliefs as explicitly as the movie does. Towards the end of the movie there is a scene that shows a dream world in which a spirit with the features of the adult Nat Turner protects the infant Nat Turner. This can be seen as another link to his African spiritualism rather than his Christianity, since it seems to suggest that his revolt was inspired by the African spirit.

Because Nat Turner is made the hero of the movie, the actual role of the historical Nat Turner's allies is downplayed. In a critical review of the movie, Rebecca Carroll rightly

points out that the movie is "an egregiously average, sweeping epic drama, […] that is both predictable […] and devoid of character development" (Carroll 3). Indeed, the amount of time the protagonist is on screen compared with the other characters is remarkable. The lack of screen time for the other male and female African American characters cuts into their character development, despite the importance of some other slaves in organizing the rebellion in the original narrative. For example, in his confession, Turner mentions a slave named Hark "in whom I [Nat Turner] had the greatest confidence" and who he trusted to do most of the killing after spilling the first blood himself (Gray and Turner 10-11). However, in the movie, Turner takes on the most active role in the rebellion. Hark is shown as an accomplice, but he has only few lines and is of little consequence in the preparation for and during the uprising (Carroll 3).

The movie follows the original text regarding the sign for which the historical Turner said he had been looking to start the revolt. "And on the appearance of the sign, […] I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons" (Gray and Turner 10). The sign which started the revolt was a solar eclipse, which is also the sign used in the movie adaptation. What is not made as explicit in the movie, however, is the time it took for this sign to appear after Turner made the decision to start a revolt. In Turner's confession, he said that the time to prepare to act was May 12, 1828 (Gray and Turner 9), more than three years before the rebellion on August 23, 1831 (Kenneth xi). This timeframe is not clearly portrayed in the movie. This lack of elaboration on the preparations ties in with the limited screen time of the other African American actors on screen. By not showing these preparations and the difficulties they might have caused, the movie keeps focusing on the character of Nat Turner, while transferring agency from the other slaves who aided in the (preparation for the) revolt to him. The African American voice and agency are therefore concentrated in one character. Since the actor who plays this role is also director of the movie,

the background of Nate Parker forms a link between the movie and the contemporary United States.

Most of the critics who reviewed the movie pointed out the parallel with Nate Parker being accused of rape as a college student and the role sexual violence against women plays in the movie. Nate Parker stood trial for the alleged rape of a female student in 1999, but was acquitted (Truitt 1, Cunningham "Worth Defending" 3). His personal past is ironic when we look at the pivotal moment for the protagonist in the movie to decide to revolt. Just as the timeframe of this movie is different from that of the historical rebellion, so is the motivation for the revolt. While throughout the movie violence against slaves is repeatedly and persistently shown on screen, the event that causes Nat Turner to rise up against his slaveholder is a violent sexual assault on Nat Turner's wife. In the historical Turner's confessions, there is no reference to sexual abuse of slave women; instead the confessions suggest that his religious beliefs played the main role in his revolt (Gray and Turner 9-10). However, as Leslie Alexander points out in her review of the movie in *The Nation*, the rape of Turner's wife Cherry (played by Aja Naomi King), was the "crucial turning point [… which] ultimately drove Turner to launch his rebellion" (Alexander 1).

Throughout the movie, the slave women are portrayed as victims. This victimization is expressed through two women being raped and the director's decision not to give them a voice or the agency to fight back. Instead, the male slaves (in particular Nat Turner) are given the agency to incite the revolt, being motivated by the rape of Turner's wife to start the revolt. By being made the cause of the revolt, then, the women are marginalized to a narrative device. According to Mary Kemp Davis, who researched the role women played in the historical Nat Turner rebellion, black women were likely active *non-violent* participants in the insurrection (Davis, "What Happened in This Place" 176). However, in the movie, the

women characters lack the agency the male slaves have, and the movie turns into a revenge narrative with Turner in the role of the avenging hero.

In the scenes depicting the revolt, some elements were omitted as well. The primary omission occurs in the way the violence against the whites is depicted. Nat Turner confessed that he and his allies killed any white person they encountered or found during the revolt, regardless of age or gender. In the movie, however, we see no children and only a few of the female characters being murdered. In fact, the slave mistress Elizabeth Turner is not killed in the movie, although her historical counterpart did not survive the revolt according to Turner's confession (Gray and Turner 22). The reason for this is that, unlike her son, Samuel Turner, Elizabeth is portrayed in the movie as a kind-hearted woman who introduces Nat Turner to the faith and teaches him to read and write. By leaving her alive and not visibly harming children on screen, the characters participating in the revolt retain their humanity. The direct implication, of course, is that this is an act of desperation against the institution of slavery, which is depicted as an institution devoid of any humanity (with the exception of Mrs. Turner).

Reporting on a Q&A session with Parker and his cast at the Toronto Film Festival, Tasha Robins of online magazine *The Verge* quotes a member of the audience who asked what the message of *The Birth of a Nation* is in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Parker's response was that he portrayed Nat Turner as a character who sacrificed himself for "a future he'd be able to enjoy" and that anyone watching the movie should look at themselves and what they can change themselves to achieve a better future for "their children and their children's children" (Robinson 1). A concrete example of such changes is, according to Nate Parker and his movie consultant Reverend Marshall Mitchell, for the black community to "[r]ise up by voting. Rise up to build affordable housing" (Barnes 1).

Parker's comments suggest that the movie tries to encourage people to protest against injustice in a peaceful way. Ironically, however, this is the exact opposite of what Nat Turner did with his revolt and it is hence unclear how exactly this call for peaceful protest can be derived from such a fundamentally violent historical event. Additionally, the target of the criticism of the movie is different as well. Whereas in *The Birth of a Nation* the target of the resistance is the unjust institution of slavery, given the link to the contemporary context made by Parker, such an institutional target for protesting remains unclear. This is relevant if you consider that Black Lives Matter originally emerged as a movement against unjust police brutality, whereas Parker's call is to plead for affordable housing and a greater political investment on the part of the African American community. In short, there is a significant disconnect between the movie's ideological message and Black Lives Matter.

In order to further explore this disconnect, we now need to look at the main guiding principles of the movement and in particular the one that is labeled as "Black women". This label is explained in "HerStory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement." One of the movement's creators Alicia Garza points out on the Black Lives Matter website that besides the unjust violence against black people, the movement has gone on to represent and "[affirm] the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum" (Garza 1). Since the Black Lives Matter movement was founded by three black queer women, the inclusion of women together with a list of minorities is not surprising, but Nate Parker's indictment (and acquittal) for rape and the role of women in *The Birth of a Nation* clash with the Black Lives Matter movement's guiding principles.

Just as Nate Parker reduces the agency of Turner's slave allies in the movies, so too does he undermine his allies in the Black Lives Matter movement. Rather than activate a

constructive discussion about race and gender, *The Birth of a Nation* is fraught with contradictions and inhibits the public debate on race and its intersection with gender.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shown that the three movies I have discussed can be linked to the social and cultural environment in which they were released by looking at the movies' visual rhetoric through the lens of agency. Focusing on the degree of agency the characters have in each movie, I have investigated in what ways the movies engage with contemporary race relations in the United States.

When we consider *Amistad*, critics are divided over the agency given to the main black character. Most critics argue that Joseph Cinqué, being most of the time in captivity, has no agency to speak of. However, when we compare the movie with Howard Jones's historical account of the *Amistad* mutiny and the court case, it is clear that the movie gives black characters more agency and takes agency away from some of the white characters. In the movie, the African characters are closer in degree of agency to the white characters than in the original work. In fact, the black protagonist and white characters are represented as equals, notwithstanding the language and cultural differences. Examples of the "equalizing" effect of the movie is Cinqué's direct involvement in his own trial with sharp questions and inquiries on the one hand, and the incompetent linguist Josiah W. Gibbs's inability to communicate and misinterpretation of every single thing said by the Africans on the other hand. Neither is historically accurate, but both are telling of the agency given and taken away.

The message to the viewers in the late 1990s is clear. The riots caused by the acquittal of the police officers for the maltreatment of Rodney King and the difference in reaction of the white and black populace to the outcome of the OJ Simpson trial are clear indicators of the racial divisions in the United States. By producing a movie which put the fictional representatives of the two races on a more equal footing than their nonfictional equivalent, Steven Spielberg calls attention to the fact that in the 1990s there is still no racial equality in

the United States. In this regard, the movie tries to be a catalyst for the debate on racial tensions by showing content in which the injustice of the Africans is a central point. However, despite Spielberg's attempt to give voice to the Africans as well as to African American characters for whom there are only a few historical counterparts (through for example the fictional character of Joadson), the focus of the filmic narrative is set on diminishing the differences in terms of agency between black and white characters, thus providing a critique of the differences in social status of African American communities in the 1990's.

Like *Amistad, 12 Years a Slave* somewhat reduces the agency of "allied" white characters such as Ford and Bass in order to give the black characters more agency. For example, lines containing an important anti-slavery message, which were originally spoken by Bass, are given to the ex-slave of Harriet Shaw. Shaw, who is not a fictional addition as is the African American abolitionist Theodore Joadson in *Amistad,* is given a voice whereas she had none in the original slave narrative. Additionally, the omission of both the role whites played in the search for Northup and the trial that eventually secured the historical Solomon Northup's freedom in the movie *12 Years a Slave* is another indication that agency was transferred from the white characters to the enslaved blacks. Indeed, *12 Years a Slave* avoids the pitfall of being a movie which is partly a courtroom drama like *Amistad*, which reviewers found lacking in black agency as a result of the defenders being white lawyers and the courtroom drama taking up the larger part of the movie's runtime (Jeffrey 86).

Unlike *Amistad, 12 Years a Slave* cannot be directly linked to a significant event in the debate about racial injustice such as the Rodney King trials and the resulting riots. Instead, the movie lays bare an undercurrent of continuous racial injustice and discrimination by taking the collective memory of slavery and turning it into a compelling account of injustice done to a free black man in a white-dominated society. Northup's attempts to convince the slavers of his freedom are structurally punished and instead he develops a strong desire to

survive rather than live. Northup is symbolic for a person sliding into trying to survive in a white-dominated and unjust society. The parallel with the contemporary United States is that African Americans are faced with a structural racial bias and a disproportionate degree of police violence. Indeed, *12 Years a Slave* can be considered a catalyst for the debate about racial relations in the contemporary United States, as the movie raises awareness of the injustice African Americans face today and implicitly links it to the nation's history of slavery.

Another main aspect of the movie is its gender dynamics. One interesting difference between *12 Years a Slave* and *Amistad* is the inclusion of female characters. *Amistad* features none of consequence, while in *12 Years a Slave* black and white female characters play important supporting roles. This introduces a new dynamic in the movie with power relations of its own. The movie gives these characters their own story and individual agency, which is mostly separate from the male power dynamic. *The Birth of a Nation* features female characters as well, but their individual agency is far less pronounced than those in *12 Years a Slave* as they are mostly represented as victims.

Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* presents a narrative which changes the original confessions by Nat Turner himself. It glorifies the character of Nat Turner (and perhaps by extension Nate Parker himself), and discards the agency of the other African American characters. The lack of character development of the white characters makes it impossible to make an effective comparison between black and white agents. The confessions and the historical accounts of the events of the 1831 Nat Turner uprising show it to have been a group effort with Nat Turner as the leader, but not the sole leader as the movie *The Birth of a Nation* suggests. In the movie, then, all agency is concentrated in the character of Nat Turner.

The movie aims to humanize the historical character of Nat Turner by cutting back on the visible violence of the revolt. During Turner's incarceration, he confessed to having murdered without regard for age and gender. Women and children were not spared. This aspect was cut from the movie altogether and the movie instead created the image of Turner as a rightful avenger.

Furthermore, the movie introduces female characters, who have no voice and whose rape is the reason for setting up the revolt. If we consider the rape scandal Nate Parker was involved in, by making the rape of a Turner's wife the fire to light the fuse of the rebellion, he invited controversy. Because all agency is concentrated in the character of Nat Turner in *The Birth of a Nation* and because Nate Parker is both the director of the movie and plays Nat Turner, one cannot judge one without considering the other. Nate Parker is a contradictory figure, as he propagates the call for peaceful protest in a movie in which violent revolt is motivated as revenge; moreover, Parker makes the pivotal moment of the movie the same felony he was acquitted of. This contradiction makes it difficult to link the movie's message with the racial debates in the contemporary United States.

In a time where the Black Lives Matter movement has gained momentum through social media, *The Birth of a Nation* falls short of propagating the idea that black lives matter by robbing all other African American characters (and in particular female characters) of agency in the events leading up to the rebellion. The controversy due to Nate Parker's involvement in a rape scandal and the alteration of the historical events cause this movie to inhibit a public debate on race in the United States.

In conclusion, I have discussed three different movies about slavery that are based on historical events. Each of these movies tries to expand on the historical narratives and/or accounts by adding or modifying events with the purpose of giving more agency to the

African (American) protagonist at the cost of other characters. While *Amistad* and *12 Years a Slave* takes agency from white allies to increase the agency of their protagonists and added or modified significant black characters, *The Birth of a Nation* take a different route by taking agency from other black allies and making the rape of Turner's wife the pivotal moment of the movie'. The marginalization of women in *The Birth of a Nation* conflicts with the principle of gender equality central to the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement and the movie is therefore unlikely to appeal to all supporters of the movement.

On the other hand, *Amistad* reflects on the differences in social status and legal protection between the races in the contemporary United States and while the movie tries to address the racial injustice in the United States of the 1990s by giving the black characters more agency, it falls short because the courtroom scenes, which take up a large part of the movie, are dominated by whites. Finally, *12 Years a Slave* attempts to contribute to the discussion about race in contemporary United States by showing the inherent injustice done to slaves by both the institution of slavery and the slaveholders themselves. While no concrete event can be linked to the release of the movie, there are parallels with the disproportionate police violence against African Americans in the United States today.

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