

# Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

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Volume 6

Issue 1 *Coming of Age: When Nostalgia Isn't Enough*

Article 14

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2017

## Being Shocked into Paying Attention

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### Recommended Citation

Molina, Ramon and Mussie, Danny (2017) "Being Shocked into Paying Attention," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol6/iss1/14>

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# BEING SHOCKED INTO PAYING ATTENTION

Ramon Molina & Danny Mussie

A strong heart beats to an even tempo, but even such a heart will begin to palpitate and ache after watching Ava DuVernay's newest documentary *13th*. In an especially turbulent year for US political and racial disparity, *13th* provocatively portrays centuries of injustice against African-Americans. The documentary will make you look away in discomfort yet enrapture you with its raw narrative and gripping truths. If rallying behind the Black Lives Matter movement or understanding the distinction between light and dark skin have been difficult, then *13th* is here to shock you into what you and everyone else should know.

DuVernay's documentary is not the first in its genre, but it is one of the first to directly assert that modern day slavery in the United States exists in the form of mass incarceration. Guest speaker Jelani Cobb equates the mass incarceration and enslavement of the African-American race by drawing on the emancipation of slaves. When the 13th Amendment was passed, the South lost their economy composed of black bodies. Thus, a gross exploitation of law and sentiment towards African-Americans led to criminalization and marginalization.

And so the strong heart begins to slow its pace, captivated by the plots against African-Americans...

*13th's* powerful drive emanates from its poignant visuals. Images of re-enslaved African-Americans from the 1870's are coupled with images of incarcerated African-Americans in the present day. Old folk songs about freedom are played before rap classics, describing similar situations in the new day. DuVernay marches us through these carefully composed sequences of black history in America, but this time, we actually see it. Pictures of the past seem so old and far away; yet, we consistently see crimes against African-Americans.

"WE TOLD YOU!", *13th* screams.

But *13th* does more than scream. *13th* strings the pieces together, connecting the past narrative to the present year. DuVernay forces her viewer to think: what if being black was the crime one was being convicted of?

And with each statistic, with each ounce of anger and sadness in the words of the guest speakers, the heart beats in resonance to *13th*...

The film is a difficult pill to swallow, but it is the truth; this is our country. The ending scenes can distress even the mentally fortified. A wave of bullets fly by, and black bodies fall to the ground. In those fleeting moments, we watch the light fade from their eyes, and realize that the world has just lost another precious life to an unforgivable mix of race, ideology, and ulterior motives.

This unapologetic documentary is not the answer to ending racism or erasing the color line in the United States. However, DuVernay does demonstrate the power and potential in the shock-factor. Watching *13th* is an experience. DuVernay is not afraid to demonstrate how people in power historically seize opportunities to dampen African-Americans efforts towards equality. In a barrage of historical evidence and testimony, DuVernay effectively captures the relentless struggle against laws that deem Black Americans second-class citizens.



Dr. Jelani Cobb speaks in Kagin Hill Ballroom  
Photo by Cameron Hill

May your hearts be open to *13th*, as they will beat like a slow drum, aspiring for the post-racial society we desperately need