Gary Ross, dir., *Free State of Jones*. STX Entertainments, 2016.

Directed by Gary Ross and released in theaters in June 2016, *Free State of Jones* has a strong message for viewers: there is hope even in times of hardship. Based on the real-life story of Newton Knight, an ex-Confederate soldier who deserted the army, the film takes place between 1862 and 1876. Most of the scenes include intimate relationships and interactions between Anglo American farmers, ex-Confederate soldiers, and African Americans. The movie also depicts these three groups' unique experiences, dismantling the myth of a culturally, socially, politically, and economically homogeneous South.

At the beginning of the film, we witness Newton Knight deserting the Confederate Army. As he flees, he is chased by Confederate vigilante patrols, bit by one of their dogs, and is forced to take help from Moses, an African American man hiding from slave patrols in a swamp area. Moses' character in the movie represents the awful realities that African American people faced in nineteenth-century America. As the movie progresses, White Southern American families encounter food shortages caused by an abusive Confederate tax system. Newton Knight and a local Southern family resist a Confederate lieutenant who tries to take what "belongs" to the Confederacy. This is the first event in which Newton Knight explicitly makes a statement to secede from the Confederacy. It leads to his complete break-away from the "formal" South. The food shortages experienced by Anglo American Southerners push them to ally themselves with African Americans in their opposition to the Confederacy. Although both groups may have different reasons for their opposition, they find commonality in the desire to pursue a life where they can enjoy the liberties of reaping what they sow and keeping what is rightfully theirs. The individual and collective awareness of living under a corrupt society bring the founders of the "Free State of Jones" together to participate in rebellion. These founding members forcefully take Ellisville, Mississippi, from Confederate hands.

The last section of the movie takes place in the early years of the Reconstruction Era. The 15th Amendment is ratified in 1870, which allows Black men to vote for the first time. As a

result, White Southerners attempt to intimidate them by standing outside voting booths brandishing guns and rifles. Arguably the cruelest way that White Southerners prevented African American men from voting was through lynching. After Moses' character is tragically lynched, Knight leads several Black men to the voting center to cast their ballot for the Republican Party. Although they meet some resistance by the White Southerners who favored the Democratic Party, Knight explains that his Black American companions will fight to their deaths if it becomes necessary. This final scene reflects African Americans' experiences in their attempt to exercise their right to vote for decades to come.

Historical evidence shows that Newton Knight initially volunteered to enlist in the Confederacy, making his portrayal as an inclusive man questionable.[1] However, we also know that he did indeed lead a rebellion against the Southern Army in Mississippi. On the one hand, it is reasonable to state that his perceptions of African Americans may have changed at some point. Yet we must also keep in mind that this is a Hollywood movie that may have exaggerated the actual narrative of Newton Knight and the Free State of Jones. Knight may have never had the sympathies portrayed in the movie. He could have acted out of self-interest and merely compromised with African Americans to achieve his goals. It is possible that this "Free State" never truly and entirely accepted, welcomed, or incorporated African Americans in their community. Although this film may fail to meet professional historians' strict criterion in terms of accuracy, it reaches a wider audience that may not know the story of the Free State of Jones. This film can be used to spark the general public's curiosity about the complexity of opinions that some Southerners held during the American Civil War. Ultimately, this film teaches that where there is suffering, there is hope, and without hope, there is absolutely nothing. Hope, then, is what drives us to have courage even in the face of an army.

Luis Manuel Zavala

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[1] Richard Grant, "The True Story of the "Free State of Jones'," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March, 2016.