

An Introduction to *ANTEBELLUM*

By

Michael Eric Dyson

In a world where George Floyd's death has sparked a social movement that addresses the nation's long and brutal racial history, the Lost Cause has gained renewed currency as activists wrestle with statues and flags that testify to the bitter struggle over national identity. The cultural clash over the Confederacy is taking place as we redefine the racial landscape and argue about what makes us uniquely American. Beyond that, the prominence of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project forces us to turn once again to America's original sin.

Slavery still ignites heated debates about how the past affects the present, and how bitter disagreement over enslaved Black people led kinfolk to take up arms against one another on bloody battlefields in the Civil War. That "Late Unpleasantness," as southern historians took to calling the Civil War, has so deeply stained the American consciousness that thousands of folks each year participate in reenactments of its most notable conflicts. White Southerners who lost the war but won the battle to interpret the war's meaning can't seem to let go of that war, or the Confederacy, or for that matter, the idea of slavery that backed it all.

But what if they didn't have to surrender slavery? What if they could find a way to get us back to the old days where Black folk were shackled and had to obey the ruthless will of white overseers and owners? That sounds like a horror film, and that's just what *Antebellum* is – a brilliant, disturbing piece of visual magic and historical imagination wrapped inside of a highly charged thriller that keeps us on the edge of our seats precisely because it yanks us from the present and transports us into a dark, foreboding, and hateful racial past.

Or does it? The nation is presently torn between a vision of national thriving that borrows from the demented and twisted mindset encouraged by neo-Nazis and assorted bigots, and one that owes a debt to confronting our worst instincts and communing with the better angels of our nature. *Antebellum* forces us to confront the fact that in the midst of such epic seizures of social discontent, the choice to revert back to a racist past without hopping in a time machine to get there is a truly horrifying thought – and according to this film, a realistic prospect.

The horrors of racism and slavery are most clearly seen when lives otherwise meant for excellence and greatness and freedom are subject to subservience, oppression and humiliation. The white supremacist imagination has featured Black bodies in its fantasies as stuck perpetually in slavery, and if there was any way that such an imagination could have its way, Black folk in 2020 would be somehow transported back in time when the rawhide whip of the malevolent overseer lashed bodies with a message of brutal domination.

If *Antebellum* is not quite a fever dream, it is a film born of nightmare – in the mind of its creators, and in the national imagination from which we scarcely seem able to awaken. It is to the filmmakers' credit that we feel the trauma and thrill, the horror and catastrophe, of the racial nightmare of slavery. With this remarkable film, they have managed to throw fresh light on an ancient malady in a way that is both scary and compelling.