

**Review: Greg Garrett, *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

By Greg Garrett

Oxford University Press, 2020

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Beware the relics to which you attribute power. Greg Garrett's *A Long, Long Way: Hollywood's Unfinished Journey from Racism to Reconciliation* aims to chart a path from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Get Out* (2017), at every juncture analysing the films' depictions of Black people, their relevance in their times, and their attempts at racial reconciliation. "Narrative can help us to have hard conversations," Garrett poses as his thesis, "to grow as human beings, and to develop compassion for others" (17). Needless to say, matters of race and racism have featured prominently within film studies research to date. Whilst it might seem as though all possible angles have been thoroughly covered, Garrett claims to offer a novel approach to his case studies: approaching them from a theological focus, and using historical analysis.

Conceptually, Garrett uses each case study — including *Casablanca* (1942), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Crash* (2004) — to analyse the growing progressivism within Hollywood filmmaking between 1915 and 2017. However, he covers this century of progress with broad strokes and little engagement with other scholarship, creating the pervading sense that *A Long, Long Way* is fundamentally pure of heart but tragically misguided in its analysis, and ultimately guilty of reiterating the same observations heaped on these films for decades now rather than truly exploring any fresh avenues of research.

Garrett quotes James Baldwin liberally, as well as a tapestry of mostly white authors and critics — such as in the introduction, where the text presumptively likens its mission of “exposing and rejecting” the “often-racist literature and culture” that form the basis of modern films and filmic storytelling to the U.S. civil rights movement (4). Such short-sightedness signals a lack of self-reflection and awareness that belies the noble, yet rudimentary, goals of the text throughout. Perhaps the text is intended for neophytes. Nevertheless, the text features very problematic phraseology — for example, “whites” and “blacks” are both lowercase throughout and used as common nouns, rather than “white people” and “Black people,” expressions that are *de rigueur* throughout many academic publications, showcasing one of many instances in which the text, for all its good intentions, muddies its efforts to promote anti-racist education through cinema (5).¹ Equally questionable is the author’s unflinching use of the term “Negro” in analysis of *The Birth of a Nation* (as on 32, 36, 42, and 50), as well as a disastrous logical fallacy that it is “patently untrue” that “black women are not attractive to whites. [...] Throughout the antebellum period, black women were raped [by white slaveowners] and were routinely treated as sexual objects,” crudely and incorrectly equating rape with sexual or romantic desire (39).

Oversimplicity and reductiveness are the enemies of understanding. Garrett purports an idealisation of cinematic depiction as the affirmation of the real — and therefore that representation on-screen is tantamount to recognition of one’s humanity. This argument would make analysis of, say, *The Birth of a Nation*, complex and involved, reckoning with the white identification with D.W. Griffith’s valiant Ku Klux Klan (KKK) while also dealing with the sticky transference of blackness in the film onto white performers clad in blackface. Yet Garrett avoids this route, instead taking the argument to its simplest — and also one of its most incorrect — cul-de-sacs: that films

such as *Moonlight* (2016), *Get Out*, *Black Panther* (2018), and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) are signs that racial tensions in the U.S. have the potential to heal, ignoring the widespread socio-political and economic barriers obstructing that goal in an attempt to make the argument as palatable and hopeful as possible.

“Hope” here makes a parody of ignorance. Hope, one reasons, must have driven the author to state that “The Tuskegee Airmen have since become a legendary part of our culture; witness their appearance alongside American icons Teddy Roosevelt (Robin Williams), Amelia Earhart (Amy Adams), and General George A. Custer (Bill Hader) in *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* (2009)” — Garrett constructs a portrait of culture as monolithic homogeneity, as though representation in one film is as good as representation in a hundred, as though readers can read into this cherry-picked example an authentic extracultural presence (56). Hollywood holds exactly as much sway as you care to give it. As an academic text, *A Long, Long Way* repeatedly refuses to interrogate power structures and question canonical history. By calling Hollywood “perhaps our greatest mythmaker,” Garrett’s writing assumes a passive voice and suggests that the industry’s control of racial and social representation is definite and inescapable rather than a deliberately manufactured impression (6).

Similarly, Garrett treats the literature and scholarship on films such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* as having already been written — and perhaps, in the latter case, this is correct. Given his preponderance of quoting Baldwin, one wonders what Garrett has to say vis-à-vis race in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* that Baldwin has not already discussed in *The Devil Finds Work* in 1976. His analyses of later films, however, such as *Do the Right Thing*, *Crash*,

and *Get Out*, rely too heavily on the words of white critics, such as Roger Ebert and Jason Bailey (115–16). Throughout, his analysis invokes the academic and journalistic history behind these films as an excuse to circumvent innovative thinking and reinterpretation. “We must, on the one hand, hold the film [*The Birth of a Nation*] up as a marvel of cinematic accomplishment,” Garrett writes (37). Must we? If history in *The Birth of a Nation* is writ with lightning, as Garrett seems to be insinuating, then who are we to rewrite it? The text’s argument is flawed, of course. I am sure there are many who would look at *The Birth of a Nation* and observe that it is not an essential cornerstone work of the medium, that it merely did the right things at the right time and that there is nothing singularly impressive about the filmmaking that would render its immutability as the author renders it here — as being absolute. (Garrett also approaches the film as separate from its artists and chooses to criticise the film as an entity more often than he discusses the relevant filmmakers.) The author so steadfastly insists we, in our contemporary enlightenment, view *The Birth of a Nation* as a necessary evil, as both a revelation and a Van Gogh-like masterpiece — something that defined and continues to define the medium, which has the mythical power to, in its finale, get anybody to cheer for the KKK — rather than reassess that mythology or leave any room for doubt. This is how myths are created in the first place.

Notes

¹ Journalism is more advanced on this front than academia, as the Associated Press began capitalising “Black” officially in 2020. Academics utilising this more appropriate phraseology include Phil Allen (*The Prophetic Lens: The Camera and Black Moral Agency from MLK to Darnella Frazier*), Aria S Halliday (*Buy Black: How Black Women Transformed US Pop Culture*), and Simone Adams, Kimberly R Moffitt, and Ronald L Jackson (*Gladiators in Suits: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Representation in Scandal*). Their texts were published in 2022, 2022, and 2019, respectively.