

Playing Patsy: Film as Public History and the Image of Enslaved African American
Women in Post-Civil Rights Era Cinema

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Introduction

In 1915, thousands of newly minted cinephiles pack movie houses and independent theaters in celebration of one of the most influential films in modern history. Its legacy: cutting edge cinematography for its time, complex scenes with layers of dialogue, and the long reach of its influence on the newly formed film industry. However, in the reverie surrounding the milestone, film critics by and large forgot to acknowledge the other reasons the film was so memorialized: its blatantly racist depictions of African Americans that had long lasting effects on community in real life. The film: D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of Nation*.

The Birth of A Nation was written by Thomas Dixon, a novelist turned playwright. Originally published as *The Clansman*, the novel was developed into a stage play in 1906. However, most audience, even Southern ones, were not impressed with the story's heavy reliance on the sexual specter of blacks during Reconstruction. In fact, many whites demanded that the play be shuttered, saying "for God's sake, for the negro's sake, and our sake, give the negro a rest from abuse."¹ This led to film critic Frank Woods rewriting the script, lessening its sexual overtones and replacing them with paternalism, rural virtues, and American patriotic values in order to better appeal to wider audiences. And appeal it did, with thousands of people lining up for viewings throughout the United States. Even President Woodrow Wilson, a graduate school friend of Dixon's, said the film was "like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."² Although Wilson came to withdraw this claim and discredit the movie,

¹ Cripps, 44.

² Cripps 52.

the damage had been done: the nation began to question the events of Reconstruction. This alternative to reality began to take hold in the minds of millions of Americans, not only Southern apologists, but even for some Northern liberals. For the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), it was this emerging intersection of entertainment and history that could prove not only false, but also dangerous for African American communities across the country. Something had to be done and the NAACP would launch a national effort to stop the film from poisoning an already contentiously white supremacist society.

In large cities across the nation, activists mobilized members of black communities to protest *The Birth of a Nation*. In Boston, New York, Columbus, OH, Chicago, hundreds of people marched outside of theater. Letters were written to government officials calling for the film to be banned. But why was *The Birth of a Nation* such crux for the nascent NAACP? Truly, it was due to the negative impact that the film had on black identity at a time when African American growth and development in the larger United States was on the decline, largely due to racial discrimination in nearly all levels of public life. Indeed, then-President Moorfield Storey called the film “an effort to mislead the people of this country and to excite a strong feeling against the colored people, already suffering everywhere from race prejudice.³” Storey was correct in his assertion--when *The Birth of a Nation* was released in various cities over the course of a year, several incidents of white-on-black violence soon followed, with perpetrators often citing the film as their reason for mobilizing⁴. This violence, though not necessary intend by the filmmakers, was directly related to the feeling of white decline in the years after

³ Rylance, Pg. 1

⁴ Ibid, Pg. 7.

the Civil War. Indeed, Dixon said during the opening of *The Clansman*: “my object is to teach the north, the young north, what it has never known--the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful reconstruction period. I believe that Almighty God anointed the white men of the south by their suffering during that time...to demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme.”⁵ This statement, combined with the reactions of white audiences, only affirms the very real worries that the NAACP had for the film, pushing them to launch a national protest of movie.

In the end, the NAACP failed to stop the film from being shown in most major cities for two major reasons: (1) fans of the film argued that the depiction of African Americans in the film were not a detriment, but a way to show how the community had grown in the years since Reconstruction, largely becoming a productive group of citizens. For them, “negro of then” was every bit of Dixon’s monster, but the “black man of today” should be complimented for how far they have come⁶. The second reason was the First Amendment; that the NAACP had no right to censor the film, as it was a clear case of the filmmakers exercising their right to free speech. This argument was rooted in nationalism and patriotism, with those for whom censorship played the anti-American villain. According to historian David Rylance, this argument was troubling for white liberals, placing them in a moral dilemma between racial assault versus freedom of expression and information. For many, this proved to be the nail in the coffin for the

⁵ Cripps, Pg. 44.

⁶ Rylance Pg. 12

NAACP's movement, with liberal whites moving to protect free speech, and, by extension, "preserving racial hierarchies and reaffirming a white national identity."⁷

However, the mass mobilization of a significant part of the African American community manifested a huge human resource for the organization. They had built the foundation by which future NAACP-led movements could thrive upon, including lynching documentation and trials, the desegregation of the American public school system, and the larger Civil Rights Movement to name a few. Although many historians claim that the protest movement against *The Birth of A Nation* was a complete failure due to the long focus on viewings of the film rather than on the quality of roles for black actors⁸, it is clear that the effort jumpstarted NAACP's growth in both membership and mission, as well provided the first test of group influence and might.⁹

Additionally, this standoff between the NAACP and the first Hollywood blockbuster was also the first public test of the recreation of public memory through the media. Griffith and Dixon often referred to the film as an accurate portrayal of the "tragedy of Reconstruction," pushing the mostly Northern audience to believe that they held historical authority and validity. Here, the NAACP made the basis for their critique: mobilizing an educated force to dismantle the mythos of *Birth* at every premiere and showing, effectively "attacking [the film] on its own ideological grounds" and turning inaccuracies into "proof the [film] was designed to provoke racist sentiments."¹⁰ This strategy proved so successful that when Griffith demanded that Storey and the NAACP

⁷ Ibid 13-14

⁸ Rylance, Pg. 2-3.

⁹ Cripps, Pg. 69

¹⁰ Rylance Pg. 8-9

provide proof of historical falsehoods, this publicity stunt proved a failure when Storey wrote a letter to the *Boston Herald* tearing the film apart point by point. The much republished piece promoted letter campaigns by private citizens across the country to also discredit the film, “exposing its assumptions to criticism and stirring up the population to interrogate it” putting its validity into question¹¹. The act of questioning media and its representation of the past was a groundbreaking move that had never been put to the test before. In this way, the NAACP, in addition to beginning its role as a defender of black culture, also became one of the first film critics, demanding that the public truly evaluate what they were viewing and how it affected the ways in which they thought about not only the past, but about a large portion of society at large.

At the root of the NAACP’s case against *Birth of A Nation* was the idea that the negative portrayal of African Americans on this new medium called film would help roll back the progress their communities had made since Emancipation and jeopardize their political future. Of course, this argument would be difficult to prove under the pressures of rapid mobilization, but, in the decades after the film’s release, D.W. Griffith’s influence on the film tradition and America’s understanding of race is beyond question. Almost immediately, violent episodes took place following screenings of the film, including at least one incident of white-on-black murder. To make matters worse, the NAACP’s fight against the film was billed as censorship, placing it (and troublemaking blacks) in direct conflict with the First Amendment. President Wilson’s screening of *Birth of a Nation* at the White House gave support to the film’s claims of historical accuracy to an eager viewing public. Eventually, *Birth of a Nation* become the standard

¹¹ Rylance Pg. 9

for all films of the early twentieth century would be measured, in terms of the cinematography, set layout, makeup, plot development, and character design, becomes the foundation for all cinema. Yet, the film's stature also included permanently linking African Americans to stereotypical ideas of blackness-- including Sambo, Remus, Uncle Tom, Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and others. Later, these images transformed into drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, welfare queens, and gang bangers. In short, *Birth of a Nation* set the tone for not only the blossoming movie industry in the United States, but also for how Americans perceived blacks and their place within history of the Republic.¹²

It is clear that with the NAACP's avowed dedication to the flop of *The Birth of Nation* and one hundred years of conversation and debate since its 1915 debut, there is a certain understanding about what filmgoers perceive from seeing history portrayed on screen. As historian Alison Landsberg asserts in her work *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (2015), "no matter how much academic history one has read, no matter how sophisticated one's understanding of the complexities of the past one's image of it has inevitably been affected by the images and narratives that have circulated in mass culture."¹³ Despite the beliefs of naysayers and some historians, film shapes the ways in which we understand the past, leaving a lifelong impression about historical events and the groups involved. In the decades since *The Birth of Nation* first launched the United States into a conversation about historical narratives and the limitations of free speech, historical films have remained a popular form of entertainment for the American public. No other genre of cinema brings more people into movie houses, or increasingly to the couch or computer screens, than

¹² Ibid, Pg 7, 9, 11-16.

¹³ Landsberg, Pg. 2

dramatic imaginings of the past and our place within it.¹⁴ Today, this fascination with the past also extends to television, where historical television shows prove to be extremely popular.¹⁵ The question remains: are these depictions useful tools to teach history or merely entertainment that have no place in our understanding of history? But, what if the question is not if films with historical themes aren't either/or, but a mix of both. That, when supplemented with historiography and criticism rooted in historical thinking, cinematic depictions of the past make history more accessible to the public and serve as a form of public memory, shaping the way the public thinks about our collective past.

This thesis hopes to argue the viability of this statement by analyzing the stories and the public responses to four films of 20th and 21st centuries focused on the very controversial historical topic of American chattel slavery and its representation of the most underrepresented and misunderstood victims of the Peculiar Institution: enslaved African and African American women. This topic was chosen for several reasons. In recent years, depictions of slavery in the United States on film have been sources of intense discussion. With the Oscar win of Steve McQueen's *12 Years A Slave*, a new era of slavery on screen seemed to be on the horizon. The 1970s epic *Roots* was remade to cool fanfare. But discussions of women's experiences during slavery have lacked nuance, if discussed at all. We need to see the black women in these films, and, by extension, the complex lives actors are attempting to recreate.

The goal of this thesis is to understand the relationship between the evolving representations of African American women in post-Civil Rights era films about the

¹⁴ See *Dunkirk* (2017), *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016), *The Imitation Game* (2014), et al.

¹⁵ See Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle*, WGN's *Underground*, History's *Vikings*, Netflix's *The Crown*, and Masterpiece Theater's *Downton Abbey*, to name only a few in recent years.

Transatlantic slave trade; the portraits these images present of black women and their history; and how these films approach the issues of difficult heritage and re-presenting atrocity in entertainment. In the United States, there are many histories that academics and non-academics are attempting to reconcile with the modern day; American slavery is one of these difficult issues. In the case of African American *women*, the issue of enslavement has layers that have yet to be fully understood by the general, non-academic public, many of which result from the position of African American women as black in a white supremacist country and females living under patriarchy.

There is little to no analysis of the enslaved African American woman as presented on film, especially in regards to their particular position as the “most vulnerable group of Antebellum Americans¹⁶”, nor of how films may have affected the ways in which American viewing audiences of varying backgrounds understand the precarious position of female life under slavery. In fact, because the majority of these films are centered on African American men, it is their stories that center most general discussions of slavery on film. Black women are left at the periphery of public imagery of slavery, as sidekicks, mammies, and victims who lack desire and agency, without their male counterparts. It is here that this work will look at this difficult subject and present a new discussion about representing tough history in popular culture. This research is important because movies shape public understanding of the past. Slavery, and its place within American history, is an event that has proven to be a “difficult history” for the American public to reconcile. Anthropologist Sharon Macdonald defines this term as a past that is "recognized as meaningful in the present," but is also "contested and

¹⁶ White, *Aren't I A Woman*, Pg. 2

awkward" for public understanding, in combination with a "positive, self-affirming" contemporary identity¹⁷. But, how does this contested understanding of the past translate on to a format traditionally used for entertainment? Unlike standard forms of presenting history, television and cinema are methods by which the mediums are seen as both inherently false and true; that is, the movies and television form a counter-reality that both is not happening (sitcoms) and has happened (news).¹⁸ In historical films, screenwriters and directors play on this idea, using creative license to embellish the past, usually for a more appealing film. But, then is the film based in actual historical inquiry or a director's interpretation?

An area that has made strides regarding this line between historical representation in film has been that of Holocaust studies, a central concept in this field. Historian Sarah Horowitz has addressed some of the central dilemmas in representing the Nazi genocide in *Voicing the Void* (1997); for instance, how does one adequately convey "the unspeakable, unimaginable terrors of the Nazi program of atrocity and extermination?"¹⁹ Saul Friedländer has identified similar dilemmas to those raised by Horowitz and other scholars. In "The Shoah in Present Historical Consciousness (1992)," he criticized the trivialization of Holocaust depictions by the "culture industry." In turning history into a commodity, the industry places profits above telling accurate history²⁰. What happens when history becomes something that can be solely measured monetarily? In *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2009), Jerome De Groot finds that in the last twenty years, historians have ignored the commoditization of

¹⁷ Macdonald, 1

¹⁸ Rosenstone, 54, 60

¹⁹ Horowitz, 37

²⁰ Friedländer, 47

the historical, rooted not in traditional avenues of history, but in popular culture.²¹ This work will add the issues of gender and race to this line of inquiry.

Films and movie culture have had a history of racism and sexism toward African American women, re-presented through slavery-based stereotypes. Racism and sexism in film have shaped how enslaved African American women are understood by the American public and have altered the ways that we understand their place in the American past. Through looking at four recent films on the topic of American chattel slavery, one can see these issues for themselves.

²¹ De Groot, 1-13

Chapter One

The history of enslaved women, most vulnerable of antebellum Americans, is complex and varied.²² But how are they presented on film and what can we learn from representations and interpretations of their histories cinematically? Filmmakers and producers who make an effort to learn and understand the material they are working from provide a narrative about enslaved women that is in conversation with modern historiography. Specifically, in looking at four recent films about the peculiar institution that feature African American female slaves that intersect with historiography at three major points: violence, production and reproduction, and resistance. Viewing these films with a critical eye, one may gain a better understanding of the world in which enslaved women lived and how their position as black, female, and enslaved made their experience as slaves different from that of their male counterparts.

These issues-- violence, production and reproduction, and resistance-- are in direct conversation with the findings of historians of black womanhood pre-Civil War. Conversely, when filmmakers are not cognizant of or does not use historical research to help build their story, the picture that they paint of enslaved black women is dated and misinformed, continuing the incorrect picture of slave women that Hollywood films have perfected since *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

The films chosen for this study, *Sankofa* (1992), *Beloved* (1998), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), all are recent attempts to conceptualize American chattel slavery for the big screen. However, unlike other films of the same

²² Deborah Gray White, *Ain't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 9.

topic and time, these films feature enslaved women at the center of the film's purpose. For instance, *Sankofa* marks the beginning of telling the stories of slavery around the black female experience. *Beloved*'s story circles around a mother and her daughters. *Django Unchained*'s main character's goal is to rescue his wife. And, in *12 Years a Slave* the brutality of slavery is best portrayed through the enslaved women with whom the main character interacts. In short, these films provide ample material through which to analyze the representation of enslaved African-American women on film and how those representations relate back to historiography.

The reasoning behind the decision to look at the presentation of production/reproduction, violence, and resistance can be traced to the historiography of enslaved black women. The study of African American female slaves as their own subject has only emerged since 1985.²³ Prior to that time, historians approached women's history through family history. Additionally, the older historiography of American slavery, with its male-centric focus, overlooked African American women. Finally, when scholars actually discussed women and the institution of slavery, they centered their analysis on white women. These omissions fail to present the precarious position that black women held as female and black in a white supremacist patriarchy. This omission changed in the 1980s, when a group of path-breaking historians of black womanhood intervened in these discussions. Coming out of the Civil Rights generation, many of these new historians were disappointed with the obvious gaps in the historical record of American slavery. One of the first books that filled the gap was Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985).

²³ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 13-25.

Black women, White argued, "were perhaps the most vulnerable group of Antebellum Americans" due to their unique position in a society that elevated free white males to the top of the socio-economic hierarchy.²⁴ As she described in the introduction, historians such as Stanley Elkins, John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, and their contemporaries had placed black female slaves in the "Victorian model of domesticity and maternity" by emphasizing black masculinity and familial dominance.²⁵ They reduced or neglected the experiences of women and their impact on the slave family and larger society. According to White, because of the dual burdens of being black and female, African American women proved more vulnerable than other subjugated groups. Slave owners held different expectations of enslaved women because of their gender. They had a double role to play: as laborers in the field and the house, but also as "reproducers," child bearers who produced the next generation of laborers. Historian Barbara Bush added that the attempt by the master class to assert dominance over the bodies of black women "was a major area of struggle involving power relations at a most basic level."²⁶ To control the bodies of black women meant access to a self-replicating workforce whose ability to increase profits was only limited to the amount of children a woman could bear. This appropriation of black women's sexuality doubled their exploitation as workers.

In addition to her groundbreaking research into the lives of enslaved women, Deborah Gray White was also the first scholar to place stereotypical images of African American women into a historical context. White asserted that slave owners invented the

²⁴ Ibid.,15.

²⁵ Ibid, 21.

²⁶ Barbara Bush, 194

stereotypes that they used to define black womanhood and to justify their subjugation. These stereotypes legitimized all forms of violence against black women, including rape. The first stereotype that White analyzed is the Jezebel. As the oversexed antithesis of the proper Victorian white woman, Jezebel was wanton, aggressively sexual in nature, and shirks piety. White men generally believed in the Jezebel image and assumed that black females "invited sexual overtures with white men, and that any resistance they displayed was feigning."²⁷ In "'With a Whip in His Hand:' Rape, Memory, and African American Women," Catherine Clinton asserted that by denying black women their own bodies, white males were able to use rape as a method to further the oppression of African American women. Enslaved women were property, Clinton stated, and thus legally "unable to be raped."²⁸ With no legal recourse, black women could be sexually abused by white men and then had the act blamed on the image of the Jezebel.

In stark opposition to Jezebel's sexuality was the asexual Mammy, the plantation superwoman and surrogate mother to their master's children.²⁹ White claimed that Mammy's virtuous, pious, and tender nature aligned her with Victorian ideals of womanhood and ignored the brutal realities of slavery. After emancipation, whites faced a situation where their former female slaves no longer pretended to respect them. Thus, a new stereotype, that of Sapphire, was born. Sapphire appeared "so aggressive in defense of her freedom, she hardly seemed a woman."³⁰ These stereotypes pushed women into externally imposed and rigidly defined roles that continued the cycle of violence in the decades after slavery's end.

²⁷ Ibid., 30.

²⁸ Catherine Clinton. "With A Whip in his Hand:," 206.

²⁹ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 29 and 47.

³⁰ Ibid., 179.

A detailed analysis of the black female image has developed as a direct result of Deborah Gray White's work. As she argues in *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, the ideas of African American women as both Jezebel and Mammy have survived the abolition of slavery. Slavery died, but the stereotypes lived on. Indeed, these images remained the most common depictions of black women. In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, several black feminist writers responded to the perpetuation of the stereotypes. For this group of intellectuals, the lack of what Kimberle Crenshaw calls "intersectionality" was a weakness of mainstream feminism.³¹ Intersectionality refers to the intersection of race and gender that African American and other women of color occupy.

Stereotypes of African American women, especially those that stemmed from the period of enslavement, have been particularly prominent in film. The history of African Americans and cinema has been a complex dance between racist depictions on the one hand, and representations that attempted to empower African Americans and discredit stereotypes on the other. In his groundbreaking work, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Donald Bogle contended the purpose of these characters was to "entertain by stressing Negro inferiority." The stereotypes themselves were nothing new, yet, they continuously attracted large numbers of white American moviegoers, even in the earliest decades of cinematography.³²

These stereotypes first emerged on screen with D.W. Griffith's infamous work, *The Birth of A Nation*. Griffith's film became the movie industry's standard for many

³¹ Kimberly Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." 140

³² Donald Bogle. Pg. 4

reasons: the use of music to add emphasis to particular moments, the cinematography, and the use of costuming and makeup to make characters come alive for audiences. However, the film was particularly damaging to the public image of African Americans. For many viewers, the tragedy of the Civil War and the bane of Reconstruction were symbolized in the animalistic and child-like portrayal of former slaves. Black men were lustful brutes and black women were willing participants in all sorts of sinful acts. In short, *The Birth of A Nation* provided a visual justification for the continued mistreatment of African Americans.³³

To reiterate, black women are often presented as decentralized and marginalized individuals. Bogle defines two major characters: the Mammy and the Tragic Mulatto. The Mammy is probably the most recognizable trope of black stereotypes, with her rotund stature and unthreatening smile. One of the most recognizable depictions of a Mammy is Hattie McDaniels' role in the infamous *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The Tragic Mulatto serves as a warning to practitioners of miscegenation, willing or otherwise. The, normally, female mulatto is a victim of circumstance, unwelcomed by whites and unwilling to be black. In the majority of films that depict these characters, the beautiful light-skinned girl is unable to gain her inner-most desires (love of a white man/upward mobility) because she has one drop of black blood. She must remain an outsider to both groups. Although this character has fallen out of favor with filmmakers, *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959) and *Showboat* (1951) have examples of the Tragic Mulatto. In each of these films, the beautiful woman's life collapses when she is discovered to be black. Shunned

³³ Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became A Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's *Birth of A Nation*" in *Representations*, No. 9, Special Issue: American Culture Between the Civil War and World War I. (Winter, 1985), 150-195. <http://web.uvic.ca/~ayh/RoginBirth.pdf>

by her white compatriots, she refuses to return to the African-American community, doomed to live a life of lonely orphanhood and drunken alienation.³⁴

The most critical analysis of African American women on film emerged with the Black Feminist movement. Because of their position as black and female in a white supremacist patriarchal society, modern oppression that African American women experience is an oppression that is decidedly different from that of white women. For black feminists, white feminist rhetoric lacked an understanding of how race changes the treatment of women in American society. At the same time, the rampant misogyny of the Civil Rights movement disheartened them. As a result, African American women developed their own ideas regarding black women's liberation, arguing that when their freedom was achieved, due to their socio-economic and racial status, freedom for all people, regardless of arbitrary differences, would be secured. These scholars were especially concerned with the representation of black women in all areas of media, including cinema. They criticized the media for relying on older images and, hence, for their complicity in the oppression of African American women.³⁵ Patricia Hill Collins' remarks that black women become a visual "Other," to which the wider society can compare itself to and keep in subjugation. Similarly, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks [sic] asserts, "representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism."³⁶ Through their reliance on erroneous and harmful stereotypes from the age of slavery, the mass media,

³⁴ Ibid., 9

³⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Theory*, 69.

³⁶ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 62

so this line of argument went, reinforced the societal restrictions that were placed on African American women.

Films about black womanhood are never only movies. Negative depictions of black women have gone far beyond solely influencing popular media.³⁷ Dorothy Roberts in her work *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, asserts that updated versions of the Mammy and Sapphire images (Matriarch and Welfare Queen) have directly influenced American legislation as it relates to the bodies and reproductive rights of women. Melissa Harris Perry, in *Sister Citizen*, argues that African American women push back against these stereotypes by creating alternative images of themselves and that the inability to live up to the ideals of these images leads to feelings of failure.³⁸ Problematic representation through stereotypes can then lead to distorted identity formation for the misrepresented group, in this case, black women. For black womanhood, past and present, representation matters.

As previously noted, the directors and screenwriters of these films engage the historiography of enslaved women in three major areas: production/reproduction, violence, and resistance. At these intersections, women experienced the system of slavery different than others. At the root of all of these elements is the notion that despite their position at the bottom of society, as both black and female, that enslaved women are still human, with self-determination. In the case of several of the filmmakers discussed, the

³⁷ See Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks : An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, bell hooks' [sic] *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Entman and Rojecki, in *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

³⁸ Melissa Harris Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 191.

complexities of black women's history is approached via background knowledge and research.

Haile Gerima, while building the funds to produce *Sankofa*, spent nine years studying the history of the transatlantic slave trade. "In terms of looking to make a film on slavery and taking nine years to make it, the process gave me time to shape the script. Before, all slavery movies were about victims and Blacks did not make history. I wanted to make a film where Black people fought back."³⁹ Steve McQueen's goal in directing a film about slavery was to fill a "hole in the canon of cinema."⁴⁰ With his historian wife guiding him, McQueen found his way to classic slave narratives. When he found Northup's account, he was upset that neither he nor anyone he knew was familiar with Northup, so he "had to make [it] into a film." McQueen immersed himself into the history of slavery in order to tell Northup's story.⁴¹

The material that Richard Demme/Oprah Winfrey and Steve McQueen/John Ridley⁴² engaged with are two types of slave narratives: classic and neo. A classic slave narrative is a first-hand account recalled by enslaved or formerly enslaved people. The most famous of these include Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Olaudah Equiano. Neo-slave narratives are works that touch on the same themes as classic narratives, but are written in a way that is more so aligned with historical fiction. The majority of these authors, however, spend a great deal of time researching the history of slavery and

³⁹George Alexander, Interview with Haile Gerima in *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema*, Pg. 208

⁴⁰Henry Louis Gates, "12 Years A Slave: A Conversation with Steve McQueen," *Transition* 114. (2014): 186.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 193.

⁴²Richard Demme directed *Beloved* at the behest of Winfrey, who owned the rights to the screenplay. John Ridley wrote the screenplay for *12 Years A Slave*.

reading the accounts of enslaved people in order to recreate an experience that feels authentic.

12 Years a Slave was originally published by Solomon Northup in 1853. The story, which is focused primarily on his life, does not go into as much detail about the enslaved women around him as the film does. When observing the three major themes that are subject in this study, it is clear that, in their attempt to portray the stories of Eliza, Patsy, and other women, McQueen and Ridley are calling on historians of enslaved womanhood to flesh out the hints that Northup gives us.

In the case of *Beloved*, Winfrey purchased the rights to Toni Morrison's fictional account of Margaret Garner in 1987. Morrison was inspired to write the book while working as editor for a black history journal, *The Black Book*. Coming across the story of Garner in passing, Morrison "was drawn by the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to [Garner] the necessity of freedom."⁴³ After deciding that the time was right to turn the book into a film, Winfrey worked with a number of different filmmakers before settling on Jonathan Demme.⁴⁴ The project, first and foremost, was a Harpo Studios production and Winfrey had input in any and all adaptive and creative decisions. But she supplemented her approach to the film with reading slave narratives and histories: "*Bullwhip Days; Roll, Jordan, Roll, the Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*."⁴⁵ It is clear that these three groups had deep connection to and

⁴³ Angela Christie, "A *Beloved* Performance: Reading Between the Lines," *Litterature et cinema: Des limites de l'adaptation* 24 (2011): 11.

⁴⁴ Some people thought Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* a problematic view on women and thus not a good choice to lead a film on women in slavery. Read "[He's White, Male and made a Very Nasty Movie. Would you Trust Him with a film about women and slavery?](#)".

⁴⁵ Oprah Winfrey, *My Journey to Beloved* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 48

reverence for the material they were working from. As a result, the films they produced are complex in the way they present enslaved women.

Violence, both physical and sexual, is an element that is unable to be removed from the context of slavery. To place someone in a position of subjugation is for them to be in a constant state of violence. As Orlando Patterson asserts in his groundbreaking work, *Slavery and Social Death*, slavery is “one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave.”⁴⁶ This loss of power extends to the loss of heritage through displacement and removal of traditions, changing of names, language usage, and the loss of ownership of one’s very body. To maintain a position over people treated in that way, one must commit a terrible act of violent dehumanization.

The oldest film included in this study is *Sankofa* (1993). Directed by Haile Gerima, this film is the only independently produced piece chosen for this study. *Sankofa* was the first of the new wave of films on the topic of American slavery to emerge in the early 1990s. It set the stage for all other films after it, including *Amistad* and *Beloved*. What makes *Sankofa* unique is it has the earliest setting by far, with a character directly from Africa. While *12 Years, Django*, and *Beloved* are all centered on native black slaves, *Sankofa*’s Nunu (Alexandra Duah) provides an additional layer of context for viewers, showing that American chattel slavery was very much a global affair.

⁴⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 3.

The film opens in modern day Ghana at the Angora Slave Fort, founded by slave traders in the 18th century. Mona (Oyafunmike Ogunlano), an African American model, is at a fashion photo shoot on location at the site, while tour groups are passing in the background. Mona seems oblivious to her environment and is ignorant of the abuses that happened there. The self-appointed guardian of the Fort, The Drummer (Kofi Ghanaba), angered by her ignorance and the presence of the tourists, yells in his native tongue about the sanctity of the space they were in and for Mona to “return to her roots.” At this point, Mona becomes more aware of her surroundings, but is unsure of the history of the place. During a break in shooting, Mona follows a tour group down into the dungeons of the fort, where captive Africans were kept while awaiting ships for the new world. After the group moves on, Mona begins to see chained Africans in the dungeon, all of them staring at her. Panicked, she runs up the stairs, opening the doors to find herself in the grasp of British slave traders in complete 18th Century garb. They drag her back inside, screaming the whole way, and remove her dress. As she is held and branded, Mona passes out.⁴⁷

We next see Mona working on a sugar plantation in Louisiana⁴⁸. However, she is no longer Mona; she is Shola, a house slave who was born into slavery within British Colonial North America. As she narrates her life on the farm and describes the other people enslaved there, it is clear that she is enamored with two people: Shango and Nunu. Shango (Mutabaruka) is Shola’s lover and works in the fields. Originally, from Jamaica, Shango is deeply fixated on rebelling. He is constantly trying to convince Shola to stop being so afraid to fight for her freedom and join the resistance movement that is growing

⁴⁷ *Sankofa*, directed by Haile Gerima (Negod Gwad, 1992), DVD (Mypheduh Films 2003), (00:18).

⁴⁸ Gerima never confirms the exact location of the film, however, the presence of Maroon colonies, sugar plantations, the architecture of the buildings presented led me to read the setting as Louisiana.

on the plantation. Nunu, an African woman who was taken from the continent at fourteen, is a leader among the slaves on the plantation. Highly respected and beloved, she is a source of strength for the rebels both on the plantation and the maroon colonies out in the hill. She is constantly speaking in both her native language and English and practicing her traditional religion, placing herself in direct conflict with the white owners and Spanish Catholics around her. Shola is enamored with Nunu's strength and resolve, desiring to become more like her.

However, Nunu's biggest threat is not her enslavers but her own son, Joe. Joe (Nick Medley) is everything that Nunu is not: he is the perfect slave on the plantation, unflinching in his loyalty to the master class. He is Christian and heavily influenced by Father Raphael, so much so that he rejects his mother and her heritage in his attempt to assimilate with the white people around him. A lot of his issues stem from the fact that he is a mulatto, the product of his mother's rape as she was transported to the New World. As a result, Joe resolves to push back against the culture his mother raised him in, with the hopes of being accepted into a society that believes he is lesser than.

As the film progresses, we find that slave rebellions are spreading across the countryside, mostly led by maroon colonies. Nunu, Shango, and other enslaved leaders are trying to convince others on the plantation to revolt when the time is right. Shola, at first unwilling to join the rebellion, joins the cause after a particularly brutal whipping by the master and Father Raphael for running away for a short period.⁴⁹ She, in turn, is working with her friend, Lucy, to convince Joe to cooperate with them. Lucy (Mzuri) is in love with Joe, but he rejects her advances. Angered, Lucy gets a "love potion" from

⁴⁹ Ibid., (01:23:11-01:26:53)

Shango, hoping to trick Joe into returning her affections. However, the plan backfires when Joe reacts badly to the potion, growing ill in front of the others on the plantation.⁵⁰ Despite her struggles with him, Nunu reacts with motherly affection, taking Joe to the river to refresh him. When he recovers, Joe believes that it was Nunu who poisoned him with African magic, subsequently attacks and kills his mother. Shola comes to check on the pair, exclaiming her horror at the sight of Nunu's body. Proclaiming that Joe "ain't got no future," for killing his mother, she runs off. Joe, realizing that his mother was trying to help him, is overcome by grief and madness and takes his mother's body to Father Raphael's chapel. Confronting the priest, Joe curses himself and his Christian faith and kills Raphael. The scene ends with Joe, the bodies, and the church being burned by a crowd outside.⁵¹

The death of Nunu sparks the film's climax, the planned slave revolt. Led by Shango and the incoming Maroons, all of the white staff of the plantation are hacked with machetes. Shola, who is working in the fields as punishment for her earlier escape, is being attacked one last time by the master. In a moment of resistance, she fights back against her attacker, killing him with her cutting tool.⁵² As Shola rises, the scene cuts back to the present and Mona, who has awakened in the slave fort's dungeon. Emerging from the cavern, she is embraced by a local woman, saying "welcome back, my child."⁵³ In the final scene, Mona follows the sound of drums to find the Drummer/Guardian on the steps of the fort, facing the ocean. He is surrounded by men and women of the African Diaspora, all in the traditional dress of their diasporic cultures. Mona joins them,

⁵⁰ Ibid., (01:30:00-01:34:17)

⁵¹ Ibid., (01:35:00- 01:44:53)

⁵² Ibid., (01:47:43 - 01:53:58)

⁵³ Ibid., (01:55:23- 01:56:17)

looking out over the Atlantic Ocean toward the Americas. A final voiceover saying, “Spirit of the dead, lingering spirit of dead: rise up and possess your bird of passage. Those stolen Africans, step out of the ocean and reclaim your story;” an obvious appeal for the descendants of enslaved Africans to *sankofa*, or “look back to the past, in order to move forward.”⁵⁴

The next film studied was 1998’s *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme and produced by Oprah Winfrey. *Beloved* came at the tail end of a big budget Hollywood push for films on American slavery, where other pictures like *Amistad* became blockbusters. However, *Beloved*, as a neo-slave narrative with intensely spiritual and dreamlike sequences proved difficult for most American audiences to understand. At the box office, *Beloved* tanked, sending Hollywood scrambling for the next big historical theme to tackle. Nonetheless, *Beloved* serves an interesting contrast to the rest of the films, as it is focused on the trauma that slavery left on black women mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Set immediately after Reconstruction, *Beloved* is a fiction inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who went to extreme lengths to keep her children from being re-enslaved. Sethe (Winfrey) and her daughter, Denver (Kimberly Elise), are living in a house literally haunted by the past. Once a beacon for black travelers and community members led by Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, the house is dark with an angry spirit, that of one of Sethe’s children who died. The spirit is only further angered when Paul D. (Danny Glover), a man who works on the same plantation that Sethe escaped from, comes to the home. With the end of the Civil War some eighteen years

⁵⁴ Ibid., (01:57:31 - 02:01:00)

prior, Paul wanders the U.S. with millions of other freed African Americans, searching for family, work, and a place to start a new life. With no place to go, Paul arrives at Sethe's home on the outskirts of Cincinnati. Paul can feel the anger and sadness of the spirit lurking in the house as soon as he crosses the threshold, saying "what kind of evil you got in there, girl."⁵⁵ After an intense struggle with the spirit, Paul seemingly banishes it from the house⁵⁶ and he and Sethe begin a romantic relationship.

The spirit, however, is not done with Sethe. After returning from a trip to the fair, Sethe, Denver, and Paul find a sickly woman has appeared in the yard. Unable to name where she came from or how she arrived, the woman can only croak her name when asked: "Beloved."⁵⁷ Sethe and Denver elect to take Beloved (Thandie Newton) in to care for her until she is well enough to leave. As the story progresses, Beloved becomes stronger and creates a place for herself in the family. Denver thinks of her as the older sister she never had and Sethe enjoys seeing Denver happy. However, Paul D. is uneasy about Beloved's presence in the house, questioning how she knew about the house and how she arrived there, as her traveling clothes were fine and seemingly new.

Denver also begins to suspect things about Beloved: although a stranger, Beloved seems to know about aspects of Sethe's life before arriving at Baby Suggs' home, and she has baby-like characteristics (defecating on herself, drooling, and a toddling walk). Denver soon realizes that Beloved is the returned spirit of her sister who died and desires to protect her no matter the cost.⁵⁸ But Beloved's presence soon begins affecting Paul D.

⁵⁵ *Beloved*, dir. by Jonathan Demme (Touchstone Pictures, 1998), DVD (Buena Vista Pictures, 1999), (00:09:24 -00:09:40)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, (00:20:00- 00:22:00)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, (00:34:37-00:37:47)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, (01:02:57- 01:19:04)

more directly. He is having “house fits,” sleepwalking and insomnia, but wants to remain with Sethe, as he loves her. However, Beloved soon corners him and forces him to have sex with her,⁵⁹ an act he tries and fails to tell Sethe about.

After a particular tense conversation with some of the other black men in the community during the workday, Paul is approached by elder Stamp Paid. Paid was the boatman who assisted Sethe across the Ohio River when she was running away from Sweet Home and a friend of Baby Suggs. Showing him an old newspaper article, Stamp points to a woman in the picture. “That’s Sethe,” he says, going on to read the paper to Paul. Distraught, Paul confronts Sethe with the newspaper, looking for confirmation. Unashamed, Sethe admits her terrible secret: that, after twenty-eight days of freedom with Baby Suggs and her children, Sethe’s master, Schoolteacher, came to the house in Ohio to collect her. Seeing no other options, Sethe drew all of her children, two boys, a toddler girl, and a newborn girl, into the shed, knocked out the two boys, and slit the throat of her older daughter. Stamp Paid, followed closely by Schoolteacher and his gang, stopped Sethe just in time to save baby Denver and the boys from suffering the same fate. As a result, Sethe is ostracized by the community and she and Denver are left alone. Paul, disgusted with the act, remarks “Your love is too thick!” to which Sethe answers “Thin love ain’t love at all. I put my babies where they’d be safe.” Paul leaves Sethe and the girls.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., (01:29:37-01:33:35)

⁶⁰ Ibid., (01:38:40-01:54:31)

After Paul's departure, Sethe becomes closer with Beloved. It is at this time that she reveals herself as the baby killed those many years ago.⁶¹ Sethe is overjoyed, happy to have her daughter back and spoils her with sweets, dresses, and toys. In her indulgence, Sethe ignores other parts of her life, getting herself fired from her job and spending all of her savings. The family soon finds themselves without food to eat and no funds to buy more. Beloved, either oblivious or uncaring, is demanding and wrathful, slowly leeching away at Sethe's health. Denver comes to learn that Beloved did not forgive their mother for her death and is slowly killing Sethe. Unable to be starved anymore, Denver goes out into the community to look for work. She arrives at the home of the Bodwin siblings, an older white pair who had provided work for her grandmother in the past. Their daytime housekeeper, who knew Baby Suggs, convinces the Bodwins to take on Denver as their nighttime help. She also spreads news of Sethe and Beloved throughout the community. They leave food for Denver and her family and meet to make sense of the spirit living in the house.⁶²

The climax of the film arrives with spring. The house is in shambles, Sethe is ill, and Beloved, visibly pregnant, is destroying much of what happiness remained in the building. Denver, eager to start her first day of work, is sitting on the porch waiting for Mr. Bodwin. Suddenly, she sees the religious women of the community, most of whom wear dark mourning clothing, gather in front of the house. There, they begin to weep and sing sorrowful religious songs. Roused by the commotion, Sethe and Beloved come onto the porch, the women's screaming intensifying upon seeing the spirit of Beloved. First observing the situation, Sethe then notices Mr. Bodwin arriving on his wagon.

⁶¹ Ibid., (1:54:55-01:58:46)

⁶² Ibid., (02:12:55-02:23:21)

Envisioning him as Schoolteacher coming to collect her, Sethe charges at him, but is stopped by Denver and the weeping women. She collapses, distraught, onto the ground. Beloved, who is still standing on the porch screams a long, bloodcurdling screech and then disappears, never to be seen again.⁶³

A few months later, Denver crosses paths with Paul D. in town. He asks about her mother and Beloved, surprised to hear of the spirit's departure. Denver encourages him to visit her mother. When he does visit, Paul is saddened to see Sethe bedridden and ill, but happy that she is rid of the spirit. Sethe is depressed, saying that "[Beloved] was my best thing." Paul replies "You. You your best thing." He resolves to stay and help Denver care for her mother. The film ends with a vision of Baby Suggs preaching to the community "love your heart!"⁶⁴

An interesting choice to view was *Django Unchained*, written and directed by pop culture powerhouse Quentin Tarantino.⁶⁵ Arguably the most popular film made by Tarantino, *Django Unchained* was very well received by audiences all over the world. Despite the fact that it was created and directed by a filmmaker who is known to have a peculiar relationship with black representation, to ignore the popularity and reach of this film would be a very significant oversight to this project.

The film centers on Django (Jamie Foxx), an enslaved man who had been caught trying to run away with his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). As punishment, the two are sold separately, with Django being sold west into Texas. As he and other slave

⁶³ Ibid., (02:23:25-02:31:45)

⁶⁴ Ibid., (02:31:49-02:42:12)

⁶⁵ This film was inspired by Italian director Sergio Corbucci's 1966 spaghetti western *Django*. The film's lead, Franco Nero, made a cameo appearance in *Django Unchained*, directly referencing the connection between the two films.

men are marched by slave drivers, the group is stopped by Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), a Prussian dentist-turned-bounty hunter who offers to buy one of the slaves off of the drivers. After learning that Django can identify the men that Schultz is looking for, the encounter turns violent, with Schultz shooting one of the drivers and the now freed black men killing the other. Django joins Schultz in tracking down his bounty in exchange for his freedom.⁶⁶

The two travel the South during the winter of 1858, first finding their target then moving on to other interesting encounters, including nightriders.⁶⁷ Schultz soon learns that Django's goal is to find and rescue Broomhilda, who speaks German. Inspired by Django and his wife's parallel to the mythical Siegfried and Brunhilda story, Schultz agrees to help Django in his quest.⁶⁸ That spring, the two end up in Greenville, MS, where they discover that Broomhilda's new owner is Calvin Candie, a brutal slave master who often stages fights to the death between the strongest male slaves, or Mandingos. In order to get close to Candie, Django poses as a Mandingo fighter expert, with Schultz as his employer. The two offer to buy a man from Candie. Intrigued, Candie invites the two to his plantation, Candy Land, where they can further discuss the prospect.⁶⁹

After a particularly brutal scene of one of Candie's runaway slaves being ripped apart by dogs, the group arrives at the farm.⁷⁰ Django is immediately at odds with Candie's trusted head slave, Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), who is immediately suspicious

⁶⁶ *Django Unchained*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (The Weinstein Company, 2012), accessed October 2015, <http://www.netflix.com/>. (00:03:22-00:13:53)

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, (00:28:13-00:46:22)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, (00:24:14-00:26:58)

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, (00:59:00-01:12:11)

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, (01:18:30-01:25:35)

of Django. Feigning curiosity about his German-speaking slave, Schultz requests a meeting with Broomhilda. Candie orders her readied, while Stephen makes him aware of her attempts at escape while he was away. The group watches as a naked Broomhilda is removed from “the hot box” and dragged into the house.⁷¹

Later, we find that Candie’s sister, Lara Lee, has gotten Broomhilda dressed and ready to meet with Schultz. Inviting her into his room, he informs her that a “mutual friend” has requested that he come and rescue her. This friend is Django, who reveals himself. The two inform Broomhilda of their plan to buy her from Candie.⁷² Later at dinner, Stephen begins to suspect that Django and Broomhilda know each other. As Candie prepares to make a deal with Schultz, Stephen informs him of the perceived connection. Angered by being duped, Candie makes the two aware that he knows they want Broomhilda, putting the trio at gunpoint, and charges them a substantial amount more than what she, a known runaway, is worth: twelve thousand dollars. As Schultz makes the payment, Candie insists on a gentleman’s handshake, which Schultz rejects. He later accedes to the request, and promptly shoots Candie as he reaches for his hand. Candie’s bodyguard shoots Schultz, who is then shot by Django. The scene ends with Stephen and Candie’s remaining partners attacking Broomhilda and Django.⁷³

As the film climaxes, we find Django in the process of being tortured by Stephen, who informs him that Broomhilda was given to one of Candie’s slave drivers, as he is “sweet on her,” and that he will be sold to a mining company where he will be worked to death. When collected by representatives of the company, Django convinces them that he

⁷¹ Ibid., (01:25:50-01:34:50)

⁷² Ibid., (01:36:01-01:41:00)

⁷³ Ibid., (01:41:14-02:17:30)

is a bounty hunter and that there is a big score back at Candy Land. When they release him, he promptly kills the two and sets back to the plantation. When he arrives, Django kills many henchmen, as he makes his way back to Broomhilda. Giving her the freedom papers signed by Candie, the two try to make their escape, but first give one last assault on Stephen and the rest of Candie's partners. As the group returns to the house after burying Candie, the building explodes, thanks to dynamite planted by Django. Stephen, Lara Lee, some henchman, and the remaining house slaves emerge from the rubble, with Django pointing his gun at them. After ordering the African-Americans, with the exception of Stephen, away, Django has the group arm themselves for this final duel. When someone reaches for their gun, Django shoots and kills most of them with one shot each, as he is the fastest shot in the South. Lighting one more stick of dynamite, Django tosses it into the carnage and rejoins Broomhilda. The film ends with the couple riding off into the distance, finally together.⁷⁴

The final film viewed for this study was Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*. Starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, Lupita Nyong'o, Michael Fassbender, and Benedict Cumberbatch, *12 Years* recounts the story of Solomon Northup, a free man of color who wrote about his time as captive slave in Louisiana. First published in 1853, Northup's story was very popular amongst northern abolitionists of the time. This is also, arguably, the first of the classic slave narratives to be presented in cinema, which would include Frederick Douglass' account of his time as a slave and the iconic narrative of Harriet Jacobs.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid., (02:17:40-02:42:06)

⁷⁵ *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984), directed by Gordon Parks, was the first film adaptation of *12 Years*

Northup (Ejiofor), a violinist, was living in Sarasota Springs, NY, with his young family when he was lured to Washington D.C. by who he thought were fellow musicians with the promise of work. However, after getting him drunk, the two men sold him to a slave pen, where Solomon was beaten, informed of his new identity, “Platt,” and is shipped with other enslaved people south to New Orleans.⁷⁶ Northup, with his educated and very northern mind, was sure that he could reason with slave traders, but he soon realized that he, as a black man, would find no friend amongst the white men who kept him. As they travel, Solomon became attached to the small group he is with, including Eliza (Adepero Oduye), a mother with two small children. We soon learn that Eliza had been a willing concubine to her white master, who in exchange treated her extremely well and promised the freedom of her and the children. However, after her master’s death, his daughter, who hated Eliza and the evidence of her father’s indiscretion (her daughter Emily), promptly sold Eliza and the children to the slave pen.⁷⁷

Northup and the others soon found themselves in a fancy auction house, where groups of wealthy planters, business owners, and others inspected the “items” for sale down to their teeth. William Ford (Cumberbatch) soon takes an interest in Northup and Eliza, inquiring about their price. Eliza realizes that she will be separated from her child and begins to cry for Ford to buy all three of them, as she “will be the best working nigger for him.” The auctioneer refuse to sell Emily, a “fancy girl,” and Ford, unable to

A Slave and aired on PBS.

⁷⁶ *12 Years A Slave*, dir. by Steve McQueen (Regency Enterprises, 2013), DVD (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014), (00:10:16-00:26:01)

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, (00:44:05-00:45:59)

sway him, concedes. The scene ends with Emily and her brother screaming as Eliza and Solomon are led away.⁷⁸

Life on the Ford plantation is hard on both Eliza and Solomon. Upon arriving on the farm, Eliza is confronted by Mrs. Ford, who says for her to stop her crying, as her children will “soon be forgotten.” This does not deter Eliza, who continues to constantly weep for her lost children. Sometime later, we see her being led away by the overseer and others to be sold away, screaming for Northup.⁷⁹ Solomon is placed with a gang of men who are cutting lumber in the swamp, driven by Tibeats, a young white carpenter who takes pleasure in his position over the slaves. Tensions soon arise between Tibeats and Northup, as Solomon comes into favor with Master Ford after finding a way to transport newly cut logs quickly and cost-effectively across the swamp. Their conflict comes to a head when Tibeats attempts to beat Solomon, who overpowers the other man and whips him. Later, Tibeats and a gang of regulators arrive to hang him, nearly completing the deed when the plantation overseer arrives and threatens the gang with death for messing with the master’s money. Ford arrives sometime later to cut Northup down, telling him that the plantation was no longer safe for him and that he would be selling him to another owner.⁸⁰ Little did Solomon know that the next plantation would be even more dangerous.

Solomon arrives at the cotton plantation of Edwin Epps (Fassbender), who is the complete opposite of the comparatively benevolent Ford. Epps is hard drunk, who can be best described as a sadist who uses religion as an excuse for his abuses of the enslaved

⁷⁸ Ibid., (00:27:56-00:32:06)

⁷⁹ Ibid., (00:32:16-00:32:53)

⁸⁰ Ibid., (00:45:22-00:54:24)

people he owns. He is obsessed with young Patsy (Nyong'o), the hardest working slave on the farm. She works twice as hard as any man, picking more than five hundred pounds of cotton a day, which she hopes will keep Epps from her. However, it is clear that he constantly stalks her, rapes her at will, and is unabashed in his desire to have all of her, body and mind. Patsy receives no pity from Mistress Epps (Sarah Paulson), as the woman exercises her disgust and hatred of her husband and blames his licentiousness on his young victim. This pull on Patsy pushes her to the brink, with a pivotal moment of her asking Solomon to kill her, so that she may have some peace.⁸¹

At the Epps' plantation, Solomon is given tasks that take him to a local store to collect requested items. This gives him access to paper, of which he takes a sheet with the hopes of writing a letter to his contacts back in New York. He places his faith in a white day laborer on the plantation, asking him to deliver his letter. The laborer goes to Epps with the story, who then confronts Solomon. Luckily, Solomon is able to talk down Epps, saying that the worker is only trying to get in Epps' graces so that he may become overseer. This appeases Epps, who fires the laborer, leaving Solomon with no hope.⁸²

Life on the plantation becomes increasingly rough for both Solomon and Patsy. In his nightly drunken tears, Epps rouses his slaves, bringing them to the house to dance for him while Northup plays the violin. Often, he stares lustfully at Patsy, bringing the ire of his wife down on her. Her violence ranges from throwing bottles at Patsy to outright scratching her face in plain view of everyone. Epps does nothing. The tension of this cursed triangle comes to a head when Patsy goes to a neighboring plantation to get soap.

⁸¹ Ibid., (01:18:34-01:20:49)

⁸² Ibid., (01:30:00-01:37:30)

The Shaw Plantation is run by Master Shaw, with his black “wife,” Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard), who had been a laborer on the farm who decided to give in to her owner’s advances for her personal gain and comfort. Epps, who in a jealous rage accuses Patsy of going to see Master Shaw, orders Solomon to whip her. Patsy is stripped down and tied to the whipping post. Solomon, in obvious pain, whips the girl until he breaks down and cannot. Epps, egged on by his wife, then takes the whip and beats Patsy until she cannot stand. When he tires, Epps orders Solomon to take Patsy away to the cabin, where the women tend to her wounds.⁸³

The tides turn for Solomon when Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt), a Quaker traveler, arrives on the plantation looking for work. Epps hires him on to build a gazebo, enlisting his male slaves to help him. Bass’ presence on the farm causes some strain, as his religion does not believe in enslavement. He and Epps argue about the humanity of the black laborers and whether or not the bible allows for slavery. Epps, clearly shaken, remarks about how Bass is in the South and this is how they do things, subtly hinting that if he has a problem, he had better keep it to himself. However, this moment gives Solomon the courage he needs to proposition Bass. Telling his story of how he got to this place, Northup begs the Quaker to help him. Bass acknowledges the danger he is putting himself in by taking the letter, but says that to ignore Northup’s plight was against his religion.⁸⁴

Sometime later, the local sheriff arrives on the plantation with a northern white man looking for Solomon. His letter, sent away by the long since departed Bass, had

⁸³ Ibid., (01:45:00-01:54:00)

⁸⁴ Ibid., (01:40:00-01:59:17)

reached New York. The sheriff questions Solomon on his real name, his family, where he was from, and finding the information to be accurate, brings him to the other man, a friend of Solomon's from home. Epps, roaring with rage, demands his property be released to no avail. He gathers his horse and rides ahead of the group to town to protest the event. Meanwhile, Solomon embraces Patsy, reluctantly letting her go as he gets into the carriage, riding away from his nightmare twelve years after it began.⁸⁵

The film's finale finds Solomon back in Saratoga, reuniting with his family. His children, now adults with families of their own, and his wife embrace him as they all cry tears of joy; their father finally back with them after so long. However, we find in the film's epilogue that Solomon received no satisfaction for the ills he suffered. As a black man, he could not sue the two men who captured him nor the slave pen operator they sold him to as it was illegal for him to testify against them in a court of law. However, his story was published and he did small tours in New England telling abolitionists about his time as a slave. Solomon's story ends with the audience unsure of where or when he died.⁸⁶

Violence

In viewing *12 Years*, it becomes obvious that the secondary theme in the movie is the plight of enslaved women. Unlike the book, Ejiiofor's Solomon is in constant close interaction with and is keenly aware of the situations of the black women around him. Through their interactions with him, we get a more detailed understanding of the lives they lived and the unique violence committed against them. For example, from the very

⁸⁵ Ibid., (02:00:16-02:03:53)

⁸⁶ Ibid., (02:03:53-02:08:57)

beginning of the film, we find Solomon attached to Eliza, who tells him that she used her body to appeal to her master until his death, even bearing a child from the relationship. However, when the master's daughter is put in charge of the estate, Eliza and her children are promptly sent away and sold. During the sale of Eliza to William Ford, the tension and desperation of Eliza is high. She is begging for her children to remain with her.⁸⁷ The violent act of selling enslaved people is best discussed in Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999). Johnson asserts that people of all ages and sexes were turned from humans to commodities upon which potential buyers could imagine themselves building their hopes and dreams.⁸⁸ But in doing so, familial connections are destroyed and, as was the case for Eliza, are unlikely to be mended.

The hinted tension between Eliza and her master's daughter is an important relationship to note, as it is one of many interactions between enslaved women and plantation mistresses seen in *12 Years*. In most films about American chattel slavery, the angry and lustful Master is the ultimate villain to both black men and women alike. However, scholarship tells us that mistresses were not as meek and mild as had been previously thought. Thavolia Glymph, in her groundbreaking work *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, argues that the main purpose of the plantation mistress was to maintain her position as lady of the house, while female slaves, in simply being, challenged that authority. Mistresses, despite having significant power over the house, were to defer to their male relatives in business. They had no identity of their own, unless they did something worthy of note, but even then, they are

⁸⁷ *12 Years A Slave* (00:27:56-00:32:06)

⁸⁸ Walter Johnson, "Turning People into Products" in *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 117-134.

listed as “Mrs. Plantation Master.” But there was something she was able to control: her slaves. Thus, in order to make sure that her position as mistress was secure and to exercise her power, plantation mistresses were just as abusive, if not more savagely, than their male counterparts. Violence is at the very core of the system of slavery and to exercise the process of social death upon another human being is a violent act. Slave mistresses were not excused from this process; they were complicit and benefitted from it.⁸⁹ In a single line, Eliza makes sure that the audience knows that her abusers were also female.

Eliza is later at odds with another white mistress. After being bought by Master Ford, Solomon and Eliza arrive to his Louisiana plantation. Eliza, who is weeping for her children, is told by Ford’s wife to stop crying, as Eliza will “forget [her children] soon enough.”⁹⁰ In a later scene, Eliza’s constant crying annoys the mistress, with her remarking “all that crying is depressing.”⁹¹ Eliza is sold away in the next scene.⁹² It is not explicitly said that it was Mistress Ford who decided to sell Eliza, but it is implied that she convinced her husband to do so. The inhumanity of the slave trade on families is embodied in Mistress Ford, as she is discomfited with Eliza’s weeping for her children. Eliza’s feeling as a mother are trumped by the mistress’ desire for a passive, quiet slave.

The angry and evil plantation mistress is seen in Sarah Paulson’s stunning performance of Mistress Epps. Angered by her husband’s blatant desire for Patsy, Mistress Epps resolves to take out all of her anger and frustration toward her husband on

⁸⁹ Thavolia Glymph, "The Gender of Violence" in *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18-31.

⁹⁰ *12 Years* (00:27:56-00:32:06)

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, (00:39:37-00:44:59)

⁹² *Beloved* (00:27:56-00:32:06)

Patsy. Patsy is constantly attacked and belittled by Mistress Epps, in overt forms like being scratched during one of Epps' drunken dance parties, and covertly, by denying Patsy basic needs, like soap. Mistresses Ford and Epps, then, are in direct contrast to the gentle Southern plantation lady of Hollywood past and more in line with what historians have argued regarding interactions between enslaved women and plantation mistresses.

In *Beloved*, Sethe, eighteen years beyond her escape, literally wears violence on her back. During a particularly gruesome flashback, a very pregnant Sethe is whipped by her enslaver for telling others about the sexual violence committed against her.⁹³ Paul D. remarks that she was whipped with cowhide, a thick material that was known to leave deep gashes in the skin. When her back heals, the scars are reminiscent of a tree, with deep roots and branches that bear fruit. The Chokecherry Tree is Sethe's burden to bear, a reminder of the pain and cost of her captivity.

An interesting unsaid tension in *Beloved* is the relationship between Sethe and Schoolteacher, the master at Sweet Home. It is established early in the film that despite the name, Sweet Home was "anything but sweet and not our home."⁹⁴ As the only woman at Sweet Home, Sethe was the focus of all male sexual attention, from both whites and blacks. Although she married Halle,⁹⁵ they had no wedding (not what Sethe was expecting) and no real legal bond to each other. As such, Schoolteacher and his ilk were able to do what they wanted to her, including sexual abuse. In her recounting of the night she escaped, Sethe explains to Paul D. that Schoolteacher and his nephews took her

⁹³ Ibid., (00:15:34-00:20:26)

⁹⁴ Ibid., (00:06:30-00:20:26)

⁹⁵ Halle is the son of Baby Suggs and bought her freedom some years before. He is driven mad by seeing Sethe's milk taken in the barn and does not run away to Ohio with her as planned.

into the barn and “took her milk,” from her breasts that was meant for her young baby.⁹⁶ This act of violence was one that loomed over the heads of enslaved women of all ages; sexual abuse and coercion went hand-in-hand with the institution of slavery.

Production and Reproduction

Production and Reproduction is also a theme where film and historiography intersect. For Eliza in *12 Years A Slave*, in becoming a concubine for her white master, her body is literally a space for labor. In the case of Patsy, the labor of her body is twofold: the slave body that picks five hundred pounds of cotton daily and the slave body who is unwillingly raped. She is producing more than any man on the plantation, but she still must give her body over to be worked by Epps. Patsy comes to represent the subset of women who worked in the fields. Ira Berlin contends that with the rise of industry and manufacturing in the antebellum South, African American men were taken away from the fields and occupied these special skilled positions.⁹⁷ As a result, the field labor force on plantations became overwhelmingly female. We also see this in *Sankofa* where the majority of the field hands we see are women.

Alternatively, in *Beloved*, in which Sethe was the lone female on the small farm in which she was enslaved, her ability to reproduce was her major secondary point of oppression. The next generation was at the forefront of her master’s mind, and her sex on the minds of the enslaved men on the farm. From her arrival on the farm, the men constantly are wishing to be paired with her. However, once she attempts to escape, the

⁹⁶ *Beloved* (00:15:34-00:20:26)

⁹⁷ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 270.

Schoolteacher and his ilk take the literal symbol of motherhood, breastmilk, from her. In this way, Sethe's double consciousness as slave and woman is laid bare for viewers to acknowledge.

Reproduction is a uniquely female form of production. In this case, children, a self-replicating workforce, are the product. Since slavery was different for women due to slaveholders' gender based expectations, masters burdened black women with the task of reproducing the next generation of labor. Reproducing meant that an owner would gain more free labor, thus enhancing his income. Much of an enslaved woman's life centered around the performance of her work duties, but also giving birth to as many children as possible. An enslaved girl could anticipate being placed with a "trash gang," made up of young mothers, pregnant women, teenagers, and old women.⁹⁸ This group was to assimilate girls into the predetermined life of an enslaved woman. However, in this attempt by the master class to force girls into motherhood, female slaves were able to create a network for themselves. "Slave women," White writes, "had ample opportunity to develop a consciousness grounded in their identity as females."⁹⁹ Since men were more likely to be sold, women by necessity depended on the slave community for assistance. Consequently, women had to build a world for their survival, which enhanced their sense of womanhood and their connections to each other.¹⁰⁰ This world provided an alternative to a white patriarchal social order that attempted to keep black women subordinate and unfeminine.

⁹⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Ain't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), Pg. 91

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 121

Resistance

Resistance of enslaved women is also displayed in *12 Years A Slave*. When her children are taken from her, Eliza cries for the remainder of the movie. At a particularly tension-filled moment, Solomon angrily berates Eliza for her “incessant crying,” as there is nothing she can do to bring back her children. In defiance, Eliza says “will you even stop crying for your children? Let me weep for children, Solomon!”¹⁰¹ Eliza’s crying is her resistance to a system that demands forgetting your children. She is exercising her ability as mother and displaying her humanity. American chattel slavery is a system that strips away one’s humanity and replaces it with commodity and capitalism.

Another moment of resistance is in the beginning of the film, where we find Solomon sleeping in a cabin with other enslaved people. A woman who was sleeping next to him, rolls over to face him. She places his hand on her breast, and later, moves it down to her privates. After a moment and seemingly satisfied, she turns away from Solomon and begins to weep. In this scene, this nameless black woman displays a basic form of human desire. It seems that she used Solomon not only for sexual release, but as a method to display her own humanity, as we know black women have been denied that presentation historically.¹⁰²

Patsy, in her own ways, also resists the bounds of slavery. In a tense scene, she begs Solomon to kill her.¹⁰³ Suicide, for many under the system of slavery, is the ultimate form of resistance. To deny an owner access to both your body and labor, while taking

¹⁰¹ 12 years (00:39:41-00:41:45)

¹⁰² Ibid., (00:03:45-00:05:40)

¹⁰³ Ibid., (01:18:34-01:20:49)

money away from them through death, is a more permanent way of arguing for their humanity.¹⁰⁴ Enslaved women were more likely to do this, especially when their children were at risk. Infanticide, in the womb and outside, was a method by which enslaved women could exercise their right to their own bodies and the future of the children that they produced. Legally, the children of slaves were owned by their mother's master. Their enslaved parent(s) had no right to them.

The epitome of Patsy's resistance comes in the form of the most memorable scene of the film. Epps is roaring through the plantation looking for Patsy who is nowhere to be found. She returns to the plantation to see Epps charging toward her, yelling about where she has been. Revealing a piece of soap, Patsy says that she had gone to see Mistress Shaw for it, as Mistress Epps refused to give her anything to clean with. "I pick five hundred pounds of cotton a day; more than any man here" she cries. "I will be clean. That's all I ask." In saying that she will be clean, Patsy is demanding that Epps see her as human.¹⁰⁵

Two additional things are happening with this scene. One, Patsy committed truancy, an act of temporary escape to gain momentary autonomy while still being held in bondage.¹⁰⁶ This form of resistance and rebellion was more common in enslaved women, as they were less likely to actually run away from plantations.¹⁰⁷ Second, Patsy's nod to her labor presents the fact that women who worked in the fields were expected to work

¹⁰⁴ Forret, *Slave Against Slave*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ *12 Years* (01:45:00-01:54:00)

¹⁰⁶ Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, "Coerced but Not Subdued: The Gendered Resistance of Women Escaping Slavery" in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 59.

¹⁰⁷ Stephanie Camp, "I Could Not Stay There: *Women, Men, and Truancy*" in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 35-59.

just as hard as men. There was no gender divide between men and women in regards to labor for the benefit of the master class.

The major theme of *Sankofa* is resistance within the enslaved African Diaspora. In an interview with Haile Gerima, the director notes that prior to his film “all slavery films were about victims and Blacks did not make history. I wanted to make a film where Black people fought back.”¹⁰⁸ As displayed by main characters Nunu and Shango, neither born in America, resistance is the method by which enslaved people maintain their humanity. In the case of Nunu, she is an African woman who “was sold by her own people” to slave traders on the coast. While onboard a ship to the New World, she is raped by a slave trader and becomes pregnant. All the while, she resolves to hold on to her heritage and teaches others about her homeland. This is a overt form of resistance that is not seen in the other films explored in this study. Because Nunu is an “Atlantic Creole,”¹⁰⁹ or a person who was born free in Africa and imported into enslavement, she has not experienced the social death from birth, as native-born African Americans have. She retains a direct connection to Africa, which makes her appealing to the enslaved people around her. She is powerful and respected in the community and a leader in the impending uprising.

Her son, Joe, serves as Nunu’s antithesis. Joe desires to be accepted by his enslavers, going as far as to accept Christianity in order to force it on other slaves in the community and completely cut him off from his “pagan witch” mother. Specifically, the tension between Joe and Nunu symbolizes the forced assimilation of native slave

¹⁰⁸ George Alexander, interview with Haile Gerima (New York: Harlem Moon Books, 2003), 208.

¹⁰⁹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 29-46.

populations in the Americas. That, in order to totally break and create a society of slaves, white slaveholders and their associates must break the hold that African culture maintained. In killing his mother, Joe symbolized the millions of enslaved people who became unconnected to their heritage. Joe literally killed his connection to his heritage and history, leaving only a destructive husk that can be molded into the perfect slave. In essence, the process by which chattel slavery thrived.

An unexpected form of resistance is found when Nunu is sent to be sold. When the coffle returns to the plantation, the other slaves are surprised to see Nunu with them. “Finally, I’m too old for the white man!” she exclaims happily. “Too old to be sold, too old to be bought.”¹¹⁰ Age as resistance is an interesting concept, as it is one thing that no one can control. As enslaved women aged, their value beyond childbearing years dropped exponentially, often making them more of a cost rather than a producer. In this moment, Nunu realizes that she is now a burden upon her master, which may be the greatest form of rebellion.

Beloved is set around a moment of resistance that Sethe performed in order to save her children, themselves a product of Sethe’s female labor. Mirroring the Margaret Garner case, Sethe, in a moment of desperation, kills one of her children and attempts to do the same to the others. “Through asserting her right to decide what happened to her children, Garner defied slavery by surrendering the physical flesh in order to allow the metaphysical spirit to survive.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *Sankofa* (01:11:00-01:11:57)

¹¹¹ Kristine Yohe, “Enslaved Women’s Resistance and Survival Strategies in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s ‘The Slave Mother: a Tale of the Ohio’ and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Margaret Garner*” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson

At all points in the history of slavery, infanticide is the biggest taboo for both enslaved and free alike, though not uncommon.¹¹² Through infanticide, enslaved women seized control of their bodies, rejected the expectation of virtually all masters that their female slaves reproduce, and thereby augment the wealth of their owners. When they killed their children, they wreaked vengeance upon their masters by depriving them of the next generation of bound labor.¹¹³ As an enslaved African, Garner rebelled; as a mother, she decided; as a woman, she resisted. She killed out of love for her children.¹¹⁴ *Beloved* presents an enslaved mother who refuses to be the passive object of others, instead claiming to be “far more significantly herself a feeling and thinking subject.”¹¹⁵ Though on the extreme, *Sethe* presents the lengths that some women went to rebel against the institution of slavery.

A major underlying current of the film is the unique difficulties faced by enslaved women who made the decision to run, one of the most extreme forms of resistance for slave women. In the slaveholding South, it was more likely for men to become runaways, as it was easier and more likely for them to be unattached to any familial responsibilities.¹¹⁶ Conversely, women were more often in charge of other family members, including small children. Though not uncommon, female runaways were more at risk on the road alone than men, and often escaped in larger family groups. It was more

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 101.

¹¹² Jeff Forret, *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 363.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 373

¹¹⁴ Kristine Yohe, “Enslaved Women’s Resistance and Survival Strategies in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s ‘The Slave Mother: a Tale of the Ohio’ and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Margaret Garner*”, ed. Mary E. Frederickson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 102-104.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107

¹¹⁶ Stephanie Camp, “I Could Not Stay There: *Women, Men, and Truancy*” in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 35-59.

likely that women were truant, or temporarily escaped and returned to the plantation on their own. For Sethe, being a pregnant woman on the run meant giving birth and caring for a newborn in the wild.

Sankofa, *Beloved*, and *12 Years a Slave* each make important points about the evolving lives of enslaved women within the American chattel system: women had a uniquely difficult life within the confines of enslavement, one that was different from that of enslaved men and white women. These films are able to make this point by using certain themes to convey current historical understanding of black womanhood during this period.

But, this is not the case for all the films viewed in this study. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* did not reach the same level of engagement with the history of enslaved women. In fact, it is arguable that Tarantino's portrayal of these women is more in line with that of older Hollywood presentations of slave women: that of mammies, jezebels, and general filler characters who lack any and all agency in their lives. Broomhilda, as the leading woman in the film, lacks any displays of depth or agency beyond the realm of her husband. We are unsure of her motivations, although she must have some given that she was in the "hot box" at Candy Land. Broomhilda is a mystery to us, but the other black women we see in the film definitely present a contrasting image to what we see in the other films explored.

For instance, at Calvin Candie's gentlemen's club, the two women Django interacts with here are Sheba, Candie's sexual plaything, and the maid, whose scanty

French maid's outfit signals her place as an object of desire and fantasy.¹¹⁷ Taken against the singularly rebellious acts of Broomhilda, these images present slave women as having an easy life under the conditions of slavery if they acted in a very particular way. If they acted poorly, then they would be treated badly, placing the blame on the treatment of enslaved women on the women themselves rather than their subjugators.

It is not as if Tarantino did not include scenes that show Broomhilda as a woman with her own thoughts and feelings. In reading through the screenplay, one finds a chapter entitled "Broomhilda," where the events leading up to her captivity at Candy Land is presented. Auctioned off to the highest bidder, Broomhilda uses her femininity to attract a young, awkward male buyer, Scotty Harmony. As their joint story progresses, we see that Broomhilda is able to manipulate Harmony into trusting her and giving her a more comfortable life than she would have had otherwise, until she is taken by Candie.¹¹⁸ Comparing and contrasting with the other female images included in the film, Broomhilda's ability to get the best out of her situation is a story that many enslaved women were able to do.¹¹⁹ But, cut from the theatrical version of the film, this scene was not seen by the millions of people who viewed the film. Broomhilda's complexity and life beyond Django is left on a cutting room floor. This executive decision to ignore her story shows that Tarantino did not wish to show a black female with agency, but a simple damsel to be rescued, keeping in line with Blaxploitation era portrayals of women during slavery.¹²⁰ The omission of Broomhilda's story tells audiences that her experience is

¹¹⁷ *Django* (01:01:45-01:01:12:11)

¹¹⁸ Quentin Tarantino, Screenplay for *Django Unchained*, 55-68.

¹¹⁹ This type of relationship was known as *placage* and was most commonly seen in New Orleans. See Shirley Elizabeth Thompson's *Exiles at Home*.

¹²⁰ Much of Tarantino's work is inspired by Blaxploitation films, as seen in *Jackie Brown* (1997). *Django Unchained*, although mainly a spaghetti western tribute, can also be seen as blaxploitation-esque, as seen

lesser than that of Django, Candie, and any other main character in the film. In essence, she is a prize to be won, not a person whose story requires empathy.¹²¹

Tarantino's lack of engagement with modern understandings of enslaved women is disappointing. As one of his most popular films, *Django Unchained* grossed over \$425 million dollars worldwide.¹²² This was more than double that of *12 Years a Slave*, at \$187 million dollars.¹²³ Tarantino's other films, including *Jackie Brown* and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*, provide interesting and worthwhile female characters. Tarantino's reach is momentous and he could have developed a film where enslaved women were compelling and complex. But, in giving "black men a hero" rather than "a victim,"¹²⁴ the black women are left to remain singular and complacent in their subjugation. Additionally, it is problematic to engage with difficult historical topics in ways that deviate from well documented historical narratives, particularly when most of one's audience is not aware of the history at all. To create an imagined scenario, set in a period/topic that is widely misunderstood and under taught, is to play a difficult game with the past.

Approaching difficult and widely misunderstood histories, like American chattel slavery, filmmakers have an ethical duty to tell a clear story, with reasonable creative license. Most directors and other film creators argue that their depiction, while set in the past, is not fact, as what they create is for entertainment purposes only. However, this assertion lacks insight to how audiences consume entertainment, as time and again, historians of certain historical events, including American chattel slavery, are constantly

in *Mandingo* (1975) and *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972).

¹²¹ For a compelling critique of Django and Broomhilda, see Jesse Williams' "[Me Tarzan, You Jane. Me Django, You Chains.](#)"

¹²² <http://pro.boxoffice.com/statistics/movies/django-unchained-2012>

¹²³ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=twelveyearsaslave.htm>

¹²⁴ "[Quentin Tarantino, 'Unchained' and Unruly](#)" Terri Gross, NPR. February 20, 2013.

combating the myths made popular by Hollywood. If movies do not shape the public's understanding of the past, then why has *Gone With the Wind* (1939) been seen as the quintessential American South for much of the twentieth century? There would not be articles dedicated to discussing the "real Django," when there was no black man who could openly attack white men during the antebellum period and live to tell the tale. Movies shape society's understanding of the past and dated ideas about certain groups should have no place on screen.

Chapter Two

Filmmakers who create films that feature enslaved African American women are engaging with a history that has only begun to be fully understood. As described in the previous chapter, it is only since the 1980s that one finds a historiography of black womanhood emerging as separate from the history of the black family and outside of basic plantation history. This interest only grew with the popularity of author Alex Haley's two part epic *Roots* and *Queen*, both fictionalized accounts of his family's lives as slaves in the American South. For the first time, millions of Americans, black and otherwise, were viewing a story of the enslaved on American shores, not from the viewpoint of slave owners.¹²⁵ Most interesting, once *Roots* progressed beyond the story of "Kunta Kinte," there is an intense look at the life of his daughter, "Kizzy." In Kizzy's story, Haley provides the audience with a short glance into the experiences of enslaved women, an experience that he marks as explicitly different from that of the men in his story. Haley revisits the story of black women under enslavement with *Queen*, which he calls the story of his grandmother's line.

Roots proved to be the most popular counter to the *Gone With The Wind* version of slavery interpretation. For millions of viewers, *Roots* was the first time they had seen the story of African Americans on screen. It led to a new interest in America's dark past and how society had evolved over time. As a child, my first reckoning with slavery was through watching and later reading *Roots*. Prior to viewing the film, I had an idea of what slavery was like in the United States, but did not have the image of what it meant to be

¹²⁵ *Roots* was the first made for TV movie to address American slavery from an African and African American perspective. However, films within the Blaxploitation genre did have themes surrounding this topic as well. See *Mandingo*, *The Legend of Nigger Charlie*, ETC.

property. I imagined what it was like for my ancestors in Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina to grow rice and tobacco in the Low Country as Kunte Kinte's hands bled on cotton. And, as I watched Leslie Uggams' "Kizzy" being raped by her new owner after being sold away from her family, I thought about the wide spectrum of complexions in my family and if that was evidence of our past. It was with *Roots* that I became interested in the history of African Americans in the United States

It is important to understand the filmmakers behind these films and why they made the decision to make these particular films at that moment in their career and/or socio-political climate. What was happening between 2009 and late 2013 that made *12 Years A Slave* a must-see, Oscar winning film? Why was *Sankofa* made by Haile Gerima and not John Singleton?

The most popular of the film directors is by far Quentin Tarantino. Known for grindhouse style pictures with a cult following, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* is his highest grossing movie to date, at \$425 million dollars. Born in Knoxville, TN, in 1963, Tarantino was raised by a single mother in the Los Angeles area. He spent much of his time viewing films, participating in theatre productions, and, as an adult, working in a film rental store and as an usher at a porn theater while attending acting classes and landing bit parts on television. Tarantino's big break came with his first screenplay-turned-film *Reservoir Dogs*, which premiered at Sundance in 1992. Extremely popular, the film established features that are quintessential Tarantino's style: non-linear dialogue and violence.

Tarantino's style of filmmaking comes from a variety of influences. Specifically, one can see the very heavy blaxploitation-esque style of many of his films, particularly in *Jackie Brown*¹²⁶ and *Django Unchained*. Tarantino often attributes his time spent at the cinema as a child in the 1960s and 70s as heavily influencing his directorial skills. In addition to his popularity, Tarantino is also one of the most controversial directors in Hollywood, especially when the topic involves race and violence. As *Django Unchained* emerged as one of the top films for the 2013 Holiday season, many critics of the film panned the widespread use of the word "nigger" throughout the film. This is not the first time this criticism has been linked to Tarantino. Throughout most of his film, including *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) where African Americans are not represented on screen,¹²⁷ the N-word is a constant presence in the language of the film's characters.¹²⁸ For many who disagree with the use of the phrase, Tarantino uses it only to make his films more provocative. His defenders argue that the use of "nigger" is relevant and appropriate for the story and/or time period that the films are attempting to represent. However, many other words and phrase that are used in Tarantino pictures are not time appropriate. For instance, journalist Rich Juzwiak in "The Complete History of Quentin Tarantino Saying 'Nigger,'" says that the word "is roughly said 65 times" in newest of Tarantino's films, *The Hateful Eight*, a post-Civil War western. Additionally, other modern phrases like "fucked up" and "I don't know about all that" are also used in the film. This issues of phrasing makes Juzwiak question the validity of the historical accuracy argument, saying

¹²⁶ *Jackie Brown* stars Pam Grier, an African American actress best known for her roles as *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Sheba Baby*. Some pop and black culture critics have argued that Pam Grier best exemplifies Tarantino's obsession with a very particular type of Black culture and Black Womanhood.

¹²⁷ There is one black character in the film, Marcel, the lover of the film's heroine, Shoshanna.

¹²⁸ An interesting argument about the use of "historically accurate derogatory language" comes from actor Jesse Williams, who questions why Tarantino did not use similar terms for the Jews depicted in *Inglorious Basterds* in "Django, In Chains," CNN, February 21, 2013.

that “presence of these modern phrases suggests selectiveness when it comes to keeping the language in step with the time portrayed.”

Yet, the director does not leave “nigger” to his characters; he has often drawn ire by saying it himself in public. His most vocal critic is the director Spike Lee, with whom he has a very contentious and volatile feud for near twenty years.¹²⁹ Tarantino argues that his use of the word is a way in which he diffuses its power, saying “my feeling is the word ‘nigger’ is probably the most volatile word in the English language. The minute any word has that much power, everyone on the planet should scream it. No word deserves that much power. I’m not afraid of it.”¹³⁰ In fact, he sees his use of the word as a type of reclaiming of the phrase, as “he could be identified as a ‘nigger,’” based on how he understood the phrase to be used by those around him growing up. In many ways, Tarantino attempts to claim a form of blackness that is both problematic and mythical. In a 1997 interview with shock-jock Howard Stern, he presents himself as a member of the black community by proximity: he went to a then-all black high school and “hung around all the black guys and just had this black thing going.”¹³¹ For him, because he was friends with African Americans as a teenager, he has the right to use and reclaim ‘nigger.’ However, one must question whether or not that proximity is a valid excuse. Does Tarantino, a white Italian man in the United States with all the privileges therein, have the ability to reclaim a word that has never been used to oppress him? Does proximity

¹²⁹ Spike Lee and Tarantino worked together in the early 1990s on Lee’s film, *Girl 6*, where Tarantino played a small role. The feud did not really get to the levels that we see today until *Jackie Brown*.

¹³⁰ Rich Juzwiak, “The Complete History of Quentin Tarantino Saying ‘Nigger,’” in *Gawker*, December 21, 2015.

¹³¹ *Ibid*

erase all lines of race within the American social hierarchy? For many, these questions are a hearty no, but for Tarantino himself, the jury is still out.

Although *Django Unchained* is Tarantino's most financially successful film to date, it is arguably his most controversial. In addition to the heavy use of "nigger" throughout the film, the use of graphic violence has led to many debates about historical accuracy, artistic interpretation, and morality. For many critics, the extreme forms of violence committed by and against enslaved people go beyond what would have actually happened during the period being represented, thus rendering all violence against them a Hollywood fantasy. Specifically, historians reference Mandingo fighting as a type of sensationalizing that did not occur. Tarantino, in answering this critique, argues that he is simply telling the "real story" of American slavery. However, one can argue that Tarantino is telling the real story as he sees it, through the lens of Blaxploitation film. A historical consultant could have provided information about documented instances of graphic violence to inform the script, giving credence to the phrase "the truth is stranger than fiction".¹³²

In interviews about the film, Tarantino argues that he is attempting to create a hero for African American men to look up to during this dark period in American history, as well as stimulate a conversation about race in America that, from his perspective, has not happened before. However, for many people within the African American community and those who study American chattel slavery and its place in public memory, discussions about race and history are constantly happening. In February of 2012, the

¹³² A particularly horrifying case would be of Marie Delphine Lalaurie and her cases of torture and murder of her enslaved house staff in 19th Century New Orleans.

brutal murder of teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman launched the country into divisions over race, self-defense, white supremacy, and the injustice of the American justice system. In July 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of fault in the death of Martin. As a result, the media and American society in general, especially social media with a large presence of African Americans (Black Twitter, Black Tumblr), became hyper-vigilant in making issues of unjust racial violence by law enforcement known. In the years to follow, police brutality would become another big issue, spawning from the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, and leading to the Black Lives Matter Movement.¹³³

At the same time, Tarantino is defensive when discussing violence in *Django*, saying that it is just a movie and for pure entertainment reasons. From these two arguments, it's obvious that the director is not sure what he wants audiences to gain from watching *Django*: either a fictional black, hetero-normative hero that is influenced by history, or a film to be taken at face value.

This confusing desire to create a hero for black men is directly related to the time in which *Django* was filmed and released. The script was completed on April 26, 2011. It is also important to note that Tarantino is currently being sued by Oscar and Torrance Colvin, a father-son writing team, who allege that Tarantino stole their screenplay. The case was dismissed May 3rd, 2016.¹³⁴ In her article "*Django Unchained* and The Black Man Sitting Behind Me at the Movie Theatre," Joyce A. Joyce argues that if Tarantino's

¹³³ Tarantino has had limited connections to BLM, participating in a Rise Up! Protest about police brutality in December 2015

¹³⁴ See <http://www.polygon.com/2015/12/31/10696140/quentin-tarantino-is-being-sued-for-100m-over-the-django-unchained> , [https://www.pacermonitor.com/public/case/10213341/COLVIN et al v TARANTINO et al](https://www.pacermonitor.com/public/case/10213341/COLVIN_et_al_v_TARANTINO_et_al) , <http://www.open-public-records.com/court/district-of-columbia-114247.htm>

desire is to stand with the multicultural intellectuals, such as John Blassingame, John Hope Franklin, and Eugene Genovese, who reminded society of how slavery's legacy influences the contemporary world, "he has to consider that some of his viewers do not read books about slavery; they learn exclusively through television and movies, and his works bestow him with, perhaps, an unwanted responsibility."¹³⁵

Steve McQueen comes from a very different directorial style. As a child of the African Diaspora, McQueen is a descendent of Grenadian and Trinidadian parents. His mother fostered a love of art in him, encouraged him to attend art school. He studied at Chelsea College of Arts, Goldsmiths College, and had a brief stint at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. However, McQueen did not complete his degree, calling the art school form of instruction "restricting."¹³⁶

He first emerged as a film director in the early 1990s in the British Art House scene. His film, *Bear* (1993), won him the Turner Prize. From there, McQueen's career in cinema only further developed. Later films include *Five Easy Pieces* (1995), *Just Above My Head* (1996), *Deadpan* (1997), *Exodus* (1992-1997), and *Carib's Leap/Western Deep* (2002) and *Rolling Thunder* (2007).¹³⁷ However, his popularity with general audiences emerged with his first film with actor and frequent collaborator, Michael Fassbender, *Shame* (2008). *Shame* tells the story of a sex addict and his unhealthy, somewhat incestuous relationship with his sister. *Shame* is the first of three films that features

¹³⁵ Joyce A. Joyce, "Django Unchained and The Black Man Sitting Behind Me at the Movie Theatre," in *Black Hollywood Unchained: Commentary on the State of Black Hollywood*, ed. By Ishmael Reed, 2015. 71-72.

¹³⁶ Jonah Weiner, "The Liberation of Steve McQueen" in *Rolling Stone*. March 3, 2014.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/the-liberation-of-steve-mcqueen-20140303?page=2>

¹³⁷ "Steve McQueen" Fundaciontonitapias. <http://www.fundaciontonitapias.org/site/spip.php?rubrique514>

Fassbender in a prominent role, including *Hunger* (2011) and *12 Years A Slave*.¹³⁸

McQueen argues that those three films can be seen as a period in his directorial development. “Those films feel like a trilogy. I was angry. I was really fucking angry. And now I’m happy: I did it, and all the anger came out in the end.”¹³⁹

After the success of *Hunger*, McQueen was very interested in exploring the subject of slavery on film. However, it was his partner, Bianca Stigter, who found the story of Solomon Northup. A historian of The Netherlands, Stigter was aware of the various narratives of enslaved people in the United States and decided to mine those collections for a viable story.¹⁴⁰ She remarks, “[McQueen] was working on a story about a kidnapped free man and I suggested he look at a true account of slavery. I read about twenty books and Northup’s one really stood out. I went to Steve and said ‘This is a film script already’.”¹⁴¹ As a historian, Stigter understood that “the past is an immense trove; history holds so many extraordinary stories you might not have to invent one.”¹⁴² After conducting his own research, McQueen gained a better appreciation for both the history of chattel slavery and Solomon Northup himself, saying that he wanted to take audiences on “truthful” journey into slavery.¹⁴³ At the same time, most of McQueen’s films center

¹³⁸ *Hunger* features Fassbender as Irish activist Bobby Sands during his last hunger strike in the 1980s.

¹³⁹ Jonah Weiner, “The Liberation of Steve McQueen” in *Rolling Stone*. March 3, 2014.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/the-liberation-of-steve-mcqueen-20140303?page=2>

¹⁴⁰ Slave narratives were a very popular form of anti-slavery materials for abolitionists in the pre-Civil War period. In addition to Northup’s story, other narratives include *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Equiano. During the 1930s, the WPA hired journalists to travel the country and interview former enslaved African Americans. These narratives have not been used in popular cinematic representation outside of *The Diary of Miss Jane Pittman*.

¹⁴¹ Penny Martin, “Reader of the Month: Bianca Stigter” in *The Gentlewoman*.

<http://thegentlewoman.co.uk/readers/bianca-stigter>

¹⁴² Bianca Stigter, “*12 Years A Slave*: Bianca Stigter on Finding Solomon Northup” in *The Standard*. January 10, 2014.

¹⁴³ Steve Ramos, “‘Truth Is Truth:’ Steve McQueen On Making *12 Years A Slave*” in *Fast Company*. October 25, 2013.

on the theme of the human body in various states of duress. *Bear* features two male characters, one played by McQueen, in a wrestling match tense with ambiguous relations, aggression, and erotic attraction. *Shame* highlights the body addicted to a very physical vice, and *Hunger* presents the human form wasting away. For him to direct *12 Years*, where the body is a commodity and a source of physical labor, is not outside of the realm of the possible.

Beloved is much different from *12 Years* and *Django*, in that the motivation for making the film was not by the director, Jonathan Demme, but by owner of the rights to Toni Morrison's novel and leading actress, Oprah Winfrey.

With *Beloved*, I was given the opportunity to have very intense personal feelings about race relations and the state of racial affairs in my county and indeed the world. I had very strong feelings, so the chance to make a film that deals in an imaginative way with stuff you care tremendously about is a real high. It's a really amazing thing to be able to do.¹⁴⁴

Oprah was able to make the film she wanted because of her star power and success as a corporate asset for the Disney Company and the American Broadcasting Company.¹⁴⁵

But she needed a director who could make her film. Demme, prior to *Beloved*, had a variety of different films under his belt, including *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Philadelphia* (1993). However, he had not yet made a film that dealt with issues of race.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Adrian Wootton, "NFT Interview: Jonathan Demme" from *The Guardian* in *Jonathan Demme: Interviews* ed. By Robert E. Kapsis. 107-109

¹⁴⁵ Adrian Wootton, "NFT Interview: Jonathan Demme" from *The Guardian* in *Jonathan Demme: Interviews* ed. By Robert E. Kapsis. 108-109

¹⁴⁶ In several interviews, Demme says he "was fed up with the absence of African American stories and African American presence in movies" and was looking for a way to elevate those voices. From "A Conversation with Director Jonathan Demme" by Charlie Rose, from *The Charlie Rose Show*, airing

In the case of *Sankofa*, it was a film decades in the making. Haile Gerima knew nothing about slavery in the Americas when he travelled to the United States for his education. Born in 1946 in Gondor, Ethiopia, Gerima spent much of his time as a child in movie houses watching films about the United States, eagerly drinking up classic Hollywood depictions of “Americanness,” an image that centered on the dominant, white culture. Of course, that ideal placed people of color, especially Africans and African Americans, in the least desirable positions and never addressed or identified issues about their histories. “I came worshiping America without knowing the history of America.” His ideas about America changed dramatically once he arrived in the United States and saw firsthand the systematic and blatant racism that Hollywood often forgot. Additionally, as a child from a traditional storytelling family, with his father being a historian and playwright, Gerima was well versed in the power of the arts to tell a larger and complex story.¹⁴⁷

It is important to understand that Gerima’s approach to the topic of chattel slavery comes from a Diasporic point of view, specifically that of East Africa. That area had its own understanding of enslavement and colonialism with the East African or Arab Slave Trade, which has never officially ended¹⁴⁸. Additionally, Ethiopia is the only African country to successfully defend itself from European imperialism and colonization. This history influences the ways in which Gerima envisions the slave rebellions in *Sankofa*. When taken into consideration with Oprah Winfrey’s ancestry as an African American,

October 26, 1998, in *Jonathan Demme: Interviews* ed. By Robert E. Kapsis. 125-6.

¹⁴⁷ Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jaqueline Najuma Stewart, “Introduction: Emancipating the Image--The L.A. Rebellion of Black Filmmakers” in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema*. 2015. 15.

¹⁴⁸ The East African Slave Trade is one of the longest lasting slave trades in African and the Middle East. Places with large populations of enslaved Africans and/or their descendants include Mauritania, Zanzibar, Ethiopia, and parts of India.

and Steve McQueen's position as an Afro-Brit with Grenadian and Trinidadian roots, it is interesting to see how their ancestries affect the ways in which they all approach the effects of chattel slavery on their respective communities and even themselves.

Gerima attributes his interest in American slavery to the 1968 uprising in Chicago, IL. Noting that he was taught by "whites in the Peace Corps," Gerima acknowledges that he had never thought about the black diasporic struggle until he experienced it firsthand. He arrived in the United States in 1967 to attend drama school. Like many other American cities with large African American populations, Chicago was a hub for racial tensions and radicalism. The Nation of Islam, founded by Black Nationalist Elijah Muhammad, was based out of the city, and branches of organizations within the Civil Rights Movement also made the city their home. However, with the assassination of Martin Luther King on April 4th, 1968 in Memphis, TN, those tensions came to a head. Describing the moment as "the death of peace," many African Americans felt that the peaceful marching and protesting done by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, and other non-violent civil rights activism had failed to protect not only their most visible proponent, but that their message of non-violent action was not helping to move black liberation further. In cities all across the nation, riots, arson, and various other violent acts took place. With the exception of Indianapolis, every major city in the Northern United States suffered damages due to race riots. This explosion of tensions inspired groups like the Black Panthers to strive for liberation by any means, including violent confrontation.

The film school at the University of California at Los Angeles is one of the premier education facilities for new filmmakers. Founded in 1947, the number of successful graduates of the school are in the hundreds. However, in the 1960s and 70s, a small number of instructors banded together to challenge the racial status quo at UCLA and within American filmmaking in general. Specifically, the goal of the group was “emancipate the image,” that is, to revolutionize the ways in which African Americans were portrayed on screen. Experiments with film form broke from earlier generations of Black filmmaking and the popularity of Blaxploitation films to interrogate on deeper levels how moving images construct notions of race, class, and gender, particularly for Black viewers. The group of filmmakers who came out of UCLA between 1970 and 1986 were known as members of the L.A. Rebellion.¹⁴⁹

Members of the L.A. Rebellion identified along the lines of Third World filmmakers, which emphasize employing guerilla production practices, collaboration, and worked collectively. In *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, there are four main purposes of aesthetics of liberation: decolonize minds, contribute to the development of a radical consciousness, to lead to a revolutionary transformation of society, and develop a new film language with which to accomplish these tasks. These filmmakers understood that to make a film within the confines of the United States, it must adhere to the standards and desires of mainstream white male centric way of filmmaking. To be a black filmmaker, especially one who strives to elevate the ways in

¹⁴⁹ Clyde Taylor, “Preface: Once Upon A Time in The West...The L.A. Rebellion” in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema* ed. by Allyson Nadia Field et. al. 2015. ix-xxiv.

which marginalized people are presented on screen, is to be in direct contrast to the status quo.¹⁵⁰

The influence of the L.A. Rebellion has been long-lasting and far-reaching. Many of the members of this group, from Gerima to Julie Dash, have created significant contributions to cinema culture and the black diaspora in the public. Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) is one of the most influential depictions in Black Feminist canon.¹⁵¹ In late 2015, Ava DuVernay elevated Gerima's work for her millions of Twitter followers, calling for donations for his Indiegogo fundraiser to fund new works. Additionally, her company Array was granted distribution rights to Gerima's *Ashes and Embers* (1982), further drawing the attention of new audiences to this legendary director.¹⁵²

For Gerima, the late 1980s/early 1990s was the time to finally film the script he began as a graduate student at UCLA in the 1970s. At the time, he knew that there was no interest or funding from any American production company, so he went abroad to Europe and Africa to find funders. For some countries, like Ghana, telling the history of the Triangle Trade was important not for financial reasons, but Pan-Africanist ones. The Ghanaian National Commission of Culture noted during production of *Sankofa* "we believe that slavery is the number one cause of most problems on the African continent. We need to tell the world this, and we need to do it without feeling guilty about it."¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jaqueline Najuma Stewart, "Introduction: Emancipating the Image--The L.A. Rebellion of Black Filmmakers" in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema*. 2015. 1-53

¹⁵¹ Singer Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (2016) has introduced the black southern gothic aesthetic epitomized by *Daughters* to a new generation.

¹⁵² Jeff Sneider, "Ava DuVernay's Array Releasing to Restore, Distribute 'Ashes and Embers'," in *The Wrap*, December 17, 2015. <http://www.thewrap.com/ava-duvernays-array-releasing-to-restore-distribute-ashes-and-embers/>

¹⁵³ Mary Ann French, "Haile Gerima, Menace II The Status Quo." *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1993.

They recognized the value of telling a global story from a black point of view and contributed to it.

The 1990s were a very significant time period for a number of reasons. American audiences were wanting to see black stories on film and film companies were beginning to be more willing to pay for such stories. The Steven Spielberg adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985) had been extremely popular amongst a general audience, leading to more films featuring black female leads. Director Spike Lee was telling unique stories about people of color in New York. The year before *Sankofa*'s release, Los Angeles was thrust into the national spotlight in the wake of the beating of Rodney King by police officers and the riots that followed. In short, the switch to the 1990s was a great time to not only narrate black stories, but to be a black filmgoer.

Now that one understands how these filmmakers understood their films and the world they were created in, how did audiences react to and interpret them?

12 Years A Slave is arguably the most successful of all the films viewed in this study at multiple levels. It made over \$187 million during its theatrical run, \$56.7 million within the United States. It was heralded as a successful and realistic depiction of slavery in America by everyone from filmmakers to historians of the topic. It swept mainstream cinema awards in the 2013-2014 season. It won multiple Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Supporting Actress for Lupita N'yongo, and Best Adapted Screenplay for writer John Ridley. Contributing to the theatrical success of *12 Years* is that the film had a real life educational tie-in: Northup's narrative itself. Penguin Press reprinted and sold millions of copies of *12 Years A Slave* in the wake of the opening of film. Production

Company 20th Century Fox, in conjunction with the reprinting of the book, created a website for schools to use for slavery education.

On the opposite end of the successful spectrum, *Django Unchained* also received many awards, including Best Supporting Actor for Christoph Waltz and Best Screenplay for Tarantino. However, the film was heavily criticized for its fantastical vision of chattel slavery, mostly from African American film critics and historians of black history. Some of the most interesting commentary on the film can be found on social media. In October 2015, an interesting discussion on Tarantino's criticism of black film directors took place on Twitter, in which the majority of commenters were incensed by the "gall" of Tarantino to say that *Django* was more authentic than *Roots*.¹⁵⁴ In short, Tarantino argued that his fictional account of slavery was more realistic than Alex Haley's interpretation, despite his being directly influenced by the miniseries. Twitter user @pfunk1130 said "I actually remember those comments. Bamma was trying to convince us he'd made the realest Black movie."¹⁵⁵ Star of the 1977 miniseries, LeVar Burton, responded with "*Django Unchained* is a fantasy, let's be clear. And when Tarantino says that *Django* is more real than *Roots*, I call bullshit. I got nothing against him, but don't go there, okay? Don't go there, Quentin."¹⁵⁶

Much of Tarantino's response to such criticism is that his race is the major factor in bad reviews. He argues that if one had made money as a black critic in the last twenty

¹⁵⁴ This conversation was launched by interview "The Gonzo Vision of Quentin Tarantino" by Bret Easton Ellis, author of *American Psycho*. In addition to making these remarks about *Roots*, Tarantino also calls Ava Duvernay's *Selma* worth of "an Emmy," not an Oscar. He later admitted to never seeing *Selma*. See Twitter account of user @FilmFatale_NYC from October 12, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ Twitter comment of @2pfunk1130, October 12, 2015.

¹⁵⁶ "LeVar Burton Talks *Roots* Remake, Calls 'Bullshit' on Tarantino" in *The Huffington Post*, updated November 21, 2013.

years, “you have to deal with me,” and that “savage” think pieces came from them after *Django*’s release. In those pieces, he asserts, the subject of his skin color was mentioned countless times.¹⁵⁷ This is not the first time Tarantino has defended himself on the basis of his race--whenever the topic emerges, the director often argues that great art transcends societal ideas about race, gender, class, and other such boundaries. However, this argument ignores the validity of how individual understandings of race affect the ways in which we interact with each other and view the world.

Sankofa had less commercial success but was widely acclaimed by independent film festivals outside the United States. Despite the limited release and distribution, *Sankofa* was well received by the majority of black audiences who view it, albeit tentatively. A critique that many viewers had was Gerima’s slow style of filmmaking, rather than “the fast-cutting and boom-boom, shoot-’em-up kind of Hollywood [film].¹⁵⁸” Additionally, the delivery of his message has been described as “heavy handed” in combination with the limited budget and subsequent stretched filming and development schedule, and makes the film “uneven.” However, it remains an effective and powerful piece of cinematic history for many viewers. The film made Gerima a game-changer in multiple ways: independent funding, marketing, distribution, and, most importantly, taking characters in positions of servitude and making them radical humans with real emotions and desires. In think pieces, reviews, and comments from both film critics and

¹⁵⁷ Bret Easton Ellis, “The Gonzo Vision of Quentin Tarantino” in *The New York Times*. October 12, 2015.

¹⁵⁸ Mary Ann French, “Haile Gerima, Menace II The Status Quo.” *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1993

everyday viewers, *Sankofa* was “the first time [they’ve] seen slavery depicted as something horrible, without the romanticism of *Roots*.¹⁵⁹”

Unfortunately, *Beloved* did not reach the popularity that its cast and filmmakers hoped for. The film failed at the box office, making less than a third of its production value of \$80 million dollars, and was pulled from most theaters after one month. Much of the film’s criticism surrounded its surrealism and fantasy, an impactful and startling presentation in the narrative that did not translate well cinematically. As a result, many Hollywood film companies stopped funding films that featured themes about American slavery, choosing to invest monies into black dramas and comedies. The film’s financial shortcomings also pushed Winfrey away from acting out of “embarrassment,” not returning to the big screen until *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* in 2013. It would not be until *Django Unchained* and *12 Years A Slave* that we see slavery take a starring role in American film.¹⁶⁰

In looking at each of these films, several issues with accuracy, the value of creative interpretation, and race and gender come into play. However, it is possible that these filmmakers are engaging the established history of American chattel slavery on a level that has not yet been elaborated on: the “virtual plantation.” The virtual plantation as a term originates with Michelle Raheja, a professor of English specializing in film and visual culture, at the University of California at Riverside in her book *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (2011). In the case of films created by and featuring Native American filmmakers

¹⁵⁹ Mary Ann French, “Haile Gerima, Menace II The Status Quo.” *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1993

¹⁶⁰ Alex Suskind, “Oprah Winfrey on ‘Lee Daniel’s The Butler,’ Returning to the Big Screen, and the Commercial Failure of ‘Beloved,’” on Moviefone.com. August 8, 2013.

and/or actors, they create a space in which current ideas about the modern meanings “Native-ness” and the baggage that comes with it are abandoned, making the space a place that one can address and work through issues of history, tradition, and culture without engaging “competing colonial discourses,” i.e. Hollywood’s ideas about American Indians. “The virtual reservation” or “media reservation”¹⁶¹ then is a space “transformed by Indigenous people into something of value, a decolonizing space.” The term reservation itself brings its own damaging history, as sites of continued pain and struggle for Native and First Nations populations in the United States and Canada. However, the complexity of the reservation as both site of subjugation and site of resilience makes it the ideal site for Native people to make efforts to evaluate themselves and their image. With this idea in mind, it is arguable that filmmakers of the films referenced in this study are engaging with “the virtual plantation,” a space in which they are delving into the history of American chattel slavery in order to come to terms with the difficult and often misunderstood history therein. In *Sankofa*, Gerima creates a fictional plantation on which his characters stage a rebellion. In main character Shola, Gerima takes viewers through a number of different realities for enslaved women, as house slave, victim of sexual and physical abuse, distrust of other enslaved people on the plantation, and the desire to have relationships beyond the design of slave owners. The story culminates in the freeing of Shola, and Mona, through both the larger rebellion on the plantation and a symbolic beheading of her master. In this action, Shola is symbolically and literally cutting off her status of slave and embracing her humanity and African-ness. This reclaiming of African identity is later presented through the gathering of people of the African diaspora at the end of the film.

¹⁶¹ Media Reservation Theory developed by Lorna Roth

In *12 Years A Slave*, McQueen uses the story of Solomon Northup to address the injustices of slavery as a system and the government systems that allowed it to flourish, survive, and bring the country to the brink of falling apart. As a free man of color in the North, Northup is believed by most audiences to be safe from the violence of South plantations. However, his capture and selling into subjugation and, later, his inability to receive justice through the American legal system, force all to understand there was no safe haven for African Americans in this period. That slavery was not limited to the American South, but that the country as a whole contributed to the system of white supremacy and black people were to simply survive. This is best symbolized in the character Eliza, whose status as a black women in a system that placed her at the bottom meant that she had no reprieve. She did everything she thought she had to in order to comfortably survive: giving herself sexually without fight to her master, having his child, submitting to her status but is separated from her children and is further punished for mourning her lost kin. In Eliza, the virtual plantation solidifies that there was/is no justices for enslaved people and that we as a community must come to terms with that reality.

But the virtual reservation is not only for dealing with issues of the physical world, but that of the spiritual and emotional. Raheja asserts that while the virtual reservation contains violent and violating representations that exist on reservation territories, “it also provides a creative, imagined space with critical ties to physical places that have protected what might be called ‘traditional’ practices and permitted the maintenance of some Indigenous languages and knowledges, such as prophecy.¹⁶²” This

¹⁶² Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*, Pg 152.

means that the virtual reservation is a place where interactions between real life and traditional beliefs happen and have an effect on those coming to terms with difficult events beyond the confines of time.¹⁶³ Sethe and her supernatural encounter with the spirit of her murdered child in *Beloved* is an example of this interaction. For African Americans under slavery, Christianity, southern spiritualism, and African traditional religions combine to create a syncretic belief systems that included the existence of the supernatural, including spirits and haints. On the virtual plantation, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D are forced to interact with the trauma of their enslavement via the ghost of Beloved. They are forced to have a dialogue with the actions of the past in order to free themselves from the horrors and actual scars that their former condition left behind. Additionally, the belief in the power of religion and the ability to battle the spirit world comes to a head when the women of the community come together to exorcise Sethe and her family of their haunting. Like virtual reservations, on the virtual plantation, former slaves and their lineage workshop in order to “recuperate, regenerate, contest, and begin to heal, under the radar of the direct gaze of the national spectator,” the viewing audience.¹⁶⁴

This theory of the virtual plantation gets even more complex when engaged by white filmmakers.¹⁶⁵ The place of whites in the history of slavery is mostly that as oppressor and owner, making them have a direct link to the plantation as well, with just as much baggage as the descendants of slaves. This means that they have just as much of

¹⁶³ This interaction is best seen in the Native film *Imprint*, in which a Native American woman interacts with ghosts of the past in her childhood home on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

¹⁶⁴ Raheja, *Reservation Reelism P*

¹⁶⁵ I do not include Jonathan Demme in this analysis, as his participation as director of *Beloved* was at the behest of Oprah Winfrey, who had creative control over the project. I believe that Oprah was the real filmmaker in this regard.

a place on the virtual plantation as Africans and African Americans. However, the plantation can be a place of assumed guilt and responsibility. In the case of *Django Unchained* and Quentin Tarantino, the virtual plantation is a place where the director is coming to terms with a history in which he more closely aligns himself with the oppressed rather than the oppressor, yet cannot separate himself from his place of privilege within this system of white supremacy. This contentious engagement with status and placement is exemplified by the title character himself and the ways he interacts with white and black characters after being freed by partner King Schultz. Django is a fascinating abomination for the majority of the white characters he interacts with, especially Calvin Candie. He speaks freely and crassly to them, lacking all the respect and decorum that the time period calls for. He acts as an equal in all ways, without apology nor fear of retribution, as if he had never been enslaved. However, his interactions with other African Americans are limited to brutishly barked orders and abuses along the same lines of their mutual oppressors. In fact, beyond wife Broomhilda and the villainous Stephen, Django never really interacts with other black characters in the film. In these ways, Django is more like the white people he supposedly loathes than a champion for those who are still in positions of subjugation. Django, then, is not a hero for black men, as Tarantino asserts: he is the personification of Tarantino's desire to be a member of the black community without losing the privileges of his whiteness. In the safety of the virtual plantation, this evaluation and exploration can happen, with the caveat that the film "is only a movie" providing a suitable defense from detractors.

The virtual plantation, then, is a space of recognition and exploration for the descendants of slaver and enslaved. Because larger American society has not dealt with

it's "original sin," film provides a space to delve into a topic that has long-lasting impact on the ways in which Americans view themselves, each other, and their collective history, while having distance.

In conclusion, historical films cannot only be viewed by what they literally present. It is important to understand the background of the film's creators, their history, and the circumstances that developed them to better understand why the film's final version turned out in that manner. These inner workings, combined with the sources, or lack thereof, influence what is shown and what is not, creating a piece that is uniquely tailored to that particular filmmaker in a very particular moment in their creative lifetime.

Chapter Three

Films are a valuable tool for teachers to use for helping students to understand the intersections of gender and race under the system of slavery. Because film allows for a deeper level of understanding via depictions, students are able to “see” their history, rather than just imagining it. They can hear the lash cracking through the air, they see the emotional toll on families as they are sold and separated forever. And, they can better envision and acknowledge the differences between men and women as slaves to the system.

There are several elements that make a historical film a good piece of historical documentation. As with all historical texts, being based in historiography, with a documented trail of primary and secondary sources with clear arguments is very important. Second, close attention to detail in world building--are the costumes, mannerisms, and other elements closely aligned with the time period?--is crucial for an air of realism. Next, when utilizing creative license, do these elements or scenes take away from the historical argument the film is attempting to share? When looked at together, asking these questions can assist in determining whether or not a particular film is an example of good historical practice. However, this questioning does not mean that one can simply share these films blindly as “good history”. First, you must be able to extract information based in history from Hollywood elaboration. This means one must be properly prepared with historical knowledge prior to viewing these films. It is important that students are given the tools to recognize arguments based on evidence and creative license.

These elements also extend to historical film in the classroom, where students will consume them on an educational basis. According to *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film* (2006), there are four major frameworks for teaching with historical films: moving image documents as (1) representations of history, (2) evidence for social and cultural history, (3) evidence based in traceable sources, (4) evidence for the history of film and television. As we have seen in the analysis of the films used in this writing, films are complex sources on both the subjects they are attempting to re-present, but also the time in which they were created and the world that created it. There are numerous ways students can and do learn from film. However, by asking a piece of film the same analytical questions we would ask of print documents, we can train students both in the process of historical thinking and in critical viewing: visual literacy or historical film literacy.¹⁶⁶ The following rubric and lesson plan (Appendix A) are tools by which teachers in secondary education can assist their students in understanding the history of enslaved women on film and determining useable depictions from historical films.

¹⁶⁶ Marcus. Pg. 20

Enslaved Women On Film Rubric

Question: Is this character a good representation of an enslaved woman?

Film:

Director:

Producers:

Production Company:

Distributing Company

Primary Actors:

Consultant on African American slavery? Who and what credentials?

Character Name:

Position in film? (Main or supporting character):

Portrayed by:

	Excellent	Strong	Fair	Weak
Age appropriate depiction	The character's interactions with other characters reflect one's age and position within the hierarchy of the plantation or other place of subjugation.	Character's interactions with other characters somewhat reflect their age and position within their society.	Character's age/position is barely acknowledged. Is not really seen as a part of a larger society and community.	The character's age/position is never referenced or discussed.

Black Women as Women	Character is one of many well developed black female characters in story. Characters interact in realistic and/or meaningful ways without centering all discussion around males or whites..	Character is one of several female African American characters. Interaction between black women is limited to filler and/or basic conversation, sometimes on males and/or white characters..	Character is one of two/three black women characters. If they do interact, conversation is only around males and/or whites. The have little to no interaction between them.	Black female characters never interact with each other. Only are a part of story due to their proximity to the main white or male characters.
Performance	Actor performs at high level, immersive. Clearly passionate about the character and/or story.	Actor is good, could be better.	Actor needs work	Acting is stagnant and boring, making character forgettable
Use of Stereotypes?	No stereotypes of black women used without interrogating/evaluating their presence in the narrative.	Light use of stereotypes with little attention paid to evaluation.	Stereotypes are lightly placed in film without interrogation/evaluation.	Stereotypes are used throughout the film without any interrogation/evaluation.

<p>Historical Realness</p>	<p>Character’s portrayal and actions are historically realistic. Elements of historiography are clearly referenced by filmmaker(s) and performers. Artistic license does not take away from the historical accuracy.</p>	<p>Character’s portrayal and actions are somewhat historically realistic. Some elements are based in historical research but artistic license can distract from historical accuracy.</p>	<p>History is lightly referenced in the film’s interpretation but the character’s portrayal and actions are largely fictional and unrealistic relative to the time period/location /etc.</p>	<p>Film does not reference current historiography at all. Character portrayals and actions are highly inaccurate and not based in history.</p>
<p>Relationships: Black Males</p>	<p>Interactions between character and male counterparts are complex. Unhealthy relationships are evaluated during the film. Clear understanding of how tumultuous relations between African Americans under slavery could be.</p>	<p>Relationships with black males are somewhat complex under the context of slavery. Some hints of modern ideas about family structures, but does not overpower other elements of the depiction.</p>	<p>Relationships are not complex and does not reflect the time period/location setting. Film attempts to incorporate historical understandings , but modern visions of black families often overpower the history. Women’s struggles often are used to motivate black male characters.</p>	<p>Relationship reflects modern understandings of intraracial relationships, rather than the past. Interactions rooted in nuclear, patriarchal, 20th Century+ American family structures. Women’s pain/struggle serves as base for black male’s evolution/adventure / rebellion/etc.</p>

<p>Relationships: Children (if applicable)</p>	<p>Mothers' relationships with their children under slavery are depicted as complex and often heartbreaking. With female children, mothers are seen struggling with knowledge of what the future holds for them.</p>	<p>Relationships with children are largely rooted in historical research with some elements of modern understanding of mother-child relationships bleeding through. Issues of gender/age/violence are discussed.</p>	<p>Relationships between mothers and children attempt to bring history into the depiction but are not strong enough to block out today's understandings. Issues of gender/age/violence are hinted at but not evaluated at all.</p>	<p>Mothers' relationships with children reflect modern ideas about motherhood and how they relate to children. No basis in historiography. No evaluation of gender/labor/age/violence or risk of being sold away.</p>
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<p>Relationships: White Women</p>	<p>Interactions with white women are complex depending on individual characters. There is clear distinction between the privileges of white women over black women and how each related to the other. Sexual tensions are also a significant issue.</p>	<p>Interactions with white women are somewhat complex and dependent on individual characters. There is some evaluation of white women's places of power over black women. Sexual tensions are hinted at but not fully explored</p>	<p>Interactions with white women are basic and very similar between characters. Little to no reference of white female power under slavery. White women mostly seen as benevolent and kind, with black women always willing to serve. Little to no reference to interactions between enslaved women and white slave owners.</p>	<p>Interactions between black and white women are straightforward, lacking in nuance and understandings of race and gender under chattel slavery. White women are largely seen as genteel Southern women and/or in solidarity with black women due to gender. Black women are steadfast and love their white mistresses. No reference to possible sexual relations with white/black men made at all.</p>
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<p>Relationships: White Males</p>	<p>Interactions between enslaved women and white men depicted as complex. Issues of gender and race are clearly referenced. Sexual relations are more than the violent/romance dichotomy, show power imbalance of white men and/or exercise of black female self-preservation..</p>	<p>Interactions between white men and black women are somewhat nuanced, with some references to issues of gender and race under slavery. Sexual relations tend to lean toward dichotomy but makes attempts to be more complex.</p>	<p>Complexities in white male interactions with black women are hinted at but not evaluated. Sexual relationships have little to no nuance.</p>	<p>Interactions between enslaved women and white men are not complicated. Sexual relationships are shown as inherently violent or romantic, with no room for issues of consent or black female self-preservation.</p>
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Additional Questions:

- Who is this character for? Do they have an appeal to wide audiences or any in particular?
- Does the female character need a male character to forward her story unnecessarily?

Rationale

Characters in films are what drive a story forward and make a film beloved to viewing audiences. Beyond determining whether a film is “good” or not, one must be able to determine if a depiction of an enslaved woman is a useful and accurate portrayal in order for that character to be useable in a teaching context. As such, the goals of this rubric are to determine if an African American enslaved female character within a particular film is a good representation of a black woman under American chattel slavery via a number of crucial elements:

- Actor Performance
- Placement of the character within the film’s world
- How the character interacts with other characters of the time period/location
- Historical Accuracy

Additionally, it is important for film consumers to understand the basic background of the productions of the film they are watching, as they shape the very production standards and reasoning behind the making of the movie. To get at those roots, fields for director, production company, distribution company, and beyond are also included in the beginning of this rubric.

Age appropriate depiction

This category refers to whether or not the character’s depiction is accurate for a woman of her age and place within the community hierarchy during this time period. Humans interact with others within their age group differently than they would with

others from different age groups. An enslaved woman who was older and considered a “Granny” would have had a different experience, depending on what type of location she was enslaved in, the amount and/or type of labor that was expected of her, and her place of status among both white slaveholders, the enslaved community on the plantation, and the larger community outside the home. Likewise, the experiences of a young enslaved woman would vary due to those same factors. Acknowledgement of these differences are important in realistic storytelling.

Black Women as Women

An important element of an excellent depiction of an enslaved woman is if there is an apparent understanding of black womanhood and realistic interactions between them. As we know from black feminist evaluations of film, black women have been the least likely to be presented in ways beyond stereotypes. In order to elevate a basic portrayal to an excellent one, directors and actors must acknowledge the humanity of African American women and make a concentrated effort to combat dated ideas of black femininity. In short, black women under the system of slavery were just as complex as any other woman during every era of human existence: they loved, lost, danced, and cried. They have a right to have their humanity shown in all of its complicated beauty, especially on film.

Performance

An actor’s portrayal of a character is the very base of whether or not the character will be considered good by audiences. Actors bring their skill, background research, and passion to the their representation of the character. Those who play enslaved female characters have an additional burden of representing not only that character’s personality,

but also the subtleties of black womanhood under slavery, including issues of gender, sexuality, motherhood, and labor for viewers who may have little to no understanding of that history. When done correctly, an actress's depiction of slave womanhood can effectively transform a mediocre film into an amazing piece of cinematography, possibly paving the way for future films that center on black women during enslavement.

Use of Stereotypes?

The purpose of this section is to identify if stereotypes of African American women are used as character traits for this representation and if they are adequately interrogated on screen. As we have seen referenced in this work, negative stereotypes of black women have historically been rampant in Hollywood's image of these groups on films. Often rooted in slavery itself, these harmful ideas about African American women have been hard for filmmakers to abandon. However, the inclusion of stereotypes could add an insightful element to a film's story. Though, if directors and scriptwriters want to include those depictions, it is important that they are evaluated explicitly and deliberately, in order to discourage misinterpretation. For example, if an enslaved woman is angry and emasculates the black men around her, is that characterization rooted in stereotypical ideas of how Black women are or is it a part of this character's makeup and important to moving the story forward? As with all of the issues addressed in this rubric, this question is up for interpretation and debate. Yet, in order to have a good character, issues of stereotyping need to be addressed, as these images have real life consequences for African American women.

Historical Realness

Historical accuracy is one of the more complex elements of this rubric. It requires viewers to have some background preparation on the history of enslaved women when interpreting the film and the character, and/or the wherewithal to recognize creative license. In an excellent depiction of enslaved women, a filmmaker's creativity in the character's actions does not detract from the historical realness of the character. That even though a certain phrase, action, or scenario would likely have never happened to an enslaved woman, the presence of that element does not take away from the character's historical accuracy. Concurrently, if creative license takes center stage away from historical accuracy, then the character and the larger film cannot be considered a useable depiction of American chattel slavery. This means that a director and actors must walk a fine line when deciding to include certain embellishments to historical stories that they are attempting to sell as "historical realness."

Relationships: Black Males

Relationships between African American men and women, like other relationships under the "Peculiar Institution," were complex and often made more difficult due to that fact that people were considered property. Still, many men and women decided to risk separation and even death in order to build relationships with each other. However, it is important for filmmakers to question placing these relationship within the context of today's understandings of a family unit: nuclear and patriarchal. In many cases, it was women who were the primary caregivers for children during slavery, because they were more likely to remain on the plantation than men. Men were often

hired out for labor and able to leave the farm more often than women. Additionally, men were also more likely to run away.

Another issue that often appears in films that depict romantic relationships between black men and women is the use of female pain as a catalyst for black male action. In these films, black men are not moved to rebellion until their woman is attacked, most likely via rape. This element is problematic for many reasons: it places black women in a position of double possession, owned by both the white slaver and, to a lesser degree, her black husband. In these situations, she has no agency for herself and is symbol of the masculine power struggle. Also, the use of female pain as a motivator implies that all black men had the ability to defend their families from the violence of slavery. Although there are some cases of men successfully defending their wives and children from white violence, there are far more cases of men being murdered for daring to challenge white supremacy. This belief that black men would have been able to rise up based on women's pain is rooted in modern ideas of patriarchy and masculinity and should not be applied to the past.

Relationships: Children

Films depicting the complexities of mother-child relationships are elements that are just now beginning to be explored in historiography, let alone film interpretations. However, some filmmakers are clearly engaging with this very limited material, noting that this element of enslavement is a place rich for depiction. When attempting to understand these relationships, it is important that filmmakers and actors make the audience understand the very real risks associated with having children as enslaved property: you have no rights to your children. They are the master's property and they

can do what they wish with them, including selling them away from you. Many children were also the products of sexual relations between white males and black women, both consensual and not. There is also the issue of gender and children. Mothers understood that, unlike their male children, their daughters were being born into a society that placed them at the bottom, with their destinies to be entwined with their reproduction. They also understood that at a certain point, those daughters would be at risk of white male attention, continuing the cycle of sexual violence under chattel slavery.

Relationships: White Women

Arguably, there has been no depiction more lackluster than that of relationships between black and white women on film. Even after the myth of benevolent slave owner was dashed by films like *Roots*, the belief in the gentle Southern lady and her trusted servant girl persists in popular culture, despite historiography proving that female slaveholders were just as violent toward their human property as their male counterparts. For many, the idea that women were just as wedded to the system of slavery is baffling: how could women participate in subjugation if they themselves were second class citizens? Again, this places modern, often non intersectional feminist, beliefs in the past. White slaveholders did not see black women as their equals; they were property and meant to be used as any other tool. In fact, as we have seen in other chapters of this work, white women often saw enslaved women as a threat to their position as wife, as many of their husbands used their positions to take advantage of black women sexually. More often than not, those white women used their position to further abuse female victims of their husbands, knowing that they were unable to confront or attack their husbands. Black women's gender did not save them from the violence of white women no more than it

saved them the violence of white men. Films depicting simple relationships between these two groups of women do a historical disservice to both intertwining histories.

Relationships: White Males

As is the case for all other interactions discussed in the rubric, black women and white men under slavery were in a delicate balance. White men, although at the top of the social hierarchy, often had intense interpersonal relationships with black women beyond that of master-slave. Most often, this interaction is manifested as sexual relationships on film. However, these sexual relations often do not refer to the very real element of black female agency. For many enslaved women, using one's body to gain favor and privilege with the master was a very real option and many women used their only leverage to their benefit. Although these benefits were often short lived, it was their choice. As well, like in the case of Harriet Jacobs, black women also engaged willingly in sexual relationships with other white men outside the plantation in order to extend their access to the world beyond their site of subjugation. Additionally, there is also the fact that these women may have also entered these relationships for romantic reasons, but still understood their place within this society.

Moving beyond sex, relationships between these two groups could also vary based on feelings of family. Black women, by and large, raised both black and white children on plantations. Boys who would grow up to be masters and other important people on the plantation could have strong maternal feelings for the slave woman who raised them, giving her a much different interaction with him than other women on the farm. She could use their close ties to sway him in decision making, such as changes to

the plantation household. In short, these are interactions that are deep and long-lasting, which can change how filmgoers understand interracial relations under slavery.

Further Analysis

After looking into these characteristics in a film's enslaved female characters, one must also decide who this character was created for. This means determining if this character was made to represent a black woman's perspective, to add nuance or complexity, or just to serve as a way to push forward the male centric story being presented in the film. Different viewers will come up to a variety of conclusions, but it is important for one to determine what the filmmakers' goals were and if the outcome is line with them.

The elements included in this rubric are by no means final or completed. Differences in viewership and understanding will change, subtract, and add to the categories listed. However, it is important that those who view films that feature enslaved women and their world have the tools to make an enlightened decision about whether the character can be considered a historically sound interpretation. Additionally, rubrics like this one can be useful for filmmakers themselves in thinking about whether or not they are breaking new ground in the image of female slaves on film or if they are continuing the cycle of misinformation and stereotyping for yet another generation of moviegoers.

Conclusion

In the years since *12 Years A Slave* won Best Picture, interest has grown significantly in films and television shows depicting American chattel slavery. WGN's *Underground*, which portrays a group of enslaved people using the Underground Railroad to escape their subjugation became one of television's best new shows in 2015-2016. The miniseries *Roots* was revisited to much fanfare and star power. And, renewed interest in telling the stories of Harriet Tubman (Viola Davis), Toussaint L'Overure (Danny Glover), and other figures from the period of the Triangle Trade has grown as well. In this time of renewed interest in the retelling of history, it is important that historians and filmmakers work together in order to tell well-rounded, inclusive, nuanced stories. There is no better playing field on which to test a historical film than that of the history of enslaved African and African-American women, whose stories within the American context are multilayered, even within the complexities of American chattel slavery itself. Indeed, because enslaved women's experiences differed from that of enslaved black men and free non-black women along the intersections of race, class, and gender, capturing their lives in the pages of screenplays and on the big screen is an extreme practice in telling good history on film.

By viewing and analyzing four films created in the last two decades, this work attempted to determine the ways in which enslaved women are being immortalized via modern cinema and how those depictions are shaping in public memory. In viewing four films of the 20th and 21st centuries, *Beloved*, *Sankofa*, *Django Unchained*, and *12 Years A Slave*, it is clear that the most common recurring theme in depictions of enslaved women is the threat of sexual violence and the fallout afterward. However, each of these films

addresses this issue in differing ways, from the birth of children, emotional breakdown, damsel in distress, and even spiritual haunting. Concurrently, each film reflects the ways in which the filmmakers' and influencers' ideas about why their film is important and their beliefs regarding slavery and black women's places in it, as well as the time period in which they were created. The result is a collection of films that vary in terms of their usefulness in telling a well-rounded history of the experiences of African and African American women under chattel slavery.

There are several elements that can determine if a film featuring enslaved women is usable as a historical text. Are well vetted sources, including primary and secondary sources, referenced in the film in a larger context? Does the filmmaker apply modern understandings of gender, race, and class to period drama? Within the boundaries of the story's time and place, are black female characters varied in status, ability, and relationship between themselves and others? Combined with analysis on the film's creators and time of creation, one can determine whether or not a particular image of enslaved women provides, by and large, an accurate portrayal of the past and, thus, is a useful tool for understanding their precarious lives.

This question of the usefulness of historical film is one that has been in the media very recently. Nate Parker's *The Birth of A Nation* (2016) is one of the first movies to depict one of the bloodiest slave revolts in American history, with Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion in Southampton, VA, taking center stage. The film has garnered much attention from the film community, especially after its debut at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival,

where it was sold to Fox Searchlight Pictures for \$17 million.¹⁶⁷ However, several failings marred the film's impact, most notably being the accusations of rape from Parker's past. These allegations completely overpowered discussions about the film, so much so that when the film finally released to the public, it flopped in theaters, not staying around for more than a month. Nonetheless, calls to overlook Parker's past in favor of telling a history that "is bigger than all of us"¹⁶⁸ flooded internet comment sections, discussions, and even during interviews with the film's cast and crew. That, we needed to learn about this history, ignoring any controversies around the filmmaker no matter how ugly.

However, this call was further dismantled. To add to the moral dilemma that many filmgoers felt regarding Parker, discussions around the historical accuracy of the film also affected its success. Several historians of Nate Turner and his rebellion called out Parker's use of false claims of interracial rape and the misogynist lens that shades the enslaved women of the film, saying the piece "strips away too much valuable context"¹⁶⁹ for understand the radical ordinary people who shaped the Southampton Rebellion. For instance, Parker imagines the catalyst for Turner's rebellion being the rape of his wife, Cherry, by their white master. However, historian Leslie Alexander asserts that "by all accounts, Turner took up arms against slavery because he believed slavery

¹⁶⁷ Fox Searchlight Pictures is also the Production company behind *12 Years A Slave*. Perhaps the success of that film has led them to invest more funds in films based on African Americans under slavery. See *Hidden Figures* (2017).

¹⁶⁸ Tillet, "How 'The Birth of A Nation' Silences Black Women"

¹⁶⁹ Holden, "The Trouble in Nate Parker's Southampton: *The Birth of a Nation*, a review"

was morally wrong and violated the law of God,” going on to mention that Turner claimed to receive visions and messages from God in time before the insurrection.¹⁷⁰

In a particularly scathing review, Danielle McGuire, author of *At the Dark End of The Street*, calls out Parker’s and Fox Searchlight’s use of the memory of Rosa Parks and her work as an activist to highlight the leadership of black men in the movement, ignoring her roles as anti-rape activist and mobilizer in her own right. For McGuire, “Using women like Parks to highlight male leaders makes the graphic rape scene in [the film] seem like another effort to justify male vengeance and retributive violence instead of identifying rape as a political weapon used to terrorize individuals and communities.”¹⁷¹ McGuire also dissects the curriculum developed by Fox Searchlight for use in schools alongside the film, saying that much of the content, especially that of the black women who are touted as carriers of the Turner legacy, is lifted from basic, non-critical sources, including History.com, Time Magazine, and crowd-sourced encyclopedia, Wikipedia. “If [the filmmakers] really cared about connecting the past and the present in an effort to teach young people about the gender and racial legacies of slavery and freedom, perhaps they could have invested time in building a site with more intellectual depth.”¹⁷²

When considering these points, it is clear that Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* is a case in point of the complications in seeing film as historical text. Despite the fact that Parker and his allies called the film a “must see” on the basis of it being an untold

¹⁷⁰ Alexander, “‘The Birth of a Nation’ is an Epic Fail”

¹⁷¹ McGuire, “‘Birth of a Nation’ Website Dishonors Black Female Activists, Quotes Wikipedia”

¹⁷² At the time of research, this curriculum website was no longer online. This is unlike *12 Years A Slave*, also distributed by Fox Searchlight, whose classroom website is still available online.

and unknown story, when called out about the inaccuracies, Parker said “nothing is ever 100 percent historically accurate.¹⁷³” His assertion is correct: no history film is fully true to the historiography. But what is the truth when it comes to history? When topics are being constantly reevaluated by historians, it is important for filmmakers to not only work to tell an interesting story, but to call on the work of historians to give credence to their depictions of the past. As Steve McQueen states,

Truth is truth. Horrific is not what I’m interested in. I’m interested in understanding. Number one. It has to be a situation where you’re telling a story and where the audiences trust you. They trust the filmmaker not to exploit the situation but to sort of project it into a light that’s understandable and that everyone can reach for and understand the why. The vessel is Solomon Northup. Everybody in the audience is Solomon Northup. What he goes through you go through. That’s what always was key for me. That was the realization for this story and that’s how I wanted audiences to take that passage and take that journey.¹⁷⁴

In summary, filmmakers are bearing witness to the past and have a responsibility to their audiences as the translator of our collective understanding.

It seems that we are in a critical moment for the historical film, especially those concerning race. The most popular genre for Hollywood productions, history and film will always be interconnected. Movies are accessible, even more so with the popularity of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Video. It is crucial that historical film be taken as a serious form of public memory, shaping the ways in which we view the past.

But, historical film does have its limits. The biases and underlying goals of the filmmakers and funders should give pause to those who wish to blindly consume these

¹⁷³ Alexander, “The Trouble in Nate Parker’s Southampton: *The Birth of a Nation*, a review”

¹⁷⁴ Ramos, “‘Truth Is Truth:’ Steve McQueen On Making *12 Years A Slave*.”

types of films. Indeed, a recent controversy with the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) highlighted the director's effort to create a "kind white man" who destroys the "whites only" bathroom sign for Katherine Johnson, when Johnson and *Hidden Figures* author Margot Lee Shetterly both point out never happened.¹⁷⁵ This development seems, for some critics, to be a reappearance of the "white savior" trope, an event or character created solely for modern white audiences to assuage their "guilt" over the racial injustices of the past. However, these elements of fiction were chosen by the director to embody some feelings and tones from the past, specifically de facto racism and sexism. Because there is no way to push all of those elements into one 120 minute film, creative license came into play. Nevertheless, it is important to realize these element exist in film to understand the underlying themes and ideas that shape these depictions and why they cannot be entirely trusted.

As historians, we are taught to read sources but understand the limits of what items like diaries, firsthand accounts, and other primary sources are able to tell us. It is in this vein that we should consider historical film, what they tell us, and the period in which they were made. Even if one is critical of said film, one thing is certain: their reach and popularity cannot be matched and the value, as Alison Lansberg notes, of film to memory :has been fostered by these popular narrative that touch and move and provoke one, engaging one not only intellectually, but in affective ways as well.¹⁷⁶ As Alan Marcus says in *Celluloid Blackboard*, "most people spend more time learning about the past through film and television than any other media. This is not surprising given how

¹⁷⁵ "Hidden Figures (2017)," *History vs Hollywood*, Accessed February 2017, <http://www.historyvshollywood.com/reelfaces/hidden-figures/>

¹⁷⁶ Landsberg, Pg. 2.

much of our day to day experience had been reconfigured by an expansive visual culture that is now ‘the almost constant background presence, the fabric of our lives.’¹⁷⁷” In an interview with Slate, African American filmmaker Robert Townsend remarked:

I teach at a university in Oklahoma, where I come into contact with white students who often have very little interaction with people of color. There have been times when I was asked if I knew where to find weed as I walked across campus late at night. I’ve experienced the occasional microaggression, the clutched purse as I walk into an elevator. There have been white students in my film, race, and philosophy class who have stayed after class and informed me that their expectations about people who are nonwhite have been deeply informed by the films they’ve watched. For some, the only access they’ll have to the complexity of the black experience is by way of the big screen. That’s why movies, like black lives, matter.¹⁷⁸

Therein lies the most important aspect of the intersection of film, history, and race, and why this thesis exists, that for many populations and groups, film introduces subjects, topics, and ideas that can be completely foreign to people across wide swathes of society. For many, movies are the only ways in which they are exposed to certain histories. Film shaped our understanding of not only the past, but of our world, our place in it, and our future that we can develop from our shared past.

¹⁷⁷ Marcus, 45

¹⁷⁸ Ware, “Black Actors Could Make History at this Year’s Oscars, but the Roles Matter More than the Wins”

http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/02/22/a_record_six_black_actors_are_nominated_at_the_academy_awards_for_roles.html

Appendix A

Lesson Plan

Title: History, Film, and Enslaved Women: Learning to understand complex topics through cinema

Grade Level: Upper Secondary (10, 11, 12 grade)

Time Required: Four one-hour class sessions

Subject Areas: African American History>Chattel Slavery, American History>Antebellum and Pre-Civil War America, Film Studies, Art Interpretation, Creative Thinking

Skills Developed:

- Critical analysis
- Critical thinking
- Cultural analysis
- Debate
- Discussion
- Evaluating arguments
- Gathering, classifying and interpreting written, oral and visual information
- Historical analysis
- Interpretation
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Representing ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing

Guiding Questions

- What was life like for enslaved African and African American women?
- Why was slavery different between men and women?
- How do movies on slavery help us understand the past?
- What is historical accuracy and how does it affect films?

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand how gender affected slavery in the United States.
- Understand how to read a historical film and be able to understand sourced material and creative license.

Preparation Instructions (What will Teachers do to prepare to teach)

- Read biographies of film directors

- Choose a selection of film clips to show to students during class
 - Recommended: *12 Years A Slave* (2013), *Sankofa* (1993), *Alex Haley's Queen* (1993)
- Read reviews of film choices
- Review the essay "Film as Social and Cultural History," available on the History Matters! website¹⁷⁹.

Background

From 1649 until 1863, colonial North America, and what becomes the United States, participated in the slave trade. Often called the Atlantic slave trade or the Triangular Trade, this cycle of transporting African people from West-Central Africa to the Americas to work on large farms, or plantations, in order to grow and harvest raw materials for industrial use for the global colonial powers of Britain, Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and, later, the United States, created a way by which the foundations for the modern, industrial world were built. Under this brutal system, over 60 million African people were kidnapped and sold as property, making it one of the largest mass-movements of people in human history. Although selling people into slavery is an old practice, the creation of race-based slavery, or enslavement based on one's proximity to blackness, was developed and perfected by both slaveholding White elites and their allies in the policy-making halls of the Congress (positions that often overlapped).

The system of chattel slavery was based on brutal violence and fear, with limited means of escape for those enslaved people. However, resistance came in many forms, both covert and overt: covert being slowing production, stealing from storehouses, and feigning sickness, and overt resistance ranging from running away, armed rebellions, and even suicides. The brutal violence of slavery varied by time, place, and gender. Female slaves had an additional layer of social status that made them the most vulnerable group under slavery, making them susceptible to sexual violence from both whites and other blacks, as well as the method by which the slave population was replenished. Showing that although the system's goal of social death often caused debilitating harm to generations of black families, those who lived under the system found ways to not only survive, but to thrive.

Since its beginnings in the early 20th century, history has always been a very popular subject for film entertainment. The first blockbuster of the movie industry, *The Birth of A Nation*, launched a nascent art form into the public eye, using flawed history to capitalize on national feelings of nostalgia in the years after the Civil War. Since then, cinematic depictions of the past are one of the most popular story formats for all kinds of entertainment: film, television, video games, and literature. Since the 1970s, there have

¹⁷⁹ "Film as Social and Cultural History," *History Matters*, Accessed February 2017, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/socialhist.html>

been a number of films set through or are heavily influenced by society pre-1865 depicting the lived experiences of enslaved Africans and African Americans, with black women's lives only starting to be meaningfully explored.

Lesson Activities (stimulate conversation about elements relevant to slavery, America, race, and women)

- Read parts of *Are 'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* by Deborah Gray White, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison, *Celia, A Slave* by Melton McLaurin, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler
- Create a diagram depicting the differences between men and women under slavery
- Discussion Questions:
 - Can art represent history? Why or Why not?
 - How is slavery in America depicted in the film clips? Did they show you something you didn't know?

Assessment

- Write a diary entry of an enslaved woman at three stages of her life: young, adult, and elderly. Describe how her life has changed over the course of time.
- Write an essay on the relationship between the women affected by slavery in America: African Americans (enslaved and free) and European-American (slaveholders and non-slaveholders)
- Find an art piece (visual, musical, etc.) that you feel describes an important element of black femininity during and after slavery. Write an explanation as to why you feel this is a representative piece and present it to the class

Resources to continue the lesson

- Watch *Underground* (2015-Present), *Roots* (2016)
- Read: *The Underground Railroad* by Colton Whitehead

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

Master of Arts, Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN

History, December 2017

Thesis: "Playing Patsy: Film as Public History and the Image of Enslaved African American Women in Post-Civil Rights Era Cinema"

Bachelor of Arts, Wayne State University, Detroit MI

History, May 2013

Capstone Paper: "Trying *Something New*: Responses to the Image of African-American Women and Interracial Relationships in Film"

Professional Experience

Public Engagement & Community Programs Coordinator November 2017-Present

The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, LA

Creates and manages all adult programming, builds and maintains relationships between the museum and local communities in the New Orleans Metro area and larger Louisiana.

Education and Service Coordinator

June 2016-October 2017

American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, TN

Plans, manages, and facilitates all Continuing Education/Professional Development programs, including recruiting and training instructors, marketing programs, webinar production, and coordinating onsite workshops' logistics. Creates a vision for the program's future including new components, increased earned income, partnerships with other organizations, and content review and revisions. Maintains organization's standing, governance, and affinity committees, and serves as staff liaison for several affinity committees. Also assists in social media management and additional projects.

Exhibitions Graduate Intern

August 2015-May 2016

Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, IN

Conducts primary and secondary source research on events in Indiana's history for use in future *You Are There!* exhibition series. Served as head curator on *Mapping Indiana: Treasures from the Indiana Historical Society Collection* exhibition (January 16 -April 6, 2016).

Indiana Traveling Exhibitions Team

August 2015-February 2016

Humanities Action Lab and IUPUI Public History/Museum Studies Departments

Contributed to the creation of *Indiana: Intersections of Mass Incarceration and Mental Illness* exhibition, as part of the Humanities Action Lab's *States of Incarceration*, an international exhibit project traveling the United States from April 2016 to Fall 2018.

Public Programs Graduate Intern August 2014-July 2015
Indiana Humanities, Indianapolis, IN

Assisted in the development and implementation of all Indiana Humanities programming, including *ALL IN* special programming. Served as program manager for annual Historic Bar Crawl, including conducting all research, securing community partners, logistics, and budget management. Represented Indiana Humanities at partner and grantee events.

Intern, Programs in African American History June 2013-August 2013
Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington DC

Assisted in research on the events of Freedom Summer 1964 for 2014 National Youth Summit, a yearly program. Facilitated the visit and programs of Smithsonian fellow, Roy Underhill of PBS' *The Woodwright's Shop*.

Historical Research Assistant May 2012- August 2012
Wayne State University, Department of History, Detroit, MI

Researched primary source documents, while creating applicable summaries of information using EndNote program in preparation for upcoming publication on women, African-Americans, and voting rights during the 20th century.

Gallery Associate 2011-2013
Detroit Historical Society, Detroit, MI

Engage visitors with presentations at the Detroit Historical and Dossin Great Lakes Museum. The collections provide a valuable glimpse into the history of Detroit and its place in Great Lakes maritime history.

Guest Services Representative 2009-2013
The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Dearborn, MI

Provide assistance to guests, including ticket sales, IMAX theatre service, and private event needs. Also worked in the Ticket Fulfillment office, printing Call Center and online ticket orders.

Intern, Curatorial/Education March-August 2008
Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History, Detroit, MI

Independently researched and developed short film on the 21st Century African-American family. Also assisted in conducting tours and performing vignettes.

Grant Writing

Community Grant, Humanities Tennessee, on behalf of AASLH 2017

Organization Grant, Arthur Jordan Foundation, on behalf of Indiana Humanities 2015

Humanities Initiative Grant, Indiana Humanities, on behalf of the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site 2015

Conferences and Speaking Engagements

“Teaching and Learning for Cultural Competency in the Profession“ April 2017
National Council on Public History Annual Meeting
Indianapolis, IN

“Public Historians of Color” March 2016
National Council on Public History Annual Meeting
Baltimore, MD

Volunteerism

New Professional and Graduate Student Committee 2016-Present
National Council on Public History

Emerging Professionals Committee 2016-Present
Association of African American Museums

Diversity and Inclusion Task Force 2016- 2017
American Association for State and Local History

Black History Month Community Committee 2016-2017
Andrew Jackson's The Hermitage

MAPH Advisory Board 2016-Present
Wayne State University Dept. of History

Awards

Burroughs-Wright Fellowship, Association of African American Museums 2015
Minority Scholar, Smithsonian Institution 2013