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A Long, Long Way: Hollywood's Unfinished Journey from Racism to Reconciliation

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A Long, Long Way: Hollywood's Unfinished Journey from Racism to Reconciliation

Abstract

This is a book review of Greg Garrett, *A Long, Long Way: Hollywood's Unfinished Journey from Racism to Reconciliation* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

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Author Notes

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Garrett, Greg, *A Long, Long Way: Hollywood's Unfinished Journey from Racism to Reconciliation* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

As its subtitle indicates, this book addresses “Hollywood’s unfinished journey from racism to reconciliation.” The title itself, *A Long, Long Way*, is taken from a comment made by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., after a lecture he gave at Southern Methodist University in 1966. When asked whether America was making real progress in race relations, he responded, “we have come a long, long way, even if we still have a long, long way to go.” Together, the title and subtitle sum up the thesis of this book.

The book traces an arc from the overtly racist films of the early twentieth century, through the well-intentioned efforts by white filmmakers in the mid-twentieth century, to the forthright cinematic storytelling by black filmmakers from the late twentieth century to the present. Its thesis is that film has the power to shape or reinforce attitudes about race, violence, and identity. Not only do films from different eras help us to track the changes in attitudes over time, but they can also help us to have difficult conversations, and to contend with our own racism. While the book will be of interest to a broad audience, it seems to be directed principally at white readers.

The book provides a chronological outline of six phases of representation of African Americans on film, choosing one film for each phase for in-depth analysis. The first phase, in which films promote racist stereotyping, is exemplified by *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), perhaps the most viciously racist film ever made. The second phase, which sees incremental change in movies by white filmmakers, focuses on *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), which presents Sam as the black friend to the white protagonist. Films in the third phase, such as *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* (Stanley Kramer, 1967), attempted to portray black lives in more realistic, and sympathetic ways, if not always successfully. The fourth phase begins to see films,

such as *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) made by people of color. In the fifth phase, films such as *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2005) attest to a casual multiculturalism in which racial difference is taken for granted. In the sixth and current phase, people of color make films for mainstream audiences that overturn harmful stereotypes, often by subverting genre conventions. The prime example here is *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). This chronological survey suggests that Hollywood has indeed come a long way over the past century, though, as the subtitle states, the journey to reconciliation is not yet complete.

Each chapter addresses three themes: relevance, evaluating the film in the context of American racism at the time it was made as well as in the context of American film history more generally; representation, with a focus on characterization and the myths and stereotypes the film creates or perpetuates; and reconciliation, describing the lessons these films offer to their audiences. To this study Garrett brings his own experiences as well as his perspective as a self-described white, middle-aged man who is both a film historian and cultural theologian.

The book has much to commend it. It is written in an engaging conversational style, which holds the reader's attention from beginning to end. The experiences that he recounts, especially his fruitful teaching partnership with the Very Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas – the inaugural dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary and the Canon Theologian of Washington Cathedral – underscore the importance of conversation and dialogue. Although each chapter provides an in-depth analysis of only one film, other films are also mentioned briefly, allowing the careful reader to create a good filmography on Hollywood and race.

A more complicated question is whether the book meets the objectives that it states at the outset. Garrett states that his task is to interrogate the six phases that he has outlined, from his perspective as a middle-aged white theologian who feels called upon to “be awake, to pay

attention, to look through new lenses, to see what really is as opposed to what we would like to or have been encouraged to see” (p. 3). In my judgement, it fulfills its promise with regard to relevance and representation, but falls short with regard to reconciliation.

The first part of each chapter, dedicated to relevance, establishes its place in the narrative arc that the book outlines by discussing the relevant contexts, in the history of film, in the history of racism in America, and in the political and social movements of the era under discussion. Garrett does not look at American society, or film history, with rose-colored glasses. In the opening pages of the chapter on *The Birth of a Nation*, for example, Garrett acknowledges both the genius of the film as a classic of film history, and its vile celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, which played a major role in the revitalization of this hate group. He also describes President Woodrow Wilson’s apparent approval of the film, after its White House screening. These aspects, as well as many of the other points made in this and subsequent chapters have been well-documented elsewhere but may be unfamiliar to the general white audience that would appear to be the primary audience for this book. Garrett draws on a broad range of material and comments on the impact of the Trump presidency, events such as the Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally, and the Black Lives Matter movement on American race relations. (The book was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and the 2020 presidential election; the impact of these events on future films by black filmmakers and/or about black characters remains to be seen.)

The discussions of context are helpful in tracing the narrative arc from racism towards reconciliation. The book’s strength, however, lies in its detailed analyses of the narratives and characters in the primary film discussed in each chapter. Here is just one point (of many) that I learned about each film. 1) In *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith used photography to grant authenticity

to his fictional scenes, and to reinforce racist myths and stereotypes. 2) In *Casablanca*, the character Sam represents a common trope of the Black person as “faithful retainer,” a motif that occurs in numerous other films, such as, for example, *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989). 3) Similarly, the white father in *Guess Who’s coming to dinner* plays the conventional role of White Savior insofar as the plot revolves around gaining his approval for the marriage of his daughter to the black physician played by Sidney Poitier. 4) The opening soundtrack of *Do the Right Thing*, which runs throughout the credits, introduces the audience to its discursive and narrative space by juxtaposing Branford Marsalis’s rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” with Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” and thereby sets up the conflict between two visions of race and progress. 5) Although *Crash* exhibits a “casual multiculturalism” it also points out the contradictions, for example, when a racist white man saves a young black woman whom he had earlier tried to rape. 6) *Get Out* subverts certain racist tropes, such as the myth of the ferocious black man, and the conventions of the horror genre, such as the haunted house. These are just a few of the thought-provoking observations from the representation sections of each chapter.

Less satisfying, however, are the comments that occupy the last few pages of each chapter and that are meant to address reconciliation. On the basis of the book’s subtitle, I had assumed that Garrett was using the term reconciliation to refer to Hollywood’s – and American society’s – progress towards fully rejecting racist stereotypes and myths and valuing African American directors and actors, along with all human beings. By the end of the introduction, however, I realized that Garrett was applying the term not so much to society or Hollywood at large, but to the individual Christian. As someone who is neither a Christian nor a theologian, I admit that I do not have a firm grasp of such usage. I infer, however, that for Garrett it pertains to the search of the individual for reconciliation with the divine, which would entail the need to own, seek

forgiveness, and atone for one's own biases, with a focus on anti-Black racism. Nevertheless, the pivot from social history and film analysis to theological reflection remained somewhat jarring. Its rationale in the context of the book's aims was rather unclear aside from Garrett's own concerns as a self-described cultural theologian.

I agree that each of us, especially each white person among us, has an obligation to engage in self-examination with regard to our own attitudes and behaviors when it comes to race. I also agree that film can be a medium through which to do so. In the chapters where the reflections on reconciliation are articulated with regard to the film itself, as in the chapter on *Do the Right Thing*, the comments on reconciliation further the book's stated aim of showing how films can help us to grow as human beings. In other cases, however, the turn to scripture and religious tradition does not seem to offer more than the generic values of love of humankind, morality, celebration of racial, cultural, and other differences, and anti-racism.

My concerns about this aspect of the book stem at least in part from my own perspective as a Jewish scholar in the fields of biblical and religious studies. Garrett states at the outset that he will draw on the "wisdom traditions" of different faiths. Throughout the book, however, he makes only a few, very general, references to traditions outside of Christianity and Judaism, and his discussions of these latter traditions relies substantially on the (Christian) Bible as a whole, not, as stated, on "wisdom traditions," a term usually reserved for ancient texts such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Wisdom of Ben Sira, and the prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). Garrett acknowledges that he takes his primary inspiration from Christian scriptures and theology. That being the case, however, it would have been better had he simply refrained from discussing other traditions altogether. In his brief comments on Judaism, Islam, and other traditions, Garrett

essentializes and dehistoricizes these traditions. In his discussion of Christianity, Garrett also leaves aside issues that are core to an understanding of American anti-Black racism.

I illustrate these problems by referring briefly to two aspects of the chapter on *The Birth of a Nation*. The reconciliation section of this chapter begins by acknowledging slavery as a “normative” institution in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. While it is true that slavery was accepted – if not in fact normative – in Christian scripture, it is surprising that so little is said about the use of the Bible to justify slavery and anti-Black racism, not only during the period of enslavement but even today, as the slogans chanted during the Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally showed so clearly. Although one cannot dispute Garrett’s main point – that Jews and Christians alike believe that God loves all humankind – I would have expected Garrett to explore the contradictions and nuances of this issue, as he does so well in the sections on relevance and representation. The use of the Bible and the role of religious tradition in racial reconciliation is a much more complex matter than this book would suggest.

Second, the discussion of Judaism contains a rather jarring error. Much of the discussion here is grounded in references to statements by “Rabbi Oliver Sacks” (pp. 47, 214). Here Garrett has confused the neurologist Oliver Sacks with his nephew Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and the best known, arguably the most highly regarded, Jewish theologian of the 21st century. Mistakes can creep in despite best intentions, but given the fame of both uncle and nephew far beyond the Jewish world, this should have been caught either by Garrett or by the book’s copyeditor.

Similar questions arise with regard to the other chapters, though less so when the reconciliation discussion continues to reflect on the film, as in the chapter on *Do the Right Thing*, rather than drawing solely on snippets from scripture and well-known theologians. It is difficult to

see how such discussions actually further the project of reconciliation, the need for which is so clear from the other sections of each chapter.

The question therefore arises: Without the theology section, would this book be relevant to scholars of religion and film? My answer is yes. Although the discussion of reconciliation falls short of the mark, the book as a whole is a worthwhile and interesting read. Garrett is not the first or only scholar to discuss the issue of race in Hollywood. Nevertheless, even seasoned scholars of religion and film stand to learn from the insightful discussions of relevance and representation. The book will be even more valuable for readers new to the issue. In this regard, it may well fulfill its purpose of helping readers reflect on how their own views may be shaped by media representations of race, racism, and race relations, that they consume on their screens.