

### Debunking the Myths of the White Savior and the “Better Life”

“Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach.”

Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*

The 2007 film *Freedom Writers* places Erin Gruwell, a white teacher, in charge of a class largely made up of minority students. While the movie is (admittedly) heartwarming, the film emphasizes the concept of the “White Savior.” The “White Savior” —or the “White Hero” —is a trope in which a white person acts as a messiah and saves a person of color (or another marginalized group) from their unfortunate circumstance. My experiences in learning about injustices throughout history have been relatively the same: the marginalized person is “saved” by a white person, and life after being saved is leisurely and jubilant. However, after independent research, I understand that this is not the case. Mataoka (often referred to as Pocahontas) was not in love with John Rolfe, and her conversion to Christianity was certainly not her “decision.” Life after enslavement was not a world of equal opportunity. The lives of Jews and Romani were not suddenly better after the Holocaust.

From September to late November of 2020, I assisted with a study seeking to determine how well Davidson’s students understand the Holocaust. When asked to name one way Jews resisted deportation, most students responded with “hiding.” Of those students, many attributed it to help from neighbors. This suggests that the American education system is uncomfortable with portraying victims of racism as anything other than helpless. This also implies that the American education system promotes the notion that non-marginalized people are the “heroes” of the story.

**Commented [VH1]:** Your two opening paragraphs establish a helpful shared context and I like the way you incorporate your findings from your class’s study. You might go on to briefly speak to whose interests are served by fashioning the white hero, and what negative effects—beyond misunderstanding—this has.

The Underground Railroad is an aspect of American history that wears a veil of mysticism. As Schulz best describes it, it was “not quite wrong, but simplified; not quite a myth, but mythologized.”<sup>1</sup> Though—and I cannot say this confidently—most Americans (presumably) are aware that the Underground Railroad was not a *literal* underground railroad, there is still great confusion and misconception surrounding it. By definition, the Underground Railroad was a clandestine system in Antebellum America that involved the support of slave abolitionists who offered aid and shelter to runaway slaves. Just how being an enslaved person was more than being merely another person’s property, the Underground Railroad was more than simply a “system.” I find that the Underground Railroad should be looked at holistically and is therefore best viewed as an experience. Modern retellings like to paint the Underground Railroad as a symbol of freedom and self-government, and while I find this perspective to be well-intended, I do find that it is misguided. This outlook, once again, emphasizes that life after escape was peaceful and safe. However, this was not the case, for what lied above the Mason-Dixon line was not true freedom.

Furthermore, these retellings often focus on the aid of White abolitionists, disregarding the significant role played by African Americans. This is a trend that is all too familiar. Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* helps to address and disprove these misconceptions. Throughout the novel, Whitehead emphasizes that the life of a runaway, or even a free Black, was difficult and far from enjoyable. There were still systematic barriers that black people could not escape no matter how far north or west they went. For example, while slavery may have been illegal in free states, those who live there were still obligated to follow fugitive slave laws. He furthers this by including more modern racial injustices and controversies. Moreover,

**Commented [VH2]:** I believe “myth” or “mythology” are the terms you are after rather than “mysticism.”

**Commented [VH3]:** Is it the whole story, or perhaps parts of the story that this “it” refers to? You may need to provide a bit more context in order for her quotation to work here.

**Commented [VH4]:** I’m not yet sure how these two sentences are interrelated. (By the way: they need to be joined by a semicolon; otherwise, this is a run-on sentence).

**Commented [VH5]:** What does “holistic” mean in this context? What needs to be considered along with everything else (that typically is not)? Similarly, what do you have in mind in recommending we think of as an “experience”?

**Commented [VH6]:** Do you have any thought about why some Americans retell its story with these ideals featured?

**Commented [VH7]:** In the context of your analysis, isn’t it the assumption that slaves were transported to a land of liberation and freedom that is the more pertinent contrast?

**Commented [VH8]:** Where else do we witness the role of marginalized persons diminished when a national myth evolves? (That’s similar to your point about the role of Jews in their resistance.)

**Commented [VH9]:** For instance, what does he add?

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Schulz, “The New Yorker,” *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2016, p. 3.

Whitehead introduces black characters who helped Cora on her journey, disproving the notion that minorities are incapable without White assistance. It is important that today's Americans understand the true story of the Underground Railroad, for current misunderstanding both discounts the harsh experiences of escapees and discredits the African Americans who helped them.

### The (Marginally) "Better Life"

Modern versions of stories about slave escapes are quite rosy. They usually end with the escapee starting a new life, finding a job, maybe even learning to read: all without fear. They paint the North as a haven vowed to protect runaways. Schulz breaks it down best, "geography is the plot: the South represents iniquity and bondage, the North enlightenment and freedom."<sup>2</sup> However, **if this were true**, there would have been no need for the clandestine Underground Railroad. While the North did not practice slavery, it respected fugitive slave laws. Not only did fugitive slave acts compel northerners to help in returning runaway slaves, but they also punished those who would not.

While in South Carolina, Cora entered an office and had a brief conversation with Miss Lucy, a proctor. While Miss Lucy asserted that she is committed to helping black people, she still strictly followed fugitive slave laws. Miss Lucy told her colleague that "The Fugitive Slave Law says we have to hand over runaways and not impede their capture— not drop everything we're doing just because some slave catcher thinks he's onto his bounty."<sup>3</sup> **Because of these strict laws, runaway slaves could rely on few and trust even fewer.**

**Commented [VH10]:** Perhaps it's not that such talk is false, but rather that it is incomplete or distorted.

**Commented [VH11]:** You might go on to say how this contributes to Cora's sense of uncertainty and precarity (since you'll go on to address her anxiety in the next section).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>3</sup> Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, New York: Anchor Books, 2016: 130

Life as a runaway was full of anxiety. Throughout Cora's journey, Ridgeway trailed behind her, eager to capture and return her to her owner. While Cora's escape was, ultimately, successful, we cannot say the same about many other slaves in the story. We do not know how many people escaped or attempted to escape slavery because many either died along their journey or were captured. America's education system rarely addresses this. While this may be an attempt to "protect" students, they are, instead, misinforming them. Whitehead addresses this gap of information by telling stories of failed escapes. Toward the end of the book, we learn about Mabel's, Cora's mother's, fate. Shortly after leaving the plantation, a cottonmouth snake bit her and she died.

**Commented [VH12]:** What, for instance, do you recall from your own schooling?

**Commented [VH13]:** Any thoughts about what they are getting protected from here? Why might the experience of slavery, especially its acute anxieties, be omitted from the nationally-sanctioned stories we tell schoolchildren about slave life?

In the second chapter, Georgia, Whitehead presents Big Anthony's tragic fate. After attempting to run away, he was discovered sleeping in a hayloft. Once he was found, he became a spectacle for white visitors for three days. On the second day, he was "whipped for the duration of their [the white visitor's] meal, and they ate slow."<sup>4</sup> On the third day, "Big Anthony was doused with oil and roasted. The witnesses were spared his screams, as his manhood had been cut off on the first day, stuffed in his mouth, and sewn in."<sup>5</sup> Big Anthony was looked upon as a marvel, a creature used for sadistic onlookers' pleasure. Escaping was hard, but staying hidden was an entirely different challenge. Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* effectively corrects the record and serves to better our understanding of the reality that was the Underground Railroad.

**Commented [VH14]:** How might you frame this paragraph? What's its point, since you have left your focus on anxiety? Is this the sort of detail you recommend might be made a part of students' education about slave life? If students receive a sanitized version of history, might an episode like this help to correct that?

**Commented [VH15]:** What does Big Anthony's story set aright? What does it reveal that is otherwise hidden?

### It Wasn't Just Harriet Tubman

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 47

If asked to name a black person who played a role in the Underground Railroad, most people would respond by naming “Harriet Tubman” or maybe even the occasional “William Still.” The list of recognized African Americans who helped runaways escape to freedom is short. However, the list for acknowledged white abolitionists is quite long: Isaac Hopper, Thomas Garrett, Levi Coffin, Thaddeus Stevens, etc.

Schulz identified this issue as well, asserting that “no one disputes the white abolitionists were active in the Underground Railroad, but later scholars argued that Siebert had exaggerated both their numbers and their importance, while downplaying or ignoring the role played by African Americans.”<sup>6</sup> There is a reason why more “people know the name Levi Coffin, Midwestern Quaker, than that of Louis Napoleon, a freeborn black abolitionist, even though both risked their lives to help thousands of fugitives to safety.”<sup>7</sup> It is not that African Americans played a minimal role, it is that we have eclipsed their role and dismissed their efforts to encourage the notion of the White Savior. Some may argue that Quakers and Evangelicals receive more attention because of America’s deep Christian roots. However, recognition is scarcely given to African Methodist Episcopal churches that aided fugitives.<sup>8</sup>

Why do we know Harriet Tubman’s name? I argue it is because the American education system deliberately selects historical minorities that they wish to teach about. There seems to be a trend with whom they select: they always make an entertaining story. Most of us know about Rosa Parks, a middle aged, middle class black woman who refused to give up her seat on the bus—yet, we seldom credit Claudette Colvin, who refused to move to the back of the bus nine months before Rosa Parks did. We learn about Pocahontas who threw herself across John

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Schulz, “The New Yorker,” *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2016, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

**Commented [VH16]:** Another run-on sentence. You might watch this video for clarification: <https://natureofwriting.com/courses/sentence-structure/lessons/comma-splices-and-fused-sentences-2/topic/comma-splices-and-fused-sentences/>.

**Commented [VH17]:** A telling contrast. What does the omission of the role of the AME church indicate about that earlier question about motives and interests served by the mythologic version?

Rolfe's body to save him from being clubbed to death (which never actually happened). We have learned about Harriet Tubman, because she helped at least 130 slaves escape and because her story is extraordinary. A black person must perform 20x the effort of a white person in order to be recognized as an important historical figure.

The erasure of African American efforts was intentional, for without it, authors could not rework Northern Whites as the "heroes" of the story. However, Whitehead strives to correct this. In the chapter Indiana, Cora is living on Valentine farm, a haven for free blacks and runaways. The farm is owned by John Valentine, a light skinned black man. Cora felt that Valentine farm "was something beyond her imagination. The Valentines had performed a miracle. She sat among the proof of it; more than that, she was part of that miracle."<sup>9</sup> Whitehead recognized the efforts of black abolitionists, and by doing so, he is actively working against continuing the concept of the White Savior.

### Tunnels? What Tunnels?

The fantastic representation of the Underground Railroad as being a *literal* underground railroad in Whitehead's novel is troubling, for it pushes the notion that there were secret tunnels and hiding spaces. "Fugitives did often need to conceal themselves... most of their hiding places were mundane... spare bedrooms and swamps and caves, not bespoke hidey-holes built by underground engineers."<sup>10</sup> Many Americans mistakenly assume that the Underground Railroad contained hidden, underground passageways. Whitehead's depiction does not help to correct this misconception. However, I would assert that this fanciful portrayal of the Underground Railroad

**Commented [VH18]:** I think your good point isn't so much about the amount of effort (or that is part of it, surely). It seems to be more about deliberate omission based simply on race. And, then there's this business of choosing a single "hero" that is evident here.

<sup>9</sup> Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, New York: Anchor Books, 2016: 252

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Schulz, "The New Yorker," *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2016, p. 4.

was necessary for Cora to face the wide range of experiences she did along her journey that seemed to defy the laws of time.

While it is imperative that we take a stand against the concept of the White Savior, we must be careful to not turn to the image of the “Magical Negro.” The “Magical Negro” is a stock character whose sole purpose is to help the main character. The “Magical Negro” seems to solely exist to help people (usually white) attain a goal or reach a higher potential. Not only is the “Magical Negro” a form of dehumanization, it further serves to promote false theories, such as the belief that African Americans have a higher pain tolerance—a falsehood that has historically led to Black Americans receiving lower doses of pain medication. The middle ground between these two extremes is simple: present history as it occurred, not what we rewrote it to be.

**Commented [VH19]:** I suggest you rework this part of the argument. Are Whitehead’s “tunnels” fashioned in the way that we expect the historic rr’s underground passages to have been constructed? This final section seems less well thought-through than the earlier parts of your argument.

**Commented [VH20]:** Who might play this role in UR? Not sure about the need to introduce this as a problem given your emphasis on myth-making versus actual history.