

Written by Commentary by Eric Mahmoud  
Friday, 08 November 2013 13:05

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Last week I had the opportunity to attend the screening of the most brutal, gut wrenching, and emotionally overwhelming film I've ever seen in my 53 years. *12 Years a Slave* is British director Steve McQueen's adaptation of a memoir by the same name, written 160 years ago by Solomon Northup. Northup was a freeman who lived in New York. He was tricked, drugged, kidnapped, taken to New Orleans, and made a slave.

Northup's story is one-of-a-kind because it is told by the victim of the slave condition himself. This first-person perspective makes the condition impossible to sanitize. One woman in the theatre could be heard weeping through half the movie. Whites and Blacks alike were in tears by the time the viewing was over.

Imagine being free one day and shackled the next. When Northup tried to assert his rights as a free Black man, he was brutally beaten by his kidnappers. He was stripped of his name and identity. He had to hide his education, as revealing his ability to read and write could have led to his murder. One day Solomon Northup existed as a literate, free man. The next he did not.



*12 Years a Slave* brings us into the world of the slave-making process and the sadistic treatment Black people had to endure. Women were savagely raped by their slave masters in their slave quarters while the male and female slaves looked on. In the most horrid and inhumane scene in the movie, a slave named Patsy, favored by her master for rape, leaves the plantation to find soap to wash her body because she said she couldn't stand the smell of herself. She returns only to be tied to a post and whipped, and then—to further dehumanize her and all her fellow slaves—the slave master orders Northup to “whip the skin off her back”. Northup resists, but the master threatens to kill every slave present unless his command is carried out.

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As an African American educator who has studied the historical, social, and psychological condition of African American people all of my adult life, I am particularly interested in how history has had an impact on our current condition as African American people. Some may think that it would be a stretch to link the institution of slavery to the current condition of Black people in America; however, Sigmund Freud reminds us that “in the human mind the past is always present”.

It is easier for us to understand the debilitating psychological effects of war on a soldier even after the war is long over. We call this condition Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But, as clinical psychologist Dr. Joy Degruy points out, there is also a condition known as Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). PTSS represents behaviors and beliefs that are passed down through generations by Black people to their children based on the oppressive conditioning of the slave system. Emotions such as self-hatred that lead to high rates of Black-on-Black crime; the belief in Black intellectual inferiority – these are symptoms of PTSS.

In a two-hour movie that covered the ordeal of one man’s traumatic experience over a 12-year period, it became clearer to me that the condition that many Black people continue to struggle with today is directly related to the oppressive conditioning that many Blacks were subjected to under the slave system. From the inordinate rates of violence in the Black community to the lack of engagement of some Black parents in the education system; all of these issues are vestiges of the unbroken mental chains of the 400-year institution of slavery.

At the conclusion of the film it was Northup’s education, grit, and the conscious act of a stranger that happened to be white (who took a great risk himself) that finally liberated Northup from his enslavement. I’m convinced that the only way we (all conscious adults regardless of ethnic background) will liberate a significant number of Black people from the shackles of poverty, crime, and underachievement is by providing Black children with a belief in their infinite possibilities, as well as a solid, world-class education. It worked for Northup almost 200 years ago, and it can work for our children today.



**On 12 Years a Slave**  
**Email correspondence**  
**compiled by Al McFarlane,**  
**Editor-In- Chief**

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Laysha Ward, President Community Relations for Target, invited a small group of community leaders to a pre-release screening of the film, *12 Years a Slave* at Walker Art Center. The group included me, Scott Gray, President and CEO of Minneapolis Urban League, Louis King, CEO of Summit Academy OIC, Ella and Eric Mahmoud, founders and leaders of Harvest Prep and Best Academies in North Minneapolis, and Sarah Bellamy, Associate Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul.

Like most in the audience, we all sat silent, transfixed by the enigmatic contradictions laid bare by this powerful story and cinematic masterpiece. I was not able to stay for the discussion that followed, but I reached out to get impressions of friends who did stay. Laysha Ward, in a post event email, graciously thanked those she had invited to the screening. I seized the moment to ask Ward and the list to share reactions for publication in *Insight News*.

Eric Mahmoud went deeper with excellent commentary that properly frames our email conversation. Robin Hickman of SoulTouch Productions, did stay for the discussion and shared her comments, feelings and insights.

This is a conversation that needs to expand. I invite readers to join this conversation online at [insightnews.com](http://insightnews.com) and at [facebook/insightnews](https://facebook.com/insightnews).

### -----Original Message-----

**From:** Laysha Ward

**Sent:** Wednesday, October 30, 2013 11:57 PM

**To:** Scott Gray; Al McFarlane; Sarah Bellamy; Louis King; Eric & Ella Mahmoud

**Subject:** Thank you

Scott, Al, Sarah, Louis, Ella and Eric

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join me at the Walker tonight for the screening of *12 Years a Slave*.

Tonight was the 3rd time I've seen the movie and I've just started to read the book. I often describe the film as brutal and yet beautiful, if these two emotions can live in the same space.

We are all left to wrestle with what is most compelling about this true story.

For me ultimately it's about love, freedom and the resilience of the human spirit to conquer hate. It's also a reminder that while we've made progress there is still work to be done to create freedom and equity for all. It is in that spirit that I'm grateful for your leadership in our community, focused on education, jobs, bringing a voice to our stories and so much more.

I'm honored that my role at Target has given me the opportunity to know and work alongside you.

Best, Laysha

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**On Oct 30, 2013, at 11:55 PM, "emahmoud" <[emahmoud@thebestacademy.org](mailto:emahmoud@thebestacademy.org)>; wrote:**

Laysha,

On behalf of my wife and me, I want to thank you for inviting us to the very powerful, disturbing, emotional and thought provoking film *12 Years a Slave*. I must say that it took me a while to regain my composure after viewing the film this evening. I kept thinking about not just the devastating psychological impact that it had on Solomon and the other slaves almost 200 years ago; and most importantly, what are the residual psychological effects that this kind of brutality and dehumanization has on Black people today. Sigmund Freud said that "in the human mind, the past is always present." If Freud is right, then this may provide some explanation for Black on Black crime (Solomon whipping Patsy) as well as explaining the origin of the Belief Gap (Black people being convinced that they are intellectually inferior) that so many of our children come to school with.

As someone said at the post-film discussion tonight, this film will open up a much needed dialog about the devastating effects of the institution of slavery in the shaping of the American ethos. Thanks again for thinking about us and creating the opportunity to learn from what will prove to be one of the most important films of our time.

Sincerely, Eric Mahmoud

**Sent: Thursday, October 31, 2013 5:34 PM  
To: 'Laysha.Ward'**

Dear Laysha,

Thank you for inviting me/us to screen *12 Years a Slave*.

So I dreamed about the film last night and have spent most of the day today discussing it with my wife, Bobbie Ford. I am comparing this film to *Django*, which stirred a certain sense of satisfaction from the fiction of retaliation.

*12 Years a Slave*, however, doesn't fuel that fantasy. Rather it demands that I examine the points at which I would have thrown in the towel and said "no more" ... "no mas"!...choosing suicide by lynching... or some certain death at the hand of my oppressor.

Then I weigh that impulse against the biggest message in the movie, the imperative of reaching grandparenthood, against all odds and at all costs, and embracing, holding, eternity...the child.

Laysha, I think you identified it as love.

The takeaways for me:

1. We trust. We are deceived. We trust again. We are deceived. Still, again we trust.

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2. This film debunks the myth of the slaveholder's wife as an innocent bystander/victim.
3. I call on those who see the Brad Pitt character in themselves to act on their convictions today.

I would love to compile brief impressions of your/our group for publication as a screening review in Insight News. What do you think?

Laysha, thank you again. Kudos to you and Target for helping move the ball forward.

Al McFarlane

**On Nov 1, 2013, at 10:19 AM, "Louis King" wrote:**

Laysha,

Whew! I saw *Gravity* the previous weekend and I thought that it had me on the edge of my seat. *12 Years a Slave* was gut wrenching and initially confusing. I experienced so many emotions and had to take the time to think about them.

*Django* was, at the core, about family, and so was this movie: except, the good guy did not win against those who wronged him. (This story was) much like being imprisoned unjustly and set free with just a handshake.

Brad Pitt brought to life those who have always been there. They simply recognize that the injustice is wrong and are willing to help if we are willing to stand up--same line of thought in *Django* when the character would not shake hands with a man who put dogs on a slave.

Family, faith, and friends are the ties that bind.

-Louis King

**From: Laysha.Ward**

**Sent: Friday, November 01, 2013 10:38 AM**

**To: Louis King**

Wonderful reflections, Louis. My great great grandma Hattie Mae, who was born in 1880 and died at the age of 105, always told us growing up that "there are a few things in life worth fighting for- freedom, family, friends, faith and an education." This film also reconnected me with her and the spirit of our ancestry. She often spoke of a focus on fighting for what is right and just in the world and that many things she fought for, generations later, were being realized in me. Powerful.

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### On Nov 1, 2013, Scott Gray wrote:

Laysha,

I was out of the office yesterday, and still I probably needed a day to rein in my emotions. I share the emotions expressed by each of you. At the end of the movie when Al asked me what I thought, I had just one word: brutal.

As I reflected on this movie, I wondered how "our people" who were treated so unfairly and inhumanely, got through this type of oppression. I also see the correlation of this horrific experience to the struggles that exist for Black people today.

I agree with Louis that strong faith kept us. Many of our unsung heroes, including those we learn about in stories like this, illustrate that hope, faith and selflessness have been critical qualities for our survival. Many would contend that we should move past these stories and embrace "multiculturalism" where we all have an equal opportunity to achieve. However, the current realities prove again and again that we have not all arrived.

There still exists a subconscious pain that inundates, permeates us, and even binds us, whether we are at the neighborhood corner or in the corporate suite. We must lead a new movement with that same faith and selfless nature of our ancestors and show the world that we are "a people that have a true destiny."

Scott Gray

**To: Robin Hickman**  
**From: Al McFarlane**

Dear Sister Queen,

Here is the thread of our conversation re: *12 Years a Slave*. Please send 2-3 paragraphs adding your voice to ours. Thanks, One Love,  
Al

Dearest Brother Al-

Deepest gratitude. I just parked my car at Crystal Lake Cemetery for a visit with dear Momma, the Queen Mother Patricia. I usually turn radio off and put the phone away during this sacred time. But I was drawn to check my email and here is your message. Thanks for sharing Laysha's thoughts. I got chills when she stated, "There's still work to be done." That was Mom's homegoing theme... words she lifted up often and right before her passing... "We still have so much work to do!" God I miss her... I'm going to go over and sit in the presence of her shell and spirit. Here is mighty peace and wisdom for me... her resting place, in her beloved Northside. I'll get some energy from her sister friend, Aunt Bernadette A., (Anderson) who's a few plots over from Mom.

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I'm very excited about the possibility of your proposed special *12 Years a Slave* African diaspora film screening and conversation. It would be powerful and perfect as a part of the Ordway's African Diaspora in Harmony focus to facilitate a conversation between African immigrants and legacy African American residents. This is a conversation that needs to take place between African Americans and Somalis, Ethiopians, the Oromo, Ghanaians, Liberians and Afro Caribbean and Afro Latino residents of our community.

During the Q&A I posed questions and comments to the film's producer Bill Pohlad, related to plans for community/educational engagement, development of discussion materials and the link to current disparities of Black people in Minnesota.

It is important that people know that a descendant of slaves, my uncle, Gordon Parks, directed the first epic film about Solomon Northup for *PBS* 25 years ago with very little acknowledgment in the national buzz. Young Black men should know that these two Black men, Gordon Parks and Steve McQueen, (director of *12 Years a Slave*) have lifted up the story of a strong Black man, Solomon Northup.

This will encourage them to tell their stories. This is a powerful film and most appropriate for such a time as this.

It was interesting, but not surprising that many of the audience questions focused on the artistic and production elements/ value of the film (which was AMAZING), but not many about the content. I look forward to what we'll do with this historic gift in cinema. Blessings.

In spirit, Robin