

Brenda E. Stevenson, “*12 Years A Slave*: Narrative, History, and Film” (2014)

Introduction

12 Years a Slave is, without a doubt, a masterwork—boasting stunning cinematography, a brilliant cast, and a gut-wrenching story that is moving, suspenseful, enraging, and eventually, uplifting. Still, it is a flawed and incomplete masterwork. The screenwriter’s and director’s lack of scholarly inquiry into the intricacies of the institution, and those touched by it, left telltale signs in the film’s portrayals (or lack of them) of a slave community, acts of resistance, forced labor, and the diverse roles of enslaved women. As a result, the film’s viewing audience is left to believe, mistakenly, that slave resistance was rare and an experience largely confined to the actions of men.

Stories of Enslaved Women in Film

Consider the ways in which McQueen negotiates the roles and experiences of the enslaved women found in Northup’s account—a fundamental component to the film audience’s understanding of southern slave life. McQueen’s interpretations of the lives of African American women in *12 Years a Slave* are an example of what is right, and wrong, with his portrayal of Solomon Northup’s story, and more generally, the institution of slavery in the U.S. South.

Steve McQueen seems particularly determined to tell the stories of enslaved women in this film. Indeed, McQueen has stated that one of the aspects of Northup’s autobiography that convinced him to choose this narrative to film was the numerous images of enslaved women whom Solomon Northup detailed in his lengthy account.¹ Publicizing the plight of enslaved women, of course, was an important abolitionist device employed to gain sympathy for their cause. True stories of the inability of enslaved women to maintain the gendered conventions of the day—domesticity, sexual purity, and maternal bonds—because of their status as physical and sexual laborers who could not legally marry or have parental control over their children—was a staple on the abolitionist lecture circuit and in the published accounts of the institution. It is little wonder then that women’s experiences were a significant part of what Northup chose to expose once he regained his freedom.

From the first day that Northup was enslaved in Washington, D.C.’s “Burch slave pen,” he took notice of the women around him, providing his reader with detailed accounts of their personal histories—their families (particularly their children), physical attributes, special skills, and personalities. Northup brought the optics of free manhood, Christianity, middling class status, and intelligence to the descriptions of his life as a slave. His views of southern women, black and white, then, were shaped more by the decades he had lived free than the twelve he worked as a slave. Nevertheless, Northup’s

¹ Black Entertainment Television, “The Reel Story: *12 Years a Slave*, Steve McQueen Comments,” Pacific Design Center, West Hollywood, CA, 16 October 2013, author’s notes.

autobiography offers the historian a rich palette of southern black womanhood. How well does McQueen capture Northup's palette in his film?

Once enslaved, Northup first encounters Eliza, a turned-out concubine, and her two children, who epitomize the loss that so many enslaved women, and their young, endured through sale. Eliza had believed that her sexual relationship with her owner would protect her and her family, since he had promised to free all of them. Instead, she and her children were sold separately, and she never saw them again. Eliza mourned her losses bitterly throughout the early part of Northup's saga, and as well in McQueen's film adaptation. Solomon eventually befriended and tried to comfort Eliza, but found that there was no soothing her wound.

In the narrative, Northup describes Eliza's fall in status from domestic to field worker because her mistress could not tolerate the enslaved woman's overwhelming sadness. The additional work that she had to do in the field, the loss of material support, along with her broken heart, led to Eliza's early death, and Solomon grieved deeply for her. In McQueen's movie, Eliza becomes the symbol of the devastation that the institution wrought on African American social life and identity. She is the slave whose identity, as such, is depicted in stark contrast to that of the free man who has been wrongfully enslaved. The director deploys Eliza's defeat as the one response to slavery that his film's protagonist absolutely rejects. Eliza is utterly vanquished, unable to move past her losses to survive long enough for the hopeful day of freedom that Northup is determined to see again, no matter what hardships he has to endure.

The long-suffering slave mother, of course, is a reality of black bonded womanhood that has been captured repeatedly on film. Indeed, the only image of enslaved women in the post-*Roots* film era which rivals that of the beleaguered enslaved mother is that of the sexualized slave woman, most particularly that of the slave concubine. In the latest spate of Hollywood films that thematically have taken on African and African American slavery, including *12 Years a Slave*, the "concubine," not surprisingly, remains the most important black female character. Consider, for example, the roles of enslaved women in the award-winning films from the 2012-13 season. In Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, Lydia Hamilton Smith, the quadroon concubine of famed abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens, and Elizabeth Keckley, once a concubine as well, are the film's only two women of color. Likewise, virtually all of the enslaved women in Quentin Tarantino's box office blockbuster *Django Unchained* are either concubines or prostitutes.

[McQueen] readily adopts this favorite Hollywood trope of the black woman as sexually bound to powerful white men. As such, Eliza is hardly his film's only concubine. Remarkably, unlike in Solomon Northup's narrative, all of the enslaved women who have substantial roles in McQueen's film adaptation are concubines. Along with Eliza, there is Epps's slave Patsey, and Harriet Shaw, the slave "mistress" of a neighboring plantation. Certainly there is some merit in the inclusion of these concubines' stories in any realistic film about slavery. Most enslaved girls and women, after all, were sexually harassed and abused. Yet this abuse did not define their entire lives. This point is one that McQueen repeatedly fails to make in his film and offers no counter or additional images of bondwomen's lives. Nor does he offer a multidimensional perspective on the concubines he presents in *12 Years a Slave*. These lapses are especially disappointing

because it is clear from the narrative that Northup realized that bondwomen struggled to create, and often succeeded in having, a life beyond the lash and the grasp of their masters and mistresses.

More to These Women's Lives than Their Abuse

To be certain, Solomon Northup often made note of the sexual abuse that enslaved women endured. As such, his autobiographical account undoubtedly contributed to a tradition of narration that made it possible for a prudish northern audience to accept the details of rampant sexual abuse and forced concubinage more explicitly described in Louisa Picquet's *Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, both published in 1861.²

But Northup's narrative also revealed that there was more to these women's lives than their abuse, no matter how much it clouded their existence. Northup chose to place *more* emphasis on these women's amazing laboring capacity, their ability to experience joy in spite of the myriad forms of abuse they suffered, and their strategies of resistance.

Northup described the work of female domestics in the house, yard, laundry, and barn, but he was especially impressed by the labor these enslaved women performed alongside, and instead of, men in the virgin forests and desolate fields of this rural parish. He was astonished, for example, by the "large and stout" lumber-women Charlotte, Fanny, Cresia, and Nelly, who could fell trees in the forest as efficiently as their male peers. Of the black women he met while working in Louisiana, Northup observed, "[T]hey perform their share of all the labor required on the plantation. They plough, drag, drive team, clear wild lands, work on the highway, and so forth."³

² Louisa Picquet and Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York, 1861), electronic edition, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet/menu.html>, accessed 11 February 2014; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Valerie Smith (New York, 1988). The earliest published narratives also included references to the sexualized labor of enslaved women. See, for example, Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, A Native of Africa*, in *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772–1815*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William Andrews (1787; reprinted, Washington, DC, 1998), 94; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, ed. Richard J. Allison (1789; reprinted, Washington, DC, 2006), 263; and Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself, 1849*, electronic edition, 112, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>, accessed 11 February 2014.

³ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 156.

Despite all of the hard work and abuse he witnessed, Northup also recorded scenes of happiness and gaiety that enslaved women and men crafted for themselves. Their self-sponsored dances, Christmas celebrations, courtship rituals, enjoyment of music, marriage celebrations, and the camaraderie found in their quarters filled the lives of enslaved African Americans whom Northup came to know in the South. Northup's scenes of black female agency, self-expression, and manifestations of humanity, however, were beyond the thematic scope of McQueen's film adaptation.

The enslaved women Northup described also resisted their enslavement in direct and indirect ways, an important element in these women's lives that McQueen also largely excludes. For example, there was Celeste, who hid in the swamp for almost three months in order to avoid the barbaric whippings of her overseer. The absence of Celeste's story of flight from her physical abuse and sequestered healing in a "maroon" space denies the audience comprehension of aspects of enslaved women's lives that belie the particular images of passive resistance and victimhood that one sees in the film's version of Eliza and especially Patsey.

One-Dimensional Characters

Patsey endured the most brutal punishment Northup described in his narrative. Her "offense" was that she left the Epps plantation without her master's permission in order to get soap from a neighbor and fellow concubine Harriet Shaw. She did so because her nemesis, Mrs. Epps, refused to give Patsey soap to clean herself. Patsey's was a small, but important, act of female resistance because it underscored the importance that enslaved women placed on their appearance and femininity, visible markers of their humanity. It was Mrs. Epps's determination, however, that Patsey, her husband's involuntary lover, should not enjoy such female or human "rights."

Patsey is the female character that McQueen gives the most attention to in his film. Both he and Northup admirably expose Patsey's pathos and her mistress' contribution to it in this forbidden triangulation of mistress-master-concubine. Mary Epps, in Northup's narrative and McQueen's film adaptation, certainly is not the submissive, compassionate southern matron, as depicted, for example, in the character of Ellen O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. McQueen appropriately paints Mary as the "hell cat" and "devil" that formerly enslaved women were so eager to expose to the public.

Unfortunately, McQueen's depiction of Patsey is not as appropriate. In public interviews Steve McQueen stated that he believed that Edwin Epps's savage treatment of Patsey was driven by his hatred of his "love" for her.⁴ That is hard to accept. The slave girl was in no way responsible for her master's brutality, and certainly "love" is not expressed in life-threatening whippings. Northup, of course, offers no such apology for Epps's vicious behavior. "Platt" is clear enough regarding his master's sadistic reasons for harming Patsey; and his analysis aligns with the history of sexual abuse of enslaved women.⁵

⁴ BET, "The Reel Story," author's notes.

⁵ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 254-258.

Edwin Epps demanded absolute control of his “property.” He wanted to own Patsey’s body unconditionally. She had to work harder than anyone else in his cotton fields by day, permit his sexual satisfaction at night, and yield to his barbaric whippings upon his, or his wife’s, whims. Patsey was their property to do with whatever they liked. Mary Epps wanted to control her husband’s extramarital dalliances with Patsey and maintain her pride as the superior white wife. Mary was determined that all of her slaves understood that they were her inferiors and only tolerated for their capacity to enrich her family through their labor. She could not tolerate Patsey because through her husband’s sexual relationship with both women, he equated the two, publicly and privately. It was only by ridding her home of the enslaved woman, either by completely destroying her, or having her husband sell her, that Mary Epps believed that she could restore her honor as wife, mistress, and member of the ruling race. It was, of course, Mary’s and Edwin’s inability to completely defeat Patsey, physically and spiritually, which so unnerved both master and mistress.

Northup believed that Patsey’s resilience was related to her cultural distinction from the other enslaved workers. She was the daughter of a “Guinea” woman, a first-generation descendant of Africa, a distinction that imbued her with a certain pride. Northup described her as having an “air of loftiness in her movement, that neither labor, nor weariness, nor punishment could destroy,” and with a kind of delight in life that was, surprisingly, only surpassed by her capacity for physical labor.⁶

McQueen, however, fails to alert his audience to Patsey’s familial background, her cultural difference, and the source of strength she derived from both. Even though Patsey has equal screen time with the other female characters in *12 Years a Slave*, she is still diminished by McQueen’s portrayal of her essentially as an extension of her master’s greed, lust, and abuse. In the film, Patsey is left broken. In Northup’s account, Patsey survives Epps’s most barbaric attack, even sharing in Solomon’s hope for freedom.

It is certain that the role of the “unbroken” or rebellious slave on film typically is depicted through a male. Yet McQueen still had some memorable images of rebellious, and even complex slave women from other films to draw upon such as Nunu in *Sankofa* and Sethe in *Beloved* that might have inspired him to more honestly depict the Patsey of Northup’s memory.

Eliza, like Patsey, also remains a one-dimensional character in McQueen’s film—a victim. Of course, their submission as women and as slaves plays well on a Hollywood screen against Northup’s masculine, freedom-seeking persona. Both reductions to gendered stereotype, however, diminish the audience’s comprehension of the lives of enslaved workers more broadly, and Solomon Northup’s experiences in Louisiana specifically.

Steve McQueen’s third concubine in the film, Harriet Shaw, is perhaps the most problematic of all of his female characters, both in relationship to Northup’s text and in characterization. In order to “develop” Harriet’s role, McQueen embellishes

⁶ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 188-189.

tremendously, almost ridiculously on Northup's spare description of this "privileged" slave woman, having her appear on screen as the genteel hostess of tea parties organized on her master's/lover's veranda, accompanied by her two favorite neighbors, "Platt" and Patsey. Unfortunately, the "agency" with which McQueen imbues Harriet completely contradicts what he actually manages to get right in his portrayals of Patsey and Eliza. Just as they are not just victims, Harriet is not solely the self-possessed, "free" woman of leisure that she appears on the screen. Harriet's character is a fanciful Hollywood notion of a concubine.

Conclusion

Like all first-hand accounts of slave and plantation life, and certainly the films about these subjects that come to the big and small screens, neither Solomon Northup's 1853 account, nor Steve McQueen's 2013 screen adaptation, delivers a comprehensive view of the lives of bondwomen and men, or their owners. Northup's account, however, provides its readers with a much fuller and more informed depiction of the men and women who endured slavery in the South than that is found in Steve McQueen's film. Despite its flaws and historical lapses, Steve McQueen's award-winning film still does manage to provide its diverse movie-going audience with a stunning visual drama, an impeccable cast, and a story that at least captures remarkably well the deadly violence inherent in the institution of southern slavery and the brutality of its architects, protectors, and benefactors, men and women alike.

Source

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