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# At the Center of the Periphery: Gender, Landscape, and Architecture in *12 Years a Slave*

Kimberly Juanita Brown

## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the spatial construction of the slave plantation in the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* as a way to negotiate gender and racial hierarchies in US antebellum slave society. Through the movement (and stillness) of the film's two prominent female characters, the enslaved woman Patsey and the slave master's wife, Mrs. Epps, I consider Steve McQueen's emphasis on natural landscape and the built environment as a way to examine race, gender, labor, and slavery's unyielding acts of repetitive violence.

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Landscape overwhelms Steve McQueen's 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* with daunting immediacy and horrendous intensity. From the plantation fields illustrating the unyielding force of labor to lingering shots of the southern landscape marking itself against the multitude of bodies it will invisibly claim, a clash of stillness and movement visualizes slavery's profound extensions. These extensions, at once national, cultural, and historical, range from photographs of Civil War battlefields where hundreds of thousands of soldiers perished and were buried in unmarked graves to contemporary plantation wedding sites happily reminiscing over the glorious past represented by the "Old South." The extensions participate in memorial refraction, framing the event of slavery as a series of visual images held in place over time. In this, the film is the epitome of cinematic-photographic rendering, for it participates in the slow, methodical process of film developing as visual articulation. Stillness and imagistic pause give the viewer an understanding of slavery as the long stretch of modernity, horrifically ordered and repeatedly enforced. Nature, then, mediates the liminal space between movement and stasis, between the center of modernity and its extended periphery.

Built structures are part of these extensions, etching outward from the land and encroaching on nature with great force. The film is an examination of the



Figure 1: In *12 Years a Slave*, swamps, cane fields and weeping willows tether the enslaved to the labors their bodies must produce in the film, thereby suturing the land to those for whom the entire idea of landscape is both cruel and unyielding.

constitutive elements of landscape and modernity that have ordered slavery's reach and its grasp. Within this order, McQueen produces a *land-over-body* dualism that figuratively embeds each character visibly on screen. For instance, in the construction of the main house and the gazebo we can see the layered framework of Master and Mrs. Epps's interrelated symbiosis: he is the temperamental big house, she the orderly gazebo. Between the big house and the gazebo, in that sliver of possibility, there is Patsey, the black woman enslaved on the property who represents corporeal containment amid constant resistant attempts to move.

In this essay I want to consider the way *12 Years a Slave* structures the two prominent female characters—Mistress Epps and the slave woman, Patsey—against the visuality of their containing registers: for Mrs. Epps it is the double triptych of the plantation mansion (where she is often visualized drifting about like a figure of haunting), and for Patsey it is the earthbound tether of the literal landscape, the place where she works, rests, is whipped, and exploited sexually. Placing both women within these fixed spaces allows McQueen to explore landscape and architecture as gendered constructions, both fluid and fixed. Through an externalized notion of pleasure and power, Master Epps commands both spaces and forces his will upon both women repeatedly. In this way both women represent the center of the periphery, as both embody the exterior/interior boundaries encapsulated by Epps and replicated through his force and his efforts.

In the patriarchal deployment of masculine power, landscape is a resource to be tamed, conquered, utilized, and encroached upon, while the domestic space is that which has already been tamed, conquered and utilized. Women are central to the construction of the patriarch, as there can be no replication without the labor (physical, reproductive, and corporeal) their bodies provide.

McQueen attends to the power differential on Epps's plantation as a way to contemplate the perpetual violence of colonialism, slavery, forced migration, and sexual exploitation.

Patsey and Mrs. Epps occupy inverse trajectories of gender and order. Though ostensibly free, Mrs. Epps is seemingly held by an invisible tether to the Epps property. Her bodily movements constitute both regal and religious detachment, and thus render her less a southern lady in good standing than a skulking, stealthy, ghostly apparition with slow and methodical bodily movements.<sup>1</sup> Framed in the film through the architecture that holds her photographically in place, Mrs. Epps is a series of still shots meant to register her stasis against the constant bodily movements of Epps's patriarchy and Patsey's perpetual unfreedom. (Mrs Epps is the most stationary character in the film. She rarely moves and when she does so she moves slowly, resembling a still image). Both women hover at the center of the periphery; they signal the intertwining of the race/gender framework that propels the narrative force of the film. Though *12 Years a Slave* ostensibly tells the story of Solomon Northup, the film allows the two women to occupy the visual field in ways that highlight their respective positions.

*12 Years a Slave* is the film adaptation of the 1853 slave narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. Northup was a free black man living in upstate New York when he was kidnapped and sold into slavery, where he is called "Platt." From 1841 until 1853 Northup was enslaved on multiple properties in Louisiana. He began on a plantation owned and managed by William Ford, a short period that was nonetheless instrumental for the owner. Northup's skills and expertise are useful to Ford, but he ends his journey of enslavement on the cotton plantation of Edwin Epps. (Northup meets Patsey while on Epps's plantation, and his narrative is the only place the enslaved woman exists in the written record). Ten of Northup's twelve years are spent at Epps's plantation—and it is there that the fullest measure of his experiences round out the narrative.

These experiences are most fraught for Northup when he must navigate the delicate space between ignorance and knowledge in order to survive his years in bondage. Early in the film, he is warned by another captive not to reveal his literacy, and this danger is revisited in a pivotal scene near the middle of *12 Years a Slave* where Mistress Epps (played by Sarah Paulson), wife of the mercurial slave owner Epps (Michael Fassbender), tasks the protagonist Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) with a trip to the county store. She does so while tethered invisibly to the porch that at once elevates and contains her, never moving off the domestic edifice that is one-part symbol, one-part captor. "Where you from, Platt," she inquires during their first official exchange:

"I told you."

"Tell me again."



Figure 2: Mistress Epps, symbolically remaining fixed to the front porch of the big house, calls Solomon to carry a list of items to the store. While she utilizes his limited mobility, she also demands that he maintain ignorance regarding the written word. Their exchange in this scene is one of light hegemony; one arm extended to a walking possession, a list of necessities to procure. Mrs. Epps, chin raised ever so slightly, cautions Northrup against the possession of too many words.

“Washington.”

“Who were your master?”

“Master name of Freeman.”

“Was he a learned man?”

“I suppose so.”

“He learn you to read?”

“A word here or there, but I’ve no understanding of the written text—.”

“Don’t trouble yourself with it. Same as the rest, master brought you here to work, that’s all. Any more’ll earn you a hundred lashes.”

Mistress Epps is a figure of stiff misery in the film, gliding around the perimeter of the property, sometimes in the company of her husband, but often alone. Perched like a bird in the service of racial purity, Mrs. Epps stands encased by the very whiteness she deploys as a source of power. Her body, her clothing, her home—all illustrate the height and the depth of the racial imaginary that slavery reinforces.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the first time she is shown in the film, she emerges out of focus and from the edge of slow circular pan of the cinematic frame in which the viewer also first encounters Epps. She is the fuzzy elongation of Epps’ possessive patriarchal and religious might. (Epps is reading sections of the bible that reinforce his need for utter subservience). She is the cartography of symbolic white supremacy.

Mrs. Epps has her race and her gender as bookended subjectivities that render her necessary to the logic of the plantation but also subsumed within it. Existing everywhere within the film as Epps’s bodily extension, she is a figure



Figure 3: Mrs. Epps emerges out of focus and into view, the stone-still manifestation of the Cult of Domesticity in *12 Years a Slave*.

of pause and drift: central, yet out of focus, moving in circles and semi-circles on the property that lead her right back where she started. The circular movement deployed to represent Mistress Epps duplicates the octagonal structure of the gazebo in all of its visual harmony and plantation dissonance.

### The “Lovely Gazebo”

An appendage of the slave plantation space, garden pavilions—or gazebos—offer shelter and provide an added measure of beauty to a site already brimming with black pain, trauma, and loss. They are imagistic curiosities, and like the plantation homes that they signify on, gazebos are a constructed lie within a secret, within a circle of shame. McQueen painstakingly positions the gazebo as yet another instrument of leisure and excess, an ornamental structure that symbolizes wealth and status, but has little practical plantation use.

In *12 Years a Slave*, Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), Solomon’s first owner, is in the process of having a gazebo-like structure built, and it is Northup’s folly that he underestimates the pursuit of racial supremacy embodied by Tibeats, the white carpenter tasked with directing the construction of the gazebo. For Solomon, Tibeats (Paul Dano) is an immediate opposing force, forcing Solomon and the other slaves to participate—despite their bewilderment—in the folksong “Run, Nigger Run.” The song and its auditory taunt are utilized to connote both secrecy and surveillance, as Tibeats shows that this black folksong, sung as a kind of instruction manual for slave escape, is familiar to the whites who control black labor and movement. “For understanding the African-American condition,” Craig L. Wilkins writes, “space as motion is an important concept to consider” (106). Space rivals motion in the visual field of McQueen’s film, and Solomon’s corporeality, like Patsey’s, also contends with





Figure 4: The carpenter Tibbeats emerges in the film as an assault of sight and sound, facilitated by the visual dissonance of the bayou—brimming with the possibility of freedom—beautifully lingering in the background as he forces the slaves to join him in singing about their state of surveillance and endangerment.

the very landscape he traverses in order to eventually get free. He is constantly seen running, fighting, laboring, suffering and lamenting.

Solomon's physical fight with Tibbeats, which occurs soon after they meet, precipitates the excruciating scene of Northrup hanging from a tree for nearly four minutes on screen. With the resulting physical removal from Ford's plantation he is swiftly immersed into Master Epps's world. Ford's unfinished pavilion (described in Northrup's narrative as a "weaving house") is followed through to completion on Epps's plantation, symbolically rendering Northrup's creativity and skill to its fraught completion (107). At the center of this completion is the obsessive dominion that Epps represents as a slave owner, since he is the duplicating imago of the main house: large, domineering, sturdily constructed and difficult to move. He is also the surveillance mechanism that gazes upon the house, gazebo and everything else the property holds. As yet another extension of his value and his power in a patriarchal economy, then, the gazebo is the built beautification mechanism of the master's desire and design, and it must replicate his stature and importance, albeit on a smaller scale.

It is this scale that McQueen manages to critique in his film. One question concerning slavery that McQueen seems intent on asking is "What was it all for, anyway?" The answer is a soft avalanche of seemingly non-essential items: Sugar. Cotton. Tobacco. Gazebos. Though consumable products have a direct memorial link to slave plantations in the US, the gazebo does not immediately connote this relationship: on the contrary, as suggested by some of McQueen's images, this structure seems designed to evoke the antithesis of physical labor—a site for engaging in quiet contemplation. And interestingly, when searching the history of the construction of the gazebo in the United

States (which began in the 1800s), the gazebo and the slave plantation seem to be chronologically and spatially connected but historically at odds.<sup>3</sup> There remains an incongruence between what gazebos are supposed to connote and where they are often located. When looking for “lovely gazebo” online, most visual offerings (many via Pinterest) will come from plantation sites.<sup>4</sup>

How cleanly, then, can we separate plantations as built environments from the enslaved workers who built them? McQueen directs the viewer’s gaze toward the imagined contemplation of the gazebo, returning it as a violent cacophony of racialized violation. In doing so, he removes the veneer of elegance and sophistication from the gazebo’s spatial nexus, replacing it with the creepy atmospheric violence of slavery’s memory. He marks the landscape with that violence. If Mrs. Epps is the corporeal manifestation of the gazebo, her external veneer works to duplicate and extend the framework of the main house. She is a functional addition, pleasant to look at, adding to the visual opulence of the property, and to Epps himself.

McQueen’s method of juxtaposing elegant images with those of horrific violence recalls the strategy of Rita Dove’s 1980 “The House Slave,” from her first book of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner*. The poem begins with an image that disrupts the opulence of the plantation. “The first horn lifts its arm over the dew-lit grass,” she writes, “and in the slave quarters there is a rustling—/children are bundled into aprons, cornbread/ and water gourds grabbed, a salt pork breakfast taken.” The speaker, a woman with the desired position in the plantation hierarchy of “house slave,” orders the sights and sounds of the repeating workday as she observes them. She presents a flurry of actions in the first four lines. There are “lifts” and “rustling,” small children get “bundled,” and food and water are “grabbed,” or “taken.” The house slave continues her observations from the interior of the big house:

I watch them driven into the vague before-dawn  
while their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick

and Massa dreams of asses, rum and slave-funk.  
I cannot fall asleep again. At the second horn,  
the whip curls across the backs of the laggards—

sometimes my sister’s voice, unmistakable, among them.  
“Oh! pray,” she cries. “Oh! pray!” Those days  
I lie on my cot, shivering in the early heat,

and as the fields unfold to whiteness,  
and they spill like bees among the fat flowers,  
I weep. It is not yet daylight (33)





Figure 5: “The lovely gazebo” highlights the structure and silences of the plantation house in *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

In the sights and sounds of plantation labor and its concomitant violence, the speaker’s vantage point is its own source of torture. “I watch them driven into the vague before-dawn” she states, “while their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick.” The landscape contains all of the horrors visited upon field and house slave alike, and the speaker registers the full sensory assault she experiences as “the whip curls across the backs of the laggards” and she hears the voice of her sister “unmistaken, among them.” An unrelenting flood of corporeal force is illustrated through the repetition of one coordinating conjunction: “and.” “[A]nd in the slave quarters ... and water gourds grabbed ... and Massa dreams ... and slave-funk ... and as the fields unfold to whiteness ... and they spill like bees among the fat flowers.” The poem ends with the speaker’s own attempt at cathartic release. “I weep,” she says, “It is not yet daylight.” The poem ends in the dark void of the “before-dawn,” where bodies labor under the perpetual force of violence, and “daylight” brings its own set of terrifying realities. Dove’s poem merges the presumed serenity of the natural landscape with the unyielding force of slavery’s repeating violence.

Somewhat similarly, McQueen suggests slavery’s past resides in the interstices of lush landscape and an indifferent natural environment that is then bent, altered, or reinterpreted. This is the way the British video artist and director has chosen to illustrate the cryptic materiality still with us from the plantation era. Contemporary images of plantation sites and the joyful wedding receptions they advertise often feature pavilions as main features of aesthetic attraction. McQueen disturbs this universe by using the architecture of slavery’s excessive production against itself. It is here in the haunting afterlife of slavery’s memory that viewers can attempt to meet the terms of the totality of the event.<sup>5</sup> “Behind the façade of innocent amusements lay the violence the master class assiduously denied,” Saidiya Hartman contends (43). How

might these present amusements—plantation spaces as commodified centers of hetero-patriarchal unification—be understood within and beyond what Hortense Spillers calls “the relative silence of the record” (73)? The gazebo in *12 Years* subtly occupies that silence and engages it, proposing that the space has much to tell.

### The Land Escape

In *12 Years a Slave* Patsey’s (Lupita Nyong’o) movements—in sharp contrast to those of Mistress Epps—are varied and open, from her representative work in the fields to the distances she traverses across plantations. Even her casual contemplations, her miseries and abuses are linked to the landscape and its vicissitudes. Though she is the object of Epps’s multiple obsessions (sexual, physical, and economic), McQueen shows Patsey’s containment is filled with the multiple invectives of land and body she occupies. Her body, literally used against her by Epps, is also utilized as a tool of the landscape. Though she resists the myriad violations against her flesh, her body is also implicated in those acts of resistance. Patsey’s visual enjambment—body against landscape—underscores this impossible duality (land against body) at the same time as she is registered as somehow beyond the spatial confines of Epps’s constant surveillance and repeating violations. Her visibility is its own form of irony. From the first scene until the final time she appears in the film (she collapses on the ground as Northup is saved and removed from the plantation) her corporeality is as fluid and expressive as her limited agency allows.

McQueen produces, in one such vivid example, the boundary marker of Patsey’s corporeal entanglement, as Epps bursts into the slave quarters in the middle of the night. “Get up! We dance tonight! Get up,” he shouts, dragging his slaves out of their slumber and into the main house for his own entertainment. Describing such scenes in Northup’s print narrative, Hartman writes, “The humiliations delivered the conscripts of Master Epps’s terrorizing bacchanals and the brutal command to merrymaking suggest that the theatricality of the Negro emerges only in the aftermath of the body’s brutal dramatic placement—in short, after the body has been made subject to the will of the master” (*Scenes* 43). Hartman suggests that these “scenes of subjection” necessitate deeper looking to understand how enslaved bodies were organized and orchestrated by the planter class. When Patsey utilizes her body in the forced enclosure of the interior of the plantation space, it is the mistress who inflicts violence against her after Epps begins it with his coerced dance. As Patsey dances, Mistress Epps tosses a glass decanter at her head, knocking her to the ground. In the seconds before this act of violence occurs, the viewer has the opportunity to see the impossible dual constitutive arrangement of the plantation space, where Patsey is at the center of the periphery of the Epps’s domestic



Figure 6: Occupying the center of the screen, Patsey dances, framed by dueling controlling gazes—the mistress’s fury and the master’s lust.

arrangement. She toils in the middle of the master’s lust and the mistress’s fury, trying desperately to will herself free. As Patsey swirls her body in the scene, her arm is raised in an act of spiritual uplift and release. “Sell her!” Mistress Epps demands of her husband in the middle of the scene. “Sell little Pats?” is his indignant reply. “I will not ... Choose another to go.” Though the mistress threatens to leave her husband, and go “back to Cheneyville,” Epps is resolute: “Back to that hog’s trough where I found you? *Do not* set yourself up against Patsey, my dear. Because I will rid myself of you well before I do away with her.” The entire exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Epps occurs while Patsey is heard whimpering off screen. Mrs. Epps quickly leaves the room, having failed at her mission and Epps returns to his “merrymaking” as Patsey is dragged from the space.

In the corporeal motions evoked in the film, Patsey negotiates a cartography of subjected movement alongside the release her body produces whether through will or coercion. When she moves, she moves as one who would be free. For Patsey, this often involves journeys beyond the boundary of Epps’ plantation. Hartman writes, “Stealing away involved unlicensed movement, collective assembly and abrogation of the terms of subjection in acts as simple as sneaking off to laugh and talk with friends or making nocturnal visits to loved ones” (*Scenes* 67). Solomon approaches Patsey during one such abrogation, as she visits the neighboring Shaw plantation, where Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard) is a black woman and former slave. There, in the company of Mrs. Shaw, Patsey exists in an altogether separate plantation economy. She is the invited friend of a free black woman. They laugh and sip tea as Solomon approaches, determined to return Patsey to Epps without delay. Patsey resists Solomon’s imploring, claiming that it’s the Sabbath and she is “free to roam.” The use of the word “free” coupled with “roam” invokes the rhetorical slippage



Figure 7: Patsey in her full humanity despite her body being exploited for labor, *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

of the periphery, where people are organized and ordered and, as Christina Sharpe notes, “subtended by plantation logics, detached optics, and brutal architectures” (114). For Patsey, there are very few reprieves from the “brutal architecture” of her experience on Epps’ plantation. McQueen nevertheless endeavors to show the viewer the many ways that Patsey moves in order to control some semblance of her externally-subjected world.

McQueen participates in an art process Roshini Kempadoo refers to as “inhabited by the perspective of the fugitive, seeking twists, turns,” while “maintaining opacity for flight and steeped in a long and deep knowledge of what it is like to be violated, disciplined and restrained” (61). *12 Years* continually casts Patsey against the contours of her bonded/bounded visibility, as if the landscape itself is her only containing register. Throughout the film McQueen shows this, too, to be faulty. In fact, Patsey’s movements within the cinematic space necessitate visual diligence on the part of the viewer, for like Solomon, we are being asked to see her within the spatial configurations of her full humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Patsey first appears in the film as one of several enslaved workers on the Epps plantation, culling tufts of cotton from their planted core. Her motions are quick, nearly mechanical. She efficiently navigates the task before her, arms and fingers curved to illustrate the contortive properties of cotton production. The cotton is weighed, and Patsey is the superior laborer, managing to pick 512 pounds of cotton in one day. Epps then refers to Patsey as “Queen of the field ... born and bred to the field.” With this declaration, Epps marks Patsey with a natural exteriority that places her body in the service of his dominion.

With just a few notable exceptions, Patsey is outdoors for the duration of the film; even her violations take place against the backdrop of nature. Her

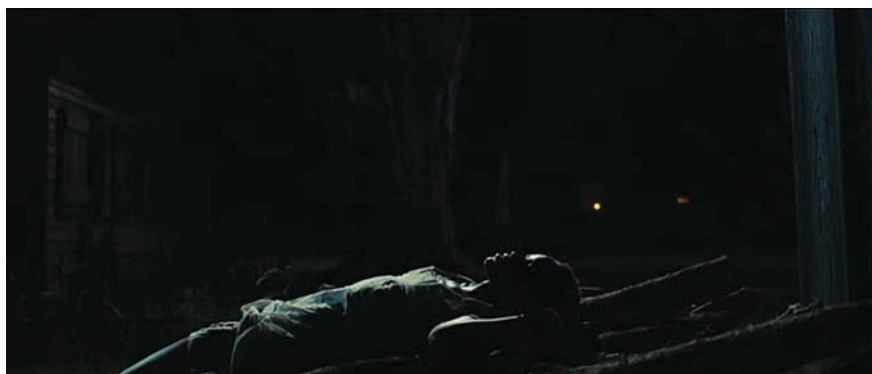


Figure 8: Patsey's body is continually set against the very landscape she tries desperately to traverse or transcend.

movements envision the futurity of a freedom that her present condition does nothing to guarantee. Thus, McQueen delineates Patsey's subjectivity as present, past, and possible but distant future. And each of her resistant actions allows the viewer to contemplate all of the mechanisms of slavery's framing with her as a central figure.

Mistress Epps has no such futurity. Like the 'lovely gazebo,' she is constructed at will and subject to the whims of the architect, her husband, and/or the weather. Tethered as she is to the main house and its properties (structural, human), she signals modernity's industrial gravitas and also its traditional naiveté. Presented as one thread in the patriarchal stitching that gives Epps his dominion, Mistress Epps is rigidly embedded within the structure of the site, both awkwardly and unhappily configured as the embodiment of Epps's imagination and desire. Her visual stillness is set, imagistically, against the many genres of movement Patsey engages (working, moving, dancing, and playing), whether they are forced or self-initiated.

Yet, as Saidiya Hartman reminds us, "The captive female does not possess gender as much as she is possessed by gender ... that is, by way of a particular investment in and use of the body" (*Scenes* 100). In the visceral enunciation of this gender possession, Patsey's movements are held in the very captivity rendered as expansive as the landscape she tries desperately to traverse.

Katherine McKittrick writes: "Once the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless" (45). Despite these markings, Patsey's semiotic embodiment reinforces vulnerability against strength, and corporeal restrictions against the elongation of physical movement. Natural imagery envelops her, producing the boundary marker of her labor as a river that hydrates the entire plantation. Epps's labor force is not very large, and thus, as Tera Hunter reminds us, "The small holdings of individual owners also



put greater burdens on slaves to perform labor beyond their capability” (12). Patsey is the filmic embodiment of those “greater burdens,” since she alone must negotiate Epps’s myriad expectations and demands while also managing Mistress Epps’s violent outbursts.

In his obsessive delineation of Patsey’s plantation capacities, Epps imagines divine bequeathing. “God give her to me,” he declares. Epps reads in Patsey’s productive abilities a sign from above. His interest in the enslaved woman, her present and future labor production, is within his control and beyond his dominion. Here, McQueen invokes an imperial mandate of religious import. She is the gift that allows the measure of his personal empire to expand, while also rendering him the sole creator of that empire. In this, the historical Patsey, a woman who likely toiled on Epps’s plantation until the end of the American Civil War (if her death did not precede it), occupies the periphery of Northrup’s narrative but looms large in the visual imagination that McQueen struggles to create.

In this, nature again reveals itself to ameliorate the space between humanity and the exterior world, while also exacerbating the violence this space represents to the vulnerable and unprotected. The culminating scene of Patsey’s abuse features Mr. and Mrs. Epps along with Patsey and Northrup, and it occurs outside the domestic space with Patsey tied to a tree and whipped unmercifully while Mrs. Epps watches with interest from a close distance. As they are, each of them, outdoors, with subjectivities cleanly demarcated for the viewer, the scene resonates with Patsey’s literal tethering—to the tree, and to the order of the plantation. She is whipped for being out of sight and off-site, suspected of having run away when in fact she has been to the Shaw plantation to procure a bar of soap, the very item the mistress has refused her.

The impending whipping brings Mistress Epps off the porch of the main house. She moves swiftly, goading Epps as he prepares himself for the task. “Do it,” Mistress Epps demands: “Strike the life from her.” It is in this moment that Epps forces Solomon to manage what he himself has hesitated to do. In the exteriority of the public whipping, slaves are all about, but it is the trinity of Mr. and Mrs. Epps along with Solomon that the scene is meant to highlight. This scene refers back to a previous one where Mistress Epps left the periphery of the main house, stepping down from the porch steps to break up a fight between her husband and Solomon (she does so only twice in the film). This fight is also about Patsey, and occurs immediately after Patsey returns from Shaw’s plantation the first time Solomon is sent to fetch her. Both scenes are meant to provide a visual boundary marker that is also invisible, since Patsey’s ability to move, her continual efforts at self-possession and agency, are thwarted by the paranoid surveillance of Epps.

Corporeal containment in *12 Years a Slave* fluctuates between movement and stasis, with boundary markers illustrated through race, gender, landscape, and slavery’s unyielding inflictions. The physical, sexual, and psychic pain of



enslavement, inflictions of racialized violence, and the vagaries of masculine power are the circular logic of the plantation system. McQueen invokes the cinematic-photographic throughout the film so that the viewer is encased between the stillness of Mrs. Epps's domestic construction and Patsey's limited, often excruciating, but nevertheless border-crossing movements between and across plantation sites. When she moves, she moves as one who would be free. Though it is precisely this freedom she fails to attain, her physical movements in the film allow for a legible articulation of her enslaved existence to dominate the field of vision.

### Notes

1. Mrs. Epps is portrayed in the film as a woman whose religious piety is in constant conflict with her husband's known lascivious behavior. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Epps both resist and reflect the domestic structure of US antebellum plantations.

2. In Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, in a chapter called "The Jealous Mistress," Jacobs writes of the mistress of the plantation, "Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasions, she would glide stealthily away, and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep, and ask who I was talking to" (34).

3. For an extended conversation about Thomas Jefferson's relationship to the gazebo/pavilion he made popular at Monticello, see <https://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/garden-pavilion>.

4. There is a popular contemporary wood gazebo available for purchase called the "Monticello," in honor of Thomas Jefferson and his affection for the pavilion structure.

5. In her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman declares "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (6).

6. In Northup's narrative he notes that Patsey had the most difficulty on Epps's plantation. "Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed" (188).

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**Kimberly Juanita Brown's** research engages the site of the visual as a way to negotiate the parameters of race, gender, and belonging. Her book, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Duke University Press, 2015) examines slavery's profound ocular construction, the presence and absence of seeing in relation to the plantation space and the women represented there. She is currently at work on her second book, tentatively titled "Mortevivum: Photography, Melancholy, and the Politics of the Visual." This project examines images of the dead in the *New York Times* in 1994 from four overlapping geographies: South Africa, Rwanda, Sudan, and Haiti (kimbrown@mtholyoke.edu, Twitter: @kjuanitabrown).