

Antebellum Fauxstalgia

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Somewhere downriver in the nation's conscience, magnolias are in bloom. Slavery is having a moment in American culture. It has made its presence felt across the arts, from plays such as Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon* or Suzan-Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home From the Wars*, to art installations like Kara Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby*, an homage to the "unpaid and overworked Artisans" of plantations past. James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*, a picaresque retelling of the abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, won last year's National Book Award for Fiction—the same year that *12 Years a Slave* won the Academy Award for Best Picture, and just two years after the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. Louis C.K. has done slavery stand up, while in one recent sketch, Key and Peele went so far as to put themselves on the auction block. Slavery has even insinuated itself into video games, with the recent release of two new versions of *Assassin's Creed* that make it a central subject. A century and a half after abolition, slavery has become—of all things—popular.

Or, more accurately, the unpopularity of slavery has become popular, its uncomfortable infamy universally interesting. America is passing through a period of antebellum fauxstalgia, a perennial revival of interest in slavery which is equal parts a memorial and an exorcism. We have passed through this moment before. Fifty years ago, the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath carried slavery forcefully into the national consciousness, interrupting decades of anxious silence, compulsory ignorance, and revisionist nostalgia. Scholars like Eugene Genovese educated the country on *The World Slaves Made*, while artists like Malcolm Bailey used the Middle Passage to highlight continuity between the past of slavery and the present of legal segregation. (Bailey's "Separate but Equal" is a modern blueprint of a slave ship, with white and black figures chained on opposite ends of the hold.) The popular peak of this resurgence was the television mini-series *Roots*, starring LeVar Burton as the enslaved Gambian Kunta Kinte. *Roots*'s searing melodrama, now forty years old, remains the dominant image of American slavery. Its continued popularity, evident in Kendrick Lamar's recent track "King Kunta," suggests that our own era of recalcitrant racial injustice has an affinity

with this earlier time. As in the seventies, we seem to have run up against the hard limits of American racial progress. Moments of rude awakening like these seem to demand a ritual return to slavery as the origin point of American racial injustice.

And yet, our own obsession with the antebellum period is, by comparison, strangely depoliticized. Today, slavery is a subject that allows audiences to feel morally engaged with violent racial injustice while remaining safely distant from its contemporary ravages. It is a cultural placebo politics, enabling a liberal public that craves the chance to engage with questions of race to do so without the discomfort of proximity. Audiences have confused the antebellum world's problems with those of our own, so much so that *The New York Times* is able to call Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon*—the revival of a melodrama more than a century old—"the most eloquent theatrical statement on race in America today." This is itself an eloquent statement about race in America today. It speaks volumes about the liberal public's desire to think about contemporary racial injustice *through* slavery—and through slavery alone. Pick almost any black writer, and if they've written a book about slavery, it's become the most celebrated of their works. Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, James McBride, and Ishmael Reed have published many excellent books, but *Kindred*, *Beloved*, *The Good Lord Bird*, and *Flight to Canada* are the ones people read.

On the side of black artists themselves, the subject of slavery can, ironically, enable a certain freedom. It satisfies the liberal public's craving for black artists who "express themselves" on the issue of racial injustice, while avoiding the contemporary specificity that might make that same public feel implicated. Its historical remove also allows these artists to avoid having their work reduced to political statement or personal grievance. Creating art about racial injustice *today* risks making you look like a propagandist. Creating art about slavery, or that deals with contemporary racial injustice *through* slavery, allows you to remain a serious artist.

This is not to deny that the art of antebellum fauxstalgia has often been both beautiful and politically provocative. It is only to point out that the antebellum world has become in many ways a segregated district of the national imagination, a closed arena where the country can exorcise its racial demons without touching too closely on the here and now. It is the only context where representing racist violence—and violent black resistance to racism—is reliably acceptable. Audiences are ready to applaud

the vengeful Jamie Foxx of Tarantino's *Django*, to bleed with Lupita Nyong'o in *12 Years a Slave*, and even to backstab overseers as the escaped Adéwalé in the game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*. They are less hungry for stories of resistance set in more recognizable worlds. It's hard to imagine a blockbuster about Black Panthers facing police in the 1970s, or about the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921, when members of the local black community defended themselves against thousands of rioting neighbors armed with guns, bombs, and planes. These conflicts, which took place between free people in an America recognizably our own, are more dangerous than slavery—which, for most Americans, is less a historical period than a mythic locale. Staging our national anxieties around race within the safety of this myth is a popular alternative to telling and listening to the riskier stories of other periods, especially our own. It is because we wish to avoid ourselves that we build so many imagined plantations—effigies for our General Shermans of the screen, stage, and page to burn down.

“SHARE!”—*If You Dare*

OLIVIA MUNK

On March 5, 2012, if you logged into Facebook, a video entitled “KONY 2012” was sure to pop up as every third or fourth post.

Perhaps at first, you ignored it. However, after seeing it posted over and over again for hours, maybe you clicked on it, and watched at least some of the 29 minute, 59 second video. Even if you only watched the first few minutes, you learned that there is a warlord named Joseph Kony wreaking havoc in Uganda with a rebel militia group, that he is kidnapping children from their homes to make them unwilling soldiers, that the situation is getting worse, and that something must be done. It is a call to arms, for the people of America to do their part to combat a foreign terror. Like many of the other people on your Newsfeed, you probably felt horrified, outraged, catalyzed. And maybe, just like them, you shared it.

KONY 2012 is remembered today as one of the first Internet trends to spread like wildfire across feeds from Twitter to Facebook, Tumblr to YouTube. As most of its proponents and critics will remember, the fall of KONY 2012 and Invisible Children came as quickly as its rise to fame. The organization was simply unprepared for the rapid onslaught of support

(at the time of the video's release, Invisible Children had one intern to fill 500,000 orders of their \$30 “call to action” kit). Within two weeks, the organization's founder and the narrator of KONY 2012, Jason Russell, was famous himself, though unfortunately due to a nude mental breakdown on the streets of San Diego.

Like with Britney's change of hairstyle or Kanye's defense of Beyonce, KONY 2012 showed the world how quickly fame devolves into infamy. Invisible Children closed in December 2014, just under 2 years after the video was released, and Joseph Kony remains at large today. Ultimately, the disaster that was KONY 2012 remains more “famous” than the warlord it sought to blast into the spotlight.

When a campaign is as unprepared for mass sensation as was the KONY 2012 publicity stunt, could it be that virality actually hurts the cause it hopes to relieve? This question came under serious debate in late 2014 due to the retraction of a *Rolling Stone* article entitled “A Rape on Campus.” The piece, which focused on the rape of a student pseudonymously dubbed “Jackie” at the University of Virginia, went viral on social media when it was published in November. The article, written and researched by Sabrina Erdely, used Jackie's heart-wrenching story to comment on the injustices of unreported and unpunished rape on colleges across America.

Like the KONY 2012 video, the graphic details of the article made readers feel horrified, depressed, and then incensed: why was no one talking about this major problem as fervently as this article? Could journalistic publicity, more delicately handled and less flashy than KONY 2012's video, help Jackie and girls in similar situations? As with KONY 2012, social media users shared the piece in hoards, urging others to read it and work to help end rape culture on college campuses.

Unfortunately, also similarly to KONY 2012, the downfall of the article's viral success came quickly, and swiftly. Soon after its publication, outlets such as *The Washington Post* began to point to blatant discrepancies in Jackie's story, unraveling a chain of spurious journalistic practices that began with Erdely and wound their way up to Rolling Stone's top editors.

In April, the Columbia School of Journalism compiled a lengthy report on the problems with both the article and the practices surrounding its reporting. In an introduction to the report (which Rolling Stone willingly elicited and published), Managing Editor Will Dana writes, “Sexual assault is a serious problem on college campuses, and it is important that