

**Stories of Endurance:
Remembering Enslaved Black Women in Hollywood Films**

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HL90L: Stories of Slavery and Freedom

Stories of slavery are incomplete without stories of resistance. To remember the oppression of enslaved people in the United States without also remembering their individual and collective struggles against their enslavement is to do them an injustice. Common conceptions of resistance have been and still are quite male-centered, largely excluding women. Thus, to talk about resistance without talking about *all* kinds of resistance, particularly gendered forms of resisting, is to do the female slaves in history an injustice. One iconic American story of freedom is that of Frederick Douglass; his is one of the most widely studied slave narratives today. His story has, in the minds of many Americans, become *the* story; it has come to shape the very definition of resistance. Douglass' equation of freedom and manhood, of resistance and "being a man," still prevails today and has found its way into contemporary renditions of slave narratives, particularly Nate Parker's 2016 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and Steve McQueen's 2013 film, *12 Years a Slave*. In these movies, which are the only Hollywood films today based on true, American slave narratives, black men are portrayed as the saviors of black women, and when they cannot protect those women, the focus is on their sense of emasculation and how the plights of women help fuel their own heroism. Further, both Parker and McQueen depict black women as passive victims and largely ignore their everyday acts of resistance. Ultimately, the two movies subscribe to and perpetuate the misconception that resistance was only the work of men and as a result, they unjustly obscure the roles of black women as agents and actors in the struggle for freedom.

By equating freedom and manhood, Douglass defines the nature of resistance to be masculine, involving certain traits, such as physical strength and courage, typically associated exclusively with men. Published in 1845, Douglass' narrative describes his journey from slavery to freedom and abolitionism. A pivotal moment in the narrative

occurs when he transitions from feeling disheartened about his oppression to deciding to struggle against it. He famously writes, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.”¹ Douglass directly positions the state of being a slave and that of being a man as opposites, implying that being a man is synonymous with being free. Some may argue that Douglass uses the word “man” in a universal sense here, with “man” meaning “human,” however, the behaviors Douglass goes on to associate with being “made a man” are typically perceived as overtly masculine ones. For example, after engaging in a physical fight with Mr. Covey, a white man to whom he was rented, Douglass reflects, “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”² The battle is a demonstration of Douglass’ physical prowess—usually an area in which men pride themselves on being superior to women—something he seems to believe is necessary in realizing his manhood.³ Douglass links power, self-confidence, determination, and agency with masculinity; his story of freedom is not a story of becoming human, it is primarily a story of becoming *a man*. As such, Douglass’ story of freedom is one in which the subject can only ever be male. This suggestion has troubling implications for how society has thought and continues to think about the role of female slaves in resistance and freedom struggles. Over 150 years after Douglass’s story was published, contemporary Hollywood representations of slave narratives still showcase male-centered

¹ Yuval Taylor, ed., “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*, by Frederick Douglass, vol. 1 (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 567.

² Taylor, ed. *I Was Born a Slave*, 570.

³ It is worth noting that in both Parker and McQueen’s films, just as in Douglass’ narrative, the male protagonist engages in physical violence against a white man at least once. Nat Turner and his army of black slaves slaughter a multitude of white men, and Solomon Northup beats up Tibbeats.

fights for freedom. Meanwhile, the women are left either silent or bemoaning in the shadows, non-actors waiting for men to act—for either white men to hurt them or black men to rescue them. Parker positions black men as black women’s only hope for protection, and both Parker and McQueen focus more on the emasculating effect of rape on black men than its impact on black women. Further, through Patsy, McQueen paints a one-dimensional portrait of the black female slave experience, as does Parker by placing black women in the background of Nat Turner’s rebellion.

Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* repeatedly illustrates the image of a male savior, emphasizing black male heroism and black female victimhood. *The Birth of a Nation* is based on the true story of the slave, Nat Turner, who was known for leading a notoriously violent slave insurrection in 1831 Virginia. Early in the movie, Nat accompanies his master, Samuel Turner, to a slave auction, where he watches in horror as the auctioneer shoves a young woman, Cherry, onto the stage and attempts to strip her of her clothing. The camera zooms in on one of the bidding white men’s bulging groin area, indicating his sexual arousal, and immediately after, focuses on Nat’s desperate face. Likely understanding that if Cherry was sold to one of the nasty bidders, she would be sexually assaulted, Nat convinces his “benevolent” master to buy her.⁴ After essentially saving Cherry, Nat marries her, devoting his life not only to loving but also to protecting her. Cherry appeared powerless and vulnerable when being sold, and if it were not for Nat, her body would be at the disposal of some cruel master’s hands. Such a narrative legitimizes the idea that only the black man can secure safety, dignity, and freedom for the black woman. Further, when Cherry is brutally abused and likely raped by a group of white men one day, her assault serves as one of the main catalysts for Nat’s eventual

⁴ *The Birth of a Nation*. dir. Nate Parker (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2016), 21:13-21:30.

decision to revolt. Part of “being a man” means being able to protect one’s wife. When his wife is violated, Nat’s manhood is threatened, and his revolting is, in a sense, an attempt to reclaim that manhood. In the scene where Nat consoles his bruised wife as she lays in bed, he asks her to tell him who hurt her, promising that he will “take care of it.”⁵ Although Cherry initially tells him to refrain from violence, she later says to him, while still weak and in bed, “If the Lord’s called you to fight, you fight. You fight for me... you fight for us all.”⁶ Immediately following this scene, Nat slaughters his master. His violence is his attempt to “take care of it” and fight for Cherry; through rebellion, he strives to disrupt the system that enables white men to hurt her. Even in his narrative, Douglass describes early on the brutal violence of white men against his Aunt Hester as “the first of a long series of... outrages” that eventually drive him to fight against slavery.⁷ Where there is a black male savior in a slave narrative, there is a black female slave in distress, whose existence is defined by her being the object of his actions instead of the subject of her own. Her very purpose is to be saved; she exists *for* the black man, exists to inspire him to act and, subsequently, prove his own manhood.

Further, in *The Birth of a Nation*, when black men are unable to save black women from sexual assault, the focus is on the emasculation of the men instead of the perspectives of the women. Being the guardian of women is central to masculinity, and thus, when unable to play the role of the male savior, a man is stripped of some of his manliness. In Parker’s movie, when Sam Turner’s butler calls the female slave, Esther, into the house to sexually entertain a white guest of Turner’s, her husband, Hark, says to the butler, “I ain’t doin’ it, alright?”⁸ as if he is the one that will suffer from his wife’s

⁵ *The Birth of a Nation*, 56:37.

⁶ *The Birth of a Nation*, 1:23:50.

⁷ Taylor, ed. *I Was Born a Slave*, 539.

⁸ *The Birth of a Nation*, 1:01:38.

rape. Like property, Esther is his to protect and also his to turn over; the “it” that Hark will not do is *give* his wife, and with her, *his* dignity, to another man. When the butler insists, Hark assaults him, as if he needs to physically reassert his manhood in the face of this threat to it.⁹ Sam Turner’s will ultimately prevails over Hark’s and when Esther is in Turner’s house, the camera remains outside with Hark, diminishing Esther’s plight by fixing primarily on the anguish in her husband’s eyes as he waits for her to emerge.¹⁰

Similarly, McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* also pays more attention to the impact that rape has on black men than the impact it has on black women. *12 Years a Slave* is a rendition of the narrative of Solomon Northup, a free black man in the North who was kidnapped in 1841 and sold into slavery for twelve years before returning to freedom. Near the beginning of the film, when Solomon is on a slave ship, one of the white sailors wakes a female slave, Eliza, at night, likely calling her to sleep with him. Once Eliza awakes, the camera only shows her facial reaction for four seconds, and from afar. After the audience witnesses her expression, which is, at most, one of slight trepidation and mild distress, the camera shifts to the intensely indignant face of a black man lying near her. Without resisting, Eliza quickly gets up to follow the white man, and as soon as she moves out of the frame, we see the black man stabbed after getting up to stop the white man. The music immediately becomes louder and more dramatic once the black man is stabbed, and for about seven seconds, the camera switches between the black man’s defeated face and the white man’s victorious one.¹¹ Eliza fades both literally and figuratively out of focus; the heightened music and disproportionately longer screen time awarded to the martyred black man centers the main drama of the scene as well the

⁹ *The Birth of a Nation*, 1:01:43.

¹⁰ *The Birth of a Nation*, 1:03:30.

¹¹ *12 Years a Slave*, dir. Steve McQueen (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013), 23:50-24:21.

audience's sympathy on him. The black woman is effectively forgotten as the other slaves awaken and flock to the dying black man on the floor and, in the following scene, theatrically throw his body into the sea and watch it float away.¹² Additionally, later in *12 Years a Slave*, when Solomon's cruelest master, Edwin Epps, enters the slaves' chambers to take the slave, Patsey, outside to sexually assault her, the audience does not even see Patsey's face as she leaves the room. The camera only reveals her feet blurrily shuffling past Solomon's face as he lays awake, focusing on *his* troubled and helpless expression.¹³ In their depictions of sexual assault, Parker and McQueen both direct the audience's attention towards the men's faces, their pain, and their trampled upon dignity and pride, instead of the faces, emotions, and viewpoints of the women. The two movies largely sway their audiences to pity the black man more than the black woman, as if she is powerless to begin with, whereas the man is the one who *could* act but is robbed of his power, thus more deserving of pity. In ignoring the complex perspectives and nuanced experiences of black women as survivors of sexual assault in their own right—not just victims to be saved—the directors overlook the very personhood of such women.

In *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen tells a single story of the female slave experience by depicting the character Patsey as a mere victim, with little agency or means of preserving her own dignity. In her famed TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie asserts, "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become."¹⁴ Moreover, in a conversation with television host Melissa Harris-Perry on *12 Years a Slave*, feminist bell

¹² *12 Years a Slave*, 24:23-25:00.

¹³ *12 Years a Slave*, 1:13:16-1:13:20.

¹⁴ *The Danger of a Single Story*, perf. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, TED, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story, 9:26.

hooks said, “I’m tired of the naked, raped, beaten black woman body.”¹⁵ She is likely tired of this image because it is shown “over and over again,” especially in McQueen’s movie, to the point where all that the enslaved black woman *becomes* is defenseless and broken. In the film, Patsey seems to groan or cry in pain more than she speaks; we constantly witness her being beaten, attacked, raped, and whipped. Her facial expressions are typically of either resignation or sorrow, rarely of resolve or courage. When Epps rapes her, Patsey looks down submissively and lays limp beneath him.¹⁶ At one point in the movie, Patsey begs Solomon to kill her, miserably declaring, “I ain’t got no comfort in this life.”¹⁷ She implores him, “Do what I ain’t got the strength to do myself.”¹⁸ The filmmaker added this scene, as Patsey does not ask Solomon to end her life in the written narrative. The scene only makes Patsey appear weaker and more incapable of resistance; if she desires death it is because she can find no other way to cope with the violence and terror that afflicts her every day. Even if death is her only respite, she is unable to administer it herself—she still needs a man’s help to give her relief, to help her reach some sort of freedom. At the end of the movie, when Solomon is rescued, Patsey pitifully grabs at him and whimpers a soft, “No,” after their embrace, as if she still needs him—as if he is still her only hope for freedom.¹⁹ Left behind, Patsey disappears in the distance, collapsing into the background, as she watches Solomon ride off into freedom.²⁰ As far as the audience can surmise, she is left in perpetual slavery, unable to ever free herself. For many audience members, *12 Years a Slave* is one of their only sources of education on

¹⁵ *Black Female Voices: Who Is Listening - A Public Dialogue Between bell hooks and Melissa Harris-Perry*, YouTube, November 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OmgqXaoIng>, 24:10.

¹⁶ *12 Years a Slave*, 1:13:27-1:14:15.

¹⁷ *12 Years a Slave*, 1:19:54.

¹⁸ *12 Years a Slave*, 1:20:37.

¹⁹ *12 Years a Slave*, 2:03:28-2:03:32.

²⁰ *12 Years a Slave*, 2:03:45.

the true conditions of slavery in America. As such, despite the fact that the Solomon Northup's written narrative was from a man's eyes and did not afford female slaves much of a voice, McQueen had the power and in turn, the responsibility to create as representative and truthful an illustration of American slavery as possible, which would entail portraying multidimensional experiences of female slaves. Patsey, however, is, in many ways, one-dimensional. There is no scene showcasing Patsey's strength or empowerment that can compare to the emotional magnitude, cinematic prowess, or dramatic value of the scenes in which Epps rapes and whips her. Thus, when audience members leave the theater, what many remember most about the movie and its portrayal of the female slave is "the naked, raped, beaten black woman body" and little else.

The Birth of a Nation also portrays a single story of female slaves by failing to acknowledge the ways in which they were actively involved in Nat Turner's rebellion. Parker positions black women on the sidelines of the entire revolt, either sleeping or hiding while black men fight. The main female characters in Nat's life, his wife and mother, lay indoors, in bed, while he and the rest of the male slaves are outside fighting for freedom.²¹ In an article critiquing Parker's movie, historian Dr. Vanessa Holden explains that women were, in actuality, "active participants in and witnesses to an event that proved catastrophic for their community just as they participated in the everyday resistance of their communities. If they were not the infantry and cavalry of the rebellion, women were certainly active in its supply line and intelligence network."²² Just because women may not have been as heavily involved in the violence of the insurrection, that does not mean they were not involved at all. *The Birth of a Nation* depicts the struggle for

²¹ *The Birth of a Nation*, 1:24:00 and 1:28:00.

²² Vanessa Holden, "The Trouble in Nate Parker's Southampton: The Birth of a Nation, A Review," Process: A Blog for American History, October 6, 2016, <http://www.processhistory.org/holden-birth-of-a-nation>.

freedom as requiring the stereotypically male traits of physical strength and violence. Resistance becomes intertwined with the overt demonstration and declaration of manhood, as it did in Douglass' narrative following his battle with Mr. Covey. Consequently, the women in the story come across as silent and docile, and the far more dramatic scenes of men slaughtering other men eclipse any contributions women may have had to the affair. In a *Time* magazine article, Holden was quoted to have said, "There are gaps and silences that as a historian I can't write about definitively. I can suggest that something might have happened, or it's hard to imagine that something didn't happen. But filmmakers and artists can actually imagine it."²³ Filmmakers have the ability to envision and convey the stories that have not been told or have not been heard; they need not perpetuate the silence and oppression of a group of people by sticking to a narrative they may be trying to recreate. It is important to note that Nate Parker has a history with sexual assault, having been accused of rape. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise, then, that he depicts women as passive and uninvolved in resistance. The lack of surprise aside, however, we can and should hold him, as well as all filmmakers, to higher standards. We should expect filmmakers who deal with history to take advantage of their distinct, creative platform by filling in the gaps that Dr. Holden mentioned, and recreating the past through a new, more informed, and more just lens.

There are countless ways in which black female slaves resisted total domination of their bodies and spirits that Parker and McQueen could have engaged with in their movies. In her conversation with Harris-Perry, hooks argues that "film does not exist for the purpose of giving us reality" and in movies, there should be a "pushing of the

²³ Lily Rothman, "Nat Turner and the Forgotten Women Who Resisted Slavery," *Time*, October 7, 2016, <http://time.com/4521379/nat-turner-birth-of-nation-women>.

imagination, a broadening of how we think about things.”²⁴ The question then arises, is it disempowering to show the naked, raped, beaten black woman body over and over again or is it necessary, in order to depict a historical reality? This does not have to be an either-or dilemma. While we may need to witness the ways in which enslaved black women were systematically and relentlessly disempowered in order to reckon with that reality, we *also* need to see ways in which they empowered themselves, reclaimed their dignity, and resisted complete submission to their masters.²⁵ There exists a wellspring of historical examples that Parker and McQueen could have drawn from to tell stories of black female resistance, in order to “push our imagination” and “broaden how we think about things.” In her 2015 Keynote Address on Women and Slavery at the UN General Assembly, historian Sylviane Diouf highlighted the unfathomable hardships that women were forced to endure in slavery. However, she pointed out, “In the midst of it all, women fought back in a multitude of ways.”²⁶ Just as enslaved women faced different trials than enslaved men, they also resisted and exercised power in different ways. Diouf mentioned female slaves’ acts of hostility and insolence towards their masters through looks, faces, gestures, attitudes, and even confrontations. Some slave women constantly challenged the authority of and refused to respect white men. Diouf also stressed that female slaves used poison on both animals and people to terrorize slaveholders. Mothers and midwives conducted abortions or even killed children to keep them from life in slavery, but also to decrease the holdings and fortunes of slaveholders. In insurrections, Diouf underlines that

²⁴ *Black Female Voices: Who Is Listening - A Public Dialogue Between bell hooks and Melissa Harris-Perry*, 23:37-24:00.

²⁵ Note that the “we” here is complicated. White and other non-black audience members may need to reckon with the brutality of slavery more than some black Americans who already know of it all too well.

²⁶ UN Web TV, March 25, 2015, <http://webtv.un.org/watch/international-day-of-remembrance-of-the-victims-of-slavery-and-the-transatlantic-slave-trade-general-assembly-83rd-plenary-meeting/4136261496001>, 20:49.

black women acted as spies, transported ammunition, provided food for fighters, cared for the wounded, and sometimes even disguised themselves as men and fought alongside them. Some women even used their gender to their advantage.²⁷ For example, the runaway slave, Harriet Jacobs, used her body to engage in a consensual affair with a white neighbor in order to avoid the unwanted sexual abuse of her own master. Like Jacobs, women did sometimes runaway and successfully escape, albeit not as often as men. Parker and McQueen could have easily found ways to incorporate these everyday acts of black female resistance into their films, just as they made other additions that strayed from the plots of original slave narratives. But instead, both films seemed to espouse a definition of freedom that revolved around manhood and disregard the ways in which enslaved black women retained power and dignity in the face of adversity.

The idea that resistance and freedom are exclusively masculine projects, as established in Douglass' narrative and perpetuated by *The Birth of a Nation* and *12 Years a Slave*, has had a grave impact on how we remember black women in the history of American slavery, and how we see them today. While there is certainly some value in watching the two movies, as they are commendable in their commentary on racism, for example, it is also important to recognize that they are lacking and misleading in other respects. They unfairly represent enslaved black women as incapable of fighting against the system that oppressed them. Accepting Douglass' association of freedom and manhood obscures the roles of female slaves in stories of freedom, simply by virtue of their womanhood. As Adichie declared in her TED Talk, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also

²⁷ UN Web TV, 20:55-23:20.

repair that broken dignity.”²⁸ Filmmakers, historians, teachers, and anyone else in the business of telling stories about the past, must seek to transcend the narrow definition of resistance that reduces female slaves to sheer spectators of male slaves’ actions. To include black women in our conception of enslaved peoples’ struggles for freedom in the United States is not only to be truer to history, but also to repair the long-broken dignity of black female slaves—to empower and to humanize them, as Adichie insists. Women like Cherry and Patsey never got to tell their own stories. They have only been seen filtered through the lenses of men; first through the past narratives of male slaves, and then through the modern eyes of male filmmakers. Other female slaves, like Harriet Jacobs, *have* told their stories, yet theirs have yet to make it to the big screen and have yet to be anchored in our national consciousness. When thinking of classic narratives of slavery and freedom, many will think of Frederick Douglass before thinking of someone like Jacobs. Although, as Jacobs herself stated, “slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women,”²⁹ this was not to say that women were nothing more than victims to be pitied, or that they were too broken and too brutalized to fight in whatever ways they could. If slavery was “far more terrible” for women, it did not make them weaker. If anything, it would have made many of them stronger and more resilient because they did not just *suffer* rape and other forms of terror. They *endured* it all. Yet many stories of black female perseverance are unknown to much of the American public. Even today, black women’s voices seem to carry less weight and their stories are not heard nearly enough, when they speak up about sexual assault for instance. Just as they are not treated as equal characters in films, black women are often not treated as equal

²⁸ *The Danger of a Single Story*, perf. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, TED, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story, 17:36.

²⁹ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), 100.

citizens in modern American society. When it comes to art and American history, perhaps not instead of but rather, in addition to, stories of black female suffering, it is time for stories of black women's endurance to be told and to be heard, for they, too, are central to stories of slavery and freedom.

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