

Slavery's Harrowing Reality By Xiaomara Santamarina

MANY HAVE DESCRIBED the visceral experience of viewing “12 Years as a Slave,” Steve McQueen’s film, as harrowing. But as a longtime teacher of 19th century U.S. slave narratives, I think the best term that describes the film is “uncanny.”

Resisting an impulse to leave the theater during the scene of Solomon Northrup’s violent initiation into slavery, I was taken aback by its on-the-nail dramatization of tropes that 19th century abolitionists — white and Black alike — employed in their anti-slavery pitches to national, racist audiences.

Even as critics of the film — many in the Black media — chastise McQueen for aestheticizing Black suffering with its graphic violence, it’s worth recognizing that this sophisticated 21st century film owes much of its raw power to the language and images of one of the most popular literary genres of the 19th century, the slave narrative.

The source of the film’s realism is something of a paradox, emerging from an uncanny recreation of the sentimental tropes in 19th century American slave narratives rather than from any modern, sophisticated discourse of trauma. In this respect, McQueen could be described as Northrup’s 21st century amanuensis and/or dramatizer, a present-day contributor to the long tradition of slave narratives.

Historians describe McQueen’s adaptation as closely following the original narrative, the meticulous details of which — including names of persons, places, local flora and fauna — suggest that Northrup, who retold his experience to an amanuensis, had something of a photographic memory.

As such, Northrup’s descriptions were most likely the main inspiration for the 1853

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Northrup (center) faces slavery in the cane fields.

narrative’s visual lexicon and original seven illustrations. This makes McQueen’s film adaptation all the more interesting; the filmmaker clearly borrowed, and in some cases reenacted, the original illustrations in all their glorious sentimental iconicity.

Northrup’s bestselling narrative probably owed much of its popularity to these illustrations for the same reasons we are hypnotized by some of the film’s central images: for example, the slaves standing, arrested, in the cane field during the film’s opening scene; the slave mother Eliza on her knees, imploring a prospective buyer to let her daughter remain with her; the moment Solomon recognizes his rescue is at hand.

Explosive Emotional Intensity

The film’s novelty derives, not from a 21st century screen imaginary that innovates ways of seeing slavery, but in the explosive emotional potential it recovers from the 1853 illustrations — illustrations that today appear to us as highly stylized, conventional and sentimentally iconic. McQueen’s staging of these tableaux infuses life and blood into the narrative’s sentimental frame, overwhelming unsuspecting film viewers with the surprising, graphic, and nauseating power of 19th century sentimentality.

Some scenes from the film reproduce the narrative’s image bank almost to the last detail, for example, the narrative’s

frontispiece, captioned “Solomon in his plantation suit,” is evoked in the film’s opening scene when newly arrived slaves are standing in rows in a cane field, silent and tense as they are initiated into the brutal work of cutting cane.

One of the film’s most gruesome scenes — the vicious paddling and symbolic rape that takes place after Northrup is kidnapped — is meticulously restaged inside the stone walls of a slave pen cell, depicting the almost naked Northrup

cowering on the ground, a broken paddle lying beside him and the slaver’s whip in mid-air. Solomon’s rescue by a northern friend was filmed on a set — the planting field outside the house and featuring the friend, Mr. Barker, and Epps, Solomon’s depraved owner — that restages the narrative’s illustration in every detail.

Remarkably, McQueen’s (and Chiwetel Ejiofor’s) enactment of the poses and props from this particular illustration reveals how the seemingly paternalistic image of a slave’s deference to his white ruler evokes something much more powerful — Solomon’s surreal, dream-like disbelief at being redeemed from a nightmare.

McQueen’s indebtedness to the narrative’s sentimental aesthetic is clear, even in one scene that appears to diverge from its matching illustration, Patsy’s brutal whipping. This is the slave woman many viewers have identified as the film’s central character.

While in both narrative and film the slave woman appears naked, bloodied and tethered to stakes, the film compels us to witness the intensity of the slave woman’s pain in closeup face shots that are truly overwhelming. With this artistic choice, McQueen may appear to violate the narrative’s adherence to sentimental representation, but the fact is he is being

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and Horace Sheffield of the NAACP's Youth Council, appealed to them to leave the plant — and after the UAW assured their safety, over 1,000 Black workers left.

For the author, the organizing of Ford foundry workers, plus the April 4th walkout, signaled that Black autoworkers were willing to give the UAW a chance to represent them. They could commit to doing that because the backbreaking and repressive policies at Ford propelled them to consider the option of uniting with white workers.

Bates sees the role of Black organizers as the linchpin in this process. And the May 1941 the Ford-UAW contract contained an important anti-discrimination clause, the handiwork of Shelton Tappes. It was approved.

Revisiting the Strike

While I found *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* a compelling story, it did cause me to go back and reread *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* by August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. Bates cites *Black Detroit* throughout her story, and challenges its more pessimistic account of the alliance forged between Black and white workers.

Meier and Rudwick offer a more detailed account of the strike. While workers walked out on April 1st, they point out that the following day about 300 whites — mostly working in Ford's Service Department — and 1,500-2,500 Black workers crossed the picket lines. Armed with steel bars and knives, they were sent out to launch attacks against strikers. Meier and Rudwick note, quoting the *News*:

“Both times the attackers, mainly black, were repulsed by the pickets.” Organizer John Conyers was among the unionists seriously injured in the violence, yet the fact that at this stage only small numbers of blacks

were among the thousands on the picket line reinforced the tendency to perceive these clashes as racial conflicts which might erupt into a race riot. (89)

Seeing Ford's tactics as an attempt “to encourage a back-to-work movement,” similar to what Chrysler management had in mind when they attempted to use Black workers as scabs, UAW officials sought and received statements of support from Black leaders.

That Sunday the NAACP Youth Council and adult branch distributed 10,000 “Don't be a strikebreaker” leaflets at churches. The UAW also prepared special radio broadcasts and issues of their newspaper, *Ford Facts*, aimed at Black Ford workers and their families; they were careful to blame the company for the assaults on the picket line.

As a result, Meier and Rudwick echoed the assessment in *The UAW and Walter Reuther* that this strategy “won the hesitant neutrality of Ford Negro workers, which was enough to ensure the success of the strike.” (102)

They also concluded that the UAW contract, which passed two months later by a 70% vote, did so without the votes of the majority of Black workers. However, they point out that once the contract passed, the vast majority came to support the union. Those who were in the better jobs didn't lose them, as management had predicted. And most were impressed by Shelton Tappes' ability to negotiate the contract's anti-discrimination clause.

While Bates proposes that Black workers supported the contract and ends her narrative with its passage, Meier and Rudwick's account ends two years later. This enables the authors to evaluate the UAW's promises.

Despite some upgrading of jobs under

the UAW contract, Black autoworkers were more likely to be laid off in the transition to war production. The authors also cite the mixed role UAW officials played in confronting white “hate strikes” as Black men were beginning to advance and Black women hired for production.

I think *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* still offers a more realistic view of the tensions that existed within the union. It also explains the need for the establishment of the Trade Union Leadership Conference in the 1950s and the rise of the Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in the late 1960s. The fact of the matter is that the corporations — particularly GM — and much of Walter Reuther's base didn't want Black workers to advance, particularly into skilled trades.

The strength of *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* is that it highlights the role Black organizers played in the UAW drive at Ford. Bates shows how for organizers like Shelton Tappes, Veal Clough and Chris Alston, the union was to serve as the basis for building civil rights for the entire Black community. Certainly that was in the tradition of the CRC, NNC and even the social gospel ideology that a growing number of ministers adopted.

Even if the UAW was timid in taking on the company and educating its base, unionization represented the new floor upon which generations of Black families were to stand. §

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faithful to another of the narrative's important features, an uncommon one in its day: Solomon's insistent, proto-feminist spotlighting of slave women's subjectivity.

Patsy's centrality, unanticipated in the dramatic story of a man enslaved for twelve years, conveys perhaps the film's most powerful message: if “12 Years a Slave” represents the tragedy and abjection of a free man precipitated into slavery, that amount of suffering does not begin to compare to the pain to which slave women are condemned from birth.

If the narrative's dramatic power originates in Solomon's sudden fall into what Harriet Jacobs, a slave woman, described in 1861 as a “cage of obscene birds,” Northup's narrative ethos and McQueen's film aesthetic converge in the irrefutable recognition that slavery for women was a national traged-

dy, on a scale unimaginable then and now.

When Solomon climbs onto the coach that will take him from slavery, his look back — in the narrative as in the film — takes in Patsy's stare of wonder and despair just before she falls down into the dirt. In this poignant moment, Northup and McQueen have fully realized the pathos of what Jacobs experienced at her daughter's birth:

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.

That viewers 150 years later can finally comprehend this sentiment is perhaps the film's most meaningful and significant achievement. §