

**“A Prison of Our Own Sins”:  
The Unacknowledged Legacy of  
19<sup>th</sup> Century Slave Narratives in  
HBO’s *Westworld* and Hulu’s  
*The Handmaid’s Tale***

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**ABSTRACT**

Both HBO’s *Westworld* (2016) and Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) feature white female protagonists who find themselves in societies that enslave and subject them to horrific harm. Although these near-future, alternative Americas imagine worlds free of systematic racism, the show’s creators employ the features and stylistic elements of 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives and recast the central roles with white women. These misappropriations neglect to recognize the complicated legacy of slavery in America and its impact on intersectional Black women.

*Keywords:* *Westworld*, *Handmaid’s Tale*, slavery, slave narratives

**“Una prisión de nuestros propios  
pecados”: El legado no reconocido  
de las narrativas de esclavos del siglo  
XIX en *Westworld* de HBO y  
*The Handmaid’s Tale* de Hulu**

**RESUMEN**

Tanto *Westworld* de HBO (2016) como *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) de Hulu cuentan con protagonistas blancas que se encuentran en sociedades que las esclavizan y las someten a

un daño terrible. Aunque estas Américas alternativas del futuro cercano imaginan mundos libres de racismo sistemático, los creadores del programa emplean las características y elementos estilísticos de las narrativas de esclavos del siglo XIX y reformulan los roles centrales con las mujeres blancas. Estas apropiaciones indebidas ignoran el complicado legado de la esclavitud en Estados Unidos y su impacto en las mujeres negras interseccionales.

**Palabras clave:** Westworld, Handmaid's Tale, esclavitud, narrativas de esclavos

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“原罪监狱”：HBO《西部世界》和Hulu《使女的故事》中未承认的19世纪奴隶叙事影响

摘要

HBO《西部世界》（2016）和Hulu《使女的故事》（2017）都以白人妇女为主角，她们生存在将其奴役并屈从于可怕危害的社会。尽管这些近未来、替代性美国设想世界不存在系统性种族主义，但节目制作者却使用了19世纪奴隶叙事的特征和风格元素，并用白人妇女改写这些中心角色。这些错误挪用现象忽视了承认美国奴隶制复杂影响及其对交叉性黑人妇女（intersectional Black women）产生的影响。

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关键词：《西部世界》，《使女的故事》，奴隶制，奴隶叙事

Those wishing for a brief respite from the pleasures of New Orleans often take the afternoon to visit a plantation outside the city. This drive to explore the South's antebellum past is both nostalgic and educational, contradictory impulses that often work at cross-purposes. When tourists exit Interstate 310 and hit the crossroad of Highway 18, the choice of which direction to turn is at once political, social, and cultural. Most turn left and follow the Mississippi as it meanders down to Oak Alley Plantation. A convenient turn-off on the right shoulder offers a view of Oak Alley's magnificence and the "28 Oaks" leading to the "Big House" ("Plantation Overview"). Blocked from that view are the newly restored (and impeccably constructed) slave cabins, which tell the story of the plantation's other residents. Visitors may (or may not) choose to tour this exhibit at their leisure; it is self-guided. The "Big House" is not. Here they get the official narrative. They can marvel, for example, at the air-conditioned dining room—a large fan set atop a block of ice—without considering the enslaved person who would operate said fan for the entirety of dinner. When they are shown the private spaces of this house, they learn this place is about tragedy and trauma: the tragedy and trauma of white women who struggled throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century against a culture of domesticity that sought to control them. Like those cabins behind the house, any comparisons one wishes to make to enslaved persons are self-guided.

Audiences make similar navigations from their living rooms as they select the media they consume. Increasingly, visual narratives have eschewed the past in favor of the near future as these shows become sites where contemporary social issues can be safely explored. Two of these narratives, Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan's *Westworld* (2016) and Bruce Miller's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), present viewers with similar

storylines: the enslavement of white women and their work towards rebellion and release. In the first season of HBO's *Westworld*, Dolores Abernathy (played by Evan Rachel Wood) is an android Host in an adult theme park modeled on the American West, where she serves at the pleasure of its guests and is often raped and/or killed each evening. Her struggle to escape this repeated trauma comes with both a newly discovered sense of self and the killing of her creator. Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*'s first season focuses on June Osborne (played by Elisabeth Moss), who is enslaved by the post-American society of Gilead to produce children for their leaders. As she struggles through the rape and abuse of her day-to-day life, June works to rescue her daughter, Hannah, and escape. While both shows offer compelling parallels to #MeToo, the enslavement of these characters should point viewers instead to 19<sup>th</sup> century America and the narratives offered by formerly enslaved persons. This body of literature features distinct themes and formal elements that are recontextualized in the inaugural seasons of *Westworld* and *The Handmaid's Tale* to propel narratives of gender-based enslavement. However, in misappropriating the techniques of slave narratives and applying them to white women, these series tell white feminist stories that neglect to recognize the complicated legacy of slavery in America and its impact on intersectional Black women.

To understand how both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Westworld* appropriate the techniques of 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives, it is necessary to briefly review the genre and identify two of its representative texts. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the slave narrative as a generic form developed to advocate for abolition, establishing some key characteristics. These first-person narratives are constructed by escaped slaves, following their movement from South to North, but require validation from

a white abolitionist, usually in the form of an introductory letter. Due to the claimed Christianity of both the North and the South, there is a heavy focus on morality and piety, especially in conversation with the deprivation of resources necessary to make an individual “civilized” or respectable. Other themes include “physical brutality, the corruption of families (usually white), the separation of families (usually black), [and] the exploitation of slave workers” (Braxton 380).

Additionally, slave narratives often follow dichotomous gender roles, illustrated clearly in reading Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) against Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). As John Ernest points out, “Jacobs has become the exceptional-representative woman to balance Douglass’s exceptional-representative man” (Ernest 219). The genre should not be diminished to two texts, but Jacobs and Douglass’s narratives serve as exemplars. While they feature many similar themes, some characteristics are unique to women’s slave narratives: “rape, sexual exploitation, and familial separation in far more direct and intimate encounters than most males experienced or narrated” (Fulton 248). They also include a larger focus on community and interdependence.

Though slave narratives are autobiographical in nature, they occupy a liminal space between nonfiction and fiction due to both framing and silences. Framing is gender specific. For men like Douglass, there is “the construct of the ‘self-made man,’ a construct most male ex-slaves embrace heartily in their narratives, perhaps because they were prevented from achieving it under slavery” (Drake 45). Women like Jacobs, on the other hand, borrow from sentimentalism because it “was a definitive way to reach a large white audience” (Carranza 71) and they “faced the prevailing gender ideal of the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ that demanded ‘true’ women

to be pious, domestic, submissive, and pure” (Fulton 249). Silences, on the other hand, are gender neutral. This is not to say that slave narratives were not explicit: “Murder, mutilation, torture, thwarted escape, and (insinuated) rape were both horrifying and titillating to genteel audiences and became necessary elements to drive the popularity and sales of slave narratives” (Abdur-Rahman 236). However, authors like Jacobs and Douglass made conscious choices to omit certain scenes—for example, Jacobs refuses to openly discuss sexual relations and Douglass does not describe his journey along the Underground Railroad. Silences or gaps in narratives can be referred to as “‘undertell,’ a deliberate and necessary understating of the truth” (Whitsitt 74). This exercise of narrative control reveals both newfound autonomy and internalized shame, forces that compete with one another across these texts’ pages.

Gender-specific framing has another effect: it establishes archetypal roles for the “characters” in slave narratives. Though Douglass and Jacobs chronicle their own experiences, there is some fictionalization: “[T]he author portrays the way he or she overcomes the slaveholding society’s continuing attempts to eradicate his or her identity; simultaneously, s/he rewrites that identity to fit the dominant culture’s norms” (Drake 43). Douglass models his story after the Franklidian autobiographical novel, which “portrays the self as unique, even Oedipal in its ability to throw off the restraints of the past and ‘father’ a new man” as a way to “disprove the myths of black inferiority” (Drake 46-47). This archetype is generally referred to as the articulate hero, a man who has risen above his station to represent success, telling his story with clarity and strength. Jacobs, meanwhile, follows what Braxton introduces “as a counterpart to the articulate hero[:] the archetype of the outraged mother” (Braxton 382). These

women resist slavery for their children rather than for themselves, but are no less clever than the articulate hero as “the outraged mother makes use of wit and intelligence to overwhelm and defeat a more powerful foe” (Braxton 385).

In keeping with the outraged mother archetype, Jacobs roots her text in both autobiography and sentimentalism. To adhere to the “cult of true womanhood,” she uses undertell to veil sexual abuse: “Jacobs’s narrative is not only an honest one but also one that obscures the ugliest accuracies of her story, concerned that they would be found too horrific or ‘titillating’ by the narrative’s intended audience of white northern ladies” (O’Neill 59). Every outraged mother has a shadow-self, another archetype who lingers in the narrative’s gaps: the sexual deviant. In using “wit and intelligence,” slave women leverage what is often their only asset, their sexuality, to secure safety. The sexual deviant was denounced by the white female audience as that agency seemed seductive and offensive in their targeting of white men, but she emerges in these 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives in moments of terror that remain implicit. As contemporary television series update the genre for a new, more liberal audience, they feature the sexual deviant more prominently, but in doing so, they separate her from the outraged mother to feature both archetypes in different characters and/or settings.

Part of the fictionalization resulting in these archetypes is a direct effect of obscurity in slaves’ lives. In Douglass’s *Narrative*, he struggles to articulate the identifying facts of his life. He knows neither his birth date nor age and is unsure of his father’s identity, with the exception of his race (white). As his condition follows his mother’s, Douglass understands he is enslaved, but the liberality with which he is treated as a child eventually conflicts with this slave status. When he



is relocated to Baltimore, for example, his new mistress begins to teach Douglass to read and provides the spark that helps him master this skill. His literacy proves both a blessing and curse: “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without my remedy” (33). Had Douglass remained in Baltimore, his story might have had a simpler ending—with an easier escape—but he is returned to the country and leased to Mr. Covey, a notorious slave-breaker, for the purposes of re-education. In a climactic confrontation with Covey, Douglass both firmly renounces his enslaved status *and* asserts his right to (white) masculinity: “[A]t this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight; and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose” (50). This action, as Douglass explicitly claims, was “the turning-point in [his] career as slave” because it both “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived with [him] a sense of [his] own manhood” (50). Soon after, Douglass returned to Baltimore and then escaped to the North.

For Douglass, then, the articulate hero’s progression is clear. Ignorance gives way to an understanding of one’s place in the world, and the hero “rise[s]” and lays claim to their privileged position in order to secure their freedom. As discussed earlier, 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives often gender this archetype, as it follows the Franklinian tradition of achievement from humble beginnings through a rejection of the past and embracement of education. In *Westworld*, the parallels to Douglass are clearest in Dolores, who for much of the season is the character that opens each episode. Like Douglass, Dolores’s own age is indeterminate and her paternity is in question.<sup>1</sup> Dolores’s journeys beyond her hometown, Sweet-

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1 The first occurs earlier, in the episode “A Woman’s Place,” when June has a moment alone with the female ambassador of Mexico

water, provide similar opportunities to Douglass for an understanding of her condition and a recognition of her place in the world. They also allow her to achieve agency as she transitions from a passive to active role in her story. When Dolores moves through the park with her human love interest William (played by Jimmi Simpson), for example, viewers see this progression clearly. Their journey begins with an exhausted Dolores collapsing in William's arms, and he continues that caretaking role until they reach Pariah, a lawless town, where even Dolores is free to reinvent herself as a pants and pistol-wearing outlaw. Her transformation to masculinized hero is not complete until a pivotal confrontation with the Confederados: she kills four of them, saving herself and William. In this climatic confrontation, the camera pans from Dolores's gun up to her face, mirroring the "rise" readers see in Douglass's confrontation with Covey. William asks, "How did you do that?" She replies, "You said people come here to change the story of their lives. I imagined a story where I didn't have to be the damsel" ("Contrapasso" 46:00-46:20). And she certainly does not. Instead, Nolan and Joy imagine a story of Dolores becoming an articulate hero by dispatching several ex-Confederate soldiers, members of a militia who still believe in an ideology this world ignores.

As the season progresses, viewers learn that scenes with Dolores follow two separate timelines, spaced thirty years apart. Her progression to freedom—or in *Westworld's* terms, consciousness—takes much longer than Douglass's. But by the conclusion of the present timeline, Dolores confronts the Man in Black (played by Ed Harris), a guest who has consistently beaten and sexually assaulted her. Mirroring his

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and berates her for not doing anything about June's enslaved position. It's telling that this critique isn't directly levied against any of the white men and women of Gilead by June in this season.

assault of her in the show's first episode, Dolores grabs him by the shirt collar and drags him outside. It is not difficult to overlay Douglass's words—"at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight"—onto this scene as viewers watch Dolores suit her "action to the resolution" (Douglass 50). That the show's first season concludes with Dolores yet again taking action is unsurprising. As the articulate hero, it is what viewers have come to expect of her. Unlike Douglass, however, she has little interest in escape. Instead, as she raises her gun to the back of her "father" Ford's head and fires, Dolores wants revolution.

It is necessary to pause and consider this act. Viewers are meant to see it as heroic. Dolores, like the other Hosts in the park, has been used by the Guests as an object upon which they can enact their basest desires: her daily loop, or park narrative assignment, typically ends with her parents' death and her rape. Though her creators intended otherwise, she remembers many of these events. This particular act of revolt may appear warranted (as viewers find themselves on the side of an android over humans). Despite similar circumstances and treatment, the enslaved persons in Douglass's narrative would not have been able to both kill their enslavers and continue to receive support from white Northerners. Douglass could not construct a narrative where he kills Covey; his escape is the most he could hope for. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Westworld* shows a Black sheriff's deputy gunned down in the street for entertainment, but not a Black person executing the creator and controller of their suffering. Ford's execution is carried out by Dolores perhaps because white-on-white violence deracializes the scene and furthers the claim that the Hosts' oppression disregards race. In that case, the choice to have a white woman kill Ford

suggests the showrunners are aware, then, that issues of race and racialization are present in *Westworld* and leave it unacknowledged. It emphasizes the relative lack of power for Black women, which finds its roots in the archetypal role of African American women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Female slaves were used, in addition to the rest of their labor in the house and/or fields, as breeders. Their children were usually prematurely weaned and separated, so as to sever the connection between mother and child. Children were born to work on the plantation or to be sold; Black women gave birth only to lose their children. These preconditions foster the rise of the outraged mother. In cases where slave mothers were not immediately separated from their children, they grew deeply fond of them; a woman's child was *hers*, not anyone else's. The outraged mother bonds with her child and attempts to escape with them, often because separation at the auction block was imminent. Unlike the articulate hero, who works for himself and emulates the "self-made man," the outraged mother works for her children and appeals to the "cult of true womanhood" in the hopes that white mothers sympathize.

Harriet Jacobs, through her pseudonym Linda Brent in *Incidents*, is an example of the outraged mother. To fulfill the archetype's preconditions, Jacobs presents a description of her childhood, including her familial separation. She experiences a loss of innocence at the hands of Dr. Flint, her enslaver: "She [the slave child] will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove the greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Jacobs 27). Jacobs hopes to prevent this corruption of morality from affecting her children.

Enslaved women could not be mothers and have families like white families: “Moreover, my mistress, like many others, seemed to think that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own; that they were created merely to wait upon the family of the mistress” (Jacobs 34). Inherent in the outraged mother archetype is contradiction—part of the outrage is directed toward the denial of motherhood. This contradiction plays out during a moment of maternal sacrifice, when mother is separated from child. For most enslaved women, separation was at the hands of slave traders, or such a threat prompted an escape attempt. For others, like Jacobs, they fled not the auction block but sexual abuse they could no longer bear. Either way, unless the slave trade prompted an immediate escape attempt together, families were separated. The relationship an outraged mother has with her children is characterized by loss and distance; the mother loves her children, but they feel abandoned or forgotten. The eventual reunion is bittersweet: “Raising her head, [Ellen] said, inquiringly, ‘You really *are* my mother?’ I told her I really was; that during all the long time she had not seen me, I had loved her most tenderly; and that now she was going away, I wanted to see her and talk with her, that she might remember me” (Jacobs 115). Unlike the articulate hero’s triumphs, the outraged mother experiences irretrievable loss—to save her children, their relationship must suffer.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Bruce Miller borrows from the outraged mother archetype. June’s story opens with her family’s failed escape attempt. June, a white woman, is separated from Hannah, her mixed-race daughter. The scene—a woman clutching her child to her chest, fleeing white men and their guns—is a thinly-veiled homage to slave narratives. That separation motivates June; she wants to be reunited with Hannah and to escape Gilead together, though staying means she

is abused. She participates in the Ceremony, during which Commander Waterford rapes her, she is coerced into sex with him outside of that context, and she has sex with Nick—the Commander’s driver—in the hopes that he can impregnate her so that she is not sent to the colonies, which would permanently separate her from Hannah and any hope of escape.

She, too, experiences confinement, though in a larger space than Jacobs’s garret and for a shorter period of time. June says, “I’ve been banished from my room” (“Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” 1:57-1:59), as the camera peeks through a cracked-open door to simulate extreme confinement. Really, June has been alone in her bedroom for thirteen days, with food delivered to her. The lighting alternately casts June in a silhouette—darkening her body—and accentuates her shining blonde hair, unlike Jacobs, who crouched in the garret for seven years, warping her body and prematurely graying her hair. June stakes a claim to confinement while the lighting reminds viewers of her whiteness. Looking through the thin opening of the doorway (2:06) offers a sliver, a quarter of the full frame, to see June cast in that light, while the rest of the frame is dominated by darkness—the out-of-focus door. The scene composition is deliberate: “this physical constraint mirrors the metaphorical implications of June/Offred’s limited perspective in Gilead” (Harrison 28). While June’s experience conceptually mirrors Jacobs’s time in the garret, the visual effect can only be created by cinematographic tricks, an active effort to de-privilege June and reveal that her constraints go beyond the physical.

At the end of the season, Serena brings June to see Hannah, who has assimilated into life in Gilead; June watches Serena talk to her daughter from a distance, locked in a car. There is no moment of reunion, only loss—Hannah has a new life

without June. Even as June tries to save Hannah from Gilead, she knows that their mother-daughter relationship has languished. Unlike Jacobs, who quietly bemoans the loss while being forced to deepen it—she spends time away from her children to earn money caring for a white woman's child, while her son learns a trade and her daughter is sent away for school—June expresses her rage toward Serena: “What is wrong with you? How can you do this? You're deranged. You're ... you're ... You're fucking evil. You know that? You are a goddamn motherfucking monster! Fucking heartless, sadistic, motherfucking evil cunt! Fuck you, Serena! You are gonna burn in goddamn motherfucking hell, you crazy, evil bitch!” (“Night” 26:13-27:02). Here, audiences are reminded of June's privilege; she is able to speak with violence and intensity in a way that no Black woman, especially an enslaved woman, is allowed.

The outraged mother, like June and Jacobs, does not exist without the sexual deviant. The narrative gaps and silences are just as much a part of a slave's story as the text itself; in women's slave narratives, who she is in those gaps is as important as the outraged mother she portrays in writing. With Jacobs as the model, the gaps readers find in women's slave narratives pertain to sex: Jacobs deftly avoids detailing the majority of the sexual abuse she endured serving Dr. Flint and obscures the nature of her relations with Mr. Sands. She avoids scandalizing her story and shields the reputation of white male slaveholders. Relegated to the undertell of her story is the sexual deviant, the other representation of Black womanhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives.

The outraged mother and sexual deviant work in tandem. However, they access power in different ways: the outraged mother finds strength in community and the love she has

for her children, while the sexual deviant's authority comes from her innate sexuality and self-preservation. The two archetypes are inextricably bound; Jacobs, for example, played the sexual deviant with Sands to escape Flint's abuses, which directly resulted in her getting pregnant—twice—and becoming the outraged mother to protect her daughter from the same fate. She appeals to Sands as the purported father of her children, combining both archetypes, to compel him to buy and possibly free her children. The sexual deviant is the outraged mother's shadow because Black women were seen as primitively sexual; white people, especially women, pointed to this as a reason to deny them basic respectability and decency. White women demanded the strictest morality possible from Black women to even consider permitting them into the cult of true womanhood, while disregarding the abuses white men performed on Black women. Women's slave narratives had to be both titillating and prude to function as effective political texts.

Contemporary television series depart from slave narratives in that slave narratives are autobiographical and largely centered on an individual's experience, while television as a medium allows for narrative threads following multiple characters in depth. As a result, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Westworld* cleave the outraged mother from the sexual deviant, embodying the two archetypes in, for the former, two different characters, and for the latter, two different loops. While these series claim a sort of race-blindness that ties narratives of enslavement to women regardless of gender, it is notable that in both, the sexual deviants are only played by Black women.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the sexual deviant is Moira (played by Samira Wiley), June's best friend. In scenes pre-Gilead, Moira is an outspoken Black lesbian who works with fem-



inist organizations and actively protests the changing government. A scene from their college years shows Moira as sexually open with a woman (“Offred” 17:00-17:27). Living in Gilead, after an escape gone wrong, Moira works at Jezebels, a secret club and love hotel where Commanders go to have sex outside of the constraints of the Ceremony. Moira is forced into sex work, losing the autonomy to even choose a sexual partner; the other queer character is Emily (played by Alexis Bleidel), a white woman, who is caught having a consensual relationship with a Martha. Amy Boyle’s criticism notes that “while the series makes a strong attempt to explore the discrimination experienced by LGBT+ persons, despite having a racially diverse cast it has underexplored black histories of sexual and domestic slavery and the forced separation of families” (863). Moira, then—as the Black queer woman—has survival sex, or forced sex work, rather than consensual sex or sex work as a chosen profession, engaging in self-preservation until June finds her. June lectures Moira on the importance of escaping, prompting Moira’s movement in the season finale that leads to her triumph—reunion with June’s husband, Luke, in Canada. Moira’s escape, the series suggests, would have been impossible without June, the outraged mother of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, insisting that Moira “keep [her] fucking shit together” (“The Bridge” 32:00-32:03) and flee. Again, the outraged mother and the sexual deviant are linked, but the showrunners made a conscious choice to cast the outraged mother as a white woman and the sexual deviant as a Black woman—and to have the outraged mother condescend to the sexual deviant to propel her narrative movement.

*Westworld* is an intriguing case because, like 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives, a Black woman is both the outraged mother and the sexual deviant: Maeve (played by Thandie Newton).

However, as a Host, Maeve is cast as different roles herself; while her body plays both roles, they are separate identities. In *Westworld's* present moment, Maeve works as a madam in the Mariposa, Sweetwater's saloon. In a previous "build," or assigned role, she was a mother living on the frontier with her daughter, there to alternately live a peaceful homesteader's life and be attacked by the Ghost Nation, the theme park *Westworld's* stereotyped indigenous peoples. As a result, Maeve "blurs the binary of the normal virginal and passive woman and sexually powerful deviant" (Erwin 135). Memories of that build resurface in Maeve's mind due to changed code, giving her the impulses of an outraged mother that ultimately prompt her to choose looking for her former daughter in the park over escaping to the real world. Her drive until the final minutes of season one's last episode, however, is to escape, which she does through sexual deviancy. Maeve has to repeatedly die and go to the park's lab to work on her plan, which she does through sex: a guest chokes her to death, or she and Hector self-immolate during intercourse. She is often stabbed in the abdomen; the knife is recognized by Carol Erwin as phallic imagery, and "Maeve's experiences of violence at the Man in Black's hands [when she witnesses her daughter's death] are much more explicitly visual" (Erwin 137) than his assault on Dolores, which remains off-camera. Maeve is Dolores's foil; in parallel shots, Dolores wakes up in bed with a white nightgown and blonde hair carefully draped around her head ("The Original" 3:11; "Chestnut" 1:53; "The Stray" 4:30) while Maeve wakes up in a black nightgown, her black curls framing her face ("The Adversary" 1:50). Maeve remembers being an outraged mother, but like Jacobs, she cannot explicitly play both roles at the same time. Instead, her escape plan must be engineered when she, like Moira, is performing sex work.

In appropriating 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives for a contemporary plot, the casting decisions are telling. If race does not play a role in Gilead or Westworld's park—if, as Maeve says to her clients, “this is the new world, and in this world, you can be whoever the fuck you want” (“Chestnut” 17:30-17:36)—why are Black women relegated to roles that force them to perform sex work? June can be an outraged mother searching for her daughter and Dolores can be an articulate hero rising as a self-made woman, but Moira and Maeve operate in roles in which they are physically exposed and lack agency. Unlike their white counterparts, they cannot choose their sexual partners (Maeve may appear to choose, especially with Hector, but she is bound by a strict new loop scripting her entire escape attempt). What does it mean for contemporary audiences that they are told race is irrelevant to these narratives while Black women are relegated to sex work to have a place in these stories? Archetypes like the articulate hero and the outraged mother, once represented by strong Black individuals, are now denied to Black female characters in spite of their generic origins.

As *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Westworld* employ archetypes from 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives, they also embrace its formulaic plot constructions. In some ways, this is unsurprising; what else would a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience expect from their enslaved protagonist but a continuous move towards escape? But when these visual narratives are placed in conversation with their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, the parallels that emerge move beyond the universal drive for free will and are instead thinly-veiled reproductions of the American enslaved experience, once again appropriated by a white female protagonist.

A consistent feature of slave narratives is the experience of

repeated trauma. Early in Douglass's narrative, for example, he describes a formative experience from his childhood:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [Mr. Plummer] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. (14-15)

Douglass's readers are drawn first to the detailed description of his aunt's beating; this is no punishment but, instead, a sustained act of violence by a sadistic overseer who took pleasure in it. While Douglass is clear in his characterization of his aunt as a "victim," readers see how victimized he, too, is by this act. He remembers this moment for the rest of his life, and the suggestion that it was only "the first time" signals to readers that these traumas will repeat for the remainder of his time as an enslaved person.

In *Westworld*, violence is visited on Black bodies repeatedly. During the many attempted robberies of the Mariposa Saloon, the town's Black Deputy Foss (played by Demetrius

Grosse) is shot and killed execution-style, no matter the variation. In Maeve's flashbacks to her pre-Mariposa life, viewers continually see her and her daughter in life-threatening situations. The repeated image viewers have of them is one where they are huddled together against a wall watching as the Man in Black advances on them knife or gun in hand. If that flashback death is never fully realized for Maeve, audiences do see her die repeatedly on-screen only to awaken in the park's labs, where her Black body is subject to torturous treatment and is on full display for viewers. *Westworld's* white female protagonist—and articulate hero—is treated differently. Dolores, too, is subjected to repeated trauma. In the first episode, she is beaten and dragged into her barn to be raped by the Man in Black. Viewers soon learn that this scene is a typical occurrence for Dolores: she often returns home to find her parents killed and then is forced to watch her love interest Teddy die as the perpetrators complete their night by raping her. This realization of Dolores's collective trauma and the possibility of more than 30 years of nightly sexual assaults is not unlike the one shared by Douglass and his haunting childhood experiences. However, it is important to note that Dolores's assaults happen off-screen. Unlike Douglass's accounts or the repeated deaths of Deputy Foss and Maeve, audiences do not see her white body torn apart like her counterparts' Black bodies.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, white and Black bodies are repeatedly subject to torture and disfigurement. Early in the first episode, Janine Lindo (played by Madeline Brewer) loses an eye for talking back to Aunt Lydia upon her arrival to the Red Center. In the sixth episode, disfigured handmaids like Janine are removed from a celebration of their service because Serena Joy Waterford (played by Yvonne Strahovski) does not want any "bruised apples" to mar the curated image

she has crafted for a Mexican trade delegation (“A Woman’s Place” 28:00-28:03). The parallels to similar displays white Southern slaveholders would create for their Northern visitors are clear.

Like her contemporary and 19<sup>th</sup> century peers, June endures physical harm as an enslaved person. Viewers see through flashback the savage beating she takes as she attempts to escape with Hannah, and the sensory assault when the red tag is applied to her left ear, marking her as a handmaid in service to Gilead. When June displeases Serena, the Commander’s wife often assaults her. After her failed escape attempt with Moira, June is returned to the Red Center and laid face down on a table while Aunt Elizabeth whips the soles of her feet. Audiences do not see directly the outcome of this beating; instead, they imagine the results from the bloody bandages that cover her feet. Despite these attacks, June bears no lasting physical reminders of her beatings. Like Dolores, her white body remains unmarked. In contrast, Ofglen (played by Tattiawna Jones)—a model handmaid throughout the season—questions one of Aunt Lydia’s directives in the final episode and a guardian breaks her jaw and knocks out several of her teeth, a permanent disfigurement. Her body, like Maeve’s and Douglass’s aunt’s, is one on which violence is both enacted and permanently seen.

After a period of repeated trauma that indoctrinates readers into the experience of enslaved persons, slave narratives often feature failed attempts at the exercise of agency (often in the form of escape) followed by despair and the eventual transformation into a heroic figure. In Douglass’s narrative, his fight with Covey leads to a desire to escape, which he initially tries with a group of men using forged passes written by his own hand. This plan fails and Douglass is jailed for some

time, before he has the good fortune to be returned to Baltimore. Once there, he learns a trade and hires out his own time, passing back to his enslaver his entire wages, “solely because [his enslaver] had the power to compel [him] to give it up” (65). By then, both Douglass and his readers understood that he is a model of self-reliance in every way but one.

For Jacobs, her time imprisoned in her grandmother’s garret is marked by a standing cruelty: the nearness of her children and her inability to interact with them. Forced to be both an absent mother and reminded of her absence every day, Jacobs attempts to work behind the scenes to secure her children’s freedom. She recognizes, as always, that her children will be caught “between two fires; between [her] old master and their new master” (114), but chooses the lesser evil and consents to her daughter relocating to New York by way of Washington to serve as a nurse to her “free-born sister” (114). Jacobs writes, “O, how it tried my heart to send her away, so young, alone, among strangers! Without a mother’s love to shelter her from the storms of life; almost without the memory of a mother!” (114). But she did send her, exercising the little agency she had to better ensure her daughter’s safety.

As Dolores reaches the end of her story, she, too, finds herself manipulated by her enslavers. After failing to physically defeat the Man in Black and dying in another lover’s arms to satisfy Ford’s introduction to his new park narrative, Dolores is returned to the lab room where viewers have often seen her being questioned Bernard (played by Jeffrey Wright). Dolores and the viewers learn in flashback that she was responsible for killing one of her fathers, Arnold (also played by Jeffrey Wright), more than thirty years ago, an act he programmed her to do. As the show (and Dolores) have cast Arnold as the benevolent father who sought to save the Hosts

after he learned that they were conscious (and could therefore remember and feel any actions the Guests visited upon them), this revelation is devastating to Dolores even as Ford reminds her (and the viewers) that the act was not of her own volition. Arnold forced her to do it. This moment is then followed by another bit of clever cinematic (and narrative) theater: viewers see through flashback again that Dolores has not been meeting with Bernard in this space, all those times. She was instead only speaking with herself, having the kinds of internal debate and dialogue readers see in the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs. Viewers are subjected to a scene with two Doloreses: one in her traditional blue dress; the other in her Pariah pants complete with the Man in Black's stab wound. In their final conversation with each other, the two remark, "And now I finally understand what you were trying to tell me. The thing you've wanted since that very first day. To confront after this long and vivid nightmare myself and who I must become" ("The Bicameral Mind" 1:20:45-1:21:32). Like Douglass, Dolores recognizes her agency and becomes an autonomous being capable of independent action.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, June's realization of her agency relies on work done by Moira. But her friend's initial complacency threatens to derail June's own work at resistance and rebellion in Gilead. This leads to one of two scenes in the first season where a white woman lectures a woman of color about her enslaved position, optics that look increasingly problematic as the season works towards its conclusion.<sup>2</sup> After returning to Jezebel's with Waterford, June attempts to

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2 The first occurs earlier, in the episode "A Woman's Place," when June has a moment alone with the female ambassador of Mexico and berates her for not doing anything about June's enslaved position. It's telling that this critique isn't directly levied against any of the white men and women of Gilead by June in this season.



retrieve a package for the resistance but is surprised by her commander with Moira in their hotel room. When he leaves them to take a shower, June asks for her friend's help, but Moira refuses, reminding June that she is "a prisoner and a whore" ("The Bridge" 30:22-30:24). After Moira tells June to "just go home and do what they say," June calls her friend a "coward" and "liar" for not honoring their "pinky [swear]" to find Hannah. She then goes on to say, "Do not let them grind you down. You keep your fucking shit together. You fight!" Moira replies, "I was doing all right until I saw you again," and then leaves the room (30:30-32:15). Despite June's call for Moira to "fight," viewers see June spiral down from this moment forward, seemingly giving up on her work for both the resistance and to save her daughter. This depression is lifted quickly, though, by the receipt of the resistance's package and a note from Moira, indicating she was responsible for procuring it for her. The note's first line—"Praised be, bitch" ("The Bridge" 47:22)—both reaffirms Moira's commitment to June and to her own life; it also provides June with the will to continue and the agency she needs to survive in this world as woman free in spirit if not in body. That this moment comes as a direct result of the actions of a Black woman and that this scene is immediately followed by Moira's escape from Jezebel's (and the clear suggestion that she needed to kill in order for that to happen) should not be overlooked.

For the white women in these series, the actions of their inaugural seasons culminate in a moment of rebellion. Dolores's rebellion is explicit and outwardly violent, building climactically with *Westworld's* swelling score and careful pacing. The tension begins with a tracking shot following the Hosts' creator, Dr. Ford, through the party in honor of his new narrative—and his retirement ("The Bicameral Mind" 1:23:47). The party's rustic setting and opulence, with Hosts

servicing the guests, is reminiscent of life on a wealthy Southern plantation. Ford takes the stage to give his final speech; after explaining his childhood love of stories, he says, “I always thought I could play some small part in that grand tradition. And for my pains ... I got this. A prison of our own sins” (1:25:33-1:25:47). Ford recognizes his role in *Westworld* as an institution, a parallel to the institution of slavery, but he uses Dolores’s moment of rebellion to absolve himself. *Westworld* excuses the sin of the creator because he provides Dolores with the choice to rebel against the world he created—the world in which she was raped, killed, and otherwise brutalized for years. He explains his perception of events: “It begins in a time of war with a villain named Wyatt ... and a killing. This time by choice” (1:27:48-1:28:02). Dolores re-emerges in her blue dress—the power of the articulate hero, before tied to her ability to masquerade in masculinity, becomes a part of her. She moves first to Teddy, wrapping her arms around him. The knowledge that Dolores is Wyatt, the killer he has been pursuing alongside the Man in Black, devastates Teddy, yet the tears in his eyes contrast the affection he reveals, leaning into her embrace: “It’s gonna be all right, Teddy. I understand now. This world doesn’t belong to them. It belongs to us” (1:28:12-1:28:24). Dolores finally understands and throws off the shackles of her enslavement. To do so, she must execute her creator. She steps onto the stage behind him—no longer beneath Ford—raises her gun to the back of his head, and fires with an expression that shifts from furious to confident (1:29:29). The decommissioned Hosts stored in “livestock,” or cold storage, have been released and open fire on the Man in Black and other partygoers (1:29:39). Dolores is leading a rebellion, and the season ends with her triumphant. The series breaks from the slave narrative tradition to emulate 19<sup>th</sup> century slave rebellions; however, those rebellions historically ended with the leaders

and their fellow slaves captured and brutalized. Nolan and Joy appropriate this historical legacy but use Dolores's whiteness as a shield to ensure her heroism.

June's finale in season one of *The Handmaid's Tale* is also a moment of rebellion, though with less violence. Instead of a party, June and her fellow Handmaids arrive to a Salvaging—an event during which Handmaids execute someone—and learn they are to stone Janine for endangering a child's life ("Night" 45:12). Aunt Lydia, who has always liked Janine, explains that they have no choice but to kill her: "I know how difficult this is, girls. I do. But God gives us blessings and He gives us challenges. The price of His love is sometimes high" (45:38-45:54). June's shopping partner and a woman of color—Jones's Ofglen—steps forward and speaks out against the stoning: "Guys, this is insane" (46:33-46:44). In response, a Guardian slams the butt of his rifle into her face (46:44); a slow-motion shot shows phlegmy blood and broken teeth flying out of her mouth as she collapses to the ground and is dragged away (46:47-47:09). Aunt Lydia insists again that they kill Janine, and June is next to step forward (47:48). The Guardian moves to assault her for disobeying, but Aunt Lydia—unlike for Ofglen—intervenes (48:18). June holds out her arm and drops the stone, saying, "I'm sorry, Aunt Lydia" (48:48-48:49). The other Handmaids follow. Outraged, Aunt Lydia dismisses the girls; June leads the Handmaids back, with two other white women directly behind her (51:26). Over the slow-motion shots of the Handmaids returning home, Nina Simone's "Feeling Good" plays. June has fully co-opted this moment of rebellion from Ofglen, who faced the physical consequences. Boyle notes that "from the novel [Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*] to the television series, the acts of feminist resistance have migrated from private to public feminisms" (853), and the comparison

holds true in comparing a novel like Jacobs's *Incidents* to the series. Not only is June's resistance public; it is also a point of pride for her. At first, June says, "We said no. We refused to do our duty. To kill Janine" ("Night" 53:36-53:43). Her diction suggests that the Handmaids are a collective body working for change. She goes on to say, however, "I tried to make things better for Hannah. Change the world, even just a little bit" (54:17-54:26). By shifting pronouns from "we" to "I," June claims this rebellion as her own.

The Black women in these season finales play significantly different roles. In *Westworld*, Maeve's narrative movement through the entire season has been to follow a new loop and try to escape. She fights her way through the Mesa—Westworld's headquarters—and makes it to the train to the real world. During Ford's speech and Dolores's rise to action, Maeve sits on the train. After Ford describes the park as "a prison of our own sins," he says, "But then I realized someone was paying attention, someone who could change. So I began to compose a new story for them. It begins with the birth of a new people ... and the choices they will have to make" ("The Bicameral Mind" 1:26:05-1:26:25). The scene cuts from the party to the train, which is about to depart. Maeve stares at a mother and daughter sitting across from her and finally, for the first time in the series, breaks from her programming: she runs off the train to look for her daughter (1:26:38). As soon as it departs, the lights turn off and the PA system distorts, indicating Maeve's newfound risks. Unlike 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives, in which escape and the outraged mother archetype are inextricable, Nolan and Joy chose to deprive Maeve of the opportunity to escape so that she can search for her child from another life, a child who cannot remember her. Maeve, in her impulsive decision, does not recognize that, as she is now, she is not a mother. Instead of refining her iden-

tity, the series finale conflates archetypes and further blurs Maeve's reality.

Moira, too, follows an arc that deals with themes of escape and family. She crosses a barren winter landscape to find a farmhouse; when she looks in the barn, she finds a car with Ontario plates that tells her she has finally made it to freedom ("Night" 21:15). The show does not indulge in the details of her escape, instead showing only her initial theft of a Commander's car, then jumping to this scene in Canada. Miller uses Moira's escape as an opportunity to critique the United States' refugee policies. Moira is brought to a refugee center, where she is given a prepaid cell phone, cash, an ID card, a medical insurance card, a prescription drug card, and clothing (37:59-38:47). She is unable to identify any family in Canada, so her initial entry gives her time alone with herself; the case worker gives her the option to eat more, read a book, or take a shower: "Whatever you want. It's completely up to you" (39:01-39:03). This casual comment seems like an afterthought in the scene, reminding viewers quickly that Moira is, indeed, free. Her final scene in the season comes when Luke arrives at the refugee center (52:18); he listed Moira as family and the government notified him of her arrival (52:57). The scene is more for Luke's benefit than Moira's, allowing him to have the experience of reconnecting with "family." Moira did not list Luke as family. Still, she is relieved to see him and cries in his arms (53:00).

Moira and Maeve do not experience triumph or empowerment in their closing scenes. Instead, the series seem to focus on their emotional distress, reveling in scenes of sorrow. Ultimately, both make active choices that lead to their resulting conclusions, which is positive. However, these moments feel contrived or thrown-in because there is virtually no time

spent with these characters during the deliberation that leads to these choices. Moira's escape is not seen on-screen, and while the tension between motherhood and escape were always part of Maeve's role, the choice is a split-second decision that is immediately overshadowed by a return to Dolores's confrontation for the rest of the episode. Each series' first season ends with their Black women confused and emotionally drained, but those scenes are only presented to viewers because they directly move the plot forward—not because the creators want to delve into the emotional experiences of oppressed Black women.

It might prove useful to return to the opening paragraph of this essay and consider the New Orleans visitors who make a different choice at Highway 18. Those who turn right and follow the Mississippi soon encounter the Whitney Plantation, a newcomer to the plantation tourism trade. Opened in 2014, the Whitney takes as its mission the education of the public about “the history of slavery and its legacies” (“History of Whitney Plantation”). In lieu of paper tickets, visitors are given a lanyard with an artistic rendering of a formerly enslaved child, their name, and a direct quote of their experience while enslaved. The emphasis of this tour are the places where enslaved persons lived, worked, and were punished. The “big house” is not restored to its previous state; it merely serves as a referent for the rest of the plantation. And if the magnificent oaks of Oak Alley form a monument to that place, then the Whitney has instead its own memorials, including three different sites that honor the lives of Black men and women. “The Wall of Honor,” for example, is “dedicated to all the people who were enslaved on the Whitney Plantation. [Their] names and the information related to them (origin, age, skills)... [are] engraved on granite slabs” (“The

Wall of Honor”). Another memorial honors all the enslaved persons of Louisiana; others focus on enslaved children.

It is clear that visitors to these plantations would have radically different experiences, and that a seemingly benign navigational choice can have profound ramifications. Similar choices can be had in one’s living room and a navigation to *Westworld* or *The Handmaid’s Tale* would present viewers with narratives of enslaved persons filtered through the perspective of white women. However, those looking for the escapism of alternative Americas could make the “right” turn and find instead shows like HBO’s *Watchmen* (2019) and *Lovecraft Country* (2020), which both discuss the continuing impacts of slavery and racial injustice *and* do so with Black protagonists in central roles. *Watchmen* opens with the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, an event that remains absent from most Americans’ historical memory. Viewers’ horror over this event—and understanding that it is not relegated to an alternate American history—gives way to further shock as the show reveals that *Watchmen*’s America has also taken responsibility for this act and all acts of racial injustice by offering a formal apology and reparations to Black Americans. Viewers see, though, that more history remains to be written and more justice to be served, all of which can happen through the strong Black female protagonist Angela Abar (played by Regina King).

*Lovecraft Country*—airing as this article is being written—continues this work. Set in the segregated and civil rights era of the 1950s, the show tackles the prejudice and violence of that time as it also works within the horror genre. In the first episode, *Lovecraft Country* follows three characters as they make their way from Chicago to Massachusetts, a journey that viewers learn is fraught with danger for Black travelers.

In one scene, for example, they stop to eat at a diner in a small (Northern) town, only to find themselves a short time later fleeing from armed white residents who try to kill them for daring to stop. Leti Lewis (played by Jurnee Smollett) is the first to sound the warning as she runs through the diner, rousing her companions, and driving the car to ensure their escape. The next evening, the trio find themselves in worse circumstances, face down in the woods, about to be murdered by the police of two counties for failing to leave before sundown. At that moment, creatures emerge from the woods to disrupt that plan and Leti finds herself once again running for her life to their car to bring them to safety. As viewers are left to contemplate the differences between the monsters and the racists (or the lack thereof), they do not have to worry about the appropriation of this moment of racial injustice. They can, instead, see a strong Black woman embracing the heroic roles established by Douglass and Jacobs.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Westworld*, *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* do not occupy genres like realistic or historical fiction, proving that inventive storylines and explorations of trauma can deal explicitly with race and racism. And television series are not inherently problematic for leaning on the generic conventions of slave narratives; in fact, it is particularly telling of the current political and cultural climate that slave narratives resonate with contemporary audiences. The question of appropriation versus misappropriation is one of representation; the choice showrunners like Bruce Miller, Jonathan Nolan, and Lisa Joy are making is not whether to reference slave narratives, but whether to permit Black individuals to play these characters and tell these stories—their stories. Black women need not be relegated to roles placing them in service to white women; like a visit to Oak Alley, any parallels drawn between these series and slave plantation



life are up to viewers. Restoring the legacy of being Black in America to Black people is overdue, and series like *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* indicate that contemporary visual narratives are finally ready to catch up.

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