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Former teacher turned school abolitionist. Working at the intersection of land, food, and climate justice. Light brown. Unapologetically Black. Punches up.

# 12 YEARS A SLAVE: BLACK SUFFERING FOR WHITE CONSUMPTION

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**12 Years A Slave**, for those who have somehow missed all the buzz, is a film about **[Solomon Northrup <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon\\_Northrup>](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon_Northrup)**, a free black man in the mid 1800s who was kidnapped in New York, taken away from his wife and kids, and enslaved in New Orleans for more than a decade. The film is based upon Northrup's real-life account. Now, I have a general policy of not watching films about slavery, not because I'd rather turn a blind eye to history, but because I find them plain traumatic to watch. I went against this policy for *12 Years* because of all of its critical acclaim, because it was adapted for screen by a black man (John Ridley), directed by another black man (Steve McQueen) and because it featured actors I have come to admire for their craft (Chiwetel Ejiofor, Adepéro Oduye, Quvenzhané Wallis). Less than halfway through the film, I realized it was a mistake.

*12 Years A Slave* is a film for white people. More specifically, white liberals. When I say that, I also mean that I firmly believe that no black person has any business watching the film. For the very reason I don't watch films about slavery: it is traumatic. Of course many black folks have watched the film, and maybe they came out no worse for wear, or think they did, but I am more inclined to think that this sort of psychological trauma, rooted in the Diaspora's beleaguered history in the United States, doesn't always surface on the level of consciousness. Beyond that, the film doesn't tell us anything that we didn't already know. That the institution of slavery was brutal, inhuman, and one of few things in this world that can be considered unequivocally, objectively, and absolutely *evil*.

“ 12 Years A Slave is a film for white people.

What does any black person stand to gain from sitting in a dark movie theater—more than likely surrounded by white people—and being psychologically assaulted for two hours? Will we then turn to those white audience members, or get together in groups with them later, and discuss how horrible it all was, how many tears they shed, and eventually breathe a collective sigh of relief that all that was in the past, and thank God that we've come so far? Yeah. No thanks. Fortunately for me, I was able to obtain a DVD screener copy, and watch it in the privacy and security of my own home, with my partner, a safe space where I could distill all the damage this film was heaping upon me.



Solomon runs an errand while two men are lynched behind him

What makes it worse, of course, is that this all more or less really happened—and worse things still—not just to Northrup, but to countless black people throughout the institution of slavery, for the better part of 400 years. I maintain that it simply isn't possible, as a black person with any knowledge or sense of ownership of history, to watch these sorts of things and come away undamaged. My fellow Diasporans, if you *must* watch this film, for whatever reason, then I highly encourage you to wait until it is released on home video.

“ What does any black person stand to gain from sitting in a dark movie theater—more than likely surrounded by white people—and being psychologically assaulted for two hours?

Now, let me go back to what I said earlier, that *12 Years A Slave* is a film for white people. What do I mean? Well, white America *loves* movies about slavery, whether its *Amistad* or *Django*. They'll say they love it because it's important to take an unflinching look at our history. That much is true. They'll say they love it because of the “stellar performances” of Actor X, or the amazing cinematography. They'll say they love it because it's a story of triumph over adversity, or because of how those people survived in spite of all odds, and they must have had such courage and resilience “as a people” to have “overcome” such horror. Sure we did, but you know what? I really don't need a white person to tell me that.

The other reason white folks in general, and white liberals in particular, love movies about slavery is because they reinforce a certain narrative wherein black folks have overcome so much, and white society has changed so much, and we as a country (talking about the US here) have come so far. White people like

to juxtapose the sheer brutality of slavery against the less visible, less conscious, more subversive systems of inequality today, thereby giving themselves license to downplay or dismiss the latter. After all, we've come so far, what is there *really* to complain about?

This is not a new phenomenon. You could've heard some variation of the same conversation between the Emancipation and the institution of the Black Codes. Between the replacement of the Black Codes with Jim Crow laws. During the Civil Rights Movement when white liberals thought Martin Luther King was "asking for too much". And now, when we speak of the persistence of institutionalized racism and systemic inequality, of white supremacy which is, in fact, the enduring legacy of slavery, we are dismissed as "angry" or "too radical" or in denial of, again, *how far we've come*.

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Addressing these things require white people to look inwards, to accept responsibility for their part in upholding a legacy, and that conflicts with their insistence that the worst is behind us, that even though they're *really very sorry* it happened, *they* weren't the ones who enslaved us, and for that matter we weren't even the ones who were enslaved. Films about slavery allow modern white folks to cast slavers—long dead and no longer accountable—as the villains, as the epitome of evil, and more importantly, as the very thing that *they* are not, thereby absolving themselves of any responsibility. Perhaps they'll feel guilt, because they *should* as a "good person", but if you press them on the facts of slavery's legacy, that guilt will quickly turn to resentment.

This is especially true of white liberals in the North, and other "free" territories, who can cite the fact that at least *their* ancestors were on the right side of the thing, or maybe that they never owned slaves at all, or that abolitionism was an ideological current that ran through their family from the beginning. Regardless, *12 Years a Slave*, and all films about slavery produced in Hollywood, only serve to empower white people to deny any sort of accountability for a system set up by their ancestors and from which they historically have benefited, and continue to benefit from today.

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For more insight about how “black films”—that is, written/directed by black people, featuring mostly black actors, endorsed by black elites, and are ostensibly geared towards black audiences—are actually made, or perhaps later edited, for white consumption, I highly recommend Ishmael Reed’s op-ed, [Fade to White < http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/opinion/05reed.html?\\_r=0 >](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/opinion/05reed.html?_r=0), which discusses the film, *Precious*, and the hoops it had to jump through before it could be brought to the screen. While *12 Years* doesn’t quite reach the same level of #BlackMiseryPorn as *Precious*, because it at least has the distinction of being based on a true story, many of Mr. Reed’s points apply here as well.

So far I’ve spoken generally about slavery films and the role they play in white USAmerican society, and in the white collective consciousness. But I would like to discuss some of the particulars of *12 Years*, and why I think that it—while deserving of some acclaim from a craft perspective—is not a film worth watching. A film that may even be harmful to watch, especially for black people in the United States.

Pretty much everyone who goes to see the film already knows the premise. And the director wastes no time getting right to it. Northrup is kidnapped within the first 15 minutes or so, and the horrors of slavery begin in earnest. We learn a few things right away: that white folks, even in the north, were generally not to be trusted; that white folks in the south were mostly slurry-mouth brutes, and that slavery was a virtually impenetrable institution. The enslaved black folks, by and large, accept their roles as property, as servants, as complacent rape victims who, *if they’re raped good enough*, might even—in places like New Orleans, where *12 Years* takes place—earn [placée < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plac%C3%A9e >](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plac%C3%A9e) status. That is, a sort of concubine. Any thought, let alone any act, of dissent was met with a swift and vicious reprisal in all cases.



Solomon is brutally beaten with a wooden paddle.

Early in the film, three captured black men, including Northrup, are conferring about their predicament. Robert, played by Michael K. Williams, suggests that they fight. Abram, played by Dwight Henry, does not think that fighting is a viable option because most of the other slaves on the ships are just lowly niggers who have succumbed to their fate. An interesting dichotomy is presented here, between “free black man” and “nigger”, a sort of class differential that separates black people from each other, and in the eyes of some free black folks, excises the latter from the very humanity that they share with white folks. Solomon, at least, is relieved of this delusion very quickly.

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By the end of the ship's journey, Robert is dead—stabbed by a white man as he tried to defend a black woman from being raped, and then thrown overboard—while Abram runs eagerly to his master, who has come to reclaim him. He walks off-screen, leaving Solomon calling after him, and is not seen again for the rest of the film. I am placing a special emphasis on this scene, because I would like to revisit it later. But the message at this point in the film is clear: dissent leads to death, and submission is the only chance an

enslaved person has to mitigate some of the cruelty.



Abrams gratefully embraces his master for “freeing” him.

Northrup wouldn't make for a compelling protagonist, nor would the film be very interesting, if in spite of these lessons he didn't at least try to rise above his circumstances. So there are a few times throughout the film—two, really—where he attempts to change his fate, first when he literally whips one of the overseers for trying to unfairly punish him, and second when he tries to get a letter to his family.

After the first case, the “aggrieved” white man attempts to lynch Northrup, but is stopped and chased away by the head overseer. But the head overseer's intervention is clearly to protect his boss's investment, not a kindness or an act of nobility. Northrup is left hanging by his neck for hours, his feet barely touching the ground, as life on the plantation continues without interruption. To the film's credit, it stretches this scene to an excruciating length, to the point where you start to wonder why you, as the viewer, should be forced to endure it anymore.





Solomon hangs from a tree while life on the plantation continues like normal.

Only when the plantation owner—William Ford—returns, is Solomon finally cut down from the tree. Ford then keeps vigil over him, rifle in hand, knowing that the “aggrieved” white man will eventually return to have his vengeance. Ford ultimately sells Northrup to another plantation owner named Edwin Epps, ostensibly to protect him, but also to settle his own debt to the man. This is the first instance, but not the last, where we see that the best hope for any black person to survive the circumstances is through the kindness of white people, even if those white people are responsible for their circumstances in the first place.

In the second case, Northrup confides in a white indentured servant, a former overseer who drowned his guilt in alcohol and amassed a high debt. He offers to pay this man, with earnings made from playing fiddle at a nearby plantation party, to deliver a letter to his family. In predictable fashion, the white man—I mean, come on, he was an *overseer!*—betrays Solomon’s trust, and reveals the plan to Master Epps. Thinking on his feet, Northrup is able to talk his way out of the situation, thankfully not yet having given over the letter to be used as evidence against him. As he watches the letter burn, it seems all hope of escape turn to smoke and ash as well. Again we are reminded, along with Solomon, that white people are not to be trusted.



Solomon burns the letter to his family.

A side story in all of this, is that of Patsey, an enslaved woman who has earned the favor of Mr. Epps, by being twice as productive in the cotton fields as all of the men, and because Epps has taken to raping her on a regular basis. For this, she comes to Solomon one night, begging him to kill and bury her, because she lacks the will to commit suicide. Solomon refuses. Patsey is further punished for her own rape through regular abuse from Mrs. Epps, who can't do much of anything to punish her husband for his infidelity. Mrs. Epps at one point throws a heavy liquor bottle, striking Patsey in the head. Another time she slices Patsey's face with her fingernails. And later she starts denying Patsey soap to bathe, as a punishment, but also conceivably to make her less desirable to Mr. Epps. Unable to stand her own smell, Patsey sneaks off one day to get some soap from a nearby plantation, only to be accused of some other offense, and get whipped into unconsciousness. At first Mr. Epps leaves the whipping to Solomon, but because Solomon does so with a lighter hand, Epps takes over himself, spending the full of his drunken, jealous rage in lashing Patsey's flesh to pulp.



Patsey, after being whipped mercilessly by Edwin Epps.

About three-quarters through the film, we are introduced to Samuel Bass, a carpenter from Canada, who speaks against slavery to Edwin Epps. By the end, this earns him enough trust for Solomon to confide in him, to tell him the truth of his origins, and to ask him to write a letter to friends in the North who might secure Solomon's freedom. Shortly thereafter, the Northerners come to the rescue, and whisk Solomon away from the plantation, leaving Epps swearing that he will see justice for this wrong.

During this sequence, Solomon runs into the arms of his friend Mr. Parker, a shopkeeper. It is a moving scene, if only because it signals an end to nearly two hours of psychological assault. But it's also interesting in how it parallels the scene from the beginning of the film, where Abram runs and embraces the slave master. In the earlier scene, Solomon is left behind, calling after Abram. In the later scene, Patsey calls after Solomon. He remains long enough to embrace her, but ultimately has to leave her behind.

Because of the intentional nature of film as a medium, it must be assumed that these scenes were designed to mirror each other. What does it mean, then, that where Solomon corresponds to Abram, the southern plantation owner corresponds to the northern shopkeeper? In both cases a black man runs into the arms of a white man, who is perceived to represent his salvation. Yet another instance of black people needing to rely upon the kindness of white people to improve their circumstances.



Solomon gratefully embraces Mr. Parker for coming to free him.

The “white savior” is a common trope, and one with a long history, from the lionization of Lincoln, to Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to white NGO activists in Africa, “saving” black folks from hunger, disease, or evil warlords. It is a trope, and by that I mean a *fiction*, created for white audiences, wherein they get to identify themselves with the “heroes”, as a counterbalance to guilt, to reaffirm their goodness, and to give them permission to distance themselves from the evils of their predecessors. In the process, it also denies black people any agency or any role in their own liberation. The official description of *12 Years A Slave*, written by distributor Fox Searchlight, further illustrates that the film is meant for white audiences. It reads as follows (emphasis added):

“ TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE is based on an incredible true story of one man’s fight for survival and freedom. In the pre-Civil War United States, Solomon Northrup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a free black man from upstate New York, is abducted and sold into slavery. Facing cruelty (personified by a malevolent slave owner, portrayed by Michael Fassbender), **as well as unexpected kindnesses**, Solomon struggles not only to stay alive, but to retain his dignity. In the twelfth year of his unforgettable odyssey, Solomon’s **chance meeting with a Canadian abolitionist (Brad Pitt) will forever alter his life.**

First, in a movie about slavery, *any* kindness should be unexpected, so including that bit in the description is redundant. And any “kindness”, as such, short of complete liberation, is hardly worth mentioning, which also makes the description misleading. Where exactly do we see kindness in this film? Is it when William Ford gives Solomon a fiddle as a gift, to provide him “some joy over the years”? Is it when Ford cuts him down from the tree, or stands over him to prevent him from being murdered? Excuse me, but I should remind you, again, that *none* of this would’ve happened, and all could’ve been avoided, had Ford shown the only true kindness and bought Northrup’s freedom.

The description of Northrup’s meeting with a “Canadian abolitionist” that “forever altered his life”, is perhaps the most misleading text of all. While Samuel Bass, the character played by Brad Pitt, is indeed a Canadian, he is not an abolitionist. That is, if we take “abolitionist” to mean a person who *actively* worked to undermine or dismantle the institution of slavery. Bass is a carpenter who was outspoken in his opposition to slavery, and who—let us praise him for his graciousness—actually saw black people as human beings.

Here I would like to take a moment to show you a couple of the promotional posters for the film that were on display in Italy. Even though the film is about Solomon Northrup, about enslaved black people, and Chiwetel Ejiofor is the primary actor, these posters market the film to Italian audiences under the assumption that white actors like Fassbender and Pitt will draw a larger audience.



Italian Promotional Posters for 12 Years a Slave

I would like to juxtapose this marketing tactic with the official description of the film, which suggests that Samuel Bass “changes Northrup’s life forever”. Indeed, because Bass manages to contact Solomon’s friends in the North, which eventually leads to him being freed, his life *is* changed. But it needs to be mentioned here that Pitt is on screen for all of ten minutes *total*, in a film with a duration over two *hours*. And that really, it was the further intervention by Solomon’s associates in New York that led to his freedom.



Solomon confides in Samuel Bass.

Yet, to read the official description, and to look at the posters above, one might be led to believe that the role of Samuel Bass was greater than it was, maybe even that Pitt’s character formed a deep and meaningful relationship with Solomon Northrup. This, of course, is not an accident. Everything—every image used or cut, every word written—in filmmaking and marketing is meticulously intentional. The Fox Searchlight description, much like the film itself, was created in such a way as to appeal to white audiences, who need these examples of kindness to assuage the grief and guilt they necessarily feel from watching films about slavery. Acts of kindness like those of William Ford, or *kind actors* like Samuel Bass, remind white audiences that although slavery was such a terrible, *terrible* thing, there were *some* good white people, much like they are themselves. Without these things, the film would be plain unwatchable. For them.

Finally, there is all the institutional praise: nominated for and winning multiple Golden Globe and BAFTA Awards, and waiting to find out which of its whopping *nine* Oscar nominations it will bring home. These awards, and the predominantly white organizations that distribute them, have often come under fire for excluding works created by and/or starring people of color. Even those relatively rare instances where awards were given to people of color, the choices have sometimes been contentious. As in the case of

Denzel Washington, who became the second black man to win an Oscar, for his role in *Training Day*, a film which cast him as the villain, and ended with him being unceremoniously shot to death. There was also Halle Berry, who that very same year, became the first black woman to win the Oscar for best actress, for her role in *Monster's Ball*, a film that saw her sexually ravaged by a racist white man.

There are plenty of articles on these subjects, so I won't go into depth, and merely say that in both films black people occupied roles that were palatable and indeed comfortable for white audiences. There is practically a requirement for black people in the US to be subservient or in some way deferential, to not be considered "angry", or a threat. What better way to show a black woman's deference to a white man on screen than to literally place her beneath him, and for him to dominate her sexually? What better way to deal with a black male threat than to gun him down like a dog in the street? *These* are the roles that the Academy decided were suitable to finally award black actors their prestigious awards. I say all of this, not at all intending to take anything away from the performances of black actors, directors, writers, etc. who by any metric would be considered excellent.

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That brings us back to *12 Years A Slave*, which is the answer to both questions raised above, even though they were mostly rhetorical. The single best way to portray black people's deference to white people, the ultimate example of subservience in history is, of course, slavery. Now, the enslavement of black people was a real thing. It happened. Merely depicting it on screen is not really the issue. Unless you're a voyeur like Quentin Tarantino, peering through the windows of history and culture, masturbating furiously, and then celebrating the outcome. No, the *issue* is which instances of slavery Hollywood chooses to put on screen, and afterwards shower with praise and awards nominations.

*12 Years A Slave* is a safe film, because although the black man triumphs in the end, it isn't before every attempt at dissent or to play a role in his own liberation is crushed beneath some white man's heel. And, as I mentioned earlier, his liberation comes due to the kindness of "good white folks", with whom white audiences can identify. In the case of Solomon Northrup, even in being liberated he remains deferential to the white heroes of the film.

These are the sorts of roles that black people can fill to institutional acclaim, like Tom Robinson was deferential to “white justice” in *Mockingbird*, and eclipsed in significance by Atticus Finch and Boo Radley. On the other hand, you are not likely see books or films about figures like Nat Turner or Toussaint L’Ouverture or Malcolm X—who scared the hell out of white people—receive the same institutional acclaim. Oh, they went ahead and nominated Denzel for his portrayal of Malcolm, but of course he did not *win* it. In spite of being shot to death at the end of that film, too.

Institutional acclaim, of course, comes from predominantly white institutions like the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which gives out the Oscars, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which gives out the Golden Globes. For this reason, a great amount of recognition from these organizations necessarily equates to a film being suitable—indeed highly favored—by white audiences.

So to wrap things up, I would like to reiterate my main point: that *12 Years A Slave* is a film for white people. And white people only. Now while I realize that it is a completely unrealistic expectation that black people won’t watch the film, given all of the recognition, the genuinely solid performances, and that the film is well-crafted, I hope to at least provide fair warning that this film was not made for us. That there is little for black folks to gain from watching it, unless there is some incentive for widespread rage and sorrow.

While I can think of a few sociopolitical applications for rage and sorrow, I can say with certainty that *they* did not factor into any decision to write, direct, or distribute *12 Years A Slave*. To *those* ends, a film about Nat Turner or the Haitian Revolution would have been a far better choice. Alas, because such films would not appeal to white audiences without significant historical revisionism, it may be awhile before we see them on-screen. Just ask Danny Glover how production on [Toussaint](#) <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0785063/> is coming along.

**UPDATE (March 3rd, 2014):** So, *12 Years A Slave* won the Oscar for best picture. That in itself doesn’t necessarily validate my claims, but what I found interesting was the awards that the film was nominated for, and which ones it actually brought home. It won Best Picture, which goes to the production crew, that is the financiers of the film, including Steve McQueen, Brad Pitt, Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner, and Anthony Katagaswas. Most fascinating was how the first person to the podium was Brad Pitt. A movie about enslaved black people, based on a book by a black author, adapted to screen by a black man, directed by another black man, principally starring black actors...and the first person to speak on its behalf is a white man. But I’m sure that was just a coincidence, simply a matter of seating order, and who happened to reach



the stage first.

Lupita Nyong'o also won the best supporting actress award for her portrayal of Patsey. Well-deserved with respect to her acting talent, but I would like to refer back to my earlier point about how these awards tend to be given to black folks only when they play roles that fit neatly within white people's comfort zones for where black people belong in the social and historical hierarchy. Again, intending to take nothing away from Nyong'o, she won the award for a role in which she was brutalized and raped by a white man. Something I'm sure doesn't correspond at all to Halle Berry winning the award for *Monster's Ball*. Right?

Then there was John Ridley, who won the award for Best Adapted Screenplay. I honestly had no idea who Ridley was before his name was attached to this film, but it turns out that he's a pretty well-known public figure, a contributor for news outlets such as MSNBC and the Huffington Post. Then it came to my attention that in 2006, Ridley wrote an article for *Esquire* entitled **The Manifesto of Ascendancy for the Modern American Nigger** < [http://www.esquire.com/features/essay/ESQ1206BLACKESSAY\\_108](http://www.esquire.com/features/essay/ESQ1206BLACKESSAY_108) > , in which he proceeds to offer up choice bits of internalized anti-black racism, presumably for white consumption, since no one with any love for black people could possibly write something so hateful.

Ridley's commentary is the sort that white pundits solicit when they need the BlackOpinion™—that is, the *alternative* view called upon whenever black people present any kind of physical or ideological threat to white supremacy. Now, I would ask if you think it's even remotely possible that Ridley's views of Black Americans did not factor into his decision to adapt Northrup's novel to the screen, and how he chose to adapt it? Or that his views were strictly confined to his own mind throughout the production of *12 Years A Slave*, and were altogether unknown to everyone else in the production crew?

Amongst the awards that *12 Years* was nominated for, but did *not* win, were Best Actor (Chiwetel Ejiofor) and Best Director (Steve McQueen). Ejiofor, as Northrup, played the one role in the film where a black person attempted to rise above their circumstances. And ultimately triumphed. Perhaps because Northrup was not humbled into oblivion or killed at the end, his character exists in a space that white audiences find discomfiting—even in spite of being fodder for white salvation—thereby disqualifying Ejiofor for the award. As for McQueen not winning Best Director, I think we need look no further than the title of the award itself. Director. That is, s/he who leads, presides over, controls, facilitates—verily a position of power with respect to a film's production.

But maybe I'm grasping at straws here, and the dynamics of race and power have absolutely nothing to do

with the fact that McQueen is only the third black person in eighty-six years to be nominated for the award, and to *not* win it. To be clear, I'm saying that no black person has ever won the Oscar for Best Director. In case you're wondering, though, the other two black nominees were John Singleton for *Boyz in the Hood* and Lee Daniels for *Precious*, two films that fit neatly within the white establishment's comfort zone for how black people should be represented on the big screen: as violent criminals and beleaguered victims. That Daniels was also the director of *The Butler*, a film about a black man who spent a lifetime serving white people, and a producer on *Monster's Ball*, probably isn't a coincidence. That all three nominees were *men* invites further discussion about how gender intersects with race and power, especially given how the Academy has chosen thus far to recognize black women: as rape victims, sexual conquests, servants, magical negroes, "angry black bitches", and victims awaiting white salvation.

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If in light of all of this, if you remain unconvinced that *12 Years a Slave* is a film for white people, or more broadly that all film narratives featuring black people in Hollywood are measured against some standard for white palatability, then I concede the point. Because clearly the film was made for **you**, too, regardless of whatever race or ethnicity you claim.



## By Kermit O

Former teacher turned school abolitionist. Working at the intersection of land, food, and climate justice. Light brown. Unapologetically Black. Punches up.

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