

12 YEARS A SLAVE
“Utter Darkness”
by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

12 Years a Slave is Steve McQueen’s astonishingly brilliant cinematic conjuring of an African American’s bestselling, harrowing memoir exactly 160 years after it was published to great fanfare, just eight years before the start of the Civil War. As a literary critic and cultural historian who has spent much of my career searching out African Americans’ lost, forgotten, and otherwise unheralded tales—especially the narratives of fugitive slaves—I was proud to have served as a consultant on McQueen’s film and excited to see the fruits of his labors. As a cinephile, I also was thrilled to bear witness to perhaps the most vivid and authentic portrayal of American slavery ever captured on screen. That this magnificent artistic achievement was made by a Black British director, bringing an African American’s screenplay so vividly and subtly to life, makes this unprecedented achievement all the more impressive, and all the more of a signal event in the history of film and in the history of representations of slavery in the American South.

As I sat riveted during Steve’s film, I also found myself sitting with *12 Years a Slave*’s original author and protagonist, Mr. Solomon Northup (1807—unknown), during those first hours, days and nights in April 1841, when, in “the dungeon” of Williams’ Slave Pen off Seventh Street in Washington, D.C., he reckoned with the betrayal that had lured him out of a lifetime of freedom in upstate New York into a nightmare of enslavement in the deep and deeper South. “[W]hen consciousness returned I found myself alone, in utter darkness, and in chains,” Northup wrote, and “nothing broke the oppressive silence, save the clinking of my chains, whenever I chanced to move. I spoke aloud, but the sound of my own voice startled me.”

Not only was Northup suddenly a stranger to himself, in an even stranger place, but with his money and the papers proving his status as a free black man stolen and a beating awaiting every insistence on the truth of who he really was—a husband, a father, a free man—Northup was forced into a horrifying new role, that of the paradoxical “Free Slave,” under the false name “Platt Hamilton,” a supposed “runaway” from Georgia. That all this happened in the shadows of the U.S. Capitol Building—that, in cuffs, Northup was shuffled down the same Pennsylvania Avenue where generations later Dr. King would be heard delivering his “Dream” speech and President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle

would parade in hopes of fulfilling it—must have made Northup’s imposed odyssey all the more bitter. “My sufferings,” he recalled of the first whipping he received from the notorious slave trader James Birch, “I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!”

But unlike Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, the outpost to which Solomon Northup was shipped was no metaphor with circles but the forests and cotton fields of Bayou Boeuf, Louisiana, a no-man’s land between the Red River, the Great Pine Woods and The Great Cocodrie Swamp. “I had not then learned the measure of ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ nor to what limitless extent of wickedness he will go for the love of gain,” Northup revealed about his fateful first hours as a slave, but in Louisiana he did learn as the property of three different owners: one paternal (William Prince Ford); one insecure (John Tibaut, whom Northup nearly choked to death after being attacked by him); and one former slave driver and overseer, Edwin Epps, brutally efficient with the lash whenever Northup was too late, inefficient, unwilling to whip Epps’s other slaves himself, or high on his own talents as a violinist—Northup’s “ruling passion” ever since his childhood as the son of a free woman, Susanna, and an ex-slave farmer, Mintus, who, as a property owner in Fort Edward, New York, had earned the right vote. As if Northup’s luck couldn’t have been any worse, 10 out of his 12 years as a slave were spent under Epps’ watchful eye. “I never knew a slave to escape with his life from Bayou Boeuf,” Northup wrote. As a result, the driving force of his new life—and story—could be summed up in one question: would *he* be the exception?

No, nothing about Solomon Northup’s 12 years as a slave (actually it was 11 years, 8 months and 26 days) was familiar or natural. Where he had been born in the Adirondack Mountains and grown up felling trees and rafting on and around Lake Champlain, in Louisiana there were swamps and killer dogs to tame. Where he had had access to books and a common education in Sandy Hill, New York, in Louisiana, there were laws forbidding slaves to learn to read or write, and even when one could, like Solomon, every letter had to receive his owner’s approval (thus his censure) before it could go out. And where Northup had earned a living working at a hotel in the burgeoning resort town of Saratoga Springs, with a wife Anne and three children, Elizabeth, Margaret and Alonzo, on Edwin Epps’ plantation there were no wages but acres of cotton to pick and a punitive system as arbitrary as it was severe. While looking out for Epps’ other slaves, Northup could never overcome the memories that set him apart from them, so that his only true companion was himself—his curiosity, his resourcefulness, his strength and skills, his beloved violin and his ability to figure other people out.

An “American” Story

Since D.W. Griffith premiered his whitewashing—really, a gross, racist distortion—of the history of slavery in his 1915 silent film, *The Birth of Nation* (a film designed to serve as propaganda to justify the emerging system of *de jure* or Jim Crow segregation), there have been all too few films that have captured, or even attempted to convey, the truth of the experience of slavery, *from the slave's point of view*. There have been even fewer films worthy of recognition. Yet, slave stories are the stories of the shaping of America—and the Americas, which received a total of some *eleven million* Africans over the history of the slave trade, between 1501 and 1866—and, like the Holocaust in Europe, their stories cannot be told and retold enough. While the United States received about 400,000 of these Africans shipped directly from the Continent, by the outbreak of the Civil War, their descendants had grown to some 4 million. 101 fugitive slaves published books about their enslavement; but only one, Solomon Northup published a book about his passage from freedom, to slavery, to freedom again.

What makes *12 Years a Slave* especially worthy of attention is what audiences in Northup's own time appreciated about his tale: its sober presentation of "American Slavery" as it really was interwoven with the universal themes of identity, betrayal, brutality and the need to keep faith in order to survive confrontations with the evils in man. Most of all, Northup, as much as any man who endured slavery's trials, reminds us of the fragile nature of freedom in any society, then and now, and the harsh reality that whatever legal boundaries existed between so-called Free States and Slaves States in 1841, no black man, woman or child was truly safe.

As distinctive, and as poignant, *12 Years a Slave* has an unusual trajectory unlike most other antebellum slave narratives. In fact, its drive is in reverse, from freedom *to* slavery, in both a single human life and as a larger allegory for the institution of slavery itself. In this way, it defies the more common (and reassuring) American story of upward mobility, of attaining ever greater badges of liberation with "luck and pluck," from "rags to riches," from log cabins to respectable frame houses to fancy mansions with a view, much like the other 100 slave narratives published by black authors before the end of the Civil War. Instead, Northup's trajectory is down—down from Saratoga to New York, down from New York to Philadelphia, Baltimore and D.C., down from D.C. to Richmond to Louisiana—and thus an inversion of most of America's popular literature (at least by Amazon standards), which, to my amazement, makes it all the more uncanny that the name of the hotel where Northup's two white kidnapers, the rascallions Alexander Merrill (a.k.a. "Merrill Brown") and Joseph Russell (a.k.a. "Abram Hamilton"), tricked him with him too much drink was none other than Gadsby's Hotel. In Northup's prefiguring of the *counter*-narrative, the isolation in darkness that Ralph Ellison later made famous in his unparalleled novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), *12 Years a Slave* gives us the soul of African American literature and culture, the "sound of life" in "oppressive silence."

“A Man—Every Inch of Him”

Whatever the trajectory, in any great story, from the Greeks to *Gatsby*, the protagonist functions as our guide, the reader’s or audience member’s eyes, ears, nose, hands and tongue, the one through whom we think and feel. In Solomon Northup, unlike even the greatest African American writer and speaker of his day, ex-slave Frederick Douglass, the audience of 2013 and beyond has a guide who is as surprised, shocked and horrified by slavery as we might have been, because we begin at the same starting point in life as free men and women. The result of Northup’s story, of the free man made a slave, is almost biblical, which again is also uncanny, because, at the time of Northup’s kidnapping in April 1841, he was exactly 33 years old, the same age most assume Christ was when he carried his cross up to Golgotha. Unlike a God humbling Himself in the form of man, however, Northup was a man forced into the life of a slave, and the prospect of his resurrection was more elusive than three days.

What ensues in his book—and in Steve McQueen’s film—is frightening, gripping and inspiring, because as one reviewer of Northup’s theatrical staging in Syracuse, New York, put it, “He is a man—every inch of him” (*Syracuse Daily Journal*, January 31, 1854). Yet because of the color of Northup’s skin, every inch of his manhood was vulnerable to being falsified, stolen and denied, and there was nothing he could do about it. In fact, Northup quickly learned that protesting his enslavement represented an even greater threat to his survival, because, to his traders and his owners, he was worth real money as a slave while as a free man he would have been worth more dead than alive (at least as a slave he could *choose* not to speak).

North and South, Free State and Slave

At the same time, it is important not to overdraw the boundaries between North and South, Free State and Slave, before the Civil War. True, at the time of Northup’s capture, there were 13 Slave States and 13 Free States in America (a perfect balance by way of imperfect, indeed disastrous, Congressional compromise). While it would be impossible to explain the history of their differences here, suffice it to say “two roads diverged in a yellow wood,” to borrow from poet Robert Frost. One was better suited for industry, and thus wage labor, while the other was rich-soiled enough to continue on with large-scale planting, and thus slavery. Summing up the difference and its consequences for human beings in 1860, incoming President Abraham Lincoln wrote in a letter to Alexander Stephens of Georgia, “You think slavery is right, and ought to be extended; while we [Republicans in the North]

think it is wrong and ought to be restricted.”

Actually, it was far more complicated than any simple (albeit elegant) syllogism could communicate. In fact, as Ira Berlin writes in his book *Slaves without Masters* (1974), at no time before the Civil War did the number of free blacks in the North outnumber those in the South, even with the existence of slavery, and while there was a grave difference between the freedoms Solomon Northup could exercise as a free man in New York versus as a slave in Louisiana (including the right to testify against his betrayers), there was persistent, widespread discrimination in the North, including, in some states, anti-immigration laws and segregation regimes that anticipated the Jim Crow era that rendered true freedom a myth for black Americans from the end of the Civil War to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Nevertheless, the further that North and South pulled apart in the antebellum years, especially over the question of slavery’s expansion west into the territories the U.S. acquired through purchase and war (*the political issue of the time*), the more tempting it became for slave catchers to venture north, across state lines, to rob free blacks under the pretense of retrieving fugitive slaves. The bottom line for most of them was the bottom line: trading in slaves was a lucrative business, especially after importing them from abroad was banned by Congress (under the Constitution) in 1807, the year of Solomon Northup’s birth.

Most of this kidnapping activity occurred along the Mason-Dixon Line (where it was easy to escape back and forth between Slave and Free States), not where Northup resided in Saratoga Springs, but as he traveled further south with Brown and Merrill (professed circus employees who tempted him with an offer to make money playing his violin in New York City and D.C.), the riskier the adventure became, risks Northup himself had been warned about, he admitted. Given the concealed nature of this type of crime, there are no official estimates of the number of free blacks kidnapped into slavery in the United States (abolitionists put it in the thousands a year while Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, put it in the “hundreds ... all the time”), but it was not uncommon and it continued through the Civil War, Paul Finkelman and Richard Newman write in the *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1619-1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass* (2006).

“Completely Enraptured”

What makes Steve McQueen’s and screenwriter John Ridley’s magnificent retelling of Northup’s *12 Years* so powerful is that it comes closer than any other representation to the true intent of Northup’s

original book, which was published in 1853 (just five months after his rescue) and sold some 17,000 copies in the first few months, and the lecture tours he went on throughout New York and New England in the short years that followed. In reading Northup today, one immediately senses how determined he was to be authentic in order to prove the veracity of his tale (to this end, he even included details on how sugar mills worked). In short, Northup (and his cowriter/ “editor,” David Wilson, a former attorney in Whitehall, New York) wanted us to see what he saw. Had this approach fit the theatrical conventions of the day, Northup might have retired a rich man. Because it did not, the attempts he made in translating his tale—twice—to the stage devolved into melodrama and quickly flopped—even with Northup himself acting in the starring role. In this way, Chiwetel Ejiofor, the Solomon Northup in Steve McQueen’s film, can do—and does—a better job in the film than even Northup himself was able to do in the stage versions of his own story, and instead of melodrama we, the audience, are left with the haunting images McQueen’s camera unflinchingly captures, not least the startling up-close performances of Michael Fassbender’s Edwin Epps, Brad Pitt’s Samuel Bass and countless others.

In viewing *12 Years a Slave*, we, the viewers, must test our own commitment to freedom, just as Northup’s audiences were tested (though with much higher stakes). As the film rolls on, we also are the ones willing him to freedom. We are the ones fearing for his life. We are the ones confined as he was confined. In our hopes, we are the ones emulating the petitioners and affidavit-signers who testified to his status as a free man, including his wife Anne. And in following his story to the end, we are the ones sitting in the shadows determined to reclaim our own freedom, ‘sadder but wiser’ for having witnessed its fragilities.

In the words of the greatest African American of the 19th century, Frederick Douglass, who in his praise for the original *Twelve Years a Slave* wrote, “We think it will be difficult for any one who takes up the book in a candid and impartial spirit to lay it down until finished...” (*Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, July 29, 1863). Of Northup’s story on stage, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* also had this to say: “His story is full of romantic interest and painful adventures, and gives as clear an insight to the practical workings and beauties of American Slavery. . . . It is a sure treat to hear him give some hazardous adventure, with so much sans [sic] froid that the audience is completely enraptured and the ‘house brought down’” (January 27, 1854).

When the house lights went back up in the screening room where I saw *12 Year a Slave* for the first time, I, too, felt “completely enraptured.” Every viewing of it also constitutes a further act of testifying to the truth about American slavery, which is what Solomon Northup could not do for himself during his 12 years of confinement in the slave South, even though he could write. While Solomon Northup’s death remains a mystery to this day, we do know he spent the rest of his life

testifying to the truth he had lived—and so should we.

The last amazing fact I'll share without giving the entire film away: You would have to watch Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, with its 134 minute-running time, close to 50,000 times, to equal the amount of time Solomon Northup spent as a slave. It is one of the miracles of American history and American literature that this noble, sensitive, intelligent man survived this horrendous ordeal, and lived to testify about it. Now, 160 years later, the brilliant collaboration between a Black British director and an African American screenwriter has brought Solomon Northup's tale back to life.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Harvard University

Further Reading

For those interested in reading more, I encourage you to begin by reading Solomon Northup in his own words (and that of his co-writer and editor, David Wilson), in the book, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), available in bookstores and online.

The best current biography (and the *indispensible* source to me in penning this column) is *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave*, by David A. Fiske, Clifford W. Brown, Jr., and Rachel Seligman (Praeger 2013). I personally want to thank the authors for sharing a copy of their manuscript with me in advance and for working so hard to set as much of the record straight as can be set straight. The facts you've uncovered are invaluable—the living descendants you've identified, precious.