
Our Peculiar Institution: *12 Years a Slave*, American Protestantism, and the Erotics of Racism

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Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* is mandatory viewing for all Americans, unblinkingly revisiting a crucial and painful chapter in United States history and helping to flesh out the genealogy of America's still-tilted racial politics today. It also records a moment in United States religious history, a phase in which white and black Protestantisms were intimately bound together but set on divergent tracks. It illustrates how white and black Protestantisms developed particular strategies for managing what Sharon Patricia Holland (2012) calls the "erotics of racism"—methods for directing the flows of shame and dignity that emerge out of America's traumatized relationships between racialized communities.

The film, based on an 1853 autobiography, follows a free black man, Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), as he is lured by disguised slavers from Saratoga, NY, to Washington, DC, where slavery is still legal, and then kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. He is purchased first by a fair-minded but feckless master named Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), but after an altercation with Ford's foreman, Solomon is sold to another plantation owned by the sadistic Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). Epps is cruel to his slaves and torments Northup for several years before Northup is able to send a message with his whereabouts back to his family. Northup is rescued by his friends and in the closing scene reunited with his family in Saratoga.

Religion appears in *12 Years a Slave* in its conventional costume in the antebellum era, as a discursive technology that slaveowners use to persuade their slaves to be obedient. We are shown Epps preaching to his slaves and verbally underlining a Bible verse emphasizing subservience. But this scene also images the *limitations* of this analysis by showing the disconnect between discourse and power. The slaves in the film are not moved to serve by Epps's sermons—by ideological mystification dazzling them with heavy-sounding words—but by regimes of physical and psychological violence. The one-

to-one relationship between language and power is shown to be inadequate as an explanatory frame for the role of Christianity in the antebellum South.

Rather than an abstract ideology of race, I suggest religion is better understood in this film through the lens of Holland's notion of the *erotics* of racism. Holland in *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012) proposes an alliance between critical race theory and queer theory, probing for ways that the frictions between racialized bodies produce affects. Instead of reading the intertwining of religion, race, and power in this film in terms of discourse, I suggest, following Holland, that it is better illustrated through an exploration of the logic of affect. Rather than lying in discourse, the locus of power of the set of bodily practices called "religion" is in its ability to reorganize affects, specifically by rearranging patterns of shame and dignity.

Religion is imaged in two locations in the film: among the slaves and among the white plantation owners. For the white slave owner Epps, religion becomes an affective strategy that he uses to dissolve his frustrations at his own failing marriage, his moral uncertainty, and the vicissitudes of his life (such as a swarm of caterpillars devastating his crops) by blaming his slaves for bringing divine wrath upon him. Epps muses that there must be wickedness among his slaves, and this is the source of hardship in his life. He sends his slaves away and when they return tells them that because his crops have been restored, they must have been morally and spiritually responsible for the plague. Epps in this scene is calm and confident; the religious architecture he has created—physically and morally dividing demonic, wicked blacks from pure whites—has restored his sense of dignity and power. Drawing on a dim mishmash of pre-Darwinian science and moral philosophy, Epps assures one of his white workers with a sneer that blacks are animals, no more reasonable than the baboons in the New Orleans zoological gardens. Internal psychological tensions and the frustrations of daily life are melted down and expelled

onto bodies inhabiting a racialized / animalized zone beyond the sphere of whiteness. Race and religion merge to become a highly effective mechanism for solidifying dignity by affirming the abjection of outside bodies.

At the same time, Christianity for whites in the film often seems to be a mechanism for the repudiation of shame itself. Providing a useful hermeneutic key for understanding the psychology of Southern whites involved in slavery, the alcoholic laborer Armsby (Garret Dillahunt) explains that the moral crisis caused by his former position as an overseer drove him to drink. Slavery is not just a material regime of violence against blacks; it is a source of soul-destroying shame and pain for whites. When Epps is preaching scripture verses to his slaves authorizing their bondage, McQueen shoots him in a close-up, alone with his Bible, his gaze buried in the thick pages. The image is a soliloquy, a self-enclosed religious dialog: Epps is *having a conversation with himself* in which he tries to erase the shame of owning other human beings. White bodies, too, are trapped in the grinding economic and moral engines of slavery, and use religion as a technology to dissipate their shame and pain. This in no way diminishes their complicity or moral responsibility, but offers insight into the genealogy of the banality of evil.

For the slaves, religion is a set of embodied practices (including discursive practices) that activates hope and rebuilds dignity. As Eugene Genovese famously argued in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974), slave societies used religion as a strategy of resistance that reaffirmed their dignity against the onslaught of white degradation. In *12 Years a Slave*, we see this prerogative explicitly imaged in the context of a set of embodied affects. This is most dramatically exhibited in a late scene, when Solomon desperately screams at Epps—in the middle of one of Epps's rages—that he will be condemned by God for his violent acts. The astonishing bravery of his interruption—Epps is in the middle of whipping another of his slaves, Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), and he and Solomon are so physically close as to be visible in the same frame—underscores the affective stakes of the condemnation. Solomon, powerless to protect Patsey physically, nonetheless interrupts the violence by invoking religion to *reverse the current of shame* in the scene: no longer is Epps degrading his naked victim; the weapon in his hand makes him the one degraded. Radically reconfiguring the economy of dignity circulating between the

bodies in that scene is *so important* that Solomon ventures enormous physical risk to achieve it.

This scene is also significant in the way that it exhibits the change in Solomon Northup's character, from a risk-averse pragmatist to a passionate defender of the victimized—and from a free black disdainful of slaves to an abolitionist activist in solidarity with all other blacks affected by white racism. This transformation is imaged in another religious scene in the film, the slaves singing "Roll, Jordan, Roll" at the humble slave cemetery on Epps's plantation. Although Solomon, heretofore shown as uninterested in religion, starts out staring down at his hands, as his fellow slaves raise their voices and the rhythm of the hymn accelerates, he gradually loses himself and begins to sing. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1934, "Negro songs to be heard truly must be sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not on sound effects" (Hurston 1995, 345). In this shot he is enfolded into a group he had previously felt to be beneath him through an affective, embodied gesture: the act of collective song.

McQueen, who frequently places his characters in the right margin of the frame, has Solomon near the center in this shot. My argument would be that this images the reconstitution of a center of gravity within Solomon's body through the restoration of his dignity. The realization that becoming a slave is *not a source of shame* enables his solidarity and camaraderie with other oppressed black bodies. The entire shot—a static camera done in one take and lasting at least two minutes—is done in close-up, Solomon's face a mask of pain that remains even after he begins to sing—but that captures a dawning sense of passion and dignity. The architecture of this image is reprised in the final shot of the film, where Solomon is reunited with his family: his face is in the center of a cluster of black bodies, and his expression exhibits his new awareness of their shared vulnerability in a white supremacist society. This visual repetition underscores that the trajectory of Solomon's character development is driven by a complex of religion, racial solidarity (cutting across class lines), and affect—rather than discursive or ideological persuasion.

Blacks and whites use religion as a technology to produce and distribute affects, and the primary currency in both spaces is dignity. But there is still a vital difference between the two that carries into contemporary American evangelicalism. For black evangelicals, religion remains a source of joy and

dignity in the face of the degradations of everyday racism and inherited traumas. Some conservative white Southern evangelicals also use religion to sustain their dignity and self-respect, but, like the slave owners shown in this film, they do so in a way that defiantly imposes the burden of sin on other bodies. Conservative white Southerners who want to celebrate their heritage are placed in an intractable bind: their ancestors not only fought on behalf of one of the most evil institutions devised in American history—the system of black chattel slavery, which the architects of the Confederacy referred to with the blushing euphemism “our peculiar institution”—they lost. Faced with this compound shame, they have two options: to either repudiate this past and try to take responsibility for the legacy of white privilege they inhabit, or, double down, act like nothing ever happened, and insist that they have nothing to apologize for.

This latter method was on display as recently as last fall, when protesters during the federal government shutdown of October 2013 raised a Confederate flag—the consummate symbol of the refusal to take responsibility for the legacy of slavery—on the lawn of the White House (Capeheart 2013; cf. Schaefer 2012). During the same day’s protests, at the World War Two memorial less than a mile away, conservative activist Larry Klayman drew the political battle lines in terms of religious difference, saying, “I call upon all of you to wage a second American nonviolent revolution, to use civil disobedience, and to demand that this president leave town, to get up, to put the Qur’an down, to get up off his knees, and to figuratively come out with his hands up” (Killough et al. 2013). Just as with Edwin Epps, this strain of right-wing white politics uses religion to erect a racialized bounding line between the corrupt (black, “Muslim”) and the pure (white, Christian).

Even though the specific racial parameters have (mostly—see Feddes 2012) changed, with the Southern Baptist Convention—founded partly in defense of slavery—apologizing in 1995 for its history of supporting institutionalized racism (Niebuhr 1995) and electing a black president in 2012 (Eckholm 2012), conservative white southern evangelicalism

in the United States today remains a technology not merely for the dissemination of beliefs or even covert ideological operations, but for the rearrangement of affects, the expulsion of shame, and the extension and enrichment of what Holland calls the “American feast of difference” (Holland 2012, 6).

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