REWARDING EXPECTED SHIFTS:
A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE OSCAR-WINNING PERFORMANCES OF
MO’NIQUE AND LUPITA NYONG’O IN “PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL
PUSH BY SAPPHIRE” AND “12 YEARS A SLAVE”

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies
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in

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by

Katreena Elizabeth Ann Alder

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Department of Communication Studies
Abstract

of

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This thesis examined performances of the real life phenomenon of shifting and how it was performed by black female actors Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o in the Oscar-winning films Precious: Based on the novel push by Sapphire (2009) and 12 Years a Slave (2013). A semiotic analysis paired with a textual analysis was applied to the fictional filmic texts in order to determine what cinematic elements were present in these filmic performances of shifting. bell hooks’ oppositional gaze along with Jacqueline Bobo’s explanation of black women as cultural readers was used as the theoretical framework for this thesis and helped determine what implications are present when
shifting is performed by Oscar-winning black female actors in fictional films. The analysis uncovered different filmic strategies used to perform shifting such as camera position and distance and a discussion on the findings, limitations, and future research followed.

__________________________, Committee Chair
Michele Foss-Snowden, Ph.D.

__________________________
Date
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Chapter 1

Introduction

On March 2, 2014, Lupita Nyong’o won the Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for her performance in *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Her win is notable because it is only the seventh time in the 88-year history of the Academy Awards (also called the Oscars) that a black female actor has won the award (and five of the seven were awarded after 2001). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is an “honorary membership organization” made up of more than 6000 members (Academy History Archive, digitalcollections.oscars.org, n.d.). The Academy is responsible for the nominating, voting for, and awarding of the Oscars. Edward Mapp (2008) calls the history between the Academy and African-Americans “occasionally contentious, sometimes conciliatory, and always controversial” (pg. xi), because even though African Americans have been involved in the film industry since its beginning and have not had the easiest course.

The earliest image of a black character in an American film was in 1903 and the character was Uncle Tom in the film *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Bogle, 2001). Although the character was black, the actor playing the character was not (Bogle, 2001; Mapp, 2008). During the time of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it was normal to see white actors dressed in blackface to portray black characters. Black actors were used as extras, but were not recognized in named roles until years later (Bogle, 2001). It was not until 1939, a decade after the birth of the Academy Awards, that Hattie McDaniel, a black woman, was nominated for an academy award. McDaniel’s Oscar nomination and subsequent win for
her portrayal of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was the first Oscar win for a black person in Oscar history.

**The Significance of Winning an Oscar**

To understand the significance of winning an Oscar it is important to first understand The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy Awards (Oscars). This section provides a brief overview of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Academy Awards (Oscars), and the history and background on the research location of black female Academy Award winning actors and the films that produced those winning roles.

**The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.** The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences came to be on May 4th, 1927 and started as a response to the unionization of the movie industry’s technical staff. During this early time in the organization’s history, the Academy was dealing with the process of resolving a labor dispute that was on the cusp of exploding in the film industry (Osborne, 1999). Louis B. Mayer, co-founder of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and two of his contemporaries invited 36 people to a banquet and presented their idea to begin an organization known as the International Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In his 2012 article, Leon Lewis said, “The word ‘International’ was soon dropped, and the state of California granted a charter giving it nonprofit status as a legal corporation in May 1927, with the distinguished actor Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., as its first president” (Academy Awards, para. 1). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) was known as an honorary organization and obtaining membership required an invitation or Oscar
nomination (Atkinson, 2001). After AMPAS was created, one of their earliest tasks was the forming of the Awards of Merit committee, who presented to the board an idea for giving awards to film industry people across 12 categories. The board liked the idea, and soon they created a ceremony to recognize the award recipients; this ceremony is known as the Academy Awards.

**The Academy Awards.** The Academy Awards are an important component of American entertainment and history. The ceremony, later also known as the Oscars¹, was created as an opportunity for those in the movie industry to recognize what they considered extraordinary achievements in film and production. The first Academy Awards ceremony was held on May 16th, 1929 in the Blossom Room of the Roosevelt Hotel; the winners recognized that night had received the news three months prior to the actual ceremony. Beginning with the second ceremony in 1930, the Academy did not reveal the winners until the evening of the ceremony; however, they did provide the newspapers with an advanced list of winners so the results could be published. According to Oscars.org, “this continued until 1940 when the Los Angeles Times published the winners in its evening edition-readily available to arriving guests. That prompted the sealed-envelope system in use today” (Academy Story, 2015).

Winning an Academy Award is among the highest of honors an actor in Hollywood can receive and Edward Mapp (2008) calls the Oscar “a metaphor for

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¹ The nickname has been used officially since 1939 and when used it is known that it is referring to the Academy Award of Merit. The name Oscar remains a common moniker for the Academy Award of Merit and both terms are used interchangeably. The belief is that an Academy librarian, Margaret Herrick, said that the statue looked like her Uncle Charlie (Oscar Statuette, 2015).
success” (p. ix). Academy Awards, or Oscars, are awarded to honor work released in the previous year and when referenced the year of the release is what is often referenced. The actual award is a gold statuette that was designed to “depict continuing progress in the industry and that was both militant and dynamic” (Mapp, 2008, p. ix). Designed by Cedric Gibbons, it was not until sculptor George Stanley rendered that design into a statue that the Oscar Statuette was born. The award is officially known as The Academy Award of Merit but is more commonly called an Oscar. The statuette has changed sizes over the years but it has always kept its original design (Oscar Statuette, 2015).

The Oscars and Black Actors and Actresses. In 1940, Hattie McDaniel became the first black person, male or female, to be nominated for an Oscar; on February 29th, 1940, she won the Oscar and made history. In the 87-year history of the Academy Awards, only 14 black male and female actors have won an Oscar. Seven black male actors have been recognized, including Sidney Poitier (1963), Louis Gossett Jr. (1982), Denzel Washington (1989, 2001), Cuba Gooding Jr. (1996), Jamie Foxx (2004), Morgan Freeman (2004), and Forest Whitaker (2006). Seven black female actors have won an Oscar, including Hattie McDaniel (1939), Whoopi Goldberg (1990), Halle Berry (2001), Jennifer Hudson (2006), Mo’Nique (2009), Octavia Spencer (2011), and the most recent, Lupita Nyong’o (2014). There has been criticism that black actors, male or female, who have won Oscars all won for roles that were highly stereotypical or contained very stereotypical depictions (Bogle, 2001; Harris-Perry, 2011; Mapp, 2008; Mask, 2009) that have existed since Hattie McDaniel and persist today. The All of these black actors have
a place in the history of Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy Awards, but the female actors will be the specific focus of the discussion to follow.

**Oscar-Winning Black Female Actors: A win is a win.**

This next section will provide background information on the only, as of 2015, seven black female actors to win an Oscar. There has been literature that discusses the often-stereotypical nature of these Oscar-winning film roles (Bogle, 2001; Bowdre & C.B., 2007; Mapp, 2008; Wanzo, 2006) but ultimately when a black female actor wins an Oscar it is significant. The stereotypical nature of these roles does not take away the victory of recognition, but they are still racially, stereotypical depictions of black women. Mapp (2008) states, “Talent rather than race will have prevailed when the presence of African American nominees is no longer newsworthy” (p. xvi). Currently, when a black actor wins an Oscar it is news and, stereotypical or not, a win is a win. The next section will introduce the seven black female actors who have won Oscars and provide a little background on each person.

**Hattie McDaniel.** On February 29th, 1940, Hattie McDaniel won the Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role² for her portrayal of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). With this win, Hattie McDaniel made history as the first black actor in Hollywood, male or female, to win an Academy Award. McDaniel’s win was praised in the black community for the moment in history it represented, but McDaniel was also criticized for portraying yet another damaging representation of a black person on screen.

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² This award is also just called “Actress in a Supporting Role” but when announced at the ceremony it uses the full moniker. In this thesis each mention of this award will state the award’s title in its entirety.
(Regester, 2010). McDaniel’s win was especially extraordinary because she was not even allowed to sit with her *Gone with the wind* co-stars but taken to sit at a small table against the wall; she was only allowed into the ceremony because director David Selznick called in a favor to allow her into the segregated Cocoanut Grove nightclub (Abramovitch, 2015). McDaniel’s historic win would stand as the only Oscar victory for a black female actor until 1991.

**Whoopi Goldberg.** On March 25, 1991, 51 years after Hattie McDaniel’s historical win for her portrayal of Mammy, Whoopi Goldberg became the second black female actor to win the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role. Born Caryne Elaine Johnson on November 15th, 1955 in New York City, Whoopi Goldberg’s acting career began when she was a child. As an adult, her career included performing original one-woman comedic stage shows that eventually landed her on Broadway. After performing on Broadway for several years and even winning a Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album in 1985, Goldberg moved into film acting. She starred in Steven Spielberg’s big screen adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1985), and her portrayal of Celie Harris Johnson in the film earned her a 1986 Oscar nomination for Best Actress in Leading Role, a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress, and helped to launch her film career in Hollywood (Whoopi Goldberg, 2015). Goldberg’s Oscar win for her portrayal of Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost* (1990) solidified her position among the Hollywood elite.
**Halle Berry.** On March 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2002, Halle Berry became the first black female actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role\textsuperscript{3} for her portrayal of Leticia Musgrove in *Monster’s Ball* (2001). Born in Cleveland, Ohio on August 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1966, Halle Berry began her journey to Hollywood as a beauty pageant contest and model. After winning first runner-up in the 1985 Miss U.S.A. competition, Berry began modeling and in the late 1980s she started an acting career. Prior to her Oscar-winning performance, she also found success starring in and helping to produce HBO’s *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999), which earned Berry a Golden Globe and a Primetime Emmy Award (Halle Berry, 2015). Berry’s historic Best Actress Oscar win still stands as the only Best Actress in a Leading Role honor awarded to a black female actor. She has since starred in more films and produced for television.

**Jennifer Hudson.** On February 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2007, Jennifer Hudson became the third black female actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role, and fourth black female actor overall to win an acting Oscar, for her portrayal of Effie White in *Dreamgirls* (2006). Hailing from Chicago, Illinois, the multi-talented singer and actress was born on September 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1982 (Jennifer Hudson, 2015). Hudson’s ascent to the top of the acting world was filled with challenges and triumphs; she appeared on the national scene in 2004 as a contestant on Fox Broadcasting Company’s well-known talent program, *American Idol* (2002). Although she did not win the televised talent contest, she developed a fan base that followed her into her acting career and beyond her Oscar

\textsuperscript{3} Like the aforementioned Supporting Actress in a Supporting Role award, this award is also known as “Actress in a Leading Role” but when announced it is called “Best Actress in a Leading Role.” In this thesis, each mention of this award will use the title in its entirety.
success. Her portrayal of Effie also won her a Golden Globe Award, a Screen Actors Guild Award, a British Academy of Film and Television Arts Award (BAFTA), and a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image Award (Jennifer, 2015). Dreamgirls (2006) was Hudson’s debut film role, and she has since gone on to star in several films and she has released multiple musical albums.

Mo’Nique. On March 7, 2010, Mo’Nique became the fourth black female actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for portrayal of Mary Lee Johnston in Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire (2009). Born on December 11, 1967 in Maryland, Mo’Nique Imes started her career in entertainment on the comedy stage. As a stand-up comic, Mo’Nique performed on programs and films such as Showtime at the Apollo, HBO’s Def Comedy Jam, and The Queens of Comedy. Mo’Nique’s career as an actor started when she starred as Nikki Parker on now-defunct network UPN’s hit sitcom The Parkers (1999). Like Whoopi Goldberg before her, Mo’Nique’s acting career started in comedy, but her Hollywood peers only recognized her when she transitioned into dramatic roles. For her portrayal of Mary Lee Johnston, Mo’Nique won a Golden Globe Award, a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Award, a Critics’ Choice Award, a British Academy of Film and Television Arts Award (BAFTA), and a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image Award (Biography, 2015). Since Mo’Nique’s Academy Award-Winning portrayal of Mary Lee Johnston, she hosted her own syndicated radio and talk shows. Recently, Mo’Nique has come out to say that she found out she was blackballed in the industry. According to Mo’Nique (2015), “I got a phone call from Lee Daniels maybe six or seven months ago.
And he said to me, ‘Mo'Nique, you've been blackballed.’ And I said, ‘I've been blackballed? Why have I been blackballed?’ And he said, ‘Because you didn't play the game’” (Abramovitch, 2015). In addition to her proclamation that she was blackballed, she recently starred in Home Box Office’s (HBO) biographical film, Bessie (2015), based on the life of the late Bessie Smith.

Octavia Spencer. On February 26th, 2012, Octavia Spencer became the fifth black female actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role. Spencer won for her portrayal of Minny in the film adaptation of Kathryn Sockett’s The Help (2011). Born in Montgomery, Alabama, Octavia Spencer began her work in film in 1994 helping to cast films; her first film appearance came in 1996’s A Time to Kill, a film adapted from John Grisham’s novel. After her debut in A Time to Kill (1996) Spencer decided to move to Los Angeles, California and pursue acting full-time (Octavia Spencer, 2015). She starred in several films and television programs before her Academy-Award winning turn as Minny. Her portrayal of Minny garnered her a Golden Globe Award, a British Academy of Film and Television Arts Award (BAFTA), A Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Award, and a Broadcast Film Critics’ Choice Award (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

Since her Oscar victory Spencer has continued to work in Hollywood on film and television programs.

Lupita Nyong’o. On March 2nd, 2014, Lupita Nyong’o became the sixth black female actor in history to win the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role and only the seventh black female actor to be awarded an Oscar. Nyong’o won for her portrayal of Patsey in Steve McQueen’s film adaptation of 12 Years a Slave (2013). The
film, based on the book by Solomon Northrup, launched the relatively unknown Nyong’o to center stage. Born in Mexico City, Mexico, Nyong’o (the daughter of exiled Kenyan parents) grew up in Mexico for a time before returning to Kenya and then moving to the United States. Nyong’o graduated with a degree in film from Hampshire College in 2003. Nyong’o worked behind the camera for a time before eventually earning her Master of Arts degree from the Yale School of Drama in 2012 (Lupita Nyong’o, 2015). After graduating from Yale, Nyong’o sent in an audition tape for 12 Years a Slave (2013) and was chosen to play Patsey. Her performance won her several awards including a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Award and a Critics’ Choice Award (Morris, 2014). Since her win, Nyong’o has been cast in upcoming films and continues to work in Hollywood.

The present study will focus on the Oscar-winning performances of Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o in their films Precious (2009) and 12 Years a Slave (2013).

**Theoretical Framework**

This section will cover the theoretical framework relevant to this thesis and present the research questions to be covered in this study. The areas covered in this section include Black women as cultural readers and bell hooks’ notion of the oppositional gaze and how these ideas will be applied to the present study. The final portion of this section will present the research questions and explain how the present research will be situated within the on-going conversation about black women and their experiences in America.

**Black Women as Cultural Readers.** Jacqueline Bobo (1995) asserts that “Black women are well aware of their heritage of reprehensible treatment in cultural works, and
they bring an oppositional stance to their interaction with mainstream media. They have not simply reacted but also worked to counteract the effects of the images” (p. 27). Black women as cultural readers are women who have “created views of themselves for themselves as audience” or women who have viewed works of or about themselves and as audiences “control their reception of certain cultural works and to employ them toward a different end” (pp. 27-29). Black women as cultural readers can take a filmic text written about them by someone who is not a black female and determine how much of that text they see as negative representations and how much they see as positive or realistic representations.

The notion of black women as cultural readers has been applied in the literature commonly to black women reading and negotiating texts presented by other black women (Bobo, 1995; Stewart, 2003). Many of the studies regarding black women and film and television depictions look for the stereotypical or negative depictions of black women (Bobo, 1995). Bobo (1995) states “Scholarship by black women should not limit itself to a hunt for negative imagery. This can be self-defeating in that is diminishes any hope for change” (p. 35). Bobo’s position on scholarship focusing on only the negative is important to consider because there is enough text out there to provide an opportunity to look for more types of imagery. If black female cultural readers only negotiate a text for negative imagery a certain power can exist in the language and concepts used to describe stereotypical depictions of black female characters and the black female actors who perform these roles. These descriptions “become cardboard characters rather than multidimensional people with actual lives, with little separation between the
representation and the actual persons” (Bobo, 1995, p. 36). Consistently searching for these stereotypical depictions and validating their existence can limit the scholarship of black female readers and this thesis looks to take an alternative approach. Choosing to navigate a text for what is not obvious is to take an alternative or oppositional approach to the text.

The Oppositional Gaze. In bell hooks’ 1992 publication *Black Looks: race and representation*, she introduced concept of the oppositional gaze. hooks reflected that when she learned in her history courses that white slave-owners “punished enslaved black people for looking,” she “wondered how this traumatic relationship to the gaze had informed black parenting and black spectatorship” (p. 115). hooks (1992) further asserts that “there is power in looking” and “the politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze” (p.115). When black people were denied their right to look and gaze freely the temptation and need to look did not go away. This control over a black person’s freedom to look and even stare created what hooks calls “the oppositional gaze” (p.116). The oppositional gaze itself is what a black person does when she/he chooses to not only openly stare but also determine for herself/himself what she/he going to see and believe. This determination for oneself is an integral component of the oppositional gaze because as hooks (1992) states, “Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency” (p.116). The concept of agency, as it relates to power, is a commonly studied area in the literature (Hegde, 1996; Hobson, 2003; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009) and has been used in
relation to anthropology, politics, communication studies, ethnic studies, and other fields of study. According to sociocultural anthropologist and linguist Laura M. Ahearn (2001), “agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”; however, Ahearn herself notes the conflicts with the basic nature of this definition because “it leaves many details unspecified” (p.112). This definition does not specify who possesses the agency or if all agency is socioculturally mediated and Ahearn (2001) asserts that there is no exact definition but when used by researchers, a definition should be clear and detailed. For the purposes of the present thesis, agency will be defined as one’s ability to act or feel as though she/he is empowered to act even in the face of hardship or oppression and directly relate to her/his position as a black person. Agency is an especially important concept to consider because it is a crucial component to the oppositional gaze as it pertains to black women and their position as cultural readers.

bell hooks (1992) argues that “power as domination reproduces itself in different locations, employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control” (p. 115). This is to say that the dominant group, or group that holds the most power, uses similar tactics to propagate their message of power. These tactics include stereotypical or distorted depictions of black people in film and television. Stereotypical depictions of black people in films are a heavily studied area in the literature (Bobo, 1998; Bogle, 2001; Collins 2000; hooks 1992; Sims, 2006; Diawara, 2012) and the conversation is ongoing. From the Uncle Tom character to Nyong’o’s Patsey, representations of blacks in films have changed as much as they have remained the same. The oppositional gaze, as it pertains to a black woman viewing filmic texts with depictions of black women, is an
opportunity to enact agency for how the black woman can negotiate the texts for meaning.

The present thesis seeks to add an additional voice to the conversation on filmic representations of black women by applying a textual analysis approach paired with semiotics as a method to negotiate and analyze scenes from two cinematic texts: Precious (2009) and 12 Years a Slave (2013). The scenes analyzed will be those that include the black female actors who have won Oscars for their filmic performances in the designated films. By applying a textual approach paired with a semiotic analysis as a method, the researcher seeks to look beyond negative or stereotypical representations of black women in film and apply an oppositional gaze (a negotiation for something more) and see what lies beneath the obviously stereotypical performances. Further, when a film is created there are several components involved including: the actors (female or male), the director, the writer, the scripts. This thesis will analyze how the aforementioned components ultimately resulted in Oscar wins for black female actors and analyze two films, to negotiate for strategies used to convey shifting on film. These strategies, or ways shifting is performed on film, can include how a part is written and how an actor, female or male, performs a part. Using the theoretical framework of bell hooks (the oppositional gaze) and Jacqueline Bobo’s explanation for the position of black women as cultural readers, the present research is guided by the following research questions:

1) What strategies do films use when depicting the real life phenomenon known as shifting?
2) In what ways, if any, is the real-life phenomenon known as shifting performed by Oscar-winning black female actors Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o in the Oscar-winning filmic texts, *Precious* (2009) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013)?

Black women live and experience life in America in such unique and different ways (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998) that an opportunity to analyze fictional filmic texts for these real-life experiences is an indispensable opportunity. According to Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts (2001), “movies—even bad ones—are important sociological and cultural documents. Like any other popular commercial art form, movies both reflect and influence public attitudes” (p. ix). In addition to transmitting pervasive ideologies films can also serve as entertainment for their audiences, but what if the opportunity to be entertained as a black female film viewer does not truly exist? This thesis seeks to understand how fictional, filmic representations of black women and the experience known as shifting can contribute to the on-going conversation of how black women in America cope and survive, especially when films can influence attitudes and perceptions.

**Films Producing Black Female Oscar Winners**

This thesis analyzes two filmic texts for the phenomenon known as shifting as performed by black female actors Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o. The filmic texts to be viewed and analyzed are *Precious: based on the novel push by Sapphire* (2009) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). However, this section will briefly review the seven filmic texts that share the distinction of being the only films in the 87-year history of the Academy Awards to produce Best Actress in a Leading Role and Best Actress in a Supporting Role
Oscars for black female actors in Hollywood. These seven filmic texts are important to highlight because not only part of the history of black actors, female or male, in Hollywood but they are also culturally relevant texts that deserve recognition for their contributions to the academy as well.

_Gone With the Wind._ Gone with the Wind (1939) premiered in Atlanta, Georgia on December 15th, 1939. The film, based on a 1936 novel of the same name, was received with wide critical and popular acclaim. During its initial run, the film made an estimated $200,276,459 at the domestic box office and with re-releases has made an estimated $401,776,459 overall (Gone With the Wind). The film was three years in the making and in its original preview, it ran for four hours and twenty minutes (Flannery, 1990). The film, told in two parts, is the story of Scarlett O’Hara and her selfish pursuit of love in the South. The first part of the film is set in the South on the brink of the Civil War; the second part of the film takes place after the South loses the war and follows O’Hara through the tragedies, triumphs, and eventual learned lessons in her life. The film, produced by David O. Selznick, starred Clark Gable, Vivian Leigh, Leslie Howard, and Hattie McDaniel as Mammy, Scarlett’s black maid and help in her home.

_Ghost._ Ghost was released on July 13th, 1990 and with a domestic, box-office total of $217,631,41.00 the film was a commercial success. As of July 2015, the film is the 127th highest grossing film of all time in the United States (All time domestic growth). _Ghost_ is the story of Sam Wheat, a man who was murdered and comes back as a ghost to protect his living girlfriend, Molly, from those who murdered him. Sam enlists the help of a psychic named Oda Mae Brown to help him reach Molly and protect her.
The film, directed by Jerry Zucker, starred Patrick Swayze as Sam, Demi Moore as Molly, and Whoopi Goldberg as Oda Mae Brown, a con woman who discovers that her psychic abilities are actually real.

**Monster’s Ball.** *Monster’s Ball* was released December 26th, 2001 and went on to gross $31,273,816 domestically in the United States with a worldwide total of $44,909,486 (Monster’s Ball), making it the 76th highest grossing movie of 2001 (2001 Domestic Gross). *Monster’s Ball* is the story of Leticia Hargrove, a poor black woman who lives in Louisiana with her son, Tyrell, and struggles to make ends meet. Her husband, Lawrence Musgrove, is on death row. The man in charge of witnessing Lawrence’s execution is Hank, a correctional officer. The story follows Leticia through the loss of her husband and son, and the eventual relationship she has with Hank. Hank, who lives with his racist father, Buck, also has a son named Sonny who is a correctional officer. Sonny commits suicide after a particularly upsetting confrontation with his father, Hank. Hank and Leticia eventually meet and bond over their mutual loss and begin a relationship. *Monster’s Ball*, directed by Marc Foster, starred Billy Bob Thornton as Hank, Heath Ledger as Sonny, Peter Boyle as Buck, Sean Combs as Lawrence, and Halle Berry as Leticia Musgrove. Berry’s win was the first (and as of 2015, the only) time a black female actor has won the Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Actress (instead of Supporting Actress) in a Leading Role, giving her win an additional level of historical significance.

**Dreamgirls.** *Dreamgirls* was released on December 25th, 2006 and went on to make $103,365,783 domestically in the United States, with a worldwide total of
$154,937,680 (Dreamgirls), making it the 19th highest grossing movie of 2006 (2006 Domestic Gross). *Dreamgirls* was based upon a 1981 Broadway musical of the same name. The story was loosely based upon famed singing groups and artists like “The Supremes, The Shirelles, and James Brown” (About the Musical). The Broadway show, directed by Michael Bennett, opened on December 20th, 1981 and ran for 1521 shows. The show was a Tony-award winning success and spawned a hit single in Jennifer Holiday’s vocal powerhouse performance of “And I’m Telling You I’m Not Going” (billboard.com, 2015). The film version of *Dreamgirls*, directed by Bill Condon, was also a success and launched Jennifer Hudson into a successful music and acting career.

Like the Broadway play, *Dreamgirls* told the story of three childhood friends, Effie, Dina, and Lorell, who dream of being a famous singing group and call themselves The Dreamettes. The three girls link up with an unscrupulous used-car salesman who begins managing them, changes their name to the Dreams, and helps them attain success. The story follows the three friends through betrayal, heartbreak, loss, success, and ultimately redemption. The film starred Jamie Foxx, Beyoncé Knowles, Anika Noni Rose and Eddie Murphy, and Jennifer Hudson as Effie White, the original lead singer of the Dreamettes. Though Jennifer Hudson made the character of Effie hers, there was definitely a sense that she was attempting to fill the very big shoes of Jennifer Holliday. According to Wloszczyna (2006) “Broadway history was made and the concept of a stage star redefined when the original Effie, Jennifer Holliday, let loose her primal roar on And I Am Telling You, a rendition that is still revered to this day.” Nonetheless, Jennifer Hudson left her mark with her portrayal.
Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire. Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire (also sometimes shortened to Precious) was released on November 20th, 2009 and went on to make $47,566,169 domestically in the United States with a worldwide total of $63,559,277 (Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire) making it the 65th highest grossing domestic movie of 2009 (2009 Domestic Gross). Precious is based on the novel Push by author Sapphire. Directed by Lee Daniels, Precious is the story of 16-year-old Claireece Precious Jones. Precious is illiterate, overweight, the mother of one son, and pregnant with another child; both her son and her unborn child resulted from her father raping her. Precious lives with her mother, Mary and when her school discovers that Precious is pregnant again, she is sent to an alternative school. Precious has grown up in a very abusive home environment but at her alternative school, she begins to open her mind to the possibilities for her future. Precious stars Gabourey Sidibe as Claireece “Precious” Jones, and Mo’Nique Imes-Jackson as Mary Lee Johnston, Precious’ abusive mother.

The Help. The Help was released on August 10th, 2011 and went on to make $169,708,112 domestically in the United States, with a worldwide total of $216,639,112 (The Help), making it the 13th highest growing domestic movie of 2011 (2011 Domestic Gross). The film is based on a 2009 novel of the same name by Kathryn Sockett and is set in the 1960s Deep South. The Help, directed by Tate Taylor, is the story of Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan, a young white woman from Jackson, Mississippi who has just returned from college. Skeeter has aspirations of being a famous writer; when she returns home

4 Lee Daniels also received an Oscar nomination for Best Director
5 Gabourey Sidibe also received an Oscar nomination for Best Actress in a Leading Role.
from college, the only job she can get in her field is as a domestic advice columnist for her home newspaper. As part of her duties, she tries to find out the best ways to help her readers clean their homes. Skeeter’s research leads her to asking “the help” (or the black maids and housekeepers in the community) for their best tips and advice. During this time, Skeeter begins to work closely with two black maids: Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. Skeeter realizes that she does not agree with the way the black maids are treated, and she grows increasingly curious about their lives. Skeeter decides that she would like to write a book that discusses the experiences and relationships the help have with their white employers. The film follows their journey as Skeeter writes about the experiences Aibileen, Minny, and other black maids have had and the impact the stories have on their town and the people who live there. The Help stars Emma Stone as Skeeter, Viola Davis as Aibileen, and Octavia Spencer as Minny. While Viola Davis was nominated as Best Actress in a Leading Role for her portrayal as Aibileen, it was Octavia Spencer who won the Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role, making her the sixth black female actor to receive the honor.

12 Years a Slave. 12 Years a Slave was released on October 18th, 2013 and went on to make $56,671,993 domestically in the United States, with a worldwide total of $187,733,202 (12 Years a slave) making it the 62nd highest grossing domestic movie of 2013 (2013 Domestic Gross). 12 Years a Slave is based on a book of the same name written by and based upon the experiences of Solomon Northup. The film tells the story of Solomon Northup, a born-free black man, husband, and father from New York who was kidnapped and sold into slavery for 12 years. The film follows Northup as he works
on plantations, deals with cruelty, meets other enslaved blacks, and strives to regain his freedom from slavery. The films starred Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup, and Lupita Nyong’o as Patsey, another enslaved black who lives and works on the plantation where Northup is taken. Lupita Nyong’o won the Best Actress in a Supporting Role Academy Award for her portrayal of Patsey, making her the seventh and most recent black female actor to be recognized with an Oscar win.

Recognition for excellence in film is important because films are among the earliest forms and representations of mass media in American culture and often leave lasting impressions. James R. Nesteby (1982) argues, “It is the nature of the film medium to create fantastic and superficial images of the peoples and cultures it treats” (p. 3). Films are created, viewed, and distributed all over the world and reach audiences in far-reaching places and audiences consume these film performances (or texts) and create meaning from those texts (Fiske, 2011). The idea that any given communication text (like a film) can contain potential for multiple or different interpretations is called polysemy (Fiske, 2011, p.15). The existence, influence, and limitations of polysemic texts represent a widely studied area of interest in the field of Communication (Condit, 1989; Mckerrow, 1989; Rowland & Strain, 1994; Ceccarelli, 1998; Fiske, 2011); scholars in this tradition agree that texts can contain multiple meanings. Thus, films are polysemic texts that can mean one thing to one consumer and something completely different to another. Films, as polysemic texts that depict different cultures, are an important medium to study in the field of Communication Studies. This thesis views the filmic performances of Oscar-
winning black female actors to be culturally relevant and a valuable opportunity to analyze the potential meanings inherent to their film portrayals.

Fiske (1990) explains that there are two main schools of thought in Communication Studies. The first school of thought contains those who consider communication to be “the transmission of messages”; this school concerns itself with how senders and receivers encode and decode. The second school of thought contains those who consider communication to be “the production and exchange of meanings” and looks at “how messages, or texts, interact with people in order to produce meanings, it is concerned with the role of texts in our culture” (Fiske, 1990, p. 2). The transmission of message limits communication to simply the act of sending and receiving messages without any consideration for the actual meaning of those messages. Whereas, the production of meaning concerns itself with all facets of the communication process, the sender, the medium or way the message is sent, the message, and how the receiver receives and processes the message. Within the second school of thought, communication as the production and exchange of meanings, the study of film as a text and its cultural relevance can be found in the literature (Bonney, 2001 [1983]; Fiske, 1990). The second school of thought sees films as a useful research location, because it is a place where we can see how culturally relevant communication messages and meanings are produced and exchanged. In keeping with Fiske’s and Bonney’s work, in this study we will examine the filmic performances of the two Oscar-winning black female actors, Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o for the experience known as shifting as it relates to the communication of culturally relevant messages.
Rationale

Of the aforementioned seven Oscar-winning films only two of the filmic texts, *Precious* (2009) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) were selected for this analysis. The selection of the films was purposeful and the rationale for the film selections will be explained in this section. This section will cover what commonalities are shared between the directing, writing, and production of each film, the Academy Award nominations and victories they share, some differences between the two films, and the final rationale for how each film was selected.

**Two different films with so much in common.** *Precious: Based on the novel push by Sapphire* (2009) was chosen for analysis because of the significance of the year when the film was released *Precious: Based on the novel push by Sapphire* (2009) was released nearly 70 years after the release of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) a film also based on a novel. Mo’Nique won her Oscar 70 years after Hattie McDaniel was awarded an Oscar for her role in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and even mentioned her in her Oscar acceptance speech (Kaltenbach, 2010). *12 Years a Slave* (2013) was selected for analysis because it is the most recent film to result in an Oscar for a black female actor. *Precious* (2009) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) were both directed by black men. Lee Daniels directed *Precious* (2009) and received a Best Director\(^6\) Oscar nomination for his work (Daniels lost that year to Kathryn Bigelow, who won for directing *The Hurt Locker*); Steve McQueen directed *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and also received an Oscar for Best Director for his work on *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Lee Daniels and Steve McQueen each

\(^6\) This is also referred to as an Oscar for “Directing” but for this thesis it will be referred to as the Oscar for Best Director.
directed films before but each found Oscar success with these films. Lee Daniels was also
the first black director to receive a nomination for Outstanding Directorial Achievement
from the Director’s Guild (Bio, 2015). Lee Daniels and Steve McQueen both based their
films on texts written by black authors. *Precious: Based on the novel push by Sapphire*
(2009) was adapted from a novel written by Sapphire, and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) was
adapted from an auto-biographical novel written by Solomon Northrup. Each film won an
Oscar for best-adapted screenplay: Geoffrey Fletcher won for *Precious: Based on the
novel push by Sapphire* (2009) and John Ridley won for *12 Years a Slave* (2013).
Geoffrey Fletcher and John Ridley both wrote screenplays that contained Oscar-winning
roles performed by black women, positioning black men in positions of authority on the
topic of black women. Each film also received Academy Award nominations for Film
Editing and Best Picture, with *12 Years a Slave* (2013) going on to win the Oscar for Best
Picture. The films are also both contain traits that would categorize them as dramatic
films; Dangelo (2012) states, “A drama film is a film genre that depends mostly on in-
depth development of realistic characters dealing with emotional themes” and those
themes can include, “alcoholism, drug addiction, racial prejudice, religious intolerance,
poverty, crime and corruption put the characters in conflict with themselves, others,
society and even natural phenomena” (p.28). *Precious: Based on the novel push by
Sapphire* (2009) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) both contain some of these themes.
*Precious: Based on the novel push by Sapphire* (2009) mainly deals with the theme of
poverty and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) mainly deals with the theme of racial prejudice. The
most significant difference between the two films is that *Precious: Based on the novel
*push by Sapphire* (2009) was adapted from a novel written by a black woman and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) was adapted from a novel written by a black man. *Precious: Based on the novel push by Sapphire* (2009) has studied in the literature for it’s depiction of racially stereotypical depictions (Mask, 2012) and for it’s portrayal of disability (Jarman, 2012) but there does not appear to be any literature analyzing the film for performances of shifting. *12 Years a Slave* (2013) has been studied in the literature in for the cinematic shots that make the film powerful, the character of Solomon Northrup (Smith, 2014), and the significance of the Patsey character in the filmic version of the text (Tillet, 2014) but no mention of the phenomenon of shifting and the films appears. This lack of literature regarding filmic performances of shifting in films that result in Oscars for black female actors highlights the need for this thesis.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

The following section will review literature relevant to this study, including a brief overview of the history of black people in the United States tracing back from slavery. This section will also cover sexism, shifting, films and Hollywood, and black people in film. The overview of black people in the United States helps to illustrate how much this population has had to endure and how its history in this country began. The portions on sexism and shifting help to highlight the experiences of black women in America and to elucidate on the unique experience of shifting. The literature on films and Hollywood covers some history on film, Hollywood, and the history of blacks in entertainment to demonstrate how blacks have been situated in a filmic context.

Black People in America

This section will briefly cover slavery in the United States and racism. The portion on slavery illustrates the controlled beginnings black people had in America and how a black face became the face of slavery in America. The section on racism connects the institution of slavery to America’s issues of race and how that connection is relevant to the experiences of black people in America.

Slavery. Literature indicates that many of the first black people in what went on to become the United States were brought to North America in the early sixteenth century (Berlin, 1998; Martinez, 2011; Rose, 1982); once in North America, they were strategically grouped and separated so they could not effectively communicate with one another. Enslaved Africans were bought to colonial America to help with the production
of different plantation crops and to be unpaid, unskilled labor; prior to their arrival, free hired labor and white indentured servants were the primary ways that American colonialists supplied their labor forces. When the American colonies decided they needed to produce a staple agricultural crop, the amount of labor, expenses, and need for expansion changed the costs. When agricultural crop production was limited to family farms and on a smaller scale, “the annual cost of indentured servants was below that of slaves, and planters continued to rely on indentured laborers” (Galenson, 1981, p. 40). Once the American colonies began to produce profitable crops such as rice, tobacco, sugar, and rice the need for skilled and unskilled workers alike grew. As immigration to the colonies grew, so did the opportunities for skilled, white workers and the need for a less-expensive and unskilled labor force opened the door for the enslaved Africans to become that unskilled labor force (Galenson, 1981). By the late eighteenth century the landscape of the tobacco industry changed and the South had to determine a new crop to ensure their survival; with this changing landscape, the actual need for slave labor came into question. With the advent of cotton and later, the cotton gin, white plantation owners in America began to seriously grow the institution of slavery. As slavery in America grew, the term “slave” became synonymous with a black or African face.

This brief description of slavery is relevant to the current study because it helps to illustrate that pre-determined views of black people existed from their earliest time in the country. These pre-determined roles have evolved over time, and even as the United States changed and became more progressive, this tendency to attach a view or belief to blacks in the U.S. has persisted. Further, to truly understand how many impediments
black people have overcome, it is important to see exactly where their position as citizens in the United States began (at the bottom).

**Racism.** With the abolition of slavery, the U.S. seemed primed to move into an era where racial equality and opportunity for advancement would be available to all. However, even with the legal end to slavery, the problems with race, injustice, and economic inequality were nowhere near over for black people. The terms race and racism often bring confusion because the origins and applications of each can vary. Literature traces the origins of the term “race” as it is used in western language to the seventeenth or eighteenth century (Niro, 2003). The term race can defined as “a system of categorization that classifies populations by reference to physical attributes such as skin colour and other perceived bodily distinctions” (Hartley, 2002, p.192). In other words, people group individuals into racial groups based on the color of their skin and other features such as hair color or texture.

The term racism is complicated because as Wright (1998) points out, “the literature on racism by historians, social scientists, and others was about race and writing on such things as prejudice, race prejudice, racism discrimination, or racial segregation. And the word racism was also used” (p. 19). The interchangeable nature of the term racism has sometimes muddled exactly what the term means. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013), racism is “a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races” (p.26). In other words opportunities for people can be hindered socially, politically, and professionally because of the racial group people identify them to belong to. The use of
the word in racism in American literature dates back to after World War II. The effects of racism on black people have been felt throughout history but during the twentieth century and the modern civil rights movements in the 1960s, black people in the United States forced the issue of racism to forefront. During the modern civil rights movements and under the oppression of a Jim Crow south, racism against black people was overt and frequent, including instances of brutality committed against those marching for civil rights (McWhorter, 2009). This brief overview of racism is important to this thesis because it continues to trace the historical challenges black people have faced and highlights the present challenges black people continue to face because they are black.

**Sexism.** Sexism can be defined as “prejudicial or disrespectful attitudes or discriminatory behavior on the part of individuals towards others on the basis of gender” (Sexism, 2011, p. 631). In other words, sexism is enacted when someone is treated differently, and in many instances, oppressed because they are viewed as male or female. Typically sexism has been seen in the literature in reference to the oppression of women based on their gender (Berg, 2009; Guillaumin, 1995; McWhorter, 2009) but there is some literature on sexism against men as well (Benatar, 2012). Hernton (1992) argues that black women were brought to North America to “serve as breeding animals for more slaves” and as “served as body toys for their white masters” (p. 126). In other words enslaved black women were valuable only for what their female bodies allowed them to do that black men could not: reproduce more slaves. The longstanding issue of sexism in America is sometimes compared to the issue of racism (Berg, 2009, p. 318) but for black women, the two experiences are intertwined. This very brief section on sexism is
important to this thesis because sexism is one of the two battles that black women fight on a regular basis.

**Shifting: The Double Jeopardy of Being a Black Woman in America.**

This section will cover the experience black women in America have known as shifting. The section will define shifting, trace the historical origins of experiences unique to black women, explain the concept’s positioning as an interpersonal theory of communication, and will describe how shifting also exhibits elements of non-verbal communication and how it is relevant to the present study.

**Shifting.** A life in the United States for a black woman is filled with many challenges and struggles. Research has shown that many of these challenges and struggles include: fighting stereotypes, bigotry, misogyny, racism, sexism, and self-doubt (Essed, 1991; Giddings, 1984; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). As a result, black women in the United States have developed strategies to live and cope with these challenges. One such strategy black women use to cope is an experience known as shifting. Psychologist Kumea Shorter-Gooden and journalist Charisse Jones coined the term shifting in their 2004 book *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. Between the years of 2000 and 2002, Jones and Shorter-Gooden conducted and analyzed more than 74 interviews to create the publication. They gathered responses from black women from different geographic, educational, economic, and social backgrounds. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) used these interviews to understand the ways black women live and cope in the U.S.; the authors used the term shifting to describe the general category of coping strategies used by black women.
More specifically, shifting refers to the changes black women make in their behaviors, appearance, and thought processes in their attempts to successfully navigate through their personal and professional lives. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) further explain shifting as “a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure survival in our society” (p. 12). Modifications in behavior might include a black woman choosing not raise her voice during an argument (even if raising her voice is her natural inclination) to dispel the notion that she is an angry black woman. Black women have changed the ways they shift over time as the times have changed. As stated by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), a black woman “living under the heel of Jim Crow would have to shift literally, casting her eyes downward, moving her body off a sidewalk or to the back of a crowded bus when a white passenger came into view” (p.12). Now, shifting can be understood as including behavior modifications of all kinds. Shifting can also be experienced cognitively or the way a black woman thinks about herself or the situation she or he is in. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), common examples of cognitive coping strategies include denying a problem (such as convincing one’s self that a magazine article is enough to distract a person from being terrified about airplane turbulence), minimizing it (such as reminding one’s self that people are much more likely to be killed or injured in a car accident than a plane crash) or spinning the problem into a positive direction (such as telling one’s self that a bumpy plane ride gives the passenger a chance to work on her feelings of fear). When black women shift cognitively they purposely change the way they think about a situation, problem, or themselves, which can cause them to minimize or distance themselves from a problem or personal goal.
Conversely, black women can shift cognitively in a positive manner by increasing their belief in themselves and what they can accomplish. Now, shifting can be understood to include different types of thought processes as well.

Obviously, texts reflecting on black women creating strategies to live and cope in American society existed before Jones and Shorter-Gooden wrote their 2004 text. In 1969, Frances Beale, a black feminist and scholar, wrote a pamphlet on black women entitled, *Double Jeopardy: To be black and female*. This pamphlet, which was later adapted into an essay, discussed the troubling experience of being both black and female in America. The term “jeopardy” used in Beale’s title refers to finding oneself in peril, danger, or at risk, and to be in jeopardy is to be in danger or at risk. So, Beale (1969) argues that being black in America puts you in jeopardy, and being black and female in America puts you in double jeopardy or in twice the peril and danger. Being a black person comes with its own set of disadvantages just as being female comes with its own set of disadvantages.

In 1851, Sojourner Truth, a black abolitionist and freed slave, spoke at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. This convention was developed by Frances Dana Barker Gage as a place for women to fight for the proliferation of rights for women. Gage was influential in the movement for women to gain rights but as a black woman, Truth’s experiences differed from hers. Sojourner Truth’s speech is commonly known as the “Ain’t I a Woman Speech?” There has been some controversy on the accuracy of the circulated speech transcript; Gage released an account in 1863 that some believed “romanticized” what Truth actually stated, but her account was reprinted several times
and is well-known (Washington, 2011, pgs. 224-226). Sojourner Truth’s knowledge of her position as a black woman in the largely white fight for women’s rights in America is critical because it illustrates that black women have acknowledged for a long time that they were fighting two battles, one as a woman and one as a black person. In her speech, Truth spoke about the differences between her experiences as a black woman versus the experiences of white women as spoken by white, male speakers who spoke before her. According to the Gage transcript, Truth said, “Dat man over dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And arn’t I a woman?” (Painter, 1997, p. 167). Truth asserted that her experiences as a black woman did not include being assisted into carriages or helped over ditches, which spoke to her double jeopardy as a black woman. Women of the time were supposed to be helped into carriages, but they were not to expect to have any of the rights of men. As a black woman, Truth saw that she was not viewed in the same way as a white woman. Not only were certain rights withheld because of her race, but her comments showed how her race led to a withholding of the “rights” (if help into a carriage can be considered a right) due to her as a woman (Painter, 1997). Truth also said, “When dey talks about dis ting in the head; what dis they call it? [“Intellect,” whispered someone near.] Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do with woman’s rights or niggers’ rights?” (Painter, 1997, p. 167). When Truth presented women’s rights and negro rights as two separate questions, she showed awareness of double jeopardy or the difference in the experiences of lives lived by black women. She acknowledged a perceived necessity of behavior modification even
then. Truth’s awareness existed long before Frances Beale’s 1969 text, which existed long before Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s 2004 work on shifting. The concept of shifting, even if not presented under that name, has been around as long as there have been black women in the United States.

In their 1998 text *Double burden: Black women and Everyday Racism*, Yanick St. Jean and Joe R. Feagin stated, “Imposed situations of discrimination shape mightily a group’s heritage and create the need for an oppositional culture, for an effective means of survival, resistance, and community creation” (pg. 4). This oppositional culture closely resembles shifting. St. Jean and Feagin (1998) also found that black women “face not only the ‘double jeopardy’ condition of having to deal with both racism and sexism but also the commonplace condition of unique combinations of the two” (pg. 16). As a result of this unique combination of elements, being black and female, determining how best to navigate through their daily lives can be challenging for black women. Gendered racism, like double jeopardy, is a form of oppression black women deal with that is uniquely related to their experience of being black and female. The idea of modifying personal behaviors or appearances in different settings is not specific to just black women; women and men from all cultures can make changes to their behaviors and appearance depending on environment and setting. For instance, performing professionalism (behaving in a suitable manner for the workplace) is not an uncommon occurrence, or people also may not always behave the same way with family as they would with friends. What makes the phenomenon of shifting itself unique to black women is how these personal modifications can and often do affect the physical and mental health of black women who continuously
shift to avoid being labeled with stereotypes or to circumvent erroneous assumptions about their behaviors simply because of their double jeopardy of being black and female.

**Shifting as an interpersonal theory of communication.** The understanding that the experience of shifting has been an acknowledged part of a black woman’s experience is crucial to the current study. It does not stretch the imagination to wonder if this acknowledgement of shifting applies to more than just black people’s understanding. In the field of communication studies, shifting can be considered a theory of interpersonal communication. Solomon and Theiss (2013) define interpersonal communication as “communication that occurs between people and creates a personal bond between them” (p.5). In other words, interpersonal communication happens when people interact and develop a personal connection. Interpersonal communication is multifaceted but also has two constants: “interpersonal communication is irreversible” and “interpersonal communication is imperfect” (Solomon & Theiss, 2013, p. 10). Calling interpersonal communication irreversible essentially means that interpersonal behaviors or thoughts, once conveyed, cannot be undone; the experience can be explained, but it will always be a part of the participants’ joint history. Calling it imperfect essentially means that no matter how elegantly or clearly an idea or action is conveyed, the participants will attach their own meanings or understandings to the message. Interpersonal communication can vary depending on the type of message being communicated and Solomon and Theiss (2013) explain the two types of meaning as “content messages” and “relational messages” (p. 10). Content messages focus on actual or expected meaning of the words, language, or symbols used to communicate a message; relational messages focus on the
meaning of the words, languages, and symbols used in the interpersonal communication interaction for the people communicating with each other (Solomon & Theiss, 2013, p. 10). In this way, non-verbal communication can also be positioned as part of the experience and performance of shifting. Fiske (1990) explains non-verbal communication as “carried on through presentational codes such as gestures, eye movements, or qualities of voice. These codes can give messages only about the here and now” (p. 67). In other words, non-verbal communication is most commonly exhibited with the way someone moves his or her body and/or eyes; it can also be conveyed through tone of voice. Fiske (1990) asserts that, “Presentational codes...are limited to face-to-face communication or communication when the communicator is present” (p.67). This is to say that a non-verbal communicative interaction typically involves two people who are interacting in person and face to face. Fiske (1990) explains that presentational codes have two functions: “to convey indexical information” and “interaction management”. Indexical information refers to information about the speaker that the listener gets that informs her/him about the speakers’ “identity, emotions, attitudes and social position,” and interaction management refers to the gestures, postures, and tone of voice used by the one transmitting the message to denote his or her relationship with the person receiving the message (p. 67). In other words, indexical information reveals to the listener how the speaker feels, thinks, acts, and her/his position in life; interaction management refers to the way the speaker chooses to communicate the relationship between herself or himself and the listener and how the listener processes it. The “two functions of presentational codes can also be performed by the representational in so far as presentational codes can
be present in representational messages” (p. 67). In other words, indexical information and interaction management can be performed and represented beyond one-on-one interactions and can exist in texts.

The current study seeks to negotiate texts for the performance of shifting in film because, as a research location where culturally relevant messages and meanings and produced and exchanged, films provide valuable material to analyze.

Films and Hollywood

This next section provides a brief overview of film in America, a brief history of acting, and a brief history of the depiction of black people and specifically black women in film. The overview of film describes the positioning of film in U.S. society; the section on acting traces the Grecian history of acting and its beginnings in the United States. The section on acting also provides an overview of black entertainers, including information on blackface minstrels. The portion on the depiction of black people in film offers a short history of representations of black people in films. Finally, the section on black women in film briefly shows how the conversation about representations of black people in film changes when the focus is on Black women.

Films. Films, or motion pictures, are an important component of American history and popular culture; “they open windows into American cultural and social history” (Mintz & Roberts, 2001, p. 1). As stated by Joseph Boggs and Dennis Petrie (2000), “film is both an industry and an art form” (p. 2). In other words, creating films can be a business venture or opportunity that also allows for creative or artistic expression. Films are the result of a combination of light and shadow, action, genre,
moving images, gestures, and dialogue (Boggs & Petrie, 2000). Films themselves are not actually moving images but are what Foster and Dixon (2008) call a “persistence of vision,” in which the human eye sees 24 images per second, each projected for 1/60th of a second, and merges those images together into fluid motion (p. 1). The persistence of vision is the brain’s way of combining multiple images to create the illusion of motion.

Films “provide a host of insights into Americans’ shifting ideals, fantasies, and preoccupations” (Mintz & Roberts, 2001, p. 1). In the late nineteenth century as the economic climate in the U.S. changed, the needs and stressors for Americans changed as well. Sklar (1994) explains, “The decades from 1890 to 1910 span the gap from the beginning of motion pictures to their firm establishment as mass entertainment; they are also the years when the United States transformed itself into a predominately urban industrial society” (p. 3). Americans began to restructure their social systems and the class systems began to rearrange themselves geographically. The middle classes moved out of the city and the working class and immigrant population moved in. In an attempt to navigate a changing nation where personal attitudes and behaviors began to change shape the U.S. began to make changes to its entertainment landscape. These changes led to what Mintz and Roberts (2001) argue was a “commercialized mass culture that provided all Americans with standardized entertainment and information” (p. 3). Motion pictures were shown at vaudeville theatres but often only included people that could afford a 25-cent extravagance such as the theatre; the real money was to be made in charging far less to see movies (Sklar, 1994). The introduction of “movies for a nickel” (Sklar, 1994, p.14) made entertainment accessible to the masses
During this time frame, the images of blacks in popular culture also began to increase. Depictions of blacks in books presented negative descriptions and characterizations. In the mid 1860s, during the “Radical reconstruction period” white writers continued rationalizing slavery and purporting “that without slavery—which supposedly repressed their animalistic tendencies—blacks were reverting to criminal savagery” (Pilgrim, 2012, para. 3). Other imagery of blacks during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century included the face of black people on products, such as Aunt Jemima, an image of smiling, dark-skinned, black woman now synonymous with pancake mix. Stereotypical depictions or representations of black people also appeared in artwork, lawn decorations, television programs, games, and toys (Pilgrim, 2012). Nesteby (1982) argues that films released from 1896-1954 were “a reflection of attitudes and as a mirror of the predominant traits of American society” (p. 3). These negative representations of black people reflected the society’s viewpoints of black people.

**Acting.** As the legend goes, the first actor, a man named Thespis, is responsible for bringing the “theatrical invention” of improvisation to the world in 560 B.C. Initially, Thespis was met with derision and an Athenian lawyer labeled his improvisations as “dangerous deceptions” (Cole & Chinoy, 1995, p. 3). Research traces the origins of acting in America to 16th century Virginia, where colonists performed plays for entertainment. Acting began on stages where performers acted out theatrical plays. American colonists borrowed much of their theatrical interpretations from England and among the earliest theatrical companies to come to America was the Lewis Hallum company. As explained by Cole and Chinoy (1995), “Descendant of an English theatrical
family, Hallam brought with him the English acting tradition and the mid-eighteenth century English repertory: Shakespeare, Rowe, Farquhar, Cibber, Congreve, Fielding, and Garrick” (p. 537). Hallam was an important influence in the colonial tradition of acting (Cole & Chinoy, 1995).

Black actors too have been acting in the United States for a long time. Some of the earliest representations of black characters in U.S. popular culture can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and the theater. Blacks were not allowed to perform in professional theaters, so white actors were used to represent blackness for the entertainment of white audiences. In order to portray black characters, white actors used burnt cork to paint their faces so they could play black characters in minstrel shows; their “white parody of black song and dance” was called “blackface minstrelsy” (Manning, 2013, p. 5). Blackface minstrelsy often consisted of several white male performers (white female performers were seldom used or seen) who, with faces covered in black, wore large or exaggerated “negro costumes” (Lott, 2013, p. 6). The white performers often played several different musical instruments while conversing and joking around in what they and white audiences considered black vernacular language.

This blackface minstrelsy was “the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture” (Lott, 2013, p. 4) and was very lucrative for white actors. The origins of blackface minstrelsy have been traced back to the early 1830s when Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a white performer and traveling actor, performed his Jim Crow song and dance in New York City. Dartmouth is also credited with introducing the term Jim Crow to American audiences (Lott, 2013, p. 3). He later took his show to London and created
the desire for blackface entertainment there as well. His performance of blackface both in America and England is significant because as with slavery, it shows the transatlantic transport of these very damaging images of black people through minstrelsy (Nowatski, 2010). In the early days of minstrelsy, these damaging images often depicted black people as a group to be pitied and mocked, which allowed sympathetic white audiences to experience righteous outrage while simultaneously observing another humorous depiction of white superiority. The use of white actors to portray black people not only mocked and insulted black people but it also enabled white people to have the power to determine and define the black experience for widespread public consumption by white people.

With the stress and brutality of slavery and trying to survive in a racist country, blacks needed ways to be entertained and cope as much as anyone did. As stated by Peter Noble (1969), blacks “found certain outlets, and in the early nineteenth century some all-coloured amateur plantation companies began to tour from one plantation to another in the South in a semi-professional capacity” (p. 14). There was even a group of amateur black actors that called themselves “The African Company” who performed many different plays including works by Shakespeare. Even though the black performer created a space for expression during the era of minstrelsy on the stage, there was still a long way to go before that presence on stage was actually accepted. For a time black performers were more known for putting on shows that were light and amusing for audiences but as the nineteenth century came to a close black performers began to use the performances as opportunities to express their feelings on race relations. Most notably, The Lafayette
Theater in Harlem, a well-known theater in black theatrical history, was known for presenting shows that covered many areas of concerns for blacks at that time (Noble, 1969). In addition to presenting a socially conscious viewpoint of the black experience, the shows also provided steady employment opportunities for black actors.

**Depictions of Blacks in Film.** Representations of black men and women in films began in film before the advent of sound. Many of the images seen of black people were just the racist, vaudeville stage representations transferred to the moving image. As with the minstrel and vaudeville circuit, white film actors used burnt cork to cover their faces and represent black characters; even when black actors were hired to perform in films, they were still required to use the burnt cork (Berry & Berry, 2007). One of the earliest films to represent black characters, and use black actors to play themselves, was a short film from 1894 called *The Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (Lupack, 2002, p. 47). As the transition from stage to film (and from white to black actors being used to portray black characters) began, black actors began to portray themselves and initially found enjoyment in expressing themselves creatively but as stated by James R. Nesteby (1982), “the fun-making did not continue for long,” and black actors soon found themselves “as something which the film-viewer either laughed at” or feared (p.15). Black characters in films of the time were typically only on screen for comic relief (Nesteby, 1982); to a certain extent, this same kind of typecasting and “the notion that global audiences won’t be able to identify with black actors” continues today (Mapp, 2008, p. xi).

**Black women in Film.** The inclusion of gender into the conversation about racial representations in film further complicates the matter. Black women faced the same
typecasting and stereotyping as black male actors, but faced additional kinds of discrimination and damaging portrayals due to their sex. The stereotypical depictions of black women have been particularly damaging because many of these images put black women in direct opposition to black men. Some of these stereotypes include the Mammy, the Tragic Mulatto, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel. One of the most prevailing and well-known stereotypes of a black woman in film is the mammy. The mammy is depicted as a large, well-endowed, enslaved, black woman who is obliged to care for her white master, white mistress, and their children. Bogle (2001) states, “she is usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (p. 9). The mammy is also largely viewed as asexual. The image is damaging because it depicts a black woman as subservient and one-dimensional; no mention of her personal life or aspirations is ever mentioned. Another stereotype is what Bogle (2001) calls the “tragic mulatto”; he describes the tragic mulatto as “likeable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt) – and the audience believes the girl’s life could have been productive and happy had she not been a victim of divided racial inheritance” (p. 9). The tragic mulatto is by definition light-skinned and of mixed racial descent that mixture being black and white; even if a person is only half black because they contain at least one drop of black blood in their system in the U.S. they are considered black.7 This stereotype is damaging because it not only condemns a life of being a black woman as tragic but it also negatively portrays the life of someone who is mixed race. A third commonly viewed stereotype is the Sapphire. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) describe the sapphire as “harsh, loud, uncouth, usually making the other

7 F. Davis (2001) explains, “In the south it became known as the “one-drop rule,” meaning that a single drop of “black blood” makes a person black.
characters seem more professional, more charming, more polished by contrast” (p. 9) The sapphire is also often viewed in terms of her behavior and seen as emasculating to black men, bossy, and independent to a fault. The last stereotype discussed in this section is the Jezebel. The term Jezebel does not specifically refer to a black woman but in the context of black women in film she is seen often. The Jezebel is typically depicted as an aggressively sexual, devious, and amoral woman. This stereotype positions black women as seductresses and represents, much like the mammy, a one-dimensional black woman who seems driven only by her sexual desires. This image is particularly damaging because the belief that all black women are devious and driven by their sexual desires allows people to attribute sexual deviances committed against or by black women to be something connected to the race/ethnicity. These stereotypical images have existed since Hattie McDaniel became the first black actor to take home an Oscar and it is not surprising to find these images present in recent Oscar-winning film roles for black female actors. These prevalent stereotypical images of black women in film are of paramount importance because images of black women in Oscar-winning film roles project these damaging stereotypes to a larger audience and, to a certain extent, enlarge the context.
Chapter 3

Method

Communication Studies as a discipline allows scholars unique opportunities to approach the study of communication and culture (Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Kellner, 1995), but early in the discipline’s history, these opportunities were few. In 1983, Australian scholar Bill Bonney discussed and critiqued two approaches to thinking about and studying communication; the first, he argued, believed in the existence of “the human communication process” and held the belief “that Communication is an independent discipline” with the study of the human communication experience at its center (p. 20). He called the other perspective the Cultural Studies approach and posited that “the objects of study that fall under the label communication fall wholly within the ambit of theories of culture, theories about signifying practices, the production of meaning, the shaping of consciousness, and the constructions of subjectivity” (Bonney, [1983] 2001, p. 20). Bonney (2001) argued that the independent discipline approach to communication fails because even if the human communication model consists only of a sender, receiver, and feedback, there still exists a component of meaning. Meaning is related to messages and meaning “is a clear social/cultural phenomenon, not something that can be productively abstracted from the social/cultural sphere” (Bonney, 2001, p.21). Further, Bonney (1983) asserted that the other common components of the Communication process, the sender and the receiver, are also cultural/societal in nature. This thesis will adopt Bonney’s Cultural Studies approach to researching communication; one such way
to conduct research from a Cultural Studies perspective is to use a method known as textual analysis.

Textual Analysis

Textual Analysis concerns itself with making informed predictions about likely interpretations of particular texts. The act of interpreting a message’s meaning is to treat that message as a text; it is from text that we make meaning (McKee, 2003). Describing a message as a text is a deliberate decision made by the researcher and implies certain rules when considering the production of meaning. Literature traces the beginnings of the term text to the Judeo-Christian practice of explaining sections of holy or religious concepts in written or verbal form. Over time, the Judeo-Christian practice of explaining sections of holy texts changed, but the practice of reviewing and studying different texts has not and neither has the term text (Hartley, 2002). The term text remains consistent but the sense of the text has evolved over time to encompass more than just the written word; there have been three major developments in the contemporary era of textual analysis that contributed to this expansion of the idea behind the term.

As Hartley (2002) explains textual analysis “is not a tool to find the correct interpretation of a text, rather it used to understand what interpretations are possible” (p. 226). Textual analysis can applied through different methodologies because the primary concern of textual analysis as an approach is to discover possible interpretations of a text. The act of interpreting a particular text and creating meaning from that text relates to the concept of sense making. Karl Weick (1995), known as “the father or sense making” (Ancona, 2012, p.3) believed that sense making concerns itself with the study of how,
why, and what events are made and what they mean, a researcher will view several moving parts of the whole and make sense of them. Sense making is an integral part of textual analysis because through the process, researchers discover how sense making can vary from culture to culture. Allen McKee (2003) explains that, “different sense-making systems demand, or allow, different ways of thinking about the relationships between people and things” (p. 8). McKee (2003) further explains the different ways of thinking about relationships, people, and things as historically seen from three different points of view: realist, structuralist, and post-structuralist. The origins of the realist point of view are found in the Greek classical period where debates centered on the idea of realism and its “long-term implications for the semiotic discussion on the nature on representation” (Stam, Burgoyne, & Lewis, 1992, p.2).

From the realist point of view there is one true way of sense making when viewing the differences between cultures; all other points of view are incorrect. From the structuralist point of view, there are many different ways to make sense of cultural differences (or structures), but underneath all of those differences is a common thread of sameness, meaning that different cultures are really not that different. From the post-structuralist point of view, sense making is different for all cultures and no culture is any more correct than another because everyone experiences her or his own reality differently (McKee, 2003). So, when using textual analysis and making sense of the world and different cultural experiences, it is important to signify which position (realist, structuralist, or post-structuralist) is being taken to interpret the texts. Each of these
points of view can be applied in textual analysis, but the present research will employ the post-structuralist viewpoint.

According to McKee (2003), “no single representation of reality can be the only true one, or the only accurate one, or the only one that reflects reality because other cultures will always have alternative, and equally valid, ways of representing and making sense of that part of reality” (p. 11). This thesis will adopt McKee’s perspective that no single representation of reality to critically view the texts, or films, for this study. Films not only lead to different types of sense making when viewed by individuals in different cultures, but the films themselves represent the sense making enacted by the filmmaker and others who worked to create the film. Deidre Pribram (1988) asserts that different meanings in filmic texts “can be said to reflect/remake the ideologies of the culture from which its springs” (p. 3). Thus, a post-structuralist perspective used to conduct textual analysis of filmic texts is necessary. In the present research, textual analysis will be used to interpret the chosen filmic texts in an attempt to make sense of the experience of shifting performed and represented in those films.

Semiotics

The most ancient origins of the term semiotics are related to medical science in Greece. Noth (1990) states, “the physician Galen of Pergamum referred to diagnosis as a process of semeiosis. By the eighteenth century semiotica, semiotique, or semiotik had been officially adopted as a medical term for the doctrine of symptoms in European languages” (p. 13). The term was quoted frequently in the medical field and, in some instances, the term semiology was also used to describe medical semiotics. The
philosophical use of the term semiotics first appeared in seventeenth century in the writings of John Locke (Noth, 1990).

The terms semiotics and semiology have often been used interchangeably in the literature, but historically each term has its own implications and origins. Scholars (Allen, 1992; Noth, 1990; Silverman, 1983) agree that philosophical semiotics, or the branches from which we currently derive much of our understanding of semiotics and linguistic tradition, was derived from two influential thinkers, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Saussure is credited with founding the linguistics tradition of “the science of semiology” and Peirce is credited with founding “the science of semiotics” (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992, p.4). Saussure and Peirce both inspired followers but each man is responsible for influential and significant contributions to the field known now as semiotics.

**Ferdinand de Saussure.** Ferdinand de Saussure was passionate about language and considered it “the most complex and universal of all systems of expression but also as the most characteristic” (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992, p. 4). Saussure did not have an opportunity to write a book about the breakthroughs he is known for, but the book *Course in General Linguistics* was drafted from lectures he gave in his classes before his death. Saussure believed that language was a system of signs comparable to other systems, such as writing, formulas, and military signals, but he believed language to be the most important system (Silverman, 1983). His belief led to the development of what he called the “science of semiology” and he predicted that one day the science of semiology would exist and would show what constitutes signs and what laws govern
them. Saussure argued that people regarded language too simply and assumed too little about it; he also believed that language was intricately related to culture, traditions, and rights and that people discounted these connections when defining signs.

Saussure argued that a linguistic sign actually links two elements: Concept and Sound-Image. The Concept portion of the linguistic sign “designates the concept which that form evokes” (Silverman, 1983, p. 6); the Sound-Image portion of a linguistic sign is the psychological impression left on the senses or the image one pictures in their mind when we think of the sound rather than an actual sound. Saussure was clear that sound-image manifests as “vocal activity” because the speaker can speak the sounds and syllables of a word. When referencing terminology, he referred to the linking of a concept and sound-image as just a “sign” rather than a linguistic sign, but recognized that this practice was somewhat ambiguous (Saussure, 1972, p. 67). Saussure argued for the need to designate names for all three components of a linguistic term, including its terminology, and so he presented the terminology of the sign, the signified, and the signifier (Saussure, 1974). The sign retained its initial meaning as a replacement for linguistic sign, the concept became the signified, and the sound-image became the signifier.

With the changes in terminology, Saussure also developed two principles to the study of the linguistic sign. The first principle established that signs are arbitrary in nature because the signifier may not have a natural connection to the signified. In other words, the connection made between the signifier and signified may be related to the culture that developed the language system, but may not be connected outside of that
particular system. What helps people to determine the signified with the signifier, when they are unsure of pronunciation or accented words, is how similar that word is to another word which then helps them identify the word. Saussure noted the imperfect nature of this principle and stated that onomatopoeia and interjections could seemingly violate his first principle. Onomatopoeia refers to words that emulate or reproduce the sound of a thing (like “boom” or “smash”) and an interjection is a word that exists at the beginning of a sentence or statement to express a particular sudden emotion or powerful feeling (like “wow” or “err”). For onomatopoeia, Saussure argued that the terms are often very different in different language systems, and for interjection he argued that in addition to differences in language systems, there is “no fixed bond between their signified and their signifier” (Saussure, 1974, p. 69). The second principle established that the signifier is linear in nature and represents a span of time and that span of time is only able to be measured in a single line. Within this single line, the signifiers are only presented in succession and they form a chain. Although widely heralded and followed, Saussure’s science of semiology is imperfect. Silverman (1983) stated, “by positing the linguistic model as the most semiotically ideal, Saussure establishes a value system within which any language which relies upon motivated signs would be automatically inferior” (p. 8). In other words, Saussure’s language system is presented as the best way to understand and apply language which can lead to the assumption that any other systems that do not apply his principles are not as good.

Saussure also believed that once semiology became a science, the main concerns would be whether groups of systems could be grounded in the arbitrary nature of signs,
and if all means of expression could be grounded in principles (Saussure, 1974).

Although Saussure’s semiological outlines were vague, his understanding of semiotics was based on how it applied to culture (Noth, 1990). Noth (1990) asserts that Saussure’s main argument was that form means structure and “forms can exist only as structure within a system” (p. 61). This argument eventually became the foundation for an area of structuralism as it pertains to linguistics. Saussure’s position on forms only existing within a system is relevant to this thesis because shifting itself exists as an experience for black women as a result of systems of racial and gender oppression in America. Films, as polysemic texts, are also part of a larger system, which includes the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and this thesis will highlight where the roles of black, female actors who have won Oscars fit into this system.

Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce is also credited with “coining the term semiotics” (Seiter, 1992, p. 32) and some refer to him “as America’s greatest philosopher” (Noth, 1990, p. 39). In Peirce’s theory of semiotics, he argued that there was a referent that depended on two interlocking triads. The first triad he called: the sign (representamen), the interpretant, and the object. When all of these components combine into a “complex action”, signification occurs (Silverman, 1983, p. 14). Peirce’s sign also represents a concept but “unlike Saussure’s signifier, Peirce’s sign often either resembles or adjoins”; Peirce’s interpretant “can become a sign which produces a new interpretant, and the same operation can occur with each subsequent interpretant” (Silverman, 1983, pp. 14-15). The second triad deals with signs and human consciousness that interprets and accommodates what is interpreted; the components of this triad are “icons, indices, and symbols”
These signs can include images photographs, artwork, painting, sculptures, and films and important component of Peirce’s semiotic system is his belief that a sign “addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign” (Noth, 1990, p. 42), which is a more achievable explanation of signs than that which was offered by Saussure. This explanation is important to the present thesis because it is important to understand that as a viewer signs in film there is a connection between what is known by the viewer and how that knowledge connects to what is viewed.

**Semiotics and the Cinema: An Important Component of Film Theory**

Semiotics in the cinema can be viewed as semiotics of connotation or semiotics of denotation. According to Christian Metz (1974), “The study of connotation brings us closer to the notion of the cinema as an art” and "framing, camera movements, and light effects serve as the connoted instance” (p. 67). The term “connotation refers to a procedure whereby a term, in addition to meanings allotted to it in a dictionary (denotative meanings), acquires additional significance resulting from the context in which it is applied” (Martin & Ringham, 2006, p. 51). The term “denotation designates the process referring to the dictionary meanings of a word” (Martin & Ringham, 2006, p. 62). Semiotics looks at the study of signification but maintains the connection to the human subject who uses it or the cultural system that created it (Silverman, 1983). An issue found in film theory is what Christian Metz (1974b) calls “the impression of reality,” which is when spectators (those who are watching the film) believe that they are viewing a real spectacle. Metz (1974b) asserts that “films release a mechanism of
affective and perceptual participation in the spectator” and so spectators are “almost
never totally bored by a movie” (p. 4). Films have a certain realistic quality that makes
them believable and they contain a “direct hold on perception” that “has the power to
draw crowds” (Metz, 1974b, p. 4). Further, Metz (1974b) argued that the crowds drawn
to the theater believe that there is an “impression of familiarity which flatters the
emotions” (p. 5). What makes films or movies so unique is the sense of movement
occurring on-screen, and this persistence of vision replicates actual movement for the
spectator or viewer. Even with what Metz (1974b) called the “impression of reality”, he
argued that “to inject the reality of motion into the reality of the image and thus to render
the world of the imagination more real than it had ever been” is “only part of the ‘secret’
of motion pictures” (p.15). The ideas presented by Metz are relevant to this thesis
because audiences view these films with Oscar-winning black female actors in them as
realistic; again, films are polysemic texts and products of sense making by individuals
who may not even understand shifting. Textual analysis, as an approach to cultural
studies and research in the field of communication studies, clearly situates the research
location of the films used in this study as a place where culturally relevant
communicative practices occur. Semiotics, as a method of analysis for this thesis, enables
the researcher to identify the semiotics of connotations and denotations to identify and
analyze the black female experience known as shifting in filmic representations through
the lens of a black, female, cultural reader. Together, semiotics and textual analysis
position this thesis as a credible and worthwhile endeavor to research in the field of
communication studies, cultural studies, and film analysis.
The next section will provide descriptions and analyses of the filmic texts *Precious* (2009) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). The description of each filmic text will include a summary of the film and detailed descriptions of the performances of the Oscar-winning, black female actors, Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o; the detailed scenes needed only to be longer than 15 seconds in length to be included in the detailed descriptions. The summaries provided in the description seek to provide an overall context for how the scenes selected for analysis situate the characters in the film. Immediately following the description of each film will be the analysis of scenes that reveal how Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o perform the real life phenomenon known as shifting in their Oscar-winning performances; each scene in the description is labeled with the word scene and a number, which will help clarify scenes selected for analysis. This section will also discuss what filmic strategies are employed when the depicting shifting in a filmic context which can include but is not limited to camera position, distance, and lighting; finally, this section will also include a discussion of the findings.
Chapter 4

Analysis

Precious: based on the novel push by Sapphire (2009)

Scene 1. Our introduction to Mary Lee Johnston comes early in the film. At this point in the film, the main character, Claireece “Precious” Jones, has been informed that she is being suspended from school because she is pregnant. The audience has learned that Precious is 16 years old, still in junior high school, and pregnant for the second time. The film, set in 1987, takes place in Harlem, New York, where Precious lives with her mother. The camera is on Precious, the main character, as she scrubs a skillet in the sink; the camera moves up and the audience sees a person behind Precious in another room, seated; a voice says, “You get my cigarettes?” Precious answers, “No, they didn’t have it. I played the numbers, though. I couldn’t box it” (Daniels, 2009). As Precious answers, the audience is able to make out what appears to be a heavyset black woman sitting in a recliner. After Precious answers, the woman in the background appears to put out a cigarette. She leans to the side, and then throws what looks like a book at the back of Precious’s head. The book hits Precious and she looks as though she is about to fall to the ground. Instead, the film cuts to another scene where Precious falls onto a bed while wearing a nightgown. The audience sees that Precious being raped by a man that is later revealed to be her father, and a woman who appears to be the woman from the previous scene, her mother, standing in the doorway and watching the attack. The audience learns that Precious often goes into elaborate daydreams when terrible events are happening to her. The scene then cuts back to the present where water is thrown on Precious’s face and
she jolts awake on the kitchen floor. Precious’s mother is shown to be the one who threw the water on her and as Precious comes fully conscious, her mother says, “I ain’t gonna say it no more” and walks out of the room (Daniels, 2009).

Scene 2. The scene cuts to an overhead shot of Precious’s mother, Mary, sitting in her recliner in front of the television in the dimly lit living room as Precious cooks dinner. An overhead shot, or bird’s eye view, provides the audience with a shot positioned from above to see what is happening in the scene (Prammagiorre and Wallis, 2008). As the camera continues moving to show an eye level view of Mary and the audience sees that she is seated with a scarf wrapped on her head, wearing a gray sweat suit, and she is asleep with her left hand tucked into the waist of her pants. As she sleeps, a buzzing sound suddenly goes off and she is roused from her sleep. Upon waking she reaches over and grabs an already lit or finished cigarette from her ashtray, and when the buzzer goes off again, she says to Precious, “Tell them assholes to stop ringing my bell” (Daniels, 2009). As her mother continues smoking her cigarette, Precious (thinking there are crack users at her door) walks over to an intercom at the door and says, “Stop ringing the goddamn buzzers, motherfuckers!” The buzzer goes off again and Precious walks back over and again says, “Stop ringing the goddamn buzzer!” The buzzer goes off again and Precious hurriedly walks back to the door and yells, “Stop it! Stop it!” The audience then sees Mary pause from smoking, look at Precious, and say, “Press listen stupid” as she shakes her head in exasperation. Precious presses the button and the audience sees that the buzzing is coming from Precious’s teacher who says, “It’s Sandra Lichenstein for Claireece and Ms. Mary Johnston” (Daniels, 2009). The camera again focuses on Mary,
who says, “Who is that Precious?” and Precious replies, “White bitch from school” and Mary shakes her head. Precious, speaking into the intercom, says, “What you want?” and Sandra replies, “Claireece, I want to talk to you about your education.” Precious looks at Mary who makes a face and says quietly, “Eighty-six that bitch” (the audience soon finds out that Mary does not want to lose her welfare and this surprise visit could jeopardize that situation). Precious says to Sandra, “Ms. Lichenstein, get out of here before I kick your ass” and Sandra replies, “All right, Claireece. I spoke to Mr. Wichter and he told me that you’re one of his best math students.” As Sandra is speaking, Mary says to Precious, “If yo fat ass don’t get that bitch away from here” and Sandra continues saying, “Like a potential for math, so I called Mrs. McKnight from Higher Education Alternative Each one Teach one. It’s an alternative school. Claireece, are you listening to me?” and Precious replies, “Yeah.” Sandra continues and says, “Okay. Mrs. McKnight. Each one Teach one, it’s located at the 11th floor, hotel Theresa, 125th Street.” Sandra continues, “The semester started a few days ago.” Mary says to Precious, “Get rid of that bitch.” Sandra then says, “So, you’re not too late. Eleventh floor.” Precious harshly replies, “I heard you the first time” and Sandra says, “Okay” and leaves (Daniels, 2009).

**Scene 3.** The audience sees that Mary is agitated after Sandra’s visit and she abruptly gets up from the recliner. Precious leans against a piece of furniture and the audience sees Mary suddenly swing a metal skillet at Precious in an attempt to strike her. Precious dodges out of the way and Mary advances on her and breathing harshly, as she stares Precious down. Precious stares back at Mary and then walks from the room to go upstairs; following Precious with her eyes, Mary throws the skillet to the ground and
yells out, “school ain’t gonna help none!” (Daniels, 2009). The camera is positioned at eye-level and shows a medium close up of Mary as she begins to walk towards the stairs as she continues to yell saying, “Take your ass down to the welfare. Who the fuck she think she is? So I guess you think you cute now, right? Ol’ Uppity bitch.” Mary is briefly out of the shot but is again shown in a medium close up as she sits back down in her recliner. A camera positioned from a medium close-up typically shows the human subject from the chest up (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 143). Mary continues saying, “You should have kept your fucking mouth shut. Just cause he gonna give you more children than he give me, you think you something fucking special? Fuck you and fuck him!” When Mary gets no response, she gets up and calls out, “Precious!” and, kicking something into the wall, she starts to scream, “Precious! Precious! Get down here bitch! You brought that white bitch up in my house! You…why would you bring that bitch up in here?” and Precious replies, “I didn’t bring her here” to which Mary replies, “Well, why the fuck did she ring my buzzer? I can’t hear you Precious. Since you got so much motherfucking mouth and you gon’ bring a bitch up in my house, why would that bitch ring my goddamn buzzer?” While Mary is screaming the camera alternates between close ups and low angles and medium shots with low angles. Precious replies, yelling out, “I ain’t tell her to come here!” Mary, looking up at Precious from the bottom of the stairs, says,

See, I think right now you feeling like you’re becoming a grown woman. ‘Cause that shit you pulled in the kitchen, I should’ve fucked you up, but I let you walk away and I let you come and get yo’self together. But bitch, I’ma let you know if
you ever pull that shit on me again, that will be your last motherfucking day standing. I promise you that. You gon’ send a white bitch to my motherfucking buzzer? Talking ‘bout some higher education? You’re a dummy, bitch, you will never know shit; don’t nobody want you, don’t nobody need you. You done fucked around and fucked my motherfucking man and had two motherfucking children, and one of them is a goddamn animal. Running around looking crazy as a motherfucker. Bitch you know what? See, I think you…I think you’re trying me. I think you’re really trying to fuck with me. You fucking with my money and you gon’ stand up there and look down at me like you’re a motherfucking woman. I’ma show you what real women do, bitch. See you don’t know what real motherfucking women do. Real motherfucking women sacrifice. I shoulda aborted yo’ motherfucking ass, ‘cause you ain’t shit. I knew it the day the doctors put you in my goddamn hand, you wasn’t a goddamn thing. And you gon’ have that smirk on your face, bitch? Get it off your fucking face! (Daniels, 2009).

The camera again switches distances and positions the audience from and high and low angles. As Mary shrieks that last part at Precious she hurls the skillet at Precious again and Precious takes cover. Mary then screams, “Now smile about that! Smile about that you fat bitch.” After Mary says this line, Precious kicks the skillet with her foot so that it goes down the steps towards Mary. Mary watches the skillet land at her feet, looks up at Precious in fury, and then runs up the stairs after Precious saying, “I’ma kill you, bitch” (Daniels, 2009). The film does not show the audience what occurs but the scene fades to
a darkened screen even as the audience can hear noises such as items moving and people scrambling and a voice saying, “Get off me, bitch” (Daniels, 2009).

**Scene 4.** Precious goes to sleep and the film continues showing the audience that it is now the next morning and Precious is dressed to leave for school. The audience next sees Mary from a low camera angle as she quickly appears at the top of the stairs to catch Precious before she leaves saying, “Where you going? Where you going?” and as she descends the stairs she says, “Make sure you play my 852 and tell them to box it and get some kitty litter” (Daniels, 2009). Low camera angles are often employed to situate the subject on camera in the position of power in the scene the camera, as the audience’s eyes, looks up at the subject thus putting the viewer in the subordinate position (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008, p. 141). In this positioning Mary is positioned in the position of power. Mary is wearing a big t-shirt, mules on her feet, and smoking a cigarette as she grabs the television remote and sits in her recliner. Precious goes to Each one Teach one and takes an entry exam to see where she will be placed towards completing her GED. Upon placement and while at school, Precious gets into a conflict with a classmate, but she opens up bit by bit to her classmates and her teacher, Ms. Rain.

**Scene 5.** The audience sees Mary in a close-up shot as she sits in her recliner watching television and eating peanuts. A close-up shot is typically characterized by the camera focusing in one particular part of the human subject’s body, for instance the head, face, torso, or legs (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008, p. 143). Mary says to Precious, who is in the kitchen holding a frying pan, “Get yo’ big ass in here.” Precious walks into the living room, still holding the frying pan, and Mary asks, “Where was you at this
morning?” Precious does not immediately answer and Mary eyes her and the frying pan in her hand and says, “You hear me talking to you? Where was you at this morning?” and Precious replies, “School. I was at school.” Mary responds immediately saying, “You a lying whore” and Precious says, “I’m not lying” and Mary says, “You is. The welfare called here saying they gonna remove you from my budget cause you ain’t been attending school regular.” Precious replies, “I told you I got kicked out. I been home nearly everyday for two weeks now” and Mary says, “You ain’t told me nothing about no damn school today.” Precious says, “I told you I was going to school this morning” to which Mary says, “You plan on putting some food in that frying pan?” nodding her head toward the pan in Precious’s hand. Precious walks back to the kitchen and slams the frying pan onto the stove, so Mary asks, “Precious, you got something you wanna say?” Precious replies, “No.” Mary then says, “Then don’t be slamming shit down in here. You understand?” and Precious says, “Yes ma’am.” Mary makes a humming noise and says, “You need to forget about that school shit and take yo’ ass down to the welfare” and Precious replies, “I’m getting a stipend from school.” Mary then asks, “Fool, what the fuck is a stipend? What is that? Fuck a stipend. I said take yo’ ass down to the welfare” and Precious asks, “Right now?” and Mary replies, “Why in the fuck would you go right now? It’s at nighttime. Shit is closed. You gotta be there by 7:00 am in the morning if you wanna talk to somebody. Fucking stupid” (Daniels, 2009).

Mary turns to look towards Precious while she is at the kitchen sink and says,

You think you too good now? Is that what it is? You think you is too good for the welfare? There’s more white folk getting assistance than it is niggers, Ms.

**Scene 6.** In the next scene the audience sees Mary lying on her side in the recliner covered with a blanket as she watches television. Precious walks into the room and sets down a plate of food for Mary to eat. Mary looks at the plate and says, “You ain’t cooked no collard greens with the pigs’ feet? Like, how I’m ‘possed to eat pigs’ feet with no collard greens? And why in the fuck does that pigs’ feet have so much hair in it? You eat it. You come eat this shit” (Daniels, 2009). Precious replies saying, “I’m not hungry though” and Mary says, “Yes, you is. Precious, if you don’t get this goddamn plate.” Precious grabs the plate and sits down while Mary says, “You just fix mine when you get done. Since you fucked it up, you gon’ eat it up. Hurry up and eat Precious, I’m fucking hungry too and don’t let it get cold. Cause cold-ass pigs’ feet is nasty as shit” (Daniels, 2009). Afterwards, the audience sees Precious stop and stare at Mary as sheSleeps on the recliner under her blanket.

**Scene 7.** As the film continues, the story follows Precious as she goes to speak with someone at the Welfare office; here, the audience finds out that Precious’s firstborn, her daughter, Mongo, has down syndrome. Mongo stays with Precious’s grandmother, Mary’s mother, who brings the baby to the house only when the social worker drops by.
In this scene, the camera is positioned at eye-level and gives the audience a medium long shot of Mary seated on the couch next to Precious in a skintight, sleeveless, white bodysuit with flowers. When the camera is positioned at an eye-level height it gives the viewer the impression that they are right in the action of the scene (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008, p. 140). A medium long shot is a distance that displays the human subject on camera starting from their knees (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008, p. 143). The room is cast in a warm glow from the natural light of the sun as Mary holds her granddaughter in preparation of the social worker stopping so that it appears that she lives there. Mary is holding Mongo on her left leg and smoking a cigarette with her right hand when she kicks Precious and says, “Answer the fucking door.” Mongo knocks down something from the television tray and Mary glares at the baby and snaps, “Do you see what you did? God damn it” (Daniels, 2009). The audience finds out that Mary receives food stamps for both Precious and Mongo; Precious goes to the intercom and says, “Who is it?” and a voice replies, “It’s Ms. Turner.” Precious says to Mary, “The social worker here.” Mary angrily says, “Why didn’t you tell me that the social worker was coming so fucking early? My fucking wig. Come get my wig!” as she puts her cigarettes to the side. Precious says through the intercom, “Come up” and Precious hands Mary her wig. Mary says, “Where’s my lipstick?” Precious holds out the lipstick for Mary and Mongo looks at Precious and says, “Thank you, thank you.” In a medium close up shot the audience sees Mary puts her wig on and takes the lipstick from Precious as the social worker knocks on the door; Precious turns the television off as Mary puts on her lipstick. While Mary is capping her lipstick, Mongo reaches out and touches her which causes Mary to
Mary’s mother then says, “Leave that child alone, please” and Mary says to her, “Mind your own goddamn business” (Daniels, 2009). Precious opens the door and lets the social worker into the apartment. As the social worker walks in the camera is again positioned at eye-level and a medium long shot shows Mary as she speaks to her. Mary has a smile on her face as she says in a warm voice, “Hello, Ms. Turner. How you doing?” to which Ms. Turner replies, “Hi, Mary. How are you?” Mary replies, “Please excuse that, my dear sweet grandbaby just knocked it over. Please have a seat. Excuse the mess.” Ms. Turner replies, “thank you” and Mary says, “Thanks.” Ms. Turner then asks Mary, “How you doing, Mary?” and Mary replies, “I’m doing really good, Ms. Turner. Thank you.” Ms. Turner says, “Umm, when was the last time you took her [Mongo] to the doctor?” Mary responds, “Umm, Precious, when did we take her? The baby?” and Precious replies, “Last month.” Mary agrees and says, “Yeah, on the 16th. On the 16th. Yes, Yes, Ma’am.” Ms. Turner then asks, “What did the doctor say?” As Mary starts to answer, Mongo begins squirming and moving around on her lap and Mary makes a face at her, but when Ms. Turner looks in Mary’s direction, Mary smiles again. Mary replies, “They said that uh, she’s progressing really good. She’s doing really good.” Ms. Turner replies, “That’s good” and Mary says, “Yes Ma’am.” Mary sneaks a quick look of annoyance at Precious as Ms. Turner asks, “And have you been looking for a job?” to which Mary replies, “I have, Ms. Turner. I am, but they’ve all been saying the same thing. You know, they’ll call me back. They’ll get back to me.” Mongo squirms some more and Mary looks at her and says, “Uh-oh.” Ms. Turner then asks, “When did you go looking for the job?” and Mary replies, “Umm, I went looking
last week and I filled out several applications and they all said the same thing, that they would call me.” Ms. Turner quietly says, “Okay” as she jots down notes. Mongo continues to squirm and calls out “Mommy. No! No!” Ms. Turner smiles at Precious and then asks, “Is that a new microwave oven?” and Mary says, “A…A microwave?” Ms. Turner says, “Mmmhmm” and Mary replies, “No Ma’am, we…uh…warm our things up in the oven.” Ms. Turner then says, “I see, it’s a toaster oven” and Mary replies, “Yes. Yes, Ma’am.” Precious turns around and looks towards the kitchen and Ms. Turner says, “Okay, I will be seeing and speaking with you in a week or so” and Mary responds, “In a week or so?” and Ms. Turner says, “Yes.” Mary then says, “Okay, do you know what time you’ll be, you’ll be coming?” and Ms. Turner says, “I’ll let you know” and Mary replies, “Okay.” Ms. Turner again says, “I’ll let you know” and smiles at Precious. Mary continues to watch Ms. Turner and says, “Thank you so much.” Ms. Turner then says to Precious, “Precious, any questions for me?” Precious shakes her head no and says, “Mhmm,mhmm” while Mary watches her with a sharp look. Ms. Turner then says to Precious, “How are you, Precious?” and Precious replies, “I’m doing good. How you doing?” and Ms. Turner says, “I’m good, thank you.” As Ms. Turner gets up to leave, she says “Ladies, thank you for your time.” Mary smiles at her and replies, “Thank you so much, Ms. Turner. Have a great day.” Ms. Turner says to Mary’s mother, Sheila, “And you. Bye, Sheila” and Shelia replies, “Bye.” As soon as Ms. Turner leaves, the camera returns to a medium close up shot of Mary as she roughly takes Mongo off of her lap and says, “Come get this motherfucking. Get her, moving all around and shit while I’m trying to talk to this bitch. Makes me fucking itch.” Mary reaches down to get her cigarettes and
says, “She done threw her fucking candy on the floor. Goddamn animal.” Precious reaches down to get the candy to give Mongo and Mary says, “And now you gon’ give it to her? Put the fucking candy back on the floor! Then you gon’ pick it up and let her have it. You’re so fucking stupid, just like her dumb ass. That bitch gon’ come up in here and I gotta fucking make pretend?” While speaking, Mary rips off her wig and puts a cigarette in her mouth; she then says, “I’m so sick of it.” Shelia looks at Mary and shakes her head. Mary then says, “I don’t know what the fuck you shaking your head for. You didn’t do no goddamn better” (Daniels, 2009).

**Scene 8.** As the film continues, the audience sees Precious interact more and more with Ms. Weiss, the worker down at the welfare office, even confiding in her and telling her that her father was the one who impregnated her. Precious’s actions lead her to believe that the welfare checks will end as a result of her telling Ms. Weiss the truth. The film progresses and the audience sees Precious continue to learn in school. She delivers her second baby, a son named Abdul Jamal Lewis Jones. During her stay in the hospital, Precious is advised that she should give her baby up for adoption. Precious refuses to consider adoption and says that she plans to raise her son.

**Scene 9.** The audience next sees Mary Lee Johnston when Precious returns home from the hospital and she walks into her apartment. The camera is positioned at eye-level and in a medium long shot of Mary seated in her recliner, watching television, and smoking a cigarette. The room is again bathed in a warm glow of sunlight and Mary has on a short nightgown, what appears to be a sweater, and her hair is in a small curly Afro. The camera then cuts to a medium close up of Mary as she looks at Precious and calmly
says, “Hey, Precious.” Precious looks at her and replies, “hey.” Mary says, “You had the baby?” and Precious, while pulling the baby’s blanket down to reveal his face, says, “A boy.” Mary then says, “Where you been all this time?” Precious does not reply and Mary says, “Let me see him.” Precious leans over to give Mary a closer look at Abdul and Mary says, “Can I hold him?” Precious hands Abdul to Mary who, with the cigarette still in her mouth, gets herself settled with him cradled in her right arm. As she removes the cigarette with her left hand and holds it she looks at Abdul closely and says, “He looks like his daddy.” Precious says, “He named Abdul.” As Mary continues watching the baby, she says to Precious, “Put all this shit down and go get me something to drink.” Precious complies and, while her back is turned in the kitchen, the camera cuts to a close up of Mary getting up and tossing Abdul onto a chair, she then throws a glass at Precious’s back and screams, “You bitch!” Precious ducks a bit as Mary screams, “You fucking bitch.” Precious says, “You crazy, Mama?” Precious runs back into the living room and Mary runs towards her saying, “Am I crazy? Bitch, if I...” Mary grabs Precious and slams her up against a wall. The camera zooms in on a close up as Mary gets right in Precious’s face and yells at Precious saying, “You ruined my fucking life! You done took my man, you had those fucking babies and you got me put off the welfare for running your goddamned, stupid ass, mouth!” Precious yells back, “I ain’t stupid and I didn’t take your man. Your husband raped me!” and Mary puts her finger right in Precious’s face and replies, “Didn’t no-fucking-body rape you!” While the two women are yelling at each other the camera is on both of them in a two shot close-up. A two-shot close-up is when two subjects are both shown on screen at the same time in a close-up which often
have a meaning associated the image (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008, p. 145). Precious pushes Mary’s hand down and Mary slaps Precious, saying, “Bitch, don’t you put your fucking hands on me!” (Daniels, 2009). Precious shoves Mary back away from her and the two of them begin to tussle. Mary pushes Precious down as Abdul continues to cry. The audience imagines the fight continues, but the shot is of an older picture of a younger and happier Mary holding a baby (presumably Precious). The film returns to the present and Precious, having gotten up off of the ground, grabs Mary and throws her into the wall behind the couch. Mary slams into the wall, bounces onto the couch and then hits the floor. Precious grabs Abdul and the film again goes to a picture of a younger and happier Mary, laughing with a smiling baby Precious. The film returns to the present and the audience sees Precious grab the back of the television and she shoves it to the ground. Mary, shown to have a bloody gash on her brow, grabs a potted plant and throws it at Precious where it breaks on Precious’s back as she runs through the front door.

Precious rushes out into the hallway with Abdul and walks quickly towards the stairs. Mary is shown getting up off the couch, in only her nightgown, to pursue Precious. Precious is moving quickly and stumbles down some stairs, landing on her back. The film again cuts to an old picture of Mary and Precious, but in this photo, a cigarette-smoking Mary does not look happy and she is looking down and away from Precious; Precious, more of a toddler in this photo, also no longer looks happy as she stares at the camera. The scene returns to the present and the audience sees Mary hauling the television down the hallway after Precious. Precious tries to gather herself and lean against the stairs bannister as she checks on Abdul. The camera shows a low angled close up of Mary as
she drops the television (presumably over the railing of the stairs). The film again cuts to another picture, but this picture shows a sad looking Precious by herself on the floor as she sits in front what looks to be a Christmas tree with no presents. The film returns to the present and shows Precious looking up in time to see the television bearing down on her. She quickly rolls out of the way. The television shatters as it hits the ground and the audience sees Mary step back as she stares down at where the television has landed.
Precious walks out in the snowy day and the camera cuts to the empty apartment and positioned from a high angled long shot Mary is shown returning to the apartment. High-angle shots, like low-angle shots, can also be indicative of a power position; when the camera is positioned from a high angle the subject on screen is typically viewed to be less powerful (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008, p. 140). Mary walks over to her recliner, removes the cat, and sits down in her chair. Precious continues to wander through the snowy day and happens upon a church where members appear to be having choir rehearsal; while watching them rehearse, Precious has another daydream in which she inserts herself into the choir. The camera cuts back to a medium shot of Mary in her apartment where she grabs her remote and tries turning her television on, only to see and remember that it is not there. Mary then runs up her stairs and in a fury goes into Precious’s room where she tears down all of Precious’s posters and she shoves Precious’s belongings off the dresser.

**Scene 10.** As the film continues, Precious finds herself homeless and she spends the night sleeping at Each one, Teach one. Precious’s teacher, Ms. Rain, attempts to help Precious get some help and she ends up letting Precious stay with her and her partner,
Katherine, at her home. The audience finds out that Precious’s grandmother, Shelia, won’t let Precious and Abdul stay with her because she is afraid of Mary; the audience also learns that Precious was actually raped by Mary. Precious eventually finds a halfway house where she moves in with Abdul and begins receiving public assistance. While living at the halfway house Mary comes to inform Precious that her father has died of AIDS; Precious gets tested and finds out that although she is HIV positive, her son, Abdul, is not HIV positive.

**Scene 11.** Mary Johnston last appears in the film when Precious learns through Ms. Weiss that Mary wants to have a sit down with Precious and Ms. Weiss so she can be reunited with her grandchildren. The scene begins with them sitting in Ms. Weiss’s brightly sunlit office area as she says to Mary, “Okay, Mrs. Johnston, let’s talk about the abuse.” The camera cuts to a close up of Mary who, with visibly yellow teeth and an agitated look, replies, “There wadn’t no drugs in my house.” Mary is wearing a coat with a fur-like collar and has her hair wrapped in a black scarf. She shakes her head no and continues saying, “I didn’t play that. There wadn’t no drugs in my house. ‘Cause Precious know I would whoop her ass if she gon’ bring some drugs up in my house.” Ms. Weiss interrupts her and says, “You know what I’m talking about” and as Mary looks at her she continues saying, “I’m referring to specific sexual and physical acts involving Precious.” Mary then says, “Why you ain’t say that?” and Ms. Weiss nods and says, “Yes, that.” Mary then says, “Well, what you wanna know?” and Ms. Weiss responds, “According to Precious’s files, she has now had two children by your boyfriend, the late Carl Kenwood Jones, who was also her father.” As Ms. Weiss speaks Mary begins to
look visibly agitated and looks down while pursing her lips and scratching her head. After the camera zooms in more closely on Mary she looks up at Ms. Weiss and says, “Mmhmm,” nods and then says “Yeah.” Ms. Weiss says, “This is accurate?” Mary replies, “Yes, Ms. Weiss.” Ms. Weiss then says, “I need to know why you’re here. You’ve been calling this office saying you want to be reunited with Precious and your grandchild. Now, I really need to know what’s gone on in that home” (Daniels, 2009). Mary then passionately says,

> Ms. Weiss, I understand we need to discuss it but, I’m just telling you. You said I’ve been calling here and I been wanting to see Precious and my grandson. You’re goddamn right I wanna see them. Because they belong to me, okay? Now there was a time Precious had everything and I done told her that. And me and Carl, we loved Precious, and you need to know that. We loved Precious and we had dreams. Precious was born around the same time Ms. West’s son got killed, the summertime. Precious was born in the summertime. Remember? Remember that? (Daniels, 2009).

Precious replies, “I was born in November” (Daniels, 2009) and the camera cuts to a medium shot of Mary; as she speaks she begins stumbling over words and seems to have a hard time remember things as she says them. Mary continues saying, “November. Yeah, that’s right, my Scorpio child. You know…Scorpios, they can, they can be tricky. And I’m not saying that they lie. I’m not saying that, but you just gotta watch them” (Daniels, 2009). Ms. Weiss looks at Precious and back at Mary and says, “Can we talk about the actual acts of physical and sexual abuse that occurred in your household?” As
Ms. Weiss talks Mary looks at her intensely, starts to fidget and loosens her coat as though it is choking her. As Mary unbuttons her coat, Ms. Weiss continues, “When it first began, where it happened, and how did you respond?” Mary finishes removing her coat and swallows deeply before she begins to answer. The camera cuts back to a close-up of Mary’s facial profile as she responds, “Precious was a little girl” and Ms. Weiss says, “Try and remember how old you think she was” (Daniels, 2009). Mary looks at Precious and then back at Ms. Weiss and says, “She was three…and I had been giving her the bottle and I was giving Carl the tittie because my milk hadn’t dried up in my breasts but, not from her but because Carl was, because Carl was sucking on them and that’s what kept my milk in my breasts” (Daniels, 2009). In another medium close up the camera shows Mary pause again and briefly shifts her eyes to the side before continuing, saying, “And I thought that that was for hygiene; I did what my mother told me that I was supposed to be with my child, so that’s what I did. And you’re sitting up there and you’re trying to judge me” (Daniels, 2009). Ms. Weiss interrupts Mary and says, “I’m not judging you, but you’re asking me for money and you’re asking me to be reunited with your grandson.” Positioned in a close-up the camera shows Mary as she interrupts Ms. Weiss and says, “But, Ms. Weiss I don’t like you looking at me like that.” Mary turns to Precious and says, “You got this bitch looking at me like I’m some kind of fucking monster.” Ms. Weiss again interrupts and says, “We don’t talk like this in my office, okay?” Mary continues saying, “I didn’t want her sucking behind him because that was nasty. And things that he was, it was just nasty, Ms. Weiss. I, I, I had a man, and I have a child and I had to take care of both of them. Okay?” As she speaks, the camera zooms in
for a tighter close-up and shows her hold her hands above her lap palms up. After a pause, Mary continues,

Did I want Carl to touch my baby? Because I would lay my baby, I would lay her on the side of me, on this pillow [she gestures to her side] and it was pink and it had this little white writing on it and it had her name cause she was Precious. And I would lay my baby on that pillow and Carl would be laying on the other side and then we would, we would start doing it and he reached over and he touched my baby. And I asked him, I said, ‘Carl, what are you doing?’ and he told me to shut my fat ass up and it was good for her (Daniels, 2009).

Ms. Weiss then says, “And what did you do then?” and Mary replies, “I shut my fat ass up. And I don’t want you to sit there and judge me, Ms. Weiss.” Ms. Weiss then says, “You shut up and you let him abuse your daughter?” Mary replies tearfully, “I did not want him to abuse my daughter, I did not want him to hurt her” and Ms. Weiss says, “But you allowed him to hurt her” as Mary says over her, “I did not want him to do nothing to her” (Daniels, 2009). The camera maintains the close up of Mary as she continues, saying,

I wanted him to make love to me. That was my man, that was my fucking man. That was my man and he wanted my daughter and that’s why I hated her. Because my man who was supposed to be loving me, who was supposed to be making love to me, was fucking my baby. And she made him leave. She made him go away (Daniels, 2009).
Ms. Weiss interrupts saying, “So, whose fault was it, then?” and Mary, who is openly crying, replies,

It was this bitch’s fault because she let my man have her and she didn’t say nothing. She didn’t scream. She didn’t do nothing. So, those things she told you I did to her, who else was gonna love me? Hmm? Since you got your degree and you know every-fucking-thing, who was gonna love me? Who was gon’ make me feel good? Who was gonna touch me and make me feel good late at night? And she made him go away so…when you sit there and your write them fucking notes on your pad about who you think I am, and why I did it and all of that. Because I didn’t have nobody (Daniels, 2009).

After an extended pause the camera shows Precious subtly shaking where she sits; the camera cuts back to a close-up of Mary as she says, “The people from Each one Teach one they had umm, they had called me and they told me my baby was writing poems. In fact, you know what, I got. Wait a minute,” (Daniels, 2009). Mary gets up from her seat and walks out with a smile on her face, leaving Precious and Ms. Weiss in silence. Mary returns holding Mongo and gives her to Precious before taking a seat. The camera cuts to a medium close up of Mary who then says, “I’m sorry” she shakes her head no and continues, “I’m sorry and Ms. Weiss I don’t want no checks. I don’t need no more money. Please. I’m, I’m so sorry” (Daniels, 2009). Precious does not respond and instead touches Ms. Weiss [who is holding Mongo] on her knee to get attention and says, “I took that TABE test again” to which Ms. Weiss replies, “And what happened?” Precious says, “I scored a 7.8; last time it was a 2.8. According to that test, I’m reading at a seventh and
eighth-grade level. Next year, high school, after that, college.” Precious looks at Mary and back at Ms. Weiss saying, “Well, I like you too, but you can’t handle me. You can’t handle none of this” (Daniels, 2009). Precious stands up, takes Mongo from Ms. Weiss and says to Mary, “You know, I never knew what you was until this day; not even after all them things you did. Maybe I was too stupid, or maybe I just didn’t want to. You ain’t gon’ see me no more” (Daniels, 2009). The camera zooms in close on Mary as she turns and with a look of distress on her face, watches Precious walk away as Mongo calls out “Bye.” The camera zooms in even closer as Mary starts crying and says to Ms. Weiss, “I didn’t want him to hurt my baby. Please, God, I didn’t want him to hurt my baby. Ms. Weiss, I didn’t want him to hurt my baby. I, I would say to him, ‘Carl, what you doing? What you doing? What you doing?’ mphmm, mphmm, mphmm.” Mary says to Ms. Weiss, “Can you go get her back? You can do that because that’s what you do. That’s what you do. I need you to go and I need you to get my, my baby back. You told me that I could come in here and we, you could get m-m-m, you get could get Precious to say…Ms. Weiss? Ms. Weiss? Ms. Weiss?” (Daniels, 2009). The camera cuts to a medium shot of Mary as she speaks and Ms. Weiss gets up and starts to walk out. Mary grabs her arm with Ms. Weiss shaking her off without responding and Mary is left sitting alone. The film ends with Precious leaving the Citizens Advice Bureau with Mongo and Abdul and walking through the crowded streets of New York.

**An analysis of Precious: based on the novel push by Sapphire negotiating for shifting as performed by Mo’Nique as Mary Lee-Johnston.** The first instance of shifting performed by Mo’Nique as Mary Lee-Thornton occurs in **Scene 7**; in preparation
of a visit from the social worker Mary makes a shift in her appearance. When Mary demands her wig and lipstick, the audience understands that she puts them on because she wants the social worker to perceive her in a certain way. The camera situates the audience at eye-level with a medium long shot enabling the audience to view Mary’s wardrobe, the living room, and her position on the couch next to Precious. The space between the camera and its subject is known as the camera distance which can tell the audience how emotionally invested the audience should be with the characters (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008); the camera serves as the audience’s eyes and in this instance Mary and Precious are the human subjects and the medium long shot is the distance. Mary is presented as using one of the six strategies identified by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004): “scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment” (p.65). This particular shift involves black women monitoring and observing their environment so they can be perceived in a particular way. In this instance, Mary appears to shift so that the social worker sees a put together woman wearing lipstick and with neat hair. Changing her appearance is a clear indicator of shifting and the medium close-up highlights for the audience the moment Mary applies her lipstick and literally enacts the shift. As the scene continues, Mary is presented as shifting again when the social worker, Ms. Turner, arrives and Mary addresses her with a warm greeting and a smile. Prior to this scene, when Mary interacted with other people, especially Precious, she was rude, abusive, short-tempered, mean, and generally unkind. In treating Ms. Turner kindly, the scene presents Mary as employing another shifting strategy identified by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), “battling the myths;” this particular shift involves black women
changing how they act “in order to disprove and transcend society’s misconceptions about them” (p. 65). Ms. Turner may arrive with preconceived notions about Mary being a black woman on welfare because of damaging stereotypes such that of to what Wahnemma Lubiano (1992) refers to as the “welfare queen” (p. 337). The welfare queen is a stereotype that puts black women as the face of those who receive government public assistance, such as food stamps. As explained by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), “the welfare queen constitutes a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman. Relying on the public dole, Black welfare queens are content to the take the hard-earned money of tax paying Americans and remain married to the state” (p. 80).

To further enact this shift, Mary is presented as suggesting that she has been looking for a job; this suggestion counters the idea of her taking advantage of the system or being “content to take the hard-earned money of tax paying Americans” (Collins, 2000, p. 80). Mary is presented as very much content to take the hard-earned money of taxpayers, which is why her behavior in anticipation of Ms. Turner’s arrival is a stronger indication of shifting. As the scene continues, Mary only relents in her smiling and amicable demeanor when she looks at Precious and Ms. Turner’s head is turned and Ms. Turner does not appear to notice anything out of the ordinary. The medium long shot of this interaction allows the audience to view the Mo’Nique’s performance and the shifts she makes when she is addressing Ms. Turner and when she looks at Precious. As soon as Ms. Turner leaves, Mary demands that someone come take the baby; the medium close up of this shot again shows the changes in Mary’s behaviors and highlights Mo’Nique’s seamless performance of the shifts Mary makes. Mary reaches down to get her cigarettes
and says, “She done threw her fucking candy on the floor. Goddamn animal” (Daniels, 2009). Mary immediately shifts back into her normal demeanor and disposition, even going so far as to rip her wig off of her head and say horrible things about her granddaughter. Mary’s words are evidence of the aforementioned shifting strategies because they present her as pretending in order to successfully navigate this experience with Ms. Turner. Mary appears to be aware of how and why she is shifting. What makes this particular performance of shifting even more unique is Mary’s shift back to her normal behavior, in which she actually fulfills the aforementioned “welfare queen” stereotype. Mary’s behavior in the film prior to Ms. Turner’s visit actually satisfies many aspects of the welfare queen stereotype: Mary lives on the hard work of others, she has no male significant other, she is domineering over Precious and her mother, and she fully intends to remain reliant on the government for her money. Mary’s intentional shift back to her normal behavior is unique because shifting is typically employed by black women as a strategy to counter mistreatment or negative assumptions. Mary shifts her caring and involved caretaker behaviors to behaviors that actually perpetuate negative depictions of black women. While Mary shifted to a caring and involved caretaker to be accepted by the social worker and, by extension, society; her shift back to her normal self is to shift into what is considered negative behavior. This is significant because the literature depicts shifting as harmful for black women and something that is done out of a necessity to navigate through society in order to thrive, but Mary shifts so she does not lose the benefits she receives when she relies on the government and has no interest in thriving on her own.
The next instance of shifting occurs in scene 9; Precious has just returned home from the hospital after giving birth to her son, Abdul. When Precious walks into the apartment in a medium long shot the audience sees Mary seated in her recliner, watching television, and smoking a cigarette. The room is lit in the warm natural light of the sun that leaves Mary visible and out of the shadows. Precious and Mary have begun arguing because Mary yells at Precious for stealing her man [Precious’s father and rapist] and getting Mary kicked off of welfare for saying too much to Ms. Weiss. While the women are sparring the two shot close up of the two of them provides some indicators for the audience as viewers. The women are literally on opposite sides of the screen and their positioning on camera reinforces that they are also on opposite sides of an argument. Mary’s claim that Precious was not raped by her own father could be seen as a representation of the shift some black women make in adhering to the silent belief that black women must protect black men, even if that protection is underserved, whenever possible because society will vilify them enough (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) make this assertion in relation to black women defending black men, even as those black men abuse black women, including and perhaps even usually the black women who are defending them in the first place; in this instance, Mary denies that Precious was raped by her father, a black man, leaving him blameless.

There is evidence of shifting in Scene 11; Precious has been living in a halfway house after being kicked out by Mary. Mary and Precious are meeting with Ms. Weiss (a worker at the welfare office) at Mary’s request. In this meeting, Ms. Weiss questions Mary about the sexual abuse Precious faced at home and what Mary did about the abuse.
The camera initially shows a close up of Mary as she is being questioned by Ms. Weiss and the audience can clearly see that her teeth have yellowed; she tries to offer an explanation and justification for how the abuse began. This exchange shows that Mary was aware of what was happening to Precious. Mary mentions that she feels that Ms. Weiss is looking at her differently because of her role in the abuse. After Ms. Weiss interrupts her to explain that she needs to know because Mary wants money from them and to see Abdul, Mary continues saying, “But Ms. Weiss I don’t like you looking at me like that” and she blames Precious for getting Ms. Weiss to look at her like she is a monster (Daniels, 2009). Again, Mary appears to have made the connection that she is now being evaluated for her role in Precious’s abusive home life; she says that she did not want Carl touching Precious, but she allowed it to happen because Carl was her man. When Ms. Weiss interrupts Mary, Mary continues to blame Precious and to justify the fact that she allowed the abuse to go on. After Mary makes these declarations, Ms. Weiss says nothing so Mary tries to put a positive spin on the situation with a conversation about Precious’s poetry. Ultimately, Precious stands up to Mary (literally and figuratively) and she walks away. Realizing she has lost control of the situation, Mary shifts her words and tone with Ms. Weiss; she goes from a defensive tone to an apologetic tone and her words move toward indicating remorse. Throughout this scene that camera distances vary from medium close ups to close ups on Mary’s face and the close ups on Mary’s face emphasize her facial expressions when she stumbles over words and adjusts her approach to communicating with Ms. Weiss. The scene includes additional evidence of shifting, specifically of the strategy of “scanning, surveying, and
scrutinizing her environment”; Mary changes her approach to speaking with Ms. Weiss when she realizes she is not being perceived in a positive light. Further, Mary’s change in the language she uses [she stops blaming Precious and becomes apologetic] is indicative of shifting. Essentially, the audience is left with a moment of shifting as the film closes.

12 Years a Slave (2013)

Scene 1. The audience is introduced to Lupita Nyong’o’s performance of the character, Patsey, about 54 minutes and 10 seconds into the film. At this point in the film, the main character, Solomon Northrup, has been enslaved for an extended but undisclosed period of time and he has been sold as a slave to a new plantation run by Edwin Epps. Solomon is originally from Saratoga, New York but after travelling to Washington, D.C. he is drugged and awakens to find himself chained in a cell. When he tries to plead his case and prove his identity as a free man, he is told that he is a runaway slave from Georgia and brutally beaten. Solomon and other people in his same predicament are put on a ship to be transported down South to slave states. They arrive in Louisiana and Solomon is renamed Platt\(^8\) by a slave dealer and sold to a sympathetic white man named William Ford. While living on William Ford’s plantations, Solomon meets William Ford’s carpenter, John Tibeats. John looks upon the slaves disdainfully and tells them to call him Master. John becomes jealous when Solomon draws some favor from William Ford for an idea he has about using Mr. Ford’s creeks to transport materials. John’s jealousy leads him to instigate confrontations with Solomon, culminating in Solomon successfully defending himself against a physical attack from

\(^8\) The audience already recognizes Solomon’s name as Solomon even when he is given the name Platt.
John. John, embarrassed and enraged, attempts to kill Solomon by lynching him from a tree on Mr. Ford’s property. Solomon is saved from being lynched by Mr. Chapin, William Ford’s plantation overseer, and after his experience of being left to hang for many hours, he speaks to William Ford. William decides that because of the danger Solomon faces from John, who will not stop until Solomon is dead, and Solomon’s unwillingness to back down, Solomon needs to leave. William transfers his debt (Solomon) to another plantation owner, Edwin Epps. Edwin Epps is quite different from William Ford and is seen as “a hard man” who “prides himself on being a nigger breaker” (Pitt, 2013). Epps is the only plantation owner who would take Solomon. It is at the plantation of Edwin Epps that Solomon meets Patsey.

**Scene 2.** In medium close-up shot the camera is slowly panning across a group of enslaved workers, Solomon included, the first time the audience sees Patsey, they are listening to Edwin Epps quote scripture to justify his right to enslave them. The camera slowly pans from side to side and in the bottom left corner of the screen stands Patsey wearing a straw hat tied with ribbon under her chin. Patsey is a dark-skinned and slender black woman who is looking straight ahead with a somewhat sorrowful look on her face as Epps speaks to them. The next scene opens with Patsey picking cotton in a straw hat on what appears to be a hot day. While those around her sing, Patsey methodically picks cotton with an immovable look of focus on her face. While they are picking cotton, the audience hears and sees plantation overseers on horses cracking whips and screaming for them to “pick that cotton” (Pitt, 2013). The next scene opens with a long shot of a darkened barn with Epps and his overseers measuring the amount of cotton each enslaved
person picked that day. Epps paces around while the enslaved persons are lined up side-by-side awaiting their picked cotton totals for the day. The audience learns that Patsey picked 512 pounds of cotton and at this point the audience sees the first on-screen interaction between Patsey and Edwin Epps.

**Scene 3.** Patsey is shown in a canted angle on eye-level with Epps as he exclaims, “512!” and while walking leisurely over to them says, “You menfolk got no shames letting Patsey out-pick you. A canted camera angle is characterized by a lean to one side which displays the human subject in a diagonal line; according to Pramaggiore and Wallis (2008)”A canted angle often signifies a moment of imbalance or a loss of control” (p. 142). The day ain’t yet come she swung lower than 500 pounds” (Pitt, 2013).

Epps stops walking when he is standing just behind Patsey and slightly to her left; he places his arms on her shoulders and stares at the back of her head. In this shot, the camera is positioned at eye level and a close-up is focused on Epps and Patsey. While Epps is making his way to Patsey, the audience can see that her eyes are cast down and looking slightly to her right and her body shakes with delicate tremors. When Epps reaches Patsey and places his hands on her shoulders she moves a bit and turns her head to right and continues to look in that direction; Patsey’s face is slightly cast in shadow while Epps’s full face is visible. Epps states “Queen of the fields, she is” and while still staring at her the overseer moves on to the next person’s amount. Epps cuts his eyes away from Patsey and says, “I ain’t done, Treach. Ain’t I owed a minute to luxuriate on the work Patsey done?” Treach (one of overseer’s measuring the cotton) answers, “Yes, sir” and Epps returns his full attention back to Patsey and says “Damn Queen, born and bred
to the field. A nigger among niggers and God gave her to me” (Pitt, 2013). While Epps is speaking, he begins to slowly rub the left side of Patsey’s neck with one of his fingers; Patsey’s head seems to flinch/shudder slightly but she remains silent. Epps suddenly stops touching Patsey and steps away saying, “A lesson in the rewards of righteous living.” When he steps away, Patsey finally changes facial expression with a subtle tightening and then loosening of her jaw and returns her eyes back to the ground in front of her. Epps continues, “All be observant to that, all. Now Treach, now speak.” As Treach continues, he comes to two people, Phoebe and George, and when it is revealed that they picked less cotton that day than the previous day, Epps has them pulled out and made to step forward and walk away. Epps then instructs Solomon to follow him as he walks out. The camera comes in close again as Patsey turns her head to watch Solomon walk from the barn with her eyes. The next scene shows individuals (presumably George, Phoebe, and Solomon) being whipped in the background.

**Scene 4.** The film cuts to another scene where the audience sees Patsey sitting in a grassy field. Patsey is humming and building dolls out of pieces of straw. She hums as she uses the pieces and completes the construction of one of her dolls. She straightens the doll’s hair and then sticks it in the ground (the doll has a long stick protruding from the bottom of it) with three other dolls she has made. As Patsey continues to hum, a white woman is shown standing on the second floor of Epps’s home. The woman appears to be watching Patsey. Night comes and the audience sees Solomon lying down when suddenly footsteps approach, and as Solomon sits up, Epps throws back curtains, presumably used to section of the enslaved workers’ sleeping quarters, and he screams out “Get up! We

Scene 5. The camera next cuts to a medium long shot of the enslaved workers, Patsey included, gathered in a circle in the center of what looks like a parlor and a fiddle plays in the background. The enslaved workers all appear to be in their nightclothes or pajamas and they are dancing to the fiddle and Epps clapping his hands. The audience sees that Patsey is wearing a white nightgown and Solomon is shown to be the one playing the fiddle while another enslaved person is playing an instrument reminiscent of a recorder or tiny clarinet. Epps is seen staring at something off-screen with a partial smile and rapt focus while he claps and goads on the enslaved workers. The camera cuts to another medium long shot showing Patsey in the center of the circle; while holding her skirt with her right arm, she twirls around with her left arm curved upward above her head, waving her hand. Patsey seems to have a partial smile on her face at times and she seems relaxed. The audience sees that Epps is staring at Patsey and suddenly the white woman who earlier watched Patsey abruptly appears from behind Epps. The woman grabs a glass decanter holding a brown liquid and hurls it at Patsey, striking her on the right side of her face with a solid thud, and Patsey falls to the ground and out of frame. As Patsey begins crying, the woman says, “Sell her” and Epps replies, “What’s all this?” to which the woman says, “You will sell the negress.” Epps says, “Sell little Pats? She pick with more vigor than any other nigger. Choose another to go” (Pitt, 2013). As Epps walks towards Patsey, the woman blocks his path and says, “No other, sell her.” Epps
replies, “I will not” and the woman says, “You will remove that black bitch from this property or I’ll take myself back to Cheneyville.” Patsey continues to cry in the background as Epps steps close into the woman’s space. While caressing her neck and cheek, he says, “Back to that hog’s trough where I found you? Do not set yourself up against Patsey, my dear” and, after a pause, “Because I will rid myself of you well before I do away with her.” The woman, who appears to be Epps’s wife, looks a bit dazed, turns to the side, and walks away. Patsey continues to cry in the background as Epps snaps at Solomon, who looked in his direction. Epps says, “What you looking at? Damn woman. I won’t have my mood spoiled, I will not. Dance.” Distanced from a long shot the camera shows Patsey being dragged from the room, while crying out in pain. A long shot is characterized by the full body of the subject being present in the frame and not too small within the entire space. Epps says, “Dance, I says!” The enslaved workers begin dancing again while Epps calls out, “Come on! Pick it up, Platt. Play that fiddle, boy” and the scene ends (Pitt, 2013).

**Scene 6.** As the film continues the camera shows a long shot of Patsey working in the field while the overseers supervise from horses and crack their whips. After the work day ends, Solomon is pulled to the side by Epps’s wife and he is tasked with going to the store to get some items. It is at this point in the film, while Solomon is dispatched, that the audience learns that white woman who so despises Patsey is known as Mistress Epps, Edwin Epps’s wife.

**Scene 7.** The audience next sees Patsey as she sits at a table with another black woman, laughing and drinking from teacups. A close-up shot of Patsey reveals that she is
wearing a straw hat tied under her chin with a ribbon with a flower on it. Solomon has been sent to the home of the Shaws, a married couple who also run a plantation, to get Patsey so they can return to the Epps plantation. Master Shaw married Mistress Shaw, a former enslaved worker of his, and she now lives as his wife on the plantation.

Solomon walks up to the women at the table and while breathing hard from exhaustion, he says, “Excuse me, Mistress Shaw” (to one of the women Patsey is sitting outside with). Mistress Shaw replies, “Nigger Platt.” Solomon then says, “Patsey, Master wishes you to return.” While Solomon is speaking, the camera comes in even closer on Patsey’s face and as she looks up at Solomon, she replies, “The Sabbath day, I is free to roam.” Solomon then says, “Master sent me running to fetch you, said no time should be wasted.” As Patsey begins to move, Mistress Shaw puts her hand on Patsey to stop her and says to Solomon, “Drink of tea?” Solomon replies, “Thank you, Mistress, but I don’t dare.” The camera returns to a long shot of them as Mistress Shaw says, “Would you know of Master Epps’ consternation to be any lessened with your timely return? Anger’s his constant condition. Sit. Sit and drink the tea I offered.” The camera returns to a medium close-up as Solomon takes his seat, Patsey looks on between him and Mistress Shaw with a small smile on her face. Mistress Shaw says, “What’n be Epps’s concern?” to which Solomon replies, “I’d rather not say.” She then says, “Oh, little gossip on the Sabbath be fine. All things in moderation.” Solomon answers, “As you are aware, Master Epps is a man of hard countenance. You know he has ill feeling towards your husband,” and Mistress Shaw says, “He do.” Solomon continues somewhat reluctantly, “Master Epps has somehow come to believe that Master Shaw is something of a lothario. A
misguided belief, no doubt,” and Mistress Shaw replies, while waving to Master Shaw, “No doubt. If not born out of truth itself.” Solomon then says, “I meant no disrespect” and Mistress Shaw laughingly says, “He ain’t heard you” and Solomon says, “I meant no disrespect to you, Mistress.” While Solomon and Mistress Shaw are conversing, the camera shows a close-up of Patsey who is raptly watching Mistress Shaw; when Mistress Shaw takes a sip of her tea, Patsey quickly lifts hers to follow and while watching her, Patsey sticks her pinky out as well. Mistress Shaw laughs and says to Solomon, Got no cause to worry for my sensibilities. I ain’t felt the end of a lash in more years I can recall. I ain’t worked a field, neither. Where once I served, now I have others serving me. The cost to my current existence be Master Shaw broadcasting his affections and me enjoying the pantomime of his fidelity (Pitt, 2013).

While she speaks, the camera shows another close-up of Patsey still listening but looking down and grabbing a cookie sandwich from the table, and then taking a bite while sneaking quick looks at Mistress Shaw. The camera switches back to Mistress Shaw as she continues saying, “If that what keep me from cotton picking niggers, that what it be. A small and reasonable price to be paid, for sure.” After taking another sip of her tea, Mistress Shaw puts her hand on Patsey’s and directly addresses her saying, “I know what it like to be the object of Master’s predilections and peculiarities.” Patsey takes a deep breath and steadily looks at Mistress Shaw. Mistress Shaw continues, “A lusty visit in the night or a visitation with the whip. Take comfort, Patsey. The good Lord will manage Epps, in his own, the good Lord will manage them all” (Pitt, 2013). As Mistress Shaw speaks to Patsey the camera comes in even closer to focus on Patsey and although they
are both presented in a two shot, Patsey is the focus as she nods along a bit to what she is hearing. Mistress Shaw continues, “The curse of the pharaohs were a poor example of what wait for the plantation class.” She pauses and then addresses Solomon, saying, “This is nice.” While they sit there, Patsey looks out beyond the yard and then back at Mistress Shaw with a smile on her face.

**Scene 8.** The next scene shows a medium close-up of Epps sitting on his front porch; the camera then cuts to a long shot of Patsey and Solomon as they appear in the frame. Epps calls out, “Pats. Patsey!” and both Solomon and Patsey look at him with something akin to trepidation. Patsey then looks to Solomon with concern and Solomon tells her, “Do not look in his direction. Continue on,” and Patsey hastily walks on. Epps again says, “Patsey!” and Solomon says, “Found her, master, and brought her back just as instructed.” Epps walks down from the porch towards Solomon and says, “What did you just now tell her? What did you say to Pats?” and Solomon replies, “No words were spoken, none of consequence,” to which Epps replies, “You’re a liar. You damn liar. I saw you talking with her, tell me.” Solomon then says, “I cannot speak of what did not occur” and when Epps goes to physically attack him, Solomon blocks him to defend himself. While attacking Solomon, Epps says, “I’ll cut your black throat” and Solomon replies, “Master!” Epps says, “You come here!” Solomon attempts to speak, saying, “Master Epps” and Epps cuts him off saying, “I said come here!” Solomon says, “I brought her back just like you…” and Epps commences to chase him around with a knife in his hand (Pitt, 2013). After Solomon evades Epps enough for Epps to fall down, he is tricked into helping Epps up, but before he can be punished, Mistress Epps comes outside
to see what has happened. Epps is angry, but eventually he walks off, no longer attacking Solomon. Mistress Shaw is left standing there alone. For the duration of Epps and Solomon’s altercation Patsey, having successfully evaded Epps, is not seen at all

**Scene 9.** The next scene takes us to the nighttime and a long shot of a white moon in a dark sky; the camera cuts to a medium long shot of Epps skulking about where Solomon, Patsey, and the rest of the enslaved persons sleep. After Epps retrieves Patsey the camera cuts to a two shot close-up of Patsey and Epps in profile; Epps is looking down at Patsey and Patsey is looking down towards his chest. Both of their faces are partially hidden in shadow as Epps leans down and places his forehead against hers pushing her back down onto her back. The camera remains in the two shot close-up as Patsey silently lies there and looks off into the distance just above and to the left of Epps’s head and her face becomes even more ensconced in shadow. Epps stares at Patsey as he begins to have sexual intercourse with her. Epps roughly grabs Patsey on her shoulder and begins to pant while thrusting against her. Patsey continues to stare away from Epps but begins to breathe harshly as he thrusts against her. She makes a small sound and her face remains partially shadowed. As Epps continues thrusting and grunting, he forcefully grabs Patsey’s face between his hands and makes her face him. She continues to make small noises and although facing him, she does not appear to be looking at him. Epps begins thrusting harder and Patsey makes strained noises as he grabs her throat again. When Epps finishes, the camera stays focused on Epps only as he sits and while staring at Patsey says, “Patsey,” but when she is unresponsive, he brutally smacks her across the face. The smack is hard enough to make the upper half of Patsey’s
body turn to the side; he then grabs her throat and begins choking her. The audience can hear Patsey’s struggles to breathe as Epps chokes her; Epps appears to be choking back a sob while choking her. He begins to pant as he lies back down on a gasping Patsey’s chest the close-up on them shows that Patsey is still staring off into space. After Epps gathers himself, he looks around then leaves Patsey lying there with her left arm up next her to head and her dress rucked up around her upper thighs, still staring into the distance. The medium long shot allows the audience to see that Patsey begins to take breaths and exhale deeply as she lies there in the moonlight.

**Scene 10.** As the film continues the audience sees Solomon running more errands for Mistress Epps; at the same time, he is determining ways to be free. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Patsey as she and all of the enslaved workers are dancing for Epps in his parlor. Patsey is again wearing a long, white, nightgown as she dances. Mistress Epps has walked in and interrupted their dancing to share something she has baked. Mistress Epps states, “A moment from the dancing. Come sample what I baked for y’all.” Some of the enslaved workers thank her and the audience sees Patsey anxiously waiting to have some of the baked goods. When Patsey reaches for some of the goods Mistress Epps says, “There will be none for you, Patsey.” As Mistress Epps says this to Patsey, Patsey looks away from Mistress Epps and placing her hands together in front of her, she looks away and down at the ground. Mistress Epps then says to Epps, “You see that look of insolence she give me?” As she says this, Patsey quickly looks at the women next to her but says nothing. Epps replies, “I seen nothing but her turn away.” The camera cuts to a medium long shot from behind Epps as Mistress Epps says, “Are you blind or ignorant?
It was hot, hateful scorn. It filled that black face. You tell me you didn’t see it? It’s because you choose not to look, or are you saying I lie?” Again a medium long shot shoes Patsey quickly glance away when Mistress Shaw looks at her. As Mistress Shaw speaks, the audience sees Patsey standing perfectly still with her head and eyes cast downward. Epps replies, “Whatever it was, it passed,” to which Mistress Epps replies, 

Is that how you are with the niggers, letting every ill thought fester inside them?

Look at them. They foul with it; they foul with their hate. You let it be, it’s gonna come back to us in the dark of night. You want that? You want them black animals leave us gut like pigs in our own sleep? Oh, you are manless. A damn eunuch if there ever was. If you won’t stand for me, I pray you’d at least be a credit to your own kind and beat every foul thought from them (Pitt, 2013).

Epps does not reply to Mistress Epps, so she walks over to Patsey, reaches up with her left hand and scratches Patsey harshly down the right side of her face. The medium shot clearly shows Patsey scream and bend over while crying out in pain. As Patsey screams with her hand to her face, Mistress Epps yells, “Beat it from them!” Mistress Epps walks over to Epps and he gets up and walks over to a still crying Patsey and roughly grabs her up from the floor. Epps roughly pulls Patsey along behind him as he leaves the room, Patsey continues crying but she keeps her head down. As they leave the room, Mistress Epps addresses the remaining enslaved workers saying, “Eat. Fill yourselves and then we dance,” but when they hesitate she says, “I said, eat” (Pitt, 2013).

Scene 11. The camera next cuts to a twilight evening filled with the sound of thunder as the camera cuts to a close up of Solomon lying down asleep; a hand and arm
come into the frame and gently shake Solomon. A voice says, “Platt.” Solomon jerks as
the voice says, “Platt, you awake?” and as Solomon begins to rouse, the camera cuts to a
medium shot of Patsey as she is revealed to be who has awakened Solomon. The two-
shot depicts Patsey’s profile as Solomon sits up on his side, he replies, “I am,” and
Patsey, while looking in his general direction, says, “I have a request, an act of kindness.”
She brings her hands up and in one hand reaches out to hand something to Solomon. She
says, “I secreted it from the mistress,” and as she speaks she looks straight at Solomon
and appears to look him in the eyes. Solomon replies, “Return it,” and he gestures like he
is going to hand it back to her. Patsey says with a small smile, “It yours, Platt,” and she
gently pushes it back towards him. Solomon inquires, “For what cause?” and Patsey
replies, “All I ask, end my life. Take my body to the margin of the swamp, take me by the
throat, hold me low in the water until I is still and without life. Bury me in a lonely place
of dying” (Pitt, 2013). Throughout their exchange Patsey is again shrouded in shadow. As
Patsey speaks she looks at Solomon and again with a smallish smile, she makes her
request. Solomon replies, “I will do not such thing.” As Patsey pauses and then looks
down at her hands, Solomon continues, “The gory detail with which you speak.” Patsey
interrupts him saying, “I thought on it long and hard,” and she looks at him imploringly.
Solomon replies, “It is melancholia, nothing more. How can you fall into such despair?”
Patsey, staring beseechingly at Solomon, says thickly, “How can you not know?” The
camera cuts to a close-up of a less shadowed Patsey as she says “I ain’t got no comfort in
this life. If I can’t buy mercy from ya, I’ll beg it” (Pitt, 2013). Solomon replies, “There
are others, beg them,” and Patsey says abruptly, “I’m begging you.” The camera cuts to a
two-shot close-up of Solomon and Patsey with Patsey slightly out of focus when Solomon harshly asks, “Why? Why would you consign me to damnation with such an ungodly request?” The camera cuts back to a close-up of Patsey as she vehemently replies, “There is God here! God is merciful and he forgive merciful acts. Won’t be no hell for ya’.” The camera returns to a two-shot close-up of them as Patsey looks at Solomon, she gently touches his shoulder and continues on, “Do it” and looking Solomon right in his eyes she says, “Do what I ain’t got the strength to do myself” (Pitt, 2013). Solomon looks back at Patsey then abruptly pushes her away from him and he lays back down and turns his back on Patsey. When he pushes her away she is pushed out of the frame and no longer visible to the audience. Patsey’s hands come back into the frame and touch Solomon’s back but he ignores her and as her shadow moves away you can faintly hear what sounds like Patsey moaning.

**Scene 12.** As the film continues, the audience finds out that Epps’s cotton fields have been hit with what he calls a “plague” and to keep an income coming in, he rents out some of his enslaved workers to a Judge at a nearby plantation for a season. Solomon continues to look for ways to gain his freedom and he is given an opportunity by the Judge to play his fiddle for a party and receive pay. The audience next sees Patsey when Solomon returns to Epps’s plantation and sees Patsey doing yard work. In the close-up of Patsey’s face it is clear that in addition to the scar on her face, Patsey’s right eyeball is now deeply reddened.

**Scene 13.** As the film continues, we briefly see Patsey again at a weighing for the cotton and again she has picked over 500 pounds of cotton. When Epps speaks to her, a
medium shot shows Patsey briefly look at him and then return her eyes at the floor. Patsey again appears when, after being beaten for not picking enough, Solomon is having his whipped back tended by Armsby, a white worker who is in the field with them. Patsey walks over to assist Armsby with Solomon’s back and she continues walking around to help others. After conversing with Armsby, Solomon gets the idea to use his pay from playing his fiddle to get Armsby to smuggle out a letter. Armsby turns Solomon in to Epps, but Solomon is able to convince Epps that the servant is lying and Epps believes him.

**Scene 14.** Patsey next appears in an extreme long shot with all of the enslaved workers ad they stand at the grave of a man named Abram who died while they were working the fields. The camera cuts to a long shot and Patsey is shown to be clapping, swaying, and singing along with everyone grouped together and she even smiles a bit.

**Scene 15.** The next scene with Patsey begins begins with Epps screaming and making a racket in his home. Epps screams, “I knew it! I knew it! I knew it! Patsey! Pats!” and comes running out his house. He approaches his enslaved workers screaming, “Where is she? Where’s Patsey? Where is she damn it? Where is she?” he comes up to one of the other women and, while shaking her, asks, “Phebs, where is she? Where is Patsey? Where is she? What you standing there for?” and Phebs replies, “We know nothing of her, Master.” Epps replies, “Know nothing of what?” and Phebs says, “We know nothing of” before Epps cuts her off saying, “OF what? Where has she gone?” and Phebs says, “I don’t know.” Epps then says, “She run off, ain’t she?” and Phebs says, “I don’t know” and Epps repeats, “Where is she? You know, you know, you know, you
know!” and Phebs says, “No, I don’t.” Epps throws Phebs to the ground and says, “You miserable black dogs. You stand like the deaf and dumb. Speak!” He then leans on another woman and says, “She gone. My Pats is gone.”

**Scene 16.** The film cuts to another long shot of the plantation suddenly Patsey appears in the frame and walking quickly across the yard wearing a long pink dress and bonnet on her head; as she walks, Epps appears in front of her saying, “Run off? Run off, did you?” The long shot reveals that there was also a man walking behind her. As Epps walks up on her, Patsey begins to reply saying, “Master Epps,” until he roughly grabs her by the neck and says, “You miserable wench. Where you been?” In a continuous shot teh camera zooms in closer as Epps pushes Patsey, causing her to stumble backwards as she replies, “I been nowhere.” The camera zooms in for a close-up as Epps says, “Lies to you misdeeds!” Patsey continues saying, “The Sabbath day, Master. I took me a walk to commune with the Lord,” and as Epps chokes her, he says, “Bring the Lord into your deceptions? You’re coming from Shaw’s plantation,” and she screams, “No!”

As this is taking place, Solomon has been observing. He walks up behind Epps, puts his hand on his shoulder and says, “Master Epps,” but rather than reply, Epps turns around and backhands Solomon and says, “Now you speak?” A medium shot shows Patsey run over to place her arms protectively over Solomon’s back as she stands between Solomon and Epps. The camera zooms in for a medium close-up and Patsey pushes her arm into Epps while blocking Solomon with her other arm as Epps screams, “Now that you want to add to her lies, you find your tongue!” Patsey interrupts Epps to say, “I went to Master Shaw’s plantation,” and Epps says, “Ah! You admit it!” Sobbing,
Patsey says, “Yes, freely,” initially looking down when answering and then looking up at him to say, “And you know why?” She then brings her left hand forward and opens it up to reveal a bar of soap; she says, looking imploringly at Epps, “I got this from Mistress Shaw. Mistress Epps won’t even grant me no soap to clean with. I stink so much I make myself gag!” Patsey takes deep gasping breaths before continuing on saying, “500 pounds of cotton. Day in, day out! More than any man here and for that, I will be clean. That’s all I ask. This here what I went to Shaw’s for,” and Epps replies, “Liar.” As Patsey speaks the camera zooms in for a close-up and although Epps, Patsey, and Solomon share the screen the focus is on Patsey. Shaking her head no, Patsey continues saying, “The Lord knows that’s all!” and Epps replies, “You’re a liar,” to which Patsey, looking him right in the eyes, replies, “And you, blind with your own covetousness! I don’t lie, Master. If you kill me, I’ll stick to that.”

The camera returns to a two-shot close up of Epps as he says, “I’ll fetch you down. I’ll learn you to go to Shaw’s.” Epps turns around and calls out to Treach. When Treach walks up to him, Epps grabs the whip from Treach’s shoulder and while staring at Patsey, he says, “Run and fetch some line.” Treach calls out to someone named Edward, and in the background, the audience can see Mistress Epps watch from the doorway and then make her way over to where they are standing. Epps says to Treach, “Strip her. Strike her bare and lash her to the post,” and when Treach grabs her, Patsey does not protest or fight but she loudly gasps and begins to sob when Treach tears her dress off, leaving her bare. In a medium close-up Patsey continues to sob while wrapping her arms around a wooden post as she is tied to it. The camera zooms in for a two-shot close-up of Patsey and Epps
when he walks up behind her she turns her eyes in his direction as he says, “You done this to yourself, Pats.” Patsey’s face is pressed into the post as she continues to sob and moan unintelligible words and as Epps hesitates, Mistress Epps says, “Do it. Strike the life from her.” Epps suddenly turns around and says to Solomon, “Beat her. Give her the whip! Give it all to her!” Solomon does not immediately reply or move and Epps says, “Platt, you come here and you beat her now. Platt!” As Solomon hesitantly begins to walk in his direction, Epps screams, “Come here!” Solomon continues walking towards Epps and from out of frame Patsey calls out, “I’d rather it you, Platt!” and Epps says, “You strike her. Strike her” (Pitt, 2013).

Solomon looks briefly at Epps, who has moved to stand to the side, and Solomon proceeds to crack the whip and strike Patsey, who cries out in pain. As Solomon continues to whip her, Mistress Epps says, “He pantomimes. There’s a barely a welt on her. That’s what your niggers make of you, a fool for the taking.” As Mistress Shaw speaks, the camera pans around in a medium long shows that shows Epps, Solomon, Patsey, Mistress Shaw, and others in the background watching. As Solomon continues whipping her, the camera shows Patsey as she is being whipped and her eyes have a somewhat glazed look to them as she stares off in the distance while crying out in pain. Epps scream outs, “Strike her, Platt, strike her!” and as Solomon strikes her again, Patsey’s eyes snap shut when she cries out and she begins to pant harder. Tears begin to roll down her face as she visibly flinches from the next strikes that Solomon gives her. Epps grabs a gun and placing it under Solomon’s chin, he says, “You will strike her. You will strike her until her flesh is rent and meat and blood flow equal or I will kill every
nigger in my sight. You understand me? Strike her! Strike her!” and he walks away from Solomon.

The camera pans around to a medium close-up of Solomon as he continues whipping Patsey, but this time he appears to be hitting her more aggressively and she screams out again. When Patsey is again shown in a close-up on screen, her eyes are closed as she flinches and sobs in pain. She begins to rock her body back and forth from the tree and she opens her eyes again on another strike from Solomon who stands in the back of the shot. As Solomon continues to whip her, she begins to gag, choke, and cough, and when Solomon hesitates, Epps says, “Until I say no more. I ain’t said nothing” (Pitt, 2013). Epps then walks over to Solomon and throwing Solomon bodily to the ground in an attempt to grab the whip, Epps says, “Give me the whip!” He strikes Solomon with it once and says, “Get up!” Epps then proceeds to strike Patsey who cries out as the camera reveals in a medium long shot that Patsey is naked and he strikes hard enough to split her back with each strike. As Epps continues whipping her Solomon says, “Thou devil! Sooner or later somewhere in the course of eternal justice, thou shalt answer for this sin!” Epps finishes and while panting hard, he looks at Solomon and says, “Sin? There is no sin. Man does how he pleases with his own property. At the moment, Platt, I am of great pleasure. You be goddamn careful I don’t want to come and lighten my mood no further” (Pitt, 2013). As Solomon goes to untie Patsey from the post, in a medium close-up it is obvious that Patsey has passed out from the pain and she simply falls to ground on her back when he unties her; the soap is seen lying on the ground.
Scene 17. In the next scene the audience sees Patsey’s back as she is being tended to and it is covered with deep lacerations, gouges, and it is heavily bloodied where her skin split. The person tending to her touches her back and Patsey flinches while crying out in pain, whimpering, and sobbing. The audience then sees Patsey make an effort to put her head up and move so that she can look up at Solomon briefly as she sobs inconsolably.

Scene 18. The film continues and the audience sees that Solomon has befriended a travelling man named Bass and feels comfortable enough to be able to talk him about who he really is and where he comes from. Solomon is able to convince Bass to write a letter to Solomon’s people in the North to help him to attain his freedom. Bass successfully reaches Solomon’s people in the North and a friend of Solomon’s is able to come and rescue him from the plantation. The audience last sees Patsey as she runs out to the carriage Solomon is getting into upon his rescue. Patsey calls out, “Platt!” and Solomon steps down from the carriage. The audience sees that Patsey is wearing a long-sleeved, mustard colored gown as she stares at him. Patsey and Solomon embrace each other tightly. Epps rides by on his horse and says, “Get away from him, Pats,” and then Epps says to the men in the carriage, “I’ll be seeing you real soon.” As Patsey and Solomon step back from their embrace she says, “No,” and his friend says “Solomon,” and Solomon breaks away from Patsey, who is grabbing his hand. Solomon walks away. The last image of Patsey the audience sees is of her fainting, and she fades in the distance behind Solomon as he is driven away.
As the film ends, Solomon returns home to his family to find his wife a little grayer, two adult children, and a grandson named after him. The ending credits reveal that Solomon Northrup never truly got justice for his kidnapping and what was done to him. Although his kidnappers and the slave pen owner were brought to trial, laws preventing Solomon from testifying kept them from being prosecuted. The ending credits also revealed that the details of Solomon Northrup’s death remain unknown.

An analysis of shifting *12 Years a Slave* negotiating for shifting as performed by Lupita Nyong’o as Patsey. The first instance of Lupita Nyong’o as Patsey performing shifting arrives in scene 3; Edwin Epps walks over to Patsey to stand behind her at the weighing of the cotton. While Epps stands behind Patsey, her eyes are cast down, but she looks slightly to her right while her body quivers delicately when Epps touches her. Patsey’s behavior shifts when she willfully keeps her eyes cast down in a submissive manner; submissive or obedient behaviors consist of showing deference or reverence to the one with authority over you (Olwell, 1998) According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), “an enslaved woman or black woman living under the heel of Jim Crow would have to shift literally, casting her eyes downward” (p.12). This instance of shifting is an example of behavioral shifting and requires no vocal communication at all. *12 Years a Slave* is a film set in the 1800s when slavery still existed in the South; viewers may expect to see certain injustices and behaviors indicative of that time period. Further, the canted angle of the shot represents the disparity in power represented by Patsey and Epps; the performance of behavioral shifting in the character of Patsey is expected in that situation because Epps, the white slave master, retains the power and
expects compliance. Had an actual enslaved black female in Patsey’s circumstances not shifted in a similar situation, there likely would have been physical consequences in the form of a whipping for her. The aforementioned performance of shifting is another example of the scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment strategy (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The character of Patsey is presented as having a keen awareness of her environment (being at the mercy of Epps) and she “carefully monitors how she is being perceived at every turn” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 65). As the scene continues, Epps begins caressing the side of Patsey’s neck, and while she appears to briefly flinch, she remains silent and only appears to relax when Epps walks away from her. As Epps walks away, Patsey’s jaw tightens then loosens and she looks down at the ground in front of her. When Patsey visibly relaxes the tension her jaw this indicates that she has shifted from where she felt she needed to be was and can take a breath and relax. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that the alertness and awareness strategy helps black women to feel in control, however, that same alertness and awareness can keep black women from exhaling and relaxing (p. 70).

The next instance of the character Patsey performing shifting occurs in scene 7; Patsey has gone to visit her friend Mistress Shaw and sits at a table with Mistress Shaw, laughing and drinking tea. In this interaction, Patsey wears a straw hat tied under her chin and she mimics Mistress Shaw’s behaviors; for example, when Mistress Shaw takes a sip of tea and points out her pinky, Patsey also takes a sip of tea with her pinky out. This presentation of Patsey’s friendship with Mistress Shaw is another example of shifting. As explained by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) Patsey is presented as seeking “spiritual
support through churches, religious communities, friends, and family members” (p. 65).

As her friend, Mistress Shaw has developed an emotional connection to Patsey and relates to her struggle as the “object of Master’s predilections and peculiarities” (Pitt, 2013). Patsey is the object of Master Epps’s predilections and peculiarities and Mistress Shaw was the object of her now husband’s same predilections and peculiarities. Mistress Shaw also understands a “lusty visit in the night or a visitation with the whip,” but she also encourages Patsey, saying, “Take comfort, Patsey. The good Lord will manage Epps, in his own, the good Lord will manage them all” (Pitt, 2013). Mistress Shaw’s encouragement helps Patsey to shift and cope with her hard life. As stated by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), “By finding a higher purpose and building emotional connections in their lives, many black women find they can rise above the daily onslaught of sexism and racism” (p.65). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) outline six shifting strategies used by black women and Patsey’s relationship with Mistress Shaw is an example of one such strategy performed for the audience on the silver screen.

The audience can recognize shifting in Patsey in other ways in this particular scene as well, but her shifting occurs mostly in the presence of those from her own community. The camera close-ups of Patsey allow the audience to see that when Patsey is with Mistress Shaw she sits straighter and emulates the movements and mannerisms exhibited by Mistress Shaw. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that “most black women ‘shift’ their behavior to accommodate others” (p. 13). More than half of the black women surveyed by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) indicated that, “at times they have changed the way they act in order to fit in or be accepted by white people” (p.13). Set
within the time period in which Patsey lives and the difference between her present life and Mistress Shaw’s, it appears that her behaviors are reminiscent of black women shifting to fit in with white people. When black women shift in the presence of white people it is often to counter expected stereotypical behaviors or assumptions and Patsey appears to be exhibiting some of the qualities common to this type of shifting by modeling her behavior and mannerisms after Mistress Shaw, but more so to be more like her and fit in at the tea table with her. Although Mistress Shaw is not a white person, she is a black woman and mistress of a white enslaver’s plantation; her marriage elevated her status from enslaved worker to mistress and a woman who is waited upon. This could indicate that a black woman might shift when there is a perceived difference in status between herself and others, and this status difference can exist within her own racial/ethnic community. Patsey also appears to be more relaxed when she is with Mistress Shaw, so in this instance, the shifting that occurs does not appear to be detrimental but more of an opportunity for Patsey to also shift her way of thinking.

The next performance of shifting occurs in scene 9; Epps comes in the enslaved workers’ sleeping quarters and retrieves Patsey. In this scene, Epps proceeds to rape Patsey and she silently bears the abuse; the camera’s two-shot close-up of Epps as he lays Patsey down on her back allows to audience to see them in profile and pick up on nuanced facial expressions and behaviors. The shadowed lighting in the scene looks as though low-key lighting was used to great effect in order to set a somber tone as Patsey silently lies there with a blank look on her face and look off into the distance above and to the left of Epps’ head. Low-key lighting is typically implemented to increase the
number of shadows in a scene and differing levels of color and contrast (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008). As Epps begins to rape Patsey, she resolutely does not look at him until he forcefully grabs her face and makes her face him. Patsey’s decision not to look at Epps, her violator, while she is being sexually violated is a form of resistance and a shift Patsey has made to cope. Patsey’s silence and blank look on her face are evidence of shifting as a coping or survival strategy. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) explain that some black women “erect a wall of stoicism to protect themselves from the profound emotional pain that they would otherwise feel” (p.61). Patsey appears to have disconnected herself from her current circumstance and shifted so that she can survive the ordeal. This strategy is similar to the third basic shifting strategy, “wallowing off the impact of discrimination” identified by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004); when black women adopt this strategy it can include “downplaying, ignoring, or denying the role of sexism and racism in their lives” as a way to “transcend the pain and suffering they would otherwise experience” (p. 65). Again, the two-shot medium close-up emphasizes that this scene is all about Epps and his position of power over Patsey as he is positioned up and over her prone figure. When Epps grabs Patsey’s face and forces her to face him, the scene presents Patsey’s attempt to separate herself from the experience. This moment is presented as a cognitive shift for Patsey; the film suggests that in her mind, she has removed herself from what is being done to her and potentially her being in shadows could represent an attempt to not be seen. In their 1965 study “Eye-Contact, Distance and Affiliation,” Michael Argyle and Janet Dean stated, “During social interaction, people look each other in the eye, repeatedly but for short periods of time” (p. 289); further, “there is less EC [eye contact]
if there is tension in the relationship” (p. 291). The relationship between Epps and Patsey is that of Master and slave, rapist and the raped. Patsey’s lack of eye contact with Epps shows that she is not comfortable with Epps and she is attempting to distance herself from him. Epps’s unwillingness to look away from Patsey shows that he is fully present in their interaction and wants her compliance.

Patsey also exhibits shifts in her behavior in this scene by simply remaining silent, because as with her earlier interaction with Epps, he holds the power; Epps is the white slave owner and Patsey, the enslaved, is expected to comply. As the scene continues, Epps finishes and he calls Patsey’s name but when she does not respond, he smacks her hard enough to move half of her body and he begins to choke her. After choking her for a time, he stops and leaves Patsey lying there in the moonlight with her dress bunched up near her waist and still staring off into space. Epps’s belief that he can violate Patsey whenever he wants to also relates to the stereotypical myth about black women being promiscuous and sexually aggressive, a myth that still persists today (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 32). As further explained by Collins (2000), “Rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault during slavery, domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion, accompany Black women’s subordination in intersecting oppressions” (p. 146). As a black enslaved female, Patsey has to shift both when she is begin exploited as an enslaved black person (when she works) and when she is being victimized as a female (when she is raped).

The next performance of shifting occurs in Scene 10; Patsey is again in Epps’s house dancing late at night and Mistress Epps walks in and interrupts everyone’s dancing
to tell the enslaved workers to try what she baked for them. Mistress Epps purposely excludes Patsey saying, “There will be none for you, Patsey” (Pitt, 2013). As Mistress Epps says this, Patsey looks away, avoids eye contact, and looks at the floor. This moment is a behavioral shift because Patsey averts her eyes from Mistress Epps for her own safety and so she does not upset Mistress Epps. Patsey’s attempt to monitor her own behavior is another example of the second of the six basic shifting strategies (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2004); Patsey is “scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment” (p. 65). In this instance, Patsey appears to understand that should Mistress Epps perceive her in a negative way, there could be consequences. The medium shot allows the audience to view Patsey in the background while Mistress Epps speaks to Epps. Throughout the heated exchange between Epps and his wife, Patsey remains perfectly still and keeps her eyes cast downward, maintaining her shift that shows her awareness of the scene around her. Patsey’s behavior is again expected for that time because “for Black people down South, knowing how to express oneself-and when to be silent- could mean the difference between life and death” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 89)

Mistress Epps continues to speak but when Epps does not respond or move to punish Patsey, Mistress Epps walks over to Patsey and viciously scratches Patsey on her face. Mistress Epps then yells “Beat it from them!” and Epps gets up and grabs Patsey from the floor, where she has fallen down crying, and drags her from the room. The scene also sheds light on another significant component of shifting, when “a particular form of shifting can be an effective coping strategy for one woman, and a useless, counter-
productive, or absolutely destructive one for the next” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p.64). In this scene, the other female enslaved workers also looked down at the ground while Mistress Epps spoke and one of them even looked at her but no one but Patsey received punishment in this scene. Even when determining the best way to respond and shift, Patsey was unable to avoid being punished or physically harmed which indicates that “some coping processes fail, leaving the individual susceptible to feelings of low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse and a plethora of other mental and physical ailments” (as cited by Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 64). Patsey’s strategy to shift in order to cope with Mistress Epps’ nasty attitude towards was not successful and she was still harmed.

The next observed performance of shifting occurs during Scene 11; Patsey goes to visit Solomon to request his help in ending her life. This scene indicates that Patsey has made a cognitive shift in her thinking regarding the value of her life and her circumstances. When Patsey received encouragement from her relationship with Mistress Shaw as a shifting strategy, she made no indication that she wanted to die; after suffering more abuse from both Epps and Mistress Epps, Patsey shifted her thoughts from where her life could be (free and loved like Mistress Shaw) to wanting to die. The camera close-ups used in this scene allow the audience to see the breadth of emotions exhibited by Patsey during her exchange with Solomon and the medium close-ups also allow the audience to see how different her posture is with Solomon as opposed to how it was with Mistress Shaw. Patsey looks tense when she speaks with Solomon and certain desperation permeates the entire exchange.
The next performance of shifting occurs during Scene 13; Patsey briefly appears in a short scene where Epps and all of his workers (enslaved and foremen) are gathered to weigh the cotton gathered that day. In this scene, Epps again acknowledges Patsey after it is announced that she has again picked over 500 pounds of cotton. Patsey is not visible on camera until Epps addresses her and she briefly looks at him and then glances back at the floor. The medium shot allows the audience to see when she diverts her eyes and this action is indicative of a behavioral shift.

The performance of shifting is next observed during Scene 14; Patsey and all of the enslaved blacks are gathered around the grave of Abram, an enslaved worker who died in the field, to sing for him. The extreme long shot displays all of the enslaved workers present, Patsey included, as a small component of a larger scene that shows the grave, the outdoors, and a house behind them. As they sang the religious song Patsey was in the middle of the group clapping and singing the song. Patsey’s expression is somber but relaxed and she seems to be reveling in the opportunity to sing and clap. This particular scene is indicative of Patsey using the earlier mentioned shifting strategy, “seeking spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, friends and family members” (Jones & Shorter-Goeden, 2004, p. 65). While this setting is not a church, the community of slaves is presented as coming together to sing a religious song to celebrate the life of another. Jones and Shorter-Goeden (2004) further explain, “by finding a higher purpose and building emotional connections in their lives, many Black women find they can rise above the daily onslaught of sexism and racism” (p. 65). Patsey singing and clapping along with everyone is understood as an opportunity
for her to draw on her community of fellow enslaved workers and a moment that allows her to stay encouraged.

Shifting is again performed during Scene 16; Epps has been furiously looking all over his plantation for Patsey because he believes she has run off and when Patsey appears, Epps bears down on her, with accusations she ran off. Even as she attempts to respond, he grabs her roughly by her neck and says, “You miserable wench. Where you been?” (Pitt, 2013). The situation escalates and Epps decides that Patsey should be whipped in punishment. When Solomon intervenes, he is tasked with being the one to whip Patsey. As she is whipped, Patsey never begs them to stop, and she never complains; she only sobs, even as her back is split open. This scene was shot in one take and there are no edits present to disrupt continuity and a lack of edits was crucial to the success of this particular scene (Moakley, 2014). Cinematographer Sean Bobbitt, who collaborated with Steve McQueen on the film, states,

“We’ve discovered over the years that if you extend a shot, particularly a scene of violence, and don’t edit it, you don’t lost the audience. But as soon as an edit appears in such a scene. Subconsciously the audience is reminded that it’s watching a film-that it’s not real” (Moakley, 2014).

During this scene shifting is performed several times during Patsey’s exchange with Epps. The first instance occurs after Patsey places herself between Epps and Solomon in order to protect him. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), “there is a clear mandate, even if it is unspoken, that black women must do everything in their power to protect their men, to be ever faithful to them in the face of society’s persistent anti-Black
prejudices” (p.40). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) apply this notion to black women being mistreated by black men and remaining silent about their abuse; they assert that black women have to adhere to this silent “mandate” that black women must protect their black men, no matter what. In this instance, the medium shot allows the audience to see Patsey literally use her body to protect Solomon from Epps’s wrath. She seeks to divert his wrath so that she may incur it all herself. When Patsey stood between Epps and Solomon she began to look Epps in the eye and she spoke to him more in this scene than she did at any point in the film. She verbally challenges Epps when he calls her a liar by saying, “The Lord knows that’s all!” When Epps says, “You’re a liar,” Patsey replies, “And you, blind with your own covetousness! I don’t lie, Master. If you kill me, I’ll stick to that” (McQueen, 2013). In this scene, Patsey has applied the sixth and final basic shifting strategy, “fighting back” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 65). Patsey is choosing to fight back with her words and challenge Epps’s claim that she is a liar. She is presented as shifting by fighting back. Nowhere else in the film did Patsey directly challenge Epps, nor did she ever do anything to intentionally bring attention upon herself; in this scene, she does both of those things. The close-up on Epps, Patsey, and Solomon puts the audience in the position to clearly witness Patsey’s emotions and movements and although they are all present in the shot, the focus is on her. The next performance of shifting occurs when Epps calls for Patsey to be whipped and she is dragged over to the wooden post. Patsey ceases to speak after Epps makes his proclamation and, save for her sobs and deep breathing, does not say another word directly to Epps. In this scene, Patsey has again applied the “scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing” strategy (Jones & Shorter-
Gooden, 2004, p. 65); the close-up on her as Epps addresses her shows that she has returned to not speaking directly to Epps and only looks in his direction when he addresses her as she is tied to the post. Patsey is presented as being back to monitoring how she is perceived by Epps, and the audience sees that she has again shifted into the position of monitoring herself to save herself from further consequences. She says nothing more to Epps even when a medium close-up reveals that the upper half of her body is entirely bared.

The final performance of shifting is brief and occurs when Patsey is not on-screen. The shift occurs when Solomon hesitates to whip Patsey and faces the threat of incurring Epps’s wrath himself. As Solomon hesitates, Patsey calls out, “I’d rather it be you, Platt.” Her statement is an intervention in an attempt to protect Platt from Epps’s wrath. Patsey’s behavior is again indicative of the mandate that black women should protect black men (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Patsey is protecting Solomon by telling him that she would rather he beat her than Epps; what makes this scene all the more powerful is that in this particular instance of protecting a black man, Patsey is literally helping to ease Solomon’s conscience so that he can physically harm her.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis supplied relevant conclusions regarding the performance of shifting applicable to Cultural Studies, film studies, and the field of communication studies. First, when depicting the real life phenomenon of shifting in a fictional filmic text, behavioral and cognitive shifts performed by black women are incorporated into the characters’ lives. The black female actors performed noticeable shifts in their vocal intonations to perform certain aspects of shifting, including changes in vocal tone, volume, breath, and speech patterns.

According to Mary Ellen O’Brien (1983), “It is advantageous in film to have a distinctive voice quality and pattern, whether it be raspy, hesitant, thin or resonant. The distinctive voice or speech pattern helps to establish the identity of an actor” (p. 55). Actors establish an identity on screen, but it is important for them to be flexible. As explained by O’Brien (1983), “All film actors must be able to express vocally the nuances of feelings when the roles require, no matter what kind of natural voices they have” (p. 56). Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o made changes to their vocal patterns in order to express different emotional aspects of their performances (which included the depiction of shifting).

Second, when depicting the real-life phenomenon of shifting, there were cinematic characteristics that helped convey certain aspects of the actors’ performances. Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o were successfully able to perform certain aspects of shifting by conveying their feelings through physical expression, including facial
expression, movement and eye contact. Further, through the use of camera positioning (angles) and distance (shots) the audience was able to see nuanced facial expressions and movements that contributed to the performances. O’Brien (1983) asserts, “Personality resides in the physical. Innumerable changes in the musculature of the actor’s body within his context of thought, emotion, or action create a physical home for personality. The two are so closely linked they are inseparable” (p. 58). In other words, an actor works to convey recognizable behaviors that indicate to the audience a specific action or outcome. For example, Person A might notice Person B staring off into space for extended periods of time, so Person A might say to Person B, “You seem preoccupied today. Are you okay?” In this example, Person A recognized Person B’s behaviors as indicative of a specific emotion or condition. The performances of Mo’Nique and Lupita Nyong’o as analyzed in each film contained “cinematic instances of personality” that the audience should be able to recognize as shifting, even without previous knowledge of shifting by that name (O’Brien, 1983, p. 58). For example, during scene 10 when Patsey is accused of giving Mistress Epps a “look of insolence” the medium shot allows the camera to clearly see that Patsey has not looked directly at Mistress Epps and keeps her eyes averted. The audience may not know that a shift is being performed but they recognize when someone is trying to avoid a confrontation or undue situation.

Finally, actors interpreted the film scripts they received in order to imbue meaning into their performances to convey shifting. Impressions of characters are made when they are viewed in a filmic text. According to O’Brien (1983), “First impressions of a character include both external traits, such as how the character walks, dresses, styles
the hair, handle props, smiles, talks, or relaxes, and internal traits, such as the ways the
color character...handles stress, or copes with problems” (p. 68). Mo’Nique and Luptia
Nyong’o’s performances contained detailed impressions that enabled the experience to be
observed and analyzed. The camera, as the audience’s eyes, was able to situate audience
within the scenes through close-ups, varied camera angles, and different lighting schemes
that helped reinforce these impressions. For example, during scene 7 in the description of
Precious (2009) the medium long shot on Mo’Nique’s performance of shifting gave the
audience an eye-level view of her position on the couch next to Ms. Weiss and where
Precious was positioned in the room that allowed the audience to observe Mo’Nique
perform verbal and non-verbal indicators of shifting. An eye-level shot puts the camera
(the audience) at a realistic height as if they were performing in the shot along with the
characters.

For this thesis, Peirce’s emphasis on the sign, the interpretant, and the object in
semiotics were used to great effect because, while observing and analyzing performances,
the signs presented in the films produced information and impressions. Such impressions
included the way their characters’ dressed, spoke, and interacted with others; camera
angles and distance reinforced these impressions and helped illuminate performances of
shifting. The performances of these impressions led to the observation of shifting as
performed by both women. The signs of shifting were identified based on the
explanations presented in the Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden’s text and, as
supported by Pierce’s second triad, the identification of signs as shifting were interpreted.
Metz’ position that semiotics of connotation is significant based on the context in which
the sign(s) occur was highly relevant to this thesis because of the settings of each of these films. *12 Years a Slave* (2013) was set in the racially brutal and oppressive South and *Precious* (2009) set in a late 1980’s Harlem, New York where poverty was a constant presence. The instances of shifting observed in both of these films often proved a direct correlation to the environment in which they took place.

The analyses of these films yielded some interesting conclusions, such as the similar performances of shifting between the two films. Each film contained behavioral shifts performed by the black female actors that contained strategies explained by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) including battling the myths; scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment; fighting back; and seeking spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, friends, and family members. The evidence of the presentation of shifting exhibited in these two different films is significant because films are “products of popular culture” and leave lasting impressions in viewer’s “collective imagination” (Mintz & Roberts, 2001, p.1). The camera is the audience’s eye as the performances are taking place on film and they interpret the controlled images they see. The notion that these two, Oscar-winning films, written and directed by two different black, male directors and released nearly four years apart could both depict performances of shifting in the same way does not support the idea that American films represent America’s ever-changing values. If these performances entirely represented America’s values, which should include the values of black female Americans, then the static nature of these similar performances would not be present. The values presented in these
performances may actually be more informed by the values of the largely white and male, Academy Award of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences voting members.

The films also contained stories set in the past, Precious: based on the novel push by Sapphire (2009) was set in 1987 and 12 Years a Slave (2013) was set in the early 1800’s. The films also highlight the seemingly consistent awarding of Oscars by the Academy to black female actors for performances that contain controversial or provocative representations of black women (Bogle, 2001; Mask, ). Mo’Nique’s performance of Mary provided little in the way of redeeming personal qualities and very much presented a potentially damaging image of a black woman; this representation supports the idea that the Academy only awards stereotypical depictions of black women. However, Lupita Nyong’o’s Patsey, while another awarded depiction of an oppressed black person, shed some light on the performance of shifting as a less damaging representation. Shifting, while a real life experience black women have, is not considered a healthy way for black women to live and rewarding this image on film implies that this behavior is normative and not a cause for concern. Nyong’o’s performance of Patsey reveals that shifting can also help black women stay encouraged and endure potentially harmful and unhealthy situations. This is an interesting point because negotiating a typically disparaged representation of an enslaved black woman from an oppositional stance revealed that shifting could be performed as more than just an unhealthy experience for black women. When Patsey shifted her way of thinking about herself and her life when she had tea with Mistress Shaw, this highlighted her endurance and showcased shifting as an opportunity for black women to reconsider their way of
thinking. Shifting is a survival strategy employed by black women to navigate uncomfortable or potentially harmful situations but it can also be an approach to imagine a change of circumstances. Conversely, Mo’Nique’s performance of Mary revealed that shifting to survive may not always relate to circumstance beyond one’s control; Mary shifted her behavior in order to maintain her welfare benefits and was willing to play the part to make it happen. This performance of shifting, as a way to keep yourself from thriving on your own is counter to the idea that shifting is a necessity to survive what you cannot control. Awareness of how to behave or shift is often a learned experience for black women and sometimes they are unaware they are doing; Mary’s complete awareness of her shifting shows that she is aware that she is shifting to manipulate the government and in complete control.

The two films selected were both based on stories written by black authors, adapted to the screen by black male screenwriters, directed by black men, and performed by black female actors. This “self-direction” (Margolis, 1999) of the black experience is significant because performances of shifting, an experience necessitated by the double jeopardy of being black and female, perpetuates the belief that black people are always performing. Lola Young (1996) argues that “Black people have been expected to behave, respond and experience in particular ways: we are ‘obliged’ to play particular roles” (p. 176). The black male directors are playing a particular part in order to get their films produced and distributed around the world, the screenwriters are playing a part to have their adaptations selected and used, and the black female actors are playing a part to be selected for roles that garner appreciation. Black filmmakers and directors who create
films about black experiences are likely to garner even more critique from the black community. As explained by Margolis (1999),

“The pressures on black filmmakers are obviously immense, far beyond those of individual white filmmakers. Not only do black filmmakers have to find the means to make a film and to express themselves through that film, as white filmmakers must do, but they also need to keep in mind that that film will inevitably contribute to how blacks and black aesthetics will be perceived by blacks as well as whites” (p. 50).

The fact that these black female actors are being directed by black males to perform shifting reinforces the assertion that black women are always performing. This is further complicated because the very existence of shifting immediately undercuts black women’s ability to have agency for themselves and even in Hollywood black female actors (even when they are not performing) are limited in their agency. If films that produce Oscars for black female actors continue to portray shifting and display controlled images of black women with little to no agency, the expectations of films will not change. Further, if those from the black community in a position to make changes including directors, writers, producers, actors, continue to demonstrate shifting in our own stories the films will represent academy expectations.

The dominant group uses similar strategies to perpetuate systems of oppression and awarding Oscars for depictions of damaging representations of shifting can be one such strategy. When viewers see these representations and apply what Metz calls the “impression of reality” they believe the film’s performances to be realistic which
normalizes what they see. If the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences represents the dominant population in Hollywood then the more prevalent negative depictions of shifting can be revealed as a common thread through films that result in Oscar wins for black female actors. The performance of shifting on film by black female actors as a normal part of reality could be related to the idea that people understand that because racially motivated overtures are frequently combatted, experiences of oppression based on gender are less important (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p.41). If people live and accept gender oppression to be less serious than racially motivated oppression then black female actors will constantly perform roles that keep them trapped in their double jeopardy.

In Hollywood there are more than stereotypical representations of black women present there are also archetypal representations. F.W. Gooding J.R. (2007) defines an archetype as “a broader character pattern by which individual conduct is classified” (p. 12); performances of shifting on film could be considered archetypical in nature because even though they can be performed outside of stereotypical expectations they are still overreaching themes present in Oscar-winning films that resulted in Oscars for black female actors. As mentioned earlier film produces controlled images and performances and representations are not present by accident and a black female actor being directed by black male to perform shifting in a black film based on a black film is not accidental. Ideology, or the ideas perpetuated by the dominant group, exists in fictional films as much as they do anywhere else and the cinematic decisions made for these films put forth the ideology that black women should shift.
Limitations

The first limitation to this research includes the small number of films analyzed. While the analysis of the two films yielded significant and relevant results for the fields of film studies, cultural studies, and communication studies, the analyses here are still only based on two films. Analysis of all seven films that resulted in an Oscar for black female actors could also significantly change the results of this thesis. The observation of shifting as more than just a harmful experience could potentially reveal itself in more Oscar-winning performances by black female actors. The second limitation is the lack of communication or interaction with the black female actors performing these roles, their position as black women performing a black female experience could yield valuable insight. An opportunity to speak with someone involved with the production of either of the films or even the author of *Push* could have provided details otherwise unknown about the characters as well.

Films as texts, as earlier mentioned, are polysemic and can be interpreted in many different ways, the films were analyzed using bell hooks’ oppositional gaze and Bobo’s explanation of a black female cultural reader to define the theoretical framework. Applying the same research questions with a different framework could also yield significantly different results and when negotiating the text for meaning.

Future Research

The analysis of shifting in this thesis leads to interesting implications, ideas, and questions to further explore in future research. The literature supports the idea that shifting is a strategy employed by black women when attempting navigate uncomfortable
or oppressive situations, but, further research exploring shifting as a strategy to maintain the status quo would be useful to the literature as well. As earlier stated people changing their behavior or appearances for other people is a cross-cultural experience and all instances of shifting can be valuable to analyze however, the significance of black women shifting is their severely limited agency regarding how much they want to modify themselves and how much they are forced to modify themselves. Professionalism is expected in professional settings such as the workplace, but people return to a more relaxed persona once they leave; black women sometimes maintain their shifts all day and night. Black women often shift at home when they are among family and friends, specifically black men, but what about around other black women? An interesting component of analyzing shifting in films that resulted in Oscars for black female actors would be to see how, or if, the other black female characters present in the film shift. Is there a difference between the ways black female actors who are Oscar-nominated are directed to shift versus those who actually won the Oscar? Black female actors have received far nominations than the seven they have been awarded and viewing their performances would provide further insight the depictions of black woman have differed in films that have resulted in Oscars for black female actors and the ideologies present. Mintz and Roberts (2001) assert that Oscar winning and nominated films provide a record of shifting American values (p. 1); this leads to more valuable questions about the films that have resulted in Oscar nominations for black female actors. Has shifting existed on film since black female actors appeared on –screen? How have the performances of shifting evolved over time? Are all of the Oscar-nominated black female
actors directed to perform shifting in those nominated roles? How much of their performances were interpretations of the text and how much have their performances were directed?

Research into how black men shift, or the equivalent of a black woman’s shift, could also prove to be a valuable research location in the future. Does shifting for black men exist? If so, what is it called? How long has this experience existed on film? Do black men also shift for black women? The presence of black men was very present in one film and relatively non-existent in the other, focusing on films that have resulted in Oscars for male black actors could also reveal material relevant to the discipline. The opportunity to analyze black female actors performing shifting in films where black actors received an Oscar is another opportunity to observe how black female actors are directed to perform shifting. Understanding how performance of shifting in film can affect the experience of black women off-screen is another significant area to research in the future. Is there correlation between the shifting black women do everyday and what is depicted performed on-screen? The idea of performing shifting on film as a positive way to navigate situations is another area to research regarding black women in Oscar-winning films. The research on performance of shifting by black female actors is still new but it’s significance in the fields of communication, cultural studies, and film studies cannot be understated and scholars in the field of communication studies should be leading the way.
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