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White Emotion and White Scopophilia: The Myth of Docile and Brute Blacks

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Abstract

This article investigates the resilience of the docility and brutality myths attributed to African Americans as demonstrated by three fairly recent film renditions. The focus is on the historical origins and the continued relevance of these tropes through white scopophilia and cognitive dissonance. The myths are analyzed in terms of their role in justifying racial hierarchies and reinforcing white supremacy within historical and contemporary contexts. Through a critical examination of historical texts by Lerone Bennett Jr. and portrayals in films such as Django Unchained *and* Twelve Years a Slave, *the study demonstrates how these stereotypes are alternately emphasized or diminished to maintain white dominance. It argues that white America constructs African American identities with a strategic oscillation between docility and brutality to sustain control and alleviate white guilt. This manipulation is facilitated by psychological mechanisms that allow white individuals to hold contradictory beliefs about race without recognizing their inconsistencies. By detailing the dynamic usage of these myths, the article highlights how they are not static, but are strategically deployed to reaffirm white moral and authoritative supremacy as needed. The conclusion calls for a critical reassessment of racial representations in media and historical narratives to disrupt these enduring racial myths.*

Keywords

white supremacy, scopophilia, docility myth, brutality myth, white guilt, cognitive dissonance

Introduction

In *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America,* Lerone Bennett Jr. reiterates one of the myths surrounding the black man, a myth that, like almost all others, is crafted on and against African American subjectivities and is a product of white fantasy, fear and hysteria. It is the familiar myth about the docility of the black slave faced with his master as well as his servile status versus the white man and the white woman following Emancipation. I grew up watching Hollywood feeding me with this myth and many others. Having little analytical power to resist the mighty apparatus of Hollywood, I took in the myth all along feeling uneasy about it and thinking, "How could a person cherish his serfdom in the manner that the movies are depicting it?" It took me many years to recognize this trope as a myth thanks to academics like Bennett, who comments:

> Historians, armed with hindsight, have written a lot of romantic nonsense about the docility of the slaves. The planter who lived with the slaves knew them better. He knew from bitter experience that the slaves were dangerous humans because they were wronged humans. Slaves smiled, yes. But they also cut throats, burned down houses and conceived plots to kill every White person within reach. This happened so often that many whites weakened under the strain. Some died of heart failure. Some went insane.[1]

1 Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 2007), 110.

The black man is depicted as a savage rapist and threat to white women, a portrayal which first appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Emancipation. The docility myth served to justify slavery and ease the conscience of the white man about this institution. White supremacy shrouded itself under the mantra of parenthood and paternalism for the black man, who is often projected as a child. When slavery came to an end after the US Civil War and the docility myth served no immediate purpose, another myth superseded it, one which helped contain blacks, albeit with the same goal of justifying the yoke of white authority over them. The latter myth served to further dehumanize blackness to deprive this population of their economic rights, often making them victims of lynching and race riots.

In this paper, I will examine how white racial amnesia thrives through cognitive dissonance and, more importantly, how this conditions white people to cherish contradictory beliefs about the people of color without recognizing these contradictions. In the psyche of white people as well as people of color, while one myth may weigh more heavily than the other—be it docility or aggressivity—both remain, with each reemerging at the right time to reestablish white hegemony whenever it is at risk.

To this end, I will draw upon an eclectic mix of materials, including seminal literary works such as David Walker's *Appeal*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* along with films like *Django Unchained*, *Twelve Years a Slave*, and *Terminator 2*. It is important to note that this list is certainly not exhaustive, with these works chosen specifically to lay out the central argument of this paper.

Echoes of Contradiction: Unveiling Dual Narratives in African American Portrayals

White supremacy lives through contradictions, one of which is the projection of the African American as both the brute—a fiendish savage and threat to whites, especially white women— and as a docile Tom who—given the white man's paternalistic mentorship— accepts the white man's authority. Both stereotypes appear at different times for different reasons. The docility caricature appeared during the time of slavery; when faced with abolitionist pleas from both blacks and whites, white masters portrayed a utopian life of blacks living a harmonious and happy life under the guidance of their white masters and fathers. "The happy darkie" picture served the enslavers well at the time. This utopian picture can easily be seen in the words of Dr. Samuel Cartright written in 1851. He believed that it is the duty of whites to take care of infantile blacks:

> If the white man attempts to oppose the Deity's will, by trying to make the negro anything else than "the submissive knee-bender" […] by trying to raise him to a level with himself, or by putting himself on an equality with the negro; or if he abuses the power which God has given him over his fellow-man, by being cruel to him […] the negro will run away; but if he keeps him in the position that we learn from the Scriptures he was intended to occupy, that is, the position of submission […] the negro is spell-bound, and cannot run away."[2]

2 Samuel Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *De Bow's Review* XI, (1851). Accessed October 5, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3106t.html>.

After the Reconstruction, though, feeling the loss of control over the body and souls of blacks, white supremacists sought to reclaim it in another way. Thus, white supremacists argued that without the restrictive hand of slavery, blacks were dangerous brutes who posed a serious threat to the safety of whites—especially white women. For instance, George T. Winston writing in 1901 reflects on whites' image of blacks after the Emancipation:

> When a knock is heard at the door [a White woman] shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demoniacal. A mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal. A whole community is frenzied with horror, with the blind and furious rage for vengeance.[3]

The fear and disgust of white women being sexually molested by "the black brute" is not confined to authors in America only. Roger Martin Du Gard in his Nobel-winning novel *The Thibaults* reflects on this fear. When Rachael, Antoinne's lover, breaks the news to Antoinne that she had sex with a black man, Antoine responds in utter shock: "Good God! Antoine could not help exclaiming to himself. 'A nigger—and not even vetted beforehand to make sure!'"[4] Not surprisingly, the chapter is called "In Darkest Africa." Rachel then has to provide a very lengthy explanation to justify her desire to sleep with the black man. When she explains that Hirsch, her previous lover, admires the black man, she bursts into laughter, because this is not something that can be mentioned in a neutral tone.[5]

While there are no doubts that the brute stereotype has resonances even until today, some scholars believe that the docility caricature has permanently disappeared. For instance, Thomas Craemer says, "The only stereotype that is no longer common is the 'docility' stereotype that portrayed liberated slaves as defenseless […] It likely vanished as a result of the Haitian Revolution of 1791 that that permanently abolished slavery there and frightened Southern slave holders with good reason."[6] (5). James Baldwin is another author who declares the death of the Tom caricature, although he believes that it has resurfaced in other ways: "Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead […] Before, however, our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask whence they sprang, how they lived? Into what limbo have they vanished?"[7] I do not share this optimism, as the evidence for its reemergence is too extensive to be ignored and there are various reasons for its reappearance which I will delve into below.

Both black and white authors (as well as mainstream media) have brought the servility caricature to salience, although of course black authors have had different reasons for highlighting it. One of the earliest African American writers who dealt with the Tom caricature was David Walker, who in his *Appeal* chastises those free African Americans who did not join the Emancipation cause, thinking that they were already free:

3 George T. Winston, "The Relation of the Whites to the Negroes," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18 (1901): 105-118, accessed September 14, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1009885>.

4 Roger Martin du Gard, *The Thibaults*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1939), 454.

5 Martin du Gard, *The Thibaults*, 455.

6 Thomas Craemer, "Preventing inadvertent stereotyping in the racial gap literature," (presentation, The Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association, 2011), accessed October 15, 2023, <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1901764>.

7 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 27.

> How can the slaveholders but say that they can bribe the best coloured person in the country, to sell his brethren for a trifling sum of money, and take that atrocity to confirm them in their avaricious opinion, that we were made to be slaves to them and their children? […] Now I ask you candidly, my suffering brethren in time, who are candidates for the eternal worlds, how could Mr. Jefferson but have given the world these remarks respecting us, when we are so submissive to them, and so much servile deceit prevail among ourselves--when we so meanly submit to their murderous lashes, to which neither the Indians nor any other people under Heaven would submit? No, they would die to a man, before they would suffer such things from men who are no better than themselves, and perhaps not so good. Yes, how can our friends but be embarrassed, as Mr. Jefferson says, by the question, "What further is to be done with these people?" For while they are working for our emancipation, we are, by our treachery, wickedness and deceit, working against ourselves and our children--helping ours, and the enemies of God, to keep us and our dear little children in their infernal chains of slavery!!![8]

On the surface, Walker is confirming the servility caricature portrayed by white supremacists such as Cartright and well-intentioned whites such as Harriet Beecher Stowe. Such agreement could not be further from the reality, for when African American figures evoke the Tom caricature, they do it for completely different reasons than white supremacists. Walker was fully cognizant of the numerous slave rebellions in his time such as the Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint Louverture, the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and New York Conspiracy of 1741, to name but a few, and he would soon know about Nat Turner's Rebellion (1831). He was also mindful of the fact that not everyone in the Black community could be expected to join the Emancipation cause due to the severity of the slaves' circumstances. In comparing the condition of the Helots in ancient Sparta to that of the slaves in the United States, he acknowledges:

> The sufferings of the Helots among the Spartans, were somewhat severe, it is true, but to say that theirs, were as severe as ours among the Americans, I do most strenuously deny--for instance, can any man show me an article on a page of ancient history which specifies, that, the Spartans chained, and hand-cuffed the Helots, and dragged them from their wives and children, children from their parents, mothers from their suckling babes, wives from their husbands, driving them from one end of the country to the other?[9]

As an abolitionist activist and preacher, Walker's main goal of evoking the servility caricature was to exhort, and he did so brilliantly, encouraging his fellow Blacks to even go beyond their limits, to do the impossible. He knew that despite the brave actions of his Black community, they had to stretch themselves to their fullest potential to fully break from the yoke of slavery. His own actions bespeak of a revolutionary man who stretched himself beyond his limits. His publishing of the long essay *Appeal* in 1829 was a highly rebellious act due to its highly controversial and provocative content, for which he could have easily lost his life. Walker can be seen as another Toussaint Louverture.

8 David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (1829; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2011), 30-31, accessed December 12, 2024. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unm/reader.action?docID=797769>.

9 Walker, *Appeal*, 18.

Walker's evocation of the caricature served another purpose: to turn it on its head by revealing that the apparent servility of blacks was in fact their refusal to go down to the slavers' level:

> I know that the blacks, take them half enlightened and ignorant, are more humane and merciful than the most enlightened and refined European that can be found in all the earth […] Natural observations have taught me these things; there is a solemn awe in the hearts of the blacks, as it respects murdering men: Which is the reason the whites take the advantage of us. Whereas the whites, (though they are great cowards) where they have the advantage, or think that there are any prospects of getting it, they murder all before them, in order to subject men to wretchedness and degradation under them.[10]

Of course, Walker does invite his people to fight back with as much severity as they can, yet he does not do so because he cherishes violence, but because their very survival depends on it:

> How sixty of them could let that wretch escape unkilled, I cannot conceive--they will have to suffer as much for the two whom, they secured, as if they had put one hundred to death: if you commence, make sure work--do not trifle, for they will not trifle with you--they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition--therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed.[11]

Another African American writer who dealt with the servility stereotype is Richard Wright. The phrase "Yessuh" is repeated 95 times in his 1940 novel *Native Son*, although it is used for different purposes. As Bigger Thomas and Gus watch an airplane fly up, Bigger rues his lack of opportunity to become a pilot as a result of oppressive laws against African Americans. Then they decide to act out white people: "'Let's play 'white', Bigger said, referring to a game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of white folk.'"[12] The manners of white folks in their "play-acting" suggests the lower-status jobs available to African Africans compared to whites. Through the docility caricature, Wright criticized the perpetual low status of African Americans in a job market which makes them bow down to their white superiors. Each time Bigger issues an order, Gus submissively responds, "Yessuh."

This low status compared to whites also communicates the sense of relative submissiveness as reflected in the words of Bigger and Gus. Wright's use of the servility status was and is a reminder to white America that the Jeffersonian proclamation in the Declaration of Independence "That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"[13] has never materialized for the black community. The assertion is also employed as a reminder that the American Dream does not apply to African Americans because, first: they are not regarded as completely American as

10 Walker, *Appeal*, 28-29.

11 Walker, *Appeal*, 29-30.

12 Richard Wright, *Native Son*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (1940; New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 26, accessed March 23, 2024, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05987a&AN=unm.39307514&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

13 "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

pointed out by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*[14] and that Emancipation has not achieved its purpose in freeing African Americans from the yoke of white supremacy.

Another employment of the docility stereotype in *Native Son* is seen in the interaction between Bigger and Mr. Dalton. When Bigger goes to Mr. Dalton for a job, his white employer keeps ordering him to do something — "Sit down," "Come on; this way," "Come this way," "put your cap here"— and each time, Mr. Dalton asks him for simple information —"Thomas?" "Are you alright," "Do you think you'd like driving a car," "Did you bring the paper?" "Didn't the relief give you a note to me?"— Bigger simply responds by saying "Yessuh" or "Oh, Yessuh."[15]

Here, Wright plays with and feeds the white imagination in literature. Such a use of scopophilia is a jab at the American white readership which seeks to maintain its authority and control over the body, tongues and fates of African Americans. Wright is mocking the American tradition of writing and producing everything for the white gaze. The white supremacists who hunger for superiority over blacks are initially nourished by this display of docility, but are taken aback very soon with another white fabrication on and against blacks: the black man as the brute. Bigger kills Mary Dalton, though accidentally, after he molests her sexually. This display of desire (the docility of Bigger and by extension all blacks) and then horror (murder of Mary by Bigger) creates a sense of shock in the minds of the white (supremacist) reader just like when someone is absorbed in a serene and soothing scene in a movie, and abruptly, it switches to a violent or startling action sequence which jerks the viewer out of their tranquility. By evoking both caricatures, Wright both feeds and startles the white scopophilia, reminding the large sections of white readership which lust after the "happy darkie" submissiveness of the blacks that the docility myth is an imposition on blacks, not a reality.

Ralph Ellison is another African American novelist who invokes the docility caricature. Published in 1952, his first novel *Invisible Man* is saturated with the docility theme. Like Wright, Ellison also utilizes the docility caricature with subversive intentions, albeit in a different manner. One of the first manifestation of the caricature is the grandfather deathbed scene where the grandfather exclaims,

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight […] our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.[16]

Although the narrator's grandfather is inviting his son to rebellion, he also asks him to play it out through the docility caricature. This comes as a surprise to the narrator, since his grandfather "Had been the meekest of men."[17] The well-known "Battle Royal" scene is another clear instance of the Tom caricature. When the narrator conflates "social equality" with "social responsibility," the

14 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 3, accessed September 18, 2023. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.unm.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1842601&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

15 Wright, *Native Son*, 48-58.

16 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Random House, 2002), 13, accessed September 10, 2023 <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05987a&AN=unm.48045612&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

17 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 13.

white men are alarmed, but the narrator is quick to correct the mistake in a scene that suggests he was willing to play the "happy darkie" image. The fight scene itself in the battle is an instance of how willing the narrator was to submit to the white man's will.

Later in the novel, when the narrator is giving a speech up on a ladder, he is also called "Uncle Tom" by one of the black nationalist Ras the Exhorter's men.[18] At the end of the novel, he is called an "Uncle Tom" for a second time, this time by Ras himself.[19] Although the narrator announces that he no longer works with the Brotherhood, his call is ignored and is described as an "Uncle Tom." The Booker T. Washington trope also serves as an "Uncle Tom" caricature throughout the novel. The narrator's identification with Booker T. Washington is seen by the Harlem community as race betrayal, as it serves to perpetuate the obsequiousness motif in white literature. When the narrator encounters an older black couple being evicted from their apartment and tries to prevent an angry crowd from fighting with the white marshals, he refers to Booker T. Washington's law-abiding conduct, but the crowd gets angry and calls Washington "A handkerchief-headed rat."[20] Washington was also criticized by black leaders who accused him of exhorting the black community to be obsequious to white authority.

The narrator, however, does not hold to his invisibility and docility forever. Ellison, to my eye, builds the character as an embodiment of a person who undergoes the bitter process of coming-of-age to finally fulfill his grandfather's demand "to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins."[21] Through a painful process, he comes to realize that "Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled 'file and forget,' and I can neither file nor forget […] The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath […] I must come out, I must emerge."[22] While the white characters in the novel want to keep him in his invisibility and obsequiousness, he is ready to fight this. The Brotherhood sends him a letter warning him about the consequences of his awareness: "Do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down."[23] Mr. Bledsoe also wants him to bow down to whites and keep his servile status, but seeing the results of his invisibility, the narrator begins to realize at the end that "Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled 'file and forget' and I can neither file nor forget."[24]

Performativity in White Allyship: Projecting Docility and Denying Agency

When African American authors evoke the docility and brute caricature, they often do so to subvert it. That cannot always be said regarding white literary and artistic products. Jeypal and Grigg point to the role of emotion in maintaining the centrality of whiteness in race dialogues: "Emotion is a key component for deconstructing and challenging the social and racial relations inherent in

18 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 286.

19 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 432.

20 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 214.

21 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 13.

22 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 449-450.

23 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 296.

24 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 449.

our profession and in broader society. Indeed, we encounter emotion as we learn, unsettle, and disrupt our positions of power and marginalization."[25] The two authors also argue that emotion often serves as a defense mechanism used to prioritize whiteness and marginalize blackness. When faced with difficult racial dialogues, white individuals may employ emotional strategies to present themselves as non-racist, but in doing so, they shift focus away from marginalized people. One common strategy involves performative acts of allyship in anti-racism efforts:

> Ally work can become performative […] Performing white allyship is cemented by a lack of desire to decentre whiteness in institutions. In this context, ally work is used to advance one's own position or as refusal to engage with issues that may involve personal risk. It may also occur in situations where people may not be aware of their racial biases, reconciled through a logic of colour-blind neutrality.[26]

Central to my argument is that performative ally work in the works discussed below portray black individuals as passive and incapable of effecting meaningful change without the intervention of a white hero. It fundamentally denies any agency to people of color in enhancing their circumstances and portrays them as mere followers rather than active agents in anti-racist initiatives. Consequently, this type of performative allyship capitalizes on the stereotype of docility, perpetuating the idea that black individuals are perpetually dependent on whites to guide them through complex racial issues. Furthermore, this performativity serves to soothe the emotional discomfort of whites, helping them cope with a history marred by guilt and distress.

Zeus Leonardo and Michalinos Zembylas introduce the concept of "white alibis," defined as the participation of white individuals in racial contexts to demonstrate their non-racism, serving as a protective mechanism:

> One of the technologies of whiteness is its ability to project itself as its own alibi. In other words, Whites have built anti-racist understandings that construct the racist as always someone else, the problem residing elsewhere in other Whites. In some instances, this alibi is a white subject's former self. In a recuperative logic, whiteness is able to bifurcate whites into "good" and "bad" subjects, sometimes within the same body or person during public race dialogue. We describe the process wherein a white subject positions the former against the latter, thereby suggesting the possibility of a non-racist whiteness. We problematize the tendency for white educators to forge personas that favor non-racism, a form of image management, rather than aligning themselves with anti-racism, a political project."[27]

Performative white ally work and the white alibi are emotional strategies used to decenter blackness and to center whiteness. They exploit the docility caricature in so far as the caricature strips the people of color of any agency to improve their circumstances; it over-emphasizes the role of whites in combating racism, and it alleviates white discomfort about their troubling racial history. Below I will study three artifacts to show how docility caricature is employed in centering

25 Daphne Jeyapal and Liz Grigg, "6. The Crying White Woman and the Politics of Emotion in Anti-oppressive Social Work Education," in *Teaching Social Work: Reflections on Pedagogy and Practice*, ed. Rick Csiernik and Susan Hillock, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 82, accessed March 14, 2024, https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487518868-008.

26 Jeyapal and Grigg, "The Crying White Woman," 84.

27 Zeus Leonardo and Zembylas Michalinos, "Whiteness as Technology of Affect: Implications for Educational Praxis," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no. 1 (2013): 151, accessed March 27, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2013.750539>.

white emotions and decentering the people of color: *Django Unchained* (2012), *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991).

The Myths in Films

Django Unchained

In Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*[28] almost all black characters are pictured as obsequious and living a "happy darkie" life except for Django himself, who is portrayed as an exception to the rule. Stephen, Calvin J. Candie's cruel servant, is another Dr. Bledsoe from *Invisible Man*, ready to kill everyone in order to preserve his status as the faithful servant of his master. The female slave of "Big Daddy" Bennet" is cast as a mammy who is confused about her master's orders. D'Artagnan, Candie's runaway slave who no longer wants to fight, is portrayed as a fearful character who asks for his master's forgiveness before he is brutally killed by his dogs. At the end of the film, when Django convinces his transporters that a large bounty awaits them, he looks at the fearful faces of the slaves in the cage. Except for Django, the characters in the film display signs of obsequiousness and fearfulness of the white rule. Black docility is invoked when Calvin tries to show Dr. Schultz a lesson by opening the skull of a black slave and insinuating that blacks are completely happy in their subordinate role and they do not have any power to fight back.[29] The movie makes no mention of the long history of black insurgents who risked their lives by trying to free themselves from slavery.

What is more, the character of Dr. King Schultz appears as a white ally and white alibi. He is invoked as an element to lessen white guilt and also to center whiteness by appearing as a hero. The movie is intended for a white audience, who faced with white guilt, need a white hero to tend to white fragility. The movie illustrates that without Dr. King Schultz, Django and Broomhilda have no chance of being reunited. White heroism, shown through Dr. King Schultz, serves as a white alibi for the white audiences who—by imagining themselves as Schultz—distance themselves from any implication of racism. This helps the white audience to "Construct the racist as always someone else, the problem residing elsewhere in other Whites."[30] White ally work is called upon to center white emotions. The docility of the black characters serves to show that without a white ally (read white hero), they could not have escaped the horrors of slavery and also of racism. The movie portrays good and bad whites and helps the white audience project themselves as the good whites by bringing them to the forefront of fighting against slavery and racism.

28 *Django Unchained,* directed by Quentin Tarantino (New York: The Weinstein Company, 2012), DVD.

29 *Django Unchained*, min. 01:55:00-02:02:00.

30 Leonardo and Zembylas, "Whiteness as Technology of Affect," 151.

Twelve Years a Slave

The movie *12 Years a Slave* (2013), directed by Steve McQueen,[31] employs docility in another display of white heroism and whites at the center. White heroism and white emotion serve to center whiteness through the character of Bass, played by Brad Pitt. Although Bass does play a prominent role in the Solomon Northup's 1853 memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* in saving the eponymous character, the book also shows the efforts of the protagonist Solomon in liberating himself from slavery.[32] Nevertheless, the choice of Brad Pitt, a popular movie actor and archetype of white bravery and heroism, only works to center whiteness and decenter blackness. The white audience who looks at Brad Pitt as an embodiment of white heroics comes to see themselves as an image of Brad Pitt, thus viewing good white people as the main element of black Emancipation. Brad Pitt, this giant icon of celebrity culture, tends to alleviate white guilt; the people of color—in this context, specifically, black people and their huge role in their own Emancipation—are pushed to the periphery when the character Solomon, and by extension the whole black community, in the movie appears as a helpless individual who needs white heroes to take any step towards happiness. The icon of white sophistication and white sexiness portrayed through Brad Pitt suggests the idea that despite the actions of evil white people in dragging blacks into slavery, white people are the heroes of blacks.

Another white artifact that evokes the servility caricature is James Cameron's 1991 science fiction film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day.*[33] I will discuss this movie not in the context of performative allyship, but in the context of scopophilia and the production of art for the white imagination. Docility is invoked in the scene where the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and the white hero John (Edward Furlong) try to warn Miles Dyson (played by the black actor Joe Morton) about the detrimental effects of his actions. The black character along with his family kneel on the ground and tremble in an extremely fearful manner. The black characters thus display inferiority, docility and submission to white wisdom and white power. Dyson and his family bow before white power symbolized through the Terminator. It is the wisdom and rightful power of white people who brings about the black submission as displayed in the scene. I do not believe that this was an innocent portrayal in which a black person happened to be cast as one of the characters. Intentionally or unintentionally, the scene feeds white scopophilia. Hollywood, and by extension the United States, has a long history of portraying blackness as a sight of docility and servility to the satisfaction of the white supremacists who obtain vicarious pleasure from such scenes. What happens is the docile black scientist needs white wisdom to see the error of his ways. Black docility serves to cast whiteness as the illuminator and educator.

Conclusion

This paper illuminates how, facilitated by the mechanisms of white scopophilia and cognitive dissonance, white America has historically shaped and reshaped the identity of African Americans

31 *12 Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen (Los Angeles**:** Searchlight Pictures, 2013), DVD.

32 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853; Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2014), accessed May 4, 2024. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unm/detail.action?docID=5441765#>.

33 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day,* directed by James Cameron (Culver City: TriStar Pictures, 1991), DVD.

through a juxtaposition of docility and brutality. By examining historical texts, cinematic portrayals, and the cyclical resurgence of these racial myths, it becomes evident that these stereotypes are strategically employed to maintain white supremacy and control. The ongoing relevance of these myths in both historical and contemporary contexts underscores the necessity for a critical reassessment of racial representations in media and literature. Only through such a reassessment can we hope to dismantle these persistent and damaging stereotypes, paving the way for a more equitable society. This call to action is not just a plea for awareness but a demand for active engagement in the reevaluation and transformation of how African American narratives are constructed and perpetuated.

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