

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WHO NEEDS TO WATCH BLACK VIOLENCE?: AN EXPLORATION OF THE  
IMPLICATIONS OF REENACTING BLACK SUFFERING FOR ENTERTAINMENT  
PURPOSES IN SLAVE FILMS

TROI HOWELL  
SPRING 2024

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in English  
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Janet Lyon  
Associate Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Claire Colebrook  
Professor of English, Philosophy, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
Honors Adviser

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

The central question -- Who Needs to Watch Black Violence? -- frames an interrogation of the extent to which race-based violence needs to be reenacted for filmic purposes. Here, I focus particularly on movies that depict American enslavement, as violence is oftentimes central to their plot. Though race-based violence is inextricably linked to stories of chattel slavery, the question of whether or not we need hyper realistic visual reenactments of them has been brought up time and time again in both cinematic and Afro-American studies discourse. I explore three films that house graphic depictions of chattel slavery – *Roots* (1977), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *Antebellum* (2020) – and explore the extent to which they over-utilize race-based violence in ways that are exploitative.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Film v. Everything Else.....	6
Addressing The Spectacle of the Black Body .....	9
The Implications of Black Spectatorship: Vicarious, Intergenerational, and Cataclysmic Trauma.....	12
<i>Black Violence and Trauma</i> .....	12
<i>Cultural Trauma Theory</i> .....	15
<i>Roots</i> and the Act of Viewing.....	18
<i>Roots (1977)</i> .....	20
<i>Passivity</i> .....	23
<i>Palatability</i> .....	28
<i>Violence</i> .....	29
The Act of Watching: Bearing Witness as Allyship or Activism and <i>12 Years a Slave</i> 33	
<i>Bearing Witness as Activism</i> .....	35
<i>12 Years a Slave (2013)</i> .....	37
<i>Violence</i> .....	39
<i>Audience &amp; Palatability</i> .....	41
Degradation, Dehumanization and Disembodiment: Attaching Abstract Meaning to Black Death and Torment in <i>Antebellum</i> .....	45
<i>Antebellum (2020)</i> .....	48
<i>Violence and Dehumanization</i> .....	50
Conclusion .....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	59

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1. Crowd of Onlookers at a Public Lynching in Marion, Indiana Est. 1930.....	18
Figure 2. <i>Roots</i> ' Original Promotional Poster, <i>Roots</i> (1977).....	20
Figure 3. Kizzy and Missy Anne, <i>Roots</i> (1977).....	27
Figure 4. Patsey after Weeks of Implied Torment, <i>12 Years a Slave</i> (2013).....	41
Figure 5. Veronica Henley's "Revenge." <i>Antebellum</i> (2020).....	52

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank Dr. Lyon for not only supervising this process, but for being the first professor at the University Park campus to make me feel like I belonged. Your guidance, encouragement, and patience with me meant more to me than you will ever know.

I would also like to thank Dr. Laurie Grobman from Penn State Berks, who empowered me to apply for Schreyer and to pursue independent research projects. She, too, was the physical embodiment of patience and grace throughout my first two years.

Thank you to my partner for letting me ramble about the topic, for reading (and rereading) my drafts, and for supporting me as I watched every movie.

Finally, thank you to my parents for encouraging me to question everything, to seek out my history, and for everything they have done to get me through the last four years. I could not have done any of this without either of you. Your belief in me has been my driving force for my entire life.

There are infinitely more people to thank, but to generalize, I would like to thank everyone who I love and who loves me.

## Introduction

This particular scene of Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* opens upon Edwin Epps' plantation – a place characterized by abject cruelty and scorching Louisiana heat – on the day of the Sabbath. On this day, enslaved people are left to their own devices. For the first time since the audience's introduction to this plantation, it is relatively peaceful.

Master Epps stumbles out of his home in a drunken stupor, hell bent upon disrupting this peace. He is in desperate search for Patsey – an enslaved woman with whom he has an all-consuming romantic and sexual obsession. His wife, Mistress Epps, is similarly yet conversely obsessed with Patsey – she is obsessed with making Patsey suffer.

EPPS:

Patsey ... Patsey! Where is she? Where is Patsey?

No one answers.

EPPS (CONT'D):

Talk, Damn you!

PHEBE:

We know nothin' of her, Massa.

EPPS:

The hell you don't! You know where she is! She run off, ain't she? She's escaped, and you miserable Black dogs stand like the deaf and dumb. Speak! Speak!

He becomes forlorn as he contemplates the possibility of having lost her – after his fit of rage subsides, he sits atop his piazza with his head hung low. Suddenly, Patsey returns, and Epps greets her with anger rather than relief. In a jealous frenzy, he accuses her of sneaking off to have

sexual relations with the owner of a neighboring plantation – Master Shaw. She vehemently denies this allegation, and he grows angrier and angrier with each plea she makes for her innocence. Solomon Northup, the main character of the film, steps in to attempt to plead Patsey's case, and, infuriated by his speaking out of turn, Epps raises a hand to strike him.

PATSEY:

Do not strike him. I went to Massa Shaw's plantation!

EPPS:

Yah admit it.

PATSEY:

Freely. And you know why?

Patsey takes soap from the pocket of her dress.

PATSEY:

I got this from Mistress Shaw. Mistress Epps won't even grant me no soap to clean with. Stink so much I make myself gag. Five hundred pounds of cotton, day in, day out. More than any man here! And for that I will be clean; that all I ask. Dis here what I went to Shaw's 'fo.

Patsey reveals that Mistress Epps, out of spite, hatred, and jealousy, has withheld soap from her. She works extremely hard on the plantation, picking more cotton than any other person there. Epps knows this very well – it is one of the reasons why he regards her so highly. Despite the obvious truth to this rationale, Master Epps refuses to believe her, and, with the encouragement of Mistress Epps, decides that Patsey must be brutally punished. She is stripped, tied to a nearby post, and brutally beaten on screen until the flesh of her back is shredded and bloodied.

In my younger years, I loved movies – especially movies that centered white characters.

As a Black girl who had spent her entire youth in predominantly white spaces, I learned early on that things were not necessarily for *me*: “students” meant white students, “girls” meant white girls, “pretty” referenced a possession of Eurocentric features. At the time, the media reflected this Eurocentrism – my affinity for white centric film was a result of their overwhelming presence in the mainstream.

The movies that I watched, though they always centered white characters, felt like they were more for me than any of my white counterparts. I had internalized my all-white environment and the falsehoods that it perpetuated, becoming so used to not seeing myself represented in films that I had trained myself to overlook the presence of race within them.

I was, like many children, extremely imaginative, and was obsessed with the feeling of temporarily shifting realities. Looking back, there were a few distinctive things that drew me to white-centered films.

One – white-centered films removed race as a construct. The main characters were rarely forced to interrogate their positionality, to face microaggressions, or to grapple with the implications of their whiteness. In other words, they were not white characters; they were simply characters. These films were not confined to or governed by the everyday structures or systems within which I lived.

Two, white-centered films – specifically ones intended for young audiences – thrived on relative triviality. It was easy to empathize with the characters because many of their issues were surface level. I found a strange comfort in absorbing their emotions – in being fully overcome



with anxiety over the “trials” and “tribulations” of the main characters, in feeling the relief at the end after all was said and done.

Three, white-centered film was finite – a conflict arose and was resolved within two hours. The white-centered films that I loved had a clear beginning and end, and rarely had implications beyond their conclusions.

It wasn't until I had awoken from my self-abnegation that I grew more conscious of the reasons why I scarcely saw myself represented in film, and it was then that I began to seek out movies that centered on Black stories. Many of these stories, I soon learned, were far more harrowing and upsetting than any of my favorite films. They seemed rarely to include romance or joy unless those features were to soon be ripped away from Black characters. They were far less satisfying to watch because they were far too aligned with the realities of Blackness in America and abroad.

I approach this thesis after years of avoiding filmic representations of enslavement, which I found extremely traumatic in my youth and increasingly traumatic as I got older. There were a seemingly infinite number of filmic representations of enslavement to choose from as I approached this topic – *Harriet* (2019), *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Django Unchained* (2012), *Emancipation* (2022) – all of which display excessive and hyper realistic reenactments of Black death and violence. The three reenactments of enslavement that I will discuss in this essay – *Roots: The Miniseries* (1977), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *Antebellum* (2020) – were chosen not only because of their graphic depictions of enslavement, but because I believe that their receptions raise interesting questions about the nature of the genre. They are discussed sequentially, and I believe that they not only provide accurate snapshots of the times within which they were created and released, but also illustrate the dramatic shift in filmic

representations of enslavement over time. In viewing and evaluating these films, I attempt to interrogate the ethics of the creation and monetization of these types of films. The central question, '*Who Needs to Watch Black Violence?*' evaluates the extent to which these films accomplish the healing and honoring work that they are intended to, or whether they engage, inadvertently or deliberately, in the perpetuation of the psychic traumatization of Black audiences.

## Film v. Everything Else

What are the implications of fictionalizing, and thus speculatively creating or recreating, the brutality of enslavement? Or of reaching into the depths of one's imagination to imagine some horrific and otherworldly turmoil for an invented Black character to experience and be traumatized by? Though it can and has been done in ways that have educational and cultural merit – take Toni Morrison's *Beloved*<sup>1</sup> for example – creating a character whose narrative is fueled by their subjection to torment does, in many ways, craft a sort of spectacle around said torment. What is to be said, then, about the grounding of that imagined torment in historical truth? What purpose must a story like this serve in order to rationalize its use of real and experienced trauma for entertainment purposes?

It is important to note that, mostly, existing slave films have been created as counter-narratives to existing films that have framed enslavement as mutually beneficial. Before *Roots*, the most mainstream depictions of enslavement were *Gone with the Wind*<sup>2</sup> (1939), and *Mandingo*. The former, according to the National Museum of African American History and Culture's article *Slavery, Hollywood, and Public Discourse*, depicted the enslaved as “relatively happy, loyal servants,” and the latter both sexualized and fetishized enslaved men and women (NMAAHC). Both films were criticized, but mostly they were in accordance with the times in

---

<sup>1</sup> *Beloved* (1987) follows a newly freed Black woman named Sethe who, though she has acquired her freedom, is still shackled to the traumas of her enslavement. Sethe's family home is haunted by her deceased child, Beloved, whom Sethe killed out of fear of recapture and a deep desire to shelter her children from enslavement. According to Britannica, the novel is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who, similar to Sethe, escaped enslavement and killed her young daughter to keep her from enslavement. The novel underscores the horror, hopelessness, and cruelty of the system of enslavement.

<sup>2</sup> *Gone with the Wind* is a 1936 novel which was adapted to a film in 1939. It follows the life of Scarlett O'Hara, daughter of a Southern plantation owner, in the midst of the Civil War. The O'Hara's have multiple Black people enslaved upon their plantation, all of whom appear to be indifferent — even satisfied — with regards to their forced servitude.

which they were released. *Roots*, however, flipped the script, highlighting the truth of enslavement – that it was a horrific, brutal, and inhumane system in which generations of Black people were forced to labor from their births until the day that they died.

Fictionalized representations of enslavement are housed within various mediums, such as documentaries, novels, and, most popularly, films. The act of reading a novel is, I argue, a form of conscious engagement. In order to read a novel, one agrees to spend time with and engage with the author's artistic vision – to sift through and sit with the words on the page as an art form. As such, they agree to “bear witness” to the suffering of the novel’s characters. “Bearing witness” is in quotation marks here because of the main difference between on-screen and literary representations of enslavement – in a novel, though a story of enslavement may be depicted, it is not reenacted.

Within documentaries about enslavement, such as Ava Duvernay’s *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016) or PBS’ *Slavery and the Making of America* (2005), though brutality is showcased, it is not showcased for entertainment: putatively, documentaries have educational aims. Most reputable documentaries steer clear of dramatic reenactments of particularly horrific segments of history, opting instead to utilize first-hand accounts and images to document historical truths. It is important to note, though, that documentaries do frequently showcase graphic depictions of Black suffering through photographs – lynched corpses hanging from trees, horrifically scarred Black bodies, Black bodies beaten beyond recognition. Though they may visually showcase the graphic brutality of enslavement, documentaries do so by way of historical facts, and with the intent to educate. This intent to educate does go some way towards rationalizing their use of such imagery.

Filmic representations of enslavement exist at the intersections of the aforementioned mediums – they are simultaneously fictionalized and readily consumable. Novels are fictional, and they draw upon reality to fuel their characters’ suffering, but they do not force the reader to bear visual witness to the hyper realistic infliction of pain upon a Black body. Documentaries force audiences to bear visual witness but are rooted in reality and the intent to educate. Filmic representations of enslavement – both theatrical and narrative – force audiences to bear visual witness to dramatized and speculative representations of enslavement for entertainment purposes. The films and the mini-series that I address in this thesis present stories about the experiences of enslavement which are (1) fictional, (2) riddled with violence and brutality, and (3) written, produced, and reenacted for entertainment purposes. These intersections call a few things into question: What are the merits of these types of fictionalized movies – what do they accomplish that documentaries do not? Are these films understood to be legitimate forms of “bearing witness”? If so, what constitutes “bearing witness,” and what does it accomplish? What are the implications of creating fictional Black bodies in a narrative featuring abuse and torment?

There is something to be said about historical realism. There is something else to be said about imagining the interior lives of enslaved people – about utilizing their real and experienced trauma as modern day “horror.” And something else to be said about the voyeuristic implications of watching that horror. And something else to be said about creating Black characters to suffer and die to facilitate an audience’s ability to fathom the unfathomable horrors of enslavement – to mimic them in dress, in speech, in sobs, in cries of pain, in suffering.

## Addressing The Spectacle of the Black Body

It is widely held by social scientists<sup>3</sup> that the concept of race is, in itself, a social construction, and that differences in pigmentation and facial features in no way indicate fundamental biological differences. Brian Obach, in his article *Demonstrating the Social Construction of Race*, says that the racial categories that we have become accustomed to were developed in the midst of “particular historical circumstances” – including the concurrent rise of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and the transatlantic slave trade. Race was created and institutionalized as a means through which imposition by force was not only permissible but rewarded.

Even if it is a social construction, the concept of race has upheld white supremacist ideals and values in the United States since its formation. The characterization of Black Americans as “subhuman” has underpinned their subjection to the torment of chattel slavery, and thus the economic and institutional growth of the nation. The effects of this dehumanization have persisted long after slavery’s abolition, serving as the foundation for years and years of both interpersonal and legislative attempts to uphold race-based hierarchies. Socioeconomically, systems such as sharecropping<sup>4</sup>, police violence, and Jim Crow laws are part of a long list of codes meant to sustain a Black underclass deemed inferior. Interpersonally, the caricaturizing of Black bodies and features through propaganda and media representations have been the main

---

<sup>3</sup> This concept is reaffirmed within the works of various scholars, including W.E.B. DuBois (“The Conservation of Races”) Paula Braveman, (“Abandon ‘Race.’ Focus on Racism”) Harryette Mullen, (“Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness”) and Teresa J. Guess (“The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence”).

<sup>4</sup> The system of sharecropping was widely used in the South during Reconstruction. Newly freed Black people sought resources to support their families, and, as they did not own land, they typically wound-up making arrangements with white landowners. Sharecropping was a legal arrangement wherein Black people would tend a crop until its harvest and then be forced to give a large portion of it away to the white landowner. This meant that Black farmers would spend an entire season tending to a crop only to have very little money to show for it.

inhibitors of such dehumanization. These systems compounded and characterized Black people as not only subhuman, but as a threat to the sanctity of white life. This characterization excused excessive, and oftentimes deadly, violence and force to be utilized against them.

In all of these instances, Black people are stripped of their agency – they cease to be people and become things that are imposed upon. Since the beginnings of this country, Black bodies have been agents upon which legislative limitations are imposed without their input. Similarly, Blackness as a social construction was created and institutionalized by non-Black people to perpetuate ideas of Black inferiority. America’s historical dehumanization of Black people and degradation of Black bodies facilitates their framing as a “spectacle” in that they are reduced to a “thing” to be spectated. A byproduct of this reduction is their simultaneous reduction to the visual impact of either their mockery or, more recently, their brutalization.

Lynchings, or lawless public killings of individuals as punishment for an alleged crime without due process (NAACP), were one such compensatory social tool utilized to instill fear in Black Americans. Groups of white people infamously gathered to watch lynchings, bringing along children for the spectacle of white supremacy and punitive torture. Photographs of lynchings were also circulated on postcards as mementos for the occasion.

The framing of lynchings as “public occasions” merely continued the centuries-long American practice of utilizing Black pain, trauma, and suffering as an instructive spectacle. Lynched bodies were reduced to their visual impact – for white supremacists, lynched corpses were a tool through which they could instill fear into Black Americans. In an attempt to reclaim these images, Black activists similarly utilized such photographs for their visual impact, publicizing them to shine light on the truth of their experiences.

In *Lynching Photographs*, Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith contemplate white supremacists' use of lynched Black corpses to send a message of warning to other Black people, and, similarly, contemplate our present-day use and reuse of these images for shock value. They ask, "Why take photographs of atrocity and body horror? Who has the right to look at such photos?" In response to their work, Rasul Mowatt, in his work entitled *Black Lives as Snuff: The Silent Complicity in Viewing Black Death*, contemplates whether or not the "use and reuse of the images works as a revictimization of those who have been killed" (Mowatt 798).

I assert that these lines of thinking can and should be applied while viewing films about enslavement through critical lenses. While it is an undeniable truth that enslavement is a difficult topic, and that media depictions of it have historically helped to facilitate necessary discussions regarding it, I ask similar questions regarding the ethics of their creation and existence. Who needs to watch Black Trauma? Who wants to? Does bearing witness justify our recreation of imagery depicting horrors that we could not capture firsthand? Who has the right to recreate atrocity and body horror? Who has the right to witness such recreations? Who is most impacted by bearing witness to such recreations?



## **The Implications of Black Spectatorship: Vicarious, Intergenerational, and Cataclysmic Trauma**

Any audience member – white or Black – can be emotionally moved by a filmic reenactment of enslavement. Humanity and empathy exist and persist outside of racial divides and their implications. I believe, however, that Black viewers, due to their historical subjugation to slavery, experience such filmic reenactments differently than white viewers.

### ***Black Violence and Trauma***

One tangible and scientifically based difference in Black and white audiences' responses to witnessing this violence is the potential for negative health outcomes. Researchers assert that racism should be treated as a public health issue because of the way that it perpetuates racial health inequities. One such researcher, Devin A. Noel-Harrison, discusses the negative implications of racism in his work, entitled *Distress and Growth in the Black Community*. He says that racism has been shown to result in health disparities and outcomes amongst racial/ethnic minority groups, including:

- (1) higher incidence/prevalence of disease; (2) premature/excessive mortality from specific conditions; (3) greater global burden of disease; (4) poorer health behaviors and clinical outcomes; and (5) worse outcomes on self-report measures. (Noel-Harrison)

Race may be a social construction, but racism can be seen as a force of physical harm in that it can be detrimental to one's health.

Studies have also shown that witnessing racial discrimination and violence can be just as damaging as directly experiencing it. Studies show a link between viewing excessive race-based

violence and negative mental health outcomes. One such study is *Race-Related Traumatic Events Online and Mental Health Among Adolescents of Color* by Brandesha Tynes and affiliates. Their findings indicated a significant association between exposure to “T.E.O” (traumatic events online) and higher levels of PTSD and depressive symptoms in young men of color (Tynes et. al). In this study, T.E.O. included things like videos of the “detainment of undocumented immigrants in cages” and “police killings of unarmed citizens” (Tynes et. al). This adds a new element to the potential consequences of viewing race-based violence – it can result in not only harm regarding health, but also psychological harm. Thema Bryant-Davis reaffirmed this in her work, *The Trauma Lens of Police Violence against Racial and Ethnic Minorities*, within which she noted that “bearing witness to” racially motivated transgressions against members of one's own racial demographic – like video captures of police brutality – can lead to paranoia. In the case of these types of videos, this paranoia can ultimately result in things like hypervigilance, avoidance of police interactions, and excessive and intrusive thoughts regarding police brutality (Bryant-Davis et. al).

Filmic reenactments of traumatic events often aim for hyperrealism. If instances of police brutality were recreated hyper realistically, and if audiences were aware that they were rooted in reality, would they have different consequences for Black viewers? What are the consequences for Black viewers in viewing a graphic recreation of a whipping of an enslaved Black man? Or of a violent sexual assault of an enslaved Black woman?

#### *Vicarious Cataclysmic Events*

Vicarious trauma, otherwise known as “compassion fatigue,” was first identified as the “cost of caring” by world renowned traumatologist Charles Figley in the 1980s. In *Compassion Fatigue: Toward a New Understanding of the Costs of Caring*, Figley defines it as the “deep

physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that can result from working day to day in an intense caregiving environment” (Figley). It has evolved and expanded in recent years, most recently being defined by the American Counseling Association as “the emotional residue of exposure to traumatic stories and experiences of others through work” (ACA) in the context of professions that deal interpersonally with survivors of trauma. Vicarious trauma can present outside of the workplace, too, being defined as “witnessing fear, pain, and terror that others have experienced” (ACA). In its essence, vicarious trauma is a term used to describe a sort of secondary trauma and confirms that bearing witness to a traumatic event can inflict trauma upon its viewer.

Thomas and Blackmon, in their 2015 study, *The Influence of the Trayvon Martin Shooting on Racial Socialization Practices of African American Parents*, classify the act of bearing witness to racially motivated violence against a member of one’s own racial group as a “vicarious cataclysmic event” (Thomas & Blackmon). A vicarious cataclysmic event is an instance of race-based aggression wherein the effects of racism manifest into physical violence. With the rise of social media, access to firsthand footage of race-based violence is at our fingertips. The virality of these clips and images is what makes them cataclysmic – an adjective which by definition indicates “momentous” violence that brings about “great changes” (Merriam Webster). I assert that, in the same sense, a hyper-realistic reenactment of the incessant violence inflicted on Black bodies during chattel slavery in America depicts a racially cataclysmic event. Readily accessible depictions of “Black violence” in any context may be understood as vicarious cataclysmic events in that they force viewers – particularly Black viewers – to bear witness to racially-traumatic occurrences.

### *Cultural Trauma Theory*

Theories of both cultural and intergenerational trauma highlight how the viewing of reenactments of enslavement has unique implications for Black viewers. Though all demographic groups have the potential to be negatively impacted through overexposure to representations of race-based violence, Black viewers are more directly affected by the specter of anti-Black violence.

Cultural Trauma Theory is described by scholar Jeffrey Alexander in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* as something that occurs when:

members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander p. 1)

This theory is reliant upon a few things – (1) social groups’ willingness and ability to recognize the existence of trauma (a process he calls “trauma creation”), and (2) the theory of “lay trauma,” which theorizes that traumas are “naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor’s sense of well-being” (Alexander p. 2). In other words, trauma naturally and inevitably emerges after an event that interacts or interferes with innate human needs – things like “security, order, love, and connection” (Alexander p. 3). Therefore, trauma occurs when something happens that compromises or undermines these needs.

By characterizing trauma as a result of the violent destruction of things that are directly linked to one’s humanity – security, love, connection – lay trauma theory not only places the infliction of trauma on a continuum of violence, but also characterizes non-physical transgressions as forms of violence. Chattel slavery stripped Black people of their rights, culture,

hope, joy, and love – all things that are, as Alexander says, linked to one's humanity. The system of chattel slavery, in itself, was a violence against the African people. In Alexander's words, the horrors of enslavement left an "indelible mark upon their group consciousness," and has changed "their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander p. 1). The reenactment of such an event can be categorized as a reanimation of this trauma, and therefore the film itself acts as a conduit through which this trauma is transmitted to present day audiences.

### *Intergenerational Trauma*

Cultural Trauma Theory is also in many ways similar to the ideas of intergenerational trauma discussed by such scholars as Paul Connerton (1989) and Vikki Bell (2007). Connerton, in his study *How Societies Remember*, asserts that memory and remembering are shared and collective. He focuses particularly on what he calls "non-inscribed" memory, (p. 6) or memory that is transmitted through human and non-human actors rather than through physical documentation. He claims that these physical documentations do not have the capacity to encapsulate all aspects of memory, including things like habits, traditions, and rituals. Ultimately, Connerton believes that memories are sedimented in the body, and that people have the capacity to "remember in common" (Connerton p. 38). When applied to Black Americans, his theory of human beings as "carriers of memory" implies that every descendant of those who were enslaved carries the traumas of their enslaved ancestors within them.

Vikki Bell, in *The Challenge of Ethics, Politics, and Feminist Theory*, stresses the concept of lineage to highlight the ways that different forms of shame, trauma, and affect are passed down intergenerationally. She draws upon Connerton, focusing similarly on "felt dispositions," which she describes as "those relations that are neither of identification nor of

alterity, that is, those of genealogical connection” (Bell). She argues that these connections are transmitted by means apart from more embodied practices of remembering – things like photographs, films, and fiction. Similar to Connerton’s theory, Bell’s theory implies that trauma can be passed down genealogically.

These theories about intergenerational trauma shine a new light on the aforementioned data about the harms that come from proximity to racial-violence and exposure to traumatic race-based violence through media. Bell and Connerton’s theories – both of which theorize that experiential trauma can be passed through generations – can lead one to believe that being exposed to the hyper-realistic and horrific violence that one’s ancestor endured can be *retraumatizing*. These graphic depictions can be especially traumatic given the present-day implications of Blackness in America and the many ways in which slavery as an institution has lasting present day implications for people who American society deems Black. If viewing filmic reenactments of enslavement can inflict physical and psychological harm upon Black viewers, what might rationalize their recreation? Do viewers have the right to bear witness to a recreation of a real person’s experienced trauma? Do creators have the right to inflict them upon vulnerable audiences without acknowledging possible harm?

## ***Roots and the Act of Viewing***

What responsibility do we have as viewers of these recorded acts? Are we consciously or subconsciously enjoying the aesthetics of torture?

- Rasul A. Mowatt, “Black Lives as Snuff: The Silent Complicity in Viewing Black Death”

Claudia Rankine, in her book-length poem *Citizen: An American Lyric*, explores the way that race exists subversively now that explicit racism is legislatively prohibited. In this poem, she reproduces the following image of a public lynching, but edits out the Black body; what remains is a crowd of white watchers (fig. 1).



**Figure 1. Crowd of Onlookers at a Public Lynching in Marion, Indiana Est. 1930**

In an interview with PBS, Rankine discussed the decision to remove the bodies of the victims and thus “shift the perspective to the white participants,” claiming that “this erasure reverses the spectacle, highlighting the complicity of the spectators” (Rankine). In other words,

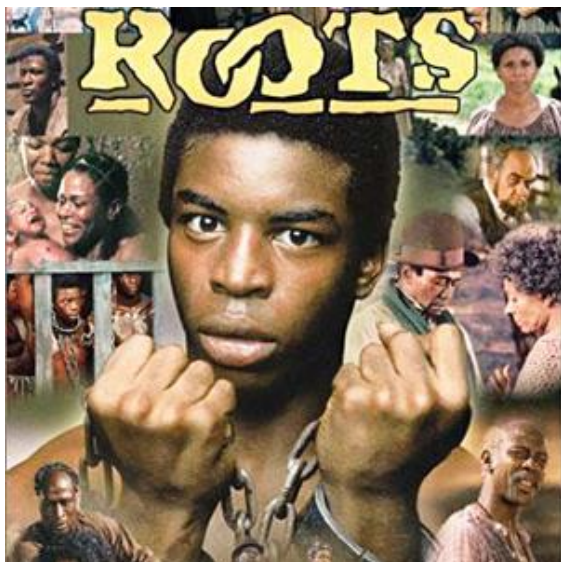
this choice inverts the spectacle of death that the white participants created, making them the thing to be gawked at.

She also discussed how this decision was influenced by Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which Sontag discusses the implications of viewership and spectating. More specifically, she discusses the ways that spectators inhabit a sort of inescapable complicity in that they are inactive. She mentions lynching pictures specifically, noting that:

The lynching pictures tell us about human wickedness. About inhumanity. They force us to think about the extent of the evil unleashed specifically by racism. Intrinsic to the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it. The pictures were taken as souvenirs and made, some of them, into postcards; more than a few show grinning spectators, good churchgoing citizens as most of them had to be, posing for a camera with the backdrop of a naked, charred, mutilated body hanging from a tree. The display of these pictures makes us spectators, too.

Here, Sontag claims that all people involved in the creation of an image – the photographers, the perpetrators, the watchers – are not only spectators of the violence of race-based hatred, but participants. What is to be said about mediums that recreate and reenact experienced violence?



*Roots (1977)*

**Figure 2. Roots' Original Promotional Poster, Roots (1977)**

Roots was an instant hit upon its release in January 1977. The miniseries, based on Alex Haley's 1976 novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, follows an enslaved Kunta Kinte, Haley's supposed distant relative, and his similarly enslaved descendants for seven generations. The novel spent 46 weeks on The New York Times Best Seller List, and 22 weeks in the top spot before it was acquired by ABC television network to be turned into a miniseries.

The miniseries first tells the story of Kunta Kinte (LeVar Burton) – a young Gambian man who is abducted and enslaved – and then, as in the novel, follows his enslaved descendants for generations. The audience watches as they are subjected to physical, sexual, mental, and emotional cruelty — they are assaulted, demeaned, degraded, and rendered hopeless. After generations-long suffering, the finale showcases them buying access to a new life, finally escaping to freedom.

When it was acquired by ABC, the responsibility of translating the novel's hard-hitting storyline to television was placed into the hands of a notably white dominated institution.

According to Lauren Tucker & Hemant Shah in “Race and the Transformation of Culture: The Making of the Television Miniseries *Roots*,” ABC’s programming prior to *Roots* featured almost exclusively white characters and was viewed by a predominantly white audience.

Unsurprisingly, the television version of *Roots* was produced, written, and directed by white people — excepting one episode directed by Gilbert Moses (Tucker & Shah).

Although *Roots* is a television mini-series rather than a feature film, I’ve decided to include it in this analysis for several reasons. For one, its impacts were both positive and negative. Prior to its airing, it was taboo to discuss enslavement – much less put it on the air. According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, *Roots* marked the first time that America witnessed slavery in detail (NMAAHC). Its success marked a turning point in on-screen representations of enslavement — one that made it acceptable for large and white-dominated institutions to fund reenactments of historically substantiated violence upon Black bodies, the shock value of which yielded enormous financial benefits for the network. In other words, I assert that *Roots* not only highlighted the need for conversations about enslavement, but also showed industry leaders a way for these conversations to be profitable. Its success opened the door to a wave of entertainment-driven programs that sensationalized enslavement for monetary gain.

In its introductory trailer, *Roots* is framed as a journey from “primitive Africa” to the “old South.” Enslavement is described as one of the “hardships of a vibrant country in its peak,” and pairs the notion of America’s “struggle to survive” with an image of the Klu Klux Klan. Dorothy Butler Gilliam, in her review “... The Series: Historically Unbalanced,” discusses this introduction and its implications, saying that:

From "primitive" Africa to the "Old South" is the voyage ABC promises the viewer. How "primitive" is a close-knit family, organized community structure reverence for human life, as opposed to the oppression of the "Old South?" ABC romanticized the American experience, but stereotyped the African.

As Gilliam points out, the framing of Africa as "primitive" in this trailer is immediately contradicted in the first episode, which is hardly that of a stereotypical Africa in need of "rescuing" through colonialism or imperialism. *Roots'* Gambia is structurally sound and is governed by strong and intelligent African characters. Members of the Kunta Kinte's tribe — the Mandinka Tribe — are known as great warriors and are portrayed as complex human beings who are prideful and powerful yet loving and peaceful. Viewers are introduced to Kunta Kinte at age 16 and witness various instances of his youthful impatience and astounding courage. We watch as he runs into a girl his age while still in Gambia – Fanta (played by Renn Woods) – and develops romantic feelings for her. We watch as he becomes a "man" in his tribe, and as he grapples with what manhood entails. We see his life begin, and then watch as it is brought to a screeching halt. He cannot have a true coming-of-age because he is torn from his home and forced to work against his will for the remainder of his life.

I assert that the inaccurate stereotyping of Africa as "primitive" in the introduction is meant to grab the attention of white audiences. This is the very first example of reality being compromised for palatability, but not the last -- historical inaccuracy is prevalent throughout the series for similar purposes.

Richard Schickel, in his review entitled "Middlebrow Mandingo," points out the series' reliance upon comfortable conventions in its storytelling, noting that in:

[t]he first four hours, which bring Kunta Kinte [...] from a happy childhood in an African village to a flogging in the slave quarters of a Virginia plantation, offer almost no new insights, factual or emotional, about the most terrible days of the Black experience.

Instead, there is a handy compendium of stale melodramatic conventions by which, since abolitionist days, popularizers have tried to comprehend a crime so monstrous that, like the Holocaust, it is beyond anyone's ability to re-create in intelligent dramatic terms.

(Schickel)

As *Roots* is framed as a historical drama, one might assume that fidelity to the historical event that it centers on would be a central priority. At the very least, one might assume that it would remain true to its original source material, Alex Haley's novel. Instead, as Schickel points out, it recycles common melodramatic plotlines. In other words, *Roots*' transition to television required its story's distortion into conventional television tropes to facilitate its reception by its predominantly white audience. I assert that these changes to the plot show the ways in which narrative storytelling conventions were chosen over historical accuracy to make *Roots*' harsh depiction of enslavement more palatable to white audiences.

### *Passivity*

In Episode 1, before his abduction, Kunta's village, which is in their longstanding tradition of manhood training, is aware of the threat of white abductors. During his own manhood training, Kunta witnesses a kidnapping of a fellow African by a group of white men. Startled and flustered, he runs back to his camp to warn the men of his village, particularly the Kintango (played by Moses Gunn), who is the spiritual leader of the Mandinka Village. Kintango

brushes him off, however, and tells him to look out for himself. Gilliam raised a host of questions about this tame response in her review, asking:

Why didn't they fight back? Why didn't they meet and plot resistance? What was the cultural difference that made them noble, but not very take charge or brave? (Gilliam)

In this scene, we see the first of many instances of relative passivity displayed by Black characters. Throughout Episode 2 of the series, after his capture and enslavement, Kunta plans a series of escapes — almost all of which he pursues independently, rather than as part of a collective resistance. Gilliam mentions this in her review, noting that:

Kunta was so alone in his fight that he appeared to be a rebel in isolation. Behind the blood and suffering, his thirst for freedom is so isolated that he seems, at times, little more than the proverbial "Crazy nigger."

The suggestion is that the enslaved people are somehow incapable of organized resistance. All of Kunta's attempts at escape fail, which consigns him to a life of enslavement. As Kunta grows into an adult (played by John Amos), he comes to embody ideal American values: he is strong, courageous, determined, and, above all else, peaceful. Even in the context of his attempts at escape, Kunta is nonviolent — he is framed as simply resistant to enslavement. He is not framed as a "runaway slave," but rather as a native African holding tight to his personhood and traditions. *Roots'* framing of Kunta as nonviolent not only justifies his incessant attempts at escape, but also solidifies him as a character who is worth rooting for, even by white audiences. He has a goal – to return to his home and his family – which justifies his disobedience. His strength and courage are presented in ways that are non-threatening. This framed rationale for insubordination helps audiences, particularly white audiences, see him as a hero.

I'd like to make clear that it is unquestionably important to showcase strong Black characters in the media – especially given that, historically, Black representation in the US has been almost exclusively negative. In creating Black characters who were undeniably just in character and action, *Roots* did something for Black Americans that hadn't been done on screen before — it framed them as morally upstanding. This being said, *Roots*' framing of these characters in this way simplified the issue of enslavement to a struggle between the “good guys” and “bad guys.” This fictionalized the issue on a national stage, implying that the only enslaved people who were worthy of freedom were those who were wholly good, while white participants were invariably bad.

The white and Black characters in *Roots* appear to exist on opposite sides of a moral and ethical dichotomy. William Greider, in his review “Shared Legacy: Why Whites Watched *Roots*,” points this trend out, noting that “for eight nights, white viewers watched coarse, wicked whites inflict cruelty, from rape to maiming, upon peaceable, vulnerable, sensitive Blacks” (Greider). Schickel also points out that, in the first one-third of the show, “...not one sympathetic white character appears. Not a single Black man of less than shining rectitude turns up either.” He calls this “dramatically vulgar and historically preposterous” (Schickel).

It is important to note that both Greider and Schickel's views, as white men, may point to their own outdated desire to see themselves positively reflected on screen. Still, these quotes do highlight the fact that the whites represented in *Roots* were almost entirely evil. I would argue that the reason behind this polarization is simple: white viewers at the time were more readily able to accept morally just Black protagonists as heroes, and, at the same time, found it easier to distance themselves from entirely reprehensible white antagonists.

The framing of white slaveholders as entirely evil is seen at various points throughout the series. While there are a few clearly and undeniably brutal white characters, including a host of expectedly cruel overseers, the real shock comes when even white characters who appear to be morally just are revealed to be just as deplorable as their more blatantly prejudiced counterparts. When Kunta is first kidnapped in Episode 1, a seemingly upstanding white man emerges, Captain Davies, who seems sympathetic to the enslaved. Later in the episode, after various scenes in which he holds steadfastly to his morals<sup>5</sup>, he winds up sexually assaulting an enslaved woman who is brought to his quarters.

In Episode 4, Missy Anne, the master's daughter, initially appears to be a sympathetic white character, teaching Kizzy to read and referring to her as her "best friend." Years later, she asks Kizzy (played by Leslie Uggams) to leave her parents Toby — formerly Kunta Kinte — and Bell (Madge Sinclair) to be her "personal slave" on the plantation she's marrying onto. When Kizzy refuses, wanting to stay with her parents, Missy Anne snitches on her for using her ability to read to aid in the attempted escape of another enslaved person, Noah (Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs).

---

<sup>5</sup> Captain Davies is shown writing home to his wife throughout the episode, informing her of the injustices being committed aboard the ship and of his inability to overlook the immorality of his task. This makes his later actions extremely shocking — his sexual assault of an enslaved woman not only undermines his morality, but also his marriage.



**Figure 3. Kizzy and Missy Anne, Roots (1977)**

Chattel slavery was a complex system that was so deeply entrenched in American society and daily life that it was nearly inextricable from it. According to Nikole Hannah-Jones’ “The 1619 Project,” ever since the first ship arrived carrying enslaved Africans, “no aspect of the country ... has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed” (Hannah-Jones). It was the foundation of the economy, and its existence paid for a large share of the burgeoning nation’s capital. Oversimplifying its complexities for the sake of plot progression is not only doing it an injustice, but also stifling the audiences’ ability to properly “reckon” with the past. This is especially interesting in that the facilitation of racial “reckoning” is oftentimes central to arguments in favor of slave films’ inclusion in the mainstream.

While this reliance upon “good” versus “bad” guys is a relatively inescapable element of film and television programming, I would argue that utilizing these mediums to tell stories about enslavement often fictionalizes and trivializes its historical magnitude. So if oversimplifying



conventions are inextricable from this type of entertainment programming, even as complexity is foundational to stories about enslavement, then how are such stories to be told?

To *Roots*' credit, it occasionally allows some room for nuance by inverting “good” characters and occasionally permitting the enslaved to be flawed. Regardless, it relies upon this sort of “stability of type” framing to not only make the story more readily digestible, but also, I assert, to permit white viewership to root for the Black characters and against their own kind.

### *Palatability*

Though this story was oversimplified, it did something that no other programming had done prior – it united American audiences against the evils of slavery. Greider recognized a similar trend, noting that:

... [*Roots*] managed to cast the Black story of slavery in totally familiar images — comfortable images that white people could recognize and identify with [...] In every chapter, those familiar American qualities reverberate so strongly in the story, that racial differences become less and less important and another message — more conventional and satisfying for everyone — becomes the powerful theme. This story of slaves struggling for freedom is the orthodox story of American values. (Greider)

Sander Vanocur's “Dramatic ‘Roots’ of America” similarly explains openness to palatability, saying that:

[Audiences] come to the television screen ... not as cultural anthropologists but as viewers. Most of us have not read the book, which already has sold more than 500,000 copies. We are not seeking historical exactitude, but what this television adaptation

provides: a dramatic sense of what the institution of slavery did to one family that endured and survived it. (Vanocur)

I acknowledge the undeniable good that *Roots* did. At the same time, though, I assert that the television mediums' need to dramatize and fictionalize is precisely what calls its ability to tell these types of stories into question. If entertainment media is reliant upon half-truths and dramatization, should it be utilized to tell stories about enslavement? Should imagery – especially imagery created to be educational or historically founded – be catered to specific audiences? Perhaps the most trenchant question is this: why is white wrongdoing deemed unpalatable, and Black torment and death not?

### *Violence*

At the time that the series was produced, *Roots* showcased extremely violent imagery for its time — violence that was “necessary” to not only convey the horrors of enslavement, but also perhaps to keep audiences – particularly white audiences – attentive. *Roots*' graphic depiction of violence was beyond anything that had been televised previously. In one memorably horrific scene, the audience is forced to witness Kunta Kinte's brutal whipping after he refuses to use his slave name, Toby.

In spite of its reception at the time, *Roots* is relatively tame by today's standards. Though it does present certain graphic instances of brutality, other instances are merely alluded to. For instance, in Episode 4, Kizzy is sexually assaulted by her new master, Master Tom Moore (played by Chuck Connors), to whom she is sold after Kizzy reveals her complicity in Noah's attempt to escape. Master Moore is a cruel drunkard who makes his sexual attraction to Kizzy

blatantly obvious. This assault is thus anticipated by his behavior, and the aftermath is shown through Kizzy's bruised body, but the assault itself does not take place on screen. Even still, the mere allusion to sexual assault was graphic to audiences of the day.

*Roots*' producer David Wolper openly admitted that whites were the target audience for *Roots*, saying that "the television audience is only 10 percent Black and 90 percent white," so if they created a "show for Blacks and [only] every Black in America watches, it is a disaster – a total disaster" (Wolper). He argued for the hiring of white "television names" to offset the overwhelming Blackness of *Roots*, saying that "if people perceived *Roots* to be a Black history show – nobody [was] going to watch it" (Wolper). This statement further illuminates the ways in which *Roots*' messaging was altered for the sake of white audiences – palatability was prioritized over historical accuracy. Though the representation of whites was toned down for white audiences' comfort, many viewers, including Journalist William Greider, still felt as though white people were depicted horribly. In his review of the miniseries, he interrogated the audiences' — particularly the white audiences' — continued interest in *Roots*.

So what kept so many white people at their sets? Why didn't they switch to something more satisfying on another channel? For one thing, "*Roots*" was exciting, with plenty of television's bread-and-butter — violence. (Greider)

Greider says that, to compete with *Roots*, other networks "were scheduling all sorts of blood-and-gore in competition, trying to break up [the] huge audience watching ABC" (Greider). *Roots*, he claimed, was different — it "promised the most exciting kind of violence — racial and sexual violence" (Greider). In his review, Greider highlights a trend that remains true in media even today — the over-use of taboo subjects, like race, sex, and violence, to grab the attention of viewers. Greider concludes his thoughts on this section with the following:

Half-naked women. Black seduction. White-on-Black rape. These racial-sexual motifs have always been powerful theater and, based on the success of “*Roots*,” you can be sure the TV networks will do more of them, until perhaps familiarity renders them as stale as other TV themes.

In other words, it appears as though the trade-off made by the network was to offset the representation of white abhorrence with the heightening of Black suffering. The potential discomfort of white audiences was thus addressed; why wasn't the discomfort of Black audiences considered?

Greider's conclusions have proven accurate – the success of *Roots* has in many ways created an avenue through which networks have reaped monetary benefits from graphically violent filmic reenactments of enslavement that cater to white audiences.

Though *Roots* offered the most graphic depiction of enslavement for its time, it is relatively tame by today's standards. I feel as though *Roots* is important in that it not only highlights the media's negotiations with palatability, but also marks a relative starting place for our society's desensitization to and simultaneous desire to view Black death and torture on-screen through slave-centric films. Though the use of Black suffering for entertainment purposes is far from new, *Roots* reframed a conversation regarding justifications for films about slavery. Its success set the stage for the films that followed – each gorier than the last.

More recent films, such as the two that I will discuss in later sections, are not only significantly more graphic than *Roots*, but are lauded for it. This shift in public perception of such violence raises the question: What factors have contributed to Americans' seeming desensitization to on-screen depictions of Black torment? I will argue that this shift in perception has resulted from Americans' constant inundation with images of Black torment. *12 Years a*

*Slave* is one such example of this shift in violent depictions – namely because, compared to its predecessor, it contains far more realistic and harrowing depictions of enslavement and its atrocities.

## **The Act of Watching: Bearing Witness as Allyship or Activism and *12 Years a Slave***

For many Americans, *Roots* was the first time they'd been visually confronted with the truth of chattel slavery from a Black perspective. The success of Alex Haley's novel signified that audiences were open to alternative narratives about enslavement. ABC's popularity, along with its access to a predominantly white audience, made it the perfect network to house this counter-narrative. Though *Roots*' account of history was not exceptionally accurate, at the very least it forced people to confront the institution of slavery through a contemporary lens.

By the time that *12 Years A Slave* was released in November of 2013, conversations about the implications of Blackness in America were already circulating. In February of that same year, the Black Lives Matter movement was founded in response to the acquittal of the man who killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy, in "self-defense."<sup>6</sup> This killing brought the long-standing ramifications of enslavement to the forefront of American life, drawing America's attention to historical inequities in legislation and in various other sectors.

*12 Years a Slave* was adapted from Solomon Northup's 1853 memoir of the same name. The film follows Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) who was a free Black violinist living in New York with his wife and children in 1841. Northup is kidnapped by two conmen under the guise of an employment opportunity and sold into slavery. The film follows his period of unjust enslavement — which lasts for 12 years — before he is helped to freedom by a Canadian laborer named Samuel Bass (played by Brad Pitt).

---

<sup>6</sup> Trayvon Martin was killed on February 26, 2012, by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator. Martin was visiting his aunt at the time and was returning to her home from a convenience store when Zimmerman became suspicious of his activity and began to follow him in his car. Zimmerman wound up exiting his vehicle to confront Martin (against police orders), which incited a violent confrontation. This confrontation somehow ended with Zimmerman shooting Martin at close range, killing him. The case was brought to trial, and Zimmerman was ultimately found not guilty — a verdict that would fuel a nationwide movement for Black lives.

Throughout the film, Solomon is both subjected to and made to bear witness to a host of injustices — injustices made even more unbearable when compared to his previous status as a free man. He is stripped of his identity and given the name “Platt” by the traders who captured him before he is made to cycle through a host of plantations — all of which are cruel and brutal in different ways. By the end, after witnessing and experiencing horrors beyond his own comprehension, he is freed. He leaves enslavement — and all his fellow enslaved — behind, celebrating the rectification of his unfair detainment.

During the film, violence is shown in graphic detail. Where *Roots* cuts away, *12 Years a Slave* zooms in. The director, Steve McQueen, told Sky News that even the brutal material in the film had been toned down:

There were things in the book that we couldn't really translate on to screen, because we couldn't do it in all conscience – you couldn't put people through some of those things... If we tried to do a literal interpretation of the book it would, in my opinion, be too much for an audience. But at the same time, to try and avoid the kind of violence that happened at that time would do an incredible disservice to Solomon Northup and the millions of people who went through this experience. (McQueen)

McQueen's claim implies that he methodically curated each violence that he depicts within the film. In his view, audiences needed to witness the horrors that Northup experienced to do him justice. Many critics felt as though its predecessors, including *Roots*, had glossed over violence, and watered down the truth of enslavement. They praised McQueen's graphic approach, regarding it a “necessary evil.”<sup>7</sup> One such reviewer, Kellie Carter Jackson, an associate professor

---

<sup>7</sup> By “necessary evil,” I am referencing the idea that a depiction of slavery must be gory because the system of enslavement was horrific.

in the College of Africana Studies at Wellesley College, called the film the “most authentic portrait of the African American experience and a fluent rendering of the violence, cruelty, and the hell of slavery in America’s past” (Jackson). Many viewers shared this same sentiment; the film went on to earn three Academy Awards and a 95% on Rotten Tomatoes.

This shift in brutality brings up interesting questions – to what extent is bearing witness a form of activism? How much violence is *too much* violence? What does it mean that images of Black death and suffering are being produced, shared, and monetized in the name of awareness? What are our actions once we “bear witness” to them? Do these actions counter White supremacy?

### ***Bearing Witness as Activism***

Rasul Mowatt contemplates similar questions in his work regarding images of Black people being brutalized by police officers. He concludes that “for potential victims, [these images] strike fear. For allies, they incite momentary anger. For others, they confirm that the machine functions, and that no new updates are needed” (Mowatt 784). The machine that Mowatt references here is a compounding system of White supremacy, which he argues utilizes images of Black pain and suffering to reaffirm existing power structures.

bell hooks references a similar White supremacist power structure in “Black Looks: Race and Representation.” After praising the use of mass-media produced images as a tool for teaching and counter-messaging, hooks notes that those same images can be used to “maintain oppression, exploitation, and [the] overall domination of Black people” (hooks 786). She goes on



to say that, since the time of slavery, White supremacists “have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (786).

Susan Sontag extensively contemplated the implications of imagery and our engagement with them. In another of her works, *Looking at War*, she discussed the photographing and widespread circulation of images of war – specifically ones that depict graphic death and destruction. She points out that “the suffering most often deemed worthy of representation is that which is understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human (p. 88)” and then points out a crucial fact about spectatorship: that “no moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: Can you look at this?” (Sontag). Here, I think that Sontag calls into question a very important element of “bearing witness”: that it requires nothing beyond looking. Each viewer processes images in their own way, of course – perhaps they are gratified by their participation in spectating, perhaps they feel called to action. But the image does not require a viewer to act upon these feelings – it merely requires them to look.

The images that Mowatt, hooks, and Sontag reference here are primarily photographs. Though photographs are still images, they hold immense power – they have been used to both build and topple systems of oppression, to spearhead and eliminate movements, and to inspire both action and inaction. What is to be said, then, about moving images? Regarding television, Sontag says that:

An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen. Images shown on television are, by definition, images of which, sooner or later, one tires. What looks like callousness has its origin in the instability of attention that television is organized around and to satiate, by its surfeit of images ... The whole point of television

is that one can switch channels, that it is normal to switch channels: to become restless, bored. Consumers droop. They need to be restimulated, jump started, again and again. Here, Sontag points out an integral element of television programming – it is intended to stimulate viewers. Viewers become desensitized to content that they see too often, meaning that, in order to drive engagement, directors must constantly ramp up their content to maintain their attentiveness. In the case of an action film, this may mean the inclusion of staggered chase scenes. In the case of a film about enslavement, it most often means the staggered brutalization of enslaved characters.

Sontag notes that “the destructiveness of war ... is not in itself an argument against waging war” (Sontag). In the same sense, displaying the brutality of enslavement is not an argument against the institution of slavery. Not on its own. The showcasing of Black torment has proven time and time again to be ineffective against its continuation.

### *12 Years a Slave (2013)*

*12 Years A Slave* opens with an enslaved Solomon silently going through the motions of life upon a plantation. He remains silent as he harvests sugar cane, or as he eats amongst his enslaved peers. As they are preparing to sleep upon the floor in a cramped cabin, a woman advances on Solomon sexually, but he remains silent. Lying alongside this woman reminds him of lying alongside his beloved wife. We see a flashback of the two of them looking at one another lovingly – a stark contrast to the film’s present day.

Though we see his face, the audience does not hear Solomon's voice until seven minutes into the film, when we are pulled fully into the flashback of a time that he was a happy, loved, free man. His first on-screen words are spoken to his children.

Thus, the film opens with emotional appeals. This is McQueen's way of highlighting the depravity of a system that strips a man of his life and liberty; it is also a way of emphasizing the stakes that will drive Solomon to survive his horrible circumstances. The enslavers are framed as villains: not only have they erased Solomon's rights, but they have taken him from his family. It accomplishes its task, setting up the audience for the horrors that are to come.

The idea of loving familial units— and the violent destruction of them — is a recurring plot device throughout the film. In another instance, at the same time that Solomon is being sold, a mother, Eliza (played by Adepéro Oduye), and her two children, Randall (Mister Mackey Jr.) and Emily (Storm Reid), are torn apart as they are sold to different masters. William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) attempts to buy the family in its entirety, but money-hungry slave-trader Theophilus Freeman (Paul Giamatti) disallows it. Freeman sells her son but refuses to sell her daughter – who is mixed race – saying that “there's heaps and piles of money to be made from her” because “she's a beauty” and “one of the regular bloods.” After Freeman refuses, Ford inquires again, more pressingly: “Her child, man. For God's Sake, are you not sentimental in the least?” In response, Freeman says that his “sentimentality extends the length of a coin.” They are torn apart as they sob and scream for one another. Eliza spends the rest of her life grief-stricken and is later sold to another plantation owner because her crying is “distracting” to William Ford's wife.

I assert that, like *Roots*, *12 Years a Slave* underscores cruelty for shock value. The difference between the two, though, is that *12 Years A Slave* is significantly more graphic in its

cruelty. Its heightened brutality, coupled with alterations for a more “palatable” story like those discussed earlier in *Roots*, raises the question of whether bearing witness is only effective if it is shocking or graphic.

### *Violence*

In her review of *12 Years a Slave*, Michelle Orange interrogates the film’s excessive violence. She discusses one particular scene in which, after getting into a verbal altercation with carpenter and overseer John M. Tibbeats (Paul Dano) on Ford’s plantation, Northup gets into a physical fight. Feeling slighted at the mere audacity of enslaved Solomon to strike him, Tibbeats attempts to murder him by hanging, but is stopped by Mr. Chapin (J.D. Evermore), another overseer on the plantation. Though he interrupts the lynching, Chapin leaves Solomon hanging with the noose around his neck for about 3 painstaking minutes. The audience watches as he gasps for air, struggles to remain perched up on his tiptoes to keep his airway clear, and as life continues unaffected around him. Orange contemplates the use of this scene, and says that she wondered whether:

... scene upon scene of dramatically inert but viscerally enervating, prolonged and ‘realistic’ suffering [was intended to] make fathomable what no 2013 viewer sipping soda in an air-conditioned theater could ever truly fathom. Because during the second or third minute of watching Ejirofor, strung by his neck from a tree, gurgle on tiptoe, letting enough air slip by his windpipe that he might not suffocate and die, it occurred to [her] that [making this fathomable] was exactly what McQueen was trying to do. (Orange)

In the same paragraph, Orange says that this portrayal was chosen so that the audience:

might know “how it had really been” and must heed the call to bear witness. As though there were no other way to communicate or represent his ordeal, or no audience sophisticated enough for any but a doggedly graphic rendition. (Blood)

In other words, Orange implies that the use of these overly graphic images is not only traumatizing, but also insulting. In her eyes, it implies that audiences could not imagine the horrors of enslavement, and that merely referencing them would have been ineffective.

This point is especially interesting when evaluating *Roots*' on-screen depictions of atrocities. It showed some instances, but merely alluded to others. Yet the off-screen violence deeply affected audiences. The implications of Kizzy's sexual assault, for instance, were shocking enough without an on-screen depiction. In *12 Years a Slave*, though, Patsey's (Lupita N'yong'o) brutal rape by Master Epps (Michael Fassbender) is shown in full and graphic detail. I assert that *Roots*' tame representation reflected the audiences' relative intolerance for such imagery at the time, and that, in the same way, today's graphic depictions reflect our own increased tolerance. In other words, *12 Years a Slave* opts for the graphic in response to audiences' increased tolerance for viewing it.

I agree with Orange that there are ways to convey the horrors of enslavement without recreating them in graphic detail – but maybe none that are as riveting to audiences. Most of *12 Years a Slave*'s runtime is taken up with relentless, harrowing suffering, and I would suggest that its depiction of suffering is a large part of the reason why it was so successful. As Greider predicted, *Roots* paved the way for the use of taboo Black violence for monetary gain. As shock value is a major selling point in cinema, the use of Black violence in this film is to entertain its audience.

This, of course, begs the question: What audience is this film catering to? I assert that *12 Years a Slave*'s target audience, just like *Roots*, is predominantly white, as evidenced by various edits for white palatability.



**Figure 4. Patsey after Weeks of Implied Torment, *12 Years a Slave* (2013)**

In the film, Patsey is framed as passive, obedient, and entirely non-combative, even in the face of extreme brutality and mistreatment. Enslaver Edwin Epps, on the other hand, is framed as wholly abhorrent. This is an example of the aforementioned reliance upon “good” and “bad” characters to drive the plot. Here, as in *Roots*, this typecasting compromises not only historical accuracy, but also textual accuracy for the sake of the original narrative’s adaptation to film. If accuracy must be compromised for filmic reenactments of enslavement, is this medium the best choice for stories that are rooted in historical truths? What are the implications of altering Northup’s true story for entertainment purposes? Is this alteration “doing him justice,” as McQueen claimed to be in his aforementioned interview?

Note that the film remains true to some elements of Northup's written account. Edwin Epps, Solomon's third and longest enslaver, was as abhorrent as he was in the film, if not more. For instance, Northup wrote of Epps' "dancing moods" — times when he would force the exhausted enslaved people to dance and whip them if they tried to stop — which are included in the film. In fact, one of the only alterations of facts regarding Master Epps is his reading of Luke 12:47: it was read by Peter Tanner, another enslaver who was omitted from the film. Despite this, it is safe to say that Epps' portrayal as wholly wicked was rooted in Solomon's firsthand account.

There were, however, drastic changes made to Patsey's character. She is at worst, fabricated, and, at best, exaggerated. Though Northup's memoir does reference Epps' "lewd intentions" towards Patsey, their relationship is not detailed nearly as extensively as it is in the film. A few details are both present and consistent — for instance, Mistress Epps *is* jealous of her husband's attraction to Patsey, and it is noted that she *does* consistently encourage Patsey's unjust punishment. Additionally, Patsey *is* recorded to have been whipped brutally by Edwin Epps. Solomon does *not*, however, detail anything about Patsey's personality, meaning that Patsey's defining characteristics, including her passivity and obedience, are speculative. Similarly, Solomon does *not* detail her graphic rape, meaning that it, too, is speculative. These speculative inclusions raise questions about what elements of this film, or film as a medium, warrant speculation — especially about historically founded events.

The film's representation of Patsey's passivity and peacefulness, especially in opposition to Master Epps' blatant sadism and self-centeredness, can be described as little more than caricature. Though Master Epps' filmic portrayal is predominantly faithful to Solomon's written account, it plays off Patsey's character, which is fabricated. This raises a similar question to the

one posed earlier regarding *Roots*: Why is Patsey shown as wholly noble, even stoic? I assert that this passivity is employed to emphasize her victimhood, and to further situate Master Epps as a villain. Situating Patsey's character as an innocent recipient of injustice and brutality seems to have been an attempt to make her story more appalling to a wider audience. I assert that this hyper-innocence was utilized to emphasize the abject horror of her situation, therefore making her character easier for audiences — particularly white audiences — to empathize with.

The inclusion of Patsey's graphic rape makes her powerlessness visual. It emphasizes the inescapability of enslavement. But did that powerlessness need a visual treatment after nearly two hours of its reaffirmation? By this point in the film, the audience has seen Eliza's family torn apart, Solomon's attempted lynching, and Master Epps' cruel and horrific "dancing moods." Is bearing witness the only way for audiences to fathom the "unfathomable" horror of rape or enslavement? Is the "unfathomable" horror of slavery truly unfathomable? Is this lack of fathomability justification for its graphic recreation?

Setting aside the abject horror of such a recreation, we might ask: should such a task be undertaken by an industry that produces and distributes entertainment? What are the implications of these alterations to the original text, especially when considering the motivations behind the alterations? I assert that these alterations in many ways reflect the central issue with filmic representations of enslavement: the medium grants creatives the liberty to speculate on existing events. Though film is an artform, and such speculation can facilitate the creation of this art, films tend to present themselves as historically accurate, which does a grave disservice to not only the very stories that they seem set upon telling, but to the people who truly experienced the horrors of enslavement. Patsey, for instance, was a real enslaved woman who was revived on screen to be brutalized. Her likeness was utilized as a means through which present-day viewers



could attempt to fathom the horrors of enslavement. In other words, she was treated as an object to be viewed and learned from – her Black body was treated like a spectacle. As such, I assert that films about enslavement monetize Black trauma and suffering, exploiting it, and continuing the age-old tradition of Black pain as a spectacle.

**Degradation, Dehumanization and Disembodiment: Attaching Abstract Meaning to Black Death and Torment in *Antebellum***

Do fugitive lives belong to everyone, as models and martyrs of democracy? Or are they victims of appropriation, their stories warped by repetitive reconciliation myths and kitsch entertainment? Can ‘embodying the past empower the living, or does it trivialize history and traumatize its inheritors?

Julian Lucas, “Can Slavery Reenactments Set Us Free?”

In her essay “Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” Elizabeth Alexander contemplates the ways in which witnessing the abuse or murder of Black bodies serves to disembody the Black people who suffer and/or die. She focuses on the video of the Rodney King Beating<sup>8</sup>, and on the ways in which the nation bearing witness to his brutalization perpetuated the aforementioned centuries-long use of Black bodies in pain for entertainment purposes. She, too, acknowledges that “Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries” (Alexander 78), and that “in each of these traumatic instances, Black bodies and their attendant dramas are publicly consumed by the larger populace” (79). Though she is speaking specifically about real-life instances of Black bodies in pain – such as lynchings and police killings – I assert that the same can be said about filmic reenactments. The suffering of the Black characters – however

---

<sup>8</sup> Rodney King was brutally beaten by four LAPD police officers after he refused to be pulled over, causing a police chase. He was tased, kicked, and beaten, and ultimately wound up with a fractured facial bone, skull fractures, a broken ankle, broken teeth, and multiple cuts and bruises. An onlooker recorded the beating from his apartment window, and it soon went viral, sparking nationwide calls for justice. All four officers went to trial — three were acquitted.

fabricated – is made a spectacle in that it is consumed by white audiences. She further asserts that:

White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles [she has] mentioned, but in one way or another, Black people have also been looking, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict” (79).

The idea of both white and Black “consumers” of this content is an objective fact – members of both demographics, as consumers of the mainstream, bear witness to such atrocities. In framing white men as the primary “stagers” of these atrocities, Alexander brings up an extremely crucial element of subjugation: power imbalances. America’s systems and structures were built by white men, and, in the present day, white men continue to benefit the most from these systems and structures. For instance, white men who lynched Black men had the power of the law behind them. I assert that, in the same way, the film industry, which was built by white people and for white people, continues to cater to white audiences – even in stories that centralize Blackness.

Though the writers and directors of these types of films may be Black, it is important to look at the racial makeup of the studios who both enable them to do so and profit from their successes. *Roots*, for instance, was written by Alex Haley, but produced by David Wolper Productions and Warner Bros. Television – two notoriously white institutions. *12 Years a Slave* was produced by Regency Enterprises, River Road Entertainment, Film4, and Plan B Entertainment – the latter of which is partially owned by Brad Pitt. Brad Pitt also happened to star in the movie as Bass, a white Canadian protagonist who helps Solomon to freedom<sup>9</sup> after he

---

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Bass mailed letters to Northup's friends on his behalf, who eventually secured his freedom.

lectures Master Epps about Black freedom struggles and the evils of the institution of slavery.

What are the implications of a white producer casting himself in a white savior<sup>10</sup> role? What are the implications of Brad Pitt, a white man, not only “staging” this reenactment through funding, but also positioning himself as a morally just representative of his race within this reenactment?

Alexander’s work also reiterates the ideas theorized in Jeffrey C. Alexander’s *Cultural Trauma Theory* and Paul Connerton’s theories of embodied memory. She questions the ways in which “bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective trauma, come to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship” (Alexander 80). In other words, she asserts that Black Americans know the trauma of their ancestors intimately, and that this trauma is reinvigorated through moments of collective spectatorship – such as filmic reenactments. She refers to this knowledge as a “practical memory,” and says that it “exists and crucially informs African Americans about the lived realities of how violence and its potential informs our understanding of our individual selves as a larger group” (79). She goes on to reiterate the claims of aforementioned scholars like Devin A. Noel-Harrison and Brandesha Tynes – that bearing witness to Black trauma and suffering can be extremely traumatic to a Black viewer.

What about the person being watched? As I’ve mentioned before, Black bodies in pain have been a spectacle in America since its inception, and that fact is exceptionally damaging because being “viewed” implies a certain level of voicelessness. A spectacle becomes an object that viewers can project onto, and that is denied subjectivity or thought. Sontag says that “in each instance [of spectatorship], the gruesome invites [the viewer] to be either spectators or cowards,

---

<sup>10</sup> The term “white savior” describes a white character who exists within a story to rescue people of color from their struggles. These stories are readily accepted into the mainstream due to their messaging, but oftentimes frame people of color as helpless.

unable to look” (Sontag). Here, in calling her subject “the gruesome,” Sontag inadvertently reduces the subject to what has happened to them. Mowatt claims that the people whose deaths are captured on camera and then publicized “become an ornament ... an object ... a tool, [and yet] are still the body of a dead mother, father, son, daughter” (Mowatt). They are dehumanized through their adoption as a martyr, as the face of the movement, and are reduced to what has happened to them instead of who they were to the people that they loved.

Can the same be said for enslaved people whose torment is reenacted for the general public of today? Do they become a “tool” in much the same way – a tool through which Americans are expected to understand the truth of the horrors of enslavement, a tool through which empathy is facilitated? What are the ethics of martyring a brutalized and broken Black body? Or of inventing a Black character to carry the burden of imagined torment?

### *Antebellum (2020)*

*Antebellum (2020)* is a Black horror film that was co-written and directed by Gerard Bush, an African American man, and Christopher Renz, a white man. Bush and Renz are a married filmmaker duo, and *Antebellum* was their first feature length work. In an interview with the LA Times, Bush said:

If you would have told me three or four years ago that I would be telling a story about slavery, I would have told you that you were smoking a new kind of rock. That’s just not something I would ever have imagined because those weren’t stories that I was comfortable with seeing. Seeing people that look like me, that quite frankly were me, in chains and bondage was not something that was very easy for me to sit through.

In the same interview, Bush said that he felt compelled to create the film after the idea for it came to him in a dream. He said that their collective “intention with the film [was for it] to serve as a prescription, a medicine, a catharsis” (LA Times).

The film follows Eden and Veronica Henley — both of whom are played by Janelle Monaé, and both of whom are interconnected on a level at first unbeknownst to the viewer. We are first abruptly dropped into a Louisiana plantation upon which Eden is enslaved at the height of chattel slavery. The audience is forced to watch nearly 40 minutes of Eden’s enslavement upon this plantation, within which she is regularly and randomly raped, beaten, and subjected to torture. Suddenly, after she is graphically raped by her overseer, the audience is introduced to Veronica Henley, Eden’s 21st century counterpart. She, by contrast, is a successful Black woman — she’s an activist, a best-selling author, and a TV personality. Their interconnectedness remains a mystery until about halfway through the film, when it is revealed that Veronica Henley has been kidnapped and enslaved by a group of present-day white supremacists — white supremacists who have stripped her of her identity and forced her to go by the name Eden.

As the movie proceeds, incessant brutality is utilized to show just how stark a contrast there is between their lifestyles. I have chosen to include this film because of its overutilization of Black violence. The enslaved people — women in particular — are subjected to extreme and random acts of brutality for a majority of the film at the hands of their enslavers. This film is framed as a sort of revenge fantasy, but it is much more comparable to torture porn.

*Violence and Dehumanization*

Antebellum features strong Black characters, but relentlessly punishes them for being so. The film opens on the outskirts of the aforementioned Louisiana plantation in the middle of a chase. An enslaved couple, Amara (played by Achok Majak) and Eli (played by Tongayi Chrisa) are attempting to escape but are being hunted down by what appears to be confederate soldiers. One of the leading soldiers, Jasper (played by Jack Huston), catches Amara by throwing a lasso around her neck, and then forces her to crawl on the ground like a dog for no other reason than to humiliate her. As she lays on the ground, writhing in pain and horror at having to return to enslavement, he shoots her in the back of the head as Eli watches. The audience bears witness as Eli screams out in mourning for his dead wife.

Though Amara's murder was clearly senseless and cruel, the confederate soldiers justify it by blaming her rebelliousness. Highlighting their participation in and rationalization of a wholly deplorable act frames them as villains, and frames Amara as a martyr whose death Eli will avenge. The issue with Amara's character is that she only exists in the film for three reasons: (1) to suffer, (2) to die, and (3) to motivate Eli to go on living and attempting escape. Her character is not developed beyond her murder. Amara is merely "an object ... a tool" (Mowatt) to motivate other characters to escape and to illustrate to the audience the stakes of their failure to do so. Her character illustrates the ways in which these films not only facilitate the dehumanization of Black people, but also make spectacles of their Black characters.

Amara is mentioned only one other time within the film – when, as punishment for calling his overseer a "cracker," Eli is sent to clean the outhouse where her corpse was burned. Amidst her ashes, Eli discovers her cross necklace, confirming that he is being made to clean up

her remains. He breaks down crying. Despite this tremendous loss, Eli continuously organizes attempts at escape alongside Eden, which reaffirms his strength and resilience in the face of opposition. This resilience, though, is punished – Eli, too, is murdered by a white overseer at the end of the film as he and Veronica make their final attempt at escape. Both Eli and Amara’s deaths serve as reminders of the absolute stakes of enslavement, and both characters were created to be murdered. *Antebellum*’s lack of historical grounding makes the implications of its use and brutalization of Black bodies all the more glaring.

Not even a full minute after Amara’s on-screen murder occurs, a white overseer only known as “The General” begins to violently beat Janelle Monae’s character, Veronica, with a belt after she refuses to claim her slave name. He puts his foot on her back like an animal, slaps her in her face, and then brands her with a hot iron as punishment. This torture exists for no other reason than to heighten the urgency of Veronica’s escape. In other words, Veronica’s character is made to suffer not to advance the plot, but for shock value. Here, Black pain and suffering is entertainment: Veronica’s torment serves as nothing more than a fabricated horror for audiences to view and be shocked by.

Later in the film, a pregnant enslaved woman, Julia (played by Kiersey Clemmons) is introduced. She is openly resistant to her enslavement and makes various attempts to convince Eden to assist her in escape. After Eden refuses, Julia attempts to manipulate a seemingly weak white Confederate soldier into granting her freedom. He seems to be giving in – allowing her to speak to him casually and somewhat disrespectfully – but he then suddenly turns on her. He attacks her, kicking her in her pregnant stomach, and ultimately causing her to miscarry. Later in the movie, unable to live with the loss of her unborn child, she hangs herself.



I find it necessary to restate that Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz are both men, and that the characters who receive the worst of the torment are all Black women. Julia's brutalization, like that of Veronica and Amara, exists in the film as a means through which audiences can fathom the senseless brutality that enslaved people had to experience. Similarly, Julia's unborn child only exists in the film to be killed, and therefore also serves as a means through which the urgent stakes of escape are established. Though horrors like the ones depicted in this film did undoubtedly occur during the period of slavery, the ones that are in this film are entirely fabricated and condensed into 100 minutes of continuous violent spectacle. Veronica, Amara, and Julia are fabricated characters who were created to enact the directors' decided horrors of enslavement.



**Figure 5. Veronica Henley's "Revenge." Antebellum (2020)**

After multiple on-screen rapes and beatings, it is revealed that these characters are not in the Antebellum South on the cusp of the Civil War; rather, they are in the 21st century on a Civil

War reenactment site owned by a racist senator. Veronica Henley has been kidnapped from a Black empowerment conference at which she was presenting a paper and was somehow brainwashed into complacency with her enslavement (which the film at no point explains). All the other characters, too, were free Black Americans who were kidnapped from their lives and forced to be enslaved. They have all somehow fully assimilated into enslavement with few questions asked.

In the final sequence, Veronica escapes, murdering the Confederate soldiers in ways that are sloppily symbolic – she wraps “The General” in a Confederate Flag and burns he and his brutal overseers alive in the same outhouse where Amaya was cremated. She kills the woman who orchestrated her kidnapping, Elizabeth (Jena Malone) by dragging her on horseback headfirst into a statue of Robert E. Lee. This seems like a revenge fantasy, but the “symbolic deaths” in no way compensate for the hours of horror that the Black characters – particularly the Black female characters – endure. *Antebellum*’s use of violence is excessive and in no way advances the plot. Sarah Tai-Black, in her review “Slavery-Era Horror Film *Antebellum* is a Smug and Dishonest Genre Exercise,” reiterates this, noting that:

For a film that spends much of its runtime portraying, without any narrative or generic upending, the violence that Black people, and specifically Black women, have lived through in North America, its twists and turns don’t make the emotional ramifications of watching these realities depicted so uncritically and, perhaps even pointlessly, on screen worth it. (Tai-Black)

Another reviewer, Travis Johnson, says that “the first 40 minutes or so of *Antebellum* is straight up torture-porn,” and notes that it “takes an almost fetishistic approach to depicting the degradation and violence visited upon the Black slaves by their white Confederate guards and

overseers” (Johnson). Yet another reviewer, Amon Warmann, describes the opening scene of the movie as “punishingly graphic” and “immediately exhausting for any viewer,” but notes that it “could be forgiven if there was a point to it, and if the filmmakers had something new and meaningful to say” (Warmann). He concludes his review by saying that, in the 21st century, “you better have a good reason for explicitly showcasing the brutalization of Black bodies” and that “*Antebellum* doesn’t have one” (Warmann).

As these reviews highlight, critics did not feel as though *Antebellum* needed or earned its brutality. I assert that writer and director duo Bush-Renz included such graphic depictions of the horrors of enslavement for shock value, and that it was painfully ineffective and exploitative. The film both disembodies and dehumanizes its Black characters, creating and then brutalizing them for the sake of abstract meaning and symbolism. As mentioned earlier, the brutality of enslavement is not an argument against slavery. Filmic representations’ reliance upon the “horror” of slavery not only oversimplifies but also fictionalizes the issue of enslavement.

## Conclusion

If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of Black people in this country, it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know. There have always been narratives to justify the barbaric practices of slavery and lynching. African Americans have always existed in a counter citizen relationship to the law; how else to contend with knowing oneself as a whole human being when the Constitution defined one as three-fifths?

– Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?”

In his 1845 work, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass recounts his firsthand experiences of enslavement. In the following passage, he recalls witnessing a brutal beating at the hands of his first master, Captain Anthony:

He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending of shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.

He also recounted the horror of bearing witness to such a thing, writing:

I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I shall never forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first in a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.

Here, Douglass describes the ways in which bearing witness to this horror was forever imprinted upon his mind. This echoes the existence of vicarious trauma – his witnessing another person’s trauma was traumatic for him. In another instance, Douglass described similar feelings while he hid inside a closet and witnessed another whipping, saying that he:

was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that [he] hid [himself] in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. [He] expected it would be [his] turn next. It was all new to [him]. [He] had never seen anything like it before” (Douglass).

Douglass was not only horrified at what he was witnessing, but at the prospect of the same happening to him. He frames slavery as a hell within which the enslaved were helpless and hopeless, wherein torment was commonplace, and trauma was to be anticipated. When he called himself “doomed to be a witness and a participant,” he alluded to his desperation to escape, and the seeming impossibility of doing so. Enslavement and torment are inextricably linked, and his introduction to the system came with the daunting realization that he would likely suffer the same fate as the people whose abuse he witnessed.

Similarly, In *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, Mary Prince recounts her experiences whilst she was enslaved, including her witnessing the brutal beating of a pregnant woman and her eventual stillbirth:

...poor Hetty...was delivered after severe labor of a dead child. She appeared to recover after her confinement, so far that she was repeatedly flogged by both master and mistress afterwards; but her former strength never returned to her. Ere long her body and limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her and she died. All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor Hetty, but I cried very much for her death. The manner of it filled me with horror. I could not bear to think about it; yet it was always present to my mind for many a day. (Prince 57)

Here, we see yet another account of the horror of bearing witness to enslavement. Prince talks about the ways in which being forced to watch Hetty die was traumatic, and how it could not be erased nor put into words – very similarly to Douglass’ account.

If these are the accounts of people who *experienced* enslavement – people who hoped to escape the horror of witnessing its brutality – would they want us to recreate it? In the times wherein Douglass and Prince publicized the extent of their brutality, white America was not yet fully aware of the implications of the horrific sin that they had contrived against enslaved Africans. When these accounts were released, the mere discussion of such graphic suffering was too much for many to bear. They released their accounts for a purpose – to sway white Americans towards abolitionism, to aid in the emancipation of their people. What is the purpose of today’s filmic reenactments of this pain and suffering? Is it education? If so, must it be embellished? If it is not education, is it entertainment? If so, is it perpetuating the centuries-long American tradition of framing of Black bodies as a spectacle? Are the reenacted rapes, beatings,

torture, and murders accomplishing healing and honoring work? If not, does the medium even have the capability to do so? If it could accomplish healing and honoring work, for whom would it do so? What does that say about us, as viewers?

I am by no means claiming that nobody has the right to tell stories of enslavement. I am also not claiming that these representations cannot be impactful, or transformative, or a way to open channels for dialogue. I am, however, asserting that the present-day conventions for filmic representations of enslavement contribute to the continual traumatization of Black Americans, the continual framing of Black Americans as a spectacle, and the disembodiment, dehumanization, and martyrization of Black bodies.

To move towards representations that are reparative, we must first interrogate our current conventions with an open mind. The belief that people must bear witness to race-based violence in order to critique or repudiate it is one that fuels the creation of filmic representations of enslavement, and one that has substantial consequences for Black audiences. I assert that filmic representations of enslavement prioritize white comfort over historical accuracy, and therefore trade off Black suffering for the profits gained from making stories palatable. Films are created to tell stories but are ultimately produced and publicized as a business. I am arguing that we must collectively interrogate the intentions and efficiency of using film as the medium through which these important stories are told.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Elizabeth. ““Can You Be Black and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video(s).” *Duke University Press*, Duke University Press, 1 Jan. 1994, [read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/7/1/77/32180/Can-you-be-Black-and-Look-at-This-Reading-the?redirectedFrom=PDF](http://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/7/1/77/32180/Can-you-be-Black-and-Look-at-This-Reading-the?redirectedFrom=PDF).
- Alexander, Jeffery C., et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2004. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9nb>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2023.
- Antebellum*. Directed by Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz, *BushRenz*, 2020.
- Apel, Dora, and Shawn Michelle Smith. *Lynching Photographs*. University of California Press, 2007.
- Bell, Vikki (2007) *Culture and performance: The challenge of ethics, politics, and feminist theory*, Oxford, UK, New York: Berg.
- Black, Sarah-Tai. “Review: Slavery-Era Horror Film *Antebellum* Is a Smug and Dishonest Genre Exercise.” *The Globe and Mail*, 17 Sept. 2020, [www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/reviews/article-slavery-era-horror-film-antebellum-is-a-smug-and-dishonest-genre/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/reviews/article-slavery-era-horror-film-antebellum-is-a-smug-and-dishonest-genre/).
- Braveman, Paula, and Tyan Parker Dominguez. “Abandon ‘Race.’ Focus on Racism.” *Frontiers in Public Health*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 7 Sept. 2021, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8452910/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8452910/).



Brendesha M. Tynes, Henry A. Willis, Ashley M. Stewart, Matthew W. Hamilton, "Race-Related Traumatic Events Online and Mental Health Among Adolescents of Color," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 65, Issue 3, 2019, Pages 371-377, ISSN 1054-139X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.03.006>.

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X19301648>)

Brown, Jeffrey, and Courtney Vinopal. "Author Claudia Rankine Answers Your Questions about 'Citizen.'" *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 July 2020, [www.pbs.org/newshour/show/author-claudia-rankine-answers-your-questions-about-citizen](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/author-claudia-rankine-answers-your-questions-about-citizen).

Bryant-Davis, T., Adams, T., Alejandre, A. and Gray, A.A. (2017), "The Trauma Lens of Police Violence against Racial and Ethnic Minorities." *Journal of Social Issues*, 73: 852-871. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12251>

Churchwell, Sarah. "12 Years a Slave: The Book behind the Film." *The Guardian*, 10 Jan. 2014, [amp.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/10/12-years-slave-uncle-toms-cabin](http://amp.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/10/12-years-slave-uncle-toms-cabin).

Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge [England]; Cambridge University Press, 1989. Print.

Deck, Alice. "The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself." *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 297. *ProQuest*, <https://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/history-mary-prince-west-indian-slave-related/docview/209793180/se-2>, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/3042372>.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Dover Publications, 1995.

Ebert, Roger. "12 Years a Slave Movie Review." 18 Oct. 2013, [www.rogerebert.com/reviews/12-years-a-slave-2013](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/12-years-a-slave-2013)

"Everyone Was Talking about 'Roots' in 1977 - Including Ronald Reagan." *The Washington Post*, 3 Dec. 2021, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/05/30/everyone-was-talking-about-roots-in-1977-including-ronald-reagan/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/05/30/everyone-was-talking-about-roots-in-1977-including-ronald-reagan/).

Figley, C. R. (1995). "Compassion fatigue: Toward a new understanding of the costs of caring." In B. H. Stamm (Ed.), *Secondary traumatic stress: Self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators* (pp. 3–28). The Sidran Press.

Gilliam, Dorothy. "...The Series: Historically Unbalanced." *The Washington Post*, 28 Jan. 1977, [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/01/28/the-series-historically-unbalanced/de14a240-4cef-4e5f-8768-c9bbadb45a65/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/01/28/the-series-historically-unbalanced/de14a240-4cef-4e5f-8768-c9bbadb45a65/).

Greider, William. "Shared Legacy: Why Whites Watched 'Roots.'" *The Washington Post*, 2 Feb. 1977, [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/02/03/shared-legacy-why-whites-watched-roots/7c793ec1-e429-43b4-b495-534e8c384666/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/02/03/shared-legacy-why-whites-watched-roots/7c793ec1-e429-43b4-b495-534e8c384666/).

Haley, Alex. *Roots*. Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1976

Hannah-Jones, Nicole et al. *The 1619 Project: New York Times Magazine* August 18, 2019. New York Times 2019.

Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 2015.

Jackson, Kellie Carter. "Writing History with Blood: Why '12 Years a Slave' Matters."

Cognoscenti, WBUR, 23 Oct. 2013, [www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2013/10/23/12-years-a-slave-kellie-carter-jackson](http://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2013/10/23/12-years-a-slave-kellie-carter-jackson).

Johnson, Travis. "Antebellum (2020)." Mr. Movie's Film Blog, 9 Nov. 2020,

[mrmoviefilmblog.com/2020/11/09/antebellum-2020/](http://mrmoviefilmblog.com/2020/11/09/antebellum-2020/).

Kelley, Sonaiya. "'Antebellum' Is Mostly Set on a Plantation. but the Directors Reject the Label

'Slavery Horror.'" *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 17 Sept. 2020,

[www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-09-17/antebellum-explained-directors-bush-renz](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-09-17/antebellum-explained-directors-bush-renz).

Lawrence Beitler, Photographic Postcard of the Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith.

General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Mowatt, Rasul A. "Black lives as snuff: The silent complicity in viewing Black death."

ResearchGate, 2018.

Mullen, Harryette. "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness." *Diacritics*, vol.

24, no. 2/3, 1994, pp. 71–89. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/465165>. Accessed 7 Nov. 2023.

Noel-Harrison, Devin A., "Distress and Growth in the Black Community" (2022). Research

Psychology Theses.

Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Enhanced edition / [The Woodlands, Texas], Eakin

Films and Publishing, 2013

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to*

*the 1990s*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 1994.

- Rothman, Lily. "Roots Review: What Critics Said about the 1977 Series." *Time*, 26 May 2016, [time.com/4338417/1977-roots-reviews/](https://time.com/4338417/1977-roots-reviews/).
- Sachs, Stephen, and Claudia Rankine. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2018.
- 12 Years a Slave*. Directed by Steve McQueen, Regency Enterprises, 2013.
- Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, John Erman, David Greene and Gilbert Moses, A & M, 1977.
- Schickel, Richard. "Middlebrow Mandingo." *Time*, 24 Jan. 1977, [content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,945724,00.html](https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,945724,00.html).
- "Slavery, Hollywood, and Public Discourse." National Museum of African American History and Culture, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/slavery-hollywood-and-public-discourse>. Accessed 29 November 2023
- Sontag, Susan. "Looking at War." *The New Yorker*, 2 Dec. 2002, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war).
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Penguin Books, 2019.
- Thomas, A. J., & Blackmon, S. M. (2015). "The Influence of the Trayvon Martin Shooting on Racial Socialization Practices of African American Parents." *Journal of Black Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798414563610>
- Tucker, Lauren & Shah, Hemant (1992) "Race and the transformation of culture: The making of the television miniseries *Roots*," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, DOI: 10.1080/15295039209366837

Tynes, B. M., Willis, H. A., Stewart, A. M., & Hamilton, M. W. (2019). "Race-Related Traumatic Events Online and Mental Health Among Adolescents of Color." *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Vanocur, Sander. "Dramatic 'Roots' of America." *The Washington Post*, 22 Jan. 1977, [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/01/23/dramatic-roots-of-america/ac7c5d88-2bde-49ee-8582-f44f055029e7/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/01/23/dramatic-roots-of-america/ac7c5d88-2bde-49ee-8582-f44f055029e7/).

"Vicarious Trauma." American Counseling Association, <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf>. Accessed 29 November 2023.

Warmann, Amon. "'Antebellum' Review: Leering Torture Porn That Serves No Useful Purpose." *NME*, 1 Apr. 2021, [www.nme.com/reviews/film-reviews/antebellum-review-janelle-monae-2912620](http://www.nme.com/reviews/film-reviews/antebellum-review-janelle-monae-2912620).

"'12 Years a Slave' Inspires 'True Conversations' About Slavery." *NPR*, NPR, 16 Jan. 2014, [www.npr.org/2014/01/16/262946971/12-years-a-slave-inspires-true-conversations-about-slavery](http://www.npr.org/2014/01/16/262946971/12-years-a-slave-inspires-true-conversations-about-slavery).