# To Tell a Free Story: Representations of Race and Slavery

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Representing Slavery within Cultural and Social Norms

“From Bodies to Souls”: The Effects of Christianity on American Slavery in the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) and What to the Slave is the Fourth of July (1852)
   By Megan Marshall

Comparing News Headlines in Modern Day Mass Media with Representations of Slavery in Steve McQueen's 12 Years a Slave (2013)
   By Cera Alexis Smith

   By Tim Patterson

Cover Art: “Slavery Real to Reel”
The images captured in the piece all instill a sense of oppression and bondage. None of the three symbols specifically give away the gender, age, or identity, such as slaves were not allowed to retain their identities or names. This piece is a direct representation of the nameless, faceless abuse, and punishment slaves received at the hands of their captors. The film strip is intentionally continued on either side, as the three images within do not symbolize the beginning and end of slavery, rather the standard treatment that continued for far too long, and is unfortunately lost in the middle of the long, tumultuous story of slavery in the west.
   By Michael Davis, April 21, 2015
Representing Womanhood in Slavery
Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* presents a consensual sex scene and a rape scene to demonstrate how an enslaved woman gained agency over her mind and body in a time when “slave women’s sexual relations with white men were primarily based on force” (Altink 271). A slave master considered slaves as his property, which meant that if he wanted to have sexual relations with a slave, he could choose any one of them. Although masters owned the female slave’s body, she could take back control through her mental state. In the film, Patsey takes control of her mental state through blacking out when her master, Mr. Epps, rapes her. A female slave could also embrace her sexuality through consensual sex with another slave, as the unnamed slave woman does with the protagonist, Solomon Northup. The institution of slavery in the antebellum South stripped female slaves of humanity through viewing them as property, of sexual safety through the constant fear of rape, and stability through the constant migration of slaves. Slavery strips her of these characteristics in reality, but she also stripped of them in representations of slavery. The topic of a slave woman's s is not as analyzed or questioned very often, as most slavery films tell the male story, as seen in Edward Zwick’s *Glory*. *12 Years a Slave*, however, does not strip the slave woman of agency in its representation of slavery; instead, the film...
grants her power to claim her sexuality and her mind during a period that threatened the safety of the female body every day.

Although a female slave had the power to claim her mind and sexuality, forming relationships was difficult during a period of slavery expansion, otherwise known as the antebellum era (1800-1860). Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin (which separated the seeds from the cotton) made the already profitable fabric even more valuable. The growing demand of cotton from British textile mills meant that there was now a growing demand for free labor workers. The antebellum era gave rise to a new kind of slavery that dominated the United States. In the article “The Everyday Life of Enslaved People in the Antebellum South,” Calvin Schermerhorn describes the era as an “agricultural revolution… [Which] profoundly altered the lives of America’s slaves as owners and traders separated families, parted friends, ad orphaned children” (31). In a country that already thrived off free labor, the migration of hundreds of thousands slaves was not an issue for the slave owners and traders. The profits that slave labor brought in to the owners was what motivated the migration. Without the obligation to pay the laborers, the owners and traders could keep all of the profits for themselves, and life a lavish life as black bodies were “weakened by fatigue and hunger, [and] wracked by chronic illnesses and injury… daily existence often came down to an endless struggle of will and endurance” (Schermerhorn 31). The danger of fieldwork and the lack of proper clothing, nutrition, and sleeping arrangements for slaves presented the risk of death at any moment. Along with the fact that owners constantly sold slaves to other plantations, the looming threat of death made it impossible for a slave to have a sense of stability, thus, making it difficult for some to form relationships with other slaves, even if sexual relations occur. As described in “‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in the Antebellum African American Narratives” Aliyyah L. Abdur-Rahman says, “Slavery had the effect of corrupting and contorting the most basic bonds. The institution of slavery den[ies] slaves basic claims to familial, spousal, and hereditary bonds” (223). The selling and migration of slaves broke families apart, and because slaves never knew how long they would be on a plantation, some of them did not form bonds with others.

Nineteenth-century conventions placed a women’s virtue as priceless, but slave masters used sexual violence to dehumanize female slaves. In “Deviant and Dangerous: Pro-Slavery Representations of Jamaican Slave Women’s Sexuality Henrice Altink says, “Female purity was
considered priceless in the metropolitan society of the day, the sexual abuse of female slaves was an excellent means… to demonstrate that slavery reduced slaves to a less than human condition” (272). Female slaves were dehumanized in the same way male slaves were through the law of slavery, but unlike male slaves, masters continually violated their bodies. As a result, presentations of slave women deemed them as promiscuous for having sexual relationships that they did not have the right to consent. The hyper-sexualized stereotype was falsely given to slave women because they did was what necessary to survive. If having sexual relations with her master kept her alive or protected her children from a beating, and then she had no choice but to do it. Slave owners did not need permission to access a slave’s body because under the law, slaves were property. The high standards placed on white women affected how society viewed slave women although they did not have equal rights to white women.

To be a good woman in society, white women had to be submissive, pious, chaste, and domestic. If she missed even one of these qualities, she would be an outcast of society. Even though the threat of rape still presented itself to white women, it was not nearly as common as the rape of black women, especially because the male members of society actually respected white women. The oppression of white women occurred in society just in a different way. The same way that slaveholders used religion to justify slavery, they used it to make white women submissive. The Bible talks about how a woman must be submissive to her husband, and trust every action he takes and every word he says. To question your husband would be to question the will of God, and the fear of God instilled in Christians would prevent a woman to step out of her place. There was only one place allotted for the majority of women in the nineteenth-century, and that was the domestic sphere. Even slave women would work in the house to serve the family or to cook. A woman could not have a career, or run a plantation. The patriarchal society was help up by men, but also by women just as the slaves held the system of slavery in place. It was all about formulating justified reasons that the oppressed should remain in that oppression. Slave owners did use Christianity to keep the cycle of oppression going, but they also used violence to instill fear within the slaves. If a slave were to run away and then got caught, masters would brand an “r” on their cheek so that every other slave would see it. The slave owners forced other slaves to watch the violent punishments given to slaves who ran away to create an example for other slaves.
American representations of slavery do not like to go into the dirty truth about slavery, and because the director reaches out to a specific type of audience to gain profit. Not accurately portraying a huge part of American history to gain a profit is harming to contemporary society. In the days of the rise and constant improvement of technology, people will believe practically anything they read and watch. Unlike many representations of slavery in film, *12 Years a Slave* tries to stay accurate to the events of Solomon Northup’s kidnapping. Although McQueen did admit the scene between the unnamed slave woman and Solomon did not actually happened but meant to expose the hardships and effects of slavery. America paints a pastoral imagery of slavery in the south by saying things like they would not survive on their own, or adopting the mind set of paternalism, we take care of them. Although the scene was added in for effect, the woman claims her sexuality because in that moment, that is the only part of her that she has control of.

The unnamed slave woman claims her sexuality by initiating sexual relations with Solomon, but her pleasure is short lived. The scene begins with a high angle shot, which is when the camera is in a higher position than the subject it is capturing, focusing on the setting in which slaves lived. They are without pillows and blankets, but there is a small fire burning to keep them warm and to light the room. The fire gives off just enough light to capture the bodies of ten to twelve slaves sleeping on the floor. A technique known as low-key lighting, which accentuates shapes of objects by shading certain areas, illuminates the bodies on the floor to expose the horrid living conditions of the South’s profitable property. The faces of the slaves are not visible because the focus of the scene is on the number of bodies on the floor to demonstrate the proximity to one another. The high-angle shot captures the objectification of slaves to preface the unbearable living conditions presented in the film due to the conventions of the institution of slavery. The following shot is a close up of Solomon’s face, and out of focus behind him is the unnamed slave woman. The low-key lighting illuminates his ear and part of his cheek and as the light caresses her neck and kisses her check, it directs us to her gazing eyes. The guiding light brings attention to her face and although it is out of focus, her face is full of emotion. The exact emotion, however, is not clear until Solomon sees her. He meets her gaze when he rolls over to lie on his back, and they are full of aggression. She looks deeply into Solomon’s eyes, but her face is not relaxed and her jaw is clinched. Although her face and eyes display aggression, her body language indicates sexual arousal. While locking eyes with Solomon, her
chest rapidly moves up and down, and it is this moment, that she takes control of her sexuality.

While she and Solomon are making eye contact, the camera shows a mid-shot (a shot taken from the middle of something, such as from the waist up) of them lying side by side horizontally. This angle produces suspense as it is unclear which of the two will initiate the sexual act. After a few moments of making eye contact with Solomon, she takes the dominant role as she rolls over on her side and reaches over and grabs his hand to initiate the moment. Taking back her sexuality is a rebellion against the institution of slavery because it argues that she is not just an object. She grabs his hand so aggressively that it forces him to roll on his side to face her. Once the two are facing each other, her dominance and her aggressive body language suggest that although the two are engaged in sexual activity, there is no intimacy. The two have eye contact but it is sporadic as opposed to a long gaze into the eyes of a loved one. She tightly grips his arm to guide his hand around her breast and then into her pants to bring her to climax. Her body language and breathing express great pleasure as she climaxes as she closes her eyes and holds her breath. When it is over, she opens her eyes and lets out a small blissful laugh, and it is the only moment in the scene that she has a soft expression. For those few seconds, she experiences a moment of pleasure and forgets that slavery oppresses her. She looks Solomon up and down as her eyes become full with anger again, and roughly pushes his hand away. When she rolls over and faces her back toward him, she begins to cry. Her crying argues that the institution of slavery robs its victims of any type of possible joy, even the most natural kind such as the pleasure one receives from an orgasm or from forming an intimate bond with a sexual partner. To juxtapose what intimacy looks like when not burdened by slavery, the next scene is of Solomon and his wife, Anne, before his enslavement.

The scenes are side by side to compare the relationships and living conditions between the enslaved and the free. The camera angle in the scene of Solomon and his wife is a mid-shot but instead of showing dominance as with the slave girl it shows equality between the two characters. They are lying on their sides just as Solomon and the slave girl were, but they are lying vertically instead of horizontally. The horizontal positioning of the two characters changes the entire tone of the scene because it depicts them lying next to each rather than one on top of the other. Anne’s body language is soft and relaxed as she rests her hand on Solomon’s neck. Solomon’s arm stretches out across the bed so

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Anne can rest her head on it as a sign of affection. Their facial expressions display happiness as they share a long gaze into the other’s eyes. The setting of this scene differs dramatically from the previous scene because it is in a home rather than a slave house. Solomon and Anne are in a private setting in their bedroom, whereas the slave girl had to satisfy her desire in a room with ten to twelve slaves. Without privacy, intimacy is difficult to build. Anne caresses Solomon’s cheek and their eye contact gets slightly sporadic indicating that the two are going to engage in intercourse. Anne initiated the sexual encounter, but she did it in a loving matter rather than a dominant manner. The aggressive nature of slavery forces its victims to become aggressive in order to survive. Since Anne has never experienced slavery, she is not afraid to be soft and caring. Patsey, however, is another woman dominated by slavery and, although not aggressive, she has learned how to be submissive to survive on Mr. Epps’ plantation.

When Patsey goes to another plantation, to get soap Mr. Epps has a demented sexual attraction to her causes him to believe she has run away, and therefore, when she returns her punishment is extremely violent. The whipping scene begins with Mr. Epps running out of the house yelling “Patsey! Patsey!” his breathing is heavy and there is panic in his voice. He runs up to another female slave and shakes her, as he demands she tells him where Patsey went. He yells at her and says, “Where has she gone? She ran off ain’t she?” The slave woman claims to have no knowledge of Patsey’s whereabouts, so he throws her to the ground and moves on to the other slave woman and as his anger escalates says, “You miserable black dogs. Stand like the deaf and dumb.” His breathing is still heavy as he rests his arms on the shoulders of the second slave woman and expresses his sadness by saying, “Y’all, my Patsey’s gone.” Both of the slave women are too afraid to move or to speak, and so they just stand there while he mourns his loss.

The shot quickly cuts to the next scene of Patsey walking up to the plantation, and Mr. Epps immediately runs out side and exerts his anger, “Run off? Run off did ya?” Patsey attempts to explain where she has been but he gives her no time. He immediately grabs her neck and calls her “a miserable wench.” Patsey tries to tell him that she went to another plantation to get soap because Mrs. Epps, out of jealousy for her husband’s favor of Patsey, will not give her any to wash with. Mr. Epps calls her a liar and calls his overseer over to get her ready for punishment. He orders his overseer to strip her naked and tie her to a post to expose her back. As she walks to the poll, other slaves are out of focus in the
background facing her direction to watch her punishment. Her clothes are ripped off as she is sobbing, and Mr. Epps says, “You done this to yourself, Patsey.” Mr. Epps pauses once he is in the position to whip her, and his eyes present sadness while he looks at her bare back. His feelings for Patsey will not allow him to whip, and so he tells Solomon, “Beat her. Give her the whip. Give it all to her!” Solomon stands there as Mr. Epps yells at him to come over there and whip her. Solomon finally reluctantly walks over, and Patsey says, “I’d rather it you!” and he takes the whip. If she must be brutally punished, she would rather it be by another in the same situation than her. A slave whipping a slave is a way to prove how much power a slave owner truly has. The fear for his own life is what causes Solomon to go on with the whipping. At the instruction of Mr. Epps, Solomon takes a whip to his fellow slave. Solomon has a hard time whipping her as hard as the master wants him to. He does it just hard enough to make her scream, and even his face is in agony. While Solomon whips her, the camera angle is a long shot that shows all of Solomon’s body, but only shows a mid-shot of Patsey. The camera is in front of Patsey while she is tied to the poll. The image creates a very personalized setting because the shot focuses on their faces. This scene evokes emotions from its viewers through Patsey’s unbearable pain and Solomon’s excruciating pain on his face. Her whipping is a public spectacle so that other slaves know what will happen to them if they run away.

Slavery is kept alive because the threat of pain, or even death, is given to anyone who tries to gain freedom. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was a law that said that anyone who sees a runaway slave shall return them to their masters immediately. A slave could make it all the way up to New York and someone could turn them in because even free states had to comply with the law, as Section Five of the document states, “It shall be the duty of all marshals and deputy marshals to obey and execute all warrants”. Masters would put ads in the papers looking for runaway slaves. Describing what clothes they had on, if they had birthmarks or brands, what their hair looked like, what they would answer to just because they felt empowered by a system of oppression. Masters like Mr. Epps abuse the power given to them by the law to treat their property with fear. White slave owners feared that the slaves would rise up against them and bring down the system, so slaves did not have an education. There were cases where the mistress may teach their slaves to read and write, but it was not the majority’s goal to make sure slaves were educated. If the majority of the oppressed population did not truly know that there was
another way of life, then they would be blissful on the plantation. Many white slave owner had sexual relationships with their slave women just as Mr. Epps does with Patsey. Moreover, because men normally worked field, plantations were uneven on the numbers of men versus women. Some slaves married other slaves or had children with other slaves, but when two slaves have a child, they have bred more slaves for the field or for the house. Thus, masters would rape slave women and get them pregnant to populate the fields. The most profit was coming in through the fields, and because slavery's foundation is money, slave owners had to produce more workers. The majority of relationships, however, were rooted in violence.

The rape of Patsey is calm and quiet, but does not mean that it was not a rape. The control she has over mind indicates that this has been happening to her for a long time. It is saddening to think that she can agency over her mind now because she has suffered so much in the past. Although he takes her body without consent, his actions portray his feelings for Patsey. He needs her attention, and he wants her to make love to him. She cannot do so because he is her oppressor, and he has the power to set her free but does not. “Some women tried to turn the tables and use their sexuality strategically” (Schmerhorn 33) by seducing their masters or offering their bodies so they could grant freedom or safety of themselves and their families. The search for family was constant for a slave because of the huge migration of slaves, and the profit that came from selling slaves motivated southern slaveholders to see them to the person with the largest sum of money. Slaves would go to the auction block where whites interested in purchasing slaves analyzed them. If a male slave had big feet, it meant he was strong and could work in the field all day. It also meant that regardless of if he had a wife or children on his current plantation, if the price was what the owner desired, that slave would be sold immediately. Slaves walked around with constant fear of being sold, and so although they searched for comfort in friends who were also slaves, not every relationship formed a bond. The fact of the matter was that there was no way for a slave to stop their master's intention to sell them for the most money they could charge. The Agricultural Revolution changed slavery for the worst, and threatened slave women's sexuality even greater than before.

Through the praise that Mr. Epps gives Patsey for picking 512 pounds of cotton he essentially sexually objectives her. While praising Patsey, Mr. Epps walks up behind her, and places his hands on her shoulders and says, “Queen of the fields she is” in a seductive tone he looks her
up and down exposing his infatuation with her. Patsey’s body language, however, does not display any pleasure in his praise or in his touch, and she looks uncomfortable when he places his hands on her shoulders. Mr. Epps’ partner then attempts to move on to the next quantity of cotton picked by another slave, which makes Mr. Epps angry, and he says, “I’m not done” in a very stern tone. This reveals that Mr. Epps pays close attention to Patsey, and he is not only praising her skills in picking cotton, but he is praising Patsey herself with desire in his voice. He then continues on to say, “Damned queen. Born and bred to the field” while he slightly rubs Pastsey’s neck and she appears extremely uncomfortable. Mr. Epps’ eyes are full of lust for her. Her body language in no way gives the argument that she desires to have sexual relations with Mr. Epps and her facial expression shows indifference to his touch. Because she was born and raised on his plantation, her indifference suggests that this is not the first time Mr. Epps has expressed his sexual interest in her. The institution of slavery forces Patsey to become numb to his advances because the day she was born she was an object. Once Mr. Epps takes his hands off Patsey, she slightly exhales and looks down insinuating that she is happy that his attention is elsewhere. Because the law condemns Patsey as his property, he has the right to objectify her.

Mr. Epps keeps a close eye on Patsey’s every move. His true violence is exposed when Patsey goes to another plantation to get soap. Mrs. Epps knows that her husband favors Patsey, and because of this she will not allow Patsey any soap to wash herself with. The sex scene begins with Mr. Epps quietly sneaking into Patsey’s sleeping area to take her outside. It insinuates that Patsey has no choice in what happens to her body, so goes quietly because fighting him changes nothing when she is his property. The next shot is of Mr. Epps standing up in the dark, and he is looking down at Patsey’s face. Although he is attempting to make eye contact with her, Patsey refuses to look him in the eye. She is choosing to ignore his advances for eye contact, and therefore, she is taking control of her mind in a situation where she cannot control what happens to her sexually. Mr. Epps places his forehead upon hers, and guides her to lie down, and there is no expression of excitement or pleasure on her face. Once she lies down, she immediately looks up to the sky as a way to disconnect herself from the moment. Patsey’s breathing is normal, her eyes are void of any emotion, and she does not attempt to hold him or to guide his hands around her body. She never establishes eye contact with Mr. Epps because eye contact would put her back in the moment she tries to escape. The noises she makes
are those of being in pain, and her head is moving around as if she is lifeless. Mr. Epps then says, “Patsey” and due to her unresponsiveness, he slaps her. He is begging her to show him that she wants him to have sexual relations with him, but she refuses to give him emotional agency. In doing so, she is taking control of the one quality that she can in this situation, and does so by not granting him the emotional connection he so deeply craves. Although she has lost agency over her body in this scene, she takes control of her own mind, and does not allow him to break down her mental strength.

While most representations of slavery do not capture the brutality of slavery 12 Years a Slave does not shy away from it. In fact, the film emphasizes it to bring the reality of slavery to light. The film presents different types of scene such as a non-intimate sex scene between two slaves, an intimate moment between free blacks, the whipping of Patsey, and the rape of Patsey in order to catch the attentions of people who do not understand the true violence and oppression that occurred under the regime of slavery. The rape scene and consensual scene uncovers the horrid truths about a slave woman’s sexuality, but the scene also show ways in which a woman can gain agency over her body and mind. This film relates to the bigger topic of representations of slavery through deeply exploring the hardships and violence slaves faced in everyday life. This film does not allow any room for a pastoral picture of the South because the violence of masters and the oppressions of slavery are constantly presented. 12 Years a Slave is a new type of film based on a slave narrative, as the director, Steve McQueen, tried to follow Solomon Northup’s slave narrative as accurately as possible. Rather than presenting his contemporary ideas of slavery, he presented the reality of slavery during the time in which it actually occurred.

WORKS CITED

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Enslaving the Weaker Sex:
Black and White Womanhood in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

BY HANNAH GRUBBS

Both Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Steve McQueen’s film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* portray relationships between a white mistress and a female slave. Both texts show the effects that living under the cult of true womanhood had on all antebellum women, slave and free. The cult of true womanhood dictated not only how white mistresses should act in home and society, but also how they should treat their slave women. Because of the social and political influences of this ideology, women who were hurt by the infidelity of their husbands took out their anger on the female slaves under their charge. The jealous mistress placed blame for her predicament on her slave in an attempt to regain her own identity in the eyes of society and also as a means of regaining agency and a voice that was denied her by the patriarchal society that she lived in. The representation in these two texts serves to show the effects that slavery had on the overall psyche of a slaveholding society, particularly on the women who were tasked with upholding the ideology of the patriarchal society.

Slavery affected everyone in the slaveholding society. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in her book *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, says that “[s]lavery as a social system shaped the experience of all its women, for slavery influenced the nature of the
whole society, not least its persisting rural character” (38). Both black and white women were affected by the institution of slavery. It not only affected the relationships between a master and his slaves or a mistress and her slaves, but also the relationship between the master and mistress. Harriet Jacobs tells her readers that “the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child’s own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to the violent outbursts of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause” (27). According to Jacobs, the institution of slavery not only affected older women, but the small children. The “jealous passion” inspired in the mistress stems from the fact of the master’s infidelity with their slave women, and even small children picked up on this fact. Because of the master’s infidelity, mistresses struggle to maintain their honor under the cult of true womanhood and as a result become bitter and jealous towards their slave women instead of using their influence over their husbands to protect them.

The inhumane institution of slavery created cruelty and anger in both master and mistress. In his chapter entitled “The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism,” William Andrews points out that “if left to its own devices slavery will pervert master and mistress into monsters of cupidity and power-madness and reduce their servant to a nearly helpless object of exploitation and cruelty” (64). This perversion of master and mistress is seen in the relationships between the master and his slaves as well as the mistress’s reactions to it. In Steve McQueen’s film 12 Years a Slave, Mistress Epps throws a canister of wine at the slave Patsey’s head in front of her master. Throughout the film, Mistress Epps abuses Patsey. Because of Mr. Epps’s affair with Patsey, Mrs. Epps becomes a jealous monster that dehumanizes slaves in order to try to regain her voice and a degree of power in a system that oppresses her as well as the slave women. In this way, white women are forced to uphold the system of patriarchy. This creates a bitter wedge between men and women in the antebellum period. Jacobs says that “[t]he mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage” (26). This jealousy and anger is seen in the relationship between Patsey and Mistress Epps. As Jennifer Larson mentions, “Jacobs shows that the cult of True Womanhood’s call to submissiveness transforms slave mistresses into angry, vengeful women and leads to continued assaults on the purity of black women, and her text specifically links white female submissiveness to
white male assaults on black females’ purity” (743). Since black slave women were not considered pure at all, the anger and bitterness towards the master is transferred onto the helpless slave as the mistress makes her a scapegoat for the consequences that the cult of true womanhood places on those women who are not able to live up to societal standards. The mistress forces her own social punishment onto her slave woman. The cult of true womanhood is the driving force behind this punishment process between a white mistress and her slave.

The cult of true womanhood has four tenants: purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness. These four tenants dictated a woman’s entire life: how she would act, whom she would marry, and how she would treat the slaves in her household. If a woman deviated from any of these tenants, she was made a social outcast by the other women in her social circle. This ensured that women would keep upholding the cult, thereby upholding the system of patriarchy itself. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “[antebellum southern women, like all others, lived in a discrete social system and political economy within which gender, class, and race relations shaped their lives and identities” (37). The cult not only affected their worldview, but also that of their slave women. All women were affected by the cult in various ways. Marli F. Weiner points out that the “ideology of domesticity as well as the daily challenges of interacting with slaves influenced the way white women thought about slavery” (89). Since the cult of true womanhood shaped their entire lives, it also shaped how they dealt with the slave women under their charge. Very quickly, the tenants of the cult of true womanhood can be perverted and twisted as a mistress watches helplessly as her husband cheats on her with his slaves. Despite the fact that the mistress tries to uphold the tenants of the cult of true womanhood, thereby making her acceptable in the eyes of society, her husband pays no heed to her purity and instead pursues that which society says is impure: the helpless slave women in the household.

The ideal marriage life is perverted early on in a white marriage. Jacobs mentions that a newly married mistress “soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto his of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the flowery home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness” (33). No matter how hard a white woman tries to maintain the cult of true womanhood, her husband makes it impossible with his treatment and sexual abuse of his slave women. While the
white master is allowed to do as he wishes with his slave women, his mistress is forced to uphold her vows of purity, causing inequality and making the marriage unstable. This infidelity causes bitterness and anger in the mistress as she realizes that her husband’s pursuit of slave women also affects how society sees her. Since she is seen as inadequate in the eyes of her husband, the master of the house and the only member of the household with standing in society, the rest of society sees her as inadequate. The blame is placed on the mistress, and the woman quickly learns to vent her anger on the object of her husband’s lust, no matter if the relationship between master and slave was forced. Every aspect of a southern mistress’s life was dictated by the tenants of the cult. In this way, the white mistress, more than the master of the plantation, was responsible for upholding the system of patriarchy.

The driving force behind slavery and the domination of women, both white and black, was the system of patriarchy that the South adhered to. Robert Olwell defines patriarchy as “the dominant cultural metaphor used to express and naturalize unequal social relations of every kind in the early modern period. In this specific historical context, patriarchy extended the familial model and the ideal of paternal authority beyond the household to encompass all forms of authority” (191). Under this system, women were stripped of their voice and agency as they submitted to the men of the household. Southern plantation owners used Christian values in order to justify enslaving people, such as the theory that Africans descended from Ham in the Bible, and therefore were meant to be slaves because Noah cursed Ham and his descendants. In her article “Ideas Have Consequences: Faith, Gender, and Social Ethics,” Mimi Haddad writes that “when patriarchy is framed as a biblical ideal, it is not only at odds with the teachings of Scripture and the purposes of God’s covenant people, it also becomes a deadly spiritual disease that chokes life all around it” (5). Not only did the patriarchal system choke the slaves that were forced to work on the plantations, but it also choked the women that were adhering to the cult of true womanhood. By using the Bible as a means of justifying slavery, plantation owners created a system in which they themselves were made out to be, in effect, the gods of the plantation. It was the masters who provided for everyone in their household, and the entire household depended on the master. However, the women of the household were the ones who maintained the system of patriarchy by their adherence to the cult of true womanhood.

Women were responsible for upholding the system of patriarchy in the South. As a result of the cult of true womanhood, white women
were made to appear pure and chaste at all times or suffer being exiled socially. Jacobs makes mention of Mrs. Flint’s struggles to maintain her pure and chaste appearance many times in her narrative. According to Yvonne Johnson, “Jacobs’ discussion of Mrs. Flint is another example of the way in which she undercuts the notion of ‘true womanhood,’ for not only does Mrs. Flint fail to conform to the ideal, but both women are portrayed, to some extent, as victims of an evil system” (38-39). The system of patriarchy was an evil system that victimized both black and white women. Neither could fully conform to the ideal set by the cult of true womanhood, and so both were punished.

The system also served to drive a wedge between white women and black women. According to Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, “[t]he ideology of true womanhood was as racialized a concept in relation to white women as it was in its exclusion of black womanhood. Ultimately, it was this racial factor that defined the source of power of white women over their slaves, for, in a position of dependence on the patriarchal system herself, the white mistress identified her interests with the maintenance of the status quo” (55). Maintaining the house for the husband meant white women’s utter rejection of any relationship other than the mistress/slave trope with a black women. Carby goes on to say that the cult of true womanhood was “dominant, in the sense of being the most subscribed to convention governing female behavior, but it was also clearly recognizable as a dominating image, describing the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women” (23). Women under this system had a certain standard to uphold at all times, and any deviance from this standard was met with scorn and social exile. The cult of true womanhood determined what was or was not a woman or womanly behavior. These standards serve to keep women in check and take away their voices. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese says it was the women who “contributed to the hegemony of the slaveholding class” (44). This meant that women participated in the system in order to keep up their image and to meet the tenants of the cult of true womanhood. All women were afraid of transgressing the boundaries of the cult for fear of being exiled by the rest of society.

A woman’s image was determined by her adherence to the cult of true womanhood. As Carby points out, the “parameters of the ideological discourse of true womanhood were bound by a shared social understanding that external physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character and therefore provided an easily discernable indicator of the function of a female of the human species” (25). Since a woman’s
external appearance was indicative of her internal consciousness, women forced themselves to remain outwardly pure at all times. This also meant that black women were seen as the opposite of a white woman, since their outward appearance was always seen as impure. Harriet Jacobs tells her readers that what “commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of a female slave” (27). Conversely, what was deemed unworthy in a white woman was often prized in a black slave woman, such as strength and the ability to work hard labor (Carby 25). The influence of the cult of true womanhood made black and white women binary oppositions in the eyes of society. Carby goes on to say that “[u]pon this hierarchical differential in power relations an ideology was built which ensured that two opposing concepts of motherhood and womanhood were maintained” (54). Black women were not seen as beautiful the way white women were. Their darker skin made them undesirable in the eyes of society. However, Jacobs says that “[i]f God has bestowed beauty upon [a black slave woman], it will prove to be her greatest curse” (27). Despite the fact that white women were seen as “pure,” masters still chose black slaves over their own white mistresses. Slave women were considered the property of their masters, and this opened up the door for sexual abuse and rape, since owners can do whatever they want with their property.

Under the cult of true womanhood, female slaves were not considered human so much as the property of the masters. They were treated as chattel, and used not only for hard labor but for reproductive purposes. Robert Olwell says that “[s]laves were valued as property largely because of their masters’ ability to extract their labor as subject persons” (188). Joanne Braxton also makes mention of the fact that “[a]s laborers and producers of children for the market, slave women were objects of sexual desire as well as profitable commodities” (20). Masters saw slave women as a means of producing more slaves for free, and they took advantage of the slave’s helplessness by raping her and forcing her to keep quiet about the affair. Indeed, Jacobs points out that “Dr. Flint swore he would kill [Jacobs], if [she] were not as silent as the grave” (27). White mistresses were forced to turn a blind eye to the abominable acts committed against slave women by their own husbands. The slave women were the hard laborers, and their “work was the foundation of daily life for white families and the entire plantation community” (Weiner 7). Yet, mistresses could see some sort of connection between themselves and their slave women.
The lives of black and white plantation women were inextricably linked. White women depended on black women to do most of the household work, and the black slave depended on her mistress to provide for her. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the “relations among women also reaffirmed the special race relations of slave society, for the more established slaveholding women viewed their female slaves as somehow part of their affective universe” (43). She goes on to say that white mistresses “unavoidably viewed those slaves as social and racial inferiors whose station in life was that of perpetual servants” (43). While both black slave women and white mistresses could see the potential for a kind of sisterly bond between them due to the fact of their mutual submission to the patriarchy, the cult of true womanhood did not allow for the mobility of black women in society, and whatever relationship could be formed between the mistress and slave vanishes under the tenants of the cult of true womanhood. According to Carby, “Jacobs recognized that plantation mistresses were subject to forms of patriarchal abuse and exploitation, but because they gave birth to the heirs of the property they were also awarded a degree of patriarchal protection. Slave women gave birth to the capital of the South” (54). Jacobs, in her narrative, attempts to call to light this binary opposition between the white mistress and the black slave and shows the bond that has been perverted by the cult of true womanhood and the system of patriarchy the South lived under.

Jacobs criticizes the cult of true womanhood throughout her narrative. According to Jennifer Larson, Jacobs, “took on the cult of True Womanhood with remarkable fortitude. One of the most striking methods of this attack is Jacobs’s exploration of active and passive actions by both black and white women. An analysis of these actions reveals that Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) criticizes the cult of True Womanhood, most specifically its calls for purity and submissiveness” (740). By portraying Mrs. Flint as the jealous mistress who abuses her slave women because of her husband’s infidelity, Jacobs calls to light the unbelievable stress that the tenants of the cult of true womanhood placed on white women. It is because of this stress, according to Jacobs, that white women lashed out at the victimized slaves instead of using their influence to help them. However, Jacobs also says that it is not impossible for white mistresses to transcend the barriers of the cult and to convince their husbands to stop the abuse of slave women and their progeny. Jacobs mentions that she knew “two southern wives who exhorted their husbands to free those slaves towards whom they stood in a ‘parental relation’; and their request
was granted” (33). Jacobs is saying that it is not impossible for a white mistress to stand up to her husband and to call out the abuse of the slaves instead of perpetuating it. Jacobs mentions this in order to encourage white women in the south to influence their husbands in order to bring about a change in the institution of slavery.

Jacobs portrays the relationship between a young slave girl and her master and mistress. Despite being harassed by Dr. Flint, Linda could not go to anyone for help, least of all Mistress Flint. Jennifer Larson points out that “Mrs. Flint subscribes to the cult of True Womanhood, adhering closely to all elements of the standard. For this reason, she is passive in her resistance to the sexual abuse of her female slaves” (743). Because of the influence of the cult of true womanhood, Mrs. Flint must be completely submissive to her husband. Yet, because her husband is cheating on her by pursuing a slave girl, someone who is not even considered to be human under the law of southern antebellum society, Mrs. Flint feels that her own morality and chastity is threatened. Her husband does not want her, and instead chooses a slave woman over herself. This throws Mrs. Flint’s own womanhood into chaos, causing her to blame Linda for her own sexual harassment. During Mrs. Flint’s interview with Linda, in which she asks the young slave to tell her everything that her husband is doing and saying, she begins crying. Linda, however, recognizes that Mrs. Flint’s “emotions rose from anger and wounded pride. She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband’s perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (31). Mrs. Flint’s assertion that she is a martyr relieves her of the burden of fault and places it all on Linda instead. Linda is made to bear the brunt of the punishment that society places on women who transgress the bounds and limitations of the cult of true womanhood.

Despite the fact that she is a victim, Linda cannot speak of the abuse that Dr. Flint is putting her through. Even though she is now free, Harriet Jacobs cannot even write details about how Dr. Flint was abusing her. Johnson points out that “[e]ven though her identity is partially concealed, narrative conventions would not allow [Jacobs] to reveal specifics about Dr. Flint’s attempts to rape her. She tells the reader that a young slave girl in her position ‘will become prematurely knowing in evil things,’ and that Dr. Flint swore to kill her ‘if I was not as silent as the grave’ (28)” (13). Jacobs tells the reader what is necessary to get the information across, yet cannot speak against Dr. Flint outright, even under a pseudonym. She
realizes that if she speaks out against him, there will be backlash against her for calling out a white man’s abuse. She is a woman; therefore, she cannot speak about her abuse without consequences.

Jacobs uses her narrative in an attempt to bring about a change in the institution of slavery by appealing to the free men and women of the North. Her numerous calls to action are frequent pleas for not only her sisters in bondage, but for all the people affected by slavery, even the jealous mistresses who uphold the cruel system. In her narrative, Jacobs recounts that she once saw a black child and a white child, half-sisters, playing together, and predicted the course of their lives. While the white child would be virtually untouched by troubles for the rest of her life, the black sister would drink “the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink” (28). This image of the black child and the white child, who share a parent, playing together in childhood and then growing up to led two very separate lives is made to “kindle a flame of compassion in [the free people of the North’s] hearts for [Jacobs’] sisters who are still in bondage, suffering” (28). By referring to these two children, she creates an image that nearly every woman can relate to and therefore to create sympathy for the sisters’ situation. This situation mirrors the plight of every other family, white or black, which is affected by slavery. Jacobs’ usage of this passage shows how the white and black half-sisters are affected, and also the depravity of the system that allows for such atrocities to take place.

Steve McQueen’s film 12 Years a Slave portrays the effects that slavery had on a free black man, kidnapped from the north and forced into slavery in the south. Through Solomon Northup’s eyes, the audience sees the debilitating relationship between the slave Patsey and Mistress Epps, the wife of the man who is abusing her. Several times in the film, Solomon is witness to cruelty and violence directed solely at Patsey over the fact of Mistress Epps’s jealousy. Just as Mrs. Flint feels that her womanhood is threatened by her husband’s attraction to Linda, Mistress Epps sees a threat to her own womanhood and marriage in Patsey. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that “[g]ender, race, and class relations constituted the grid that defined southern women’s objective positions in their society, constituted the elements from which they fashioned their views of themselves and their world, constituted the relations of different groups of southern women to one another” (43). These relationships constituted a southern woman’s entire life. Patsey throws a wrench into those worldviews of relationships despite the fact
that Patsey is an unwilling victim. Mistress Epps sees Patsey as a threat to her worldview and her happiness.

In the whipping scene of *12 Years a Slave*, Mistress Epps is the one commanding that her husband whip Patsey. Even though Mr. Epps made the decision to whip Patsey in the first place, he cannot seem to strike her, no matter how hard his wife goads him. Eventually, the burden of upholding the system of patriarchy by punishing black women for white men’s transgressions is handed off to Northup. Mr. Epps threatens him with death if he does not carry out the whipping, and Northup reluctantly begins to whip Patsey. Patsey is brutally punished, not for trying to run away, but for trying to get soap from her friend. As she tells Mr. Epps, Mistress Epps has been denying her soap out of cruelty. Because Patsey speaks up about the cruelty of her white master and mistress, Mr. Epps decides to tie her to the whipping post and have her flogged. Mistress Epps watches the scene with apparent glee, fully disregarding the fact that Patsey is a human being. Mistress Epps is wearing a pure white dress in this scene, contrasting with Patsey’s dark skin. Mistress Epps looks angelic, while Patsey is stripped bare and her dark skin is ripped apart by the whip.

Despite being seen by society as polar opposites of each other, black and white womanhood depended closely on each other. Each were connected by the system of patriarchy and the cult of true womanhood that oppresses them. White mistresses become jealous for the qualities in their slaves that they themselves do not have, such as the power to seduce their husbands, even if the seduction is rape. White women gained their power through their abuse of their black slaves. This abuse gives them a voice in a culture which strips them of any agency and voice. Every quality that was seen as good or pure in a white woman was seen as sin and debauchery in a black woman. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Steve McQueen’s film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* provide binaries between the white mistresses and their black slaves that reveal the relationship between the cult of true womanhood and how it affected both white and black women in the antebellum south. Jacobs’ narrative serves to represent slavery in such a way that both free whites and blacks would sympathize with. She shows the effects of that the cult of true womanhood has on her mistress as well as the southern society as a whole in order to point out the depravity and cruelty that the institution of slavery instills in both sexes of both races. In representing slavery this way, she hopes to bring about a surge of sympathy among free Northerners that will lead to a change in the institution of slavery.
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The White Mistresses Loss of Control and Desire to Inflict Pain in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

BY SHABINA PANJWANI

In Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave* and Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* show the cruelty of white mistresses. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Mistress Flint abuses Jacobs’ physically and emotionally and similarly in the film *12 Years a Slave*, Mistress Epps and Ford use violence to mistreat the female slaves to regain power in their life. The lack of control in their lives caused by the Cult of True Womanhood disempowers white mistresses because of the repression of their sexuality, glorification of a slave’s sexuality and their degradation by their spouses causes them to inflict pain upon the female slaves. In an attempt to regain their control, white mistresses Epps, Ford and Flint hurt the female slaves physically and emotionally which indirectly gives them pleasure. The Cult of True Womanhood’s imposition of virtues controls the white mistresses and because society fuels the cult’s power women cannot object to the cult’s injustices and they instead mistreat the innocent bystander, the female slaves. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *12 Years a Slave* white mistresses’ lack of control leads them to inflict pain upon the female slaves in order to regain control in their lives and by doing so they indirectly receive emotional pleasure.

The Cult of True Womanhood takes power away from the white mistresses and makes them helpless. In the article “The Cult of True Wom-
“The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (1). This belief binds all white mistresses and takes their power away from them by grouping them in one category. Additionally, each woman follows these norms because of society’s constant judgement and the fear of ostracization if they refuse to follow the norms of the cult. The virtues “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” that the Cult of True Womanhood imposes upon white women restricts women because the cult forces these virtues to be a part of their identity. However, because white mistresses put on a façade for society and their husband’s and pretend to be ideal women who possesses all the virtues, they fool society by wearing a mask because all their supposed virtues when society’s gaze disappears. Despite this act of rebellion, society still controls white mistresses and that causes them to inflict pain on the female slaves.

In *12 Years a Slave*, Steve McQueen presents a character that seems to follow the four virtues, but in reality, she too wears a mask that hides her cruelty. Mistress Ford, the wife of the first slave owner presented in the film *12 Years a Slave* appears sweet and innocent because of the way the director portraits her by manipulating her clothing and facial expressions. However, in the scene where Master Ford purchases Eliza from Freeman and brings Eliza home, Mistress Ford hears Eliza sobbing and she makes no move to comfort her. She wants to know the reason behind her tears, but when she hears that Freeman sells her children away to a different master she seems indifferent to the fact that Freeman separated her from her children and Mistress Ford states, “your children will soon be forgotten” (*12 Years a Slave*). Mistress Ford objectifies her children and Eliza by suggesting that Eliza will forget about her children, as if they were possessions. In Mistress Ford’s next scene with Eliza, Master Ford preaches to all the slaves and family members, while he preaches Eliza sobs because she misses her children and crying becomes her coping method. Mistress Ford fails to understand her grief and her words go against one of the virtues of the Cult of True Womanhood. The Cult of True Womanhood forces a white woman to be pious and Mistress Ford, from the film *12 Years a Slave* shows her impious side to the slave sitting next to her by stating, “I cannot have that depression about” (*12 Years a Slave*). Vocalizing her thoughts would take the mask away and society would ostracize Mistress Ford for her wickedness. Barbara Welters states that, “Religion or piety was the core of a woman’s virtue,
the source of her strength” (1). Even though religion consists as one of the attributes of the Cult of True Womanhood, Mistress Ford opposes the cult through her actions. She refuses to see Eliza’s pain and does not care to sympathize with Eliza’s pain. Additionally, the repression of their sexuality forces them to inflict pain on the female slaves in order to obtain the control they lose because of the Cult of True Womanhood.

The Cult of True Womanhood forces white mistresses to forgo their sexuality which ensures the lack of control in their lives. In the text *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the slave narrative’s author, Harriet Jacobs discusses the white mistress who mistreats her until she escapes. Jacobs describes Mistress Flint as a woman who “was totally deficient in energy, but … she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash” (12). Jacobs’s description of Mistress Flint shows her indifference to the pain of the slaves and makes her psychologically immune to it. When Jacobs turns fifteen and Dr. Flint begins sexually exploiting her, Jacobs’ realizes the misfortune of being a female slave. After seeing multiple encounters of Jacobs’ and her husband, Mistress Flint asks Jacobs to explain the relationship between her and Dr. Flint; however Jacobs comes to the realization that her mistress was only thinking about herself when she heard about their relationship. Mistress Flint “felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (32). While inquiring about their relationship, she only thought of how Dr. Flint’s actions affected their “marriage,” but nothing at all about how he degraded Jacobs. Instead of understanding how his actions affect Jacobs psychologically, she sees how she has been affected by the relationship. By repressing her sexuality, Mistress Flint also squashes her humanity by completely ignoring the sexual harassment of a child. Seeing her husband drift towards Jacobs’ sexuality enrages her and her rage blinds her. Her rage makes her blind to Jacobs’ misery and helplessness and only lets Mistress Flint see her own plight. Mistress Flint becomes powerless to see Jacobs’ pain, shame, and fear because the acceptance of the cult forces her to forgo her sexuality for the protection that the cult offers. Forsaking her sexuality allows her to be objectified by the patriarch. If a white mistress wants to be a part of society than she must forsake her sexuality and protect her chastity. To further argue that, Nelson states that a white mistress’s “chastity was ultimately a commodity; the product of her sexuality served the positive good of the society that simultaneously objectified and exalted her”
A white mistress’s purity becomes an object for society to look at and praise, but at the same time her chastity controls her. Additionally, a white mistresses “reproductive role was ‘glorified’ and her children ... were heirs to the economic, social, and political interests in the maintenance of the slave system” (134). Society places importance in a white mistress’s role of producing an heir, but a white mistress herself can be comparable to a machine. There seems to be no difference between her and the cotton gin, a machine that quickly and easily separates cotton fibers from their seeds. Society views a white mistress as a reproducing machine, who, instead of easily separating cotton, easily adapts to the role of an object. In reality, there lies no difference between a white mistress and a slave. Both are objectified, holding no value in the eyes of the male figures. However, the white mistress attempts to reclaim some control in her life by hurting the female slaves, believing that a slave is beneath her.

Similarly, in the film 12 Years a Slave, Steve McQueen presents the repression of the white mistresses’ sexuality. The cult forces them to succumb to a patriarchal relationship with their husband. The husband’s degradation makes the white mistresses inflict pain on the female slaves. In Dana Nelson’s, “Read the Characters, Question the Motives: Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” she explains how “the cult of True Womanhood may have extracted a heavy psychological toll on the Southern ‘lady,’ encouraging her to repress her sexuality” (134). The cult compels the white mistresses to repress her sexuality and that repression makes her lose control of herself and her life. In the film 12 Years a Slave, Mistress Epps’ repression of sexuality becomes evident when Mr. Epps chases Solomon due to his own insecurities with Patsy. After Mr. Epps instructs Solomon to bring Patsy back to the plantation and Solomon brings her back, but Patsy ignores Mr. Epps because Solomon tells her “do not look in his direction.” Being ignored by Patsy infuriates Mr. Epps, which leads him to chase Solomon around the plantation, until Mrs. Epps comes and states, “What is it? Ya cain’t remain the Sabbath without her under your eye? Ya are a no-account bastard. A filthy, godless heathen. My bed is too holy for yah ta share. ... Of yer misbegotten ways” (12 Years a Slave). Mr. Epps attachment to Patsy becomes visible to Mrs. Epps and she addresses him as a heathen because he cannot endure Solomon speaking to Patsy, nor can he stay away from her on a holy day. The repression of sexuality amplifies when she tells him that her bed is too holy for him to share. Mistress Flint implies that Mr. Epps sharing a bed with Patsy makes him unholy. A white mistress’s
repression takes away her sexual power, but on the other hand because a master lusts after a female slave their sexuality becomes glorified.

Even though the Cult of True Womanhood inhibits a white mistress’s sexuality, it glorifies a female slave’s sexuality. Nelson states, “True Womanhood functioned as a negation of the slave woman's ability to live up to that ideal of absent sexuality. So her enforced sexuality defined her failed status as ‘woman” (134). The cult glorifies the female slave for their sexuality because the white master’s lust after them, raped them, and made them the object of their desire. The patriarchy turns the female slaves into sexual objects and that therefore makes them a failed woman because they go against the cult of true womanhood. In 12 Years a Slave, Mistress Shaw a woman who was once a slave, becomes the object of desire of Master Shaw and she explains to Patsey that, “I knowed what it like to be the object of Massa’s predilections and peculiarities. And I knowed they can get expressed with kindness or wit violence. A lusty visit in the night, or a visitation from the whip” (12 Years a Slave). Mistress Shaw explains to Patsey how she must submit to Mr. Epps by telling her that she understands how it feels to be the object of a master’s desires and it can either end in “pleasure or violence,” and that her actions can decide how it ends. Patsey can either take advantage of her sexuality or use it to gain herself a position where she no longer has to work in the fields and have others serve her or suffer silently. Despite harnessing power over their sexuality, Patsey and Mistress Shaw have no control over their lives. However, Mrs. Epps controls Patsy and finds different ways to torture her because of her own desire to find control in her life.

White mistresses’ jealousy and rage forces them to carry out violent crimes against the female slave. In 12 Years a Slave, Mr. Epps forces the slaves dance as an excuse to watch Patsy dance. When Mistress Epps sees this, she becomes overcome with rage and throws a carafe at Patsy. Jealousy takes over and Mistress Flint completely loses control of herself and believes that by harming Patsy will lead to Mr. Epps paying her attention, but instead she realizes that her husband values Patsy more than her because Mr. Epps tells Mistress Epps, “Do not set yourself up against Patsey.... That’s a wager on which you will not profit. Calm yer-self. And settle for my affection, ‘cause my affection you got. ... ‘Cause I will rid myself of yah well before I do away with her!” (12 Years a Slave). Knowing that somebody she believes to be inferior matters more to her husband then herself infuriates her, and she enjoys the pain that she inflicts upon Patsy.
A white mistresses lack of control forces them to inflict pain on female slaves in order to regain some control in their lives. In *12 Years a Slave*, the award winning flogging scene, which occurs because Mr. Epps believes that Patsy disobeys him and attempts to run away to the Shaw plantation, but in actuality she goes to the Shaw plantation to obtain soap because Mrs. Epps refuses to give Patsy soap, which proves to be another way she tries to control Patsy. In this scene, Mistress Epps controls both Mr. Epps and Solomon by commanding them to whip Patsy. Mistress Epps controls both men shows her desire to control. This scene also shows how she enjoys watching Patsy suffer and writhe in pain. The numerous blows on Patsy’s back seems inadequate to Mistress Epps. Even though she wants control in her life she commands Mr. Epps to whip Patsy instead of whipping Patsy herself and this shows that she enjoys the aspect of control her pain allows her to hold power over her pain. In the article, “Humanitarian and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture” Karen Haltanen states, “Sentimental Sympathy was said to be a dear delicious pain ‘a sort of pleasing Anguish’-an emotional experience that liberally mingled pleasure with vicarious pain” (308). Patsy’s pain intermingled with Mistress Epps’s pleasure becomes an emotional pleasure for Mistress Epps. Patsy’s anguish takes the place of the lack of control in Mistress Epps’ life. The second hand pain offers her pleasure and allows her to vent her rage and obtain control into her own life. However, Mistress Flint goes further than inflicting physical pain, she also degrades Patsy in order to change Patsy’s her husband’s opinion of Patsy.

In addition to inflicting physical pain, Mistress Epps also causes emotional pain in Patsy’s life. She withholds soap, food, and degrades Patsy in front of Mr. Epps in order to change his opinion regarding Patsy. Additionally, causing Patsy pain brings pleasure into her life. The physical pain cannot satisfy her, so she goes further in causing pain. Haltunnen states that a white mistresses desire to inflict pain becomes a “moon-struck madness, hunting after torture” (308). Mistress Flint’s desire to cause Patsey pain becomes a madness. When hunting for ways to torture Patsy, Mistress Epps loses herself completely. In *12 Years a Slave*, when Mistress Epps gives all the slaves food except Patsy because she wants to exclude her and control what she eats, she presents a side which makes Patsy look disobedient reasoning that her husband will pay attention to her instead of a slave she considers beneath her. However, when Mr. Epps refuses to pay attention to her she lets her anger loose and drives her nails into Patsy’s face and leaves gashes in her face. When
Mistress Epps hears Patsy’s cries a smug smile appears on her face, which indicates her pleasure for causing Patsy’s pain. However, Mistress Flint continues because of her desire to cause even more significant pain and in order to achieve her goal she beats Mr. Epps. Mistress Epps states “You are manless. A damned eunuch if ever there was. And if yah won’t stand for me, I’d pray you’d at least be a credit to yer own kind and beat every foul thought from ‘em” (12 Years a Slave). Mistress Epps continuous criticism and attack on his manliness sets Mr. Epps off and he takes Patsy from the room. Even when criticizing him her lack of control is evident because she states, “if yah won’t stand for me” this statement signifies her knowledge of Mr. Epps not standing up for her because she is aware of her insignificance in his life. Mistress Epps forces her husband to give her the control by criticizing him and even the control given to her is asked for which reflects on her lack of power. Mr. Epps whips Patsy even though she forces him to give her the control which gives her pleasure. Being the cause of Patsy’s whipping gives Mistress Epps pleasure and control in her life.

Similarly, in the text, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Mrs. Flint wants to regain control of her life and by instilling a fear in Jacobs’ life she controls her. Jacobs’ states, “I began to be fearful for my life. It had been often threatened; and you can imagine, better than I can describe ... [to] wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous woman bending over you” (33). After Mistress Flint finds out the details of Jacob’s and her husband’s relationship, Mistress Flint begins whispering in her ears, similar to Dr. Flint in order to scare her. The emotional trauma of Dr. Flint whispering foul images and Mistress Flint doing the same exact act made Jacobs’ fear for her life. However, the emotional trauma was not enough for Mistress Flint. She punishes Jacobs’ by taking away her shoes in February and run errands walking in the snow barefoot. When her grandmother replaces her shoes and Jacobs’ “walked through Mrs. Flint’s room, [the shoes] creak[ed, and] grated harshly on [Mistress Flint’s] refined nerves and she told Jacobs’ to ‘take them off, ... and if you put them on again, I’ll throw them into the fire’” (19). Because the sound of the new shoes annoyed her, she made Jacobs take them off and walk barefoot through the snow. Even though Mrs. Flint does not watch her walk through the snow she relishes in the pain that Jacob’s receives because of her orders. Additionally, Jacobs’ desire of “thinking the next day would find me sick, perhaps dead” shows the control that she has on Jacobs’ and that control is what the Mistress Flint delights in. Her husband’s disrespect and degradation forces her to turn into a monster
who always seeks control in her life and controlling a slave’s life allows her to bring control into her own life. The imposition of pain results in control for the white mistress which indirectly gives her pleasure. And in her article, Halttunen states, that inflicting pain “excites a horrible feeling..., -a feeling which we might conceive to belong to evil spirits” (323). Inflicting pain on Jacobs excited Mistress Flint because the pain indirectly brings control into her life. The absence of control in their life represents the desire to hurt the female slaves.

In the text *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and film *12 Years a Slave* white mistresses show their cruelty by inflicting pain on the female slaves. The Cult of True Womanhood forces the white mistresses to repress their sexuality and watch as their husband’s lust after the females slaves. This repression takes their control away and makes them helpless and in order to regain control in their lives they inflict pain on the female slaves. However, white mistresses begin to cling to the continuous infliction of pain. The pain makes them lose their humanity. The constant pressure by society, being degraded by her husband because the white master’s consider their wives insignificant make them lose their humanity. Their actions prove their inhumanity. Fredrick Douglass’s argument that the system of slavery makes a white mistress inhumane points at Mistress Epps, Flint and Ford and their lack of humanity towards the slaves. The representation of slavery in Mistress Epps, Ford and Flint reflect on the morality of the white women and how inflicting pain on the female slaves corrupts their morality. These texts contribute to the larger discussion of representation of slavery because it reflects on how a lack of control forces women to behave a certain way and to torture other women and view them as objects. Additionally, how a person’s own objectivity allows them to see the pain of others and being indifferent to their pain. The cries nor the blood dripping affects the white mistress in either text, which shows how after seeing and inflicting multiple counts of torture makes them lose their own morality.

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Deconstructing Power in Representations of Slavery
Two of the most pivotal movies that represent black men attempting to be dominant over white men are the 1977 mini-series adaptation of Alex Haley’s critically acclaimed *Roots*, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, and the 1989 film adaptation of *Glory*, directed by Edward Zwick. The film adaptations of *Roots* and *Glory* present illusions of dominance and submission. In each film, characters struggle with oppression from their white masters and commanders, and they offer a lens of physical and psychological resistance to slavery. These films portray black men who challenge the crucial social role: slaves are not supposed to question their masters. Researcher Gervase Phillips argues in his article *Slave Resistance In The Antebellum South* that “the American slave was far from submissive and that the Old South was riven by social tension, confrontation and the fear of servile revolt” (34). In both films, characters create tension by confronting the men “in charge” of them. *Roots* portrays Fiddler, an old, kind spirited slave, who takes Kunta Kinte, a young slave, under his wing to guide and teach. In two scenes, Fiddler and Kunta Kinte give the illusion of being submissive slaves, but upon close analysis, they appear to be dominant. *Glory* depicts the historical 54th Massachusetts regiment which portrays an entire regiment as runaway slaves and free slaves who enlist during the Civil War. In specific scenes, Trip—a run-
away slave—struggles with expressing his dominance over the white men in his regiment. Trip’s struggle is evident in his flogging scene and in the “church” scene before their first battle. In both scenes, Trip denounces his expected submissive behavior in order to express his ability to be dominant. According to critic Bertram Wyatt-Brown, author of “The Mask of Obedience: Slave Psychology in the Old South,” it was common for slaves to display “dignity, resistance, indifference, and plain criminality” during slavery, so it would not have been uncommon for slaves to assert their ability to express their agency. Throughout films pertaining to representations of slavery, directors often portray black men as being submissive to the white slave master or commander. However, films such as *Roots* and *Glory* show the opposite to be true. There are multiple occasions where black men give illusions of being submissive, but when analyzing specific scenes, one finds that; the men are, in fact, dominant. Because these men are able to assert their dominance, illusions of submissiveness present themselves throughout the films, creating the notion in order to survive one must give the illusion of submission.

The 1977 screen adaptation of Alex Haley’s *Roots* displays the harsh treatment Africans faced during slavery and the ways in which they presented themselves as being submissive and dominant. Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, the mini-series is “a part of American cinematic history and cultural consciousness” (PBS) because it sheds light on the lives of slaves. In a seven-minute scene in which Fiddler confronts his master about sparing Kunta Kinte from the flogging, the power of the film displays the struggle between submission and dominance that African Americans endured. The scene details moments of obscure and manipulative social and physical power. Through this scene, Chomsky displays their struggle not only through spoken words, but also through body language and scenery. Fiddler encounters his mistress inside the house, an area where farm hands were not typically allowed. With quick scene changes, a play on shadows and illuminating specific characters, and a lack of background noise, Chomsky creates unnerving personal settings. He effectively displays Fiddler’s struggle for declaring dominance while attempting to give his master the illusion of submission through the use of camera angles that place him at a higher physical level, while maintaining a respectful distance.

Through this scene, Fiddler and Kunta Kinte’s relationship during their enslavement becomes apparent. The act friendship aids slaves in their attempt to assert their dominance, especially because slave masters do not approve of such behavior. According to Sergio Lussana, author of
Illusions of Dominance and Submissiveness

“No Band of Brothers Could Be More Loving”: Enslaved Male Homosociality, Friendship, and Resistance in the Antebellum American South,” enslaved men often bonded together in order to “frame, shape, and give meaning to their homosocial relationships. These relationships raised the self-esteem of enslaved men; serving as a buffer against the dehumanizing features of enslaved life, and a source [to inspire] resistance” (874). Fiddler’s “friendship” with Kunta Kinte evidences his attempt to prove to his master that he will not be completely submissive to him; by choice, Fiddler actively challenges the system of slavery because his friendship can, “in some cases, ultimately prove subversive, directly challenging the system of slavery” (Lussana 883). Fiddler starts to play with the laws of submission and dominance; by physically and vocally asking to meet with the master regarding Kunta Kinte’s recent escape and his inevitable brush with the whip.

Immediately, the camera draws attention to Fiddler’s submissive appearance; his hunched body, averted eyes, and polite manners display the “traditional” submissive behavior expected of a slave. Continuing the image of submission, the camera places characters in such a way—a long shot that zooms in to a mid-shot—that the mistress’ social power directly appeals to her being physically higher than Fiddler. Throughout their conversation, he continuously averts his eyes while she keeps hers on him at all times. By giving the illusion of submissiveness, Fiddler asserts his dominance. He averts his eyes, causing his mistress to believe in her power to control his submission. However, as the mistress begins her descent down the stairs, Fiddler becomes physically larger illustrating his power over her. Thus, Fiddler’s submissive behavior creates an illusion. Fiddler begins to reveal his dominant behavior as he begins to appeal to the master’s religion, which gains him favor from the mistress. Chomsky presents the shift between submission and dominance discreetly by using subtle camera angles that place Fiddler at a higher physical stance, lighting that illuminates him, and body language that allows him to assert his opinions.

As the scene progresses, Mrs. Reynolds regains dominance by attempting to put Fiddler back in a submissive stance. Although she politely agrees to grant a meeting with her husband, she takes her time pausing to realign a picture hanging outside of the office. Her body language suggests that although she realizes the importance of the meeting, it is not top priority for her. This moment sets the tone for how she has regained her dominance. The scene takes place in a well-lit entry way and a stairwell giving the illusion that Mrs. Reynolds is generally polite.
and open minded. However, the scene also illuminates Fiddler at the same time, because the room illuminates him, his dominance and submissiveness becomes central focus. The quick change in scenery offers a reminder of the importance of their conversation Fiddler wishes to have with the master, the scene with the mistress ultimately inflicts the feeling of being rushed and worried about the outcome. What if Fiddler does not change the master’s mind in time? With little to no background noise, Mrs. Reynolds’ comment, “Fiddler, don’t overstay your welcome,” seems strikingly overbearing, especially because she cuts him off mid-sentence. As she enters the office seemingly at her own pace, the camera switches to the events taking place outside, the whipping of Kunta Kinte. The changes represent that adaption Fiddler has to make throughout his interaction with his mistress, he has to skillfully master being able to become dominant while creating the illusion of being submissive.

The balance between submission and dominance is continuously bounced around like a child’s ball in the five minute office scene between Fiddler and his master. Immediately the lighting, the positioning of characters and the camera angles give the impression of tension, apprehension, and the struggle for dominance in the conversation. The scene begins in the midst of an ongoing conversation, creating a disjointed and uncomfortable feeling in the space. Presumably, how Fiddler seems at times. The jump into the middle of the conversation creates the feeling of apprehension; especially because of Fiddler’s fleeting attempt to change the master’s mind about whipping Kunta Kinte. Mr. Reynolds strategically sits amongst books and writing utensils, a clear act by Chomsky to display his overt and unquestionable dominance over Fiddler. Mr. Reynolds gives the illusion of total dominance over Fiddler; his books suggest higher education, higher social standing, and higher ability to contend with confrontation. Mr. Reynolds, with a deliberate and condescending tone, questions Fiddler’s intelligence by inferring that Fiddler does not know what continence and deduction mean. By questioning Fiddler’s comprehension, Mr. Reynolds displays his dominance—how can a black man possibly be as competent as a white? However, Fiddler demonstrates his ability to become a dominant force by appealing to his master’s ego, his word, and his money.

Throughout the scene, Mr. Reynolds displays his dominance by questioning Fiddler’s intelligence. The lack of background noise further enhances the deliberate and condescending questions about whether or not Fiddler knows what continence and deduction mean. The slave driver’s reprimands interrupt Fiddler’s plea for Kunta Kinte’s release,
creating a sense of urgency. Throughout the scene, the lighting remains dark and closed, insinuating the closed-mindedness of the master: he is unwilling to grant Fiddler’s request. The darkness and gaps in the conversation appeal to the desire to see the outcome of Fiddler’s plea, but the intrusion of the conversation by the slave driver hinders the experience; again, displaying Fiddler’s submission to his master.

Even though Fiddler attempts to balance the illusion of submission with his desire for dominance, he ultimately fails to persuade his master. The scene progresses to the end with more frequent jumps to the whipping, ultimately allowing the brutality to become the focus. The resolution rests on the notion that Fiddler’s efforts, however brave and insistent, will falter under the pressure of the system of slavery. The camera cuts to three shots that pan from left to right: the white slave driver being at the center of all of his shots, black men and women staring in shock and disbelief, and Kunta Kinte and the man whipping him sharing their shots. Throughout the end of the scene the ever ominous crack of the whip echoes in unison with the slave driver’s commands for Kunta Kinte to accept his new name. The camera pans over the faces of the witnesses, slowly displaying the wordless shock and horror on their faces, with Fiddler being the only black man in the scene to speak out against the whites. Fiddler’s comment, “Lord, God, help that boy” becomes his final attempt to confront his desire for dominance. Fiddler knows that he cannot physically intervene with the “system” of slavery, yet he verbally disagrees with the punishment. By only verbally disagreeing, Fiddler remains “submissive” because he will not physically intervene; thus furthering the illusion of submission.

Kunta Kinte’s whipping scene presents his struggle with dominance and submission. He presents himself as being dominant and insisting that his name is indeed Kunta Kinte, not Toby, while giving the illusion of being submissive by enduring the whipping. Throughout the scene his refusal becomes the one way he can express such dominance. According to Kyle Ainsworth, author of the article “Beneath the Paternal Gaze: Threads of Community in Black Resistance,” it is common for “Masters [to try] to exercise absolute control...of their enslaved people, but despite coercion and the threat of harsh penalties, slaves had found ways to resist” (47). In his initial refusal to accept his new name, Toby, Kunta Kinte refuses to let his master control him. Eventually, through tears of pain, he repeats that his name is Toby. At first, this may seem as an act of submission, but with deeper analysis, this may be Kunta Kinte’s way of becoming the dominant one, once again. He understands
that he has the control to end the whipping, all by accepting his given name. By appearing submissive to the slave driver Kunta Kinte asserts his dominance, causing the field hand to unknowingly experience a false sense of achievement in being able to make Kunta Kinte accept his new name. Chomsky blends camera angles, lighting, and body language seamlessly throughout the scene involving Fiddler, Mrs. Reynolds, Mr. Reynolds, and Kunta Kinte. The scene gives the impression of a constant struggle between submission and dominance from all characters involved. Fiddler continuously attempts to gain dominance over both his master and mistress while they attempt to prove their dominance. The constant shift compels viewers to fully involve themselves within the scene. By compelling interest, Chomsky presents the ability to observe the struggles that Africans would have experienced during slavery.

Similar to *Roots*, Zwicks’ film *Glory* challenges expected behavior and mistreatment of African Americans, especially Trip. The observation that men were unjustly flogged and abused becomes one tool for analysis. Authors Ervin L. Jordan and George Hughes examine the soldiers of the historical 54th regiment in their article “The Men Of The 54th.” They detail that “Despite their willingness to fight, black soldiers faced many problems. They usually received lower pay. They often were given little or poor training, second-rate tents and uniforms, and inadequate weapons” (1). The men in the film also struggle with a poor livelihood. In one three-minute scene, Trip expresses his refusal to accept the lack of adequate footwear, so he leaves the camp to find proper shoes, when he returns, he receives his punishment; another trope of punishment that is all too common to films regarding African Americans. Trip’s action to acquire proper shoes reveals his desire to express his dominance. He refuses to wait for a white man to help him, so he takes it upon himself. According to author Gervase Phillips, acts like this were common for slaves. He says that “The majority of slaves signaled their discontent not by taking part in doomed acts of rebellion, but through subtler tactics. Their overseers saw their wayward behavior as simple ‘rascality’. Historians, however, have come to understand it as ‘day-to-day resistance’ or ‘silent sabotage’” (36). Trip’s actions allow him to express his discontent with his commander’s decision to not supply adequate footwear, so he leaves the camp to find shoes for himself.

The scene shows Trip being marched with all of the regiment present to watch; a common theme in African American history in which one man is made to be the example for all to learn from. Trip’s appearance with a sorrowful sounding trumpet suggests that the moment, indeed,
is one of distress. Trip is referred to as “the prisoner,” which immediately renounced his title as a soldier—creating the illusion of a slave. In his article, *Blacks in Blue*, Steve Mintz reveals “that [even] within the ranks, black troops faced repeated humiliations; most were employed in menial assignments, and kept in rear-echelon, fatigue jobs. [Soldiers] were [often] punished by whipping or by being tied by their thumbs” (2). Trip’s flogging represents the looming presence of racism in the military and his forced submission. Trip forces himself to give the illusion of submissiveness, which in turn makes him dominant. Initially, the director portrays Trip as being submissive because of his bound wrists while walking into focus. Bertram Wyatt-Brown calls attention to the psychological effects that floggings had on slaves. He says that “whippings had three major [psychological] effects. They degraded the victim, shut down more normal communications, but most of all, compelled the victim to repress the inevitable anger felt toward those responsible for the pain and disgrace” (1). Trip appears to have internalized such psychological effects, causing him to be even more determined to express his dominance. The scene is set in broad daylight, which further enhances the ability for all to see what will transpire. Trip is used as a pawn in order to prevent any further action that may occur in response to the treatment the men of the 54th endured. Critic Julius Rodriguez reminds readers in his book *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion, Volume 2*, that public events like this “enabled authorities to display their power to enforce rule by removing the threatening forces. Such spectacles simultaneously assured whites that order had been restored and...as a warning to others who might attempt to organize insurrections” (467). Although Trip did not attempt an insurrection, had he not been flogged, more soldiers may have attempted to defend their right to adequate necessities like he did. A white male officer escorts Trip to his punishment, suggesting that the white male is consistently dominant throughout the African male’s life.

After an apprehensive Colonel Shaw administers the command “to commence” with the flogging, the camera pans to Trip, who immediately acknowledges his captain with direct eye contact and a slight nod, readily accepts the consequences. Here, Trip begins to assert his dominance while slightly giving the illusion of being submissive to his commander. He takes control of the situation; almost in an attempt to let those around him know that he will not completely submit to the will of his captain. He removes his own shirt, refusing to be a victim, and places his hands on the wagon wheel preparing himself mentally.
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for the flogging. Because Trip does all of this on his own, he takes away the white officer’s control, clearly removing the officer’s agency as a dominant white male. Throughout the remaining portion of the scene, Trip maintains eye contact with Colonel Shaw; suggesting a continuous and intense connection to one another. The camera then pans back and forth while closing in on just their faces. A connection is made between Trip’s face and Colonel Shaw’s, further enhancing Trip’s control of the situation. He does not cry out in pain, he does not scream, he only sheds one tear. Pairing the omniscient crack of the whip with sorrowful music enhances the connection created between colonel and soldier. In total Trip receives 20 lashes for his punishment. Trip’s body language, lack of verbal expression, and lighting solidifies the impact of his actions. Even though he is in excruciating pain and silently cries, Trip allows the commander to see him as being submissive. In reality, he asserts his dominance by accepting the flogging.

Another scene in which Trip asserts his dominance over white men is the pre-battle “church” scene in which Trip displays his discontent with his situation. Because the men in the 54th regiment are expected to fight after enlisting in the army Trip sees this as having to fight for the white men. His hate for the war blinds the nature of the fight: the fight for freedom. The scene begins with the regiment singing a pre-battle song. Shrouded in darkness with the only light coming from the fire, the men are united—all except Trip. Trip’s body language suggests hesitation to participate with the group. He sits quietly amongst the men, but is offset in the background. Only when John Rawlins, a fellow African American soldier, encourages Trip by saying, “Come on, you’re doin’ fine” does Trip’s demeanor change. Trip begins to realize the reason for the war and that the men fighting with him are his brothers in arms, he admits that they are “the only family [he had]” (Glory, 54th Infantry Pre-Battle Song) and that he loves the 54th. Quickly, the music and chanting dies down, creating a dramatic moment when Trip becomes the central focus. The camera cuts to a close-up shot for the entirety of Trip’s speech, suggesting that Trip allows his feelings to become dominant; he is no longer being submissive to the white men in control of the regiment because he realizes that these men are in control of themselves. He expresses his dominance by being able to choose to participate with his fellow soldiers and allowing himself to set aside his hate he has for the men under whom he serves.

In Roots and Glory, both Kunta Kinte and Trip are flogged for their behavior because it was customary for masters to make an example of
slaves who misbehaved. White men had to prove that their black slaves had to be submissive to them. Dinah Mayo-Bobee discusses punishment in the article, *Servile Discontents: Slavery and Resistance in Colonial New Hampshire, 1645-1785*. She describes how “Colonial New England’s slaveholders frequently used violence to control, punish, and intimidate slaves...Slaves sometimes lost appendages or were cut and scarred in their work, but others were beaten or maimed as punishment for running away or committing some other infraction” (344). Compared to Kunta Kinte’s whipping scene, Trip’s becomes even more personal, almost as if he has a vendetta against the white men in control of him. Kunta Kinte’s disobedience comes from him insisting on being called by his African name, all while allowing those around him to hear his pain. Trip, on the other hand, forces those around him to suffer with him in silence. Because they both accept their consequences, they appear to be submissive, but it is through their illusions that they challenge their masters’ authority, thus becoming dominant.

Although slaves are typically expected to remain submissive to their white counterparts, the men portrayed in both *Roots* and *Glory* continuously attempt to assert their dominance while giving the illusion of being submissive. These films present a compelling struggle between the delicate balance of being submissive and dominant. At times, the men in the films are not able to maintain their dominance and eventually give in to what appears to be submissive stances; however, the men are merely giving the illusion of being submissive when they are still, in fact, dominant. Fiddler confronts both his mistress and his master; he appears to fluctuate between being submissive and dominant in each encounter. While confronting the mistress and master, he diverts his eyes and maintains a polite disposition, but he continuously maneuvers his body in such a way that demonstrates dominance. Kunta Kinte manages to assert his dominance by willfully refusing to accept his new name. Eventually he gives in, but not out of pure submission; he gives in knowing that when he does that he is giving the illusion of being submissive. The budding relationship between Fiddler and Kunta Kinte represents a form of dominance because slaves were not supposed to create close bonds for fear of revolt against their masters.

Similarly, Trip asserts his dominance in both the flogging scene and the pre-battle scene. Though he gives the illusion of being submissive, he is, in fact, maintaining his dominance. He proves his dominance over his commander by not vocalizing his pain and by removing his own shirt and placing his hands on the wheel. When he finally decides
to join the group in their sing-along, Trip demonstrates his ability to give the illusion of being submissive while remaining dominant. Each character continuously displays the importance of not succumbing to submission, only giving the illusion of being so. Fiddler, Kunta Kinte, and Trip all challenge the notion that their white counterparts—master or commander—will not always dominate their lives. They may give the illusion of being submissive by accepting a punishment, accepting a name, crying, or willfully joining a group, but through their actions they declare their dominance. The apparent struggle between submissiveness and dominance in *Roots* and *Glory* displays Fiddler, Kunta Kinte, and Trip’s ability to create illusions. By creating illusions, each man successfully expresses his ability to assert his autonomy in society. The films *Roots* and *Glory* represent the struggles African American males face on a daily basis. The notion that in order to survive one must give the illusion of submission is prevalent. Through the display of illusions, the directors offer a lens of psychological resistance to slavery.

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Film adaptations, such as Belle and Alex Haley’s Queen, make no attempt to hide the atrocity of slavery. On camera, dehumanized characters overcome the hardships of an oppressive system and obtain freedom. These films often culminate in a granting of legal manumission, which, in turn, implies a repossession of subject-hood for the ex-slave and a redemption of the system that bound him or her in the first place. Many films depict this redemptive conclusion as the ultimate fulfilling end, as if slavery’s abolition eradicated every exploitation of the system. For the characters in these slave adaptations, their struggle for freedom appears to end with the rolling credits; however, the stories represented on film often portray more ills than just those created by slavery. In Belle and Queen, the main characters, from which each film receives its name, must battle more than racial injustices. Beyond the oppression of slavery, the young women also face the subjugation of life in a patriarchal society. While facing similar plights, the differences in each character’s story results from their portrayals on film. Although Queen and Belle show the effects of patriarchy and slavery and how those systems bind and produce divided identities among mixed-raced women, only Belle privileges the point of view of its heroine, granting her a twice-won freedom from both institutions.

BOUND AND DIVIDED:
The Effects of Patriarchy and Slavery on Mixed-Raced Women in the Film Adaptations Queen (1993) and Belle (2013)

BY RA’NIQUA LEE

I have been blessed with freedom twice over, as a negro and as a woman. —Belle

Ra’Niqua Lee
Both *Belle* and *Queen* depict slavery as a system dependent on separating blacks from whites. In “Onerous Passions: Colonial Anti-Miscegenation Rhetoric and the History of Sexuality,” Nadine Ehlers discusses how slavery and racism shaped relations between blacks and whites. Society justified slavery “by conceptualizing blacks as inherently distinct due to differences in appearance. Europeans formulated a ‘blackness’, and by implication a ‘whiteness’” (Ehlers 326). In other words, white people constructed racial difference based on belief in inherent differences between races. Instead of identifying people based on their individual characteristics, the dominant class created two broad categories: white and black. They “conceptualized” the characteristics of these categories, or constructed them, and this construction received its basis from physical appearances.

In the film *Queen*, society upholds the separation between blacks and whites, using it to create a stratified class structure and maintain the divide. Part one of the film depicts a wedding between a slave man and woman. White characters call the slave wedding “a charade and a fiasco,” and they frown upon “mixing slaves and white folks at a social event.” In a wide establishing shot, a bride and groom stand at a fork in a pathway. Their black, slave, guests enter on one side, shaking their hands. On the other side of the fork, the couple’s owners greet the white guests. The fork in the path creates a literal division between whites and blacks. As an institution legitimized by law, marriage functions in the framework of the social structure. The characters in the film treat the ceremony as a communal event in a fundamentally fractured society. Blacks must not mix with whites, nor can they receive the legitimation usually provided by the government. The slaves’ marriage has no legal validity, and the white characters mock the event as well as its participants. The white character’s treatment of the ceremony reinforces the social structure and the separation. They view slaves as objects at which to poke fun, mere humor for white amusement.

In the film *Belle*, Dido faces a similar separation, which shows how the condition of slavery depended on that divide. Although a free woman living in England in the eighteenth century, Dido cannot dine with her family at the dinner table when they entertain guests. She can only interact with the guests “after dinner, when formality is of less consequence, [and] her presence can raise no defendable objections.” Like the society represented in *Queen*, the society in *Belle* operates on an order dictated by race. Lord Mansfield, Dido’s uncle and guardian, acts as a member of the Superior Court Judge in England, a slave-trading capitol. His
acceptance of Dido as a subject, a human being, jeopardizes his ability and willingness to make decisions in favor of slavery. In order to prove his loyalty to his country, he exercises decorum. While entertaining guests, the Mansfield family takes into account the prejudices of their society, which leaves Dido to dine alone in the parlor when someone arrives for dinner who might object to her presence. Although her family attempts to treat her as an equal, under the system, her skin color still ensures her separation.

Further evidence of the desire for racial separation stems from the mistress’s discomfort when she learns of Colonel James’s illegitimate slave daughter in Queen. Returning to Ehler’s article on race relations during slavery, white women “became accountable for maintaining the white hetero-patriarchal family and were framed as its moral protectors” (Ehlers 334). Under the system of slavery, women had specific roles to fill, which were delineated based on their race. White women bore the responsibility of continuing the system through their children. Although situated below white men in the social structure, white women experienced a status higher than that of their black counterparts. However, their status faced opposition from the existence of mixed-race children. In “No Such Thing as a Mulatto Slave,” Fiona Vernal discusses court cases in which slave women won manumission based on evidence of sexual relations with their masters. She argues that “sexual relations between slave women and slave owners...threatened the existing status divisions by creating mulatto children who could claim white paternity” (Vernal 28). While not always the case, slave women with mixed-race children could prove their relationships with their masters. The word “could” emphasizes the possibility. By essence of their existence, these mixed-raced children held the possibility of claim in relation to their fathers, whether that claim be recognized or not. Upon realizing that Colonel James, Queen’s father and master, has fathered a slave child, Lizzy, his intended bride, decides to cancel their engagement. Her mother convinces her to change her mind, arguing that the slave women exist for the master’s sexual amusement and nothing else. She emphasizes the slave women’s objectified status as pure sexual entities in order to assert that Lizzy’s position as Colonel James’s wife will remain intact, despite the threat she might fear from his interactions with slave women. By negating the slave women’s subjectivity, her mother reassures Lizzy of her own subjectivity and status.

Beyond serving as proof of their fathers’ affairs with black women, the heroines in both Queen and Belle function as physical contradic-
tions of the slave system. In the article “White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction,” Nancy Bentley discusses the portrayal of mixed-race characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Richard Hildreth’s *Archy Moore*. According to Bentley, “blood relations bound Africans and Europeans and subverted the idea of a natural boundary between black and white” (Bentley 503-504). In other words, mixing white and black blood destroyed the notion of inherent separation between blacks and whites. As mentioned before, the slave system relied on that separation. If blacks belong bound and objectified because of their inherent differences, then whites belong in positions of power. However, Queen and Belle have black and white blood. The system’s definitions create a paradox that, in theory, makes them both empowered and objectified. The system seeks to maintain a boundary between blacks and whites. Queen and Belle contradict that system by embodying the blood of both.

Societies in *Belle* and *Queen* reject the contradiction their existences create in favor of maintaining the system. According to Bentley, “U.S. law denied [mulattoes] existence—in legal terms Mulattoes were identical with blacks” (Bentley 503). In order to impede the contradiction, the system repudiated any notion of mixing by creating a separation that did not exist. Imposing this separation allowed for a reifying of the system. After Easter, one of Colonel James’s slaves, gives birth to Queen, another slave calls the child “white as cotton.” The characters in the film cannot tell Queen’s ethnicity by looking at her. In appearance, she can claim sameness with her father/master’s family. In reality, she receives no legitimation. After her birth, Colonel James records her name in a ledger. He gives her the name “Queen,” but he leaves the space for a surname black. He knows she has his blood, but he makes a conscious decision to refuse her his last name. This rejection reinforces her position as a black slave and attempts to revoke her right to claim her father and her family.

Similarly, society also rejects Dido’s embodied contradiction. Michele and Harry Elam discuss the appeal for racial remuneration in “Blood Debt: Reparations in Langston Hughes’s Mulatto.” They argue that “real whiteness or real coloredness is about enactment and doing—and it is the doing that makes them real” (Elam 95). In other words, characters can only claim identities they can perform. Their actions create their character. For characters whose actions others control, they can only perform the roles allotted to them by their controllers. As a slave woman, Queen receives more regulation than Dido. Her society has cre-
ated the terms of her bondage. Through those terms, she can be black and objectified, nothing else. In contrast, Dido’s free status complicates her position. Her father seeks to give her a “life equal to [his] blood.” Therefore, he leaves her with his uncle while he continues his career in the navy. Dido receives the love and tutelage of her family. However, that love comes at the expense of any semblance of her mother’s heritage. Although her father calls her “Belle, after her mother,” his aunt calls her “Dido,” ignoring the name and the last piece Dido has to keep from her diseased mother. In both the cases of Queen and Dido, the system forces the characters to reject half of themselves. For Queen to remain a slave and Belle to remain free, the women have to fall on either side of a problematic spectrum, either black or white, never both.

In order to maintain the racial divide created within themselves, both women must remain ignorant of their full identities. According to Michele and Harry Elam, “much contemporary literary analysis of the ‘mulatto’ takes the mixed-race figure as an icon of private neurosis,” and the afflictions these characters faced “are not only personal or familial, but rather, they engage a larger agonistic struggle” (Elam 87-88). In other words, mixed-race characters suffered private confusion that caused distress and uncertainty about their identities. They faced confusion about where their identities left them within their own families, but that confusion indicated a bigger struggle. A type of “neurosis” appears in Belle and Queen as an attempt at rationalizing the characters’ existences. Under the system, they do not, or should not, exist. When Queen asks her mother where the “white part of her” comes from, her mother tells her it “don’t matter.” Queen’s society has fractured her identity and prevented her from claiming part of herself, but her mother realizes that, under the system, it does not matter where the “white part” of her daughter originates. Queen cannot acknowledge that part of her identity. In Belle, Dido fears the painter’s canvas. The paintings she sees that feature minorities portray them as subservient. When she expresses this fear to her uncle, he does not understand her distress. He accepts her as family, and he sees no need for her duress. Belle and Queen receive information that differs from what they know as truth, and that lack of consistency adds to their confusion.

Although slavery created a divide between blacks and whites, and that divide results in fractured heroines for both films Belle and Queen, patriarchy seems almost as big a culprit of creating this division. Beyond the racial oppression the characters face, Belle and Queen also contend with the oppression of a patriarchal system. Dona Nelson discusses relations
between slave women and white mistresses in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the article “The Word in Black and White: Reading ‘race’ in American Literature.” She argues that “patriarchal slavery is fueled by the oppression of blacks and women,” and so “the profoundest victim… is the slave woman” (Nelson 134). The slave system persisted through the commodification of black bodies. The system positioned black people, as a general rule, in subhuman status. Black women, however, experienced a double oppression. Not only did their race play a major part in their degradation, but their gender played a part as well. For Dido, the debate centers on which oppression weighs more, racial or patriarchal. She has good breeding and an inheritance, two things necessary for class in 18th century Britain, and she receives a marriage proposal from Oliver Ashford, a man of good breeding whose position would neither raise her social status nor degrade it. If she refuses the proposal she will remain at Kenwood house as an “unwanted maid.” The proposal raises Dido to a level equal to that of white women. Women in her society equate husbands to security. In eighteenth-century Britain, women could not inherit property if they had brothers, and they remained in their father’s care until either they married or he died. The women moved from one male’s care to another. Without men, society considered them “unwanted” and they had few options. Therefore, Dido has two options upon receiving the proposal from Oliver: she can become a maid or she can agree to a life under his care.

However, *Belle* reveals the ways in which marriage acts as a transaction. In “The Cost of Marriage and the Matrimonial Agency in Late Victorian Britain,” Harry Cocks discusses marriage ads in Victorian newspapers and how those ads reflected matrimonial practices of the time. Cocks argues that “marriage was mainly a financial transaction [that] dated back to the early eighteenth century” (Cocks 69). Unlike the ideal of modern society, marriage in Victorian England revolved around money and politics. Often, the decision to marry derived from a desire for financial gain and matches resulted from “assessing one’s personal value in the marriage market” (Cocks 68). This “marriage market” implies commodification of love and, more fundamentally, of people. Dido’s intends to marry a second son. Under the inheritance laws, all of his father’s property will go to his older brother, James Ashford. Therefore, he has no fortune of his own. His mother, who objects to his interest in Dido at first, remarks that Dido looks “better and better every time she sees her” after learning of Dido’s inheritance. Lady Ashford’s change in opinion results from a desire for her son’s financial gain. Money becomes the incentive for the
marriage between Dido and Oliver, making the entire arrangement a financial transaction. Although Dido has the fortune, the money will not buy her husband. It buys her husband’s forgiveness of her race and, in turn, leaves her bonded in union with a man who has commodified her and revoked her subjectivity. In his pursuit of Dido, Oliver states that he will “overlook [her] mother’s origins.” His assertion reduces her race to a transgression in need of forgiveness. Once again, Dido faces a system that wishes to keep her identity divided. Although burdened with racism, the system here seems more patriarchal.

If Dido accepts Oliver’s proposal, she faces a life of subjugation at the hands of her husband. If she declines, she shall forever remain at the subjugation of her uncle, Lord Mansfield. Either way, her lack of agency results from male control. When Lord Mansfield decides that Elizabeth, Dido’s cousin, will enter on the market as a potential bride, he also decides that Dido will not. He does allow her to travels with her cousin to London, where Elizabeth will meet potential suitors. As the women exit the carriage in front of the London house, Elizabeth delivers the following monologue: “Aren’t you quietly relieved, that you won’t be at the caprice of some silly sir and his fortune? The rest of us haven’t a choice. Not a chance of inheritance if we have brothers, and forbidden from any activity that allows us to support ourselves. We are but their property.” Elizabeth has to marry in order to “procure her bread and butter.” Dido’s father has granted her an inheritance. In the scene in the carriage, Elizabeth explains that, although raised under similar circumstances, they occupy different spaces. She must render herself to “some silly sir” in order to ensure her future security, but she implies that Dido does not have to face the same subjugation. However, Elizabeth’s use of “their,” plural instead of singular, implies that women fall not only at the mercy of their husband, but men in general. Neither Dido nor Elizabeth makes decisions on their own. Dido’s uncle decides that she cannot marry. He decides who eats at the dinner table and who does not, and he made the decision to accept Dido into his home. He denies his nieces the right to choose, which restricts any agency they might have. Although Dido only experiences the effects of the slave system, not the system itself, she does not yet have agency or freedom.

Queen’s understanding the world results from the treatment she receives from her father and master, the head patriarchal figure in her life. In “Love Matters,” Tamara Kuennen discusses the psychological states of women who remain in abusive relationships. She defines abuse as “inhibiting [a person] from being involved in making any big deci-
sions; acting like the “master of the castle” and she argues that “these tactics create a condition of “unfreedom.” These coercively controlling tactics may cause people to conflate their lack of control with the feeling of love (Kuennen 1000). The relationship Kuennen describes implies an unequal power dynamic between partners. One person acts as “master” the other lacks the power to make decisions and is, in fact, inhibited to the point of losing his or her freedom. The control exhibited by the “master” partner affects the “inhibited” partner’s perception of reality. The “inhibited” partner may begin to view love in the flawed way the “master” partner presents it.

Colonel James’s definition of love improves his ability to control. In the scene in the slave cabin when Queen asks her mother, Easter, about her father, the woman neither confirms nor denies Queen’s accusation. Instead, she tells her daughter that the “white part” of her comes “from love.” Easter only parrots what Colonel James tells her the night before, that if anything happens to him, he “will have loved [her] until the moment that he die[s].” Colonel James claims to love Easter; however, the love he gives her cannot receive acknowledgement. In their relationship, he has a position of dominance through his ownership of her. Through his ownership, he has rendered Easter a commodity and revoked her subjectivity. He literally embodies the role of the “master” and she the “inhibited,” and he expresses a disproportionate love toward Easter. Easter believes in “love” as Colonel James has explained it to her. When she tells Queen that she comes from love, she passes on Colonel James’s unbalanced definition.

Queen’s misguided understanding of love causes her to participate in her own objectification. As Dona Nelson argues about slave relations, the “dominant culture attempts to school members of subordinate cultures to accept their own less-than-human-status—in fact, to acquiesce to their own negation as social subjects” (Nelson 133). The dominant culture controls ideologies. Returning to the earlier argument, society needed to maintain a separation between blacks and whites in order to justify slavery. Because it needed the separation, it created it, but in order for the separation to work, the lower class had to participate in the separation as well.

Through stage direction and blocking, Queen shows its heroine participating in her objectification. In the scene when Queen questions her mother about her father, she runs into the slave cabin, leaving the sunlight for the dim lighting of the slave quarters. Before she speaks, she drops to her knees at her mother's feet, looking up at her with worry.
in her eyes. Kneeling embodies subservience through the act of placing a body physically lower. In the case with her mother, Queen likely kneels out of respect and her own lack of understanding about her past. However, Queen kneels twice beside her grandmother, a woman who refuses to acknowledge their blood relation. In the first scene, the woman reminds Queen of her freedom and asks where she will go. Queen says that she will stay and work, to which her grandmother responds that they “have no place for [her].” In the second scene, Queen realizes that she cannot remain at the plantation. She crawls toward her grandmother and throws her arms around the woman’s legs. Her grandmother stands above her with a walking stick and allows Queen to have the hug. The blocking in both scenes shows Queen’s subjugated status through her physically lowered position. She looks up to speak, and her grandmother looks down at her as she talks. Their positioning reflects their social status, but beyond that reflection, it also shows Queen’s desire to remain subjugated. Even after gaining legal freedom, she wants to remain on the plantation. She believes her family loves her despite the fact that they have only ever treated her as a slave. When she realizes that she has to leave, she still clings to her grandmother, a woman who has rejected her. Queen clings to a family that enforced her subjugation, demanded she remain divided, and offered a flawed and unbalanced idea of love. When her family forces her to leave the plantation, they do not set her free, they exile her. Queen does not seek emancipation when she leaves. Instead, she sets out in search of another home. Because of her skewed definition of love, she leaves in search of someone else to which she might belong.

In contrast, stage direction and blocking in Belle prevents Dido’s objectification. Ann Kaplan discusses the effects of the human gaze on art in “Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze.” According to Kaplan, “looking relations may mitigate racism as well as sexism and homophobia: who is allowed or forbidden to look?” (Kaplan 6). In other words, people’s perspectives affect the way they view the world, but “looking relations” can prevent perspectives from imposing prejudice. When Reverend Davinier arrives at Kenwood, Dido’s home, the butler greets him in the doorway as Davinier attempts to apologize to Dido for interrupting her walk. She turns away from him and rejects his attempt at communication by reminding him that, according to decorum, they have not been properly introduced, and therefore, he has no right to speak to her. By relegating the interaction between herself and Davinier, Dido exercises agency. Her uncle remains at dinner, and
no one else can prevent her or aid her in that rejection. In that moment, she exercises choice. Not only does she reject Davinier’s words, but she controls his gaze by hiding her face. He cannot see her, so she controls his perception of her. In the following scene, Dido waits in the parlor for the dinner party, to which decorum mandated she could not take part. As the dinner party enters, the camera focuses on the Ashfords, Lady Ashford, Oliver Ashford, and James Ashford. As soon as they enter, they begin appraising Dido. Lady Ashford asserts that she “had no idea [Dido] would be so black.” Although her words seem an attempt at objectifying Dido, the camera prevents their effort. While they stand in the doorway, appraising the woman, the camera focuses on their faces as they speak their racist words. By cutting off their gaze of Dido, the camera turns the Ashfords into the objectified party, not Dido, who remains outside of the shot.

By slowly allowing Dido her agency, director Amma Asante places Dido at the center of her story in order to provide a perspective on racism and patriarchy that differs from the one present in Queen. According to Kaplan, “women directors imagine and create fictional worlds about issues of sex, race and media” and “begin the hard work of moving beyond oppressive objectification” (Kaplan 15). As more women become directors, they bring a variety of new perspectives to film. Patriarchy, like slavery, divides. It creates difference based on gender. Women experience patriarchy differently than men as men make up the dominant side of the division, and women directors have the chance to bring those differing perspectives to light and use them to reject injustice and objectification.

Belle follows Dido on her journey to understanding her race and coming to terms with her ethnicity, and she receives the focus of the story. While still a child, Dido stands in the middle of a large hallway. Paintings hang from the walls, some of which feature black slaves relegated to the margins of the canvass and looking upward at their white counterparts. As Lord Mansfield, her uncle, enters the scene, the camera shows Dido standing dead center in front of a large painting of Jesus. As Dido grows, she comes to fear the paintings, viewing them as physical representations of racial separation and the division she has within herself. However, the scene in front of the painting shows Dido, not relegated to the margins, but elevated to the center. Although Dido must contend with her race in the film, she remains at the center of her story.

Beyond resisting her own objectification, Belle refuses to marry a man who would only love part of her. She disobeys her uncle, and does what makes her happy. By rejecting the bonds placed on her, she asserts
her subjectivity and resists the oppressions of both prejudice and the patriarchy. Queen, however, experiences constant negation. Any needs or wants she expresses tend to fall in line with the ideas brought upon her by an oppressive society, and often, her assertions receive instant rejection when she does speak for herself. The contrasting portrayals of both women call into question film adaptations that attempt to represent slavery and the efforts these adaptations make at portraying women. Black women faced a two-pronged oppression that targeted their race and their gender. The system denied these women the chance to speak for themselves and explore their points of view. Queen's family had to force her out of her objectification, but Dido learned to speak for herself. Whether or not the differences in these portrayals have to do with the women who inspired the characters or the genders of the directors, representing women in slavery validates their experiences and replaces and revives their once revoked voices.

WORKS CITED


Nelson, Dana D. “Read the Character, Question the Motive: Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. The Word in Black and White:

Representing Race in Adolescent Texts
Following traditional framework, Christopher Paul Curtis incorporates many common tropes from the African American Literature canon in his young adult novel *Bud, Not Buddy*. Paralleling *Bud, Not Buddy* to other representations of slavery and race, especially within children’s literature, demonstrates that Curtis updates the narrative and advances the protagonist’s agency. Ten-year-old orphan Bud Caldwell, who suffers abuse while in a foster home, decides to go “on the lam” in search of his family rather than continue being shuffled around within the foster care system. The significance of his name, the prevalence movement and violence, and the separation of families and friends are some of the indicators that parallel *Bud, Not Buddy* to representations of slavery. Though *Bud, Not Buddy* does not specifically illustrate a representation of slavery, it does re-present a similar struggle: finding familial community and personal agency.

It is vital to provide young readers with realistic depictions of mistreatment as well as social and political disparity to foster awareness, encourage equality, repudiate generalized notions of victimhood, and promote autonomy. In *Slavery in American Children’s Literature: 1790-2010*, Paula T. Connolly provides an overview of depictions of slavery and race in young adult and children’s literature to discuss the role of
literature as a didactic moral and political tool. She says, “Examining children’s literature about slavery ultimately provides an opportunity to explore notions of ‘American’ identity, particularly in terms of who is or is not literarily enfranchised, as object and/ or subject” (Connolly 2). By surveying popular children’s literature, a reflection of the hegemony, she investigates the evolution of American identity by considering the personal agency allocated to each particular character. She continues, “As literature teach each successive generation what race means, it also teaches children what their function is in terms of race, citizenship, and personhood” (2). Connolly supports “a more inclusionary paradigm of children” (7) and quotes W. E. B. Du Bois: “Democracy[’s…] great ends: To this [success] there is but one patent way, proved and inescapable, Education … for the Immortal Child. And that child is of all races and all colors” (Du Bois). Addressing problematic representations of marginalized black characters that depend upon whites heroes to achieve sovereignty, Connolly declares, “The dichotomy leaves little room for a representation of thoughtful black independence and implies the threat of blacks not compliant to white authority” (143). Curtis’ protagonist Bud Caldwell clearly portrays “thoughtful black independence” and autonomy without intent to harm “white authority” or kowtowing.

Bud, Not Buddy contains many tropes that harken back to historical texts in the African American Literature canon continuing the narrative while updating character agency in a twentieth century setting. Set during the Great Depression, Bud, Not Buddy demonstrates that although legal rights had changed, the reality of social and political agency remained largely the same for many disenfranchised subjects. Reflecting on the literature produced during this time period, Connolly proves that “proslavery perspectives continued… [finding] new life in neo-plantation novels that placed proslavery characters and scenarios within twentieth-century settings” (136). Despite lasting disparity Connolly points out that “the 1920s ushered in a new era of contesting voices … with the emergence of strong African American authorship writing to a specifically African American readership” (136). The later 1960s through the 1070s saw “a renaissance in slave studies…. [and] enjoyed a resurgence, as slave experience was reclaimed” revising the popular literature caricature of the simplified Sambo (171). Sadly, race relations in the United States appear to have back-pedaled during the Civil Rights era. Though the Civil Rights era saw many great victories, Connolly claims that membership in the “Ku Klux Klan reached its
‘peak’” in the 1960s and that those who promoted civil rights “were frequently met with violence resistance” (170).

Founded in the 1970s the Coretta Scott King Award “has continued to redress the underrepresentation of African Americans in Newberry and Caldecott Awards” (Connolly 171). She concludes, “The narrative predominance of black protagonists not merely acknowledges but also welcomes a young African American readership in ways that generations of text with white-hero protagonist and black background-characters had not” (173). Published only a few decades after the founding of the Coretta Scott King Award, *Bud, Not Buddy* (a winner of the Coretta Scott King Award and the John Newberry Award) provides readers with a black protagonist who traverses racial boundaries, while nonetheless delivering a difficult truths. Tambra O. Jackson and Gloria S. Boutte discuss the importance of media representation in their co-written article “Liberation Literature: Positive Cultural Messages in Children’s and Young Adult Literature at Freedom Schools.” Jackson and Boutie state, “The vast invisibility and lack of affirmation … is both overt and implicit. African American Students are typically fed steady diets of stereotypical and culturally invasive literature... African American culture is positioned on the periphery of normal behavior and perspectives” (108). Jackson and Boutte define Liberation Literature as a text that “allows the reader to travel with characters…and bear witness to the character's trials, sufferings, and triumphs” and cite Curtis’ *Bud, Not Buddy* as middle school Liberation Literature (109, 113). Bud’s insightful narration asserts a clever, pensive child on the cusp of young adulthood. Running from his abusive foster home, Bud encounters harsh realities of hunger and violence; thankfully, he receives helpful guidance from kind people along the way.

The importance of Bud Caldwell’s name is the first trope that Curtis offers; unlike many representations of slavery that depict forced submission to their re-naming, an outward expression of psychological domination, Bud consistently, but politely, corrects authority figure when he is called Buddy: “It’s Bud, not Buddy ma’am” (Curtis 2). Bud recalls his mother impressing the significance of his name and that he is to never let anyone call him anything else, especially not Buddy. She says, “Buddy is a dog’s name or a name that someone’s going to use on you if they’re being false-friendly” (42). Highlighting the nickname “Buddy” as a demeaning label demonstrates a rejection of the black protagonist as less than. Bud conforms to traditional manners using proper titles when addressing others, but does not kowtow illustrating him as an equal who...
deserves the same social courtesies he extends to others. She specifies that he is named Bud as in “a flower-to-be” (42). Linking Bud’s name to a “flower-in-waiting” evokes notions of preeminence yet to emerge (42). When Todd Amos, the biological son of Bud’s foster care family, refuses to recognize him as Bud and physically abuses him in his sleep, Bud fights back. He narrates, “I’d already told him twice that my name was Bud…. I wasn’t about to let anybody call me Buddy and stick a [Ticonderoga] pencil up my nose all the way to the R. I swung as hard as I could” (13). Though depictions of violence in young adult works are controversial, Bud clearly reacts defensively, not offensively.

*Bud, Not Buddy* reveals threats of physical harm and racial motivated violence without glorifying the gore. In “Naïve Narrators and Double Narratives of Racially Motivated Violence in Historical Fiction of Christopher Paul Curtis,” Jani L. Barker debates the necessity of truthful depicts of violence and social injustice in Children’s and Young Adult Literature and concerns for appropriate subject matter as well as a desire for “happy endings” that promote optimism and hope. She argues that Curtis balances this delicate dichotomy of historical accuracy and age appropriate content claiming that Curtis’ use of narrative perspective “veils [race-based historical violence] for vulnerable readers … simultaneously allow[ing] glimpses of these horrific truths for readers able to bear them” (Barker 176). On the road to Rapid City where Bud believes he will find his father, Lefty Lewis coaxes a weary and suspicious Bud into the car. Lefty Lewis introduces Bud to the concept of racial prejudice and associated violence; he tells Bud a “brown skinned boy” should not be walking along the road at two thirty in the morning because “some of these Owosso folks used to have a sign hanging along here that said … ‘To Our Negro Friends Who Are Passing Through, Kindly Don’t Let the Sun Set on Your Rear End in Owosso!’” (Curtis 105) Lefty emphasizes the extent of this threat saying, “Folks in this state … make your average Ku Kluxer look like John Brown” (143). John Brown was an American abolitionist who thought that violent revolt was necessary to end slavery. Though Lefty might be seen as perpetuating fear and segregation (for safety’s sake) if that is a reality in Bud's lifetime being aware of the peril is certainly beneficial. However, before Lefty schools him on the dangers of Owosso, Bud reveals a level of astuteness: “Sometimes a car would come by and I’d have to duck into the bushes and wait till it had passed” (98). Illustrating the concept of black invisibility, Bud says, “Most times they never noticed me” (98). Yet, Lefty Lewis does notice Bud as out-of-place.
Further illustrating aggression, the guns, billy clubs, and a leather strap imply an element of historical violence without overwhelming more sensitive readers to the ferocity. Bud’s fist hitting “Todd’s big balloon head” sounds “like a .22 rifle going off” and holding a “thick black razor strap” Mrs. Amos threatens to “give [Bud] the strapping of [his] life” (Curtis 13). Bud imagines enacting the same violence acted upon him. Even Bud’s apologies are “bullets” specifically “aimed” at his abuser (17). Angry with himself for being gullible enough to believe that a vampire lived in the shed as Todd told him and “for getting trapped,” he ponders about the shot gun: “I wonder how hard I’d have to pull the trigger” (29). Despite the fact that Bud desires “revenge,” the extent to which he is willing to participate in violence shows astonishing honesty and an unfaltering moral compass (30). Though he “aim[s] the gun” and “pretend[s],” even exploring what it might feel like to “put the shotgun barrel right in [Todd’s] nose,” he logically assesses the rest of the situation and decides to take the gun outside “out of the way” and admits that he feels “a lot better” with the gun “out of [his] hands” and on the porch (33). At the Flint Hooverville, Bud relates that “the cops all had billy clubs” to prevent the gentleman from boarding the train (82). Showing violent reinforcement of the law, the cops tell the men that the “[Flint police] have orders to shoot anyone who tries to get on this train” (83). Missing the train, Bud returns to the Flint Hooverville to see “cops standing around with pistols out” and exclaims, “Whew, instead of shooting people they were shooting holes into the all of the pots and pans” (85, 86). The small qualifier “instead” implies Bud’s level of understanding. It was not Bud’s first inclination to assume they were shooting pots and pans, but people, proving his awareness to the reality of violence.

Demonstrating mental abuse, Bud’s foster care family infantilize him and deems him animalistic. Todd Amos calls him a “bed wetter” and “street-urchin” (Curtis 11, 12). Regardless of the fact that Todd instigates the fight, Mrs. Amos identifies Bud as a “beastly little brute,” “vermin,” and a “little animal” (14, 15). Furthermore, she unjustly accuses him of being a dangerous thief and demands that her husband “put him in the shed” over night like an animal (14-5, 18). However, Bud describes Todd in animalistic terms, too. Bud says Todd’s chest heaves, “like some kind of big animal was inside him trying to bust out” (10). He declares, “[Todd] could hit like a mule” (13). Having Bud employ some of the same type of jargon, Curtis’ offers staggering realistic complexity. Furthering complications, Mrs. Amos implying that Bud is a dangerous insect and says that she has been “stung by [her] own people before”
While intra-racial fighting happens in all groups, it proves especially challenging for a minority group who wields more power with solidarity. Yet, it may be even more problematic to assume that race defines a community as Mrs. Amos’ statement indicates; because Bud and the Amos family have a similar skin-tone, Mrs. Amos considers Bud to be one her “own people.” Utilizing false inclusion while demeaning Bud’s humanity actually increases its cruelty. Proving Mrs. Amos’ comment as a literary device to foreshadow the abuse Bud suffers while under the care of this supposedly consociate African American family “paid to take care of [him],” hornets attack and sting Bud while he is locked in the shed (13, 28). By specifying to readers that providing care for him is a means of income for the Amos family not a moral fulfillment, Bud echoes notions of people as commodities rather than individuals. As the narrator he delivers this information, therefore, Bud is obviously aware of his position within this foster family divulging another element to the psychological trauma he must contend with and an exemplary instance that shows his cognizance.

Unlike many fiction works that center on a white hero who gives agency to the black marginal character, Bud, Not Buddy utilizes black main characters that give livelihood to a white man. Steady Eddie says, “Mr. C. has always got a white fella in the band, for practical reason. But we don’t hold his skin color against him, he can’t help that he was born that way” (Curtis 205). Incorporating unjust laws of the time into the text, Dirty Deeds says, “It’s against the law for a Negro to own any property out where the Log Cabin is so Mr. C. put it in my name” (206). He explains that he arranges many of the gigs because he does not experience racial discrimination and that they had never been “stiffed” on payment because be their performance proves themselves worthy (206).

Another way in which updates the narrative is through the librarian’s joke that Bud has matrimonial intent for Miss. Hill (Curtis 58). While seemingly harmless enough to today’s readers, the thought of a black male and white female getting married was previously of problematic concern. Connolly says, “The possibility of a fully realized heterosexual relationship between a black man and a white woman in these adventure novels transgresses socially and legally prescribed codes of the time.… [and] within these novels, those transgressions will never occur” (144). Though ten-year-old Bud obviously does not have a relationship with the librarian, and there is no indication that he views her in a romantic sense, the lighthearted joke of matrimonial intent allows for the possibility of interracial relationships.
The importance of literacy as a necessary tool for acquiring freedom is not forgotten. Annoyed that the librarian answers his simple question by “digging through three different books” Bud later applies her method on his own in order to plan a route to Rapid City (Curtis 58, 89). Demonstrating literacy and education as a valued skill within his family, Bud recalls his mother reading Brer Rabbit stories (17). He gains comfort and strength remembering his mother’s voice as he falls asleep at night (183, 234). Finding strength to carry on Bud says, “All I have to do is take two or three deep breathes and think of all the books she’d read to me at night…. I was carrying Momma inside me and there wasn’t anyone or anything that could take away” (234). The text also highlights the desire for education as harmful when taken to the extreme as Mr. Herman E. Calloway pushes his daughter’s education too hard and she chooses to runaway. A band member relates the story: “[Mr. Calloway] used to crow about how his mother and father had been born slaves and how now it was only two generations later and… one of them was actually going to be a teacher” (223). While literacy and knowledge prove to be a necessary step in obtaining personal agency, Mr. Calloway pushes his daughter towards a future he desires, not her, and formal education does not necessarily equate to guaranteed success. After all, the gentlemen make a living playing music.

Incorporating jazz, another common theme in African American literature, *Bud, Not Buddy* illustrates the importance of music as a means of survival both economically and spiritually. Though jazz was not defined during the era of slavery, its roots stem from unarranged or unfixed folksongs and oral histories, which are essentially recomposed every time they are retold allowing for new expression and spontaneous growth to fit the situation. For the Dusky Devastators jazz is not just a cathartic release, but a means of self-sustaining evocative of the historical trope of ability to persevere through song. In regards to Miss Thomas’ humming Bud says, “*Singer* wasn’t a big enough word to take in the kind of music that was jumping out of Miss Thomas’ chest” (Curtis 171). Bud compares the sensory input of the music to the odor of the public library: “All of the instruments blended together and, just like that smell in the library you couldn’t tell which one was your favorite” (202). His perception highlights music as valid a form of communication as writing. Dirty Deeds comment shows it to be just as demanding: “Now don’t let that horn whip you, son” (231). Curtis also subtly integrates the mask through the jazz band. When Steady Eddie asked Bud, “Are you attached to the suitcase, or is it the things inside that are
important?” he arouses notions about external display for others verses the internal self (191). Bud declares that “the things [he] got from his mother are the most important” and he discards his “ratty old” suitcase for an empty horn case like adopting a new outward identity (192). The band later gives him a “baby-size horn” to practice on so that he may learn a marketable skill, but before he is given the tool and the knowledge to play music, they want to know if he is willing to accept a new mask (229).

Depicting the importance of family, *Bud, Not Buddy* shows the devastating effects on Bud’s life in the foster care system, the struggle to survive alone, and the happiness in finding a family with the of the jazz band. Revealing the economic horrors that many faced during the Great Depression, Deza Malone suggests that her father has left on a train to find work else where in order to support his family which is currently living in the Flint Hooverville: “My daddy says families are the most important thing there is. That’s why me and my momma are going to wait together for him to come back or write for us to come to him” (Curtis 72). Bud replies that his “mother said the same thing” (72). At the Home the children tease each other whether or not they know whom their parents are evoking notions of questionable parentage (94). In the foster care system, Bud and his friend Jerry are expected to be servile to their foster care families. A case worker says, “We’ve been lucky enough to find two wonderful families who’ve opened their doors for you. I think it’s best that we show our new foster families that we’re very…” (2). She waits for the boys to reply, “Cheerful, helpful and grateful” (3). Before leaving the orphanage for the Amos house, Bud and Jerry are denied breakfast: “Unfortunately, you wont have time” (3). The children are depicted as a means of labor rather than as children who need nurturing which most definitely includes proper nutrition. Later, a friendly family in the breadline extends assistance to Bud when he arrives late for breakfast and a man denies him entrance (46-52). Allowing Bud to cut in line, “a square shaped man in old blue overalls” chides Bud for not “hurry[ing] back” as he was told, and a mother “smack[s]” him in the back of the head (51). On the road, Lefty Lewis picks up Bed and then welcomes him into his home temporarily (124-5). Bud sees what it would be like to live in a caring household and expresses excitement for a breakfast of orange juice and sausages (125). Bud continues with a full belly and a ride from Mr. Lewis. Finally arriving at “the Log Cabin,” the venue and restaurant where Herman E. Calloway and the Dusty Devastators and Miss. Thomas work, Bud finds his grandfather and a
new home with the jazz band (144, 214). While closure implies that Bud finds a loving and nurturing home, astute readers are left to speculate what happens to Bugs, Bud’s spit-blood brothers: “I spit a big glob in my hand and said, ‘We’re brothers forever, Bugs!’ We slapped out hands together as hard as we could” (63). Yet again, incorporating hard truths, Bug’s wordless disappearance reflects an accurate depiction of lost ties with family and friends on the road to acquiring independence.

Employing many familiar themes from the African American canon, *Bud, Not Buddy* shows the necessity of familial support and skilled knowledge in achieving personal agency and communal success. Representations of slavery in popular culture, including children’s literature, continue to promote biased and inaccurate depictions of slavery in the United States of America typically through a lens of nostalgia that perpetuates the simplified Sambo caricature or offers a white abolitionist protagonist with sidekick black characters. Although, *Bud, Not Bud* takes place decades after the abolishment of slavery, Curtis’ young adult novel reveals realistic glimpses at continuing violence, hunger, and injustice that many Americans face. Highlighting both learned and experienced knowledge as a means to provide for oneself and flourish within a community, Bud tells that the path remains about the same.

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Instructing Adolescents on Race and Slavery: Using Moral Development Theory to Examine Mulligan’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

BY KATIE SABA

Robert Mulligan’s film adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* presents the theme of racial prejudice in a way that particularly appeals to adolescents. It issues a warning against the prejudicial ideologies that white slave owners used to justify the institution of slavery in the United States. Paula Connolly, a researcher of representations of slavery in American children’s literature, points out that slavery and race debates are “linked symbiotically in the United States, as slavery became a reification of theories of racial superiority…and inferiority” (6). Considering this connection between race and slavery, the film’s racial themes call attention to the institution that birthed the prejudice which the central child figures in the film encounter. Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory, which considers how children develop their ability to determine right and wrong based on their sense of justice, offers an interpretation of the children’s encounter with this prejudice as an indication of their moral development stages, thus connecting the young central characters to adolescents of the same age and in the same developmental stage. The film features a moral protagonist, Atticus Finch, who attempts to counteract the effect of racism on his children by setting an example of justice and offering a warning against prejudice, resulting in an expansion of the children’s moral development through empathy. Identifying
the characteristics of both Scout and Jem that determine their moral development stages provides evidence for the film’s appeal to children who bear similar characteristics. Determining these characteristics in the early scenes of the film also provides a basis for recognizing the children’s growth in empathy and understanding of justice in relation to the racial prejudice in the society. Through its focus on the children and their exposure to these racial issues, *To Kill a Mockingbird* becomes an instructional text on race and slavery that appeals particularly to adolescents in the early stages of Kohlberg’s moral development theory.

The film focuses on the point of view of six-year-old Scout Finch, who exhibits characteristics of morality at the preconventional level of Kohlberg’s theory. Kohlberg defines moral development as consisting of six stages across three levels of development: the preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional. The preconventional level typically applies to children up to the age of nine (Snowman and McCown 61). The two stages in this level focus on physicality and avoidance of punishment in determining what is good or bad (Kohlberg, “Moral Development” 54). Educators John H. Bushman and Kay Parks Haas summarize the motivation of adolescents in this level of development: “Doing right is motivated by the desire to avoid punishment, obey rules, and yield to the superior power of others, usually adults” (14). Scout embodies these characteristics through her actions and attitudes regarding her father and his defense of Tom Robinson. In the scene in which Atticus talks to Scout about her fight with Cecil Jacobs, the boy at school who said her father was “defending niggers,” Atticus admits that many of the townspeople say that he should not defend Tom Robinson. Scout then poses the question, “If you shouldn’t be defending him, then why are you doin’ it?” Her confusion reveals her misunderstanding of the reasoning behind actions concerning moral issues. Scout does not yet understand or show “respect for an underlying moral order” (Kohlberg, “Moral Development” 54). She focuses on the consequences that may result from doing something that “should not” be done. This moment in the film also calls attention to Scout’s sense of justice. Her outburst in defense of her father evidences her belief that an “immoral” action, which in this case is disparagement of her father, deserves retribution. This scene creates an inclusionary atmosphere for adolescents by presenting a moral conflict at a level which they can relate to and understand.

Mulligan further establishes the relatability of the central characters through the point of view of Scout’s older brother, Jem, who shows evidence of transitioning into the second stage of Kohlberg’s preconven-
tional level. At this stage of development, children move from obeying authority and power figures in order to avoid punishment to determining the right course action based on personal benefit and fairness (Kohlberg, “Moral Development” 54-55). Kohlberg provides a succinct definition of what motivates an individual in this stage of development: “Action is motivated by a desire for reward or benefit. Possible guilt reactions are ignored and punishment viewed in a pragmatic manner” (“From Is to Ought” 170). Jem’s progression into a higher stage of development is especially evident in the scene in which the children follow Atticus to the jailhouse. When the children run up in the midst of the mob, Atticus immediately stands, making him appear much higher and consequently more powerful. As the children look up at their father, Atticus sternly tells Jem to go home. While Scout, who concentrates on respecting and obeying the powerful authority figure, would have gone home, Jem instead looks around at the crowd and shakes his head. Atticus then repeats his command, to which Jem responds by standing up on one of the jailhouse steps and saying with confidence, “No, sir.” Jem no longer focuses on avoiding punishment in this scene and ignores his guilt reactions to disobeying Atticus, evidencing that he has developed into Kohlberg’s second stage of the preconventional level. The scene in which the children watch the townspeople leaving for the courthouse to watch the trial provides further evidence for this increasing development. Jem begins to walk to the courthouse as well, but Scout protests, reminding Jem that Atticus told them to stay home. At this point Jem declares, “I don’t care if he did. I’m not gonna miss the most exciting thing that’s ever happened in this town.” The juxtaposition of Jem and Scout throughout the film, and especially in this scene, highlights the contrast of their moral development stages. Scout, who still remains obedient to the command given to her by the authoritative Atticus, attempts to stop Jem from making the wrong choice of disobeying direct instruction. Jem, on the other hand, focuses on the benefit of seeing “the most exciting thing that’s ever happened in [their] town,” resulting in disobedience to his father’s order. However, Jem shows no anguish or remorse in his decision and ignores any “guilt reactions,” a defining mark of the second stage of moral development (Kohlberg, “From Is to Ought” 170). By highlighting the contrast of the children’s moral choices, Mulligan shows a wider range of developmental stages that can connect to young children in a variety of moral stages.

Prior to the expansion of the children’s moral development through Atticus’ instruction concerning racial prejudice, Mulligan reveals the
children’s internalization of the racial hierarchy in their society and their exposure to ideas associated with the justification of slavery. Paula Connolly defines the idea of racial hierarchy in her article entitled “Slavery in American Children’s Literature”: “[D]ifferences between Europeans and Africans...were defined as irreconcilably oppositional and set in hierarchical paradigms, with ‘whites’ invariably at the top” (6). Mulligan presents the clear social order among the blacks and whites of the town through the placement of actors and props, most notably in the scene in which Atticus visits Helen Robinson. The interaction between Jem and one of Tom Robinson’s sons exemplifies the idea of white supremacy. The black boy cautiously walks up to Atticus’ car where Jem sits by the window. Jem moves closer to the window as the boy approaches, but the portion of glass that separates them illustrates the ever-present barrier between them due to their understandings of appropriate conduct for their race. Visually Jem is higher than the black boy as he sits in the car and the boy stands on the ground, representing the hierarchy that exists in that society. Neither of them speaks until Bob Ewell emerges from the woods and slaps his hand on the hood of the car, at which point Jem turns and says to the black boy, “Would you tell my daddy to come out here, please?” The boy quickly fulfills Jem’s request, creating an image of master and slave. Despite their similar size and age, Jem still appears as the higher of the two, both visually and in relation to status. Atticus defines the “evil assumption” that causes such separation and distance between blacks and whites during his courtroom speech later in the film: “all Negroes lie; all Negroes are basically immoral beings.” This statement identifies the cause of the hierarchy as racial essentialism, an idea used to justify the treatment of African Americans as less than other human beings. An overview of the research on stereotyping and essentialism by university professor Carmit Tadmor defines racial essentialism as “the view that racial groups possess underlying essences that represent deep-rooted, unalterable traits and abilities” (“Racial Essentialism,” 2013). This “evil assumption” about African Americans by individuals in the society of Maycomb affects Jem’s understanding of how to treat the boy who walks up to Atticus’ car. As he interacts with the boy, he conducts himself in a way that he understands to be appropriate based on what he knows about societal rules that reflect a belief in racial essentialism.

Mulligan continues to reveal this established social order through his presentation of other black characters in the film, representing the lingering presence of the racialized perspective that prolonged the existence of
slavery in the past. Near the beginning of the film, Atticus walks with his children by the house of Mrs. Dubose and briefly converses with her as she sits on her porch. A black woman also sits in a rocking chair near her, working from a basket in her lap; however, neither Atticus nor his children acknowledge her presence. Mulligan includes a long shot of the porch when Mrs. Dubose speaks, making the black woman clearly visible. The lack of acknowledgement from Atticus, the compassionate gentleman who remains polite even to his grumpy neighbor, reveals the strength of these prevailing notions in the society’s beliefs about race. By placing this unnamed black character in the peripheral of the shot, Mulligan creates a sense of the lingering presence of racial issues that permeate the everyday activities of the townspeople. Mulligan also utilizes a more prominent black character in order to convey another pro-slavery idea that affects the children directly. The Finch family servant, Calpurnia, appears several times in a domestic context in which she interacts regularly with Scout and Jem. Calpurnia’s function in each scene that she appears in is primarily servitude. As critic Jennifer Murray aptly notes, “[A]s a black servant she remains largely unseen; only her usefulness to the family is visible” (85). The usefulness to which Murray refers is visible as Calpurnia puts away dishes, helps Scout change clothes, serves food at the table, refills coffee cups, and agrees to stay the night to look after the children. Murray also relates Calpurnia’s function in the family to the position of a slave: “She is ‘family’ in their house since she is a long-standing and ‘faithful’ worker -- just as slaves were considered to be part of the ‘family’ of their white masters, retaining the status of protected children even into adulthood” (85). While Murray’s point about referring to Calpurnia as “part of the family” suggests a more positive situation, Mulligan does not focus primarily on that familial relationship in the film. Calpurnia always appears in an apron, contentedly working or serving in a space in which white characters also appear. Her scenes evoke images of the “mammy” caricature, the happy female slave who smiles and laughs while she works and often fulfills a motherly role for the children of her white master. By portraying Calpurnia in this manner, Mulligan recalls the notion of slave contentment that often served as a defense of slavery. The children’s close relationship to Calpurnia directly involves them in the societal norm of the racial hierarchy. By establishing the existence of the social order that results from assumptions about race and the children’s involvement in these assumptions, Mulligan emphasizes the lack of justice engrained in the
societal system passed down from the time of slavery and the children’s exposure to its detrimental effect on human beings.

After establishing the existence of racial prejudice and the children’s internalization of a social hierarchy, Mulligan focuses on the children’s learning process concerning these issues through the expansion of their moral development. Scout and Jem learn about the moral aspects of race relations in their society through the instruction of their father, Atticus Finch. Atticus warns his children against racial prejudice and violence as the trial of Tom Robinson approaches. Throughout the film, Mulligan emphasizes the authoritative, gentle manner in which Atticus delivers this instruction, which appeals particularly to individuals in the preconventional stage of moral development. In his review of the early stages of interpreting right and wrong, Kohlberg observes, “For a young child power is perhaps the most salient characteristic of his social world” (“Moral Development” 56). In light of Kohlberg’s theory, Atticus’ “masculine prowess” is the type of power that will appeal to adolescents and cause them to recognize Atticus as the empathetic, justice-driven model which they can aspire to resemble (Nicholson 66). Mulligan’s choice to cast Gregory Peck as Atticus enhances the positive image of the character. Film critic Richard Armstrong describes Peck as “an icon of integrity and high-mindedness for American audiences in the middle decades of the 20th century.” The actor’s reputation adds a sense of trustworthiness to Atticus’ authority. This aspect of Atticus’ character makes him more appealing in the eyes of adolescents in the preconventional level of moral development, thus increasing their likeliness to heed Atticus’ words. Because children in this stage of development also focus a great deal on physicality, the outward appearance of Atticus also enhances adolescents’ admiration and respect of his authority. Richard Armstrong observes the ideal physical traits of Gregory Peck, specifically how his “dark looks” and “authoritative voice” in addition to his “contemplative mien and measured tones” make him perfectly suited for the role of Atticus. With these traits that draw the attention of adolescents in Kohlberg’s preconventional level of morality, Mulligan presents Atticus as the powerful, trustworthy figure that young children will look up to. In the introduction to their collection of essays that analyze various aspects of the film, Austin Sarat and Martha Umphrey state that Atticus “asserts a vision of the future less violent and prejudiced, more just and compassionate, than the present” (6). By focusing on the figure of Atticus and his advice to Scout and Jem pertaining to racial prejudice and empathy, Mulligan attempts to make Atticus’ vision of a less
prejudiced society an acceptable and supportable idea in the minds of adolescents.

As the idealized authority figure that the two children look up to for guidance, Atticus counteracts the hierarchical thinking in their society by encouraging an empathetic attitude in his children, resulting in an expansion of their moral development. Atticus famously advises Scout, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view….Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” Kohlberg similarly recognizes empathy as the basis for understanding the growth of children in the developmental levels. He states, “The [developmental] stages may be seen as...reflecting an expanding capacity for empathy, for taking the role of the other” (“Moral Development” 56). Recognizing this increasing empathy in Scout’s moral development requires another examination of the scene in which she and Jem run to the jailhouse where Atticus stands before the lynch mob. The camera shows Scout’s point of view as she peruses the crowd, then speaks aloud to Mr. Cunningham, asking him about his entailments. In their analysis of this scene in an essay entitled “Temporal Horizons: On the Possibilities of Law and Fatherhood in To Kill a Mockingbird,” Austin Sarat and Martha Umphrey observe that Scout “reaches across lines of class and racial antagonism and, as her father has always enjoined her to do, tries to stand in the shoes of someone else, attempting to understand the weight of the entailments” (28). The gentleness of Scout’s speech and her soft facial expressions when she talks to Mr. Cunningham, a man who she knows is below her in social status, both evidence a genuine desire to understand his situation. Mulligan’s focus on Scout’s face as she spots Mr. Cunningham in the crowd and speaks directly to him draws attention to the intentionality of her decision to try to empathize with his situation. She makes a deliberate effort to engage in conversation with Mr. Cunningham, despite her higher position in the social hierarchy. This attempt to empathize indicates an expansion in Scout’s moral development as she looks past the fixed social order to understand the individual. Scout soon realizes that all eyes rest on her, causing her to recoil and step closer to Atticus. She says in a more timid voice, “I sure meant no harm, Mr. Cunningham,” and rests her head on Atticus with his arm around her shoulder. She seeks shelter from the eyes of the crowd in her father, indicating that she sees Atticus as a powerful figure that she can turn to for comfort and guidance. This perspective of Atticus is an indication of Scout’s preconventional moral thinking, explaining her willing acceptance of Atticus’ advice about empathizing with others.
Her idealized view of her father and expanding moral development due to this increase in empathy further establishes Atticus as a trustworthy protector, a figure which adolescents in the same level of moral development will similarly admire and obey.

Mulligan uses this image of Atticus that appeals to adolescents in his portrayal of the courtroom scene in which he attempts to visualize the racial prejudice and create a perceivable injustice in the treatment of African Americans. In his analysis entitled “Hollywood and Race: To Kill a Mockingbird”, Colin Nicholson notes the significance of the courtroom scene in the film: “It is the scene in which the central values of democratic justice and common decency come into conflict with racial prejudice so deeply rooted that it overturns utterly convincing evidence of Tom Robinsons’ innocence” (72). Mulligan visually portrays the “deeply rooted” prejudice in the structure of the scene as all white spectators sit on the bottom level of the courtroom and all black spectators sit on the top level. The distinct line between these two levels provides an easily recognizable illustration of the injustice of the social order in the town. Adolescents in the preconventional level of moral development, whose focus is primarily on the physical, can easily perceive and understand this physical representation of the unspoken inequality among human beings in that society. Mulligan captures the attention of these adolescents by creating a palpable energy in the courtroom and establishing the importance of the scene. Before the trial begins, the courtroom bustles like a crowded city with the sounds of incessant muffled speech, shuffling feet, and creaking furniture as the spectators move to their seats. Court officials in uniform enter the scene among the commotion, providing a physical representation of powerful authority that sets a serious tone in the courtroom. Mulligan places Atticus in the front and center of the room as the prominent figure who “takes up Tom’s defense, breaking the implicit social compact undergirding southern white supremacy” (Sarat and Umphrey 3). Atticus stands alone among the crowd of spectators and the jury, thus increasing sympathy for his cause. His children sit among the black audience on the balcony, looking down at the scene. Richard Armstrong provides an apt analysis of the children’s point of view in this scene, stating that they are spectators “agog at the hero’s performance.” Atticus does not overshadow the defendant, however. Tom Robinson, the accused African American, comes into full view for the first time in this scene. Mulligan uses the physicality of the character to make it especially easy for preconventional-level adolescents to sympathize with
him. His strong voice is clear and audible, his facial expressions exhibit fear without anger, and his disabled arm considerably reduces his ability to defend himself physically. Tom is also kind and polite toward the two lawyers who question him, frequently saying “sir” when responding to their questions. The perceivable innocence of Tom through his lack of anger and kindness toward others encourages adolescents with preconventional morality to view him as a sympathetic character, engaging their emotions toward the injustice of the accusations against him. Mulligan also continues to appeal to adolescents in a preconventional moral level by showing the process of witnesses taking oaths and by frequently keeping the judge in view of the camera, constantly asserting the presence of the authority figure who oversees the trial. These visual details enforce the weightiness of what transpires in the scene and engage the emotions of young children in the climactic moment that most clearly portrays racial prejudice in the film.

The focus on Atticus’ children throughout the courtroom scene provides a sense of inclusion of adolescents and calls attention to the negative reactions to the outcome of the trial that reflect preconventional-level thinking. Mulligan intersperses several shots of the balcony in the courtroom throughout the entire scene, showing the children’s intentional focus as they sit among the black spectators on the top level of the courtroom. A few mid-shots show both children paying close attention to the scene below them, but most of the balcony shots are close-ups of Jem, showing the intense concentration on his face as the trial unfolds. These close-up shots appear after significant moments in the trial, such as Mayella Ewell’s startling speech and the revealing of Tom’s disability. Although the scene includes both children, the focus is primarily on Jem since he is in a higher, more complex stage of moral development and therefore has a better understanding of justice and empathy than his sister. His enhanced understanding is evident in his reaction to the jury’s verdict. After the pronouncement of “guilty,” the camera shifts to a close-up shot of Jem who hopelessly drops his head down as he leans on the railing, then shakes his head in disbelief as the officials handcuff Tom and lead him away. Mulligan also includes a brief shot of Scout who looks downcast with an expression that communicates surprise and confusion. The children in this scene serve as relatable figures for preconventional-level adolescents who may respond to the outcome of the trial in similar ways to Scout and Jem. The negative reactions ensue due to the fact that the powerful authority figure loses his case and the jury deems him as “wrong,” an idea that directly contradicts what chil-
dren in the preconventional level understand about right and wrong. As the courtroom scene unveils the racial prejudice in their society and forces it out into the open, the children must engage with this issue due to their exposure to the prejudice and their admiration of their father, the lawyer who stands up to oppose the injustice. Through Atticus’ attempts to warn his children against this prejudice and his encouragement of empathy, the children, especially the oldest, grow into a better understanding of “taking the role of the other” and understanding the point of view of another person. Mulligan presents a clear connection between Jem and Atticus that increases throughout the film, evidenced by Jem’s insistence to accompany Atticus to the Robinsons’ house after the trial. This connection results from Jem’s enhanced capability to understand justice and the significance of his father’s actions, thus explaining his emotional distress at the unjust verdict of the jury.

In this film, Mulligan presents a message about equality and empathy through the guidance that Atticus offers to his children concerning racial prejudice. He creates an appealing image to validate this message, establishing its connection to the broader category of adolescents who exhibit similar traits to Scout and Jem in their moral development. Atticus, the authoritative, gentle father-figure who stands up for the cause of justice, informs his children about racial prejudice and warns against violence and hasty judgments, instead encouraging empathy and treatment of all human beings as equals. The trial of Tom Robinson, a case which unveils the unjust treatment of African Americans, provides Atticus the opportunities to offer this advice to his children, thus tying the message about empathy and equality directly to the racist ideas associated with the justification of slavery that the trial addresses. This representation of slavery ideas that extend beyond the abolishment of the institution transforms the film into an instructional text for adolescents on how these ideas survive in a society and can easily affect young minds. By portraying Atticus as a powerful figure that appeals to adolescents in the preconventional level of morality, the film encourages acceptance of Atticus’ advice to “climb into [another person’s] skin and walk around in it.” Jem and Scout both expand in their moral development as they show an increase in empathy and understanding of justice in response to their father’s instruction. The film’s focus on these central child characters provides a model for adolescents to follow as they accept Atticus’ advice and strive to resemble their father’s example of justice and empathy that counteracts the deeply rooted racial prejudice passed down from the time of slavery.
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Representing Slavery in Sci-Fi Dystopia
Never Let Me Go, directed by Mark Romanek, portrays a system that forces clones (called ‘donors’) to donate their organs to the upper classes in order to prolong life spans and keep those in the upper classes healthy. The donor program portrayed in the film exhibits a “benevolent” administration of the donors’ existence, offering them schooling, purpose, and brief, happy lives, which obfuscates the system’s intent of harvesting their organs until their inevitable deaths, or “completion” as the characters call it. Never Let Me Go portrays a system of slavery unique to its science-fiction setting that utilizes methods of justification, physical violence, and subjugation common in American slavery, creating a dialogue about slavery as a contemporary and speculative phenomenon rather than a relic of the past.

The elite/Guardians in Never Let Me Go utilize education as a means to keep the clones subjugated ignorant of their origin and subjugated as a class of non-humans, a theme that manifests itself in slave narratives such as The Narrative of Frederick Douglass. The curriculum at Hailsham, the exclusive boarding school for child donors, focuses mainly on recreational activities (art, literature, music, essay writing, sport, etc) meant to keep the children uninformed about their futures by offering an active, exciting experience to keep them from asking questions about their parentage or
personal origin. During a mock play in which students are expected to improvise, Kathy (one of the protagonists) plays the role of a barista while students approach her counter and order. As each student orders, Kathy responds by picking up a porcelain teapot, tipping the spout into a teacup, and handing the teacup to the student. When Tommy approaches Kathy’s counter, he simply repeats an order of the previous student, prompting the students’ teacher, Miss Lucy, to encourage Tommy to order something different. Tommy struggles until he finally orders a coffee, to which Kathy responds by merely repeating the same motions she has enacted throughout the play, whether students order tea, water, or something else. Miss Lucy observes the students hoping to determine whether the clone children are capable of acting independently and thinking creatively as these qualities express an aspect of humanity that the Guardians hope to prove or disprove; this purpose eludes the children who merely think that their participation in the play serves their own enjoyment. In her critique of the *Never Let Me Go* novel, Josie Gill comments that the education prescribed at Hailsham does not equip the donors to assert their personhood later on in life, despite the deception that art would enable them to express that very quality: “Far from proving their humanity, the hope the students invest in art and education only reveals their subjection to a debased liberal ideology premised on a limited idea of what constitutes the human” (851). This definition of humanity posits that the spirit of humanity, as an abstract, can be expressed in a vacuum of agency through expressive mediums. The elite ignore the artistic aspirations of the donors, knowing that the donors seek to define their humanity through these works, and opt for an illusory standard that cannot be reached, thus keeping the donors subject to the system of forced organ donation as they pursue an ideal that can never be fully realized.

Gill continues to describe this system of education in *Never Let Me Go* as a mechanism that misinforms the donors of their purpose with “their essays and reading” being “an extension of an education that has prevented them from reaching a true understanding of their situation” (853). The Guardians need the students at Hailsham to remain in the dark about their purpose in fear of their being a rebellion or disturbing the fragile existence of the clones, closely resembling the dissolution of inquiry within slavery that Frederick Douglass describes in his own experience. Frederick Douglass confronts the epidemic of ignorance proliferated in slavery in his *Narrative*, stating that “it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves ignorant” and that he, as well as other slaves, “was not allowed to make any inquiries”
concerning parentage, age, and place of birth (17). The methodology of ignorance that Douglass describes reappears in *Never Let Me Go* within a context that does not explicitly enact the violence of slavery that Douglass experienced but creates a cruelty specific to its text. In a way, the modification of slavery’s methods of ignorance to subjugate non-racialized bodies reminds viewers that slavery, as well as other systems of oppression, adapts to the discourse of its setting and time by invalidating pursuits of establishing one’s personhood while utilizing ignorance as a tool to keep the subjugated oppressed. The donors’ ignorance mirrors the ignorance present in slave narratives such as Douglass’. While the idea of slaves receiving an education contradicts the comparison of *Never Let Me Go*’s donor program to slavery, the education at Hailsham keeps the students enslaved to a system that seeks to invalidate their humanity in order to harvest them. In this instance, the concept of “resource” in the donor program replaces the concept of “property” in American slavery, furthering the notion that slaves exist as soulless bodies with no willpower of their own popularized by slavery’s defenders. While the education system in *Never Let Me Go* keeps the donors unequipped in finding their purpose and humanity, it does enable the school’s Guardians to enact a social experiment meant to determine the humanity of the clones and justify their continued harvest.

The arts education of Hailsham determines whether the clones should be considered human or not in order to defend the continued harvesting of clone organs, mimicking the employ of scientific polygenism (the idea that blacks and whites come from distinct, racial origins rather than a singular origin) during America’s slavery period to justify slavery. After Tommy and Kathy reunite near the end of the film and admit their love for one another, they hope to defer their donations by proving their love to the mysterious Madame through their artwork, operating off of the rumor that works included in Madame’s gallery reveal the inner substance of the donors’ souls and that their love could be expressed in their art. Madame and Miss Emily, the former headmistress of Hailsham, sorrowfully admit to Tommy and Kathy that the true purpose of Madame’s gallery was to use the donors’ art to determine whether the donors can be considered human at all. Using art to determine humanity echoes the liberal education Gill criticizes in her essay, but the pressing flaw in using art to establish evidence of one’s humanity lies in the “flimsiness” of such a prospect. The pseudo-science of the 19th century surrounding the anthropogenic origin of the races relied on similar flimsy prospects of attempting to derive supposed superiority
and inferiority based on skull shape. French anatomist Georges Cuvier argued, “that the ancient Egyptians had skulls resembling Europeans. Judging by cranial capacity… the Mongolian race had reached a plateau of development sometime in the past and that the Negro race had never progressed beyond barbarism” (quoted in Williams 13). James Hunt, a hobbyist anthropologist, in his speech to the London Anthropological Society titled “The Negro’s Place in Nature” asserted a similar “objective” rhetoric towards the supposed inferiority of blacks connecting skull size to perceived inequalities in intelligence, stating that “in the superior or frontal races, the cranial sutures close much earlier than in the inferior or occipital races. The frontal races he considers superior… because they have an absolutely more voluminous brain… From these researches it appears that in the “Negro” the growth of the brain is sooner arrested than in the European” (8). Hunt erroneously divides blacks and whites into separate distinctions of intelligence based on the physical appearance of the brain and deriving a standard for brain performance without understanding or explaining how the brain works. Hunt prefaces his argument with the idea that “[t]he “Negro” race in some of its characters, is the lowest of the existing races,” implying that Hunt believes in a racial hierarchy thus invalidating his so-called intent of proving the humanity of Africans (6). Hunt, and others involved in the polygenetics movement, harbored biases that would influence their research and analysis on the anthropology of Africans, making the movement unreliable and scientifically infeasible. If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave. While the Gallery roots itself in the study of polygenetics, art’s use in determining the slave’s humanity was common during the Enlightenment period. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., abolitionists used slave art to raise questions about creativity and the “differences” between the European mind and the African mind. Gates claimed that by observing slave art, one could argue that “the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave” (quoted in Gill 851). In this instance, Never Let Me Go re-asserts art’s role as a barometer for human intelligence as the Gallery draws direct inspiration from the abolitionist method. By bringing art into the dialogue on the donors’ humanity, Never Let Me Go constructs a direct connection to American and European slavery’s past.
When it came to determine the role of African race in the development of human civilization, Williams states that the dominant 19th century narrative was that “the African has always either been an exotic primitive, backwards savage, or a slave. The majority of the historians and anthropologists of the nineteenth century denied or ignored any evidence of African influences in ancient Nile Valley, Egypto-Nubian civilization” (20). Throughout most of the antebellum slavery period, and even beyond that, scientists in America and worldwide would continually try to debunk assertions of African contribution to human development by propping up racist caricatures with faulty, pseudo-scientific evidence and maintaining that whites were ultimately responsible for history’s greatest civilizations. Williams maintains that “proponents of the White Egypt thesis were Americans seeking to defend the institution of slavery in the American south” (23). Scientific polygenism did not occur from a pressing scientific quandry to discover a truth about the origin of the races, or of the human species, but to defend and justify a lucrative system of oppression that enslaved a race of people for profitable gain, much like the donor program in Never Let Me Go.

The donor program in Never Let Me Go relies on a similar method of ‘objective’ verification that did not begin with questions about bioethics in cloning, but within a discourse of proving the clones’ inability to behave within ‘human parameters.’ Operating on the definition that one’s ‘humanity’ can be defined by a capacity for independent thought and the power to act upon such thought, sources of human expression (Tommy and Kathy’s art) become methods of confinement. Creative labor becomes a commodity to be exchanged in the marketplace of human ethics, meant to serve an end rather than engage in equal, pre-existing discourse on the subject of human existence. As Miss Emily states in the film, “if you ask people to return to darkness, to the days of lung cancer, breast cancer, motoneuron disease, they’ll simply say no,” so does the lucrative nature of the donor program reveal itself to be unquestionable. The donor program in Never Let Me Go inherits the process of justification found in the pseudo-science of polygenism, pressing the audience to question the validity of Madame’s gallery and the continued denial of the donors’ humanity. Because the film doesn’t codify the donors by race, the process of justifying the donor program does not immediately resemble polygenism, but the resemblance of its effect shines true. Never Let Me Go, then, offers a view into a world adopting the procedures of America’s past of slavery while portraying a mien of an alternate, sci-fi future, granting viewers a glimpse into a world
where a system like slavery exists as ‘normal’ and can be ‘experienced’ as such through the simulation of film. The filmic phenomenon offers a unique opportunity to view the world through the eyes of the oppressor and feel the effects of the oppressors’ logic. As treacherously seductive as an insight into the rhetoric of oppression may seem, the donor program still enacts devastation to the physical bodies of the donors, removing organs in order to transplant them into the bodies of the upper class.

Never Let Me Go’s central tragedy lies in the donors’ condition of ultimately being eviscerated of their vital organs and being left to die. The great labor of the donors in Never Let Me Go lies in their physical body and the need to keep it healthy so that it may be harvested, a condition that mirrors American slavery’s fixation on the physical punishment of the slave’s body and that slave bodies existed primarily for the use of their masters’ financial gain. Within the donor program, the donors’ bodies are divided among different patients who require different organs, which could be extrapolated as a metaphor for the slave trade’s dividing of African families (bodies of ‘community’). Throughout the film, characters who have undergone organ donations exhibit physical signs of degeneration and scarring. In one scene, Kathy, now a caretaker to donors who have begun their series of surgeries, spends time with a woman wearing an eyepatch who may die after her next surgery. While one may assume that the woman is recovering from an eye injury, the tragic reality of the donor program insists upon the viewer than she has recently donated her eye. In another scene, Tommy takes off his shirt revealing a long scar alongside his rib cage, indicating the donation of his liver or kidney. Ruth’s struggle after her two surgeries outclasses prior scenes as the most visible instance of physical pain and torture upon a donor’s body. Throughout the ‘donor’ portion of the film, Ruth exhibits a deathly pallor, sunken eyes, and must walk with the assistance of a walker or caretakers. By the time Ruth has accepted her death and asked her friends for forgiveness, she resembles a walking corpse more than a whole person, fully embodying the view that the donor program’s administrators have of the donors themselves. Much of the pain presented in Never Let Me Go exists within hospitals, recovery centers, dressed in hospital scrubs and walking down dimly lit hallways, creating an illusion that the pain is negligible or manageable. The notion of pain inflicted upon the donors being ‘insignificant’ resembles the notion that physical punishment of slaves, even the killing of slaves, remained negligible enough to not warrant serious investigation. In his essay “Slavery and the Phenomenology of Torture,” Sanford Levinson argues that “the slave was
treated as having sufficient human agency to decide, in effect, whether or not it would be ‘necessary’ for the master to punish him or her. The master would prefer to minimize the incidence of violence; after all, the slave was a productive asset who might indeed be harmed through the infliction of violent methods of discipline” (165). Levinson states that the use of torture by federal American intelligence agencies resembles the forms of physical punishment enacted during antebellum slavery, but assures readers that “those who are tortured are always treated worse than slaves were” (166). While Levinson backpedals and reminds his critics that his statement by no means justifies slavery or ignores the cases of extreme physical punishment during American slavery, his views present the physical pain of slavery as a negligible or lesser condition in comparison to the infliction of torture. Levinson’s views run parallel to criminal cases in Louisiana concerning the punishment and killing of slaves. In the case of State v. Davis, which occurred in 1859, a white man managed to be cleared of a murder due to his slave not qualifying as a person to be considered the victim of a murder. Davis’ lawyers “filed a motion to quash the indictment on grounds that no law allegedly existed that forbade a free person from purposefully shooting at a slave with intent to kill. The Morehouse Parish District Court ordered Davis’s indictment to be quashed, but the supreme court reversed this order, reinstated the indictment, and remanded the case to the lower court for prosecution” (quoted. in Schaffer). The criminal case of Stave v. Davis was one of many that resulted in either no sentencing or repealed sentencing for slave masters who had either grievously injured their slaves or outright killed them. The pain inflicted on slave bodies was considered in the eyes of the law, and within southern society, as being the mere mistreatment of property rather than the torture and maiming of a conscious being. The diminishing of slave bodies within this system ensured that society saw the processes of slavery as not being the abuse of a group of human beings by other human beings but rather a necessary execution of force upon property in order to guarantee the system’s prolonging. The effects of this system of pain-based ‘labor’ in Never Let Me Go coincide with some of the consequences of pain-based punishment in American slavery, namely that these systems diminish the bodies of the enslaved through pain and lessen the likelihood of active resistance through the threat of physical violence. The bodies of both slaves and the donors thus become site of unspoken atrocity because of the removal of the bodies’ personhood. Never Let Me Go effectively captures American slavery’s desire to enact violence on the enslaved body in order to subjugate it.
When interviewed for Sight & Sound magazine in regards to his film *12 Years A Slave*, director Steve McQueen said that he considered the “film as being a science-fiction movie. He’s [Northup] going to a land where there’s a book called the Bible, which everyone interprets in a different way, and there are people who are slaves and people who aren’t” (Clark, “Alien abductions: *12 Years A Slave* and the past as science fiction”). McQueen’s adoption of the science-fiction tag, although done tongue-in-cheek, reveals how the genre’s speculative nature reflects the existential conflict of the slave experience; how can a reality be so tragic that it borders on being fantastic and sensational? While *Never Let Me Go* does not explicitly address race or slavery in its narrative, the donor program inherits the ‘motifs’ of slavery in order to create a world that might resemble how slave owners viewed slaves and the system of slavery, seeing it as a benevolent, profitable, and necessary enterprise that required the complete subjugation and abuse of a class of people. *Never Let Me Go* does not presume to be a representation of slavery, yet the portrayal of the donors as unwilling participants in a system of calculated execution of people for the ‘greater good’ must derive some inspiration, or at least appropriate, methods and practices that allowed slavery to enact its horrors. The classification of the film as science fiction may seem unnecessary, but *Never Let Me Go* speaks true to the slave experience despite not immediately seeking to recreate it. Contemporary representations of slavery seek to reconcile ideas of the past with ideas of the present, often looking for answers in verified, historically quantified narratives in the hopes the slavery’s after effects may be resolved through some nugget of knowledge found in someone’s life story, but imaginative literature, including science-fiction, can be a worthwhile endeavour in asking questions and resolving some of the anxieties of America’s past with slavery.

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Representing Slavery within Cultural and Social Norms
"From Bodies to Souls": The Effects of Christianity on American Slavery in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July* (1852)

BY MEGAN MARSHALL

In the slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and the speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July*, Douglass depicts a binary between the oppression of American slavery and the employment of Christianity by exposing the way in which blacks and whites participate in religious practices. America's establishment relies on Christianity and its traditions to make up the fabric of the nation. Specifically, during American slavery, there were two distinct forms of Christianity that co-existed with one another: White Christianity, which provides justification for slavery and inferiority of African-Americans through scripture, and Black Christianity, which provides slaves with hope, identity, and liberation. Furthermore, Christianity in the midst of slavery results in a physical and spiritual transformation for slaves from bodies to bodies with souls. From this binary, African-American Christianity emerges from both the one-of-a-kind essential features of African culture as well as the uplifting elements that they gain from biblical and spiritual encouragement. Douglass also elevates African-American Christianity through the theology of Black Liberation, which utilizes the Christian tradition as a movement toward self-identification and endurance. However, slaveholders reconstruct traditional Christianity into "Soul-less Christianity" in order to oppress slaves and ensure the presence of

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*I assert most unhastingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity, —a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, —and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection.* —Frederick Douglass
soulless bodies. Both slaves and slave owners utilize Christianity for the benefit of their own needs as well as the deformation of the others’ intentions. Both groups also use religion as a way to acquire a sense of community, though in very different ways. Furthermore, it is important to expose how the entire institution of Christianity participates in a controversy of psychological power between black slaves and white society. This racial and religious tension ultimately establishes proof of black subjectivity, in the slaves’ ability to utilize Christianity as a tool to acquire psychological and physical freedom. Douglass’ narrative exposes whites’ use of Christianity as reasoning for the exploitation of blacks as well as control by describing piety as an increase in religious perversion, and ultimately exposing Christianity as one of many driving forces for American slavery.

“Soulless Christianity” of White Society
Douglass describes white societal Christianity in his narrative as a figure of authority, as well as a way of upholding societal structure. This American societal structure was ironically built on an undeniable established institution of Christian values. Douglass expresses this fact in his speech, What to the Slave is the Fourth of July, as he quotes the Declaration of Independence: ‘all men are created equal; and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ (“What to a Slave”). The Declaration of Independence establishes the nation’s blueprint for its citizens. The unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are given by God, yet these rights are stripped away from black slaves by the domination of man. Whites control the physical lives of black Americans by transforming their bodies into tools of labor and representations of the advancement of whites’ wealth and prosperity. Whites determined the liberty of African-Americans by eliminating their ability to make decisions for themselves. Douglass states, “In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed” (Narrative of the Life, 51). As a slave, Douglass’ expression that literal death is ultimately more honorable than the inability to attain liberty creates an interesting image of the extent of black inferiority. Douglass’ reference to Patrick Henry’s ‘give me liberty or give me death’ alludes further to the nation’s hypocrisy by reminding readers that America fought for the freedom of the country, yet denies freedom to those who sew the very fabric of our nation. This
false patriotism makes the pursuit of happiness for American slaves unattainable because of whites’ cruelty and cultural ignorance. The leaders of America unquestionably denote the nation’s primary Christian values, and advance the nation’s power into an establishment of wealth that is built on the backs of African-American slaves. Furthermore, the hypocrisy of American Christianity is exposed further as Douglass explores white society’s use of the biblical scripture as further justification for the oppression of African-Americans. Specifically, the biblical tale of the curse of Ham is used by White Americans to both justify slavery and validate their superior positions within society. David Mark Whitford describes this false representation of blacks in *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* *The Bible and the Justification for Slavery.* He asserts, “according to the mythology that developed around [The Curse of Ham], Noah cursed his son Ham to perpetual slavery. Ham, according to Genesis 9:20-27, was the founding father of Africa. Thus, Africans are an accursed race predestined by God to inferiority and slavery” (*The Curse of Ham*). By using this biblical legend as a form of justification for black enslavement, whites develop a position of superiority, power, and acceptance of their assumed divine favor of God. Douglass attempts to disprove the Curse of Ham as rationalization for slavery and black inferiority. He develops this argument by discussing the interracial sexual relations often taking place between slaves and masters. In his narrative, Douglass describes the emergence of a “different-looking” variety of individuals that are beginning to multiply in the antebellum South. These individuals are also confined to the unrelenting institution of slavery, but hold a different appearance than those who were brought to America from Africa. From this observation, Douglass argues that, “if their increase will do no other good, it will do away with the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right” (*Narrative of the Life*, 3). Douglass attempts to expose the further deformation of the black body within American slavery by describing whites’ use of blacks as both operational and sexual.

Furthermore, Douglass’ inclusion of the reference to the tale of Ham in the beginning of the narrative works to signal readers to the thought-provoking correlation between slavery and Christianity. It also displays a stronghold of spiritual and cultural ignorance that has been passed along amongst many generations within the white community. Whites have ultimately granted themselves with the entitlement to dictate and control the lives of all blacks, debunking their involvement in Christian practices as proof of no wrongdoing. White slave owners’ hypocritical use
of the Bible proved to be a domineering falsehood. This misrepresenta-
tion was initially embedded in biblical theology; however, slaveholders
conveniently applied this misinterpreted theology to maintain a corrupt
society. Michael Eric Dyson explains the ideology of black inferiority in
*The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* by explaining that, “A key to keeping
blacks under white control was the psychological poison pumped into
the intellectual diets of slaves” (Michael Eric Dyson). This psychological
poison spread hastily through the nation, butchering spirits and slaugh-
tering souls of African-Americans by the millions.

During the *What to a Slave* speech, Douglass presents the argument
that no man, specifically those being addressed, would volunteer them-
sele to become a slave, and therefore questions how white society
remorselessly imposes this inhumane conditions upon African-Ameri-
cans. Additionally, Douglass criticizes America for their unauthentic
and unethical principles that shape the nation, the institution of slavery
and the false Christianity of white society. He says, “They convert the
very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty…
It is a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers, and thugs. It is not
that “pure and undefiled religion” which is from above, and which is “first
pure, then peaceable…without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (What
to a Slave). In addition to the use of the Bible for the justification of
slavery through the Curse of Ham, white slaveholders also used scripture
to encourage white supremacy and submissiveness amongst black slaves.
The Bible provided whites with the tools that were necessary to assure
slaves that by challenging their masters’ inferiority they were ultimately
opposing God’s will. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Hal Cone
says, “Black theology exposed the “white” church’s “chaplaincy to the
forces of oppression” and dared that church to “embrace the cause of
liberation…” (Cone, 131). White society held the assumption that black
slaves were not Christians; they assumed that they were without religion
and therefore classified them as heathens. They also adopted the assum-
tion that since heathens are defined as individuals without God, they
were empty vessels. Metaphorically speaking, one should be able to pour
into an empty vessel one’s own interpretations of Christian values. The
anticipated result for whites was the creation of a compliant, obedient
servant. By using Bible scriptures to psychologically justify the maltreat-
ment of African-Americans, whites successfully took full advantage of
the slaves by tricking them into believing that by being obedient to one’s
master they will faithfully fulfill God’s desires. Douglass describes his
personal accounts with religious masters, “….I should regard being the
slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me” (46). Christianity drives the evil of slavery for the white society by providing a tangible book of laws that are used to brainwash slaves by reversing their religious beliefs for the benefit of white supremacy. Moreover, assuming that slaves would not be able to engage in the reading of scripture made it more convenient to manipulate them, ultimately using worship gatherings to orally communicate biblical law. The Bible’s Ephesians Chapter 6:5-6 says: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart” (Holy Bible). By engaging in this religious manipulation, two results emerge. The first result is that slaveholders and other members of the white church begin to develop a false understanding of Christianity and its true values. Douglass says of his master, “Poor man! Such was his disposition…I do verily believe that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God” (Narrative of the Life, 37). By attempting to manipulate the slaves, it is apparent that whites fall victim to the perverted misrepresentation of the institution of Christianity in which they have created. In Douglass’ speech, What to the Slave is the Fourth of July, he speaks boldly to America’s white society as he says, “boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation…is solemnly pledge to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen” (What to the Slave). By corrupting the institution of Christianity, whites are attempting to benefit from the use of black bodies without accepting responsibility for the souls in which they possess. In the article, Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity, Robert Beckford uniquely presents the comparison of a soulless body as a zombie-like figure. He argues, “The phantasm of the zombie- a soulless husk deprived of freedom- is the ultimate sign of loss and dispossession” (Documentary as Exorcism). White Christianity embodied the destruction of black subjectivity, ultimately gaining momentum in their ability to indoctrinate and control African-American slaves. By stripping away the very souls of these human beings, whites gain the ability to differentiate themselves and as a result, apprehend power over blacks, their thoughts, and their beliefs. Douglass provides the most articulate description of the differences between the Christian faith of a slave and the Christianity of a white slave holder. He declares, “I love the pure,
peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slave holding, women whipping, cradle plundering, partial, and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (Narrative of the Life, 71). Additionally, discrepancy existed between the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans and “Christian” beliefs of whites. In the narrative, Douglass recollects Mr. Auld’s visit to a Methodist camp assembly. He had the opportunity to experience the Christian religion for the very first time. Douglass initially assumed that this introduction to religion would be beneficial to him and his fellow slaves. By witnessing Mr. Auld’s newfound association with Christian faith, Douglass made the assumption that the experience would alter his master in a positive way. Moreover, Douglass was hopeful that Auld would resort to emancipating his slaves. And even if his conversion to Christianity could not convince him to free his slaves, Douglass believed that it would at least give him a more kind and humane spirit. On the contrary, however, Auld’s spiritual transformation caused him to become more cruel, evil, and unjust. From this conversion experience, Auld embraced Christianity as a form of religious justification ultimately discovering a newfound rationalization for black inferiority. Michael Eric Dyson speaks on the theology of Christianity in The Michael Eric Dyson Reader. He states that, “Christianity gave theological legitimacy, and racial justification, to widely held beliefs about black inferiority. It also sanctioned the brutal methods deemed necessary to tame the beastly urges of black Africans” (Michael Eric Dyson). The deceitful use of Christian values proves that biblical scriptures have been fallaciously embedded into the minds and hearts of the white community and has furthermore, deconstructed the values of authentic Christianity. Instead, White Christianity upholds political ideals that financially and economically benefit White American society. Douglass declares in What to the Slave is the Fourth of July, “American Christianity preferred the rich against the poor…which divides mankind into two classes, tyrants and slaves” (What to the Slave). The distinct classification between tyrant and slave that Douglass spoke of on July 4, 1852 has proven to become a part of the woven composition of the nation for hundreds of years to come. Furthermore, the social separation of blacks and whites emerges further through the underestimation of the intellectual ability of African-Americans. When analyzing Christianity in relation to slavery, it is also necessary to examine the fact that many slaves portrayed fearlessness and unwavering faith in their spiritual relationships with Christ. Bearing in mind their severely trying experiences with White Christianity as justification for their own spiritual,
mental, and physical deformation, slaves effectively assert their own subjectivity. In *Blackness Past, Blackness Future- and Theology*, M. Shawn Copeland expresses the importance in, “seeking to discern, distinguish, and disentangle the liberating justice message of the Gospel of Jesus Nazareth from the captivity of “white” racist Christianity (Copeland, 629). Instead of condemning the entire institution of Christianity, slaves utilize religion as a tool to acquire their spiritual and bodily freedom. Furthermore, arguments of Black resistance and injustice that approached within the framework of anti-colonialism must acknowledge the pivotal role of the Black Church as an institution of African-American liberation and progression.

**African-American Subjectivity Through Christianity**

Throughout the existence of American slavery, African-Americans have endured the horrors of physical bondage and psychological oppression as a consequence of the religious and cultural hypocrisy enacted by American white society. In slaves’ attempt to endure oppression, praise God, and extricate themselves from the Christian values of their masters, they began to privately commune with one another. While sharing their prayers, worship, and songs, blacks began to develop a consciousness of the importance of community. Douglass establishes a small religious group that he describes in his narrative. He shares, “I held my Sabbath school at the house of a free colored man, whose name I deem it imprudent to mention…I had at one time over forty scholars, and those of the right sort, ardently desiring to learn. They were of all ages, though mostly men and women. I look back to those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul” (Narrative of the Life). As these spiritual unions continued to flourish, it became apparent that strong black interactions offered the slaves strength and agility to endure their oppression. Furthermore, their spiritual and religious practices continued to elevate, allowing God’s presence to psychologically unchain their bodies, souls, and spirits. African-Americans began to promote black subjectivity, black consciousness of power, and the embodiment of self-identification. Throughout his life, Douglass influenced many of his black counterparts to unite mentally and spiritually for the purpose of black freedom and religious development. One hundred years later, American theologian, James H. Cone evolved the ideology further, naming it the Black Liberation Theology. This theology promoted African-American’s new revelation of Black identity and practice and involved a multitude of experiences. However,
at their center, they hold an anchored sense of spirituality, fellowship, and the promotion of self-love and love for our fellow black companions. “For between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ,” as Frederick Douglass writes in his narrative, “I recognize the widest possible difference” (Douglass, 71). Cone’s expansion of the idea of Black liberation a century following Douglass’ generational influence suggests that our race’s progression has not occurred because of the power of white society, but exists due to the will of God, as well as the determination of our ancestors who deemed it imperative to fight for our freedom and liberation. Michael Eric Dyson suggests, “Black religion freed the black body from its imprisonment in crude, racist stereotypes. The black church combated as best it could the self-hatred and hatred of other blacks…It fought racist oppression by becoming the headquarters of social and political action in black communities” (The Michael Eric Dyson Reader). Black liberation theology also advocates that the Black community still benefits greatly from spiritual and social community. Recognizing and acknowledging the differences between the uses and intentions for Christianity during American slavery are essential when analyzing the institution’s system of power for both black and white societies. Specifically, for African-Americans, Christianity during American slavery served as a trope for the establishment of psychological authority and the mental determination to acquire physical freedom. James Cone suggests that, “Oppression refers not only to economic, social, and political disenfranchisement; there is the disenfranchisement of the mind, of the spiritual and moral values that hold together one’s identity in a community” (A Black Theology of Liberation). The Black Church has been productive in verbalizing a philosophy of optimism and implanting a society of endurance in the struggle of slavery. Christianity, as a resistance to physical and mental confinement, grants slaves with the ability to develop a community of religion and relationship amongst themselves. It is a result of the failure of whites to indoctrinate bonded men and women with a perverted ideology of Christian faith. By worshipping together, the black Christian community becomes a sanctuary of support and emotional communion. Gathering together for religious songs, scripture, and prayer emits fire within the souls of the slaves, ultimately developing self-worth and value within themselves. Furthermore, for slaves, Christianity also authorizes a restored comprehension of black dignity, providing the inspiration and encouragement to fight for the abolishment of slavery and the rise of black subjectivity. In Black Theology and Black Power, James Hal Cone
expresses, “to identify liberation as the heart of the Christian gospel,” is to locate “blackness as the primary mode of God’s presence” (Cone, vii). It is clear that by gaining an intimate relationship with God an analogy becomes relevant; the body is to oppression as the soul is to liberation. One can enslave a human being physically, but one cannot enslave a human’s soul without permission. African-American Christianity evolves and thrives from the belief that human beings are made in the perfect image of God. The belief of God’s equality of love allows the slaves to understand that they deserve freedom and agency as human beings. As Douglas exclaims, “O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free!” (38), Christianity, feels like the only hope for liberation and the best way to cope with the experience of slavery. Slaves’ survival becomes dependent upon their religious faith as well as their ability to resist the perverse use of “Soulless Christianity” that is practiced by their oppressors. Douglass’ narrative includes a parody, “They’ll church you if you sip a dram, And damn you if you steal a lamb; Yet rob old Tony, Doll, and Sam, Of human rights and bread and ham” (Narrative of the Life, 74). In addition to the slaves’ use of Christianity to overcome adversity, they also found solemn in an intimate relationship with God for the purpose of redemption and everlasting salvation. Daryl Dance, author of From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore, describes an encounter between a southern American slave and God: “…I saw old Satan with a host of his angels hop from the pit…I cried out, ‘Save me! Save me, Lord!’ And like a ash, there gathered around me a host of angels…” (From My People). This is an emotional event in which the slave is crying out to God for salvation. His spiritual interaction with God suggests an intimate level of Christian belief as well as a desire for deliverance. Here, Satan represents the evils of slavery and the unjustifiable cruelty of white slaveholders. This illustration of ‘true’ Christianity works to debunk Whites’ claim of Christian practice by establishing a divergence between the grace of God and the evils of the devil. The souls of slaves are ultimately determined by God, and not by the hypocrisy of white Christianity. Furthermore, hypocrisy drives the white societal religion in attempt to maintain the injustice and brutality of slavery while Christian faith maintains the endurance of the slaves to persevere.

When discussing the cultural and social impact of slave texts generally, it is often discovered that religion and slavery go hand in hand in the development of the genre. By embracing a Christian component, the texts provide an interesting binary between what is assumed to be negative and what is often assumed to be positive. Divergently, these
texts possess the ability to debunk those same binaries by challenging the authenticity of Christianity as well as the details of the institution of slavery. Moreover, American slavery often parallels with Christianity because both institutions are significant elements of American history and literature. Specifically in Frederick Douglass’, _Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass_, embodies a unique stance in relation to the representations of slavery. In the text, slavery is represented through the personal account of Frederick Douglass. The slave narrative portrays African-American slavery as an institution of evil oppression and presents blacks as ignorant savages. Douglass re-presents his experiences of slavery by spiritually, psychologically, and physically molding himself into the image of Black subjectivity that he prays to witness his race obtain as well. By teaching himself to read, write, and positively reprogram his being, he presents himself in the novel, as a pillar of success and possibilities. The novel also represents slavery by maintaining images of Christianity and its effects on white and black societies. Similarly, Douglass represents slavery in his epic speech, _What to the Slave is the Fourth of July_, by boldly owning his body in front of many elite white individuals and allowing his words to paint a vivid image of the devastation of black slavery. The representation of slavery in Douglass’ texts are enhanced by the theology of black liberation as this critical lens zooms in to Douglass’ fight for the deformation of racial inferiority as well as the encouragement of spiritual connection with God. Douglass says in his speech, “This, for the purpose of the celebration, is the fourth of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God” (To What is the Slave). Douglass ultimately represents slavery by debunking the hypocrisy of white society, and in turn, constructing a platform for God’s people to progress into the Promise Land.

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Comparing News Headlines in Modern Day Mass Media with Representations of Slavery in Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

BY CERA ALEXIS SMITH

*A single image influences and changes the world. When images begin to move and speak they become even more powerful. The moving image becomes a tool for spreading information and fighting injustice. Film and television shrink the world making even the remotest events seem personal and intimate. —Information is Power*

During the traumatic years of American slavery, Solomon Northup, a free African American man from upstate New York, is manipulated, kidnapped and sold into the Louisiana Slave Trade in 1841. Brown and Hamilton, the two white men that convince Northup to travel south to Washington D.C. with them profit from Northup’s capture and represent the driving force behind slavery. The need for a higher economic status changed the character of white people, causing the dehumanization of African American slaves as a means of profiting from race-based slave labor. Steve McQueen, director of the film *12 Years a Slave*, transforms the 1853 slave narrative about Northup’s twelve-year experience as a slave into a film with moving images that capture the brutality of white on black violence during antebellum slavery. American racial historian, Philip Dray, agrees with the claim that mass media outlets like news headlines, social media, television and film have the power to
influence popular attitudes and social behaviors in a racially political modern day America. In the segment titled, *Information is Power*, of The History Channel documentary, *Mankind: Decoded*, Dray states that “one of the great breakthroughs for the Civil Rights Movement was the power of the media, press photography, and news reel footage,” because it “revealed the evil of Southern racism; in other words, it captured it and transmitted it around the world, and when the footage was broadcast, people were horrified.” Images of racism throughout modern day mass media technologies are raising significant questions in a continuously changing Western culture where recent movies about antebellum slavery are re-introducing Americans to the physical and psychological white on black violence that defines the historical context of American slavery. Throughout the film, *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen effectively utilizes race-based imagery as a communication tool that challenges modern day viewers to examine the connection between the politics of the past with the racially charged mass media politics of modern day America.

Throughout the article, “Uncomfortable Historical Truths: On White Privilege and the Movie *12 Years a Slave,*” Chauncey DeVega proves that American racism is a current topic of discussion by making connections between “white privilege” ideology and racially charged mass media politics today. DeVega argues that “as is common when white Americans are forced to confront the centuries of violence by ‘other’ ‘white’ people against people of color across the Black Atlantic, discussions about the past are transformed into default statements about the present” (2). In a particular moment of the movie, Northup arrives at his first location of slave labor, William Ford’s plantation home, where John Tibeats, head carpenter of the plantation, introduces himself by saying, “you will refer to me as master,” and forcefully invites the African American slaves under his supervision to clap along with him as he sings, “Nigger run, nigger flew. Nigger tore his shirt in two. Run, run, the patty roller will get you. Run, nigger, run, well you better get away. Nigger run, run so fast stoved his head in a hornets nest. Run, run, the patty roller will get you. Run, nigger, run, well you better get away. Some folks say a nigger don’t steal, I caught three in my corn field. One has a bushel and one has a peck. One has a rope, it was hung around his neck. Hey, Mr. Patter- roller don’t catch me. Catch that nigger behind that tree!” The old, racist folk song that McQueen uses in the film directly reflects a 2015 news headline about a predominately all white, male fraternity at the University of Oklahoma. In this news headline, a white, male adult is yelling a similar chant to Tibeats song: “You can hang them from a tree, but
they’ll never sign with me. There will never be a nigger at SAE. You can hang them from a tree, but they’ll never sign with me. There will never be a nigger at SAE.” The racially charged news headlines surrounding the University of Oklahoma chant scandal are sparking dialogues about race in contemporary mass media American culture. The racial debates forming across America are making it abundantly clear that the lack of understanding that ‘privileged’ white people have about American slave history is hindering American society. On New Republic’s mass communications website, Chloe Angyal, a social scientist, deconstructs “how the Oklahoma frat scandal exposes a racial double standard” in her news article, “Being White Means Never Having to Say You’re Sorry.” Angyal suggests that “when black people break the law or flout social norms in the United States, the public conversation immediately turns to the broader concept of blackness itself,” but “when white people misbehave, however, they rarely represent more than themselves, even when they’re members of an organization like, say, SAE.” The claim that the University of Oklahoma chanting scandal is a result of the lack of knowledge that white American’s have about race-based slave brutality in the U.S. today is confirmed further when Angyal says, “I want them [white Americans] to consider how individual actions are shaped by collective beliefs and cultural pressures … For one thing, it requires of us a certain level of humility. We need to have an understanding that we aren’t special, unique, and different, but subject to the same forces as everyone else in our sociocultural group.” The racist chant circulating modern day mass media outlets, in comparison with recent films about slavery, like McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave, exposes the fact that the white on black physical and psychological destruction that defines the painful beginnings of American slave history is still present today.

CBS News covered a story spawning from the racial turmoil at the University of Oklahoma that not only reflects representations of slavery within McQueen’s film; it also verifies the stringing of events since American slave history that links the race-based imagery throughout McQueen’s film with racially charged news headlines today. The article on CBS’ online news source, “New Twist in University of Oklahoma Race Scandal,” informs the American public of Beauton Gilbow’s contradictory statements about race, which reveals the ignorant white racism that is within the present day contemporary American culture of mass media and mass communications. In a newly uncovered 2013 video clip from the popular social media and mass communications outlet, the Vine app, Gilbow, the U.O. SAE house mother, is seen at
the SAE frat house saying, “Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,” seven times in a row. The headline states that “CBS News met with ‘house mother’ Gilbow on Monday and interviewed her inside the Sigma Alpha Epsilon frat house,” where “she was reacting to the nine-second video of students chanting racial slurs.” CBS illuminates Gilbow’s contradictory understanding of racism within America by saying, “she expressed shock when talking about the SAE fraternity members who were recorded on a charter bus, using the same word [nigger]” that Gilbow uses in the vine video. Gilbow’s actions in the news today mirror the actions of white mistresses during the plantation era of American slave labor. McQueen portrays the hatred that lives within white, slave-owning women with his characterization of Mistress Epps. The scene begins with seemingly cheerful African American slaves dancing for the plantation owner, named Edwin Epps, at Northup’s second location of slave labor. In the scene, Mistress Epps is overcome with jealousy because of the attention that Edwin is giving to a particular female slave named Patsy. Mistress Epps commands the music to stop and intensifies her outwardly apparent form of racism by demanding Edwin get rid of the young African American slave girl by saying, “You will remove that black bitch from this property, or I’ll take myself back to Cheneyville.” Mistress Epps’ statement of blatant racism echoes the ideals of racial seclusion found in the SAE frat chant and Gilbow’s racial slurs.

Further examination of the connection between the University of Oklahoma controversy and McQueen’s film amplifies the link between the lasting effects of American slavery and racial politics today. DeVega continues to accentuate the racist core of American culture in his article by saying, “Because Whiteness imagines itself as benign, any discussion of systematic racial violence against black and brown people is taken personally by many white folks” (2). DeVega uses a movie review written by Dana Stevens to prove his point, “Because Dana Stevens [a white film critic] imagines herself as a good person, the anti-black racism depicted in 12 Years a Slave must somehow be a distortion of the historical record. This is a very common cognitive and rhetorical deflection when white folks are confronted about their investment in, and relationship to, white privilege and white racism” (2). The ignorance of white privilege and white racism that DeVega analyzes coincides with the statement from Angyal’s news article that “We seem [Americans] to lose the capacity to ask how a culture of white supremacy might shape a white fraternity bother’s decision to sing, on camera, about how he’d rather see a black man killed than admit him into his social circle.” The unwillingness by
white Americans to accept the white on black violence that is American slave history as reality is a symbol of the gasoline (white privilege and white racism) that fuels news headlines today. Angyal describes the white privilege and white racism within mass media news headlines as, “For a largely black protest movement, [against racist policing practices in Ferguson] the ripples of damage spread, touching the entire body of the movement. For the white men of SAE, the laws of physics are different, and the ripples don’t spread in the same way. The conservative gospel of ‘individual responsibility’ is, in this case, a luxury that white people enjoy, but that black people are denied.” The white man seen chanting racial slurs in the video across every major news headline is a modern day representation of the damaging effects that race-based slavery has had on modern American society, which justifies McQueen’s reason for making a 2013 film about American slavery. In an interview with Current News, McQueen states his reason for making the film saying, “We have to address that balance and we have to look at that time in history, because scholars have said, in order to understand America one has to understand slavery.” McQueen’s goal for 12 Years can be translated as: utilizing representations of slavery within the film to further elevate the overall understanding of race-based slave history in America; and in return, McQueen has high expectations that his movie will aid in the process of eliminating the racist core of American culture that is within mass media news headlines on a daily basis.

Ross Wilson explains the impact towards positive social change that films about slavery potentially have on cultural opinion when he says, “Representations of historical contexts on film and television have often proven to be very important in the creation of public memory. Indeed, these cultural modes of expression are often critically considered to be amongst the main source of people's perceptions and memories of the historic past” (1). Wilson’s article, “Representation Equals Recognition? The Portrayal of Slavery on Screen: from Roots to Amistad, Mansfield Park and Amazing Grace,” again, in consideration with McQueen’s images of white on black violence in 12 Years a Slave, opens the door of communication when it comes to discussing the connection between McQueen’s images of America’s painful slave beginnings and the cause of racially charged mass media news headlines today. McQueen exposes antebellum slave brutality early in the movie when Northup encounters Burch, the slave pin owner that first introduces Northup to the horrors of American slavery. In this scene, the dehumanization of African American slaves in the “old” South is revealed after Burch gives Northup a new
identity by repeating, “You’re no free man, and you ain’t from Saratoga. You’re from Georgia. You ain’t a free man. You’re nothin’ but a Georgia runaway. You’re just a runaway nigger from Georgia.” Burch then proceeds to further emphasize the psychological destruction that African American slaves had to endure by whipping Northup mercilessly while yelling, “Are you a slave?” until Northup can no longer suffer the pain that goes along with rejecting his new identity and ostensibly accepts his fate as a free man posing as a slave in order to survive. The painful past of American slavery re-presented in *12 Years* gives today’s Americans a truthful perspective of history that inspires viewers to challenge racist mass media news headlines; for example, the 2014 death of Eric Garner, a modern day African American man from New York. Garner’s death, at the hands of white NYPD police officers, was captured on video and plastered on every major news channel in America. In the video, the police pin Garner to the ground with an unnecessary chokehold while Garner is clearly pleading for his life saying, “I can’t breathe,” over and over again. The white on black violence shown in the video reveals the uncomfortable truth that modern American society is still hindered by racist ideology, which creates overwhelming controversy in the United States in the form of race riots and protests.

In December 2014, news articles about African American images with extreme racial symbolism that reference Eric Garner’s death began circulating mass media outlets. In *The Washington Post* news article, “Berkeley Students Find Cardboard Cutouts of Black Lynching Victims Hanging on Campus,” Peter Holley explains the event in detail with relationship to the racial tensions within America caused by Garner’s death. Holley refers to the racial symbolism scattered throughout the University of California, Berkeley Campus in his news article when he says, “The effigies – two of which hung from Sather Gate – included the names of historical lynching victims and the dates of their death, and at least one of the cutouts had ‘I Can’t Breathe’ printed on the front. That slogan, which has become the national rallying cry for demonstrators protesting Eric Garner’s recent death at the hands of New York police, led many to conclude that the effigies were linked to an off-campus demonstration that took place Saturday against police brutality.” Holley’s news article, with relation to the race-based slave imagery portrayed throughout *12 Years a Slave*, proves the fact that McQueen’s film has the power to inspire viewers to find the connection between politics today and U.S. slave history. The immense amount of pain that Northup suffers at the hands of Tibeats in a specific scene in the movie directly
correlates with the controversy surrounding the cutouts at U.C. Berkeley. In the scene, Tibbeats attempts to murder Northup after Northup employs self-defense against Tibbeats by pinning Tibbeats to the ground. Self-defense is a natural instinct that every human being and creature on Earth possesses, even animals have the freedom to engage in self-defense when danger is near, but for African Americans during the years of ante bellum slavery, exposing that quality meant pain, or even death, would be the consequence. Although Northup’s public death is stopped quickly by Mr. Chapin, the head overseer of Ford’s plantation, McQueen continues to develop the lynching scene by focusing on the pain and suffering of ante bellum slavery that Northup symbolizes for nearly five minutes. McQueen effectively utilizes the lynching scene as a communication tool by spending an unusually lengthy amount of time focusing on one of the more disturbing events that occurred throughout American slave history, and even well into the 1950s. In the scene Mr. Chapin commands Tibbeats to end the lynching by shouting, “William Ford holds the mortgage on Platt, [Northup’s slave name] if you hang him, he will lose his debt. You have no claim to his life … I say, be gone!” Northup is left hanging from the tree for hours with just enough room on the rope to stand on his toes and grasp for air. The perspective of pain that McQueen provides the audience with evokes a new found understanding of the link between the physical and psychological destruction that African American slaves had to endure and racially generated mass media news headlines today.

Jacqueline Woodson, an African American, female winner of the National Book Award, uses an example of modern day racial stereotyping in a New York Times news article that further links the connection between the physical and psychological destruction of African American slaves during ante bellum slavery and racial inequality in America today. On The New York Times’ mass communications website, Woodson explains the effects that racial stereotyping has on employing racial injustice throughout America today in the news article, “The Pain of the Watermelon Joke.” Woodson describes the act of white on black racism that she experiences when she says, “Just this month, I received the National Book Award in the young adult category for my memoir, ‘Brown Girl Dreaming.’ As I walked away from the stage to a standing ovation after my acceptance speech, it was the last place in the world I thought I’d hear the watermelon joke – directed by the M.C., Daniel Handler, at me. ‘Jackie’s allergic to watermelon,’ he said. I was astonished when he brought this up before the National Book audience – in the
form of a wink-nudge joke about being black.” Woodson acknowledges the connection between the physical and psychological destruction of African Americans during antebellum slavery with the racially charged stereotyping happening within mass media politics of modern day America when she says, “In a few short words, the audience and I were asked to take a step back from everything I’ve ever written, a step back from the power and meaning of the National Book Award, lest we forget, lest I forget, where I came from.” The racism that Handler unconsciously portrays at the National Book Awards embodies the definition of race relations within America today that Woodson illustrates as, “By making light of that deep and troubled history, he showed that he believed we were at a point where we could laugh about it all. His historical context, unlike my own, came from a place of ignorance.” Handler’s reference to the watermelon racial stereotype in Woodson’s news article supports the claim that the effects of American slave history are within contemporary American culture. Handler’s potentially detrimental stereotype gives Woodson the chance to spread social messages of race relations within America in her news article. Woodson illuminates one social message when she says, “To know that we African Americans came here enslaved to work until we died but didn’t die, and instead grew up to become doctors and teachers, architects and president – how can these children not carry this history with them for those many moments when someone will attempt to make light of it, or want them to forget the depth and amazingness of their journey?” The core of Woodson’s identity as an African American within modern day America gives her the purpose and the tools she needs “to write stories that have been historically absent in this country’s body of literature, to create mirrors for the people who so rarely see themselves inside contemporary fiction, and windows for those who think we are no more than the stereotypes they’re so afraid of. To give young people – and all people – a sense of this country’s brilliant and brutal history, so that no one ever thinks they can walk onto a stage one evening and laugh at another’s too often painful past.” Woodson’s understanding of American history sheds a positive light on understanding the painful past of American slavery.

The assertion that McQueen, racial equality protestors and news headline creators are trying to get a social message across to modern day Americans gains confirmation after Leigh Raiford, an associate professor of African American studies at U.C. Berkeley, is quoted in Holley’s news article saying, “To me this suggested a really powerful public art installation that was trying to provoke people to make a historical connection
between the history of lynching, state violence against black folks and the contemporary situation that we’re faced with around police brutality and these non-indictments.” Raiford’s statement in comparison with Wilson’s statement that “the representation of slavery and abolition in film is not only a highly emotive and potentially divisive subject, it also provides a means of accessing the past in a manner which is empowering and rewarding,” (1) further supports the claim that mass communication outlets like news headlines, film and social media have the power to evoke a sense of responsibility in understanding the link between American slavery and racial politics today. Nicholas Kristof wrote an article in The New York Times called, “Is Everyone a Little Bit Racist?” that calls into question race relations within America, “Research in the last couple of decades suggests that the problem is not so much overt racists. Rather, the larger problem is a broad swath of people who consider themselves enlightened, who intellectually believe in racial equality, who deplore discrimination, yet who harbor unconscious attitudes that result in discriminatory policies and behavior.” Kristof then goes on to reveal uncomfortable facts about racial inequality within America that connects the link between the race relations during American slavery and race relations in America today, “Scholars have found that … school administrators suspend black students at more than three time the rate of white students. Police arrest blacks at 3.7 time the rate of whites for marijuana possession, even though surveys find that both use marijuana at roughly similar rates.” The social message that McQueen and other protestors throughout America are trying to get across is stated in Kristof’s news article as, “These doctors, principals, prosecutors and recruiters probably believe in equality and are unaware that they are discriminating. So any national conversation about race must be a vivisection of challenges far broader and deeper than we might like to think.” McQueen’s film, in conversation with the racial tensions swirling throughout the United States of America, inspires change in popular attitudes and social behaviors throughout a racially charged modern day America.

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Everyone must understand that, whatever be the evil of slavery, it is not increased by its diffusion. Every one familiar with it knows that it is in proportion to its sparseness that it becomes less objectionable. Wherever there is an immediate connection between the master and slave, whatever there is of harshness in the system is diminished.” —Jefferson Davis

Surviving the System of Slavery: 
Stephen as the ‘Trickster’ in Quentin Tarantino’s Django: Unchained (2012)

In Tarantino’s film Django Unchained, black slaves have no choice other than to learn to adapt to the system of slavery. Although criticized by some as a comedic film, Tarantino does not desire to portray an accurate representation of slavery in Django; however, close analysis reveals several elements throughout the film which depict various tropes of slavery. The trickster is one trope portrayed in the film and serves as an aid to slaves by allowing them to work effectively within an unjust system and portray themselves as competent of surviving in the system of slavery. The system of slavery bears different effects on different slaves; some slaves react to slavery in anger, some are submissive to slavery, and some learn to manipulate their way through the system of slavery to better their conditions as a slave. Stephen, played by Samuel L. Jackson, manipulates the system of slavery and becomes equally unjust to the system in which he is forced to live in. Stephen does not completely favor with the white characters he strives to emulate nor does he completely favor with the black characters who he pries and abuses to fuel his obsession with power. Stephen portrays ‘shades of grey’ as he tricks and manipulates both white and black characters. The grey colored middle ground Stephen shuffles between causes him to cling to the white plantation owner, Calvin, serving as a father figure for Calvin. He also clashes with the other black slaves on his plantation only to satisfy
his addiction with being in charge. Stephen, a black enslaved overseer, exhibits characteristics of the trickster figure with a desire to portray his dominance over his fellow slaves, control his white master and other white overseers, and effectively navigates in the system of slavery.

The origins of the trickster figures in African-American slavery go beyond the American soil, having roots of ‘tricksterism’ brought to America by the African slaves. Earlier slave narratives written by African slaves who were shipped to American reveal diaspora, the movement of a population scattered in different areas of the world, which often leads to the narrator forming trickster habits to survive oppression (M’Baye 10). The Norton Anthology of African American Literature defines a trickster as “a group of Pan-African mythic figures identified collectively as Esu, or Esu-Elegbara; characterized by small stature and weak physicality but superior intelligence, astute perspicacity, subversive moral instincts, innate survival skills, and a keen sense of humor and wit” (Norton Anthology). Since there are many variations of tricksters; the trickster symbol a slave or ex-slave interprets depends solely on what that particular slave has experienced during their enslavement and the intensity of their oppression. Stephen, the trickster figure in Django: Unchained, share similarities with the Bouki trickster figure, a Wolof folklore character. Stephen switches personalities and manipulates everyone around him to gain power for his personal gratification. Babacar M’Baye explains the Bouki trickster figure in her novel The Trickster Comes West: Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diasporan Narratives as a symbol in African-American folklore tales that portrays different personalities. The Bouki trickster represents personalities allowing it to negotiate with its counterparts. (M’Baye 15). In the film Django, Stephen has a consistent determination to ruin Django (Jamie Fox) which begins when Django rides a nag (horse) into Candie Land, the plantation where Stephen is the black work boss. Often seen in films depicting representations of slavery, black work bosses are equally, if not, worse than the white slave overseers. In Django, Stephen even has authority over the white slave overseers which is seen initially when Stephen first appears in the film. Through Stephen’s many years at the Candie Plantation and his conniving, manipulating survival tactics, he forms traits parallel to those of the Bouki symbol.

Viewers of Django classify Stephen as the villain; however, M’Baye expresses how one must look beyond the surface of the trickster character to discover the reasoning behind the characters actions; hence, suggesting to look beyond the surface of each character (15). Stephen may seem selfish, conniving, or cruel but these are all traits used as a mask.
to utilize the power that gives him comfort as a slave. Therefore, when Stephen sees Django intruding on his domain of authority and power, Stephen utilizes the trickster characteristics to protect his authority and reputation. Django is one of the main black characters who clashes with Jackson’s character Stephen which is caused by both characters using whites to become free men in whom both characters are forced to fight below the belt. Chris Vognar wrote an journal article discussing the black, white, and shades of grey in Tarantino’s films and discusses the clash between Django and Stephen as “a vivid embodiment of the historically chronicled animosity between house slaves and field slaves” (30). Stephen is jealous of Django because Django is a free black man who can make decisions for himself. Stephen can also make decisions for himself but Stephen is not a free slave and cannot leave the plantation when he pleases. He is still confined to slavery, though he is free within the system of slavery he has learned to live in. Stephen uses the mask to hide his characteristics that manipulate the system of slavery.

Stephen’s immediate desire to degrade Django’s presence is depicted in the first scene Stephen appears in shown half way through the film as Django, Calvin Candie, Dr. King Schultz, and other slaves and white overseers arrive back to Candie Land. Candie Land is the plantation Stephen spends his entire life on. The scene frames Stephen with his back facing the camera between two white columns on the porch of the Candie Land plantation house. Quentin Tarantino’s framing of Stephen between the two columns introduces the authority Stephen obtains. White columns suggest authority or high power such as the white columns on the white house or courthouses. Most all southern plantation homes were built with white columns and for a black slave to stand centered between these two symbols of authority suggest that Stephen is not an average slave. In Steve McQueen’s Twelve Years a Slave, Solomon Northup is seen standing on the porch of the plantation home where he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. One of the white overseers, Zachary, notices Solomon and yells “Get off the porch. You ain’t supposed to be on the porch. Get off the porch” portraying the disrespectfulness of a slave to stand on the porch of a white and “pure” plantation home. Stephen standing on the porch of the Candie Land Plantation not only suggests that he does as he pleases, but also illustrates the advantage Stephen has in slavery. Stephen continues to stand on the porch watching as the slaves file into line; however, he is confounded by the sight of Django on a horse giving the slaves orders. Stephen immediately begins to curse and question Calvin, the white plantation owner, as to why...
there is a “nigger on that nag” (Tarantino 2012). As defined by M’Baye, the Bouki trickster is able to reason within relationships between opposites that normally would not be accepted in master-slave relationships (M’Baye 15). Stephen has formed a father-son relationship with Calvin through the years and it is apparent in the conversation Stephen has with Calvin, his master. When Calvin arrives to Candie Land, he greets Stephen with a “hello Stephen my boy” in which Stephen responds by stating “yea, yea, hello my ass” which happens to be the first words the audience hears from Stephen in the film. Tarantino immediately portrays Stephen as this loud mouth, power hungry, old, black slave who feels it is acceptable to undermine his master. Tarantino attempts to force the audience of this film to dislike Stephen; however, if the viewers were forced to look through the lens of the trickster figure, Stephen’s cruelty would obtain more understanding.

In her novel, M’Baye states the artistic characteristics of the trickster figure will not be fully understood if the audience looks through the lens of immortality (15). M’Baye suggests that we should not wonder why Stephen is cruel and mean but wonder what made him cruel and mean. What has happened in the life of Stephen that has formed this manipulation and greed for power? The film fails to offer that information, however, we do know Stephen was Calvin’s father’s slave. Stephen has used the time he has served on the Candie Land Plantation to his benefit. Stephen states in the first scene he appears in that Calvin’s father would turn over in his grave if he knew he had a black man on a horse, sleeping in his plantation home. It is obvious that Calvin looks up to Stephen because of his role in Calvin’s father’s life and it is obvious that Stephen uses his experience as Calvin’s father’s house slave to mold Calvin what he feels he should be. Although Stephen is still Calvin’s slave, the film portrays Stephen’s authority over Calvin as well others. Stephen has learned over time how to use his seniority and experience to control his fellow slaves as well as the white slavers. Through his seniority, he has gained control over Calvin’s decisions and established an undermining role as the actual slave master. Therefore, Stephen is not cruel simply because Tarantino directed the film to portray his cruelty, but because Stephen has learned to survive in a system he could never escape. He lived as a free man within the slavery system which gives him no reason to rebel against the plantation. Stephen uses manipulation, split personalities, altered language, and other trickster tactics to maintain and protect his authority he has built.

Protecting his authority and power at Candie Land, Stephen begins to pry into the actual reason why Django and Dr. Schultz are visiting.
After Django and Dr. Schultz have composed a plan to buy and rescue Hilda from the plantation, they execute their plan during dinner. Not allowed to sit at the dinner table, Stephen never leaves his post behind Calvin’s dinner chair as he stands and co-signs with every word Calvin negotiate to Dr. Schultz. Every price or plea Django or Dr. Schultz offers, Stephen abruptly interjects agreeing with whatever Calvin states while affronting a white guest at a white dinner table in a white Ante-Bellum slave plantation. Marlene Allen coined the term “tricksterism” in an essay regarding the Legacy of the African Diasporic Past in Nalo Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber. Allen discusses Bouki and characteristics which Hopkinson incorporates in her novel. The Bouki characteristics parallel with those of Stephen, particularly during the dinner scene. Allen states the Bouki trickster character uses “the manipulation of language for empowerment” to “denounce or embarrass someone publicly, often ‘loud-talking’ them” (84). Dr. Schultz states his interest in buying the best slave at Candie Land and naming him the “black Hercules” (Tarantino 2012). Stephen intrudes saying, “more like ‘nigga-les’” (2012). Stephen criticizes his own race seeking to gain a sense of acceptance by making racial jokes with white men. Stephen is protecting his position and role as the only black man to have free-will and power at Candie Land, even if it requires him to oppose his own race.

The novel Movies in the Age of Obama: The Era of Post-Racial and Neo-Racist Cinema contains a chapter by Rodney Fierce discussing the African American identity in Django. Titled “The Exceptional N*gger: Redefining African American Identity in Django”, the chapter focuses on the identity of African American slaves which were shaped by the system of slavery. Fierce discusses Stephen’s cruelty towards his own people and his commitment to his oppressors (53). Stephen’s desire to be accepted forces him to neglect his own race; this is evident when Stephen’s suspicions begin to unravel at the dinner table. Stephen knows Django is not at the plantation for a slave Mandingo and he figures out Django is in love with Broomhilda, Django’s wife. Going against his own race, Stephen immediately begins to plot in attempt to ruin Django’s plans to buy Hilda. Stephen sarcastically jokes with Django and Dr. Schultz while he observes their actions and body language at the dinner table. Hilda comes out of the kitchen catching Django’s eye; however, Django and Hilda are not alone in their disguised chemistry. Stephen begins to notices Django’s body language and immediately begins attempting to get a reaction out of Django. He begins to talk friendlier to Dr. Schultz asking him if he would like to see Hilda’s lynch wombs on her back. He
knows if Django has a connection with Hilda, he will react. Stephen uses friendly tactics, which Marcia Gaudet from the University of Southwestern Louisiana describes as a “means of survival through deceptions and false friendship” (70). Stephen upholds his precise trickery and deceitful friendships to maintain his authority at Candie Land; therefore, he confronts Broomhilda in the kitchen for lying about knowing Django. Tarantino illustrates the double consciousness Stephen renders which is revealed when Stephen interacts with the other black workers.

In the presence of white characters, Stephen manipulates to keep his power and identity; however, with the black workers Stephen boasts about his power and portrays his true identities. Catherine Keyser defends Stephen’s art of manipulation by describing how the white characters at the plantation are oblivious to how much power Stephen has because he does not exaggerate his power in front of them (150). At this point in the film, Stephen’s trickery is evident as he straddles the fence of black agency and double consciousness. Stephen’s agency around the other African American characters alters when he is in the presence the white characters. When Stephen goes into the kitchen, he acts as if he is the master; even Stephen’s walk is different when he enters the room with his own kind. He did not walk with a limp, nor did he have a hunch in his upper back as a weak, old, disabled man would. His posture straightens up, portraying a sense consciousness as the master which symbolizes his power and true identity away from the white characters. When Stephen is in the presence of Calvin, he walks with his back hunched over, a limp and a walking cane; however, in the kitchen Stephen does not use the cane at all. Stephen seems more comfortable around the black characters despite his neglect towards them. When Stephen surrounds himself with white characters, he performs as a fake, Uncle Tom-like character. The double consciousness of Stephen links back to the trickster figures he symbolizes who is usually “physically weak and small in stature”; however, Stephen does not use trickery when he is merely around other black characters. Tricksters are well aware of their characteristics and can determine who to perform for and who to relax around.

Stephen continues to idle between races in the film, skimming to crash Django and Dr. Schultz’s plan to purchase Hilda. As Stephen eavesdrops on Calvin and Dr. Schultz’s conversation, he bursts into the room yelling and interrupting Dr. Schultz asking to buy Hilda. Stephen deliberately ruins the conversation to pull Calvin out of the room to inform him of Django and Dr. Schultz’s plan. At the start of the scene, Stephen
is sitting in a library or a writing room drinking a glass of scotch. The scene explodes with trickster characteristics before any character speaks. Stephen is sitting and drinking as well chastising his master for being oblivious to the skim surrounding him. This scene portrays exactly how much supremacy Stephen acquired throughout his years at Candy Land. As he informs Calvin of the situation, Stephen portrays the notion that he is smarter than Calvin through his body language and facial expressions. Stephen speaks to Calvin as a father would speak to his child and Calvin is submissive to every word Stephen utters. After Stephen informs Calvin of the true reason Django is visiting Candy Land, Calvin says “if it was a snake it would have bit me” not realizing that he has already been bitten by Stephen, the true snake of the film. In other scenes with Stephen and Calvin, Stephen masks his true identity forcing the audience to think Calvin only entertains Stephen because he feels obligated to do so. Calvin’s commitment to Stephen in earlier scenes suggests Stephen is only being giving special treatment because of his experience at Candy Land; however, the current scene shows that Calvin actually needs Stephen. Stephen’s trickster characteristics force the viewers to picture him as a black slave who is granted authority as an act of charity and appreciation for his commitment to Candie Land. We now notice that Stephen’s trickster characteristics grant him the ability to control Calvin along with the rest of the plantation. Stephen is the true slave master in this film portraying his ‘behind the scene’ manipulation and trickery towards both races in the film as he belittles Calvin and exposes Django.

Stephen’s trickster characteristic is embedded in the Candy Land plantation, granting Stephen the ability to use any person his manipulates as a depiction of his trickery. The film shifts back to the dining room where Django and Dr. Schultz wait to continue their purchase of a Mandingo and, most importantly, Hilda. Calvin explains to Django, how he has “spent every day on this plantation surrounded by black faces” and Calvin questions why the slaves have not killed the white slave overseers and himself. He then uses the skull of a slave named Ben who was Calvin’s fathers slave. Calvin examines three dimples in the back of Ben’s skull stating they are areas of submissiveness. Calvin states how black people have the largest area of submissiveness and if he were to crack open Django’s skull, he would have the same three dimples. The notion of submissiveness Calvin explains suggests Django is no better than Ben or the rest of the slaves Calvin has encountered. The scene ironically portrays contradictions of submissiveness as Calvin is extremely submissive to Stephen who, only behind closed doors,
controls Calvin. Calvin explains to Django that he walks and talks exceptionally well for a black man, but suggest to him that he is not a fool. If Stephen did not inform Calvin of the trickery Django and Schultz were engaging in, Calvin would still be unaware of the game he was falling victim of. Therefore, Calvin is the only one at the table exemplifying submissiveness. Although Stephen is not in the room at the time of this conversation, he continues to use trickery as he talks through Calvin. It is Stephen who places the pieces of Django’s skim together, not Calvin. The scene illustrates how Calvin is a reflection of Stephen in which Calvin serves as an apparatus to Stephen’s trickery. The slave laws in Ante-Bellum era would not allow Stephen to talk to white people in the manner in which he speaks to Calvin. Stephen excessive use of trickery is portrayed not only through his character, but through every character Stephen manipulates.

Stephen’s ability to portray his trickster characteristics through other characters reveals the manner in which he controls the plantation effectively without any question from other white overseers. Once Calvin exposes his knowledge of Django’s plan, he becomes angry and Stephen drags Hilda into the dining room. Whenever Stephen is in the dining room, he stands directly behind the chair at the head of the table. Although Calvin is talking, Stephen’s reflection of trickery is being portrayed through Calvin. Although he is standing, Stephen’s position at the head of the table suggests that he is in charge, using Calvin to execute orders derived from Stephen’s trickery. Rodney Byer chastises Tarantino’s use of a slave as a villain in a film about slavery as horrific and classifies his use of Stephen’s character as tragic (Byer 53). However, Tarantino uses Stephen’s character brilliantly portraying slaves as competent to think critically and to successfully navigate, visibly and invisibly, through oppression. Stephen knows he will always be a slave and found great comfort in the system of slavery represented at Candie Land. The film focuses on the facial expressions of Stephen several times which depicts Stephen’s ability to think critically as a slave. Stephen picks and chooses his battles effectively, knowing when to talk and when to let others talk for him.

In the absence of Stephen’s presence, his embedded trickery in the film allows Stephen’s authority to be expressed through all characters. Trickery should not be denied attention as a major theme in the film Django and Stephen should not be classified as the desperado of the film because of his survival tactics. Not agreeing with the excellence performance of trickery through Stephen, Byer states the Stephens victimization of his
fellow black characters forces him to lose his awareness and agency of the African American identity (53). Byer fails to realize the need for African identity is irrelevant because Stephen is aware the system of slavery does not cater to the African identity. If Stephen practices characteristics of his African ancestry and black agency, he would be ridded of all power and authority. Stephen wore a mask of trickery to separate himself from the African identity and connect himself with people of authority and power used as a means of freedom.

Stephen’s sense of self is absorbed in his urge to rule and control everything on the plantation and results in Stephen becoming unaware of who he was before his power. In the final scene of the movie, Stephen was killed by Django in the end film and Tarantino exposes the trickery he composed for Stephen’s character. After dinner and the exchange of money for Hilda, Schultz refuses to shake Calvin’s hand and kills Calvin as an alternate to shaking his hand. Gun fire begins and Shultz is killed leaving Django to defend for himself. Django is unsuccessful and is sold by Stephen back in to slavery; however, Django escapes and finds his way back to Candie Land where he waits for Stephen and the others to return from Calvin’s funeral. Django kills Stephen and blows up the entire plantation. Before Django kills him, Stephen drops his cane portraying the cane as a symbol of trickery. Stephen knows that Django is going to kill him, therefore, the need for trickery is diminished. Stephen drops the mask of trickery but still refers to Django as a ‘nigger’. Stephen’s engagement with trickery for many years is not only embedded in the plantation and the people who reside in Candie Land, but the characteristics of trickery are embedded within Stephen himself. Stephen fails to acknowledge that he is also a nigger which illustrates what Byer describes as his “loss of identity” (53). Tarantino exposes the mask of deceit in Stephen’s character and portrays trickery as a part of Stephen rather than something Stephen practices.

Stephen exemplifies the conniving, critical thinking slave who learns the plantation system and manipulates it to his advantage, failing to consider anyone else’s feelings along the way. His dominance over other slaves serves as confirmation for Stephen that he is in charge. He refers to the slaves as ‘niggers’ completely ignoring the fact that he is also a ‘nigger’ finding comfort in knowing his dominance over slaves. Stephen’s manipulation and dominance over the white characters separates him from the other slaves on the plantation which portrays Stephen’s ability to be considered more than a black slave, but a well-qualified man. The reasoning behind Stephen’s trickery is not to be cruel or mean. The
film suggests Stephen is not as cruel as he is portrayed when he spares Django’s gentiles and keeps his promise not to kill Django. Although he uses Calvin as a tool and a source of power, his love for Calvin is sincere and the father-like relationship between Calvin and Stephen is real. Stephen interprets how slaves are mentally, as well as physically, able to uphold the politics and labor of plantations during slavery. Stephen is not an epic character, but he is not a mindless character either. Stephen depicts one of the many ways slaves were forced or choose to analyze, navigate and manipulate the system of slavery.

Works Cited
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