Chanell Noise

Spring 2022

Data-Driven Journalism

**Black Stories: Part One; Solomon Northup**

It is both a travesty and a novelty that so many Black stories are discovered and then, rediscovered. There is power in words, in stories and in the art of storytelling. It is no accident that our heritage and our history our muddied.

It is no accident that Black stories are maligned and sidelined or banned from the lexicon altogether.

The power of a non-fiction piece is especially important because it backs the truth that Black folks are people. Black folks are a magical, resilient and beautiful people. We are people. Black stories like Katherine Johnson’s mastery of numbers or Solomon Northup’s terrible misfortune with con artists in the Antebellum South are amazing.

These amazing stories in real-time were integral to boost inspiration and to warn communities, respectively. Again, Black books and stories are sidelined. Often, our stories don’t reach several generations unless a motion picture dusts off cobwebs.

This is true for the book, *12 Years a Slave*. The auto-biographical account of Solomon Northup, a free man, being tricked into slavery is awful. In 1853, it was an important account, however, to keep Black Americans safe. Illegal and immoral human trafficking ills ran rampant in the 1800s.

[Chart, line chart

Description automatically generated](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=12+Years+A+Slave%2CSolomon+Northup%2CLupita+Nyong%27o&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2C12%20Years%20A%20Slave%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CSolomon%20Northup%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CLupita%20Nyong%27o%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2C12%20Years%20A%20Slave%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CSolomon%20Northup%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CLupita%20Nyong'o%3B%2Cc0)

A look at Google Books Ngram viewer shows Soloman’s name as a strong trend in the years leading up to 1853, his memoir’s release date. The above graph shows the dismal trend in his book.

My best guess is that word of mouth in Black communities kept Solomon’s name strong around the time he was freed and penned his story down. The steady hum at the bottom of the graph reflects his name being mentioned his whole life and after- a whisper of a grim fate. The boogey man of freedom keeping Black folks on their toes.

When the movie adaptation of the book came out in 2013, the film was critically acclaimed. *12 Years A Slave* was nominated for nine Academy Awards and won both Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay.

Lupita Nyong’o won Best Supporting Actress in this film. This film adaptation is arguably where she got her career launch. The chart above highlights the lack of data on her name in book searches turning into a steep blip alongside the story that catapulted her into stardom.

The silver lining to this story, as mentioned before, is that Black people rediscovered Solomon Northup. He is forever alive through his story. His name growing in popularity could coincide with a. rise in class and racial consciousness. From 1983 on, his name is searched in at an exponential rate leading up to the film.

Storytelling is one of the greatest tools communities have in combating misinformation. Racism, one of the most dangerous tools ever invented, leans on storytelling. So, storytelling is perhaps the greatest tool invented and we as Black people should take care to tell, share and protect our stories.

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**Black Stories: Part Two; Katherine Johnson**

It is both a travesty and a novelty that so many Black stories are discovered and then, rediscovered. Storytelling is a powerful tool. A tool that folks use to both condemn or free.

Black storytelling is its own art, dating to the beginnings of time. The art of sharing information was important then and now. Generation to generation passed down survival tactics, songs of war, songs of peace, magic, recipes and warnings.

Today especially, Black stories are passed from generation as both warnings and often as inspiration.

Katherine Johnson, the original human computer and conqueror of mathematics, had an amazing story to tell. Her math was integral in the Apollo 11 moon missions. And while her amazing story may lead to more Black women leaning into their passion for STEM aspirations- her story is dwarfed by her white counterparts.

Chart, line chart

Description automatically generated

In the Google Books Ngram generated chart above, we see Katherine Johnson’s name trend high around 2016 when the book and film adaptation *Hidden Figures* came out.

The actresses playing the roles of the three women being honored in the film get a mild uptick. It seems that the true mission, to tell Katherine, Dorothy and Mary’s stories prevailed.

Looking at the chart below it is easily visible that Buzz Aldrin, the lunar module pilot, trends upwards as consequence of *Hidden Figures.*

Graphical user interface, application

Description automatically generated

It is of course no problem that Buzz gets his shine in the American Lexicon as a hero. He is indeed a pioneer in aero-space, forever and always.

What is problematic is how his name dwarfs or overshadows Katherine Johnson and her ‘Hail Mary’ at recognition. Johnson’s math made the Apollo 11 mission possible. She was part of a segregated team in a basement at NASA. She rose to academic then national and interstellar prominence because she was a mathematic prodigy.

No shade to Buzz but it was always going to be a white man that America sent to the moon. We wouldn’t get Guion Bluford Jr. (first African American in space) for another 20+ years.

The charts generated from Google Book search data paint a picture of peaks and valleys for names of people and books. No chart can accurately capture the esoteric value or qualitative net benefit of positive Black stories being told. Not a chart I’ve seen yet.

Black folks’ history doesn’t start with American chattel slavery and it doesn’t end there either. Our ancestry is Chinua Achebe, to Sojourner Truth, to Mary Jackson and Katherine Johnson then to Mae Jemison and on. Our stories don’t trend super high but we should keep up the trend of sharing our stories.