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How 12 Years a Slave Gets History Right: By Getting It Wrong

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12-15 minutes

Steve McQueen's film fudges several details of Solomon Northup's autobiography—both intentionally and not—to more completely portray the horrors of slavery.

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Fox Searchlight Pictures

At the beginning of *12 Years a Slave*, the kidnapped freeman Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), has a painful sexual encounter with an unnamed female slave in which she uses his hand to bring herself to orgasm before turning away in tears. The woman's desperation, Solomon's reserve, and the fierce sadness of both, is depicted with an unflinching still camera which documents a moment of human contact and bitter comfort in the face of slavery's systematic dehumanization. It's scenes like these in

the film, surely, that lead critic Susan Wloszczyna to [state](#) that watching *12 Years a Slave* makes you feel you have "actually witnessed American slavery in all its appalling horror for the first time."

And yet, for all its verisimilitude, the encounter never happened. It appears nowhere in Northup's autobiography, and it's likely he would be horrified at the suggestion that he was anything less than absolutely faithful to his wife. Director Steve McQueen has said that he included the sexual encounter to show "a bit of tenderness ... Then after she's climaxes, she's back ... in hell." The sequence is an effort to present nuance and psychological depth — to make the film's depiction of slavery seem more real. But it creates that psychological truth by interpolating an incident that isn't factually true.

This embellishment is by no means an isolated case in the film. For instance, in the film version, shortly after Northup is kidnapped, he is on a ship bound south. A sailor enters the hold and is about to rape one of the slave women when a male slave intervenes. The sailor unhesitatingly stabs and kills him. This seems unlikely on its face—slaves are valuable, and the sailor is not the owner. And, sure enough, the scene is not in the book. A slave did die on the trip south, but from smallpox, rather than from stabbing. Northup himself contracted the disease, permanently scarring his face. It seems likely, therefore, that in this instance the original text was abandoned so that Ejiofor's beautiful, expressive, haunting features would not go through the entire movie covered with artificial Hollywood scar make-up. Instead of faithfulness to the text, the film chooses faithfulness to Ejiofor's face, unaltered by trickery.

Other changes seem less intentional. Perhaps the most striking scene in the film involves Patsey, a slave who is repeatedly raped by her master, Epps, and who as a consequence is jealously and obsessively brutalized by Mistress Epps. In the movie version, Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) comes to Northup in the middle of the night and begs him, in vivid horrific detail, to drown her in the swamp and release her from her troubles. This scene derives from the following passage at the end of Chapter 13 of the autobiography:

Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see [Patsey] suffer, and more than once, when Epps had refused to sell her, has she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp. Gladly would Patsey have appeased this unforgiving spirit, if it had been in her power, but not like Joseph, dared she escape from Master Epps, leaving her garment in his hand.

As you can see, in the book, it is Mistress Epps who wants to bribe Northup to drown Patsey. Patsey wants to escape, but not to drown herself. The film seems to have misread the line, attributing the mistress's desires to Patsey. *Slate*, following the lead of scholar David Fiske (see both the article and

the [correction](#)) does the same. In short, it seems quite likely that the single most powerful moment in the film was based on a misunderstood antecedent.

Critic [Isaac Butler](#) recently wrote a post attacking what he calls the "realism canard"—the practice of judging fiction by how well it conforms to reality. "We're talking about the reduction of *truth* to *accuracy*," Butler argues, and adds, "What matters ultimately in a work of narrative is if the world and characters created *feels* true and complete *enough for the work's purposes*." (Emphasis is Butler's.)

His point is well-taken. But it's worth adding that whether something "feels true" is often closely related to whether the work manages to create an illusion not just of truth, but also of accuracy. Whether it's period detail in a costume romance or the brutal cruelty of the drug trade in *Breaking Bad*, fiction makes insistent claims not just to general overarching truth, but to specific, accurate detail. The critics Butler discusses may sometimes reduce the first to the second, but they do so in part because works of fiction themselves often rely on a claim to accuracy in order to make themselves appear true.

This is nowhere more the case than in slave narratives themselves. Often published by abolitionist presses or in explicit support of the abolitionist cause, slave narratives represented themselves as accurate, first-person accounts of life under slavery. Yet, as University of North Carolina professor William Andrews has discussed in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, the representation of accuracy, and, for that matter, of first-person account, required a good deal of artifice. To single out just the most obvious point, Andrews notes that many slave narratives were told to editors, who wrote down the oral account and prepared them for publication. Andrews concludes that "It would be naïve to accord dictated oral narratives the same discursive status as autobiographies composed and written by the subjects of the stories themselves."

12 Years a Slave is just such an oral account. Though Northup was literate, his autobiography was written by David Wilson, a [white lawyer](#) and state legislator from Glens Falls, New York. While the incidents in Northup's life have been corroborated by legal documents and much research, Andrews points out that the impact of the autobiography—its sense of truth—is actually based in no small part on the fact that it is not told by Northup, but by Wilson, who had already written two books of local history. Because he was experienced, Andrews says, Wilson's "fictionalizing ... does not call attention to itself so much" as other slave narratives, which tend to be steeped in a sentimental tradition "that often discomfits and annoys 20th-century critics." Northup's autobiography feels less like fiction, in other words, because its writer is so experienced with fiction. Similarly, McQueen's film feels true because it is so good at manipulating our sense of accuracy. The first sex scene, for example, speaks

to our post-Freud, post-sexual-revolution belief that, isolated for 12 years far from home, Northup would be bound to have some sort of sexual encounters, even if (especially if?) he does not discuss them in his autobiography.

The difference between book and movie, then, isn't that one is true and the other false, but rather that the tropes and tactics they use to create a feeling of truth are different. The autobiography, for instance, actually includes many legal documents as appendices. It also features lengthy descriptions of the methods of cotton farming. No doubt this dispassionate, minute accounting of detail was meant to show Northup's knowledge of the regions where he stayed, and so validate the truth of his account. To modern readers, though, the touristy attention to local customs can make Northup sound more like a traveling reporter than like a man who is himself in bondage. Some anthropological asides are even more jarring; in one case, Northup refers to a slave rebel named Lew Cheney as "a shrewd, cunning negro, more intelligent than the generality of his race." That description would sound condescending and prejudiced if a white man wrote it. Which, of course, a white man named David Wilson did.

A story about slavery, a real, horrible crime, inevitably involves an appeal to reality—the story has to seem accurate if it is to be accepted as true. But that seeming accuracy requires artifice and fiction—a cool distance in one case, an acknowledgement of sexuality in another. And then, even with the best will in the world, there are bound to be mistakes and discrepancies, as with Mistress Epps's plea for murder transforming into Patsey's wish for death. Given the difficulties and contradictions, one might conclude that it would be better to openly acknowledge fiction. From this perspective, *Django Unchained*, which deliberately treats slavery as genre, or Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which acknowledges the role of the present in shaping the past through a fantasy time-travel narrative, are, more true than *12 Years a Slave* or *Glory* precisely because they do not make a claim to historical accuracy. We can't "actually witness ... American slavery" on film or in a book. You can only experience it by experiencing it. Pretending otherwise is presumptuous.

But refusing to try to recapture the experience and instead deciding to, say, treat slavery as a genre Western, can be presumptuous in its own way as well. The writers of the original slave narratives knew that to end injustice, you must first acknowledge that injustice exists. Accurate stories about slavery—or, more precisely, stories that carried the conviction of accuracy, were vital to the abolitionist cause.

And, for that matter, they're still vital. Outright lies about slavery and its aftermath, from *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone With the Wind*, have defaced American cinema for a long time. To go forward more honestly, we need accounts of our past that, like the slave narratives themselves, use accuracy and art

in the interest of being more true. That's what McQueen, Ejiofor, and the rest of the cast and crew are trying to do in *12 Years a Slave*. Pointing out the complexity of the task is not meant to belittle their attempt, but to honor it.

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