Why we can't turn away from 'Gone with the Wind'

Opinion by Jacqueline Stewart

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Just before the Covid-19 quarantine, I joined my fellow hosts on Turner Classic Movies for an "Old Hollywood" fashion photo shoot for Emmy Magazine. But when the spread came out, I could not bring myself to post the photos to my social media. As an African American cinema and media studies professor, how could I promote the glamour of classic Hollywood when our current media landscape was exploding with scenes of racial crisis?

Day after day, I scrolled through posts decrying the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. For weeks, video after video showed the escalating protests against police brutality and the brutal treatment of protesters by police. It seemed inappropriate to share shots glorifying Hollywood's golden age in this moment of mourning and mobilization. Moreover, the classic films we showcase on Turner Classic Movies (TCM) have played a major role in perpetuating the racist beliefs that devalue Black lives and normalize the use of excessive force against Black people.

No wonder that many viewers were outraged when HBO Max rolled out with the Civil War romance "Gone with the Wind" on its roster. HBO Max has temporarily pulled the film with the intent to return it to their service with additional historical context.

Originally released in 1939, the film romanticizes slavery as a benign and benevolent institution. Still the highest-grossing film in history when adjusted for inflation, "Gone with the Wind" continues to have a profound impact on the ways mainstream audiences visualize the antebellum South and the Reconstruction period that followed the Civil War.

There have been many highly visible efforts to represent slavery on screen from more historically accurate African American perspectives, from the 1977 miniseries "Roots" to Oprah Winfrey's "Beloved" (1998) to Steve McQueen's "12 Years a Slave" (2013). But "Gone with the Wind" endures in popular culture. It is an account of slavery devoid of the physical abuse (save Vivien Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara's legendary slap of Butterfly McQueen's Prissy), the grueling labor and the separation of families. Over the decades, "Gone with the Wind" has seen many theatrical re-releases, featured presentations on prime-time network television and spectacularly packaged home video editions. It was the very first film shown on Turner Classic Movies when the network premiered in 1994. And then this behemoth of classic films, clocking in at nearly four hours, made the leap into the world of on-demand streaming.

Some complained that taking the film down was a form of censorship. For others, seeing "Gone with the Wind" featured so prominently in HBO Max's launch felt like salt rubbed into wounds that have never

been permitted to heal. These wounds are reopened with every act of anti-Black violence, every delay in justice and every failure to acknowledge the extent of Black suffering.

But it is precisely because of the ongoing, painful patterns of racial injustice and disregard for Black lives that "Gone with the Wind" should stay in circulation and remain available for viewing, analysis and discussion.

"Gone with the Wind" is a prime text for examining expressions of white supremacy in popular culture. Based on Margaret Mitchell's blockbuster novel, "Gone with the Wind" taps into longstanding myths about the gentility of the antebellum South. The film's lavish costumes, magnificent plantation sets and sweeping Technicolor cinematography render Scarlett O'Hara's romances and economic tribulations in grand melodramatic fashion.

As the title indicates, "Gone with the Wind" looks back nostalgically at idyllic days that are no more (because they never were). By harkening back to the great old days, plantation dramas invite white viewers to imagine appealing but false pedigrees. When working class and poor white viewers identify with a noble white lineage, for example, they might be less likely to form what could be beneficial alliances with their Black working class and poor counterparts.

The film is also a valuable document of and testimony to Black performance during an era when substantial roles for Black talent were extremely rare in Hollywood films. As film historian Donald Bogle has argued, the extraordinarily talented Black actors in "Gone with the Wind" -- particularly Hattie McDaniel in her Oscar-winning performance as Mammy, and Butterfly McQueen as the comically inept Prissy -- bring notable humanity to their stereotypical roles. Too often, these characters are deemed either harmless or harmful.

Mammy and Prissy are often read either as benign features of a movie that merely reflects its times or as victims of Hollywood's longstanding, pervasive racism. However, when we look carefully at their acting styles, we see how McDaniel and McQueen nuance their characters with their unique facial expressions, gestures, vocal inflections and brands of humor. They "steal the show," to borrow the phrase scholar Miriam Petty uses to describe how Black actors in classic Hollywood films maximize the impact of their minimal roles.

At the same time, "Gone with the Wind" illustrates how trenchant racism has restricted Black possibilities, as well as the efforts of well-meaning white allies. Producer David O. Selznick supported Hattie McDaniels' nomination for an Academy Award, believing in the strength of her performance. But he capitulated to Southern sensibilities when he did not include Black cast members at the film's premiere in Atlanta. And at the 12th Academy Awards ceremony, where she became the first Black actor to win an Oscar, McDaniel did not sit at Selznick's table with the rest of the cast. She had to be given special permission by management to enter the whites-only Cocoanut Grove club and was seated at a small table on the side of the room.

A spokesperson for HBO Max noted in a statement that the film's "racist depictions were wrong then and are wrong today, and we felt that to keep this title up without an explanation and a denouncement of those depictions would be irresponsible." As the current debates about putting up, taking down, and contextualizing "Gone with the Wind" make clear, it is a film that continues to expose deep fissures in our interpretations of American history, film history and the relationship between the two. The film has loyal fans, and it has vocal critics who critique its version of Southern history with the same language

Black activists used when they picketed the film 80 years ago. But as I saw at a jam-packed panel discussion on "The Complicated Legacy of 'Gone with the Wind'" at the 2019 TCM Classic Film Festival, there are people who love the film, and others who love to hate it, and still others who are nonetheless curious about how other folks respond to it.

HBO Max will bring "Gone with The Wind" back to its line-up, and when it appears, I will provide an introduction placing the film in its multiple historical contexts. For me, this is an opportunity to think about what classic films can teach us. Right now, people are turning to movies for racial re-education, and the top-selling books on Amazon are about anti-racism and racial inequality. If people are really doing their homework, we may be poised to have our most informed, honest and productive national conversations yet about Black lives on screen and off.