

# Women and Migration

## Responses in Art and History



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# 40. Seizing Control of the Narrative

*Misan Sagay*

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*Guerrilla* is a mainstream TV series. It is unusual in having a first generation migrant woman as one of the leads. It is set in London in 1974 in the aftermath of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which resulted in the UK parliament passing sweeping anti-immigration legislation.

Humanity learns its history through the narrative art form of the times; through the stories that get passed down through the generations. The oral histories of Greek heroes, originally told around campfires in 400 BC, are what shape our understanding of Ancient Greece today. Similarly, Shakespearean history plays don't reflect the truth about those times as much as shape how we see them.

The moving image is the narrative art form of our times. As a result, films and television have a unique responsibility to tell the human story fairly, to give an accurate representation of our time for this generation and those to come. It is therefore catastrophic that, from the outset, film has had a diversity problem, none more so than in films about resistance and people of color.

The film that established modern cinema as we recognise it today is one of the most explicitly racist films ever made. By calling it *Birth of a Nation* (1915), D. W. Griffiths created a new foundation myth for America. This movie is not simply a random exercise in hate speech but a deliberate attempt to seize control of the historical narrative. The

nation was born not from a people's rebellion against a distant King (No taxation without representation!) or indeed from the Civil War that abolished slavery and moved the nation towards a closer union. Instead, America was born when Black people were re-subjugated by force exercised by the Ku Klux Klan to restore the natural order. In this alternative foundation myth, the United States of America is synonymous with and indissolubly linked to white supremacy.

Let us not forget too, the context in which it was received.

This film was shown in the White House and its contents were endorsed by the President. 'It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true,' said President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>1</sup> It was shown around the world. There was a screening in Nairobi, Kenya, where white Kenyans were seeking to keep control of the colony from African hands.

Along with establishing cinematic language with its innovative story structure, camera work, and editing, *Birth of a Nation* established how the issues of race, Black people and Black rights were henceforth seen in film. Its visual imagery indelibly links Black people having and exercising equal rights with chaos and danger to white people. The film shows white rights as innate and inalienable and argues that any encroachment of those rights should be legitimately dealt with by overwhelming force. Black rights are shown to be in the gift of the white population and wholly dependent on Black behaviour. Black civil rights are, therefore, an aspiration, a reward to be achieved for good behaviour, like getting a new pony.

And the message was successful. Its power cannot be underestimated. The film is credited with the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, numerous lynchings and ever more vigorous enforcement of the Jim Crow laws. There is a direct line from this film to the actions of white people today calling the police in reaction to Black people doing ordinary things. Because of *Birth of a Nation*, the world of film became one of the last safe spaces for the narrative of white supremacy.

For much of the twentieth century, the hero in cinema is a white man fighting for his rights or his survival. We have watched such white heroes battle against misfortune, Nazis, Native Americans, you

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1 Mark E. Benbow, 'Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and "Like Writing History with Lightning"', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Special issue: 'Native Americans and Indian Policy in the Progressive Era' 9:4 (2010), 509–33.

name it. However, over the last seventy years, it has become harder and harder to frame a resistance narrative around the violation of the rights of white men. The great freedom movements of the late twentieth century — anti-colonization, civil rights, women’s liberation or LGBTQ rights have cried out for another kind of narrative.

Film has struggled to reflect this history and has coped in destructive ways.

It has chosen to all but ignore the resistance stories that drove these events. Vast swathes of the most important historical events of our century are simply absent from the film canon and, therefore, from the popular historical record. Where are the films about the successful Maroon rebellions in Jamaica? Toussaint L’Ouverture liberating the nation of Haiti? The Kingdoms of Africa?

An egregious example is Slavery. Cinema continued to be dominated by the utterly false narrative of the happy slave in films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Slavery was, in reality, a story of unrelenting, unremitting resistance at every level and Black people were at the forefront of that rebellion. The 1712 South Carolina slave code, taken up by all the slave states, included provisions such as ‘Slave homes are to be searched every two weeks for weapons.’ Punishment for violations escalates to include the loss of an ear, branding, and nose-slitting, and, for the fourth offense, death. Slavery meant living in a state of permanent war and the cruel laws needed to enforce it did not exist because white slave owners were gratuitously sadistic. They were required because rebellion was a daily threat that could only be managed by ever more draconian laws and measures. Yet stories of Black slave rebellions, those epic tales of heroism, resistance and triumph, over 300 years, are wholly absent from the film canon and, therefore, from popular history. For years, as I struggled to make a film about slavery from a Black point of view, I was told that no-one would want to see it. It was Box Office Poison.

The stories of nationalist resistance that brought about the fall of the British Empire; the seismic changes as whole continents rejected white rule are barely present in the cinematic canon. Films dealt with the subject through the lens of nostalgia — ‘the Raj’ — or white benevolence: the colonies were ‘given’ freedom as a gift, it was not taken as a right. We were irrelevant to our own history.

When the subject of injustice to Black people is tackled in such films it is always through the story of a benign white man: the white savior

narrative. In these narratives neither justice nor rights come about as a result of Black agency. Blacks are passive and their suffering serves merely to inform and influence the white savior's journey. In films like *White Mischief* (1987) and *Mississippi Burning* (1988), white discomfort serves as a proxy for Black pain. This provoked a fierce backlash. In the face of gathering anger, a new and even more disturbing trend has emerged.

Movie scripts are very structured. The first act sets up the conflict when the hero's rights are trampled on. That is the call to action. The remainder of the film is about our hero's resistance, his fighting back. Deprived of the white savior and yet unable or unwilling to show Black rebellion, a slew of films emerged that abandoned the normal narrative arc of film altogether. These films linger long and with almost pornographic relish on the suffering of the Black characters, on the laceration of Black flesh. Well into the third act there is still more and more suffering of Black characters who do not react against it. They are even constrained from seeming angry. In the age of videos of beatings (social media and events as they happen) there is great tolerance for that laceration and it goes on and on. Worst of all, the expected resolution at the end of the narrative never comes. This suffering does not effect change within the narrative of the film. Resolution must come from persuading the filmgoer to leave the cinema angry and, presumably, to change things in real life.

This is not how movies should work. We go to watch someone ride off into the sunset. In the absence of that, all that is left is a narrative of Black helplessness, Black hopelessness.

And, even when present, what is that Black sunset?

The white hero fights and utterly destroys the system that persecuted him. The Black hero's 'happy ending' is to be allowed to join the system that persecuted him or to be accepted by those who previously rejected him.

In a further perversion of the rules of drama, in film Black people are constrained from showing anger and from taking up arms. They must bear each indignity with saint-like forbearance until a white character notices and alleviates the situation. We are back to the White Savior.

This demand for forbearance is especially unyielding when it comes to women and especially to women of color. Too often they are reduced to stereotypes — the sassy best friend or the angry Black woman. It is

hard to depict trespass of the rights of those who are seen as having no rights, not even to their bodies.

So while white resistance films tell of white men taking up arms in violent struggles for freedom, rights or revenge, Black resistance films focus on non-violent saintly heroes: Gandhi, Mandela, King.

From the outset, *Guerrilla* set out, both visually and narratively, to turn every single one of these tropes on its head. It is a love story set against the backdrop of one of the most politically explosive times in UK history. A politically active couple (played by Freida Pinto and Babou Ceesay) have their relationship and values tested when they liberate a political prisoner and form a radical underground cell in 1970s London.

When John Ridley approached me about the new series he was writing I was thrilled that one of the lead characters would be a woman of color. On agreeing to write one episode, I inherited an embarrassment of riches from John, including complex characters drawn by a master storyteller at the top of his craft.

Episode 5 was pivotal as it would set up the finale in episode 6. In keeping with the spirit of the series, I intended that the inciting incident would overturn the norms established so long ago about how to treat stories of Black resistance.

The main character was an Asian woman of color and this accurately reflects the history of the time. In America, the Black Panthers were an exclusively Black movement. The British Black Panthers grew out of the anti-colonial movements of the 60s and so was multicultural, with people from all over the disintegrating British Empire as members. Jas Mitra was based on the real-life British civil rights activist and Black Panther Mala Sen. She was played by Frieda Pinto.

While the more vocal members of the Panthers were men, many of their lasting achievements were due to the on-the-ground activism of the women of the movement. I wanted to pay homage to these women. While *Guerrilla* is a work of fiction it was important to pay tribute to real-life heroines, and I wanted to use the inciting incident to do so.

So I came to the creative decision that this inciting incident must be an outrage on a Black woman. Not her body. I wanted to avoid adding to the desensitization to Black trauma. It would be an outrage to her dignity.

At first I felt constrained by not wanting to show angry Black women until it dawned on me that one of the tools of oppression is to delegitimize

the righteous anger and outrage of the oppressed. Make them ashamed or make them question their emotions. In cinematic language the value of something is dependent on the ferocity with which you will defend it. As I wrote I asked myself, 'Why shouldn't Black women be angry in the face of injustice?'

A true heroine of the resistance in Brixton at the time was the activist Olive Morris. She was a founder member of the British Black Panthers. She fought tirelessly for women's rights, children rights and tenants' rights and she was never afraid to be angry on their behalf. Research led me to an incident outside a housing office in the seventies. Olive was demonstrating against unfair housing practices when she was insulted by a council employee. Today that housing office in Brixton is named after her.

This episode was the springboard for the inciting incident. Jas Mitra would witness this incident with the character based on Olive, leading to righteous anger and violent rebellion and retribution.

In other words, the cinematic language reserved for white male heroes was co-opted to tell the story of a Black woman. I felt it was about time.