

Leah Aldridge
Champan University

Your children will soon be forgotten: Black Motherhood in 12 Years a Slave

Nineteen minutes into Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* we hear mama before we see Eliza, a young Black woman and mother ushered into a holding pen with her daughter. She is eagerly greeted by her captive son who runs to her and his sister, and forcefully embraces them. The pen is for free Blacks abducted from American streets, 'commodities' for the internal slave trade. Eliza is eventually sold away from her son and daughter to Master Epps during an auction. Eliza, inconsolable during the trip to Ford's plantation, is greeted by the Mistress upon her arrival, who enquires about Eliza's disposition. When the Mistress hears of Eliza's separation from her children, the Mistress kindly tells Eliza to get something to eat and some rest. Your children will soon be forgotten. The children - like you - are here for exploitation and eventual elimination so no need to have any feelings or connection to them.

What do we learn about American Black motherhood from experiencing Eliza's story? What persistent mechanisms of dehumanization and atomization of Black natal and familial life are made visible via Eliza's experience? And what is the lasting legacy of such natal and familial dehumanization and atomization that render 'Black motherhood' a phenomenon? Drawing from the works of Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe and others, I argue that witnessing Eliza's experience as depicted in *12 Years a Slave* is critical to understanding and undoing the neoliberal turn toward Black motherhood; without suturing the present to the past, societal disparity (health, housing, incarceration, employment, etc.) among a contemporary Black polity is attributed to essentialist and moral failings, letting the *longue duree* of white supremacy, chattel slavery, and colonialist capitalism off the hook. Without making these connections that illuminate their presence and impact in the contemporary moment, reverberations of Mistress Ford's your children will soon be forgotten linger.

Leah Aldridge received her PhD from USC School of Cinema and Media Studies with interests in: Representation, Race, Gender and Genre; Culture Industries, Distribution and Circulation; Diaspora, Globalization, and Cultural Exchange; and Documentary, Independent, and Experimental Forms and Circuits. Leah's main research is in the relationship between international distribution and domestic production of Black film and television and has published on the brands of cinematic blackness. Ms. Aldridge holds a joint appointment in Film Studies and Screenwriting within Dodge College of Film and Media Arts at Chapman University, where she teaches courses such as Global Cinematic Blackness, Netflix vs. HBO, and Research Methods for Screenwriters, which marries theory with practice. She has a BA (English) from USC, and an MFA (Screenwriting) from UCLA.