Seeing Humans, Making Commodities: Slave Ship Rebellions on Film

Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in African and African-American Studies and History
Chad Williams, Adviser

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

By
Lucia Pugh-Sellers

April 2020

Committee members:

Name: Chad Williams     Signature: ________________________________
Name: Alice Kelikian     Signature: ________________________________
Name: Faith Smith        Signature: ________________________________
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, who have inspired and helped me enormously during my time at Brandeis. I am grateful to know Professors Faith Smith and Alice Kelikian, who each influenced me so much, and ultimately changed my life. Professor Chad Williams, my thesis advisor, was a model of patience, offering step-by-step guidance and sage advice. His dedication to teaching was evident from the first day I stepped into his class, when he showed himself willing to engage with an intimidated first-year student. I could not have finished this thesis without these profoundly important academic mentors.

I also want to thank everyone else who helped me through this thesis process, particularly: Kavita, for being my thesis-writing buddy and commiserator; Yael, for her empathy; Allison, for advice and laughter; Tamar; my thesis cohort (Dannie, Victoria, and Jake).

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family, especially my parents and sisters, for their wholehearted support, which keeps me going.

I recognize and wrestle with my positionality as white woman, and one who has largely benefited from the systems of racism I describe here. I have long been ambivalent about my place in the African and African-American Studies Department at Brandeis, not wanting to use the scarce resources of the fantastic teaching and mentoring of the faculty and staff. At the same time, all students should learn what I am learning; I also think slave rebellions, capitalism and the racialization of film representations are crucial topics that deserve widespread exploration. I am deeply indebted to the many Black scholars and thinkers – both contemporary and historical – who have put themselves in danger to theorize these concepts, name ideas that had as yet been unnamed, call attention to racial, gender and class inequalities, and fight for a better world. Ultimately no one benefits from these interlocking oppressions, and we need all hands on deck to dismantle them.
Table of Contents

*Introduction* ................................................................................................................................. 5
   CAPITALISM AND REPRESENTATION ............................................................................................. 8

*The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* ...................................................................................................... 12
   THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE .......................................................................................................... 13
   THE FRENCH SLAVE TRADE .......................................................................................................... 15
   THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE UNITED STATES .................................................................................. 16
   THE AFRICAN DIASPORA ............................................................................................................... 17

*The Slave Ship* ................................................................................................................................. 19
   COMMODIFICATION ....................................................................................................................... 19
   VISUALIZATION ............................................................................................................................. 22
   RELATIONSHIPS ............................................................................................................................. 23
   GENDER .......................................................................................................................................... 26
   RESISTANCE .................................................................................................................................... 28

*The History of Slavery in Film* ......................................................................................................... 32
   MAINSTREAM HISTORY .................................................................................................................. 32
   BLACK INDIE HISTORY .................................................................................................................... 37
   SETTING THE CONTEXT ..................................................................................................................... 40

*Tamango (1959)* ............................................................................................................................... 42
   INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING ........................................................................ 42
   COMMODIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION: TAMANGO’S MIXED CHALLENGES AND CONCESSIONS TO CAPITALISM ..................................................................................................................... 46
   RELATIONSHIPS AND GENDER: AISHÉ, TAMANGO, AND CAPTAIN REIKER ............................. 49
   GENDER AND RESISTANCE: TAMANGO’S SHIP REVOLT .......................................................... 51
   CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................................... 54

*Amistad (1997)* ................................................................................................................................. 56
   INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING ........................................................................ 56
   COMMODIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION: COMPLICATED HUMANITY AND RESISTANCE IN AMISTAD .................................................................................................................................................... 60
   LEGALITY AND COMmodity: THE AMISTAD COURT CASE AND A FEW GOOD MEN ................. 62
   MASCULINITY AND THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN .......................................................................... 66
   CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................................... 67

*Passage du Milieu (1999), or The Middle Passage* ............................................................................. 69
INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING ................................................................. 69
RECOMMODIFICATION AND A DOCUDRAMA’S “TRUTH” ........................................... 72
VISUALIZATION AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE SLAVE SHIP........................................ 74
COMMUNITY, GENDER, AND REVOLT ........................................................................... 76
CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 78

Belle (2013) ....................................................................................................................... 80

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING .......................................................... 80
GENDER, RELATIONSHIPS, AND VISUALIZATION: DIDO AND HER COUSIN, ELIZABETH ................ 84
COMMODIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION: THE ABSENCE AND CENTRALITY OF THE SLAVE SHIP ONSCREEN ................................................................................................. 88
CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 90

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 92

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 99
Introduction

Film is a powerful medium of representation. Because of the intersection of visual and sound options available and the possibilities for large and varied audiences, film is an art form uniquely positioned to tell stories. Yet film is also a medium intrinsically tied to commercial capitalism, a fact that shapes the representations that can take place within any work aimed at an external audience.

Few films take on the subject of slavery, and fewer still the slave ship and slave ship rebellions. Notable among these are four demonstrative examples: Belle (2013), Passage du Milieu (1999), Amistad (1997), and Tamango (1959). The portrayal of slave ships in film, and specifically of rebellions aboard them, captures a tension between portraying and exploiting these events and the people involved in them, one that varies by director and the apparent intent of the films. All four of these films share this tension, in part due to a potentially misguided result of surface-level showcasing as opposed to true representation of the events and people.

Whereas literature and other forms of art have fewer boundaries in their portrayals, film is like history in that it encounters obstacles and limitations in the pursuit of free expression. For history, these limitations come from the record, the archive, the facts of what did or did not happen (although it is true that history changes depending on who is telling it, and whose records are its source). For film, and especially for historical films, these limitations are tied to the process of creating the work itself: the involvement of production companies, the many creative hands on the wheel, and the ever-present prospect of a commercial audience.¹ Whoever is the driving force behind the film plays a key role in how the subject is portrayed. Film is also

influenced by the history of the medium: important milestones such as the Hayes Code, the development of the studio system, and film technology continue to change how films are made and received, especially in the context of a commercial market.

Some scholars argue that film is a source of objectification, while others note that it is a source of representation. When films portray Black people, and especially when films portray Black enslaved people, they operate as objectification and representation at once. The idea of the slave ship itself as a machine of capital, essentially changing those it transported into products throughout the length of its journey, is critical in this case. How do filmmakers reproduce – or challenge – this commodification? How do filmmakers reimagine and frame revolt and Blackness? Is a representation of enslaved people in film performing work similar to that of the slave ship, transforming the bodies of those portraying the enslaved into a product to be sold to audiences, even as the creators of those works claim to be giving voice to those whose stories have not been heard? Can both exist at once? It is critical to understand how filmmakers understand this apparent contradiction. A medium based on visual representation, film centers the visual aspect of these differing portrayals, providing the viewer with the opportunity to investigate how slave ships and enslaved individuals are displayed, and how their stories are told.

Four movies, made at entirely different times and by directors from entirely different film traditions, can help us to think through some of these dilemmas. These films include one made

---

2 Throughout this thesis, I refer to those in the African Diaspora as “Black people”. The term “people of color,” often used today to describe non-white people, felt too broad to examine the challenges faced specifically by Back people and not faced by other non-white minorities; the term African-American is at times too specific, as well as being not accepted by a number of Black people living in the United States as too connected to either Africa or the U.S.; it has also been my understanding and experience that the term “Black” with a capital “B” as a descriptor has been reclaimed as a radical form of description, similarly to the terms “black” with a lowercase “b” and “Negro” with a capital “N” at different times in specifically American history. The words we use matter, and the terms that work for some people may not work for others; in some sense, terms will always feel essentializing or inadequate. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will be using the term “Black people” here most frequently.
during the late 1950s by a white blacklisted Communist; at the height of the 1990s by Steven Spielberg, driven in his mission by Debbie Allen’s personal goals; at the turn of the century by a Black Frenchman with roots in Martinique, a so-called French “overseas department”; and in the middle of the 2010s by a Black Englishwoman attempting to think through her own mixed-culture origins. Themes such as representation, humanization, and the deep ties to the slave ship are constant throughout these films.

This thesis will first explore the connection among capitalism, slavery, film, and representation, then pivot to the historical grounding of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, specific aspects of life aboard a slave ship, and the history of slavery as portrayed in film. It will then explore the ideas of commodification, visualization, relationships, gender, and resistance through John Berry’s *Tamango* (1959), Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997), Guy Deslauriers’ *The Middle Passage* (1999), and Amma Asante’s *Belle* (2014). These films showcase the changing face of slavery in film and portray the dual commodification of Black bodies through enslavement and capitalism, a distinctly gendered process. The films also provide a path to understanding slave resistance, but a limited one. I will use these four films to further explore the notion of “own-stories,” showing that stories are ultimately more powerful when told by people with personal connections to them, and simultaneously shed light on the ironic limitations and contradictions capitalism places on Black subjects and on filmmakers when they try to represent their stories.
CAPITALISM AND REPRESENTATION

There are definitive threads to trace between capitalism and slavery, between capitalism and filmmaking, and between capitalism and filmmaking about slavery. Scholars have long debated and studied the tie between capitalism and slavery, slavery serves as a “historical backdrop to the history of capitalism” and a driving force behind, if not a “dynamic simultaneity” to the emergence of the present economic form. This idea has already been explored to some extent in the “cold logic” of the “calculation of lives” that existed in the slave trade in the “service of unlimited wealth accumulation,” core to capitalist formulation. The idea that modern capitalism and slavery were created and popularized simultaneously makes them ideologically inseparable; we cannot analyze one or the other without an exploration of both together and the relationship between them.

Film, like slavery, also has a complex and varied relationship with capitalism. Tensions arise from the mix of commodification and art, and in films’ intersection of industry, artistic expression, and mass cultural consumption. This complexity exists especially in filmic representations of history, as films about historical events produce “a new reality rather than

---


merely representing it.”6 In what ways do films choose to represent historical events, producing a new reality, so that they may be consumed by the general public? Is political film possible, and if so, under what circumstances? It is important, especially in the case of films such as those explored in this project, to explore, and Trevor McRisken and Andrew Pepper phrase it, “the complex ways in which all films simultaneously collude with and contest dominant ideologies and discursive formations.”7 It is impossible to separate the film from the context in which it is made.8

It is also important, when studying film and visual representations, to delve into the idea of the gaze. Especially important is, as dubbed by bell hooks, the “oppositional gaze,” actively used by Black women when viewing media. As hooks writes, “the ‘gaze’ has always been political,” whether it is acknowledged as such or not, as there is “power in looking.”9 Historically, the gaze has also been “a site of resistance for colonized black people globally,” a way to resist dominant narratives and false representations critically.10 It also provides a way to develop art in response, such as Black independent cinema. Even when there was no cinematic response, however, Black women in particular were still acutely “aware of cinematic racism” and the complex idea that even when a Black woman was featured in media, it was often as a way to enhance white womanhood or as a direct replacement of the white woman – “transference without transformation.”11

---

8 Aronowitz, 127.
10 hooks, 116.
11 hooks, 119; 126.
Representation in film is a complicated subject. The idea of spectacle, especially in films portraying slavery, and whether it is necessary, has been tackled in large part by scholars Saidiya Hartman and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman. Hartman wonders about the necessity of portraying violence against Black bodies onscreen and what the purposes and effects of these portrayals are, asking

Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts?...Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance?...how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other of the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?12

These are central questions when looking at the following films and the way they show or do not show the violence committed against enslaved people. Is it possible or necessary for this violence to be portrayed onscreen, and how does this change the role of the viewer?

Stuart Hall is also a central figure in the scholarship interrogating the meanings of representation. Hall argues that an image, including a film, can have many different meanings, and, in fact, that there is “nothing absolutely fixed there in the first place to represent.” He contends that film, even film that purports to represent real events, is creating another meaning: not distinct from the “true” meaning; rather that, perhaps, there was no “true” meaning in the first place. The “true meaning of it will depend on what meaning people make of it; and the meanings that they make of it depends on how it is represented,” he writes.13 It is not that

---


nothing is signified by the intended meaning, of course. Every meaning is informed by the context created in the surrounding world, dependent on “a certain kind of fixing.”14 And it is this fixing, this context, that I will explore in the pages of this thesis.

14 Jhally, 19.
The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

It is certainly difficult to summarize succinctly the trans-Atlantic slave trade, that man-made rift in history that violently tore millions of African people from their homes and forcibly brought them to new countries and to exploit their labor. It is necessary, however, to provide necessary historical context for the films under analysis originate. This summary will provide the general outline of the slave trade, then specifically look at the trade and its legacy in the United States, Great Britain, and France.

Although slavery has been around in different forms since ancient times, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had specific qualities that separated it from earlier forms in significant ways. First, trans-Atlantic slavery was adaptable to its many different environments, from Europe to the various Americas, to Caribbean colonies. Second, the slave labor force was used for different purposes. Third, trans-Atlantic slavery was characterized by extreme dependence on one form of labor – those slaves coming out of majority Central and West Africa, who were viewed as “heathens…and as people lacking legal rights; they were prime candidates for enslavement.” Finally, the slave trade was marked by quick growth after it had started – as a “crucial factor in European competition for overseas empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Portugal was the first European nation to become involved in 1444; however, the Netherlands and Spain, competitors with Portugal, quickly followed.

---

THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE

The British slave trade was one of the earliest examples of this trans-Atlantic version of slavery after the original three. French and English trade together constituted almost fifty percent of the entirety of that slave trade over the period of 1701-1810. Simultaneously, more than forty percent of the African captives were shipped in British and American ships, making Britain an active and central participant in both the trade itself and in the physical shipping process. The British West Indies imported nearly two million slaves; many scholars estimate there being around 399,000 enslaved people being imported into English North America. Great Britain concentrated the enslaved people in “one form of labor—plantation agriculture,” especially in the years following 1650, when “the economic consequences began to be felt” and the levels of the slave trade rose dramatically. Soon, the economy of Great Britain depended almost entirely on slave labor, especially in their colonies in the West Indies.

The slave trade has been traditionally categorized by scholars who study it as a triangular one, with legs of the voyage stretching from European ports to West Africa, from the African coast to the eastern shores of North America and the West Indies, and from the Americas back to Britain. Powerful merchants and planters chiefly championed the slave trade, as they economically benefitted from it and gathered more power as the trade continued into the eighteenth century. The main private companies involved were the Royal African Company and

---

21 Curtin, 51; 126.
22 Morgan, 12.
the South Sea Company; however, political elites removed monopoly rights and in 1700 private merchants rose in the ranks of the trade.²³

Activists and political elites at first framed abolition in Great Britain as a gradual process or a form of compromise.²⁴ The Somerset Case ruled in 1771 that slaves could not be forcibly returned to masters in England.²⁵ The *Zong* case (discussed in further detail later, in the context of the 2014 film *Belle*, an adaptation of the story) helped the abolitionist argument in 1783 when judges ruled that enslaved people could not be thrown overboard as cargo in that specific case.²⁶ After the turn of the nineteenth century Parliament outlawed the continued trading of slaves coming from Africa – not including those already enslaved in British colonies and in the country itself.²⁷ By that time, however, Great Britain had already benefited immensely from its exploitation of African people, with profits comprising as much as thirty-nine percent of commercial and industrial investment in the eighteenth century, helping the country grow to be an international power, with the slave trade deeply rooted in its former and current colonies, especially the United States.²⁸

---

²³ Morgan, 61.
²⁵ Morgan, 156.
THE FRENCH SLAVE TRADE

Aspects of slavery in France and the United States were similar to those in Great Britain. France’s slave trade, similarly to England’s, peaked in the eighteenth century. The English were “swifter to exploit the possibilities of slave labour than the French,” although the French soon grew to depend on that labor, especially in their colonies. The French were also the third largest slave traders, especially because of the number of enslaved people they sent to Saint-Domingue, later called Haiti, but also including the enslaved people sent to Guadeloupe and Martinique, estimated to be over 1.1 million in total. The French plantation regime was vast and destructive: their sugar plantations were especially known for their horrific conditions and high death rates. France was the first great European power to abolish colonial slavery in 1794, due to the growth of Enlightenment thought and evangelicalism across the country during the first Enlightenment era. Napoleon quickly reinstated slavery, however, until the French state finally abolished it permanently in 1848.

For the French, as for every slave-holding nation, a key event was the Haitian Revolution in 1791. This revolution established the Republic of Haiti as the first nation to abolish slavery, and the first Black nation formed through successful revolution. Toussaint, a primary leader of this slave revolt, was determined “to link independent black Saint-Domingue with revolutionary France,” which had just had its own revolution in 1789. Toussaint’s goal resonated with the

29 Curtin, 163.
ideals of a revolutionary French people and was the main reason for the initial abolition of slavery in France. Overall, there was a “profound transformation in moral perception” that led to the growth of abolition movements in England, France, and eventually the United States, a “transformation that led a growing number of Europeans and Americans to [understand] the full horror of a social evil to which mankind had been blind for centuries.”

THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE UNITED STATES

The slave trade in the United States was an outgrowth of British slavery that became a key pillar of the economy. The first shipment of Black people to British America “arrived in Virginia in 1619.” From minimal importations in the 1600s, slavery evolved and expanded by the late 1600s and became central to the economic operation of the British colonies in North America, especially the eventual southern states, which were built around a plantation system. Tobacco and cotton were staple products of slavery in the United States. Slavery only increased after modern technology such as the cotton gin allowed for higher outputs.

Different laws allowed for the expansion and reduction of the slave trade, including the U.S. Constitution. The slave trade was officially abolished in the United States in 1808, although those already enslaved in the country remained enslaved, and illegal slave importations still occurred. Slavery as a whole in the United States was theoretically abolished with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War (itself caused because the southern states wanted to keep their enslaved populations), but in reality, extended another two years, until the passage of the 13th Amendment. Even then, there was a clause that allowed

---


34 Morgan, 21.
slavery after conviction of a crime, leading to bondage in the form of chain gangs for much longer.\textsuperscript{35}

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The trans-Atlantic slave trade fundamentally shaped the modern African diaspora. According to historian Colin Palmer, the slave trade was the fourth major African diasporic stream, meaning large movement of people from the African continent to other places in the world. This stream forcibly relocated over 12 million Africans to Europe and the Americas. Although not the only stream, this fourth one did contribute to the eventual formation of what is known as the modern African Diaspora.\textsuperscript{36} Palmer writes that Diasporic communities, although not universally the same, share a number of similar characteristics, such as having “an emotional attachment to their ancestral land,” and being “cognizant of their dispersal and…of their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside.” Palmer defines the modern African Diaspora as one that consists of the millions of peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon ‘racial’ oppression and the struggles against it; and who, despite the cultural variations and political and other divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral continent; and who also, regardless of their location, face broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves.\textsuperscript{37}


Scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois have been theorizing the Diaspora since the early 1900s, defining shared problems with race and racism against people of African descent across boundaries.38 This theorizing has also contributed to many post-colonial racial equity movements.39 In this thesis, diaspora can provide a context for the different films I analyze, as well as a place of critique in terms of the universalizing of the Black experience many scholars, critics, and creators are inclined to do.

The Slave Ship

COMMODOIFICATION

In the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the slave ship was the single most important piece of machinery powering the terrible engine. The slave ship was a mechanism that functioned as a hand of terror, a staging ground for the de-humanization of African people and their commodification as soon-to-be-sold products. It was also a place of death, where “loss of life” averaged “25 to 33 percent” of the captives onboard. The passage sailed by the slave ship “lasted four, five or six weeks, and was associated with mortality and with slave resistance.”

There are several important works that explore the significance and operation of the slave ship and examine the long-lasting impact on enslaved people and their descendants, as well as other actors including the captains and sailors which I will reference in this section. These texts explore ideas of commodification and capitalism, visualization, onboard relationships and community, gender, resistance and rebellion, all of which will be discussed later in this thesis.

The slave ship operated as a central machine of production and material transformation. The ship could take African people from the shores of their various countries and deliver them, transformed into products, to other locations, where their labor would in turn create other products that would be shipped to different places. It was also, as Marcus Rediker describes, a “strange and potent combination of war machine, mobile prison, and factory…sailors also produced slaves within the ship as a factory, doubling their economic value as they moved them.” This was the process of commodifying human life that was “central to the making of global capitalism.” The process of commodification “entailed more than the completion of a

40 Curtin, 275.; Morgan, 74.
41 Rediker, 9.
42 Rediker, 13.
market transaction” and depended on violence as the primary tool used to “transform independent beings into human commodities whose most “socially relevant feature” was their “exchangeability.”” This violence “took the form of both physical and social violence,” causing “not only social death but physical death,” and focusing on isolating and dispossessing the enslaved people while enacting violence on their physical forms from even before they first set foot on the physical slave ship.43

The idea of humans as a commodity, or property, affected the behavior of captains and other captors towards them, simultaneously causing them to inflict harm while also worrying about the infliction of that harm. There was a constant push and pull of “economic losses” versus those practices “required to commodify people,” practices that had to be perfected to be able to determine “the point at which they extinguished the lives they were meant to sustain in commodified form.”44 Those who worked aboard slave ships consistently had to walk this line between harming just enough to destroy the humanity of the subject, while not enough that the subject would die or decide to take their own life, as “maritime trade proved commercially viable only to the extent that it was possible to compensate for” the costs incurred by that same form of travel, trying to sell enough humans to compensate for the cost of transporting them. It is this same form of thinking that caused captains to “‘whip and scarify them only’” in the case of punishment or employ “good treatment,” to make sure that they had sufficient cargo to deliver at the end of the journey.45

44 Smallwood, 33; 43.
45 Smallwood, 67.; Rediker, 32.
However, death was a part of life on the slave ship, not least because of the inhumane practices employed by those who ran them. This specter of death was a further part of the commodification of humans. Those “who organized the human commerce knew the death rates and carried on anyway…Human “wastage” was simply part of the business, something to be calculated into all planning.”

The planning of so-called “human wastage” even contributed to a continued dehumanization: described by Rediker, “it [was] as if the use of ledgers, almanacs, balance sheets, graphs, and tables – the merchants’ comforting methods -- …rendered abstract, and thereby dehumanized, a reality that must…be understood concretely.” Put in other terms, these methods that seem to be make possessions more concrete by listing and cataloguing them, actually had the opposite effect, of making the human lives lost more abstract.

The ship was both the staging ground for this attempted conversion of human life into abstract numbers and products and a machine that was used for this same purpose. It had the ability to “incarcerate and transport African bodies.” The ship’s crew also used those same bodies as labor onboard while attempting to destroy their connections to humanity. The ship itself brought human commodities on a “relentlessly linear course” that “never reversed,” material commodities in the opposite directions. It linked “workers free, unfree, and everywhere in between, in capitalist and noncapitalist societies on several continents” and converted gold, extracted by African labor, back into “(embodied) commodified labor, now available to begin the process anew.”

---

46 Rediker, 6.
47 Rediker, 12.
48 Rediker, 72.
49 Rediker, 152.
50 Smallwood, 6.
51 Rediker, 348.; Smallwood, 10.
of the greatest and most terrible inventions of the century and a machine of violent capitalist goals.

This attempt at dehumanization in no way actually destroyed the humanity of those subjected to it. Often in scholarship relating to slavery, writers speak about agency as a way to describe humanity, and even this, according to Walter Johnson, is reductive, as even those enslaved people who did not openly rebel were still humans. To strip them of this humanity is to concede that dehumanization is possible, that humanity is something that can be conferred and withdrawn by others – the capitalist fantasy. Despite the efforts of the slave traders, this goal remained an imaginary one.

VISUALIZATION

Visualization is key not just to films about slavery, but also to slavery and abolition itself, especially in terms of the visualization of the slave ship. The abolitionists’ use of visualizing the slave ship concerned humanization; visualization onboard the ship was about commodification. Debates about abolition often “centered on the image of the slave ship,” with abolitionists believing that “picturing things is bad for business…It can choke the mind with horror if persisted in.” Abolitionists appealed to “the immediate, visceral experience of the slave ship, over and against abstract knowledge about the slave trade,” and viewed visual communication – drawing and recreations – as the most powerful means of conveying the horrible conditions of the ship itself. In one particularly notable case, that of the slave ship Brooks (one of the key turning points in abolitionist rhetoric), an image of the ship circulated for years from the time it

52 See page 23 for further discussion of Johnson’s work.
53 Rediker, 8; 12.
54 Rediker, 35.
was first published in 1788, coming to serve different purposes for different abolitionist cases. Mainly, though, the point of the Brooks was in the image’s “ability to make the viewer identify and sympathize with the “injured Africans” on the lower deck of the ship” as well as bringing forth “the shock of moral astonishment.”\(^{55}\) These tactics would ultimately feature heavily in the British Parliamentary debate to abolish slavery.

Besides the visualization of the slave ship, there was also the idea of visuals onboard the slave ship. The way slavers and abolitionists presented enslaved people was key to their eventual commodification. While actually onboard the ship, the captains and crew kept enslaved people in a state of disarray; however, when being sold to a slave ship and off a slave ship, it was important for the sellers and the buyers to make those enslaved look as appealing to future buyers as possible – these calculations hinged on “their displayed bodies,” especially in the case of women, on “their capacity for future childbearing.”\(^{56}\) As one merchant instructed his captains, those in charge of slave ships had to be sure “to “get your negroes shaved and made clean to look well and strike a good impression on the Planters and buyers’’”,\(^{57}\) another buyer simply ordered “’do not receive any with bodily imperfections.’”\(^{58}\) The appearances of enslaved people was key to being able to sell them, and to being able to make a profit.

RELATIONSHIPS

While onboard slave ships, different types of relationships and communities emerged, among them those based on violence and an imbalance of power, and those based on a newly emerging form of kinship. The hierarchy onboard a slave ship was heavily slanted towards those

\(^{55}\) Rediker, 335; 337.

\(^{56}\) Mustakeem, Sowande M. Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage, 2016, 1.

\(^{57}\) Rediker, 35.

\(^{58}\) Mustakeem, 36.
in charge, specifically the captains and, to a lesser extent, the officers. Mainly, the captain was a force of violence towards everyone aboard the ship, often described as “positively demonic, his heart colonized by cruelty,” or, more simply, mired in “a domineering style of shipboard leadership that can be summed up in a word: bully.”\(^{59}\) However, the ship captains were also experts in their craft of running a ship, “highly skilled, experienced masters of a sophisticated machine.”\(^{60}\) Thus they were complicated figures of survival, on the one hand, and terror, on the other. This paradox held for sailors and others on board but was especially true for those voyagers who were enslaved.

The hierarchy of violence involved each member of the slave ship. Violence “cascaded downward, from captain and officers to sailors to the enslaved.”\(^{61}\) Ship’s officers may have been “agents of violence on the one hand, and victims of violence on the other” but were mainly the perpetrators, as were sailors and especially captains.\(^{62}\) Yet while the sailors may have experienced some forms of violence, it did not compare to the multiple forms suffered by the enslaved people, who also endured the quest to dehumanize them.

Alongside these violent relationships, however, new forms of kinship also emerged among the enslaved people. The mission to dehumanize Africans included a strategy of imposing a sort of “social death,” a somewhat controversial term coined by Orlando Patterson, by interposing “a nearly impassable gulf between captives and any community that might claim them” through their “forced migration.”\(^{63}\) Part of this social death also depended on the immersion of the enslaved people in “a collective whose most distinguishing feature was its

\(^{59}\) Rediker, 144; 204.
\(^{60}\) Rediker, 188.
\(^{61}\) Rediker, 239.
\(^{62}\) Rediker, 155.
unnatural constitution,” a collective that was based on not sharing common features or ancestry, but rather on sharing a singular and frightening fate, far from everything familiar. The slave ship was “a place of profound displacement.”64

In response to this violence, however, enslaved people formed new relationships and communities in the hold of the slave ship. Fragile bonds emerged, and out of those bonds “grew new kinship among people who called themselves ‘shipmates.’”65 While literal kin were ripped away and left behind, or sold purposefully in different directions, enslaved people broadened “the idiom of kinship…from immediate family to messes, to workmates, to friends, to countrymen and women, to the whole of the lower deck.”66 Such new bonds of kinship can be seen in many surviving slave narratives, including that of Olaudah Equiano, who describes creating new bonds and forms of family onboard his own slave ship, only to be separated once again upon arrival in a new land. Communication existed in many forms, including “integrally connected, drumming, song, and dance…actively shared among bondpeople.”67 The captives on the slave ships “lived within many different bodies of affinity all at once, making and remaking strategic choices as opportunity or misfortune dictated,” and, in this case, making those choices to form a community in the hold of the ship.68

---

64 Smallwood, 305.
65 Rediker, 130.
66 Rediker, 305.
67 Mustakeem, 121.
68 Smallwood, 119.
Specifically gendered forms of relationships and treatment also existed aboard the slave ship, leading men and women to inhabit important roles and suffer extensive violence. Gender is everywhere: constructed in the African villages the captives were from, constructed as well in the British contexts for captain and crew. However, gendering processes on the slave ship reflected particular dimensions of abuse and favor. These abuses and favors were different for different genders, but both men and women experienced specific violence related to them.

The specific gendered violence levied against women on slave ships often centered around their sexuality. Captains would at times select “‘favorites,’” to whom they therefore “showed greater favours than the rest,” likely as small recompense for coerced sexual services,” a frequent activity that sometimes also included ships officers. This was often seen as “a woman’s way to make the best of a bad situation, that is, to make a strategic alliance with one man as a protection against other predators,” and sometimes gain other privileges, such as “greater freedom of movement.” This idea of the “special mistreatment and sufferings of enslaved women aboard the ship” played a key part in the abolitionist movement. By appealing to the morality of white property owners who balked at the idea of sexual assault, in some more obvious forms, and perhaps also at the thought of relationships between captains and slave women, abolitionists gained a further foothold in the public imagination through images from the slave ship.

71 Rediker, 19.
72 Rediker, 243; 20.
73 Rediker, 146.
Women also served sometimes unexpectedly powerful roles on slave ships. At times, there are examples of enslaved women keeping “order” among fellow women on the ships, “probably with a fierce determination that they should all survive the ordeal of oceanic crossing.” Other times, the position as a favorite allowed women greater access to freedoms that could in turn help the enslaved population – sometimes in terms of rebellions. For instance, there are examples of women leveraging their “privileged position as a favorite, and [the] greater freedom of movement that this entailed, to help with planning,” or arming of revolts that took place during the length of the passage. On other occasions women and children simply used their “greater mobility around the ship” to assist or plan such insurrections. These examples are important in an exploration of Black female “agency” at the time, often overlooked in favor of portraying them as passive victims. Instead, when we focus on “the subtler ways in which women have cannily assessed and expertly exploited even situations,” we can understand that without these key female figures, many historical revolts might never have happened.

Modern scholars, notably Kimberlé Crenshaw and Cathy J. Cohen, have analyzed the intersections of the racialized and gendered experiences of enslaved women. Enslaved women experienced “multiple systems of oppression” that “systems use[d]…to regulate and socialize.” Intersectionality offers an illuminating lens through which to view these powerful, enslaved women,” revealing the systems they were operating within and against. Gender and race also

74 Rediker, 16.
75 Rediker, 20.
76 Rediker, 293.
shaped the experience of enslaved men aboard the slave ship, another theme that appears in many films about slavery in general and slave ships specifically.

Slavers tormented men in specifically gendered ways. Although women were overwhelmingly the subjects of forced sexual attacks, ship captains and crew also forced men to perform sexual acts at times. Black men during the time of slavery also faced increasingly violent stereotypes; furthermore, stereotypes of emasculation and hypermasculinity also generated violent reactions at the same time. Although these different stereotypes may seem mutually exclusive, slavers used them for different purposes to keep enslaved men under their control. Aboard the slave ship, enslaved men were still subjected to these abuses and stereotypes and were most often used for their physical labor. They were also more likely than women to be involved in slave rebellions aboard the ships.

RESISTANCE

Rebellions and smaller, less obvious forms of resistance, are important to consider when looking at the slave ship’s operation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Rebellions on slave ships were not uncommon, especially in the 18th century, as the crews “grew more cruel” during the crossing and “the enslaved people resolved to use whatever means available to them to fight back” and to reassert their “human dignity and humanity itself.” However, insurrection was not

83 Rediker, 121.; Genovese, xiii.
“a spontaneous natural process,” but, rather, “the result of calculated human effort – careful communication, detailed planning, precise execution” that was even more impressive given the oppressive regime instilled on the ship and the fact that many enslaved people did not share a common language. 84 Any serious challenge to slavery also carried further implications, as slavery “symbolized the most extreme model of treating men as exploitable objects” and challenging that model would also threaten to dislodge other, “widely accepted forms of dominion and subordination.” 85

In fact, builders and captains created every part of the slave ship, from the crew, to the organization, to the abject terror inflicted on the human subjects, to prevent revolts in all forms, making each attempt a “remarkable achievement” no matter the outcome. And the outcome was never clear from the outset – what was clear was only the common identification among those enslaved of a problem that must be solved, and a shared desire to generate an outcome that from their perspective could only be better than the experience they were already having. Sometimes, the insurrections even resulted in “the mutual destruction of the contending sides,” with everyone onboard dying. 86

Different forms of resistance arose in daily slave ship life. Some of these forms of resistance, such as throwing themselves off the side of the ship, or refusing food, would lead to a different form of death for the enslaved people, one by their own hand as opposed to that of their captors. Accounts of those jumping overboard spoke of “the joy expressed by people once they had gotten into the water.” 87 However, it may never be clear why a slave might “choose to take his own life,” and it can only be speculated that it might have been a way to reclaim agency or an

84 Rediker, 292.
85 Davis, 13.
86 Rediker, 298.
87 Rediker, 289.
“affirmation that there yet remained a self to be preserved,” in the face of such a clear attempt to extinguish it.  

Scholars report other forms of agency during the length of the journey, including in acts where “one form of resistance” might “give rise to another.” By forming communities in the face of the captors trying to force a lack of sociality, the enslaved people were resisting. Their collective music- and art-making, community-building, and especially finding means of communication, were all forms of resistance to a system trying to strip them of their humanity. They divined a “means to explain [their situation], to define and delimit it.” Together, through the act of taking their own lives, rebelling with force, or simply living human lives, each enslaved person resisted in different ways.

Johnson explores this often-debated and discussed term “agency” in his seminal essay On Agency. Johnson argues that “by continuing to frame their words as “discoveries” of Black humanity…historians unwittingly reproduce the incised terms and analytical limits of…white-supremacist assumptions” that made it possible to question the existence of Black humanity during the slave trade in the first place. Johnson instead frames the term “agency” as a “liberal notion of selfhood” that fails to consider “humanness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency, a consideration, that is, of the condition of enslaved humanity.” In this way, Johnson centers the idea of a humanity that can exist and still be powerfully influenced by slavery, but not unduly subdued or, importantly, destroyed by this social condition. Therefore, the idea of agency in this paper is not holistic, nor a full summary of the way humanity existed and resisted during

---

88 Smallwood, 145; 125.
89 Rediker, 264.
90 Smallwood, 125.
92 Johnson, 114.
93 Johnson, 115.
slavery, but rather a way of demarcating one version of how enslaved people rebelled against their conditions, aboard the slave ship.
The History of Slavery in Film

Slavery has long been represented in cinema around the world. The evolution of those portrayals reflects changing dominant attitudes towards the history of race in general, especially as films always reflect their historical context. From the early, romanticized films that followed the Civil War, to more modern, gritty portrayals of individual stories; from the centering of the stories of white people, often slavers, surrounded by stereotypical versions of enslaved Black people, to the centering of the stories of enslaved people, movies that feature slavery have shifted in topic and tenor over the years.

MAINSTREAM HISTORY

Representations of slavery and its legacies, beginning in the early 20th century, are as old as modern filmmaking itself. Films such as D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of A Nation* (1915), considered by many scholars to be the first major motion picture, used “ugly, stereotyped characterizations and storylines” to create some of the era’s most successful actors and filmmakers. Powerful people at the time used films with extremely racist overtones to justify the terror against and repression of Black people and simultaneously create the “romantic mythology” of the plantation era, as “nostalgic scenes of splendorous wealth.” The historical context of this time is very important to consider as well. After Reconstruction ended in 1877, violent white supremacists came to power and instated segregation (“Jim Crow”) laws that

---


prevented Black people from gaining the rights they were promised as citizens of the United States. Through the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, racial violence was perpetrated by a large number of white people, violence that included voter suppression, lynching, and specific acts by the reborn Klu Klux Klan (encouraged by *Birth of a Nation’s* portrayal of the group as heroic). Because of the way that Black and white people were represented in mainstream film – Black people as dangerous, stupid, or horrific in some way, white people as romanticized and gallant – these early films were very popular with white audiences, and the so-called “plantation” genre became increasingly important to film studios’ revenue throughout the early 1900s.97

The later 1900s were a time of Black progress and a white stronghold on the past. As the 1900s progressed, the Great Migration of Black people moving from the South to the North and the Midwest began, lasting from 1910 to 1970. Even as more laws were put into place to protect the rights of Black Americans, racist views still had strong footholds in the country’s infrastructure, and violent riots where white communities committed horrific acts against Black ones occurred frequently.98 Films such as 1935’s *So Red the Rose*, that portrayed slaves plotting a rebellion, were not as successful in this time.99 Other films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1940) remain among the most revered to this day, even as the first Black woman to win an Academy Award played a role in *Gone With the Wind* that was “consistent with stereotypical depictions of black female house slaves.”100 The different valuing of these films – the disregard of films about Black people plotting a rebellion and the reverence of a romanticized version of the largest white

99 Stevenson, 494.
100 Stevenson, 495.
rebellion in the United States, predicated on the need to hold onto slavery – was not coincidental. Instead, it shows that public opinion at the time was still largely influenced by prejudiced and “Lost Cause” thinking, positing white Confederates as victims, even as Black citizens lost their lives and were ignored.

During and after World War II, portrayals of enslaved people on film changed in important ways. Scholars argue that because they needed recruits for the war effort, the U.S. government “had to appeal to national unity” and to find a way to motivate the Black soldiers it had conscripted to defend a nation, albeit one that did not represent their humanity very well in its media. As an audience, the soldiers were “on the brink of taking action against the glaring contradictions in Uncle Sam’s stance on racism and demeaning black depictions by commercial cinema,” especially since many Black soldiers who returned from fighting for the United States in WWI had been similarly disappointed by the country’s hypocrisy in lauding freedom abroad and failing to deliver it domestically.  

The shift in the portrayal of slavery was also related to “popular reform efforts, including black political and social activism across the diaspora,” and protests that led to the Civil Rights era, challenging the unjust status quo. This time of activism gave way to films such as *The Foxes of Harrow* (1947), a movie about an illegitimate Irish gambler finding success in pre-Civil War New Orleans.  

---


This early shift in portrayed attitudes continued as the 50s gave way to the revolutionary 60s and 70s. During this period, activists identified structures of inequality, and stories about a group being marginalized rose to the fore, underscoring the “social and inner lives of black captives and…the significance of their resistance efforts,” changing the opportunities for storytelling in films and paving the way for the public’s “reception of more realistic and humanistic images of enslaved people.”\(^\text{103}\) This was also during the rise of the Civil Rights movement, when a specific part of the Civil Rights protests focused on the innate racism of the film industry and Hollywood, so long unapologetically represented onscreen.\(^\text{104}\)

In response, Hollywood launched its controversial “blaxploitation” genre, a complicated type of film that centered Black characters for perhaps the first time, yet placed them in exploitative situations, creating new stereotypes and still not allowing for different and fully realized characters. An example of a blaxploitation film is *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), an action movie about a Black man’s escape from white police, directed by Martin Van Peebles (explored more later).

Other films from this time offered a different representation of Black life. These films include *Band of Angels* (1957), a romance about a mixed-race enslaved woman finding love with her new owner; *Burn!* (1969), an Italian film about an African slave revolt on a Portuguese-owned planation island; and *Roots* (1976). *Roots* is an iconic example in the history of film and the history of Black Americans. The story follows a family navigating the generational impact of slavery, from their origins in Africa to new roots in the United States. The mini-series created a powerful moment that forced white viewers to reckon with white complicity and gave Black viewers a media text fully devoted to exploring a version of their past.

\(^{103}\) Stevenson, 503; 488.
\(^{104}\) Guerrero, 29.
Following these revolutionary times, the 1980s and 1990s ushered in a new period when stories of enslaved people seemingly could finally be told in a more central way. This was a period of contradiction. The United States was rife with poverty, anti-Black law enforcement under guise of being "tough on crime," and mass incarceration. At the same time, there was the growth of the Black middle class, affirmative action allowing for more Black people to attend predominantly white colleges, and the prominence of black people in popular culture, from Michael Jackson, to Michael Jordan to Oprah. This shaped opportunities for black films to be made, as well as their subject matter. This period led to such films as *Glory* (1989), about the United States’ first African-American regiment in the Civil War and the white men who led it; *Beloved* (1998), an adaptation of Toni Morrison’s novel about a former enslaved woman and her life as a mother; and *The Journey of August King* (1995), about a white farmer who helps an enslaved girl continue her escape. Each of these films in some way centered Black stories first and foremost, even as they demonstrated the lasting impacts of the film portrayals of earlier times (such as the centering of otherwise minor white characters in many cases).^{105}

Heading into the 2010s, more complicated mainstream portrayals appeared, yet were still in some cases only surface-level attempts at representation. On the tail of the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, the rate of movies that centralized Black characters increased, even as the high-profile murders of Black citizens, such as 17-year old Trayvon Martin, helped to center them in the broader media world. Movements such as Black Lives Matter arose to protest the continued mistreatment of Black people within the United States and internationally. Popular outings during this period include *Django Unchained* (2012), about a slave-turned-bounty hunter; *12 Years a Slave* (2013), an adaptation of a true story about a man who was free

---

and then forced to live as a slave; Selma (2014), about the 1965 voting rights march; Freedom (2015), about the Underground Railroad; The Birth of a Nation (2016), this time following Nat Turner’s rebellion\(^\text{106}\) as opposed to the film of the same title that followed the KKK; and Harriet (2019), a version of the life of Harriet Tubman. Many of these mainstream films are influenced by the mixed times in which they were made. It seems clear that the films, centering history, serve to remind their audiences of how far the United States has come in terms of its treatment of the Black people who live the country, how far there is still to go, and how the racial injustices Black Americans suffered and still suffer cannot and should not be ignored.\(^\text{107}\)

BLACK INDIE HISTORY

For the entire length of time that there have been mainstream racist representations in film, there have also been Black filmmakers creating art that is true to their own vision of what needs to be shown in film.\(^\text{108}\) Although the definition of what constitutes “indie” film has always been contested, it is largely constituted by films that are made outside of the major film studio system, or mainstream Hollywood, and those films that challenge this mainstream. This definition is complicated, of course, by the implicitly commercial nature of all film work.\(^\text{109}\) Indie film definitionally has often included Black filmmakers, who for decades were purposefully and/or systematically excluded from major studio work in the film industry. In fact, scholar Cynthia Baron argues that films by African-Americans should constitute America’s “first


and perhaps most politically significant ‘independent cinema’, past and present.”

When looking at the history of Black independent film, it becomes clear why this argument holds up.

When Birth of a Nation premiered, Oscar Micheaux, a well-established Black indie filmmaker, made Within Our Gates (1920) in response, to portray contemporary race-relations in the United States. Micheaux was part of the school of Black directors struggling to create in one of the most blatantly racist times in the country’s history, and successfully making their voices heard (although still ignored by the white canon’s reproduction of itself). Spencer Williams, a Black director and actor, directed The Blood of Jesus in 1941, a famous and provocative film about religion. During and after the 1940s, this early Black film movement paused due to complex effects of integration: providing more mainstream opportunities, but separating communities. These early movies worked hard to portray true stories of the Black experience during a time when those stories were being actively silenced.

In the 60s and 70s, Black documentarians such as St Claire Bourne, William Greaves, and Madeline Anderson captured contemporary issues, including the Civil Rights movement. Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène made Black Girl (1966), a movie about a Senegalese woman who takes a job in France, exploring specifically racial overtones in a more international view. The 70s was a prolific time for Black independent cinema. Ivan Dixon’s The Spook Who Sat By the Door (1973) showed a Black CIA agent who begins a political revolution, Sembène’s Xala (1975) tackled cultural practices and westernized notions, and Blacula (1972), depicted an African prince who became a vampire. Martin Van Peebles continued directing films including Watermelon Man (1970) a satire about a racist white man who realizes he is Black, and Sweet

---

Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song, mentioned earlier as an example of the Blaxploitation movement and championed as a film about self-actualization. A time of unapologetic Black Power movements was represented onscreen.111

With the rise of the so-called “LA Rebellion,” dubbed so because of the forms and subjects of the films the participants made, which included Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry, and Haile Gerima and spanned several decades, Black independent film became even more widespread and widely acknowledged as important.112 Charles Burnett, with Killer of Sheep (1978), about the Black Los Angeles ghetto Watts, and Julie Dash, with Daughters of the Dust (1991), exploring the traditions of the Gullah, especially, were rising stars of this time, showing a truthful, unexpected, and previously unseen slice of Black life.

During the 80s, films such as Kathleen Collins’ Losing Ground (1982), Euzhan Palcy’s Sugar Cane Alley (1983), Robert Townsend’s Hollywood Shuffle (1987), Keenen Ivory Wayans’ I’m Gonna Git You Sucka (1988), and Spike Lee’s She’s Gotta Have It (1986) emerged in theaters. Black women, specifically, were also becoming more successful in indie cinema. Spike Lee was a standout at this time and ushered in the 90s and the “Black New Wave” with Do The Right Thing (1989), about race and class conflicts on one summer day in New York City. With Daughters of the Dust, the 90s included films such as Leslie Harris’s Just Another Girl on the I.R.T. (1992), Spike Lee’s Malcolm X (1992), James Bond III’s Def by Temptation (1990), and more.

The 2000s heralded an era of more complexity in black stories in film. In the early 2000s, Barry Jenkins directed *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), released right after Barack Obama was elected, a film that deals with gentrification in San Francisco. Finally, in the 2010s, films such as Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016), about a young gay Black man growing up in the South, actually won mainstream awards, including Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director, a sign that Black indie film was moving from being the only option to instead one among many for aspiring Black filmmakers, even as there are still very few high-budget films directed by Black directors.\textsuperscript{113} Ava Duvernay, herself a director of indie films *I Will Follow* (2010) and *Middle of Nowhere* (2012) as well as more mainstream productions largely about the Black American experience, started the African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement (AFFRM). AFFRM has released films including Alrick Brown’s *Kinyarwanda* (2011) and Andrew Dosunmu’s *Restless City* (2011). Besides this specific movement, the 2010s have hosted a group of other Black indie films including Rick Famuyiwa’s 2015 movie *Dope*. In the 2010s, these indie films showcase varied stories of the modern Black experience, with more freedom than older decades. The history of Black independent cinema is long, creative, and durable.\textsuperscript{114}

\section*{SETTING THE CONTEXT}

Throughout its history, film has been used as a powerful medium that can “solidify popular and scholarly images of history” and/or radically challenge them, as in those films that


offer portrayals of enslaved history. However, there is still some distance to go in terms of these portrayals, with the image of African Americans and other racial minorities still being consistently devalued by “confining their representations within an ideological web of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures.” Frequently, these representations are based solely and problematically on “Hollywood’s economic needs and representational strategies,” and are often in line with a “capitalist middle-class identity” that Black people are encouraged to strive for in the United States.

While the number of films that provide representations of slave ships and slave ship rebellions in film throughout history are few, they tend to follow a trajectory that is similar to those portraying slavery. The four films that will make up the next sections demonstrate that this sub-genre, moving from the 60s, to the 90s, to the 2010s, also reflects the eras in which they were made. Tamango is a film from 1959, and follows a slave ship during an unspecified time in the 19th century; Amistad is from 1997, and is set in 1839; Passage du Milieu was made in 1999 and portrays the middle passage at large; finally, Belle was made in 2014 and is set in 1783. Although they do not span the entire history of film, they do partially represent shifting representations of Black Americans on the screen, as well as the complicated welter of themes that necessarily come into play in portrayals of how lives were lived, and frequently lost, aboard slave ships.

115 Stevenson, 514.
116 Guerrero, 9.
Tamango (1959)

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING

Tamango, the 1959 film by white director John Berry, is based on a short story. The story, by French Romanticist author Prosper Mérimée, was first published in 1829. It was a part of a growth of the idea of anti-slavery in literature, where the slave was “transformed from a
despised *bête de somme* into the exalted hero.”¹¹⁸ The story follows a rebellion by enslaved people onboard a Dutch, Cuba-bound slave ship, led by the enslaved man Tamango, from an unspecified part of Africa. It also pays close attention to the changing goals of an enslaved woman Aishé (Dorothy Dandridge), who is kept by the ship captain as a kind of mistress. Ultimately, the rebellion ends in the deaths of the key players.

Brought to the screen nearly a century and a half after Merimee's story, Tamango, the film, is a product of its times. Director John Berry was blacklisted from Hollywood during the McCarthy era for being a Communist and left to make movies in Europe instead, so *Tamango* is a French/Italian film. Berry was born in The Bronx, New York, and acted and directed in the United States from 1937 until 1951, when Edward Dmytryk named him as a member of the Communist Party and he moved to Paris, France, where he continued working. However, despite being released in France, *Tamango* stars English-speaking actors, notably Dandridge in one of her final roles before her untimely death in 1965.

Dandridge was one of the first successful Black actresses in Hollywood, despite her career often hinging on her portrayals of “tragic mulattos,” those mixed race characters in literature and film who were doomed in each creation, either by birth or by uncontrollable surrounding circumstances, one of the limited role types available to Black women at the time, especially in Hollywood. This trope soundly includes Aishé, her character in *Tamango*, as well. Dandridge won an academy award for her role in *Carmen Jones* (1954) and worked steadily until her tragic death at age 42, seven years after the release of *Tamango*.

*Tamango* was controversial because of both its subject material and the man who directed it. Although it was a French film, the French banned it in its West African colonies “for fear it

---

would cause dissent among the Natives.”119 This banning was due to the subject material, an enslaved man standing up against a slave ship captain, in a time when the French colonies, while not enslaved, were threatening to revolt against the racism and economic oppression of their colonial governance.

*Tamango* also did not receive nation-wide release in the United States because of the Hays Code. The Hays Code, established in 1930, was a strict censorship code that required every studio to fall in line with the moral ideals set by the Production Code Administration, which banned everything from interracial dating to “lustful kissing.”120 The film disobeyed the edict against interracial dating, or the so-called “miscegenation” section of the code, by showcasing the nonconsensual union between the Captain and Aishé.121 The Hays Code was eventually abolished, but its effects are still felt on film today.

While these two controversies provide immediate context for the film’s release, it is also true that the world was changing. The fifties included revolutionary events such as Brown v. Board (1954), beginning the long journey to desegregating schools, the horrific murder of Emmet Till (1955), and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955) in the United States, Berry’s home country – all events that set the stage for the Civil Rights movement and other, radical protests for Black self-determination and rights. Abroad, the fifties heralded new resistance to South African Apartheid and an important period of decolonization across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. For Communists, the era of the fifties saw a sea change in their lives and ideologies as well. In the United states, McCarthyism meant the end of many bright careers, and sometimes

---

121 Hayward.
even lives, of real or merely suspected Communists. Internationally, anti-Communism spread widely. At the close of the fifties, when *Tamango* premiered, Black people, Communists, and other marginalized groups from the time were restless, perhaps even readying themselves for a shift in power, as represented in the film’s precedent-breaking portrayal of enslaved people.

In France, times were also revolutionary. There were uprisings in the 1950s and 60s in French-speaking Africa, “in other words, in the former colonies” which put mainland France on edge. The Algerian War of Independence had been going on since November of 1954, changing the way the French were allowed to interact with their colonies and those they had colonized. There were also more immigrants to France at this time, including, but not limited to, around 190,000 Algerians in the decade up to 1957.122 And in early 1963, the Congolese Revolution exploded, displacing those formerly in power and creating an entirely new government in its place. These rebellions and shifting demographics contributed to the French government’s desire to not allow *Tamango* to be shown, but also to the ideas included in *Tamango*, of rebellion and a changing world.

*Tamango*’s impact on subsequent portrayals of slavery in film is clear. Along with films like it, it paved the way for films to abandon stock stereotypical characters and “reimagine their voices and roles within slave society” by giving the Black actors involved different opportunities.123 *Tamango* showcased more multi-faceted Black characters, especially the leader of the slave revolt, Tamango himself, and the complicated leading lady, Aishé, who surpasses previous portrayals of the so-called “tragic mulatto.” The film also provides fertile soil to

---


123 Stevenson, 501.
examine themes including commodification, visualization, relationships, gender, and resistance that inform understandings of the slave ship and its cinematic representation.

COMMODIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION: TAMANGO’S MIXED CHALLENGES AND CONCESSIONS TO CAPITALISM

We can start with the way the actual slave ship is portrayed. The ship is a constant, the location of the entire story. The sounds of the sea and the ship rocking are always in the background. A machine of commodification and capitalism, the ship serves as a backdrop to the entire film, a place where the Black actors and their characters, those enslaved, experience the violence of attempted dehumanization, both represented by the film and recreated within it.

*Tamango* shows the historically enacted violence that shrouded slave ships from before boarding to after disembarking. The forms of violence included more obvious physical examples—hitting, lashing, and more—as well as those activities specific to the ship’s environment, that included backbreaking work and forced exercise. The violence is also less obvious than it is in later portrayals of slave ships, such as *Amistad*, and even more sanitized. There are no graphic beatings or deaths. In the film, though, sailors and the captain manhandle the bodies of those enslaved, hit them, and punish them for stepping out of line. They also force the enslaved people to inhabit the small underbelly of the ship, the hold, a dank, airless space with appallingly little space for people.

The violence is portrayed in many different ways throughout the film. For daily forced exercise, critical historically to preserving “human merchandise,” the enslaved people are shown to be compelled by crewmembers to dance until they literally cannot go on and drop to the ship’s deck, a form of exertion that is known to have been used on historical slave ships and functioned
as simultaneous visual entertainment for those crewmembers.\(^{124}\) The enslaved people are also forced to work menial tasks on the ship once they have been on board for some time, making them cogs in the machine. Often, this was a practice on historical slave ships, when captains would order many of the enslaved men “unchained, brought on deck, and taught how to work the ship.”\(^{125}\) These forms of violence are less obvious only because they serve multiple purposes: inflicting terror, providing visual entertainment for the crew, and exploiting the enslaved peoples’ capacity for production – even as the slavers aimed to transform the people themselves into human products.

However, alongside these previous forms of violence and commodification, portrayed by the film in order to be historically accurate, exist new forms created by the film itself. The film exploits the images of its Black actors, especially Dandridge and Cressan, which is obvious even in the publicity poster. The poster uses the abusive relationship between Dandridge’s character and the ship’s captain as a dramatic selling point for the film, framing it in terms of an almost star-crossed narrative. Below the large faces of Aishé and the captain, the bodies of Tamango and a woman who can be presumed to be Aishé stand frozen in a turbulent embrace. Both bodies can be read as sexualized from the way they are clothed and positioned. Above their heads, a caption proclaims the casting to be “bold and daring.”

This idea of using the Black actors and their sexual relationships as the main selling point of a film ostensibly about a slave rebellion is also threaded throughout the film itself. Dandridge and Cressan are in similarly revealing outfits, and both are first and foremost seemingly motivated by their sexual passions. Even a film that does its best to show the ways that visualization and commodification worked in tandem in the slave trade falls into patterns of

\(^{124}\) Mustakeem, 71.

\(^{125}\) Rediker, 152.
using a different form of visualization and commodification of its actors. It also harkens to another harmful idea associated with Black people, especially in the Reconstruction era but still seen today, as predatory and primitive beings.

Commodities and visuals work in tandem in Tamango. There is certainly a relationship in Tamango between capitalism and the way that things and people are presented; bodies such as Dandridge’s are used as a selling point. Simultaneously, Tamango does a good job of representing the ways that visuals were innately tied to commodification in the initial slave trade as well, through the portrayal of life onboard the slave ship. These two representations, both purposeful, serve two different aims, one shedding a light on the practices of the inhumane slave trade, which used commodification to dehumanize enslaved people, and the other challenging and recreating that same commodification in a way that simultaneously humanizes and dehumanizes Black actors and characters in the film.

Figure 2: Dorothy Dandridge and Alex Cressan in Tamango (1959).
RELATIONSHIPS AND GENDER: AISHÉ, TAMANGO, AND CAPTAIN REIKER

Some of the most significant parts of *Tamango* emerge from the relationships between Aishé and the Captain, Aishé and Tamango, and Aishé, Tamango and the other enslaved people. The relationship between Aishé and the Captain is an intensified extension of the paternalism and forced intimacy he shows with all of the enslaved people (for instance, he later talks to Tamango in a friendly and jolly fashion and says that he “takes good care” of “his slaves”). However, his relationship with Aishé is uniquely exploitative because there is an added and nonconsensual sexual component. At one point, the Captain, realizing that Aishé is bonding with the other enslaved people, becomes threatened. He promises her freedom, using her lack of ability to convince her by handing her a document that did not actually grant it in order to keep her in his orbit. This relationship is a reference to historical examples of captains taking women as their personal mistresses. The captain, in general, serves also to reference the historically tyrannical, “positively demonic,” slave ship captain.126

Aishé and Tamango’s relationship is also a crucial one. In their first interaction, Tamango calls Aishé trash for being the Captain’s mistress, a sexist representation of Aishé’s choices. It is as if the character is purposefully misunderstanding her positionality as an enslaved woman, or as if he is a mouthpiece for accusations that many Black woman under slavery actually faced from their counterparts. Aishé, in return, explains that she is trying to protect herself in whatever way she can. Their sparring relationship provides a jumping-off point to talk about different forms of survival under slavery – Tamango refuses to bow to the whims of the slavers, in a stereotypically male fashion, whereas Aishé has decided to take whatever actions she can to help her to continue to live, including becoming the Captain’s mistress, invoking historical figures

126 Rediker, 144.
such as Harriet Jacobs, who acknowledged the often specifically sexualized demands on Black women living under slavery.\textsuperscript{127} Jacobs herself entered into a relationship with a white man to protect herself from her master’s sexual advances. Aishé and Tamango’s interactions and growing trust also eventually provides the catalyst for Aishé to change her priorities and join the rest of the enslaved people in open revolt.

Finally, there are the relationships of Aishé and Tamango to other enslaved people on the ship. Tamango has a different kind of relationship to the other enslaved people – he is a part of the collective of men, helping to plan and keeping his fellows safe as best he can, a classically male responsibility, the patriarchal protectors in a male band that transcends their different backgrounds. Aishé, on the other hand, is seen as a traitor to her race and her gender by the other enslaved people, specifically the women with whom she tries most to interact. Ultimately, though, she helps them with their rebellious activities and decides to die together with them. Her eventual fate is a sign that Berry believes death is more heroic than surviving in her life’s context. These opposing relationships continue to showcase Aishé and Tamango’s different backgrounds, lives, and forms of survival, providing insight into what Berry believes about honor, even during slavery, and an implicit insight into his view on gender.

Tamango and the Captain spend a large part of the film fighting for the conquest of Dandridge’s body. The relationships between Aishé and Tamango and the Captain “explicitly represents a fear of male inadequacy provoked by racially marked female bodies,” specifically Dandridge’s.\textsuperscript{128} Both Tamango and the Captain spend the majority of the film literally battling


“for possession of Dandridge’s body” as the film presents the dilemma of “which male discourse will ultimately define” her. Barry’s way of defining Aishé, through her relationships to the men around her, betray Berry’s sentiments as not quite as revolutionary as they may otherwise be thought. Aishé, in Berry’s mind, can only be possessed, rather than possess herself. This idea of Aishé’s function, as the sole central female character in the film, provides insight into how gender and race is portrayed in the representation of the slave ship. The intersectionality of Aishé’s identities, as a Black female slave, come into play in her contentious relationships with these two men – she is subordinated as an enslaved woman to the white captain, but also to her fellow enslaved man because of her gender. Berry posits sex as both her path to survival and possible freedom as well as her yoke, intimacy as her path to courage and yet also her path to bending to another man.

GENDER AND RESISTANCE: TAMANGO’S SHIP REVOLT

Both individual and collective acts of resistance are shown, from a ship-wide rebellion to attempts to slow down the machine of production that is the ship and workers on board. From the start, the enslaved characters attempt to harm individual ship workers – a man attacks the Captain early on, later more individuals are punished for similar resistance. As the movie progresses, so too does the plan that Tamango crafts with other enslaved men, the women curiously absent from this process. Although it is true that historically, more men led revolts than women, we know that women had key roles to play, which are in this case largely overlooked. Ultimately, and towards the end of the film, those enslaved revolt, attacking the ship’s crew.

129 Rippy, 199; 198.
After the revolt starts to fail, the characters involved retreat belowdecks to the brig, back to the place that has kept them trapped, but at this time their only possible place of protection.

The Captain attempts to smoke them out and then threatens to kill them all. The group responds by singing a song which Aishé eventually joins, a sign of her own personal rebellion from her old way of thinking to being part of the collective force – as the movie frames it, rejoining her people. The presence of song in this pivotal moment is another historical reference. Song often served as a vehicle of expression for those held in bondage, especially when those held did not share the same language and were not meant to communicate. In this way, the scene becomes a kind of double revolt, showing both a physical revolution by those enslaved and another, more hidden rebellion, a means by which many historical figures resisted the dispossession of their lives and communities. Perhaps Berry intended the double revolts as not just a representation of a slave revolt and a fictional story, but also a nod to the colonial revolts happening in the 1950s, especially the Algerian War.

Another central theme in Tamango is also the factually accurate idea of women as “carriers of vital information and as fighters willing to die for freedom,” with Aishé as the key figure in this respect. She even says “They can’t sell dead ones…They won’t sell me” before joining in song, choosing a different type of freedom, the freedom to die, a complicated choice that did occur in history. Berry represents this choice as a more authentic, more empowering one to the false one offered by the Captain as a way to convince her to abandon the others. The Captain then fires a cannonball into the hold, presumably killing those ensconced and possibly

---

130 Mustakeem, 120.
131 Rediker, 282.
132 Stevenson, 500.
damaging his own ship, the cost he is willing to pay to shut down the rebellion, harkening back to insurrections in the past that resulted in mutual destruction.  

The film made significant advances in its portrayal of race and gender, but some of its more radical moves may not be attributable to Berry. Apparently, the script originally caused Dandridge consternation because it was written as a “melodrama anchored by a love triangle” between her, the captain, and Tamango, a version which she made him rewrite, presumably to emphasize the nonconsensual aspects of her relationship with the captain. Dandridge, in this way, is responsible for making the story more accurate and also for taking control over her character to the extent that she could, making Aishé the more complicated figure she became.

The ship in Tamango has a specific operation throughout the film, and especially during this rebellion. It is a place of harm and danger for those enslaved, and simultaneously a place of protection from storms and angry sailors, as well as the only possible form of transportation left to them. The rebellion is also specific to the ship, with enslaved people attempting to harm aspects of the vessel itself, such as the mast, as a part of their rebellion. Their attempt at harming the ship can also be viewed as a larger attempt to disable the system that the ship represents, and that it plays such a key role in maintaining, a system that attempts to dehumanize those who resist and turns them into products. Targeting and destroying the ship as well as the people who run it targets the underlying engines of capitalist destruction.

Berry also uses the film to ruminate upon the idea of what “success” means under slavery and in a slave ship rebellion. He shows the enslaved people as having succeeded in heart and mind, singing their way into their deaths and refusing to give up on their rebellion, even as they

---

133 Rediker, 298.
failed to overtake the ship. Berry seems to have been thinking through themes that followed him in his own life through this intellectual and artistic creation, as a communist director on the verge of the revolutionary sixties, rebelling against a society that had worked to expel him from its ranks. Moreover, his film accords with the historical idea that any slave revolt, especially those onboard a ship, is a masterful achievement simply by being attempted within a totalizing environment of complete subjugation, created to squash ideas of revolt from seeming possible. The idea of success, *Tamango* argues, should be expanded in relation to slave rebellions.

**CONCLUSION**

*Tamango* is certainly a product of its time and its director’s personal experience. It invoked some regressive racial and gendered dynamics and, simultaneously, some plotlines more radical and forward-thinking than seen in contemporary or later films. There is a question of whether Berry can be credited with the more revolutionary ideas in the film, even as he held his own leftist beliefs; Dandridge’s involvement appears crucial for some of the advances it made.

Overall, though, *Tamango* creates an insular world that draws our focus to the idea of the totalizing environment of the ship and the rebellion that occurs there anyway, as a comment on the courage and fatalism of those who rebel against totalizing and oppressive systems in general. With the backdrop of the late fifties, especially the growing movement for African-American rights, widespread anti-colonial resistance, and Berry’s own Communist background, the film becomes itself a form of extra-textual rebellion against the accepted portrayals of slavery and enslaved people that had existed before and also a portrayal of a complicated anti-colonial rebellion on many different levels.
*Tamango* showcases dynamics of visuals and commodity as well as gender in relationships and revolution, dynamics that were all historically found onboard slave ships. This brings up the important discussion of the duality of movies about slave ships, and the tension that is found in the space between representation, humanizing, and commodification. Dandridge, especially, exists in this space, embodying these contradictions and charting her own way through them. The film, and Aishé’s actions specifically, might even be read as a full-on ironic indictment of capitalism and its relationship to slavery. Aishé, in the end, invites death, ruining her ability to be a commodity for others to buy, sell and exploit. The captain then fires a cannonball into his own ship, thus destroying his only means of livelihood, a devastating comment on the contradictions of capitalism and how they lead to its own self-destruction.
Amistad (1997)

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING

Few scenes in the film Amistad actually take place on the namesake ship that is so pivotal in the story. Directed by Steven Spielberg in 1997, the film follows the true story of the rebellion on board the slave ship “Amistad” and the trials that decided whether or not those who rebelled would be returned to slavery. The Amistad initially set sail from Havana to another Cuban port.
on June 28, 1839, with 53 African enslaved people as cargo.\textsuperscript{135} When former vice president Henry Wilson wrote his *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* in 1872, he dedicated a chapter to detailing the Amistad events.\textsuperscript{136} As he framed it, the Amistad case was one of determining the idea of “legal” slavery and debating the morals of slavery as a whole.\textsuperscript{137}

By 1839, Spain had prohibited the slave trade by law. However, the illegal slave trade still thrived, and in this year a Portuguese crew, of the ship *Amistad*, kidnapped free Africans near Havana. Those enslaved onboard rebelled and took control of the ship, sparing the lives of the crew and passengers, and attempted to sail back to their “native land.”\textsuperscript{138} The crew instead sailed to the United States, where the rebels were arrested. What followed was a series of court cases as the crew members and the Queen of Spain attempted to reverse their losses by regaining control of the enslaved people, and abolitionists in the U.S. attempted to defend them through different strategies. A lower court decided initially that the rebels were “native Africans illegally imported; that they were not slaves.”\textsuperscript{139} This is an important distinction, between legal and non-legally imported. There was still legal slavery in the 1800s; however, there were also contexts in which the trade was illegal. The Queen and the crew appealed the decision, and the case ultimately ended up at the Supreme Court in 1841. Former president John Quincy Adams, the lead on the supreme court case, primarily called the case a moral failing of the institution of slavery itself, with the government, and slavers, as “fleshmongers.”\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{138} Wilson, 457.
\textsuperscript{139} Wilson, 461.
\textsuperscript{140} Wilson, 463.
The movie adaptation generally focuses on the stories of select men who helped with the trial that occurred when the ship arrived in the United States, played by actors such as Morgan Freeman, Matthew McConaughey, Anthony Hopkins, and Stellan Skarsgard. We also meet one central enslaved character, Sengbe Pieh, or Joseph Cinqué (played by Djimon Hounsou), the leader of the Amistad revolt. However, the film does obscure some of the real people who were actually involved in the case in favor of creating new ones – key among these is Freeman’s character, Theodore Joadson, a stand-in character to represent Black abolitionist figures from the time who actually existed and fought against the institution of slavery, but not a historical figure himself.

Steven Spielberg, the director, is almost infamous for the type of movie he makes. A generous summary by Roger Ebert characterizes his films as being “about the ways good men try to work realistically within an evil system to spare a few of its victims.”\(^{141}\) Noah Berlatsky provides perhaps a more accurate description, arguing that Spielberg and his films’ “insistence that white people have to set black people free,” exemplify the white savior complex, where “black characters are essentially foils for white self-discovery and moral growth.”\(^{142}\) Spielberg’s other projects include *Schindler’s List* (1993), a movie about a rich German who saves a group of Jewish people in the Holocaust, *Lincoln* (2012), a movie about Abraham Lincoln and his personal quest to end slavery, and *The Color Purple* (185), which had a controversial reception. His movies feature sweeping music and dramatic monologues that succinctly sum up the main lesson that the audience is supposed to take away. *Amistad* is, in some ways, no different, and

---


features similar monologues, especially from McConaughey as he realizes the enslaved people are in fact human, and Hopkins as he states that these particular slaves are not slaves at all.

Spielberg was not the initial driving force behind the creation of Amistad. Debbie Allen, a Black woman and the producer of the film, was a key figure in getting it made. Allen is an artist in her own right, an actor, producer, and dancer. Allen was devoted to bringing the story to the screen for almost 20 years, facing rejection and active discouragement until she got a meeting with Steven Spielberg, which turned from 30 scheduled minutes to two emotional hours together. During that meeting, Allen was convinced that Spielberg “got it,” and that he could “turn history into a compelling film,” especially based on his determination to make Schindler’s List. 143

Allen’s perseverance extended into the making of the film, where she insisted on centering a fictional African-American abolitionist in opposition to normal stereotypical portrayals of “white people rescuing blacks.” 144 This character was, of course, Joadson, played by Freeman, a nod to the history of Black abolitionism if not a specific character. Her role certainly complicates the background of Amistad and the way it should be viewed today, broadening it from a project simply motivated out of Spielberg’s complex relationship to slavery as a white director.

Amistad arrived in a moment when films increasingly told Black stories. It came on the heels of Glory (1989), a movie following the first all African-American infantry during the Civil War but really focusing on the white Colonel who led them, and The Journey of August King (1995), wherein a white homesteader chooses to help a beautiful enslaved woman escape; Amistad directly preceded Beloved (1998), an adaptation of the famous novel by Toni Morrison.

about the lasting echoes of slavery. Films were telling more and varied Black stories at a high-budget level; however, these portrayals were still not receiving recognition, and were still complicated in terms of the way they framed their subjects in their visuals and stories, especially in comparison to white characters. This was also the Clinton era, a time when there was a so-called “national conversation” on race that lacked genuine substance.

COMMODIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION: COMPLICATED HUMANITY AND RESISTANCE IN AMISTAD

The brutality of the slave ship appears again in Amistad, in a slightly unexpected way. The film opens with a dark shot of Cinque digging a nail out of the ship deck in the rain with his bloody fingers. It then transitions to shots of the enslaved people hurting and killing the slavers, the brutality of the scene underscored by the frightening way they are framed in the storm. It is hard to shake the feeling in this opening scene that Spielberg is framing the slavers themselves as more human – although they speak in Spanish, their words are translated as they are violently cut down by the untranslated enslaved people. Later, though, this scene is recontextualized. We are returned to the same slave ship in a flashback sequence. The audience is shown scenes of even greater violence than in the first one, of enslaved people being hurt and forced to perform for the sailors in similar ways as was depicted in the movie Tamango – scenes that have higher production quality, and are more violent, but reminiscent of that earlier film.

It is with this later sequence of violence, of the slavers against the enslaved, that the way we engage with the first, of the enslaved against the slavers, is changed. It is in some ways a scene that reframes the violence of the beginning in terms of the violence that was first done to the African people before they enacted any violence. The scenes are also hard to watch, bringing up once again the question of the efficacy of showing violence enacted on Black bodies – is it
more important than it is exploitative? Allen believes yes, having said that she is “very happy that we were able to do this…I don’t think I’ve ever seen a movie that portrays slavery in this gritty, horrific manner. I didn’t want Steven to hold back. You have to tell the truth.”  

145 There is always a choice of what to portray in film, and in this case, there are positives and negatives to the choices that were made, to be in some way historically accurate and show the violence in all its forms.

It is true that “any historian, writer or filmmaker who engages with Atlantic slavery treads highly politically and emotionally charged terrain” and must be conscious of the aestheticizing of such horrors.  

146 As Lars Eckstein argues, “by rendering accessible to the senses and thus making ‘sense’ of the—utterly senseless—deaths, the artist is perpetually in danger of belittling not only the enormity of historical injustice, but also of unduly exploiting the suffering of the individual victim.”  

147 Spielberg at times falls into this trap of exploiting the suffering of said victims – “the images of Spielberg’s slave hold are meant to induce terror, but not disgust” while “the bodies of the slaves are attractive rather than repelling” – by trying to aestheticize the scenes of the ship, making them look beautiful and horrible, without thinking through the layers of what this choice might mean in the particular story he was telling.  

148 However, the viewer cannot ignore that this was among the first mainstream portrayals of the middle passage, and perhaps it was necessary to make concessions, to aestheticize the horrors in some sense, to make the product of the film accessible to white audiences, especially in a capitalist society and industry that prioritizes the attractiveness of its subjects to sell a film. Yet the “necessity” of

---

145 Longsdorf.
147 Ibid., 76.
148 Ibid., 74.
these moves also echoes the original horrors, by harkening back to the way that enslaved people were aestheticized in order to sell during the slave trade.

Another way that *Amistad* enacts this confused version of humanizing the enslaved people is in the translation, or lack thereof, of their words. Spielberg and Allen, unlike Berry in 1959, chose to have the enslaved people speak in Mende, a major language of Sierra Leone. The idea of translation is also complicated. To some extent, Spielberg is respecting a real language that some historical enslaved people spoke – to another extent, choosing when to translate them, as opposed to translating them always as he does the Spanish and Portuguese speakers, serves multiple purposes, one of which is to betray the idea that this language is less used and acceptable, or relatable for the audience, and more strange than English or Spanish might be. The other, connected reason for the episodic translation, is to lay the ground for pointedly comedic interactions between the lawyer and Cinque as they try to understand each other, or more metaphorical moments as the audience, squarely in the same boat as McConaughey, try to understand Cinque, an obvious allegory for McConaughey’s journey to understanding him and the other enslaved people as human beings. In all of these instances, however, whiteness is centered and Blackness exoticized, untranslatable without whiteness to mediate it.

**LEGALITY AND COMMODITY: THE AMISTAD COURT CASE AND A FEW GOOD MEN**

Part of the way the movie chooses to represent the enslaved people is as property, in an echo of how the original defense also chose to represent the people they were defending during the legal battle. Scholars note that enslaved people from the time existed as “both objects and criminal subjects.”149 McConaughey’s character, the historical figure and property lawyer Roger

---

149 Fuentes, Marisa J. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. 
Sherman Baldwin, argues from his introduction that presenting the enslaved people as cargo, meeting the slavers on their own turf and winning that way, was the most effective way to win the case.

Once we meet McConaughey and the other “‘saviors’ – property lawyers, abolitionists, and political celebrities,” “the focus of Amistad shifts drastically,” choosing to focus on the battles of these so-called saviors. The film also shifts its portrayal of the Mende “as people assertively fighting for their survival and freedom,” to representing them as “objects paternalistically manipulated through the legal quagmire.” The abolitionists argue that as the enslaved people are people, they should be defended as people, but McConaughey wins the argument and, eventually, is proven to be right, winning the case. He does so by showing that the enslaved people were not actually taken in a jurisdiction that allows slavery and were rather a part of the illegal form of the slave trade.

This theme brings the film to the idea of legality, the legality of the slave trade and of selling human beings and defending them as property. It also clarifies the movie’s own mixed view on humanization. Amistad is most obviously a courtroom movie, a skewering of a system where “laws almost work,” where a “legal and punitive system they created could be manipulated for their own benefit and profit.” Even as the case shifts from portraying the enslaved people as property to arguing that they should not be property, it is still in pursuit of winning the case. The idea of the murder intended by the slavers, because the enslaved people were worth more to them for the insurance money (an idea that appears in Belle as well), is

---

151 Fuentes, 103.
treated as the winning argument as opposed to a horrifying commentary on the slavers. When Cinque testifies, his story has to be corroborated in the court (although not to us, the audience, as we have seen it happen). Overall, Amistad’s representation of the corrupt system that allowed slavery for so long is confused by its own visualization of that system.

Figure 4: A portrait of “Cinque the Chief of the Amistad captives” by Nathaniel Jocelyn, 1840.
The stories of Cinque and his unnamed counterparts seem almost secondary to those few good men trying their best in an unjust legal system – not those men who were captured and sold, whose tragic ends were told in an after-movie credit sequence, where they returned to find their families gone. Instead, the men we focus on are those who are free automatically, living in the United States, doing their best work, misunderstood except by the good liberal audience watching them now. Spielberg therefore “misses the opportunity” to emphasize “the efforts and agency of the African women and men who risked their lives, not just their reputations and monetary fees, to strike for freedom” in favor of centering the moral growth of the men helping them with their legal battle.152

152 Stevenson, 508.
This decision to center those white men is clear in the framing of the theatrical poster for *Amistad* as well. McConaughey’s lawyer is in the front, peering whimsically into the distance, alongside one enslaved man, Hounsou’s Cinque, Freeman’s fictional Joadson, and Hopkins’ former president Adams. The slave ship is relegated to the bottom right corner, in the midst of a beautiful sunset taking over the shoreline; the other enslaved people from the ship are nowhere to be seen. Most important, again, are those few good men.

**MASCULINITY AND THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN**

*Amistad* centers these few good men, and, in fact, only men, and a particular kind of masculinity. The idea that the film only focuses on the men involved is also important, as it “misses the opportunity…to expose the important communal, cultural, and gendered aspects of slave resistance and revolt.”153 The revolt is the central motivating factor of the film, yet the intricacies of planning and carrying it out are obscured in favor of the legal story. There are also no women centered in the story at all, any enslaved female characters having almost no screen time or lines. The community among those enslaved is barely shown in favor of centering Cinqué, to some extent, and the other men helping with the case. *Amistad* therefore ignores many of the dynamics that were present on the slave ship in history, and that may have existed in the case of the Amistad rebellion.

It is true that even historically, many of the centered figures in the public sphere were men: the lawyers who argued the case, the abolitionists who supported it, the presidents on the periphery, Cinqué himself as the hero of the story. However, we know now that rebellions were the result of careful and communal planning, and centered women and children in non-traditional

153 Stevenson, 508.
ways. *Amistad* obscures this historical complexity for the sake of a more streamlined story, and in some ways, as a result, erases them from mainstream understanding of the historical events.

This is not to say that *Amistad* lacks a gendered message, however. Instead, in the absence of any portrayal of femininity, the film chooses to represent only two very specific versions of manhood: the prototypical Black slave and free white masculinity. Cinque, our point of reference for all Africans in the film, is an enslaved male. Slavery historically forced enslaved Black men into positions of subordination and sexualization, and although Cinque is allowed to be a strong character within the narrative, he is not a character who drives forward the plot, and he is aestheticized in a way to be gratifying to audiences as a beautiful man.

The men working on Cinque’s case are also a part of well-established versions of masculinity. They are posited as different from other men, those who wish slaves to remain as such, but are really much more similar – obsessed with winning and dominating the other factions, they sit squarely in a longstanding tradition of toxic masculinity, and deeply tied to capitalistic individualism. Each figure in the film fully embraces this stoic version of masculinity, not expanding into representations of different versions of real-life men and, therefore, playing into negative tropes of gender in film, especially in terms of film about slavery.

CONCLUSION

The slave ship in *Amistad* is a representation of the journey that the enslaved people have taken and what they have overcome. It also becomes a representation of what the lawyers can use to beat the system. The film “renders the slave trade as a dark episode in the spiritual biography of the American nation…which was triumphantly overcome by outstanding liberals
representing the true spirit of the constitution.”\textsuperscript{154} The slave ship becomes almost a prop for those same liberals to act against, rendering \textit{Amistad} a film that is held back by “a surreptitious sensationalism, pitiful sentimentalism or other self-serving ideological stratagems,” and not a film that focuses on the slave trade and the \textit{Amistad} rebellion with the complexity that those events deserve.\textsuperscript{155}

\textit{Amistad} is positioned in film history at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, and continues that time’s tradition of making movies, specifically about slavery, that offer more varied portrayals of Black people, including those enslaved – in \textit{Amistad}, these roles come in the forms of Cinque and Joadson, central characters with their own interiority and voices. However, the movie continues the tradition of centering the stories of the white people first and foremost, with Black men’s stories on the sidelines, de-centering those of women and children altogether. This intricate play of centering and de-centering likely reflects the filmmakers’ own perspectives, but may also be related to commercialism and capitalism, with Spielberg and the film’s producers concerned about selling their final product to audiences as much as telling an untold story.

While the film is “largely a tale of white hero worship” with their more “evil, racist sides” never revealed, it is true that millions of people across the world have seen Spielberg’s portrayal.\textsuperscript{156} Spielberg certainly seems to be attempting to use his large platform for good, to mixed results. \textit{Amistad} is an interesting case in terms of movies that portray slave rebellions, with added influences including Spielberg’s own track record, Debbie Allen, and the surrounding context. It is also important to keep in mind that \textit{Amistad} was intended for general release, to be a publicly and widely consumed film.

\textsuperscript{154} Eckstein, 78.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 79.
Passage du Milieu (1999), or The Middle Passage

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING

*Passage du Milieu*, translated by HBO into English as *The Middle Passage*, is a docudrama directed by Martinican Guy Deslauriers and written by Patrick Chamoiseau and Claude Chonville. The story is told entirely in voiceover, with no dialogue in the actual film or spoken by the featured actors. The film tells the story of enslaved individuals being transported across the ocean from Africa to the Caribbean. The film attempts to universalize the experience
of those who endured the Middle Passage through the omniscient narrator, who is “both [an] individualized victim of the Atlantic slave trade and [the] embodiment of all slaves and their descendants.”\textsuperscript{157} The docudrama is an interesting conceit, a combination of documentary and dramatic film during which actors act out historical events. Deslauriers’ film takes this one step further, folding poetry into this combination.\textsuperscript{158} Docudramas combine the positives of both forms – the freedom of dramas to interpret events visually and the perceived accuracy and therefore innate trust in the history of the documentary. Deslauriers uses both of these aspects to his advantage in \textit{Passage du Milieu}.

Deslauriers’ background comes into play in the film. \textit{Passage du Milieu} is his third directorial outing, and the first that had wide release in English-speaking countries (via HBO). Deslauriers has been an outspoken critic of the French education system and how it chooses to educate students about the slave trade – he believes that the system almost completely ignores this history because of the French tradition of attempting to suppress rebellious instincts in its colonies, perhaps because of a wish to ignore what is a blight on the French past. His belief that the French school system largely ignores the slave trade and the country’s role in it is based on Deslauriers’ personal experience as a student in the colonial schools of French Martinique and on the French mainland. \textit{Passage du Milieu} is in this sense a response and a challenge to what Deslauriers sees as a purposeful and widespread ignorance of the true history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He is attempting to re-tell what he sees as an important and unavoidable history in the face of French intransigence. The way the film appears physically, his location,


directorial and filming choices, are all also related to his positionality as a citizen of Martinique, a French colony and island in the West Indies.

The context of the time the film was made is also important to consider. Passage du Milieu came out at the turn of the century, in 1999, and then in widespread release in 2001. During this time, big-budget films such as Amistad (1997) and Beloved (1998) premiered; however, this was also a time when the made-for-tv movie and documentaries were having a resurgence, led in part by Deslauriers’ outing. Narratives such as Enslavement: The True Story of Fanny Kemble (2000), Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property (2003), Unchained Memories (2003), and CSA: The Confederate States of America (2005) followed one after the other and represented a wide variety of interpretations of stories of the legacy of slavery from the United States and England, none quite as artistic as Deslauriers’, and none from France or other countries.

Passage du Milieu fits squarely in the tradition of post-colonial Black studies, as well as the theorized and lived idea of diaspora, as used to articulate the history and memory of slavery. Many scholars, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Robin Kelley, and Saidiya Hartman, have taken on and theorized this idea of an African diaspora, communities of Black people across the world who are descended from native Africans, often torn from their homes by the horrors of slavery. It has become a way of thinking about the world and the transition of the world into modernity, and in some cases universalizing a form of the Black enslaved experience, as is done here by Deslauriers.
RECOMMODIFICATION AND A DOCUDRAMA’S “TRUTH”

Deslauriers’ film comes across as more fact-based and trustworthy than the other films discussed here – perhaps because of the absence of music, dialogue, and other tactics filmmakers enlist to appeal to viewers’ hearts. Because of the documentary slant there is no specific plot – rather, the film follows the course of the middle passage from the perspective of an omniscient narrative summarizing the experiences – it appears to be unbiased and not weighed down by re-interpretation. The film also functions primarily as a “visual novel.” The scenes appear unacted, a series of “tableaux vivants: the actors who play the roles of African slaves pose silently and unmoving before the camera.” Deslauriers’ framing and use of this form of images also contributes to the idea that this is a reproduction of the actual historical events, as opposed to an interpretation, one that “effaces the specifically Caribbean origins of the film, producing a hybrid text.” The film expands from its Caribbean roots to a more universalizing experience, one that purports to be based solely in the fact of many different experiences told as one.

However, this idea of hybridity, of universalizing the story of the Middle Passage, also contributes to the film’s main problems. The single narrator “claims to speak for a mass of undifferentiated “Africans”….voiced by a single, male voice.” This narrator embodies the assumption that there is a single continental identity among the inhabitants, or descendants of inhabitants, of Africa. This ahistorical approach almost reproduces the “slave traders’ organized campaigns to disorient their prisoners by isolating them” from their distinct and varied cultures,

---

160 Halloran, 160.
161 Halloran, 162.
as well as from their fellow passengers.\textsuperscript{162} It also reproduces the idea of the slave narrative as a distinctly male one, as opposed to one that was at times defined by and at times defied gender.

Nonetheless, the approach is compelling. Deslauriers and his collaborators have created a complicated and important piece of art through \textit{Passage du Milieu}. The message remains unconfused by different threads, maintaining a singular and political message about the harm of the slave trade on the people who experienced it and their descendants, enhanced by the seeming unbiased nature of the documentary form. The film also focuses primarily on the living, as opposed to the dead – making its message not about those who died, solely, but rather about those who survived and passed their experience on to their descendants – and clearly shows a sentiment that “the slave trade and its victims ought to receive some measure of national recognition and collective mourning.”\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Passage du Milieu} communicates this message through its narrator and, especially, through its divergent use of visuals.

\textsuperscript{162} Halloran, 162.

\textsuperscript{163} Halloran, 160.
Figure 7: A shot of the slave ship from Passage du Milieu (1999).

VISUALIZATION AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE SLAVE SHIP

The visualization of the slave ship is central to Passage du Milieu. At points, it almost seems as though the slave ship, dubbed “their infernal machinery” by the narration, becomes its own character within the narrative. Almost every shot of the film takes place on some part of the ship, primarily in the hold, where there are shots of the actors stacked together in tiny compartments, not long enough to hold their bodies, and, later, scenes of rebellion and death. Several scenes also take place on the deck, especially those during which the enslaved people dance. Overall, the “middle passage traced by the film is slow, painful, and unspectacular,” and Deslauriers uses his aesthetic choices to interrupt “audience expectations”
and create an “alienating thrust.” The film is slow, deliberately, and the camera jumps from image to image without a clear path or plotline. These directorial and framing choices contribute to the idea of the Middle Passage itself as slow and incoherent, putting the viewer inside the minds of those experiencing the journey without uncomfortably exploiting their images.

This idea of staying away from exploitation extends specifically to the way the Black actors are filmed and the enslaved people are shown. The film chooses to portray “the contradictory and dynamic players in a liberation struggle” as opposed to insisting “on just their corporeal and spiritual alienation,” in part by filming bodies yet avoiding “treating them like cattle.” In a manner that is similar to Spielberg’s directorial decisions in *Amistad*, Deslauriers “deliberately aestheticises the black body” yet differently to *Amistad*, he does not fetishize it, in favor of, instead, a “disturbingly unreal” version of the images. The camera pans by feet, eyes, close-ups on just the faces of the actors playing enslaved people, centering individuals and the collective at once. It also repeats images that it has shown before, including long takes of just the piles of dead bodies of enslaved people, especially in the wake of their attempted rebellion, emphasizing the otherworldly yet historically accurate horror of the slave trade through the humans it affected. This is a focus on the dead, but only in service of furthering the stories of those who survived and continued to live.

The clearest images featured throughout the film, not at all blurred or obscured, are those of people in Africa, especially those featured at the very end, whom the narrator identifies as images of the bondspeoples’ mothers, nieces, nephews, and other family- and community-

---

166 Eckstein, 80.
members. This re-emphasizes the thesis of the film, that Africa is the homeland that people were torn violently away from, and that the ship voyage is attempting to make those Africans onboard “cease to exist,” figures “no more real than characters in stories.” Deslauriers tries to counteract this mission of slavery through his centering and portrayal of the community of people he shows onboard.

COMMUNITY, GENDER, AND REVOLT

There are strong, connected threads of community, gender and revolt that last throughout Passage du Milieu. The narrator tells the audience that those being forced onto the slave ship, who he refers to as the collective “we,” were “from every corner of the continent,” at first alone in each distinct culture, at first “all foreigners to each other, but it wouldn’t be long until we became one people” who shared their experiences, their journey, and a universalizing loss, of their roots and country, as the film frames it. This harkens back to theorization of the diaspora, a connection rooted in a shared ancestral home. From the narrator’s first sentence, those enslaved are referred to as this aforementioned collective “we,” a sign of the community that formed among the people captured in the ship’s hold. The community was in some ways a survival technique, in some ways its own form of rebellion against the alienation forced by their captors.

This community is also interestingly gendered. The only times that women are mentioned, or even really featured, are at the very beginning and when the faceless male-coded narrator says that the slavers “raped our women,” simultaneously referencing specifically gendered violence committed often against enslaved women and casting a gendered claim over those women from a male perspective. The women are not featured in the hold, except in the slow pans of fearful young children, both male and female, when the narrator talks about the
assault of those children as well. The film is very male-centered and presents a specific version of masculinity to the audience, one that paternalistically cares for “our women” and “our children” but does not center their role, and one that is wont to revolt.

Community and gender come together in the film’s featured revolts. The first is simply a “great cry” that rose up as they pulled away from the continent of Africa, the first sign of the community that would form in the hold. The next was in response to the forced dancing exercise. Deslauriers features multiple scenes of enslaved people dancing to the grating sound of a fiddle player. Then, in the midst of the film, to the sound of the fiddle slowly taken over by the sound of drums, the narrator says, “one day, we showed them what dance meant.” What dance meant, in this case, was a maintained connection to their African cultural roots, and a refusal to bow fully to what the slavers wanted. This particular revolt culminates in 15 enslaved people breaking away from the dance and jumping overboard because they were “convinced that death will free our souls,” after which the narrator says the slavers “contented themselves with making us walk.”

The next rebellion occurs when the ship nears land, when the enslaved people decide it is the right time for revolt, so they do not have to be concerned about not knowing how to sail the ship. The narrator frames it as no one caring “whether we lived or died” as “boiling rage began to shimmer in the steamy heat of the hold.” This revolt is “brutally gunned down by the slavers,” and leads to most of Deslauriers’ images of piles of dead bodies.167 After these revolts, Deslauriers and the narrator focus on the idea that “out of the hold, marked, transformed people emerge.”168 People who have collectively experienced the memory of the Middle Passage are changed, and as the narrator states, “a new man will emerge into the alien sun of this new

---

167 Eckstein, 79.
168 Barlet, 228.
world.” Although this statement, too, is gendered male, it is mostly focused on the idea that those who survive the Middle Passage will be forever changed, but will have survived, a fact that is important enough to mark and also to end his story.

CONCLUSION

*Passage du Milieu* is a complex representation of the Middle Passage, as experienced from the perspective of an omniscient enslaved man, speaking for all the victims and survivors of the actual historic event. Deslauriers was contributing to the collection of films portraying slave revolts and slavery in general. For Deslauriers the film formed his response to the lack of representation and teaching about the Middle Passage and slavery at large, and he framed this response in terms of instructing children about their history. The film continuously “makes its viewers aware that the images they see are in fact unimaginable, and what is spoken is in fact unspeakable,” yet simultaneously “resonates with a haunting depth and humanity that…may convince the viewer that imagining the unspeakable is vital, as much for contemporary viewers as it is for the victims of the past.”169 It is an important addition to the representations of the Middle Passage, simultaneously horrific and resonant, with seemingly added legitimacy through Deslauriers’ choice to use the documentary genre.

However, this representation is further complicated by the considerations of gender, viewership and the commercial impulse. The gendered considerations of *Passage du Milieu* are important, as it seemingly erased the experiences of the many enslaved women and obliterated their individuality in favor of focusing on the experience of the single, universalized, male enslaved person. It is also undeniable that *Passage du Milieu* reached fewer viewers than films

---

169 Eckstein, 81.
such as *Amistad*, and that some of the techniques it employed to purposefully make the viewer uncomfortable may have contributed to this smaller reach. There is also the question of translation. The film was adapted for HBO under the name *The Middle Passage*, and the narration was re-done – originally spoken by Maka Kotto, it was changed to Djimon Hounsou, star of the film *Amistad*, for English-speaking audiences. In translation, it seems, no significant plot points or wordings were changed, but HBO did add in a quotation at the beginning, raising the question of what else was changed, either physically or metaphorically, in translation.

*Passage du Milieu* and its Americanized version, *The Middle Passage*, does, though, stay true to the story Deslauriers and his collaborators wanted to tell, of “a boat stealing under cover of darkness like a thief” and the people it stole to bring to another land. The film grew past its initial aim of education and became something more universal. *Passage du Milieu* is a good example of a different form of dramatization, masquerading history but nevertheless containing elements of truth.
Belle (2013)

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING

The slave ship in Belle is never seen. The ship instead becomes an overarching and constantly present, yet intangible, idea in the story of a Black woman being raised in a white aristocratic world in the late 1700s. The movie follows her struggles with coming to terms with the ways many Black people are treated in her world by different people who surround her. Belle is the historically-based story of Dido Elizabeth Belle, who was taken in and raised alongside her
white cousin by her uncle, a judge who made the final decision in the case of the Zong Massacre, as it is now known.

The Zong Massacre refers to the 1781 choice of the crew of a British slave ship Zong to throw slaves overboard rather than risk the crew themselves dying, and in order to recoup the losses they may have incurred through insurance, killing over 130 people. The insurance company did not pay them back upon arrival, leading to court cases to determine who was financially responsible for the deaths of the enslaved people. British abolitionism flourished as a result of this case, first heard in 1783. Thomas Clarkson in his *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* describes the case in detail and also centers the Zong case as central to abolition, on the heels of the Somerset Case.\(^{170}\)

The Somerset case, finally decided in 1772, revolved around the question of “whether a slave, by coming into England, became free.”\(^{171}\) Ultimately, the judges in the case answered yes. This decision was backed by ideas of personal freedom and enlightenment and set the stage for the ultimate final abolition of slavery. William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield, was central to the decisions in both the Somerset Case and the Zong case. Although originally biased in the opposite direction, toward slavery, due to his economic beliefs, Mansfield during the Somerset case began “to waver in consequence of the different pleadings he had heard on this subject.” His transformation was partially due to the fact that he was anxious for a decision because he “saw…no end of trials like these, till the law should be ascertained.”\(^{172}\) Mansfield is also a central character in the movie *Belle*. He was the real Dido’s uncle, raised her in his home, and

---

\(^{171}\) Clarkson, 77.  
\(^{172}\) Clarkson, 76.
had a close, personal bond with her throughout his life, a point confirmed in both of their
counts.

After Somerset, the fight for abolition continued and strengthened. A “strong movement
emerged…to put an end to the buying and selling of human beings,” led by both white and Black
abolitionists, many of whom “came together in 1787 to form the Society for Effecting the
Abolition of the Slave Trade.” The final nail in the coffin came in the form of the Abolition of
the Slave Trade Act, enacted in 1807. After this act was passed, while there were certainly still
illegal versions of the slave trade in which British people participated, the legal and codified
version ended.

*Belle* takes place during the pivotal Zong Case and follows the central story of one
woman. Belle, or Dido as she is called through most of the film, was born into slavery in the
British West Indies, but was raised as a wealthy Englishwoman. She must throughout the length
of the film reckon with the ways she is still not truly free to live her life in upper crust British
society. She must also reckon with her connection to those enslaved people both murdered and
still living, and the complicated gendered aspects of being part-Black.

The movie was overall well received when it came out in 2013 at the Toronto Film
Festival, again when it received wide release in 2014, and has continued to be so. The main
actress, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, was especially praised for her performance as Dido Elizabeth Belle,
a multifaceted character for a young mixed-race actress. *Belle* came out in 2014, right after films
such as *Django Unchained* (2012), Quentin Tarantino’s slavery adventure film, and *12 Years a
Slave* (2013), an adaptation of the true story of free Black man Solomon Northup, then enslaved

---
173 “‘Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?’.” The National Archives, August 1, 1836.
in the south, gained international attention.\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Belle} follows a tradition of creating more and varied roles in films for Black men and women, both onscreen and off, and “Belle’s voice….help[s] audiences understand multiple and overlapping terrains of the female slave experience,” even as Dido herself is not enslaved.\textsuperscript{175} Importantly, \textit{Belle} is also unique among these popular films of the time for making the main character of the movie a Black woman, as opposed to a man.

\textit{Belle} was directed by British filmmaker and screenwriter Amma Asante, a Black woman born in England to Ghanaian parents, in her second directorial outing. Asante’s later films include \textit{A United Kingdom} (2016), another biographical film, this time about the romance between Seretse Khama, heir to the throne of Bechuanaland, and his white English wife, and \textit{Where Hands Touch} (2018), about a young biracial teenage girl falling in love with a member of the Hitler Youth during the height of the Nazi regime. Many of Asante’s films deal with multi- or bi-racial people and the way they operate in oppressive societies, a theme central to Asante’s own life.\textsuperscript{176} Identifying as bi-cultural, Asante’ parents are from Ghana, but she grew up in south London. She has received some criticism for the way that her movies, especially \textit{Where Hands Touch}, portray Black women. In \textit{Belle}, however, critics viewed Dido’s voice as more authentic, and her character as more imbued with Asante’s own personal experience of multi-culturalism.\textsuperscript{177}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{175} Stevenson, 507.
\end{thebibliography}
GENDER, RELATIONSHIPS, AND VISUALIZATION: DIDO AND HER COUSIN, ELIZABETH

Born a slave in 1761 to an enslaved mother, Dido is “rescued” by her white father, a Navy captain who brought her to her uncle’s house in Hampstead to live as a companion to her cousin. When her father dies, Dido inherits money, making her an heiress, even as she is scorned by those outside her family for her racial makeup – her birthright is questioned in the film, as “where in that order should her color be placed.”

The movie considers the ideas of Dido’s place in the world she is raised in. Even her uncle and aunt seem confused, simultaneously saying to her “you are cherished” as they make her replace the family housekeeper. This is a consistent interplay between the aunt and uncle, and even her cousin, treating her as the same as them, but only to a point: raising her as an aristocrat but not letting her come out to society; letting her get engaged, not to the man of her choice but rather to a man that will make her accepted in society; and accepting that what she says has equal weight, unless they don’t want to hear it.

The movie is also interested in exploring the uneven status of women in this time. At one point, Dido says to her cousin “we are but their property” in reference to marriage to a man, especially when that marriage is based on money. This statement specifically references their female gender and prompts the audience to look more deeply into the intersectionality of the moment – the dual oppressions of race and gender in the 18th century for Dido Elizabeth Belle. The interplay between race and gender is central, as Dido navigates what it means to be an heiress, a woman who has been taught to make a match equal to her station, and a Black woman in a slaveholding society. The film does not shy away from these questions, and often usefully deploys Elizabeth, a white woman but without money, as a foil to Dido’s own problems. When
Dido references that both she and Elizabeth are property, the film is showing the audience that while Elizabeth is seen as property in relation to her gender and making a good marriage, Dido, and others who share her skin color, are seen as property because of their gender and their race, a fact that Dido comes to terms with as the movie progresses.

It is this relationship of Dido to her cousin specifically that is a central part of the reason the film even exists. Dido’s historical existence is confirmed by a portrait, commissioned by her uncle, of both her and Elizabeth sitting together. This idea of representation lives throughout the film from the start, when Dido notices a portrait of her father in the grand hall of her home. The portrait shows her father leading a young Black enslaved boy by his hand. This idea of the representation of Black people in painting becomes a sticking point for Dido and contributes to why she later does not want to be painted at all, for fear of being put in a similar paternalistic position to the other she has seen.

The movie itself, however, takes care at most times to not paternalize Dido, and so too does the finished portrait, where she is shown as an equal figure to her cousin. As Mansfield hears the Zong arguments, Dido bonds with his apprentice, John Davinier, and starts to explore her world to a greater depth. When the film shows Belle’s journey to a greater critical consciousness about slavery, although motivated initially by her relationship with abolitionist lawyer John Davinier, it shows Dido herself as the driving force behind her learning more about it and pushing her surrogate father, Mansfield, to think more critically about it as well. This independence is also the same with regard to her decisions about her own love life, money, and family relations during the story.

Dido’s romantic relationship with Davinier, as well as with another man in the film, speaks to a more complex reading of interracial relationships than was previously seen in
Tamango. While abuse and assault were rife in relationships formed on imbalanced power in the decades of slavery, interracial relationships varied. Different relationships either challenged or re-entrenched colonial control and/or racial and gender expectations from colonial times, and no two were the same.\textsuperscript{178} Dido and Davinier’s relationship is presented as equal and loving, based on mutual respect, and most likely mutual social standing arising from the convoluted calculus of their variable derivations of social status (her, a lady, but the descendant of a slave; him, a legal scholar).

The visuality featured in Belle is meaningful to its messaging. Central to the story is the portrait of Dido and her cousin, a portrayal that the movie frames as equalizing them in the eyes of history and society. The painting “to some extent reflects the conventions for painting exotic' people, in other ways it is unusual.”\textsuperscript{179} Dido is “exotically dressed” and carries imported luxury fruits while her cousin is larger and seated and holds a book,\textsuperscript{180} however, both women look straight at the viewer and “smile as if sharing a joke.”\textsuperscript{181} These details imply a perhaps exoticized but ultimately equal visualization of both women. Moreover, “the portrait contrasts greatly with the tone of many overtly abolitionist images…which stress the brutality and inhumanity of the slave trade.”\textsuperscript{182} Instead, this portrait allows the modern viewer to consider what the purpose of this portrait was, and whether it had one related to abolition at all, harkening back to Stuart Hall’s ideas of the complexity of representation and how meaning is assigned.

\textsuperscript{180} Card, 13.
\textsuperscript{181} Card, 14.
\textsuperscript{182} Card.
Figure 9: The painting of Dido and Elizabeth by David Martin, 1779.

Figure 10: Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Sarah Gadon as Dido and Elizabeth.
COMMODIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION: THE ABSENCE AND CENTRALITY OF THE SLAVE SHIP ONSCREEN

The slave ship has a strong presence and yet simultaneously a lack of any screen time – it is not even present on the theatrical poster, which is instead devoted to the central human characters of the movie. Running parallel and intertwining with the plot of Dido finding her own identity in the society she inhabits, is the progression of the Zong Case as heard by her uncle. Early in the film, Dido meets the radical legal scholar John Davinier, who encourages her, seemingly for the first time, to consider the plight of enslaved people, especially and specifically those murdered on the Zong. The enslaved people and ship itself largely exist in the legal context, introduced through Davinier’s impassioned defense that “the law is to be interpreted, not merely administered.” The legality of the case in Belle bears much similarity to the case in Amistad. The entire case is framed in terms of cargo and insurance, shaping every following action in the framework of the capitalism that necessitated the slave trade and the Zong in the first place.

Late in the Zong case and in the film, it is revealed that the slavers purposefully sailed past ports where they could have restocked on water, disproving the idea that the slavers’ lives depended on killing the enslaved people on their ship. This shocking fact proves to Mansfield that the slavers did not treat their cargo with enough care to deserve insurance, which Mansfield communicates as the main reason for overturning the lower-court verdict. Mansfield delivers this verdict along with an impassioned speech on the inhumanity of the slave trade itself. The jettisoning of enslaved cargo, though frowned upon mainly for economic reasons, was at this time still legal. It was merely the context of said jettisoning – the fact that they demonstrated they were not good stewards of their cargo – that determined whether or not it is the legal kind.
The movie suggests that in a society such as this, humanity of Black people must be proven—but, almost more importantly, it doesn’t have to be proven to win a legal case.

The ambiguity within the court case and with regards to the portrait’s purpose exists, of course, because of the nature of visualization and history itself. Images “are not straightforward windows into the past: they are constructions showing what the patron wished to be shown,” a fact that is true about all forms of visual art—paintings, such as this one, and films, such as the one in which it is featured. Bearing in mind that paintings and films are constructions, it is important to look deeper into what the purpose of *Belle* was.

It is clear that the film has a very strong anti-slavery tilt, even if that is not always fully historically accurate. It is also clear that the self-determination of the movie’s main character, Dido, is central to the plot and the point of *Belle*. However, the film does not take the time to portray the victims of the Zong massacre, and uses it as Dido herself does, as an aid towards radicalization. It is not clear, though, whether this lack of portrayal of Black human suffering is ultimately a negative. This further ambiguity speaks even more to the ambiguity involved in representation and visualization, especially of slavery and slave ship rebellions.

This constant idea of not having to prove humanity seems central to the film as well, although perhaps in a more positive, although complicated, context. Because the film chooses not to show the slave ship itself, or any of the enslaved people who were affected by the Zong case, or any more than one or two enslaved people total, this lack of images opens up a conversation about why Asante and others involved with the production may have made this choice. To some extent, not showcasing the people directly affected by the slave trade reduces those people to simply a motivating factor which allows Dido, an aristocratic woman, to learn

---

183 Card, 8.
about her own humanity. On the other hand, the decision to exclude portrayals of enslaved people could also be read as a decision to not exploit these images any further, especially in a story that focuses specifically on Dido’s journey as opposed to any enslaved person’s journey. In this way, the lack of a visualization becomes just as complex a decision as the inclusion of a visualization. This film certainly makes concessions to the idea of commodification and the system of capitalism, but it also seems to maintain its own version of truth and its own direction.

CONCLUSION

_Belle_ is a complex film. It tells a previously unknown and untold story of an odd case, a Black woman aristocrat during a time when Great Britain had extremely few – possibly none. _Belle_ does not shy away from the notion of her rarity and instead uses the historical legal case of the Zong slave ship to ground the story of a young mixed race woman learning what her place in the world is and what she might want it to be. Some of this complexity surely comes from director Asante’s own background as someone leading a multi-cultural life.

Ultimately, _Belle_ is a good summary of films from its time, essentially dramatizing a biopic of a historical figure to represent and personalize a specific time during the hundreds of years of the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Although the slave ship in this film is never onscreen, it provides a pivotal backdrop for the rest of the story, representing the threat of inhumane slavery and the possibility for abolition. The slave ship in this film functions not just as a backdrop for the legal drama, however, but also a spectral, ghostly presence.\(^\text{184}\) The slave ship hangs over each character in the film in a different way: for Davinier, it is a moral battle to

be conquered; for Mansfield, it is a barrier to a well-functioning country; even for Elizabeth, it is a separating force between her and Dido, between her existence as a poor woman and existence as a slave. For Dido, it is almost a reminder of what could have been her life, causing her to become actively and radically involved in the political battles raging around her, and to think more deeply about her identity as a Black woman in the late 1700s in England.
Conclusion

Rebellions on slave ships were far more widespread than is widely understood. For the more than three hundred and fifty years of the slave trade in which the United States, specifically, was involved, “ships of every nationality participating in the traffic…were scenes of desperate attempts by the slaves to regain their liberty.”185 This is an incredible fact, perhaps made somewhat more understandable when measured against the horrors endured on those ships, both represented in film and not. Today, however, there are far fewer films than there were rebellions. To some extent, this deficit can be chalked up to the fact that there are finite resources, and that every possible story has yet to be made into a film. However, in a world rife with adaptations, remakes, and sequels, it does seem striking that this critical chapter in the history of the world, from Europe to the Americas to Africa, has not been portrayed more assiduously.

Part of the reason for this deficit may be found in the deep, systematic racism that radiates from the trans-Atlantic slave trade itself. The racism that predated, but then worked to justify this trade became so embedded in our culture that it still permeates every level of society, and helps to ensure that Black and brown people, especially those of a lower socio-economic class, find far fewer opportunities to create stories. In some respects, it is surprising that so many films about rebellions on slave ships have been made, as the manifestation of a racist system in the film industry also ensures that those mainly white, economically advantaged people in charge of said films have a vested interest in keeping those stories untold. A desire not to share stories that generate shame may be part of the root, but it is also financial considerations that continue to

drive decisions not to make these films. Until more Black and brown creators can fight their way into the mainstream, these stories will be left untold. This form of economic suppression and distortion serves to “legitimize white racism as a culturally practiced activity and, in doing so, generally obscure and shift attention away from the source and cause of the racial conflict – the system of capitalism and the social-racial structure of American society.” It also highlights, again, the intersection of the systems of capitalism and racism, and the specific system the two create in Western countries that produce films. The obfuscation allows those in power to continue benefitting while ignoring the reasons they could benefit in the first place – a system of capitalism formed by enslaving another people.

This is the complicated history into which Tamango, Amistad, Passage du Milieu/The Middle Passage, and Belle arrived and may have begun to change. Spanning many decades of history, each film shows us a chapter of a paradoxical history in film: representation and the lack of representation. Visuality within the film, the race of each director, and the legality of the slave trade are each factors that must be considered in their own right, and through these considerations, we can form our own picture, a separate visualization, of what was both acceptable and revered when talking about the slave trade at each time. What we can also see in this new frame is the shifting focuses of the forms of representation. While representation itself is important, especially in Hollywood, whose films reach millions of people, the way representation occurs is equally important. More films from non-white, especially Black creators, could expand the kind of stories told, including those about the slave trade.

Tamango, Amistad, Passage du Milieu, and Belle are films from different corners of the world (France, the United States, Martinique/France, the United Kingdom) that also represent corners of an African diaspora. In looking at films from these countries, we add another frame, this one for analysis and understanding. Tamango, Amistad, and Belle are all historical dramas, with Amistad and Belle, more recent films based on true stories, revealing the trend in both film and history towards the centering of real-life narratives, often more dramatic than fictional accounts. Passage du Milieu, on the other hand, purports to be a docudrama, portraying in a more unbiased way than the other films the truth of the history of the slave trade.

All four films share important similarities. They accomplish similar aims of portraying different parts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. They document the real violence of the trade, although these portrayals are much more censored in Tamango and Belle, and, at the other end of the spectrum, play a very central role in Amistad and Passage du Milieu. All four films also address the interweaving of gender and race, the question of what counts as resistance, the tension between understanding humanity and transformation into a commodity. Yet there are also important differences, differences in those people driving the projects, the audiences for whom they are made, and the way that people are humanized on film.

Much of these differences in portrayals can be traced to the people behind the films and the times and locations in which they were made. Tamango, the earliest film, was made by white Communist director John Berry in 1959, at the end of a tumultuous decade of change. Berry’s story, adapted from a short fiction piece, was not his own, although it may have been connected to themes he cared deeply about. He also worked at a time when there were fewer opportunities available to Black filmmakers at his level. This context likely contributed to his sometimes tone-
deaf portrayal of both the violence enacted against the enslaved people, and also the interracial relationship and gendered differences aboard the ship.

It is interesting to note, however, that decades later, in 2014, Amma Asante’s *Belle* chose not to show explicitly the pivotal slave ship, or any physical violence enacted against enslaved people at all. *Belle* was a deeply personal story for Asante, a Black woman who identifies as multi-cultural, just like her main character Dido. Perhaps Asante’s choice not to focus on the physical slave ship or physical violence was an attempt to center instead different forms of violence that could be enacted against a Black woman, even a high-society one (such as the way she is treated by her family), at the time, and to focus on the story she viewed as more important: of Dido coming into her own as a Black woman at the time. This focus provides a clear shift from the way that Berry sidelined Aishé in *Tamango*.

Although white director Steven Spielberg helmed *Amistad* in 1997, and his trademark vision can be found in every facet of the film, it was not his project alone. Debbie Allen, an African American woman who not only brought the idea to Spielberg but also served as an advisor and producer for the entirety of the film, proved essential to the way the slave trade and, more important, enslaved people and the violence against them, were depicted onscreen. The story was very personal to Allen, and she was key to making sure that the scenes were as non-exploitative as possible, *Amistad* can also be compared to *Passage du Milieu*, which came to screens two years later, in 1999, in the choice of whether or not to center Black characters, while trying not to exploit them.

Guy Deslauriers’ *Passage du Milieu* took care to focus on the Black characters (specifically the men) and the communities they built, whereas Spielberg often pushed the stories of his Black characters to the side in favor of telling the stories of the white and American men
who defended them and even those who did not support their cause. For Spielberg, the court drama, which depended on those white men, sometimes seems more important than the story of those African men, women, and children, who rebelled against their circumstances and caused the court case in the first place. This is not the case with Deslauriers, who takes care to focus his attention on the stories of those men, specifically, who try to rise in a similar way against their captors in *Passage du Milieu*.

To some extent these different representations should also be looked at in the context of the films’ distinct releases as well. *Amistad* was a big-budget film, released in Hollywood by a big-name director. *Belle*, similarly, had a wide international premiere. Again, this is likely a reflection of the market, and specifically of the markets the filmmakers hoped to attract with their works. Consciously or unconsciously, this may help to explain why the Black characters took a backseat to the white in *Amistad*’s case in 1997, and why the violence of the slave ship and against those enslaved took a backseat to the social and political drama in *Belle*, released in 2014. It also can explain why *Tamango*, a smaller release from a blacklisted director in 1959, had more freedom to push boundaries in its portrayal of interracial relationships and Black rebellion and *Passage du Milieu*, a smaller indie release in 1999, had more artistic freedom in its choice of who to center in its story. Of course, in *Passage du Milieu*’s case, the HBO producers who re-released it to a wider and Americanized audience chose to do so with the narration re-done by then-famous star of *Amistad*, Djimon Hounsou, who played the sole enslaved rebel Spielberg centered in that movie.

A separate, but equally clear line, it seems, can be traced through the films in terms of who is attempting to tell the story and to which audience. This provides another frame for understanding how Black characters and their stories are able to be told. Those films made or
influenced by people with deep, personal connections to the material do a better job of portraying the complexity of the story, in all of its brutality and nuance, and of humanizing the Black characters involved. Those with a looser connection struggle to do justice to their material and often end up making more negative than positive contributions. Viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear how deeply important it is to give platforms to those whose personal connection to specific stories can help to produce different kinds of films.

Moreover, this analytical framework can be applied to films being made in different contexts within a commercialized system situated within a capitalist economy. Those films with more freedom from commercial pressures seem to be able to focus on themes, subjects, and people outside societally determined norms. But for most films, Western capitalism, built in no small part on a history of exploiting Black labor, Black sexuality, and Black people at large, is still defining the way that those stories can be portrayed, and even how Black people can be included among the storytellers. It remains unclear how the film industry will resolve this dilemma, and how filmmakers will determine what to include and what to omit, what to demand and what to forgive in the pursuit of reaching larger audiences with their works. Ultimately, in the system we have today, it seems important to have both: the radical, smaller representations, true but reaching fewer people, along with slow-moving, larger projects that may have problematic pitfalls but that work to improve in small ways, reaching more people. What seems critical in either case is that the filmmakers themselves are increasingly those who have authentic stories to tell, stories to which they feel a direct connection.

Film industries do evolve, and films have come a long way since Birth of a Nation. Yet comparing Tamango to Amistad shows us that the march of time does not always mean clear progress, that holistically films do not always become more progressive in their themes,
radical in their story-telling, or even, necessarily, truer. So, we are left with questions: can an industry, embedded in a mercantile, capitalist system with a specific, and often brutal history, produce humanizing films, and especially about those subjects who were exploited in order to build the system in the first place? How can we reach for a more equitable future if we have yet to, accurately or equitably, represent our past? Given a medium that is inherently personal, and with the knowledge that filmmakers’ experiences and perspectives will always affect the films they make, how can the industry work to present more diversity – or more stories that are true to a much more diverse set of story-tellers, especially when people within the system have for so long worked to keep them out? Film representation is complicated and simultaneously important, especially when working to represent stories that are so important as those surrounding the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Finally, when telling stories of the slave ships that made such an inhuman trade possible, and of the people who suffered aboard them and the rebellions they mounted, we must ensure that these works focus on that last, most critical element, how to represent the participants’ true humanity.
Bibliography

Movies
McQueen, Steve, dir. *12 Years A Slave*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013.

Books  
www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c99bnv.5.  


Clarkson, Thomas. History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the


Hurston, Zora Neale. “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” In *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*.


Mustakeem, Sowande M. Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage, 2016.


Williams, Chad. Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I

Articles


Martin, Michael T. "The Afro-American Image in Film and Television: The Legitimization of the Racial Divisions in the American Social Order." Présence Africaine, Nouvelle


**Other references**

https://www.slavevoyages.org/