

*12 Years a Slave* is a movie built around visual juxtapositions. From a glance it is at best unsettling to see the central irony of the horrors of owning, beating, and killing human beings displayed in a palpably beautiful plantation setting. Steve McQueen, the Director of the film, also does a masterful job of subtly displaying the dignity and high class of Solomon Northup, the African American protagonist from the North, compared to the uneducated, slovenly, white Southerners who either own or work with Northup after he is kidnapped. The most poignant juxtaposed moments in the film for me, however, come when John Ridley, who wrote the screenplay, repeatedly has Northup find the courage to articulate his firm belief about his identity, only to come face to face with the impossibly hard bedrock of the racist beliefs of his captors and owners. *12 Years a Slave* is a story whose relevance to our modern understanding of history and race relations becomes most evident with McQueen's intentional use of irony in the distinct approaches to survival portrayed on screen.

These juxtapositions highlight the depth of dehumanization that had to occur for the slave system to thrive for many centuries in the Americas. If the movie simply showed violence and extreme behavior, viewers could more easily ghetto-ize the experience. By this I mean we could compartmentalize the cruelty as gratuitous, or outside the norm, thus absolving our collective conscience of lingering victimization or, importantly, ongoing perpetration. It was therefore important that McQueen positioned the worst violence in the pleasantest of settings. Consider Mr. Burch's slave auction, in which hors d'oeuvres are served while well mannered patrons promenade, inspecting the stark naked bodies of slaves who are slapped and prodded by Mr. Burch, all accompanied by fine music. Even more jarring is the presentation of the clear villain Edwin Epps, placed alongside the seemingly reasonable and kind William Ford. The horror of slavery conveyed here is layered. We do not see only

violence which stretches our ability to comprehend (ironically the viewer often dehumanizes the perpetrator in these instances, rather than identifying with the victim); McQueen's film portrays paternalism, that most lasting wrong of slavery: that these were mostly good, reasonable, dignified men who cared well for their slaves, finding themselves stuck in the same confounding system. In other words, these owners, as demonstrated through William Ford, took loving care of their slaves, improving their lot in the long run. The result of such thinking is that while the institution itself was unfortunate, everyone made the best of it and for the most part, we have no lasting effects. This narrative, which is still roundly attested to as THE narrative of slavery in the South, conveys our collective amnesia as a nation and belies our need to revise and reclaim our past.

I bring these juxtaposed narratives of history to light for this panel because I think they are also crucial as we think about if and how and

why this movie is not just, as Robinson put it, “slavery’s story” but is also “America’s story.” In the interest of time, I will explore the impact of the conflicting narratives of one man’s story in order to see slavery’s most damning impact, both then and now.

In the film, Northup is a distinguished man who loses everything, and yet he never appears to lose his sense of self. Early in the film, after repeatedly depending on his considerable abilities to articulate his own history and identity to no avail, Northup realizes that his only recourse is to subvert his own awareness of who he is, replacing his self-possession with the identity his captors tell him to assume. In fact, later in the film he references his awakening when he tells Eliza that he has scars up and down his back from protesting his name and identity too much. Notice here that this move is much deeper than simply taking on a new name. Northup, a quick study, now understands that survival in these environments depends on his

thwarting his own education, instincts, and knowledge. However, even as McQueen makes Northup's decision clear, Eliza reminds him and the viewers that she made a similar decision to abuse herself in order to survive, only to be a field hand on a plantation. Eliza articulates the question we are all asking: If subverting my self results in continued enslavement, would it not be better to stand up for myself and be killed? In order to survive, Northup does not position himself as a subject, but instead he agrees with and accepts their positioning of him as an object.

I can't go in to all the ways that McQueen highlights this very action of subversion; allow me just to remind you of the mundane moments which become the pivots on which the movie turns. I am referring here to the instance when the slaves gather to sing in a make shift funeral, and Northup joins in mightily with his own worship. Although Northup appears to have hidden his identity and agency so deeply

that he will never access it again, emotional singing of the hoped-for moment when the Jordan will roll, reminds the viewer that he indeed still claims himself as a subject with agency. The core of Northup, a man who is not content to accept his captor's identity as his own, emerges as he sings with longing and passion. The other understated but critical scene is the moment in which, with great trepidation, Northup reveals his true identity to Bass, the Canadian carpenter, and asks him for help.

This ability to possess oneself even while subverting that self in order to survive is captured beautifully in the film. I am arguing that the decision Northup made to replace his understanding of himself with his captor's understanding of himself is the very mechanism of slavery which lives on in racism and racial tension today. For centuries, people of African descent living in the Americas, and particularly in the US South, have, in order to survive, had to replace

their own sense of who they are or who they might become, in order to agree with the dominant narrative of white America. Indeed, one of the lasting impacts of slavery is that the white, Christian, Southern narrative of African American history AND present reality is incredibly difficult to challenge, especially by a person of color. As demonstrated in the film, Northup's protest and affirmation as to his real identity is denied and instead replaced with a white person's opinion of who he is. This is evidenced today in policies like stop and frisk, in the absurdly high percentages of African Americans in prison, in the narratives that have emerged in the wake of both Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s arrest and Trayvon Martin's death, in the habits of parents of color teaching their sons how to perform a version of themselves that will be perceived as non-threatening to white people in authority over them, and in our inability, especially in the church, to move beyond the "us" and "them" paradigm. After centuries of this kind of oppressive thought control, there is a lot of work to be done if

African Americans are to, like Northup, at the opportune moment, reveal that they still possess a sense of their identities, and are able to position themselves not as objects of American racism, but as subjects, capable of reclaiming their own histories and acting with positive agency to build their versions of the famed “American Dream.”

