The White Knight of Jones County: American Monomyth and White Savior Narratives in *Free State of Jones*

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When examining a Hollywood film, it is no surprise to encounter complex tales of shifting loyalties, shocking betrayals, violent acts of murder and vengeance, and taboo relationships. What is perhaps more surprising is to find a historical basis for all of these elements. Such is the case in Gary Ross's 2016 film *Free State of Jones*, which stars Matthew McConaughey as Confederate deserter Newton Knight as he fights a war-within-a-war against the Confederacy in the waning days of the Civil War and subsequently builds a life in a mixed-race community during the Reconstruction Era.

This essay argues that *Free State of Jones* uses the American monomyth and the white savior narrative to construct a heroic version of Knight's story, averting the typical, problematically simplistic conclusions to such narratives in favor of a message about cooperating against systematic oppression. Though the film centers on Knight's agency as mythic white hero, the film foregrounds the heroic actions of black heroes, particularly in the characters of Rachel Knight (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) and Moses Washington (Mahershala Ali). Yet while Newton Knight disavows and critiques his own whiteness, the film still demonstrates the pervasiveness of whiteness and its ability to reconfigure itself. This essay begins with a discussion of the context and scholarship surrounding the film *Free State of Jones* before drawing attention to issues of public memory raised by historical films. It then provides theoretical background pertaining to whiteness, the white savior narrative, and the American monomyth before analyzing how *Free State of Jones* conforms to, but also subverts elements of, the storytelling patterns it uses.

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In lieu of a fairytale conclusion to a heroic myth, *Free State of Jones* conveys to audiences the brutal realities of the Reconstruction South. Because these storytelling patterns are deeply entrenched in American popular culture and influence audience attitudes towards democracy and identification with others, this analysis discusses the ramifications of the film's subversive storytelling for American civil society.

Context for *Free State of Jones*

First, it is necessary to provide context for Newton Knight's story. The publications available on the topic of Knight and Jones County contest the historical narrative. Historian Rudy Leverett concludes that there was no true organized government in Jones county, but that loosely-organized bands of deserters held a reign of terror over Jones County residents, looting from and killing any who opposed them (118). Leverett explains that Knight's actions against Confederate agents and resources were likely disingenuous gestures aimed at earning a pro-Union reputation. He claims that Knight sought to "contrive a calculated political defense" for civilian-targeted activities earlier in the war (119). Leverett asserts that while a "Republic of Jones" did exist in Jones County, it existed primarily in the form of a local legend rather than an organized government. Leverett's conclusions stand in stark contrast to the principled, conscientious version of Knight portrayed in *Free State of Jones* who fights first to protect his community against Confederate officers' abusive plundering of civilians through "Tax-in-Kind" policy and later to oppose racial injustice. Leverett casts Knight as little more than a deserter, looter, and political opportunist who manipulated circumstances for self-gain and survival rather than an idealist fighting for convictions about property rights, slavery, or racism.

In perhaps the most detailed book on Knight to date, Victoria Bynum provides scholarly evidence for a more nuanced interpretation of Knight's life. This counter-narrative to Leverett subsequently formed the basis for Ross's film. Bynum suggests Leverett's ancestral connection to a Confederate major Amos McLemore as the potential source of a bias against Knight. Bynum also suggests that one of Leverett's sources, Knight's descendent Ethel Knight, was concerned with the racial purity of her family and influenced by the Lost Cause, leading to a bias on her part against Knight that subsequently influenced Leverett's work. Bynum argues that Leverett "ignor(ed) altogether the involvement of women and slaves" and "cast the struggle as a contest between law-abiding and law-breaking males"

(25-103). "With the civilian population erased altogether, Confederate soldiers appeared as God-fearing, hardworking, loyal citizens" in Leverett's writing (Bynum 97). Bynum further explains that Lost Cause ideology has co-opted Knight's memory when "the fact is, Newt left no record of his personal views on either racial equality or racial identity," making it possible for others to later use his story to "promote, deter, blame, inspire, include, or censure whatever personal bias we want to project onto him" (194).

In addition to complicating an understanding of Knight's motives, Bynum also muddles the narrative of his romantic relationships. Bynum points to photographic evidence that suggests Knight's intimate relationship with his first wife Serena, a white woman, continued during his relationship with common-law wife Rachel, a black former slave (94). In addition to the children he had with Serena and Rachel, evidence suggests that he fathered children with Georgeanne Knight, Rachel Knight's daughter by another man (Bynum 159). The film portrays Newton Knight's relationships with Serena and Rachel, but it omits the relationship with Georgeanne entirely. Bynum explains that "the instituting of racial segregation and the rewriting of the Civil War as a 'lost cause' to preserve states' rights contributed to the image of Newt Knight as a man guilty of both miscegenation and treason" (159). Knight's interracial relationships were taboo among his contemporaries and later scandalized descendants like Ethel Knight.

Bynum's scholarship likewise explicates Knight's friendships as portrayed in the film. Bynum explains that the character of escaped slave Moses is fictional, along with Knight's friendship with him, though she indicates that Moses' narrative, including his lynching, is a historically realistic portrayal of a black experience in Jones County during the era (Ural 102-3). The membership of Moses and other men of color in the Knight Company and Knight's participation in the Union League are also fictional elements of the film (Ural 103). Understanding how films about the past influence audiences is important for unpacking the effect of these fictional elements.

Memory in Historical Films

Though audience members are cognizant of inaccuracies, historical films present emotionally compelling narratives that shape audiences' affective relationships with the past. According to Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, Americans engage with films about the past to experience entertainment and an affective connection

to other eras through contextual elements of setting like clothes, cultural practices, or technology used (100-1). The affective nature of this relationship with the medium presents the potential for cultural consequences.

Ekaterina Haskins identifies several consequences that result from engagement with popular forms of memory such as films. Haskins examines the consequences of commemoration for democratic citizenship, explaining that both elite and nonelite members of society produce meaningful forms of popular memory. For Haskins, memory practices serve "not only as tools of ideological domination or political self-assertion, but also as rhetorical invocations of identity that can expand or limit our civic horizon as well as induce or discourage identification with various others" (4). Popularized texts such as films "speak the language of popular culture" to gain the attention of popular audiences (5). Haskins' identification of the power of popularized memory texts on audiences' civic horizons also parallels concerns this essay will discuss over the American monomyth and spectator democracy.

Given previous attempts to connect Newton Knight's story to the Lost Cause, *Free State of Jones*'s commemorative choices have important implications for audiences today. Given Lost Cause influences on the memory of Knight, the film could disseminate a version of Knight's narrative that counters those memories to a mass audience. As discussed in more depth in the next section, "(white savior) films are not simply about how we remember the past. They affect how we interpret the present" (Madison 141). And if, as Haskins argues, audiences' civic horizons and identification with others are at stake, then this interpretation of the present bears examination.

The film's commemorative choices are especially pertinent for the Knight descendants who continue to live in Jones County to this day. Knight's descendants fall into three groups: the typically pro-Confederacy "White Knights" who descended from Knight and Serena, the "Black Knights" who trace their ancestry to Knight's cousin Dan and one of his slaves, and the "White Negroes" who descended from Knight and Rachel as well as Knight and Georgeanne (Grant 66-7). Racial tension marks relationships between members of these groups. Some descendants remember Knight with pride, while others remember him as Ethel Knight did: as a traitor to the Confederacy (Grant 66). As the text on Knight most likely to reach a popular audience, *Free State of Jones* serves as Hollywood endorsement of a popularized view of Knight that will affect how his descendants and their various views on Knight are perceived by the world. Drawing out *Free State of Jones*'s messages requires an understanding of the nature of whiteness.

Whiteness and the White Savior Narrative

The concept of whiteness is elusive and difficult to clearly define. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek describe "White" as an "invisible" and "relatively uncharted territory" that "affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours" (291). In a seminal work drawing attention to stereotypical portrayals of Asian individuals in the film *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991), Nakayama explains that white heterosexual masculinity is the cornerstone of many Hollywood action and martial arts films from the early 1990s that feature a white hero who enters into Asian-American or Asian cultural spaces and emerges victorious in conflict ("Show/down Time" 164). These white protagonists build relationships with Asian sidekicks and love interests, whom Nakayama identifies respectively with the Western genre tropes of a Native American sidekick in the style of "Tonto" and a Native American sexual conquest. Nakayama concludes by explaining that white heterosexual masculinity musters whatever resources are needed to claim a universal space, leading to a re-centering of whiteness in media culture that uses race as well as "other forms of difference to construct hierarchical relations" ("Show/down Time" 162-3).

Hierarchical relations are at the heart of the issue of whiteness. Nakayama further argues that people of color have long understood the hierarchical nature of whiteness and have adapted their behavior to survive in white-dominated societies ("Review and Criticism" 364-5). He specifies that whiteness is not merely a function of race, but that it is perpetuated through other social functions of sexuality, class, location, and nationality that reinforce a dominating system. Differences of class are evident, for example, in J. David Thomas's analysis of Jeff Foxworthy's humor. Thomas argues that Foxworthy's humor constructs a "redneck identity as degenerate and primitive" that insulates mainstream whiteness and white supremacy against the intra-racial threat caused by a poor rural white underclass that "challenge(s) cherished notions of American individualism and meritocracy" (12). Whiteness also continually adapts by creating hierarchies in emergent contexts. For example, Nakayama analyzes racist responses to the creation of Barack Obama's presidential Twitter account, identifying them as signs of a disturbing shift in whiteness due to the rise of interactivity online, further evidence

that whiteness is dynamic and reconfigures itself to maintain a strategic position. ("What's Next" 68-72).

As already seen, whiteness perpetuates itself through media such as film. This is particularly true of films in what Kelly J. Madison calls the "anti-racist-white-savior" genre, hereafter simplified as "white savior" (405). Madison points to a "legitimation crisis" faced by white supremacy in the latter part of the twentieth century due to civil rights activism, and argues that films such as *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Amistad* (1997) released in the years that followed answered this crisis with narratives that limited the agency of African and African-American characters by constructing seemingly "anti-racist" narratives that actually perpetuate racism by highlighting white agency and heroism (Madison 405). These narratives follow a general pattern in which a white hero vicariously experiences racism through contact with a black individual, develops an anti-racist consciousness, suffers and sacrifices at the hands of white racists to further the interests of black people, and prevails despite this suffering. These narratives "construct a revisionist narrative of equality in which the 'black children' could not have made it without the aid of the 'white father'" (Madison 413). The white savior genre continues to warrant critical examination, particularly with the ongoing presence in American popular culture of films like *Green Book* (2018) that explore white experiences of racism against African-Americans. Another example can be found in Jeffrey L. Bineham's criticism of *The Blind Side* (2009) for indirectly perpetuating systematic racism in the United States. Bineham explains that racism, in the guise of postracism, allows society to believe that it offers equal opportunity to all individuals and therefore that all failures are due to inability or a lack of initiative. Building Madison's work, Bineham argues that *The Blind Side* "provides important symbolic resources for privileged audiences: the opportunity to identify with the hero and thereby to ignore responsibility for systemic injustices" (233).

Bineham's criticism exemplifies the connection Madison makes between collective memory and the white savior genre. Madison explains, based upon Zelizer's work, that shared constructions of the past form a "usable" collective memory that forces of domination with social, cultural, and economic power use to constrain remembrance and forgetting (400). White savior narratives create usable memories for white audiences in which white individuals have done enough to help black individuals, an example of how whiteness's "dynamic nature is part of how it maintains its strategic position" ("What's Next" 72). As Madison explains, these narratives "construct collective memories that contribute to the masking of white

supremacy in the history of global capitalist domination and in the material and cultural structure of the U.S." (415). The white savior narrative is one example of how films perpetuate whiteness, but whiteness also perpetuates itself through other narrative patterns.

The American Monomyth in Film

In *The American Monomyth*, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence propose that a distinctly American version of Joseph Campbell's monomyth characterizes innumerable American popular culture artifacts. Such narratives conform to the following pattern:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Jewett and Lawrence xx)

The authors explain that the American monomyth, emerging from "Judeo-Christian redemption dramas that have arisen on American soil," tells the story of "the supersaviors in pop culture" who "function as replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism" (xx). Neil Gerlach further explains, "In this mythic narrative, helpless communities are redeemed by a Christ figure who is never integrated into the community, but leaves at the end, remaining the perpetual outsider. He or she has an unchanging moral perfection and a strong capability for action while the community is changeable and must be saved through the violent heroic action" (1033). Another recurring theme is sexual renunciation. The hero "must renounce previous sexual ties for the sake of his trials" (Jewett and Lawrence 12).

The 2002 follow-up to their 1977 work, Lawrence and Jewett further elucidate their American monomyth in *The Myth of the American Superhero*, this time placing more emphasis on the social consequences of the myth's prevalence in American culture. American monomythic narratives cast heroes as the protectors of "Eden," communities frequently taking the form of "the rustic world of small farms and plantations" though the authors explain that such portrayals frequently overlook the realities of crop failure, depression, murder, pressures for social

conformity, and any number of other social problems that can and do occur in such communities (Lawrence and Jewett 22-3). Because the savior of the American monomythic narrative is the only one who can save this idealized community from the threat of an external evil, the normal institutions of society are rendered useless. This casts everyday citizens as members of a "spectator democracy" in which citizens are helpless to resolve social ills and must instead encourage and rely upon a violent vigilante figure to take action (Lawrence and Jewett, 29-30). Evil is the final key theme of the American monomyth, and one that typically has racial ramifications. Racial Others such as Native Americans are frequently identified as a "savage," alien threat to civilized communities (Jewett and Lawrence 85). Furthermore, the American monomyth perpetuates a problematic tendency to encourage warfare and violence towards the racial or religious Other whom the story simplistically categorizes as evil (Lawrence and Jewett 16-7).

Many other theoretical perspectives, especially intersectional perspectives on gender and race or on violence and racism, would have much to say regarding *Free State of Jones*. However, the American monomythic perspective is uniquely useful in that it sensitizes a reading of film to narrative elements that audiences routinely encounter in their experiences of American popular culture and cinema. One need look no further than the latest superhero, science-fiction, or fantasy epic to see echoes, if not whole-cloth representations, of the American monomyth. In fact, many of the very same figures that Lawrence and Jewett identify in their 1977 formulation of the American monomyth, including Superman, Captain America, Spider-Man, and Captain Kirk, remain champions of the box office even decades later. The enduring nature of this myth is enough to call for scholarly attention, but that call becomes more urgent considering the American monomyth's racial implications and connections to whiteness.

An overlap in American monomyth literature and whiteness literature comes into focus in David L. Sutton and J. Emmett Winn's work. They apply Nakayama's critique of whiteness to POW/MIA films that also conform to the pattern of American monomythic narratives. A racialized evil, the failure of institutions, and a self-sacrificing but violent white superhero are all American monomythic themes present in films such as *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), and *Missing in Action* (1984) that portray the rescue of American soldiers from Vietnam prison camps (Sutton and Winn 25-30). Sutton and Winn identify a pattern of violence against Asians, who are demonized as a racial Other to show the white American protagonist's heroism, which parallels the pattern identified in

Nakayama's criticism of *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. These films, then, provide mythic resolution to audiences' unresolved feelings about the Vietnam War, providing a heroic conclusion to a perceived problem (Sutton and Winn 30).

The overlapping racial elements of these two narrative patterns provide a precedent for dual identification of *Free State of Jones* as an American monomyth and as a white savior narrative. Both narrative patterns are present in the film, and both theoretical lenses serve here to focus on different aspects of the film's racial rhetoric and portrayal of whiteness. Furthermore, such an examination allows for consideration of the racial ramifications of the ongoing presence of these narrative patterns in American popular culture.

The American Monomyth in *Free State of Jones*

Several traits mark Newton Knight as the principled, Christlike hero of the American monomyth. Knight is economically humble and racially progressive, describing himself as someone who "don't own no slaves," and who is unwilling to die defending the ability of rich plantation owners to make money on cotton (Ross 00:40:41-00:40:45). Knight's attitudes are further seen when he helps Rachel learn to read and sleeps in the camp of runaway slaves even after white deserters also camp out in the swamp. Knight later upholds anti-hierarchical ideals, telling his followers "if you can walk on two legs, you're a man. It's as simple as that" (Ross 01:35:25-01:35:30).

Elements of Knight's character more specifically reinforce an identification as a Christlike hero figure. Knight has a massive toolkit of heroic skills as healer, guerilla warrior, blacksmith, and wilderness survivalist that he demonstrates while hiding in the swamps and during his campaign against the Confederacy, but he also demonstrates the gentler capacities to read and quote from scripture and to deliver eloquent orations. His faith motivates his racial attitude, as he reasserts his friend Moses's statement that "you cannot own a child of God" to his followers (Ross 01:19:25-01:19:28). Knight's eloquence and faith are further evident in his eulogy for Moses, describing him as a "man who had so many reasons to be full of hate, yet he never was, and that, Lord, is one of your greatest miracles" (Ross 02:01:56-02:02:10).

Contrary to the typical image of a gentle and serene Christ, but in exact alignment with the violent redeemers of the American monomyth, Knight is both master and advocate of violence for redemptive purposes. Knight teaches young

girls how to hold and fire shotguns to protect their farm from taxation. When the Confederate taxation officer balks at the children, Knight backs up the threat of violence with deadly seriousness, explaining "all they gotta do is go like that," while wiggling his finger. He continues, "last time I checked, the gun don't care who's pulling the trigger" (Ross 00:27:42-00:27:52). When Knight learns of the plantation owner's sexual assault upon Rachel, he single-handedly raids the plantation and destroys a shipment of cotton in revenge.

Knight's violence continues throughout the film. After several of Knight's company, including young boys, surrender to the Confederates and are subsequently executed, Knight stages a violent surprise attack in the guise of a funeral where the grieving mothers and widows conceal firearms under their black coats and the caskets contain armed men rather than corpses. Knight demonstrates a mastery of firearms by wounding the Confederate Colonel Hood (Thomas Francis Murphy) with precision shots. He demonstrates physical strength by chasing Hood into the church and strangling him with a belt. Knight and his army then run the Confederates out of Ellisville, the Jones County seat, with tactics like firing improvised shrapnel from a cannon. Knight stands with other American monomythic heroes by affirming violence as the appropriate means for the protection and redemption of the community.

At first glance the film would seem to contradict the theme of sexual renunciation, but the theme is nevertheless present to the extent possible for a figure who is historically documented to be a biological father. Following the pattern American monomythic heroes who give up love or sexual relationships to pursue a heroic quest, Knight's heroism separates him from his wife Serena. When defending another family's farm outs him as a deserter and forces him to flee to the swamp, Serena turns away from him saying "I can't do this anymore, Newt, I can't" (Ross 00:29:02-00:29:07). Eventually she and their young son abandon the family farm, only to later return to live in a separate house on Knight and Rachel's property. Contrary to Bynum's evidence, the film's portrayal of this arrangement implies Knight's ongoing faithfulness to Rachel rather than a polygamous relationship (Bynum 154-9). The film also omits Georgeanne entirely. The sexual nature of Knight's relationship with Rachel is implied in the film only by the birth of their son rather than portrayed overtly through romantic scenes. In this manner, *Free State of Jones* selectively presents and omits historical facts in a way that makes Knight's story conform more closely to the narrative pattern of the American

monomyth. These decisions also avoid portraying Knight as polygamous, which may serve to make Knight's character more palatable for a popular audience.

While *Free State of Jones* initially portrays Jones County as an Edenic southern farmland under threat of Confederate abuse of the Tax-in-Kind policy, the film ultimately leaves this Eden unrestored. It is not the war but rather the Confederacy's taxation practices that shatter the community's peace. This failure of the typical protective institutions of society calls the hero to action. Indeed, the institutions themselves threaten Jones County residents. As expected of American monomythic tales, Knight's actions do bring a form of restoration to the community he defends. The raid on the corn farm provides a glimpse of the lost Eden as men, women, and children enjoy the communal work of picking, shucking, and hauling away corn.

The failure of institutions is evident in the Confederacy's abuse of its own citizens, but other elements of the film also portray this theme. Despite Knight's success resisting the Confederacy, the specter of racism and Andrew Johnson's lenient Reconstruction policies haunt Eden through the final act of the film, demonstrating an unresolved failure of institutions. Knight must purchase his friend Moses's son after he is kidnapped by the plantation owner James Eakins (Joe Chrest) under the pretense of an "apprenticeship." The issue is settled in a trial conducted by Lieutenant Barbour (Bill Tangradi), a Confederate officer who Knight previously opposed. Moses himself is eventually lynched for his involvement with registering freedmen to vote. Despite Knight's heroic election day efforts to ensure that more than a dozen of Moses's registrants could cast their Republican votes, on-screen text informs the audience that only two Republican votes were counted in the election. A typical American monomythic narrative would show that the hero successfully fulfilled a redemptive purpose for his community. The film portrays redemptive action, but the redemption itself is at best incomplete.

The evil presented in *Free State of Jones* is comprised of both racial and economic components. Many former slaves join Knight's rebellion, and Knight's actions against Eakins are motivated by his abuse of Rachel: both obvious racial components of the conflict. But Knight's friend Jasper (Christopher Berry) objects to the "Twenty Negro Law" not because of its racism, but because it makes their military service a "poor man's fight in a rich man's war" (Ross 00:05:15-00:05:17). This policy allows soldiers from plantation-owning families to go home while poor Confederate citizens such as Knight are compelled to fight and, like Knight's young relative Daniel, to die. Though this essay addresses subversions of particular

monomythic themes in a following section, the narrative elements identified here demonstrate that *Free State of Jones* conforms to the overall pattern of the American monomyth by presenting Knight's narrative as a heroic quest for the redemption of an Edenic community threatened by evil. Additionally, the film also generally conforms to the white savior narrative while subverting particular themes of this narrative pattern as well.

White Savior Narrative in *Free State of Jones*

The four steps of the white savior film identified by Madison are present in *Free State of Jones*. The first step is a vicarious experience of racism through contact with a black individual. The Twenty Negro Law unevenly distributes the responsibility of fighting the war on poor citizens like Knight, but a more personal experience of vicarious racism begins through his contact with Rachel. Rachel receives a pass from her owner to heal Knight and Serena's sick son. Rachel shows deference to Knight and offers to perform the task of drawing water for the sick child, but Knight does the work instead so that she can focus on her patient. After she saves his son, Knight gives her a golden chain as a reward and earnestly thanks her. His expression then changes as he remembers that the person who saved his son's life must be given a pass to return to her owner. Slavery's effect on his life and interactions form Knight's first step in the white savior narrative.

The second step is the development of a radical anti-racist consciousness. Knight begins to develop a bond with the escaped slaves hiding with him in the swamps, but his anti-racist attitude is enflamed when he learns of Eakins' sexual assault on Rachel. This motivates vengeful burning of Eakins' cotton. While the destruction of property is itself an act of revenge, this more specifically constitutes an anti-racist act given Knight's earlier identification of cotton as the economic motivator for the injustices of the Twenty Negro Law.

For the third step, Knight suffers and sacrifices at the hands of racists to further the interests of black individuals. Following the war, Knight and Rachel choose to settle on inhospitable land in Soso, Mississippi to escape racist attitudes in other parts of Jones County. Chester (Lawrence Turner), an Ellisville resident who later lynches Moses, sarcastically asks "cap'n Newt" if it is just a "bunch o'n****rs" living in Soso (Ross 01:42:09–01:42:14). Knight's relationship with Rachel and his accepting attitude have caused him to be ostracized as a "n****r" by the white residents of the county he once led. Furthermore, Knight is harmed financially by

racist institutions. When Moses decides to rescue his son from "apprenticeship" at Eakins' plantation, Knight intervenes to prevent Moses from being killed in the attempt. Knight is only successful in freeing Moses's son by sacrificing financially to purchase the "apprenticeship" from Eakins.

In the fourth step, the white hero suffers greatly but prevails over racism in the end. Poignant suffering occurs for Knight when Moses is lynched for registering freedmen to vote. Knight discovers and weeps beneath Moses's hanged and mutilated body. Knight becomes motivated to help the freedmen vote. He and two white friends march with the freedmen to the courthouse to demand ballots. The film ends thereafter with text and photographs explaining that Knight and Rachel lived out their lives on the farm that he deeded to her because they could not legally marry. This concludes the white savior narrative: Knight experiences vicarious racism, develops a radical anti-racist consciousness, suffers at the hands of racists, and ultimately prevails despite great suffering.

Subverting the Narratives

While this analysis shows how *Free State of Jones* conforms to the narrative patterns of the American monomyth and the white savior film, there are several elements of the film that subvert or complicate the problematic aspects of these patterns. Madison identifies a masking of white supremacy and Lawrence and Jewett point to the spectator democracy and the encouragement of violence against a racial other as consequences of these patterns. *Free State of Jones*'s narrative avoids these problems in several ways.

First, the film avoids problematic American monomythic themes that valorize violence, especially violence toward racial others, as a conclusive means of redemption. The failure of institutions, typically a mere prompt for the hero's vigilantism, is instead the evil that Newton Knight ultimately fails to overcome. Though Knight is successful in addressing taxation, he cannot resolve the failure of the post-war government to protect its citizens. Neither does Knight's heroism shield Rachel and himself from discriminatory attitudes after the war, and he is not there to save Moses from lynching. Despite his best efforts, Knight also has no solution for disenfranchisement. The audience is left with a Lost Cause-countering message about the persistently oppressive and violently racist Reconstruction-era South.

Atypical to American monomythic narratives, *Free State of Jones* portrays evil not in the form of a savage racial Other, but rather as a system of oppressive economic and racial policies and structures in the Confederate South. This system is enforced and embodied in the collaborative interactions among the Confederate-loyal characters of Hood, Barbour, and Eakins. Barbour is responsible for the overzealous taxation impoverishing Jones County residents during the war, and Hood is the officer to whom Barbour reports. Eakins is responsible for sexually assaulting Rachel. He collaborates with Hood regarding Knight's raids during the war and is later seen benefitting from "apprenticeship" practices that amount to slavery due to Barbour's appointment as a local judge in line with Johnson's lenient post-war policies towards Confederates. These relationships illustrate the interconnected structures of military, economic, and judicial power that perpetuated postbellum injustice.

The portrayal of evil as systematic racial and economic oppression rather than a simplistically-defined racial Other facilitates for audiences a nuanced understanding of racial injustice in the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. *Free State of Jones* seeks to provide no mythic resolution to an unresolved social issue the way Vietnam P.O.W. films of the 1980's did. Instead, it drives home to audiences with intercut flash-forward scenes of the 1948 Davis Knight miscegenation trial that the issues Knight faced in his time would continue well beyond his era and even plague his descendants.

Additionally, the film's treatment of American monomythic themes avoids the problem of the spectator democracy. Most American monomyths portray a hero who can redeem the community through action, suggesting to audiences that they should stand by and wait for such a hero rather than participating in a democratic solution. *Free State of Jones* certainly portrays a hero of this type, but it subverts the problem of the spectator democracy in important ways. First, the diverse community of Knight's company consists of free people, slaves, and freedmen, including men, women, and children all working together for the redemption of the community. Second, Knight's leadership and capacity for violence undoubtedly suggest the role of mythic redeemer, but even the ultimately incomplete redemption of Jones County would be impossible without the aid of his companions. Third, the film subverts the spectator democracy by making the disenfranchisement of black citizens the final major conflict of the film, a barrier caused by an evil system of injustice that the hero cannot overcome despite best efforts. In fact, the audience is

left to understand that the only apparent solution for such an issue would be a democratic one: a large-scale change of racial attitudes.

Free State of Jones subverts problematic elements of the white savior narrative that mask white supremacy with Knight's confrontation and disavowal of whiteness. Adopting and elaborating upon Moses's racial ideology, Knight reframes what it means to be a "n****r." After a white deserter uses the slur against Moses, Moses replies "how you ain't?" (Ross 01:04:16–01:04:18). Knight enters the conversation, explaining to the deserter that willingness to fight and die for the Confederacy and its economic oppression is what really makes someone a "n****r," while as a slave Moses was forced to work for them against his will. Thus, Knight reframes "n****r" as a hierarchical term rather than a racial one, identifying the core difference functioning at the heart of whiteness. Knight's rhetoric suggests that it is what one does willingly that makes them subservient. Knight adheres to this ideology when he responds to Chester's remarks by saying "ain't no n****rs up there [in Soso] at all" (Ross 01:42:22–01:42:29). While it might be possible to construe his response as either problematic colorblindness or an attempt at deception, Knight's previous rhetoric and his identification of the hierarchical nature of the racist term suggests that his answer to Chester is an assertion that the residents of Soso are living their lives freely rather than in submission to a hierarchical system of oppression.

Free State of Jones also subverts the paternalistic white savior narrative with realistic and empowering, albeit fictional, portrayals of contemporaneous black experiences. Knight provides aid in the form of reading and shooting lessons for Rachel and removing Moses's iron collar, but this is far from sufficient to demonstrate that either would not have "made it without the aid" (Madison 413) of Knight. Rachel was a competent physician and navigator of the swamps and took the initiative in learning to read by secretly observing her owner's children all before Knight entered her life. Similarly, Moses persisted in escape attempts and ultimately succeeded despite the hindrance of the iron collar, all before meeting Knight. In fact, Moses' insights plant the seeds of Knight's racial rhetoric. While Knight betters Rachel's and Moses's lives, it can hardly be said that he is their 'white father.' Their relationships are built on mutual respect and assistance, values which the film seems to desire to instill in its audience.

Though elements of the film described above avert racially problematic aspects of the American monomyth and the white savior narrative, *Free State of Jones* does exhibits subtle forms of hierarchy that demonstrate whiteness's pervasive nature.

In addition to the clear gender hierarchy evident in Knight's policy of "if you can walk on two legs, you're a man," hierarchy also remains in Knight's leadership of Knight's Company. Knight dictates the actions of the group throughout the film. When his company takes Ellisville, Knight has first choice of the lavish rooms in the city's hotel. The hierarchical nature of Knight's relationship with the company is at times paralleled by hierarchy in his relationship with Moses despite their friendship. Knight intervenes in the tense exchange between Moses and the deserter, apparently feeling the need to explain Moses's statements on Moses's behalf.

Another hierarchy emerges in an examination of the characters' forms suffering. While Knight sacrifices marriage and home for his rebellion and suffers the loss of his friend Moses, it is worth noting that the film's black characters suffer bodily to an extent that Knight does not. Rachel suffers through sexual assault, Moses's son suffers forced labor and enslavement, and Moses himself suffers a gruesome death. These hierarchical elements of the film bear critical consideration against the film's messages of cooperation and equality. They demonstrate the ways in which whiteness subtly, persistently re-centers the heterosexual white male even in narratives which critique whiteness.

Conclusion

In summary, this essay argues that *Free State of Jones* uses the American monomyth and the white savior narrative to construct a heroic version of Newton Knight's story that averts some of the problematic outcomes of these narrative patterns in favor of a message about cooperating against systematic oppression. Audiences do not expect films to provide historically accurate portrayals of the past, but they do use such films to have an affective experience with it. This affective experience can in turn influence audience perceptions of democracy and their identification with others in civil society. Thus, while *Free State of Jones* omits elements of Knight's life and invents others, these factual liberties might be overlooked in the film's process of popularizing Knight's story for mass audiences. In this process the film counters Lost Cause memories, upholds the heroism of the black resistors of oppression, and identifies and condemns structures of economics, racial ideology, and Confederate and Reconstruction policies that constituted oppression in the 1860's and beyond.

Free State of Jones also provides an example of how typically problematic narrative patterns, the American monomyth and the white savior narrative, might be modified or subverted to tell stories that reach popular audiences with racially progressive and historically realistic, if not entirely historically accurate, narratives of oppression and resistance that influence audiences' affective relationship with the past. However, scholars must continue to turn a critical eye to the continued presence of the American monomyth and the white savior narrative in American popular culture. This is particularly true given the enduring presence of the American monomyth in popular film culture and the racial implications of both narrative patterns. Elements of *Free State of Jones* illustrate the pervasiveness of whiteness's hierarchical nature, demonstrating the need to continually critique ever-evolving forms of whiteness in film. Despite this need, *Free State of Jones* does offer hope. Rather than upholding the American monomyth's violence against the racial other or the white savior narrative's white paternalism, *Free State of Jones* alters these narrative patterns to valorize cooperation against systems of oppression and uphold the dignity of every "child of God."

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