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# Close-Up: Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014)

## Seen and Heard: Negotiating the Black Female Ethos in *Selma*

David G. Holmes

### *Abstract*

*This essay examines the ethos of Black women in the film Selma (dir. Ava DuVernay, 2014). It argues that controversies, such as whether or not President Lyndon B. Johnson prioritized African American voting rights, can detract from the centrality of Black women's roles during that campaign. This claim correlates with Jennifer Fuller's critique that many popular culture civil rights films tend to romanticize the relationship between White and Black women. Such romanticizing not only leads to happily-ever-after endings in these films, but further fosters the assumption that structural racism is a relic of the past. Juxtaposing salient scenes from the film and historical details, I explore the agency of Diane Nash, Amelia Boynton, Annie Lee Cooper, Mahalia Jackson, Juanita Abernathy, and, principally, Coretta Scott King. This approach honors the spirits and biographies of these women as well as invites contemporary society to revisit the unfinished business of the civil rights movement.*

Media and film scholar Jennifer Fuller argues that 1990s films and television shows depicting the civil rights movement tended to romanticize that time as largely an errant moment from which American society had been fully redeemed.<sup>1</sup> Heroic men and women of both races fought for colorblind laws that replaced bigoted customs. These films typically included a White character that was either down for the cause at the beginning of the story or was converted along the way, usually by someone who was Black and a social subordinate. More often than not, the Black and White characters would team up to carry the plot to either a victory over a social injustice or an epiphany about racial reconciliation. According to Fuller, most of these teams consisted of a White woman and a Black woman.

Curiously, Fuller sets a critical gaze on these films. Her concern lies not with the use of Black and White female characters per se. Indeed, film

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narratives that showcase the White female participants in the civil rights movement are not far afield from historical narratives, which include but are not excluded to: Anne Braden, Rita Schwerner, Virginia Durr, and a host of sympathizers from college coeds to housewives. Rather, Fuller seems to object to how the representation of fictional characters and the films themselves sensationalized the horrors of civil rights movement history and minimized the racial injustices that still remained during the 1990s. Contrary to the “we have overcome” message that these films evoked, racial distress and social unrest were part and parcel of American culture, from the Rodney King beating, the 1992 riots, and the O. J. Simpson trial to President Bill Clinton’s war on welfare and other big government programs. Clinton had co-opted Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric against social programs, particularly welfare, a rhetoric which some scholars have characterized as largely a tacit backlash against gains from the civil rights movement. Granted most expect even historical movies to err on the side of sentimentality; however, Fuller claims that the affair with 1990s civil rights film and television partly wooed American society from the moral fidelity and sociopolitical courage necessary to seek and speak truth in any age.

One should fast forward to 2015 and carefully examine the critically anticipated film, *Selma* (dir. Ava DuVernay, 2014). Times had changed, or had they? Somehow the historic election and reelection of the first Black President had neither halted nor hindered a significant rise in hate speech, decline in people of color voting, and Blue on Black crime. All of these anti-civil rights gestures, but especially the last one, gave rise to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Black Lives Matter had begun to pick up steam by the time *Selma* was released. Backed by the inimitable, socially conscious mega celebrity Oprah Winfrey, the film promised to be land marking. And, on many levels, that promise was fulfilled. Artistically the acting, cinematography, and music, to note a few features, were practically peerless. The infamous “Bloody Sunday” scene on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was exquisitely horrific. *Selma* awakened the social consciousness within some and fueled it within others. The award-winning theme song, “Glory,” paradoxically captured the ideal of inclusive democracy and the searing critique against the status quo that movements like Black Lives Matter embody, as the following two lines evince: “That’s why Rosa sat on the bus. That’s why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up.” The film rightfully garnered numerous accolades and, perhaps less expected, a level of controversy.

One of the highest-profile controversies involves President Lyndon B. Johnson. History recounts that Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act (the aim of the Selma movement) as he had signed the Civil Rights Act one year before. *Selma* portrays Johnson as being initially antagonistic to the ideas of immediate voting rights legislation and the Selma to Montgomery March.

Some historians and at least one of Johnson's former aides have cried foul concerning this supposed mischaracterization of the former President's legacy.<sup>2</sup> Johnson did in fact proclaim the need for voting rights legislation in his 1965 inaugural address. On the other side, the film's director, Ava DuVernay,<sup>3</sup> deems these objections as partly inaccurate, mostly irrelevant and largely irreverent. To overplay Johnson's role, DuVernay seems to argue, is tantamount to underplaying the leadership role of Martin Luther King to be sure, but also Black foot soldiers and grassroots members responsible for the inception and success of the Selma campaign. The question for DuVernay, as the film makes clear, is not whether Johnson backed the Selma movement but when and how forcefully. Nor would DuVernay likely deny the need for the President's assistance. A host of civil rights historians—Taylor Branch, David Garrow, Steven Lawson, and Charles Payne<sup>4</sup> among them—have argued that the overall success of the civil rights movement resulted from a network of civil rights organizations, including the church, Black leadership, grassroots activists, and the federal government. During an interview regarding the Johnson/Selma controversy, King confidant, Andrew Young,<sup>5</sup> concurred, stating that of course Johnson and King worked together for voting rights, along with a multiracial, multigenerational, male and female coalition of supporters. If anything, Young suggested, the timing of the crisis took King and Johnson by surprise and, maybe, a little off balance.

Still there is another, more consequential ideological elephant in the room that the Johnson controversy evokes. This debate distracts from the most significant takeaway from *Selma*: Black female lives matter—in terms of physical safety certainly—but also in terms of Black women speaking up, standing up, and moving forward for social justice. Black female agency mattered significantly during the Selma campaign, not to mention the civil rights movement more broadly. The effort to vindicate Johnson's legacy even within a genre, like film, reputed for taking license suggests that American culture may not be as postracial or gender inclusive as it purports to be. The obsessive attention afforded Johnson's role in the Selma campaign may indict this society with the material critique that white masculinity, ethos, and voice appear to matter more than Black femininity, character, and perspective, even when African American women are central subjects within the narrative. This is why Fuller's critique about overly sentimental civil rights films and the Johnson debate are linked. One can minimize the crucial contributions of African American women to the civil rights movement through a romanticizing or historicizing focus on Whiteness and/or masculinity. To offer sufficient critical attention to the ethos (defined here both credibility and competence) and voice of Black women in films like *Selma* is not meant to discount either White or male subjects; instead such an interpretive gaze might enable viewers to sidestep mainstream culture's ingrained tendency

to marginalize Blackness and femininity. Over the decades one or both of these identity categories have been underemphasized within various civil rights narratives.

In the reputed civil rights documentary *Eyes on the Prize*,<sup>6</sup> Kwame Ture foreshadowed the sentiments of the Black Lives Matter Movement during an interview. Formerly known as Stokely Carmichael, Ture had been an active member of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). During this interview, Ture commented upon the national outrage surrounding the murder of James Reeb,<sup>7</sup> a white Unitarian minister. Along with 450 other clergy persons, Reeb had heeded King's call after "Bloody Sunday" for people of goodwill of all races and faiths to join the Selma campaign. Ture argued that the national focus on Reeb's murder at the hands of Southern White racists actually "played into" the narrative of racism. Ture rightfully noted that we should be enraged when anyone is killed. As a point of fact several Blacks had been mutilated and murdered during the long battle for civil rights, one casualty being Jimmie Jackson, a Marion, Alabama resident whom a White police officer shot while Jackson was attempting to protect his mother. Ture bristled against the national mourning over Reeb's murder rather than Jackson's.

But Ture's scathing criticism regarding which lives mattered was tainted with sexism, at least during the 1960s. Ture and a few other Black members of SNCC would ultimately seize the leadership and expel Whites from the organization. During a SNCC retreat exploring the organization's changing politics and policies, an anonymous question came up regarding what would be the position of women in the new SNCC. Ture allegedly retorted "Prone."<sup>8</sup> Whether or not Ture had altered his sexist position by the time of the *Eyes on the Prize* interview in the 1980s, his bigoted bathroom humor does speak to the larger culture of gender bias that characterized a movement allegedly devoted to human equality. Ironically, Ella Baker<sup>9</sup> became a pioneering member of SNCC several years earlier because she felt excluded from the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), which privileged Black male, clerical leadership.

To DuVernay's credit, *Selma* does afford viewers with a variegated window into the lives of a few of the Black women women that participated in perhaps the most celebrated voting rights campaign in American history: Diane Nash, Amelia Boynton, Annie Lee Cooper, Mahalia Jackson, Juanita Abernathy, and, of course, Coretta Scott King. Each woman is shown within the film to propel the Selma campaign—sometimes in the background, other times in the foreground, yet always in practically indispensable ways. And where DuVernay seems to gloss over biographical details for a given character, she artistically and incisively captures her spirit. Understandably, therefore, the range of complexities each female character portrays varies. For

example, the film accurately depicts Diane Nash (later Diane Nash Bevel) as a willing foot soldier for civil rights. But she was also a strategist for and veteran of both the Nashville sit-ins and the southern bound Freedom Rides.<sup>10</sup> In fact, one episode of the *Eyes on the Prize* video series shows her publically challenging the mayor of Nashville to commit to the principle of racial equality that fostered the sit-in demonstrations.<sup>11</sup> Nash's activities set the tone for a grassroots leadership style within the civil rights movement among college students, women, and people of color.

Similarly, there are shades to Amelia Boynton's activism that the film did not expose. Certainly, the film contains scenes where she dutifully supports the leadership of King and the Southern Leadership Conference. And there is a brief moment where Boynton seems to be informally mentoring Mrs. King, who was reticent about giving an impromptu yet important speech at Brown's AME Chapel in Selma. Boynton reminds her that the blood of African kings and queens pumps within her veins. What might have been lost on the viewers was that Boynton and her husband were longtime activists in the fight for voting rights in Selma, a fight that likely led to her husband's hospitalization from chronic stress. Not only did Boynton continue the fight, but also she had been mentoring many of the grassroots activists in the SNCC and was one of the lesser-known forces behind inviting King and his organization into the fight in Selma. Shortly after the start of SCLC's participation in the voters' rights campaign, the infamous Sheriff Jim Clark roughed up and arrested Boynton, an incident that was caught on camera. A registered voter, Boynton was on scene to vouch for a few Black voters that were not registered.<sup>12</sup> Like the literacy tests, voters vouching for unregistered voters were one of the many hurdles to suffrage Blacks faced in the South. Boynton's arrest sparked over one hundred teachers to march to Selma's county courthouse in protest. However, Boynton's stance on the Edmund Pettus Bridge "Bloody Sunday" captures the extent of her sacrificial leadership:

Mrs. Amelia Platts Boynton, who was standing tall only a few ranks from the front a moment before, had been one of the first to fall, clubbed into unconsciousness. As she fell to the pavement, a creased plastic rain hat that someone had given her slipped down over her face. A trooper came up and dropped a tear gas canister right in front of her, and as the piercing liquid and fumes sprayed out, only the wrinkled sheet of plastic kept it from trenching her eyes and going straight to her lungs.<sup>13</sup>

This represents one of several incidents where a character's real life experience was more dramatic than one recreated in the film.

Two powerful scenes portray Annie Lee Cooper's earthy dignity and commitment. The first, in the voters' registrar's office, illustrated the widespread intimidation and indignity hundreds of courageous Blacks, like Cooper, faced when trying to exercise this basic constitutional right. Versions of the questions about what your employer would think and name all sixty-seven of Alabama county clerks were commonplace obstructions to Blacks voting across the South. The second scene, involving Cooper being brutalized while attempting to defend her son during a demonstration, highlighted the endemic and epidemic violence against Blacks that characterized most of the civil rights movement, but was especially dehumanizing to women. And according to historian Charles E. Fager, while SCLC did not condone Cooper's physical retaliation, they were decidedly empathetic, largely because of the difficulty of watching one you love attacked but also due to the stored up frustration for not being able to exercise so sacred a democratic right. But Cooper was not only concerned about her own right to vote. According to Fager, as earlier as November 1963, she attempted to organize several of "her fellow employees at the White-owned Dunn Rest Home to join one of the early SNCC marches and try to register."<sup>14</sup> Her employer later identified her in the registration line and thus thwarted the plot.

One of the briefest scenes in the movie features a call from King to Mahalia Jackson. Around nine pm, Jackson rolls out of bed to the ringing phone. King says, "I need to hear the Lord's voice." Jackson complies by singing "Precious Lord Take My Hand." A rich backstory frames this moment. Jackson had gained celebrity ironically by refusing to sing anything other than Black gospel music. Her voice and face were well known, as her records sold in scores, and she appeared in a cameo role in the 1959 film *Imitation of Life* (dir. Douglas Sirk). More significantly, she had sung at the momentous March on Washington on August 28, 1963, where King would deliver the now canonized "I Have a Dream" Speech. But the story of gospel music was broader than Jackson's fame, and she should be the first to admit this. Long before the term "gospel music" was coined in the early twentieth century to describe a blues-sounding brand of Black religious music, Americans of African descent had been singing their way through slavery and segregation—as a form of comfort, consolation, and otherworldly faith to be sure, but further to galvanize the Black masses to speak out and, in many cases, act out for their cultural, economic, and sociopolitical rights.<sup>15</sup> Jackson exemplified what countless African American singers understood, namely, that Black spiritual music (by any name) was and is about inspiring hope—not hope as wishful thinking, but hope as confident expectation.

While Ralph Abernathy occupies a significant role in the film, his wife, Juanita, is mentioned only in passing, as King jokingly threatens to call her

because Ralph is cheating on his diet. The attention the film affords the male Abernathy is well deserved, as he was more than a King sidekick. From Montgomery to Memphis, he was King's confidant, advisor, and friend. Yet what Mrs. King was to Martin, Juanita was to Ralph. She kept the house fires burning, helped to strategize for the movement, and accompanied her husband in the fight for civil rights when she could. In fact, according to Mrs. King's autobiography, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*,<sup>16</sup> Mrs. Abernathy delivered an impromptu speech at Brown's Chapel before Mrs. King delivered hers. This was the day that Mrs. King recalls meeting Malcolm X, a scene that the film does record. Several years ago, I interviewed her and found Mrs. Abernathy to be ebullient and intellectually astute—a woman short in stature but tall in terms of ideals, mission, and purpose.

Perhaps the richest female character portrayed in the film, and understandably so, is Coretta Scott King. Understandably so because part of the genius of the film lay in the way it navigates the line between King's humanity and heroism. Few popular representations of King have captured his virtues and vices with the deft crafting that DuVernay's film does. Similarly in the portrayal of Mrs. King, viewers witness much more than the archetype of the dutiful wife circa 1965. The scenes range from Mrs. King standing behind her husband to standing with him to stepping to him in criticism when such was needed. One scene that seems to encapsulate all of her stances opens in the King living room as husband and wife are listening to an FBI surveillance tape. The tape allegedly contains the sounds of King and another woman having sex. After King denies, and Mrs. King confirms that the male voice is not his, she raises two questions about his fidelity. "Do you love me?" After a long silence, King replies "Yes." "Do you love any of the others?" After a longer silence, King replies, "No." Ironically, she does not raise these questions as either an ultimatum for continuing their marriage or participating in the movement. Among the many actions the film charts indicating Mrs. King's steady commitment to her husband and the movement is when she surprises King by showing up at the trial that would determine whether a federal injunction against the Selma to Montgomery march would be lifted.

Mrs. King's *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, provides a helpful context for appreciating how dynamically her character is depicted in DuVernay's film. In fact, the two works could also be viewed in tandem as complementing one another. While the film offers a macro or widely accessible popular view of Black female agency, the book offers a micro or more nuanced take. For example, similar to the film, in the book, she describes King fumbling with tying the ascot he would wear for the Nobel Prize for Peace ceremony as well as the reservations he held about the



elitism his clothes and the entire ceremony represented.<sup>17</sup> Were it not for his family, King would have most likely taken a vow of poverty, a gesture that he felt befitting for a leader of a humanitarian crusade the stature of the civil rights movement. During private discussions surrounding the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, Mrs. King pens that she planted the seeds for her husband expanding his vision of nonviolence to a global scale. Of course King actualized this vision some three years later in his 1967 landmark speech "Beyond Vietnam." In a similar vein, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, enriches our understanding of Mrs. King's encounter with Malcolm X. She reflects on how intelligent Malcolm was and how he wished to help, rather than hinder King's work, both themes in keeping with the spirit of the film if not the details. Perhaps the most engaging element of Mrs. King's reverie on Malcolm occurs when she intimates that their philosophies were not miles apart. True, King did not believe, as Malcolm X did, that Blacks should defend themselves and their rights with physical violence; however, nonviolent resistance was every bit as militant in quality and more effective in quantitative results than was the Black Muslims' self-defense approach. Further, according to the book, King embraced the cultural pride consciousness, and even the economic empowerment of communities of color often associated with Black Nationalism.<sup>18</sup> It appears that King's interpretation of these ideas would lay the foundation for a richer integration of rather than separation of the races. Put another way, if Blacks truly appreciated themselves and their culture as a group they could enter the mainstream on unequivocally equal footing.

In short, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, fleshes out the spirit of Coretta Scott King that the film skillfully presents. She was more than an encourager to and supporter of her husband; she was an advisor and collaborator. From the beginning of their marriage on June 18, 1953, Mrs. King was determined to neither walk in her husband's shadow nor in his shoes but by his side. Even with the sexism that pervaded American society during the 1950s, she got her husband to agree to remove the word "obey" from their wedding vows.<sup>19</sup> Granted, her efforts were often behind the scenes of the civil rights movement, yet often not very far from the action. For instance, she claims to be one of the first to suggest to King that there should be a march on Washington. Around the time of the Democratic Convention in 1964, Mrs. King began using her training from the New England Conservatory of Music to stage what she called "Freedom Concerts" to raise money for the movement.<sup>20</sup> In fact, she performed in one of these concerts during the Selma crusade. These concerts usually consisted of her singing in more than one genre (spirituals, freedom songs, and classical music), framed by narrative and interspersed with poetry or oratory. And years after his passing, Mrs. King would carry on her husband's fight for human rights.

Most know that she founded and, for a time, presided over the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and occupied the front lines of the over decades-long battle to legalize King's birthday as a national holiday. But she also extended his ideals to struggles he never imagined. Mrs. King once opined that had her husband lived he would have supported gay marriage and become a vegan. No person or any living being would have escaped the range of his compassionate fight for justice. Unfortunately, Mrs. King died before Occupy Wall Street, the battle over global warming, anti-Islamic xenophobia, the precipitous rise of urban homelessness, and, of course, the Black Lives Matter Movement. No doubt she would have stood up and spoken out regarding these issues the way she did against South African Apartheid in 1985. And she mostly likely would have accepted arrest as she did in that instance.

Most likely, she would align herself on the side of social justice and what Cornel West calls "prophetic witness"<sup>21</sup>—wherever and whenever those avenues might appear. DuVernay's and Winfrey's collaboration on *Selma* underscores that there are still women of color—some known, others lesser known—willing to broadcast stories of consequences—narratives where Black female voices and bodies mattered in one of America's most critical times and matter now, not more than any other race or gender but in spite of racism and sexism.

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## Notes

1. Jennifer Fuller, "Debating the Present through the Past Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 167–96.

2. Nick Kotz offers perhaps one of the most even handed analyses of Johnson's response to the Selma voting rights crisis to appear in the past decade. See *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

3. According to Michael T. Martin, Ava DuVernay is heir to a long tradition of Black filmmakers who believe “that art serves a social purpose.” I think many would expect, and welcome to some degree, DuVernay’s weighing in on the side of the people regarding the Johnson/Selma controversy. See Michael T. Martin, “Conversations with Ava DuVernay ‘A Call to Action’: Organizing Principles of an Activist Cinematic Practice,” *Black Camera* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 57.

4. Obviously, there are dozens of fine histories covering the civil rights movement. Taylor Branch’s trilogy of books is at once among the most readable and comprehensive. In terms of this essay, the most helpful of the three is *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years: 1963–65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

5. See Steve Kornacki, “Controversy over MLK, LBJ Relationship in Selma,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ve49haYnFRk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ve49haYnFRk).

6. “Bridge to Freedom,” *Eyes on the Prize*, Volume 3, prod. and dir. Henry Hampton. 60 mi., PBS, 1992, videocassette.

7. In the 1990s, three biographies were written about white martyrs of the Selma campaign: James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo, and Jonathan Daniels. A wide range of responses followed the attack on Reeb including his wife being flown to his bedside at government expense, massive demonstrations in several states, and a call to his widow from President Johnson. Liuzzo, a Michigan housewife that answered King’s call for people of “goodwill” to come to Selma, was shot by Klan members while driving from Selma to Montgomery. President Johnson, upon finding out who killed Liuzzo, mentioned her death on television and renounced the Klan as “a dirty band of bigots.” Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian, was gunned down in broad daylight in August 1965, after having volunteered in Lowndes County for several months. While tragic and honorable, their deaths most likely took national focus off the commonplace brutality against Blacks in Selma and throughout the South during the 1960s. And, ironically, their biographies might have reinforced the sentimentalizing of the civil rights movement during the 1990s that Fuller critiques. Duncan Howlett, *No Greater Love: The James Reeb Story* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993); Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Charles W. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

8. See Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 207.

9. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

10. For a copious history on the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, see David Halberstam’s *The Children* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998).

11. “Ain’t Scared of Your Jails,” *Eyes on the Prize*, Volume 2, prod. and dir. Henry Hampton. 60 mi., PBS, 1992, videocassette.

12. Charles E. Fager, *Selma 1965: The March That Changed the South* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 33.

13. *Ibid.*, 94.

14. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

15. For a solid survey, consider Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997). For a penetrating analysis of how the sacred and the secular often overlap in Black music, see James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

16. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, rev. ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 238.

17. *Ibid.*, 10–12.

18. *Ibid.*, 239–40.

19. *Ibid.*, 71.

20. *Ibid.*, 230–32.

21. “Prophetic Witness” constitutes one of three terms that Cornel West deploys to describe his standards for a robust, accountable, and inclusive democracy. The other two terms are “Socratic questioning” and “tragic-comic hope.” “Prophetic Witness” is a form of sociopolitical critique that is rooted in religious traditions without being regulated by religious tenets. West has often included MLK as one who deftly used “prophetic witness.” See *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).