

BLACK JOY AS A FORM OF ESCAPISM IN NORTHUP'S *12 YEARS A SLAVE*

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of “Black Joy” as a form of psychological and cultural escapism in Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* (1853). While existing scholarship has primarily focused on resistance and suffering within slave narratives, this analysis introduces “Black Joy” in the context of Early American slave narratives as both survival strategy and form of collective cultural knowledge and cultural resistance. Through close textual analysis of Northup's narrative, this paper shows how enslaved individuals employed musical expression, professional competence, spiritual faith, and strategic adaptation to support their humanity and agency under dehumanizing conditions. Deploying Kleaver Cruz's “Black Joy Project” and James C. Scott's concept of “hidden transcripts” as guides, this study argues that joy itself is a powerful form of political resistance and cultural preservation. The paper extends beyond traditional readings of slave narratives that emphasize physical escape and liberation to explore psychological and spiritual forms of freedom practiced within bondage. This study reveals African slaves as subtly resisting racial dehumanization in their quest for personal survival and community building. The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of African American literary traditions and show the continued relevance of “Black Joy” as a historical phenomenon and a contemporary practice of resistance against ongoing racial oppression.

Keywords: Slave narratives, Escapism, Resistance strategies, African American literature, Black Joy, Psychological & spiritual freedom.

Introduction

This article examines how Black slaves in early America, as portrayed in *12 Years a Slave*, cultivated moments of happiness and resilience amid overwhelmingly unfavourable circumstances. Northup's slave memoir illuminates the ordeals of a person of colour and an enslaved individual, even when one is born free. These adaptive means of survival in such harsh circumstances are what this paper terms “Black Joy”. Extant studies have often analysed the film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* from perspectives that highlight the complexities and representational challenges of slavery. Stephanie Li, for example, characterize the film as a “neo slave narrative”, arguing that it belongs to an African American genre that features enslaved protagonists and interrogates “the relationship between the history of slavery and the social significance of contemporary racial identity” (Rushdy qtd. in Li 327). Li's analysis shows the deviation and embellishment of Northup's 1853 text, capturing the representation of black women's experiences and male helplessness in the suffering of enslaved women (Li 327-29). On the other hand, Deborah E. McDowell examined the engagement of the film with questions of temporality, proving how “deeply and inevitably political” they are, especially in situations where slavery's temporal rhythms granted slaveholders control over both the bodies and time of the enslaved (McDowell 375-76). McDowell illustrate the film's mediation on time through “painfully incremental steps and stages,” compelling viewers to experience the cruelties of slavery (McDowell 376).

Philip Kaisary is of the view that while McQueen's adaptation is “polished and cinematographically accomplished, it does not take into account the basic fact that...slavery created the modern world” (Kaisary 92). Kaisary claims that the film “elects to explain the brutalities of slavery with attention on individual ‘evil-doers’” instead of examining slavery as a crucial part of capitalist modernity (Kaisary 92). He notes that the film's adaptation “conceals Northup's representations of slavery's systemic character” by projecting individual personalities over institutional critique (Kaisary 100). Similarly, Robert J. Patterson posits that McQueen's adaptation privileges “behavioral explanations over structural ones” in its presentation of black inequality (Patterson 18). Patterson maintains that putting Northup within “the framework of a Protestant work ethic success story gone awry, the film enlists sympathy or empathy

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from spectators but the opportunity to engage in structural analysis is missing” (Patterson 24-25). Patterson suggests that these privileges reproduce rather than challenge dominant narratives about black exceptionalism and individual merit.

The film’s representational strategies and use of violence have also been subject of inquiry to many scholars. According to John Stauffer, the film captures an artistic imagery that “offers access into the subjectivity of the characters” (Stauffer 318). The film’s representation of violence, in contrast to earlier representations, “do not generate a voyeuristic pornography of pain” but instead “enable viewers to empathize with the plight of slaves” (Stauffer 319). However, Miriam Thaggert highlights how McQueen’s adaptation “manipulates his representation of time and duration” as violence desensitization in antebellum America (Thaggert 334). Typifying the extended scenes, like the near lynching of Solomon, she maintains that film shows “how slowly time passes for Solomon” and depict how violence has been normalized as “recurrent and perpetual, so constant that it does not register commentary” (Thaggert 335).

Erica L. Ball focuses on the film’s contemporary resonances, arguing that “McQueen invites us to meditate on contemporary manifestations of racism and to consider the ways that other forms of systemic, state-sanctioned violence continue to transform the person into property, the innocent into the convict, the living into the dead” (Ball 184). Ball contends that the film speaks to “the ongoing peculiar tenuousness of black life” and “just how easily, in our ‘post-racial’ American moment, any of us might fall” (Ball 186). This analysis connects the film’s historical representation to ongoing patterns of anti-Black violence and systemic racism. Valerie Smith extends this contemporary analysis by noting how “Northup’s sudden descent from freedom into captivity recalls the numbers of African Americans wrongfully convicted and incarcerated due to the racialized policies and profit motives that sustain a criminal justice system” (Smith 365). She argues that despite the film’s setting in the antebellum period, it resonates with contemporary viewers precisely because it demonstrates “the fragility of black freedom” and shows that “the evolution of national racial politics is far from linear and progressive” (Smith 365).

Several scholars also examine the film’s treatment of gender and sexuality. Andrea N. Williams analyses how the film uses “singleness as a metaphor for abjection” and explores “the peculiarly tenuous and threatened state” of free Black existence (Williams 351). She argues that by “framing Northup within the context of a Protestant work ethic success story gone awry,” the film reinforces problematic narratives that privilege marital status as a marker of citizenship and belonging (Williams 350-351). Brenda E. Stevenson critiques the film’s representation of enslaved women, arguing that while McQueen gives “visual and sonic space to the mournful and melancholic,” his portrayals of enslaved women “serve as a much needed recovery” from other films but “still readily adopts this favourite Hollywood trope of the black woman as sexually bound to powerful white men” (Stevenson 112-113).

The question of historical accuracy and authentic representation appears as a significant concern across this scholarship. Jasmine Nichole Cobb argues that “12 Years reveals the confining nature of ‘accuracy’...as a concern for screen representations of slavery” and that “this value functions to duplicate the nineteenth-century context for contemplating slavery and limits our ability to imagine new possibilities derived from slavery as a concluded event” (Cobb 340). John Ernest similarly contends that “what is most accurate about this film is its devotion to both deeply personal and collective witness to the force of history” rather than strict fidelity to documentary realism (Ernest 372). Li also posits that the film’s “discontinuities” with Northup’s text “are not...disavowals or trivializations of the historical record” but instead “highlight McQueen’s unique vision and his notable concern for exploring the experiences of black women” (Li 326).

While *12 Years a Slave* has generated substantial scholarly attention, much of the existing criticism centres on Steve McQueen’s film adaptation, rather than engaging deeply with Solomon Northup’s original 1853 narrative. This focus on the cinematic text, while valuable for understanding contemporary representations of slavery, has left significant gaps in our understanding of Northup’s literary strategies and narrative techniques. However, other scholars have examined different dimensions of Northup’s text. Janet Neary argues that the use of force represents an important tool for the actualization of “racial slavery” within the narrative, focusing on violence as a defining feature of the institution (Neary 2021). Mohamed El Bakal frames *12 Years a Slave* through the binary of “greed and survival,” examining how white enslavers conceived slavery as a “thoroughly commercial enterprise” while enslaved people experienced it as “hardship to survive” (El Bakal 2024, 31). His focus on endurance and resilience provides foundation for understanding survival strategies, yet he emphasizes primarily “the helplessness, impotence, and oppression of black slaves” (32), prioritises brutality rather than agency. Nurhajjah, Pratiwi, and Fatimah employ Marxist theory to analyse *12 Years a Slave* as class struggle narrative, positioning Black slaves as proletariat and

white masters as bourgeoisie (2023). Their analysis reveals “a conflicting relationship between blacks and whites, in which whites always oppressed blacks” and examines Northup's “struggle...to defend himself when he gets bad treatment” (1193). Additionally, Vincentius Ricardo and Ika Destina Puspita's psychoanalytic reading identifies multiple defence mechanisms Northup employed to manage psychological trauma, including denial, rationalization, and sublimation (Ricardo and Puspita 2019). While their analysis focuses on unconscious psychological processes, it provides important groundwork for understanding survival strategies.

This paper, however, diverges from existing research on slavery by interpreting most of Northup's actions as forms of escapism that embody “Black Joy”. While previous scholarship examined resistance, violence, economic exploitation, class struggle, and psychological defence mechanisms, none have applied “Black Joy” as a comprehensive analytical framework to antebellum slave narratives. This represents a significant gap in the scholarly conversation, as the concept of “Black Joy” offers new insights into how enslaved people-maintained agency, dignity, and humanity within bondage. Kleaver Cruz (2015) first articulated the concept of “Black Joy” as part of a broader cultural movement. The central premise of “Black Joy” is transforming the pain and injustices Black people face into expressions of joy.

Northup's doggedness in pleasing his masters shows how his wilful actions during slavery function as forms of escapism that embrace “Black Joy”. A prime example is his boldness in suggesting to Master Ford that he could construct rafts for more efficient transportation of lumber. This act earned him praise from his master as the “smartest nigger in the Pine Woods” (Northup 84). Critically, Northup's innovation reveals multiple dimensions of Black Joy: his technical ability challenges white supremacist assumptions about Black intellectual inferiority; his initiative demonstrates agency within bondage; and his pride in the accomplishment (“I was the Fulton of Indian Creek”) shows that he maintains self-worth and professional identity despite enslavement. His display of competence does not only serve as a survival mechanism but an attempt to assert humanity and dignity in a system that is built to deny both. He dispelled the racist narrative that presents Black people as unintelligent through his ingenuity and problem-solving skills. The racist slur, “smartest nigger in the Pine Woods,” which serves as a form of praise by Ford did not fully reduce Northup's achievement; it however reveals the tension between racist language and the undeniable excellence of Black people. This exemplifies Black Joy, the conscious cultivation of pride, self-worth, and competence in the face of systemic dehumanization. Thus, this essay examines how “Black Joy” is deliberately expressed even though there is dominance of white supremacist realities. Ultimately, “Black Joy” translates to survival.

Modern societies are characterized by different economic and social challenges, pushing individuals to manage stress and uncertainty by employing various coping mechanisms. An example of such mechanism is escapism, whereby people try to find temporary psychological relief by engaging in activities or narratives that provide distance from adverse realities. Studies have shown how slave narratives have been explored in connection to slavery struggles, racial segregation, bondage and freedom, and individual experiences of different African Americans in early America. According to James Olney, almost all slave narratives are composed of “overwhelming sameness” in which the reader will “seldom discover anything new” (46). What Olney has not captured is that not all the slaves of these slave narratives had a form of escapism from their harsh realities. Similarly, Sean Kelley explains the attribute of slave narratives as asserting black equality and condemning slavery (174). While extant studies are tilted towards the exploration of violence, resistance, suffering and economic exploitation, there have been few studies focused on the notable resilience and unyielding fortitude displayed by Northup and other enslaved persons in creating and sustaining joy in the midst of adversity, and the presentation of “Black Joy”, within the institution of slavery, as a conscious survival strategy. Thus, this paper examines how Black slaves in early America discover happiness amid the horrid conditions that have moulded their realities as portrayed in Northup's *12 Years a Slave*.

Theoretical Framework: “Black Joy”, Cultural Materialism, and Hidden Transcripts

This study is hinged on the integration of the concept of “Black Joy” with cultural materialist approaches to African American literature and James C. Scott's theory of “hidden transcripts.” Cultural materialism aims to understand how material conditions of existence, which include systems of oppression like slavery, shape forms of resistance and cultural practices. “Black Joy”, in this framework, serves as a culturally produced survival strategy that emanates from the material conditions of enslavement. Raymond Williams's cultural materialism describes how subordinated groups come up with alternative cultural practices within dominant systems. Examining this theoretical lens when applied to Northup's narrative shows how enslaved individuals embrace joy and dignity within the violent apparatus

of slavery. These moments of “Black Joy” symbolize emergent cultural framework that question dominant ideologies while functioning within their constraints. William termed this the “structures of feeling.”

Michaël Roy maintains that Northup's account “provided a graphic and timely illustration of how the institution of slavery threatened the liberties of all free men and women of the North (the non-slaveholding Northern states), and as such it may have gained the interest of a wide Northern audience who would not necessarily have been drawn to narratives of fugitive slaves” (81). Ricardo and Puspita's psychoanalytic reading extends this understanding by identifying how Northup deployed psychological defence mechanisms (denial, intellectualization, regression, projection, rationalization, sublimation, displacement, and repression) to cope with the trauma of enslavement (2019). While their analysis focuses on unconscious psychological processes, this paper extends their work by examining how these survival strategies manifest as conscious expressions of “Black Joy.” Where Ricardo and Puspita see Northup's violin playing as “sublimation”, redirecting negative impulses into positive action, I argue it functions as deliberate cultural resistance and joy cultivation. Their identification of defence mechanisms provides psychological grounding for understanding how “Black Joy” operates at both conscious and unconscious levels. Janet Neary writes that the use of force is an important tool for the actualization of “racial slavery” (51) while Thavolia Glymph suggests that Solomon Northup turned his musical abilities into opportunities to improve the quality of his life (38). Nurhajah et al. note that Northup “used his skills, which gave him the confidence to maintain his dignity and value” (2023, 1198), interpreting this through a Marxist lens as the proletariat asserting value within an exploitative system. This reading complements the “Black Joy” framework by highlighting the material dimensions of Northup's strategy (he improved his labour conditions through innovation). However, “Black Joy” analysis reveals additional layers: Northup's pride in being “the Fulton of Indian Creek” transcends mere material improvement; it represents cultural resistance through intellectual achievement and the maintenance of professional identity despite commodification. These criticisms do not fully acknowledge the fact that the actions of Northup and a few other characters in the narrative in combating the difficult situations they encountered, served as a form of escapism which is termed “Black Joy” in this paper. While the term “Black Joy” has gained significant cultural and scholarly momentum since Kleaver Cruz formalized the concept in 2015 and has been explored in contemporary contexts by scholars such as Tracey Michael Lewis-Giggetts (2022) and Yolanda Pierce (2022), its application as a comprehensive analytical framework for antebellum slave narratives is still limited. Most literary criticism of *12 Years a Slave* has focused on violence and trauma (Neary 2021), economic exploitation (El Bakal 2024), class struggle (Nurhajah et al. 2023), and psychological defence mechanisms (Ricardo and Puspita 2019), leaving unexplored the ways enslaved individuals cultivated joy as both survival strategy and resistance practice. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating how “Black Joy” operated in the antebellum period as a precursor to contemporary formulations of the concept.

“Black Joy” as a term crossed into mainstream consciousness in 2015 through Kleaver Cruz, the founder of the “Black Joy” Project. Cruz defines “Black Joy” as a deliberate practice of resistance and healing, arguing that “Black Joy is about holding the pain and injustice...in tension with the joy we experience”. Kim Pham, in an online article, writes that “This idea that Black people can be happy, despite their trauma and history of oppression, is Black Joy”. This study builds upon Javon Johnson's theorization of “Black Joy” as “a theory, a method, and a political device” (180) to establish “Black Joy” as an analytical framework grounded in cultural materialist principles. Within this framework, “Black Joy” serves a theory that explains how communities that are oppressed maintain humanity and generate meaning under dehumanizing conditions; a method for analysing cultural practices that appear as accommodation but function as resistance; and a political tool that sustains agency and dignity in systems designed to eliminate them.

“Hidden transcripts”, developed by James C. Scott, is also crucial to understanding the political dimension of Black Joy. Scott expresses that subordinated groups develop “offstage” discourses and practices that maintain public conformity but criticize power. Northup's musical performances, innovations, and spiritual practices are riddled with such hidden transcripts. They are of advantage to his enslavers' interests while simultaneously making room for autonomous joy and preserving his self-identity. This theoretical integration allows the reading of Northup's narrative from a perspective that identifies “Black Joy” as both individual survival strategy and collective cultural practice. It is an intentional form of happiness shown by a Black person when faced with unhealthy racial moments for survival. The word, ‘survival’ is an attempt to show that these unhealthy moments are constant because of ‘race’. Thus, this paper explores how Northup, whose other name as a slave was “Platt”, expressed “Black Joy” as a survival strategy.

Intergenerational Transmission of “Black Joy”: The Case of Mintus Northup

The cultivation of “Black Joy” as survival strategy begins before Solomon Northup's enslavement, transmitted through his father's cultural practices and worldview. Solomon Northup's father, Mintus Northup, exemplifies how “Black Joy” functions as intergenerational cultural knowledge rather than merely individual coping mechanism. The narrator reveals that he was 'liberated' and later moved to a town called Minerva in New York. Subsequently, he worked on different plantations for different employers, and the narrator notes that “his whole life was passed in the peaceful pursuits of agriculture” (12). Mintus Northup serves as a classic representation of a Black person using his skills to thrive in a racially hostile environment.

Mintus's strategic approach to survival demonstrates what cultural materialism identifies as the transformation of oppressive material conditions into opportunities for cultural resistance. His strategy for navigating a racially discriminating and socially demoralizing society was to dedicate himself intentionally and wholly to agriculture. This commitment earned him respect, as the narrator describes him as “a man respected for his industry and integrity...never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa” (12). This description implies that Mintus chose to excel in the field of agriculture, thereby earning himself a favourable reputation. He understood the social dynamics of his environment and endeavoured to maintain his dignity while expressing “Black Joy”. He refused to engage in menial jobs and lived contentedly with his agricultural expertise. The narrator further notes that he “comprehended the system of slavery and dwelt with sorrow on the degradation of his race” (12), meaning that he was fully aware of how his race was perceived and was determined to live differently from other African Americans who relied on menial jobs for their livelihood. “Black Joy” as a form of escapism is evident in Mintus' ability to become an agricultural expert in an environment where there are no prestigious jobs for people of his colour. Similarly, Robert Heilman argues that escapism “implies a flight from daily 'reality', far less forgivable than literally running away from a society or situation” (443). However, Mintus's approach suggests a more complex form of engagement that simultaneously acknowledges and transcends racial limitations. To consolidate this, Mintus found comfort in the Christian religion, where the narrator explains that he instilled in “our minds the sentiments of morality, and taught us to place our trust and confidence in Him who regards the humblest as well as the highest of his creatures” (12). This represents an extension of his (and his family's) strategic escape into spirituality. By exhibiting this spiritual dependency on God and teaching his children God's ways, spirituality functions as a survival strategy that facilitates escaping the degrading social conditions of their society. This act of “trust and confidence” in God embodies “Black Joy”, the determination to persevere happily regardless of the situations they faced.

It is pertinent to note that this form of “Black Joy” equally served as a ray of hope for Solomon Northup. His belief in God which he describes as “trusting in providence” (78) sustained his hope for his deliverance. Critically looking at this, LeRoy Moore, Jr. asserts that the Christian religion “was a religion which could give to the slave- no, not give to him but evoke in him- an inner fire when all else was bleak and cold, a religion elevating him to a direct experience with God” (661). This captures the essence of Northup's trust in providence. It is this internal joy that sustained his heart, nurturing the hope that as he carried out his daily activities as a slave, God would deliver him one day. Through this belief in God, Northup has displayed escapism which is characterized by “Black Joy”.

Musical Expression as Hidden Transcript and Cultural Resistance

Northup's narrative opens with the powerful declaration, “Having been born a freeman” (11), which immediately signals to the reader that the subsequent events of the narrator's life will be the opposite of freedom, but enslavement. The narrative reveals that Northup had never experienced enslavement before his kidnapping. Therefore, after being cajoled into leaving his home for financial opportunities and entering a world vastly different from the free world of Saratoga, he recognized he had to adapt and find ways to survive. One of the primary ways Northup expresses “Black Joy” is through his strong bond with his violin, which gave him confidence and boldness in his society. Javon Johnson emphasizes that “Black Joy allows us the space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives” (180). Northup widened his imagination to appreciate his dexterity on the violin as a “source of consolation”, acknowledging the potency of this skill in tolerating the “painful contemplation” of his fate as a slave (14). This musical dexterity presented him an avenue to escape from his reality of racial inequality. He describes the violin to provide “pleasure to the simple beings with whom my lot was cast, and beguiling my own thoughts, for many hours...” (14). This musical engagement presents him with an option of escapism and represents a drift from unpleasant realities through consolation in playing the violin.

Initially, this musical escapism instilled the belief that he would be graciously compensated as promised “by two gentlemen of respectable appearance” (21) who requested his musical services. “Black Joy’s” manifestation occurred with his growing confidence and the belief that his talent made him valuable, detailing why he became a sought-after talent. He recalls, “my responses being to all appearances satisfactory, they proposed to engage my services for a short period...” (21). His talent in playing the violin made him anticipate a substantial reward and better status -- an attempt to escape from his current reality, culminating in “Black Joy”. He makes known this excitement when he declares, “I drove away from Saratoga on the road to Albany, elated with my new position, and happy as I had ever been, on any day in all my life” (22)

Attempting to reconnect with treasured memories as a violinist and to regain scenes of joy amid the horrendous conditions set by a cruel New Orleans slave trader, Mr. Theophilus Freeman, he asked Bob, a young Black boy, whether he could play the “*Virginia Reel*,” thus resisting hopelessness through music. The narrator writes that “he handed me the violin. I struck up a tune and finished it. Freeman ordered me to continue playing and seemed well pleased...” (66). His excitement with the violin, which previously served as a representation of joy and consolation, is apparent at this moment. It establishes the memory of a tune, “*Virginia reel*”, and while the performance was ongoing, it gave him a chance to live in the façade of being a respected human being without being subservient or disregarded. This moment illustrates “Black joy” expression through escapism, as music represent a brief relief from an unpleasant existence. Moreover, Northup’s violin performance made Freeman display his musical skills before a prospective buyer (67). This performance also presents a conscious strategy for survival. He had been looking for the means of escape back to New York, but there was no opportunity until an “old gentleman” arrived. However, to his surprise, even after Freeman acknowledges his musical capabilities, he was not purchased. Amidst this disappointment, he did not abandon his skills, hoping that they might save him one day.

Northup's relationship with his violin represents the most sustained expression of “Black Joy” throughout the narrative. The violin is symbolic in many ways: it embodies his free identity before he was enslaved; represents a link to his cultural heritage and African American musical traditions; yields economic value that allows him to negotiate better conditions; creates community among enslaved people through shared musical experience and provides a space where his humanity cannot be denied, a psychological refuge. An obvious testament to Northup's reliance on his violin appears when he overtly admits that his musical skill facilitated “Black Joy” through escapism from his harsh realities. He confesses, “Alas! Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage. It introduced me to great houses - relieved me of many days’ labor in the field...” (186). The word “beloved” immediately personalizes the instrument, suggesting emotional attachment that exceeds mere utility. The exclamation “Alas!” indicates both gratitude and sorrow, i.e., joy in what the violin provided, grief that such consolation was necessary. When Northup elaborates that the violin “introduced me to great houses - relieved me of many days' labor in the field,” he reveals the material benefits of his musical skill. Yet these practical benefits are linked with deeper cultural and psychological functions. The passive construction “introduced me” grants agency to the instrument itself, interweaving Northup's identity with his music. The violin does not only serve as an escape route, but it also highlights opportunities where Northup can assert his humanity.

Notably, Northup explains how “when sleep had fled affrighted from the cabin, and my soul was disturbed and troubled with contemplation of my fate, it would sing me a song of peace” (217). Sleep, personified as “affrighted” implies the terror of Northup's nighttime consciousness, when defences lower and reality become agonizing. Again, Northup gives the instrument agency. It sings to him, forming friendship or a companionship, or even a spiritual presence. The “song of peace” it provides represents “Black Joy” in its purest form: the deliberate cultivation of beauty, peacefulness, and meaning within circumstances designed to destroy all three. When Northup plays violin to “release negative impulses” (Ricardo and Puspita 2019), this act goes beyond psychological coping; it illuminates “Black Joy” active resistance.

Professional Competence and Race Consciousness in Early America

In the context of racial domination, material conditions determine social positioning and access to resources. Northup's strategic deployment of professional competence reveals his understanding of these material realities and his ability to manipulate them for survival. Classifying people based on colour, hair, and perceived level of intelligence, among other features can be traced to race as a social construct. This gives room for hierarchical classification that poses questions about the height or supremacy of a race. There is a deliberate intention that is reflected in the lives of those classified to be “lower”. To some, the Black race has been labelled as a “wicked, and sinful” (Toni Morrison ix) race. Also, these classifications can be interpreted as “race consciousness”, which

embodies a major strand of Early American literature scholarship. Kathleen Sparrow and Thomas Durant Jr. describe how DuBois conceptualizes race consciousness as an awareness of black subservience and inequality relative to whites (339). This framework can be situated in the deliberate survival strategies of Solomon Northup within the context of escapism leading to “Black Joy”.

After slavery, Northup realized that despite all his attempts to escape, there might not be a way forward out of his present condition. He realized that his “sable race is viewed with scornful eye” (Wheatley 18) and therefore was aware of the necessity to change his disadvantages into advantages to be valuable in a race-conscious society. This achievement could be attained by carefully looking for opportunities to show his worth when William Ford, his new master, encountered some challenges in his lumber business. Northup figured out a potential shift from being a lower-class slave with unpleasant living conditions to becoming a higher-class slave with a more conducive living condition. As Northup explains, “It was the desire of Ford's approving voice that suggested to me an idea that resulted to his profit” (83). The problem in Ford's business allows Northup to maintain his dignity and show his value.

Being an experienced woodsman, Northup “ascertained the distance from the mills...and laboured hard being extremely anxious to succeed, both from a desire to please my master, and to show Adam Taydem that my scheme was not such a visionary one as he incessantly pronounced it. One hand could manage three cribs. I took charge of the forward three and commenced poling down the creek. In due time we entered the first bayou and finally reached our destination in a shorter period of time than I had anticipated.” (83-4). His proposal involved building rafts for more efficient transportation of lumber. An examination of Northup's motivation shows his determination to prove that in a segregated and race-conscious society, he possessed valuable skills and intelligence. He had to show his White master, Ford, and White superior, Taydem, that he possessed a sophisticated reasoning ability. This resolve stems from his discovery that in the south of America, specifically in his location of New Orleans, a high level of race consciousness existed.

In a twist of fortune, he succeeded and was praised by William Ford who called him “smartest nigger in the Pine Woods” (84). The text shows that Northup was proud of his new status as he happily carried out his duty, feeling victorious over Adam Taydem who had dismissed his suggestions to William Ford. He proudly says that “In fact, I was the Fulton of Indian Creek” (84). This reference to Robert Fulton, the famous inventor and engineer, illustrates Northup's intellectual ambitions and despite his enslaved status, he sees himself as an innovator. His comparison represents professional pride and a form of intellectual resistance against aspects of slavery that are dehumanizing.

A crucial point of the values of “Black Joy”, according to Elaine Nichols of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Nichols 2023), is to shift the impact of negative narratives and events in the favour of the individual or group. Northup's use of his professional skills strategically reflects this transformation, a turning point for potential exploitation into an opportunity for recognition and better conditions.

Walton's Accommodation as Strategic Resistance

In a similar pattern of analysis, Walton, a “born thrall” (82) of William Ford, another character in *12 Years a Slave*, also demonstrated “Black Joy”. The consciousness of Walton's birth into slavery shows that he understood the social status surrounding him that he could not change. Walton's status links to the different levels of slavery in Early American Literature studies, which include indentured labourers together with those born into bondage like Walton. Walton spoke “kindly and affectionately of him, as a child would speak of his own father” according to the narrator (82). William Ford is the “him” in the previous statement, and it further shows that Walton expressed “Black Joy” by accepting his reality while building a genuine connection towards it. This reality is tied to Mr. Ford's fatherly care toward him. He seems happy and ready to share his fortune of acceptance and care by a White master.

Moreover, his frequent questioning of Solomon Northup about what Washington as a city looks like, reveals that he would embrace any opportunity to become a free person of colour in the North. Walton's persistent questioning of Northup about Washington as a city shows complex layers of “Black Joy” running through hope and imagination. When Walton asks about the capital, he engages in a form of mental escapism, envisioning a world outside his immediate bondage. This curiosity demonstrates his capacity for wonder and aspiration even in slavery. His questions imply his readiness to embrace any opportunity to become a free person of colour in the North. Yet this very conversation represents “Black Joy” in practice: the act of imagining freedom and keeping hope for alternatives which itself embodies resistance to the psychological death that is woven to slavery. Walton refuses to see his condition as total reality. He preserves agency and futurity, through conversation and curiosity, the two things

slavery seeks to eliminate. Escapism is implicitly demonstrated in his relatively comfortable conditions as Ford's slave, which gives him a sense of "Black Joy". Hence, Walton's "Black Joy" emanates from his ability to accept his status and live life within the confines of oppression without allowing racial differences to prevent him from pursuing a meaningful life.

The Political Dimensions of "Black Joy"

To grasp a better understanding of "Black Joy" as both survival strategy and form of resistance, it is crucial to examine its broader political implications. Northup's expression of "Black Joy" operates on various aspects simultaneously: personal survival, community building, and subtle resistance to dehumanization. Northup creates moments of shared humanity that exceed the humiliating conditions of slavery when he plays his violin for fellow slaves. These moments imply personal escape and collective affirmation of dignity and culture.

"Black Joy" as a concept also connects with what James C. Scott terms "hidden transcripts," the private discourse of resistance that subordinated groups develop. Northup's musical performances, his innovative solutions to Ford's business problems, and even his maintenance of hope represent these forms of hidden resistance. They allow preservation of his sense of self and agency while seemingly showing conformity to the expectations of his enslavers.

Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of "Black Joy", from Mintus to Solomon Northup, highlights its function as cultural knowledge and survival wisdom. Mintus's emphasis on excellence in agriculture and spiritual grounding provided Solomon with a foundation for maintaining dignity and hope even under the most dehumanizing circumstances. This transmission indicates that "Black Joy" represents more than individual coping mechanisms; it embodies collective strategies for maintaining humanity and culture under systemic oppression.

Contemporary Relevance and Analytical Implications

The relevance of "Black Joy" as both historical phenomenon and contemporary practice extends beyond the antebellum period. Current scholarly attention on "Black Joy", including the work of scholars like Tracey Michae'l Lewis-Giggetts and Yolanda Pierce, highlights its continued relevance as a hidden transcript against ongoing racial oppression. The concept interrogates dominant narratives that offer a more complex understanding of resilience and agency and rather place Black experiences mainly through lenses of suffering and trauma. In the context of Northup's narrative, "Black Joy" also complicates traditional interpretations of slave narratives primarily focused on escape and liberation. Northup's expression of joy and meaning while in bondage represents a form of liberation which is spiritual and psychological, even though he certainly seeks physical freedom. This dual approach implies that freedom can be cultivated and managed even within systems of oppression, adding nuanced interpretation to our understanding of resistance and agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored various forms of escapism that culminate in "Black Joy" as exemplified in the lives of Solomon Northup, his father, Mintus, and Walton. The analysis shows that "Black Joy" presents both collective cultural practice and individual survival strategy, passed down through generations and adapted to specific circumstances. Even within systems designed to eliminate them, the characters in Northup's narrative show that joy and dignity can be sustained through musical expression, spiritual faith, professional competence, and strategic adaptation. This perspective shapes our understanding of both historical experiences of slavery and contemporary forms of racial resistance, implying that joy itself can be a potent form of cultural preservation and political action. Ultimately, this study fosters a more nuanced understanding of African American literary traditions and the intricate ways individuals and communities navigate oppression. By centralising "Black Joy" as both analytical framework and lived experience, it offers new perspectives on familiar texts while honouring the full humanity and agency of those who survived and resisted slavery's dehumanizing forces.

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