

BLACK CAMERA

An International Film Journal



A Memorial Tribute to Phyllis Klotman
The Films and Art of Mike Henderson
Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination

THE NEW SERIES

Volume 7, Number 1 • Fall 2015



In This Issue

MICHAEL W. THOMAS on The Local Film Sensation in Ethiopia: Aesthetic Comparisons with African Cinema and Alternative Experiences

ROBIN HAYES on *Black and Cuba*: Liberation, African American Studies, and the Tools of Third Cinema

MICHAEL T. MARTIN in conversation with filmmaker, artist, and musician Mike Henderson

GALLERY: The Paintings of Mike Henderson, curated by Mark A. Hain and Michael T. Martin

CLOSE-UP ON FUGITIVITY AND THE FILMIC IMAGINATION with introduction by **JAMES EDWARD FORD III**, and articles by **AUTUMN WOMACK, FRANK B. WILDERSON III, SHANA L. REDMOND, RIZVANA BRADLEY, DAVID MARRIOTT, JAMES EDWARD FORD III, AND M. SHADEE MALAKLOU**

WHITNEY STRUB on the Amiri Baraka Film Archive

AND INCLUDING

Africultures Dossier, African Women in Cinema Dossier, Book Reviews, Archival News, and Professional Notes and Research Resources



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

OFFICE OF SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING



PROJECT MUSE®

Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity's Lyrical Surplus, and the Cinematic Limits of 12 Years a Slave

Rizvana Bradley

Black Camera, Volume 7, Number 1, Fall 2015 (New Series), pp. 162-178
(Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/blc/summary/v007/7.1.bradley.html>

Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity's Lyrical Surplus, and the Cinematic Limits of 12 Years a Slave

RIZVANA BRADLEY

Abstract

This paper concerns an analysis of Steve McQueen's film 12 Years a Slave. Specifically, it considers how McQueen's cinema can be said to actively rely upon tropes of mastery and domination, pain and trauma, in order to construct what Saidiya Hartman has referred to as a "spectacle of sufferance," while visually qualifying "an embrace of pain" that engenders pleasure in the viewer. Patsey crystallizes a set of questions about the ontological status of black femininity in the film. Patsey's constant defiance of Master Epps through the production of a radical surplus labor is paradoxically a performance of disentanglement from the optics of McQueen's film, which draws heavily from mainstream cinema's tropes of racial suffering that specifically coalesce around the black body in pain. Patsey points to something latent in the structure of black womanhood, a remainder that initiates a set of oppositions that run through this violent history of subjection. She prefigures a representational aporia, a mode of cinematic blackness, that challenges the prescribed limits of personhood, identity, and humanity on the one hand, and labor, resistance, and anti-humanity on the other.

I like to make films in which people can almost pick up gravel in their hands and rub it but at the same time, I like the film to be like a wet piece of soap—it slips out of your grasp; you have to physically move around, you have to re-adjust your position in relation to it, so that it dictates to you rather than you to it.

—STEVE MCQUEEN¹

The Ontological Problem of Black Femininity: Tarrying with the Image

The unshakable climax of Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, the emotional power of the infamous soap scene, turns on the confrontation between the

Rizvana Bradley, "Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination: Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity's Lyrical Surplus, and the Cinematic Limits of *12 Years a Slave*." *Black Camera, An International Film Journal*, Vol. 7 no. 1 (Fall 2015): 162–178.

exhausted, overworked, and exploited Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) and her master, Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). Patsey confesses to having left the Epps plantation to retrieve soap from the nearby Shaw plantation. The scene presents Patsey wedged between Solomon Northrup (Chiwitel Ejiofor) and Epps. Epps continues to charge toward Patsey, whom he accuses of running off to philander with Master Shaw. Solomon leaps to Patsey's defense and Epps moves to strike him, but Patsey shields Solomon. At that moment, she presents a small white sample of soap from the pocket of her dress and, engaging the arm that was holding back Solomon, thrusts the soap before Epps (fig. 1). Holding Solomon back with her other arm, Patsey confesses:

I went to Massa Shaw's plantation! And you know why? I got this from Mistress Shaw. Mistress Epps won't even grant me no soap ta clean with. Stink so much I make myself gag. Five hundred pounds 'a cotton day in, day out. More than any man here. And fo' that I will be clean; that all I ax. Dis here what I went to Shaw's fo'.

Both men appear dumbstruck, as Patsey indicts Epps for the various indignities he has heaped upon her and the sadomasochistic structure of the Epps plantation, which figures highly in the film's diegesis. Patsey's defiance in this moment is, I argue, part of a general performance of black fugitivity that links and extends Patsey's performance of defiance within the diegesis to Nyong'o's own emotionally determined performance. Throughout this essay I will be describing a black fugitive performance within a performance, which enacts a disentanglement from the optics of McQueen's film and mainstream cinematic tropes structured by the sadomasochistic gaze. McQueen's film actively relies upon tropes of mastery and domination, pain and trauma, in order to construct what Saidiya Hartman has referred to as a "spectacle of sufferance," while visually qualifying "an embrace of pain" that engenders pleasure in the viewer.² A certain line is blurred between what happens on-screen and our libidinal investment in an economy of pain that comes to stand in not only for a history of black subjection, but also of anti-black violence. *12 Years a Slave* exploits a sadomasochistic gaze that is technically reinforced by the manipulation of the camera, as well as through the dialogue supplied by the film's screenwriter, John Ridley. The soap scene demonstrates that though Patsey is thoroughly scripted and inscribed in this economy of pain, the subject of her surplus labor, which compels this scene as its singular climax, troubles not only the filmic diegesis, but also the black woman's ontological status as debased and abject, an object of irredeemable violence on the one hand, and a site of unchecked physical, intellectual, and sensual generativity on the other.



Figure 1. Patsey takes her stand before Epps and Northup.



Figure 2. Patsey works in the fields.

Frank B. Wilderson has insisted that cinema “attempt[s] to position the Black in the world by way of analogy.” The cinema, in his view, permits the essential “erasure . . . of Blackness’s grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being nonhuman).”³ He writes: “In point of fact the Black is not in the world. . . . Blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form.”⁴ This essay responds to and draws out Wilderson’s conclusions for a reconsideration of the black woman’s fraught representationality. I argue that, in the first instance, the specular image of blackness and its violation bears an impossible relation to black femininity whose performative deconstruction of the cinematic apparatus disrupts the general economy of incapacity. I will focus my attention on the performative surplus Patsey enacts, drawing primarily from black feminist theory, a tradition of Marxist

thought, trauma theory, and Deleuzian thought on cinema to think through the paradoxes Patsey prefigures as well as her resistance to the genres of violence and sadomasochistic torture that the plantation inaugurates.

Returning to the soap scene: consider how the camera is directly implicated in the way the soap scene emotionally unfolds. Moving from a shot that gives us an overview of all three characters, the camera gradually circles around to the left (without a cut), where it hovers over Epps's shoulder in order to refocus and slowly close in on Patsey mid-speech. Here the camera's point of view is delegated to Epps and the close-up view of the soap in Patsey's hand, viewed from his perspective. Note that the scene is not depicted from Patsey's point of view but mimics and magnifies Epps's gaze toward her. The camera has a movement of its own, independent of any characters, and yet by a mimetic process of equivalence, it associates itself with Epps. The ambiguity of this over-the-shoulder shot is crucial, for it offers a glimpse into the frustration, rage, and anxiety that Epps directs toward Patsey.

The dramatic transfer from camera to object is intensified by the fact that the meaning of this scene has nothing to do with the soap. The soap is that elusive yet particularly charged object in the frame that works metonymically to slide us into a system of contrasting differences (black skin against white soap, blackness/whiteness, cleanliness/uncleanliness, human dignity/inhuman suffering); these associative differences generate narrative momentum and the viewer's psychic investment. The narrative tension that has been building for so long reaches its zenith in Patsey's dramatic reveal of the soap. Immediately Epps is taken aback by Patsey's censure of him. Prior to whipping Patsey, Epps is confronted with the soap once again, which functions as the lure, *objet a*, it is an object invested with a the fantasy of humanity, cleanliness, innocence and civility, that functions for Epps as the object cause of his desire; the soap is the object that shames, emasculates and humiliates Epps, who is undone in the instance of Patsey's indictment of him.

Neither Epps nor Solomon can come to terms with Patsey's ontological ambiguity, especially when she replies to Epps's accusations about her dishonesty and supposedly inherent lasciviousness: "And you blind wit yer own covetousness. I don't lie, Massa. If you kill me, I'll stick ta that." Epps is doubly blinded in a sense, both by his own "covetousness" (of her), and the subversive force of Patsey's willful transgressions. As Epps sees it, a slave is not resourceful enough to improve her own condition; nor can a slave make demands of her master; and, lastly, a slave lacks the ethical status to distinguish a lie from the truth, especially about him. Patsey shatters all three illusions at once. Furthermore, Patsey's revelation of the soap is a scandalous act because the soap reveals a genuine desire to be clean that paradoxically, to an outraged Epps, shows Patsey to be *inhuman* to the extent that she has been *humanized* in her demand.⁵

Patsey's character crystallizes a genealogy that encompasses and embodies a peculiar imbrication of race and sex, one that enables a set of conceptual paradoxes and contradictions about black femininity to emerge. She points to something latent in the structure of black womanhood, a kind of remainder that triggers a set of oppositions that run through this violent history; what emerges is an aporia that challenges the prescribed limits of personhood, identity and humanity on the one hand, and labor, resistance, and anti-humanity on the other. Patsey's ontological ambiguity depends on her critical vacillation between being subject to a violent cinematic apparatus on the one hand, and being the source of a material and aesthetic surplus that cannot be represented by the cinematic narrative. Her ontological ambiguity is bound up with black femininity's signifying history that encompasses not only the complex and contradictory epistemologies of black womanhood but the sociohistorical construction of the black woman as a figure in the popular imaginary who is at once grossly abject and lacking, and yet matriarchal, full, and complete. The black woman's consummate failure to qualify both blackness and femininity has been historically haunted by a violence meant to limit her to a normative sexuality. Angela Davis's essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" reflects this claim. The black woman is "annulled" from the category of woman and "released from chains of the myth of femininity."⁶ At the same time, however, the enslaved woman is called forth and held to the same gendered ideology from which she is interdicted, in order that she might be forced to fulfill her laboring function.

Themes of black suffering and pain are emphatically gendered, and *12 Years a Slave* conveys how the historical event of American slavery is coded and recoded on the symbolic plane of the black woman, *sous rapture*; she is placed under erasure, crossed out but held in place by the cinematic apparatus, which is mobilized by way of her absence presence, her trace. The first few opening shots of *12 Years a Slave* demonstrate this precarious (dis)placement of the body of the black woman onscreen. The scene in question illuminates an intimate encounter between the kidnapped freeman Solomon Northrup and an unnamed female slave. An extended soft focus close-up moves over the hazily composed image of two wrestling bodies until the camera gradually illuminates the fully clothed figure of a nameless female slave who uses Northrup's hand to bring herself to orgasm. The woman reaches out to Northrup for sexual healing, but in the midst of her sexual climax, she turns away from him in tears. Her interjected orgasm, instead of offering spiritual and physical release, comes as a bitter comfort; it is the sole remediation of slavery's systematic dehumanization. The unflinching quality of this first sequence is documented by the work and technical control of McQueen's camera.

Curiously, this unscripted scene, which is absent from Northrup's autobiography, is included in order to function as a prelude to the film. Instead of a standard transition from one shot to the next, the moment of their intimacy fades out to a close-up of Northrup's hands stringing his violin in his townhouse study in Saratoga. Curiously, the intimate encounter between Northrup and the woman cannot be written or scripted; it is an encounter that evades language but can be rendered graphically on screen through a kind of dream sequence, and McQueen imagines the woman's unfulfilled orgasm as the dissolution point from which the biographical opening of Northrup's exceptional life story might proceed. The jump forward in diegetic time projects the film as itself a kind of dream effect of an impossible black feminine surplus desire, preparing the viewer for the film's overall treatment of black female characters, whether it be this initial unknown character, mourning Eliza, the women leading songs at the graveyard, the cunning Harriet (mistress of Master Shaw, played by Alfre Woodard), or, of course, Patsey. The psychological endurance and emotional devotion of these black women to their scenes of survival is a principle thematic and the dramatic means by which the narrative advances. Black femininity becomes the vanishing point toward which the plotlines of its major male protagonists converge. Black women are the film's primary signifiers, and the affective dimensionality of the black female characters anchors the cinematic structure of feeling. In other words, the gaze of the film is a cinematic response to the erotic surplus of the black feminine. That surplus, brought unscripted by the unknown female character, shows up for us through modes of visual representation that operate as strategies of visual containment. The whipping scene, then, is the most pronounced effort to erase Patsey for being the film's most compelling instance of the black feminine's surplus.

Nevertheless, Patsey, as an image of black femininity that defies the logic of the sadomasochistic gaze, persists beyond this hazy dissolution. Her defiance invites several theoretical conclusions. On the one hand I want to acknowledge the potentiality of black femininity in the cinema that qualifies the black feminine as "the existence of a non-being, the presence of an absence."⁷ This mirrors Hortense Spillers's theoretical attention to "the capacity to represent a self through masks of self-negation."⁸ However, McQueen's film exercises an image of black femininity that is elaborated in contrapuntal fashion; the narrative and technical troping of both blackness and femininity are attempts to simultaneously locate and dislocate her. The critical imperatives of feminist film theory, which has developed the Lacanian premise that "woman does not exist," either critiques or centers on an ethics of sublimation that presents an idea of female embodiment as constituted through/as an originary lack. And yet this project, which fails to address how femininity, raced as white, willingly supplements mainstream white masculinity and patriarchy,⁹

falls short in accounting for the appearance of black femininity on screen. Beyond pointing to the racialized presence of black women on screen, my claim is that in the critical analysis offered by feminist film theory, a certain ontological difference gets denied—an ontological difference that nevertheless resurfaces through a visual pathologization of blackness. That pathologization is disrupted by the fugitive escape of the frame of a black feminist performance that signifies surplus, labor-power, and living labor as central concepts for understanding black life's fugitive existence in film.

Surplus Labor, Surplus Desire

This section focuses on a crucial conceptual paradox of Patsey's surplus labor, the five hundred pounds of cotton she produces, a feat that cannot be emulated by any man. Her surplus labor is linked to a surplus desire. Patsey's resistance is to be found in "the last place we would have thought of." Following a line of resistance through Harriet Jacobs, and paraphrasing Katherine McKittrick: "the last place they thought of" designates an oppositional set of desires caught up in the violent desiring arrangements of the plantation, refracted through the cinematic apparatus.¹⁰ I argue that Patsey hides in the midst of her own figurative violation, in the midst of the violence done to her. She hides in the last place they thought of, in the fold of her own surplus. Her herculean productivity in the labor fields is the sign of a more profound inexhaustible power—a form of labor power—that threatens to escape the frame narration of the film.

Patsey authorizes a theorization of the gendered relationship between surplus, labor-power, and living labor. Black feminine labor and desire bespeak an unexpected vitality derived from labor-power. Marx formally substituted *labor power* for *labor* in the *Grundrisse*, as the curious commodity that the worker sells the capitalist. Labor power "is not materialized in a product, does not exist apart from [the worker] at all, [it] thus exists not really, but only in potentiality, as [the worker's] capacity [*Fähigkeit*]."¹¹ Significantly, we never see any evidence of Patsey's labor materialize; the five hundred pounds of cotton becomes a myth of sorts circulated by others on the Epps plantation (fig. 2). According to Marx, the capitalist cannot own the worker's capacity to work. For Edwin Epps, the five hundred pounds of cotton matters less than Patsey's mysterious capacity to consistently produce at that rate under his brutal regime. That exorbitant, resistive surplus offers a promise and a threat that hangs over the Epps plantation. It tortures Edwin Epps in large part because Patsey, a black female slave, falls outside of the worker-capitalist labor relation.

At this point a crucial distinction must be theorized. Marx's theory depends upon the wage worker's ownership of her person and this personhood precedes and is reproduced in contractual labor relations.¹² It is time to consider what is made and unmade in the absence of both that contract and the impossibility of the personhood that secures it. Marx would also claim that the wage worker is triply free: free to sell his labor power on the market, free of the ownership of the means of production, and free to starve to death if one wants to forego the capitalist laboring environment. The black female slave's especially gendered relationship to the means of biological and social reproduction signifies a subversive capacity in the worker, those who own wages and otherwise. Consider W. E. B. Du Bois's remark that slaves "might be made to work continuously but no power could make them work well."¹³ Apropos Du Bois, we can conclude that for the slave, there is a certain remainder, an irreducible gap, between the slave's production, and the potentialization of her labor. In the absence of a clearly marked ontological position, the black female slave transgresses the imagined boundary between labor and fugitive performance that hinges on the question of gendered capacity. For Epps, Patsey is nothing other than her capacity. But what Patsey gives and potentially withholds is something more—her *capacity for capacity*, her fugitive giving and withholding of labor as a prior capacity that effectively cuts the ontological difference between worker and slave.

To extend Du Bois's insights here, it is the right of the slave to work and work well as a prior right that prefigures the contractual labor relation. My claim is that this "right" is not dependent upon the contract form per se, but that the contract form is both a measure and an effect of the capitalist's need to regulate the fugitive reproduction of a form of labor that is itself a performance of productivity. This secret lies with Patsey, whose giving and withholding of that capacity within the space of the indiscernible gap between labor's production and its performance, transgresses the contractual "right" that informs the ontological impasse between wageworker and slave. Furthermore, her herculean productivity, read as an expression of her performative capacity, is all bound up with her moral inexhaustibility. Her moral appeals to Epps reveals that *no wage* would be an appropriate compensation for the violent tethering of slave and worker to a capitalist social order set on the destruction of capacity and (the right to) work.

Patsey poses the same problem for Epps as she poses for thought: how does such a surplus capacity persist despite, as Wilderson insists, the slave "being generally dishonored, and perpetually open to gratuitous violence"?¹⁴ Marx also tells us that "If the worker consumes [her] disposable time for [her] self, [s]he robs the capitalist,"¹⁵ who runs up against the worker's ability, also her inherent right, to reproduce her labor power. Patsey's demand contains

an indictment of Epps that is itself an extension of Marx. Patsey's reproductive surplus necessarily folds back into black women's gestational capacities in the context of enslaved reproduction. Moreover, her surplus is not simply subject to violent capture, but throws into relief Epps's dominant position, which emerges "only through what dominance subordinates through appropriation."¹⁶ In other words, Epps attempts to subordinate a reproductive surplus *that is always already performing a deconstruction of every limit/edge/confinement*. The full force of Angela Davis's assertion that black women performed "the only labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor" might be grasped in this context.¹⁷

Patsey activates a form of what, after Marx, we might call *living labor*, as the source for her fugitive existence that is already as it were, underway, even in the most brutal work conditions, and under the cinematic gaze that typically sympathizes with that brutality. Living labor is a concept with a future tense; it is not simply a utopian vision for what will follow capitalism, but enacted and fulfilled within the space of the worker-capitalist relation, as I have argued. Patsey's living labor endures; hers is a living labor that imagines sociality beyond the whipping post, and becomes the condition of possibility for the social reproduction and futurity Solomon Northrop imagines. And so despite the film's final scenes, which imply that that she has no future as the camera whisks Solomon back to his home in Saratoga and leaves behind a forlorn-looking Patsey, it is her labor power that haunts Solomon's departure from the plantation and disrupts the narrative closure of the film. For Solomon is fleeing not simply the plantation, but a plantation regime so violent and brutal that, perversely, it confronted the persistence of a form of labor power so grotesquely immeasurable, as the only thing that could withstand it. To think about Patsey's capacity to endure, imagine, and sustain an image of life on the other side of that violence, poses a challenge to the film's assumption of the unclaimed kinship that prefigures blackness.

Falling and Flight: Between Incapacity and Capacity

Patsey's performance of surplus also depends on her strategic refusal of generativity. *12 Years a Slave* is affectively unwilling to give up on Patsey, even in the moments that she fails, or the moments that she falls. Patsey's falls are a moment of improvised failure, artistic expressions of a generative refusal that is itself a prefiguration, or a possible iteration of a form of reproductive general strike. Alys Weinbaum has identified "the Du Boisian idea of the 'general strike' of slaves against slavery as the motor of modern history."¹⁸ She theorizes the "gender of the general strike" in the context of the

long history in which black female slaves operated as workers to “take their labor power out of circulation.” This gendered refusal of laboring becomes central to the recognition that “slave women’s protest against the sexual and reproductive labor—against rape and the work of breeding—was as central to the struggle against slavery in the nineteenth century as it might yet be to the struggle against contemporary biocapitalism.”¹⁹ I extend Weinbaum’s claims by emphasizing that Patsey’s strategic wielding of that labor power has a complicated double edge (fig. 3). Her embodiment of this paradoxical capacity enables her to confound the master’s violent gendering of her as the conventionally feminine object of his desire, at the same time that it eclipses Epps’s sadomasochistic fantasies about both production and profit. In other words, both *capacity* and *incapacity*, must be considered together in the knotty symbolic economy of performance.

Examining this relationship between capacity and incapacity requires a turn to filmic performance set on the plantation, a site that has proven essential to refining the race, gender, and class privileges of “European Man” over slave. In *12 Years a Slave*, we see how the plantation serves as a kind of ur-text for the biopolitical manufacturing and instantiation of such identities. Patsey’s capacity to outperform the other slaves and Epps’s desire enables a fundamental rethinking of the human outside European Man’s limits. I want to point to the scenes in which the slaves are compelled to dance and perform for the enjoyment of the master and where Patsey’s performance willingly diverges from the master’s mandate.

In the master’s house we see how the exploited, overworked slaves are subjected to the sadomasochistic fantasies of Master and Mistress Epps who demand to be entertained by them. The slaves coerced into dancing, are also coerced into a performative display of abject obedience. In these scenes, both Master and Mistress Epps taunt their slaves, allowing them to share in the delectables of the house, only to mock the reluctant shuffling of their feet across the parlor floor as an indication of their incapacity to perform, which further evidences a general ineptitude.

While all the slaves anxiously spin at the threat of being whipped, Patsey’s solo, trance-like reverie captures the Master’s attention. The film’s script indicates, “As the slaves twirl about Epps keeps an attentive eye on Patsey. . . . [H]is primary motivation for holding dances is so that he may view Patsey twirl about the floor.” Seeing her husband actively lust after Patsey, Mistress Epps flies into a rage and hurls a carafe at her. As Patsey falls to the floor the script indicates she remains “bloody and writhing in pain.” Then, “screaming like a hellion” Mistress Epps demands that her husband sell her immediately, exclaiming, “You will remove that black bitch from this property, ’er I’ll take myself back to Cheneyville.” But Epps flatly refuses his wife, replying drunkenly:

Back to that hog's trough where I found you? Oh, the idleness of that yarn washes over me. Do not set yourself up against Patsey, my dear. That's a wager on which you will not profit. Calm yerself. And settle for my affection, 'cause my affection you got. Or, go. 'Cause I will rid myself of yah well before I do away with her!²⁰

Mistress Epps storms off humiliated and incapacitated by the dramatic muddying of the distinct boundaries between the abject position of the black female slave and pristine white womanhood. In turn, Mistress Epps questions Edwin Epps's sanity and masculinity but *only when he fails to play his sadistic role*—that is, *when he cannot treat Patsey as a fungible object* because he recognizes her singularity, even through the violently distorted lens of a sadomasochistic desiring to subjugate her. Spinning out from Edwin Epps's fleeting realization is a stunning reversal of the terms of humanity, as I will explain.

Though the nature of the violence inflicted upon Patsey and the brutality of the scene cannot be denied, Patsey's dancing poses an imminent threat to this scene of coercive violence in the big house. Like her labor, Patsey's dancing in these scenes appears inexhaustible. In contrast to the other slaves who seem weary and tired, Patsey is spirited away, and does not rest. But in breaking away from the coercive space of the slave circle, she also breaks from the film's diegesis in a dual sense. At stake in my formulation is precisely what Hartman has theorized as “the capacities of the performative” for defining the boundaries of the human, where said capacities inform acts of “doing (as in [the] making) and undoing [of] the subject.”²¹ Patsey's improvisatory break offers an optic for deconstructing the tropes of figurative suffering that presumably subtend images of blackness.

To reconceive the relationship between plot and character here, I briefly turn to Gilles Deleuze's provocative study of film. Deleuze insists the filmic spectacle is “less to tell a story than to develop and transform bodily attitudes.” Drawing out Brecht's notion of *gest*, or the embodied attitudes or the gist of the performer, Deleuze explains that just as the essence of theater is irreducible to the plot or the subject, “the gest . . . takes place independently of any role.”²² There are multiple instances of Patsey creating, playing, resting, and contemplating, activities that break off from the formal description of her character, activities that anticipate and fall under the rubric of the *gest*. Deleuze asserts, “Characters must not come from a story or plot, but the story should be secreted by the characters,” so that what we are left with is what he calls, “a cinema of bodies.”²³ Patsey catalyzes a different set of bodily attitudes and affects that infiltrate and trouble the cinematic tropes of black bodily suffering the film's narrative advances.

In this brutal scene of dancing and falling Patsey instantiates a different set of bodily attitudes, reframing the black body as a site and a resource for

a set of possibilities. She allows us to see the *fall* and *falling* as virtual movement, as a point or points of passage to a set of bodily failures that instead of prefiguring traumatic reference, could be conceived of as other alternative bodily enactments—a faltering, toppling, tumbling toward another order or ensemble of things. In and through her fall Patsey inserts herself into an experimental mode of figuration and movement, into another set of kinetic imperatives, reminiscent of a specific critique of an idea of man offered by Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* (On the Puppet Theater), written in 1810, offers a theory of the dancing body centered on the puppet or marionette. In it he conceives of a different ontological body, from which emerges a critique of man, movement, and metaphysics. Provocatively, Kleist states, "Puppets, like elves, need the ground only so that they can touch it lightly and renew the momentum of their limbs through this momentary delay. We [humans] need it to rest on, to recover from the exertions of dance, a moment which is clearly not part of the dance."²⁴ Kleist contrasts the human's exhaustible energy with the puppet, who is animated by a renewed momentum.

The marionette appeals to a different set of metaphors facilitating a critique of Man imagined as productive yet exhaustible. By positing Patsey as a marionette-like figure, we gain an understanding of the implicative force of Patsey's resistance, by way of the puppet's ontological difference. As I have argued, Patsey's surplus capacity in the labor field, which now extends to the dance parlor, breaks out of this production-exhaustion bind. In another extraordinary albeit brief scene, Mistress Epps gazes down at Patsey, sitting in the middle of a cotton field crafting dolls out of cornstalks (fig. 4). The full extent to which the Mistress regards Patsey as a threat is apparent in the way the scene fades out with the Mistress' lingering gaze upon Patsey, as she will later take action to suppress and cut off what she recognizes as evidence of an imaginative resourcefulness. Patsey's fabrication of these cornstalks as dolls or puppets traces and prefigures the event of her symbolic transformation into the marionette/doll she will soon become. In the master's house, Patsey moves like the marionette with "an infinite . . . spontaneity that self-aware humans can never achieve"; it is "above all uncanny" in how it "dissimulate[s]" the human's "self-moving" ability.²⁵ I conclude this essay by teasing out the implications of Patsey's marionette-like agency on, yet outside the confines of, cinema, which go beyond Kleist's contemplations or even the recent work of Cathy Caruth in trauma studies.

Caruth argues that the experience of trauma is metaphorically centered on the falling body (via Paul De Man's reading of Kleist's essay) whose story is tied to "the impact of reference."²⁶ For Caruth, trauma is "inextricably bound up with the fact of literal falling."²⁷ Trauma signals a "truth that is not otherwise available," which "in its delayed appearance cannot be linked to what



Figure 3. A compelling scene of containment and excess, staging Patsey's complex place on Epps's plantation.



Figure 4. Patsey crafts dolls in the fields.

is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.”²⁸ Caruth assumes that trauma is unknowable but also, infinitely transferrable. For it would seem that if the falling body secures the movement from de Man to Caruth, trauma’s experience and discoverability is always already performative. But what I mean to underscore is that the universality of the falling body arises as a source of concern. The question is *which* body can stand in for this infinite transferability, for the body that gains us access to the truth of a historical trauma in Caruth’s formulation is the body of European man.

The theoretical frame that both de Man and Caruth’s readings use to think about the falling body, confront a certain limit in the figure of Patsey and her re-inventive capacity in *12 Years a Slave*, a film consumed by its relation to historical reference. Patsey’s body captures and bears the weight of the impact of traumatic reality. Recalling the encounter with Mistress Epps in the parlor of the big house, when Patsey is violently struck with a carafe, it is important to distinguish that Patsey’s fall signifies not a free-falling body, but a body *made* to fall. Patsey’s fall attests to specific historical and political points of reference of slavery’s attempt to contain the black feminine surplus. Yet Caruth does not put “reference” in any historical context. What Caruth calls “the impact of reference” cannot be measured through a pre-affixed system of meaning, forms, bodies, or events. Patsey’s fall challenges the universal assumption that the black body figures the “literality” that attends the problem of reference.

The more salient point here, however, is how a reading of Kleist impacts the contemporary context of *12 Years a Slave*. At stake in the film, is the black female body as the site of referential return. I am suggesting that, following Lepecki, Patsey stands in for the set of “ontokinetic differences between human movement, animal movement and puppet movement,” which are unworked, re-worked and re-routed through a re-imagination of black feminine performative capacity.²⁹ Kleist describes the marionette as “the ideal dancer,” as one who possesses a “supple body . . . and infinite receptivity for the master’s movements.”³⁰ But Patsey’s ambiguous registration of herself as a puppet/marionette reverses Kleist’s kinetic formula: her dancing exhibits the movement of a marionette that has broken away from the master’s strings. She exhibits qualities of movement that bear a direct relation to a fugitive labor power. In other words, Patsey figures in this scene as a marionette without strings, an inexhaustibly innovative masterless puppet, completely indecipherable to Edwin Epps.

An enigmatic figure, Patsey as fugitive marionette, evidences the vertiginous gap between the slave and the assumed civilized structure of what Du Bois diagnosed as white bourgeois Southern humanity. But she also throws into further relief the burdened ontology of the slave. As Wilderson has in-

sisted, “The Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity.”³¹ In the film Patsey is coerced into standing in for all that that anti-humanity would signify, at the same time that she embodies a radical claim to that negation, precisely in an effort to preserve the interval between the human and the anti-human. Her achievement is her studied preoccupation with surviving and persisting within the interval.³² Patsey’s seemingly impossible occupation of an ontological negation perforates the distinction between the human and the anti-human. She potentializes that gap, opening up a space for herself that is both real and virtual.

Finally, Patsey embodies a virtuality that is immanent to the violent reality she inhabits. That practice is irreducible to the common rhetoric of choice, ability, or agency. Ronald Judy describes the conditions of possibility for this virtuality as follows:

The Negro challenge is in achieving a thinking in transition that is virtual with its own process, an occurrence of intelligence that thinks change is immanently real. Such virtual occurrences are immanent in the sense that their existence is a function of the very economy of force whose operation is to achieve absolute management of all virtuality as reality’s adjudicator of last resort.³³

I claim Patsey as a virtual black feminine figure, who reroutes viewers through a history of black subjection and through a history of creative resistance to that subjection, as an alternative site of “referential return.” Patsey returns us not to the historical site of suffering and trauma, but to an ambiguous sequence of nonhuman referentiality: the unrestricted, performative scene opened by the human-animal-puppet. That sequence makes itself apparent through its break from conventional filmic codes, recalling and refiguring the critical motifs of several theoretical traditions. Patsey’s performance complicates our understanding of the human and its fraught relationship to expressivity, truth, potentiality, and materiality.

Rizvana Bradley is an assistant professor of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at Emory University. She was previously a Helena Rubinstein Critical Studies Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. She was the guest editor of a special issue of the journal *Women and Performance* on hapticality; has published articles in *TDR: The Drama Review* and *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*; and has essays forthcoming in *Rhizomes*. Her current book project discusses and locates the material history of blackness as central to current debates about corporeality in art and contemporary continental philosophy.

Notes

1. Steve McQueen quoted in Patricia Bickers, "Let's Get Physical," *Art Monthly*, www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/steve-mcqueen-interviewed-by-patricia-bickers-dec-jan-96-97, accessed August 17, 2015.

2. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

3. Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structures of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 37-38.

4. *Ibid.*, 38.

5. Thanks to Eileen Jones for this incredible insight from her article on *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2014), which I have adapted for my purposes in order to further emphasize that 1) the fraught status of humanity and subjectivity for the black, and 2), the black woman as a the transitional figure and the bridge between the human and the nonhuman. See Eileen Jones, "No War But Ape War," *Jacobin Magazine*, July 18, 2014, www.jacobinmag.com/2014/07/no-war-but-ape-war, accessed August 17, 2015.

6. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review* 13 (1972): 87.

7. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.

8. Hortense Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race," *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 116.

9. Cultural theorist bell hooks has theorized the racialized presence of black women in film. hooks critiques feminist film studies, whose reliance upon psychoanalytic rubrics for understanding feminine sexuality, fails to understand that "sex/sexuality may not be the primary/exclusive signifier of difference." See bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 123.

10. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 44. See also, Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

11. This insight is from Martin Nicolaus, "Foreword" in Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 21. See also 281, 292, 293, 359.

12. Karl Marx, "The Buying and Selling of Labour-Power," *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 185-97.

13. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 40.

14. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 11.

15. Marx, *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, 217, 342.

16. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 262.

17. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," 87.

18. Alys Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction and Black Feminism's 'Propaganda of History,'" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (2013): 440.

19. Ibid.

20. Mistress Epps quoted in the adapted screenplay. John Ridley, *12 Years a Slave*, 66, www.pages.drexel.edu/~ina22/splaylib/Screenplay-12_Years_a_Slave.pdf, accessed August 17, 2015.

21. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 40.

22. Gilles Deleuze, "Cinema, body and brain, thought," in *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 191.

23. Ibid.

24. Heinrich von Kleist, quoted in Andre Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

25. David Farrell Krell, *Derrida and Our Animal Others: The Beast and the Sovereign* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 22.

26. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 89.

27. Ibid., 75.

28. Ibid., 4.

29. Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 132.

30. Ibid., 137.

31. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 11.

32. To echo Kara Keeling, Patsey already understands the extent to which for the black, slavery "is an interval punctuated by a hellish cycle of appearances in which one must survive." Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 38.

33. Ronald Judy, "Reflections on Strausism, Antimodernity, and Transition in the Age of American Force," *boundary 2* 33, no. 1 (2006): 58.

34. My reading of the soap scene, specifically the camera's "mimetic process of equivalence," is aided by Thomas [Elsaesser](#) and Warren Buckland's *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, (Arnold: London, 2002), as well as Amanda Fleming's annotation of Slavoj [Žižek's](#) *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: [Routledge](#), 2004). This missing footnote, which should appear on page 165 of the text, will be mentioned in a future issue of *Black Camera*.