

# Introduction

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The 2014 release of Ava DuVernay's *Selma* movie is widely regarded as a key moment in African American history and culture. The first major motion picture about the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Selma* treats a central moment in the civil rights movement with all the sensitivity and rigor that it deserves and earned over \$66 million at the box office, over three times its budget.<sup>1</sup> The film was received with almost unanimous critical acclaim. A. O. Scott, of the *New York Times*, was overwhelmed by the movie's "astonishingly rich and nuanced" depiction of the history, predicting that it "will call forth tears of grief, anger, gratitude and hope. . . . I have rarely seen a historical film that felt so populous and full of life, so alert to the tendrils of narrative that spread beyond the frame," he said.<sup>2</sup> David Denby, writing in the *New Yorker*, considered the film extraordinary and concluded simply, "This is cinema."<sup>3</sup> British reviewers focused on the performance of the British actor David Oyelowo, who portrayed Dr. King. Mark Kermode felt that Oyelowo's performance elevated what might have been a humdrum historical drama "into something genuinely inspiring."<sup>4</sup> David Sexton also praised Oyelowo's moving performance.<sup>5</sup> Ashley Clark, of the British Film Institute's house journal, *Sight and Sound*, felt that King was "complex and alive" in the film, "incarnated wonderfully" by the actor.<sup>6</sup>

Surprisingly, however, *Selma* found Golden Globes and Oscars hard to come by, winning only for the song "Glory," performed by the soul singer John Legend and the rapper Common. This was a sad reflection of white attitudes toward the African American contribution to American history and culture. Once again, African Americans were relegated to "song and

dance” men and excluded from the prestigious roles of director, producer, or star. In this sense, one might observe that white America prefers only to remember black America’s legacy in terms of song rather than the major contributions African Americans made to the destruction of slavery and then segregation in American political, legal, and, to a certain extent, social life. That Oyelowo was not even nominated for a Best Actor Oscar caused considerable upset, with the actor himself pointing out that this was sadly typical of white attitudes: “We as black people have been celebrated more for when we are subservient, when we are not being leaders, or kings, or at the center of our own narrative driving it forward,” he told delegates at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.<sup>7</sup> The film’s director, Ava DuVernay expressed her hurt at Oyelowo’s exclusion from the Oscars. When asked about her own absence from the Best Director nominations, she, too, turned to wider issues: “There has been no precedent for a black woman to be nominated for best director, so why was it going to change with me?”<sup>8</sup>

*Selma* itself is a powerful assertion of the centrality of African Americans to American history. Some white critics might have carped at the sidelining of Lyndon B. Johnson, but in doing so they fell into an artfully created trap. Given the historical marginalizing of black people in America, *Selma*’s mild distortion of the record in suggesting that Johnson had to be convinced by Dr. King of the need for more civil rights legislation was an infinitesimal step in the right direction. In reminding viewers that the Selma campaign was black-organized, black-controlled, and black-staffed, the film was also a profound articulation of African American agency.

Unlike Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*, which famously opened with the 1991 videotape footage of Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles police, *Selma* made no overt attempt to draw parallels between the past and the present. Common’s rap in the theme song featured two references to the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, one explicit and one oblique, but the film itself did not need to.<sup>9</sup> The murder of Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old African American man, in Ferguson by a white police officer on August 9, 2014, sparked an international outcry. Ferguson soon became a byword for racial tension that emanated from police brutality. It propelled the Black Lives Matter movement, which coalesced in 2013 following the murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood watch

volunteer, back into the international spotlight. Formed by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, #BlackLivesMatter started as an online campaign but rapidly outgrew its initial home on the web after helping to organize protests in Ferguson.<sup>10</sup>

The Black Lives Matter movement's engagement with direct action, which included marches, demonstrations, and civil disobedience inevitably drew comparisons with the celebrated civil rights actions of the 1960s, irrespective of its attempt to subvert the parallels through its decentralized structure, avoidance of a leadership-based hierarchy, explicit focus on marginalized voices, and its often vocal rejection of an older generation of protesters. Nightly vigils in Ferguson took place until the announcement in November that Brown's killer would not be indicted, whereupon tensions erupted amid police gunfire, tear gas, and random violence.<sup>11</sup> By the time of *Selma's* release on Christmas Day, at least 600 people had been killed by violent police actions in 2014, and two more were to die on that day.<sup>12</sup>

Events following the film's release helped to reinforce the sense that *Selma* spoke across the generations. On January 18, 2015, the film's stars, director, and producers marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge alongside members of Selma's community in homage to the original march. Selma's mayor welcomed the city's visitors at a vigil in front of the city hall before the marchers set off.<sup>13</sup> The *Selma Times-Journal* was moved enough by the event to offer its thanks to the filmmakers for allowing them to remember the city as a beacon of hope and a place where "great things have happened."<sup>14</sup> This message of conciliation was repeated by Oprah Winfrey, who played Annie Lee Cooper in the film: "Our hearts are saying thank you to Selma," she said. "We thank you for being a symbol of what hope and progress, what grace and goodness can be and do."<sup>15</sup>

The film faded into the background at precisely the moment when the fiftieth anniversary of the original march came into focus. Previous ten year anniversaries of Selma were opportunities for former marchers and civil rights activists to rededicate themselves to the struggle. In 1975, Coretta Scott King led a procession numbering 5,000 across the bridge.<sup>16</sup> Jesse Jackson and 2,500 others joined her in 1985, and Governor George Wallace begged forgiveness for his previous defense of segregation ten years later.<sup>17</sup> Present at all of the marches was John Lewis, civil rights organizer, Selma veteran, and later congressman. By 2005, he was

accompanied by five other house representatives.<sup>18</sup> The transformation of Selma commemorations into a moment of triumphal national unity was completed in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations. The march was led this time by the U.S. President, the First Lady, their daughters, and a number of veterans including Lewis, followed by 40,000 Americans. Amid the expected encomiums to American exceptionalism, vitality, and genius, in his address President Barack Obama pointed out that, “The Americans who crossed this bridge, they were not physically imposing. But they gave courage to millions. They held no elected office. But they led a nation. . . . What they did here will reverberate through the ages. Not because the change they won was preordained; not because their victory was complete; but because they proved that nonviolent change is possible, that love and hope can conquer hate.” He cited Ferguson, noting that the horrors experienced there were no longer lawful or customary as they were half a century before.<sup>19</sup>

The 1965 Selma campaign was thus cast as a moment of American transcendence. Yet the 2015 celebrations also remind us of the gulf between memory and history. Obama’s speech attempted to memorialize Selma as another moment that is emblematic of the nation’s supposed ability to heal its own wounds and look to the future optimistically while glossing over the schisms of the past. A small section of the audience were alive to the problematic nature of such a process, interrupting the speech with chants of “we want change” and “stop the violence” before—somewhat ironically—being removed by the police.<sup>20</sup> These citations of Ferguson, coupled with *Selma*’s unflinching examination of the violence that accompanied the 1965 campaign, remind us that history is far more knotty, troubling, and complicated than (in Abraham Lincoln’s peerless phrasing) the mystic chords of memory would like us to believe.

While Obama’s presence suggests that history is made by great men (even if his skin color challenges the previous assumption that only white men could be great), *Selma* and the Selma campaign itself remind us that history is very much owned by ordinary people. The pictures of Obama walking over the Edmund Pettus Bridge might have been choreographed to encourage comparisons between him and Dr. King, but the blurred faces of thousands behind him are a reminder that leaders are dependent on their so-called followers whose individualism is often written out of history. Mahatma Gandhi might have told a journalist that he had to

leave because his people were moving and he needed to follow them, but few other “great men” make such concessions so readily. The unknown thousands of 2015 were, in this respect, much like the thousands who accompanied Dr. King on his final, triumphant march to Montgomery, Alabama, but they were also reminders of the hundreds who accompanied John Lewis over the bridge on “Bloody Sunday” exactly two weeks before—and on the precise date, March 7, that Obama’s speech later took place—and were tear-gassed, beaten, and charged by horses for their trouble. The memory of Obama’s speech may well linger, but the history of the thousands must endure.

It was in this spirit that this collection was conceived and produced. The film and the commemorations raised many questions that need answering through historical analysis and debate, including Selma’s place both in history and geography. *Selma* reminds its viewers of how small the actual city is, and that such places in relative geographical backwaters can be elevated to sites of historical importance by social movements that descend upon or emerge from them. This volume encourages a rethink of Selma the place as well as “Selma” the event, not to mention *Selma*, the movie.

*The Shadow of Selma* seeks to reconsider the relationship between the “great” individual figures of the Selma campaign and the thousands of other—often equally admirable but unheralded—people who populated the campaign, making it such a historical event. It wants to discuss the networks that undergirded the movement but also the networks that opposed it, in order to undercut the leadership focus that so dominates public discourse about history and historical movements. While the focus on King in *Selma* and Obama in 2015 are part and parcel of popular discourse, this volume calls upon the findings of generations of historians who argue otherwise. As suggested by the collection’s title, it shifts focus to consider Selma’s long-term impact. Ava DuVernay’s film offers a perfect opportunity to reconsider the ways in which contemporary and subsequent media, both fictional and factual, represented, re-represented, and reconfigured Selma.

Finally, the volume contemplates the impact of Selma, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that followed it, over the subsequent fifty years of American history. It questions whether the events in Selma during 1965 should be considered a major turning point in American history.