

FROM UNDERGROUND RAILROAD TO FREEDOM: A PERCEPTION OF HARRIET TUBMAN'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK FEMINISM

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Abstract

In Blacks's collective memory on American history, Harriet Tubman is the embodiment of resilience and courage. Her commitment on the Underground Railroad is an epitome of self sacrifice for human cause. This engagement has been a successful challenge against the systemic political will to keep colored people under bondage. It is also a life experience which breaks the patriarchal myth in society and paves the way to Black feminism whose main goal is to fight for African American women's emancipation at all levels. Such is the indelible legacy of Harriet Tubman, a black female figure of the XIXth century who inspires modern Black women in their quest for emancipation by means of Black feminism. Womanism as a mindset for Black feminists is also a perfect expression of Tubman's insight to freedom as opposed to patriarchal gender conceptions. The identification of the link between her life experiences and Black feminism is the guiding objective in the current research.

Keywords: Black feminism, emancipation, freedom, Underground railraod, womanism,

Résumé

Dans la mémoire collective des noirs sur l'histoire américaine, Harriet Tubman est l'incarnation de la résilience et du courage. Son engagement dans le Chemin de fer clandestin est un exemple parfait du sacrifice de soi pour la cause humaine. Cet engagement est un défi qu'elle a réussi à relever vis-à-vis de la volonté politique systémique qui vise à maintenir les hommes de couleur dans la servitude. C'est aussi une expérience de vie qui brise le mythe du patriarcat dans la société et qui trace le chemin du féminisme noir dont l'objectif principal est de lutter pour l'émancipation des femmes Africaines-Américaines à tous les niveaux. Tel est l'héritage indélébile de Harriet Tubman, une figure féminine noire du XIX^{ème} siècle qui inspire les femmes noires du monde moderne dans leur quête d'émancipation par le biais du féminisme noir. Le womanism, en tant qu'un état d'esprit pour les féministes noires, est aussi une expression parfaite de la conception de Tubman vis-à-vis de la liberté en opposition aux perceptions patriarcales du genre. L'identification du lien entre ses expériences de vie et le féminisme noir est l'objectif principal dans cette recherche.

Mots-clés : Émancipation, féminisme noir, liberté, chemin de fer clandestin, womanism

INTRODUCTION

Harriet Tubman's story begins not with legend, but rather with the harsh realities of slavery experienced by Blacks in America. As a young Black woman, she is determined to resist the deep injustices underwent by her people. Thus, rather than to secure her own life, she dedicated herself to lead the others out of bondage through the mechanism of the Underground Railroad. The leadership that she displays throughout this project remains, not only a source of inspiration, but also an example of resilience for African-Americans in general and in particular for Black women. In other words, Tubman's impact goes beyond a mere tale of escaping chains for her whole life speaks to the heart of Black feminist ideology.

In this article, we look forward to knowing whether or not Harriet Tubman has got an influence on Black feminism in America, hence the following research questions : What is Black feminism ? To what extent, Harriet Tubman, as a Black female figure of the XIXth century can influence Black feminism ? To provide relevant answers to these questions, we will make use of feminist theory in order to see how the rationales of Tubman's commitment fit the principles of Black feminism.

Within this perspective, it is necessary to structure our analysis around three main parts. Thus, the first part covers the historical context of Harriet Tubman's life and work, bringing to the fore her commitment in relation to racial equality. Secondly, we will present the main ideology of Black feminism starting from its origins, and finally show how Tubman's legacy, despite the complexities of Black feminism, continues to inspire Black women leaders in politics, culture, community organization to assert their authority unapologetically.

1. Historical context of harriet tubman's life and work

This opening section aims to grasp the socio-political framework of Harriet Tubman's time and appreciate her courage and her pivotal role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. It also allows us to understand how she apprehends racial and gender equality, two values whose quest provided a great sense to Tubman's activism.

1.1. Slavery and Harriet's Early Life

Harriet Tubman is born in a tumultuous era defined by a systemic oppression, an intense political conflict and some profound moral reforms. In fact, the United States is deeply divided between the industrialized Free States of the North and the agricultural Slave States of the South. Slavery is the fundamental economic base of the Southern states, particularly through the production of cash crops like tobacco and cotton. This economic dependence drives the South's fierce political defense of the institution of chattel slavery. The system relies on constant violence and psychological control over Black people, including whippings, threat

of sale to enforce obedience. Black people have a lower legal status. They are considered as property, not citizens with legal rights. Meanwhile, White people have the right to control, punish and sell enslaved people. Sometimes, that results in the brutal separation of black families. Paraphrasing Eric Foner in his *Give me Liberty ! An American History*, slavery in the antebellum South was not only an economic institution but also a system of power designed to enforce racial subordination (Foner, 2017, pp. 338-400, 401-414). In other words, slavery is more than a mere economic system. It is deeply woven into legal and social structures to reinforce racial subordination. Race becomes a defining line of difference and inferiority. In this sense, Foner highlights the ideological dimension of slavery. Beyond economics, slavery creates and maintains a strict social hierarchy.

But in the mid-19th century, we observe both the rise of abolitionism and resistance in the context of Civil War and Reconstruction. Activists such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Sojourney Truth mobilize public opinion against slavery. Within this context, the Underground Railroad emerges as a clandestine network of safe house and allies who assists enslaved people in escaping slavery. Harriet Tubman becomes one of its most renowned conductors before the Civil War. Born into slavery, she refused to help an overseer punish a enslaved person. In 1849, on the base of rumors that she was about to be sold, she fled to Philadelphia, leaving behind her relatives and husband¹. After her own escaping, she transformed her personal experience into a mission of liberation for others with the help of the Underground Railroad.

1.2. Harriet Tubman's role on the Underground Railroad

During slavery in America, the Underground Rail Road was a well-organized system composed of both free Blacks and white abolitionists who gave protection and support to enslaved people escaping from the South. Historians hardly pin down how the Underground Rail Road got its name. However, it is named "Underground Railroad" for a few key reasons. This metaphor describes its secret and organized nature. Underground means that the network is secret, hidden, and clandestine. Its operations have to be kept out of sight from slaves owners and authorities to protect the people involved and the freedom seekers. In other words, it is a metaphoric reference to the way a subway operates underground, which means the different operations of the Underground Railroad are not visible by every person.

In this designation, the "railroad" refers to the mode of transportation. The stationmasters are people who provide shelter and aid at those safe houses. As for the conductors, they are the guides who lead the freedom seekers along the routes. Finally, the passengers or cargo are the freedom seekers. It is also necessary to

¹ Harriet Tubman, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 19 sept. 2024, available on <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Tubman>., Consulted on 26 september 2025.

precise that its underground designation is due to the safe houses that provide shelters and the fact for the identity of the participants to be kept secret. Over time, it developed an elaborate system of catchphrases such as code words, secret knocks, lamps lit at night, and hymns to warn off slave catchers and to identify sympathizers. But, it was not easy for slaves to flee on their own. So they have to be organized in small groups. Among all the conductors, Harriet played a great role by helping many enslaved people escape the slave states in the south.

Harriet Tubman played a crucial role in the Underground Railroad for several reasons. First of all, she escaped herself from slavery and she helped her own parents gain freedom by guiding them in a primitive horse-carriage and carrying them 80 miles to a safe house in Wilmington, Canada. After that successful trip, she became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. In addition, she multiplies trips to bring others to freedom. From December 1850 through 1860, Harriet returned to Maryland approximately 13 times to lead more than 70 family members and other slaves to freedom. In his work entitled *Bound for the Promised Land : Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*, Kate Clifford Larson provides the details in a lengthy explanation :

Over a ten year period, 1850-1860, Tubman directly assisted 60-70 people, mostly family and friends, but also provided detailed instructions to another 60 to 70 or so freedom seekers who found their way to freedom on their own...During the late 1850s, Tubman spoke at several anti-slavery meetings, in churches, and abolitionists home, where she told her audiences that she had made 8 or 9 trips and rescued 50 to 60 people. By following the document trail from Maryland to Canada, we have come to identify approximately 13 trips (Larson, 2004, p. 100).

This quotation deals with the period from 1850 to 1860, where Harriet Tubman was active on the Underground Railroad and started giving public speeches. The number of people she directly or indirectly assisted with the varying number of trips earned her respect among the conductors.

Furthermore, Harriet Tubman's heroism is not limited to free black slaves. During the Civil War, her role was crucial. She worked as a soldier and a spy for the Union Army. Indeed, by working as a cook and a nurse in Union camps, her tenacity helped her operate within enemy lines in procuring information. Her detailed knowledge of routes through swamps, rivers, and wet lands helped Union troops in Maryland as the war raged. According to *U.S History*: "Tubman was the only woman in the Civil War to plan and lead an armed assault" (Corbet et al., 2014).

On the night of June 2, 1863, she supported a troop of 150 black soldiers of the Second South Carolina battalion in the raid of the Combahee River. The plan was to liberate as many slaves by catching slaveholders by surprise. The attack became known as the Combahee River Raid and liberated more than 750 slaves. Tubman's accomplishments in the Combahee River Raid stayed anonymous until July 10, 1863 when Franklin B. Sanborn, a journalist, published an article entitled "Harriet Tubman". It was a biographical outline of Tubman's life. The Combahee

River Raid solidified her reputation as a fearless leader and freedom fighter. Tubman's actions were not only a mere military success but also a powerful psychological blow to the Confederacy. The raid remains a testament to courage, intelligence, and unwavering commitment to the cause of freedom. Following the raid, she also taught slaves freed by the Union Army. Later, she will sail to South Carolina, extending her liberty lines into the Deep South. Finally, she devoted time caring for fugitives and guiding them back north.

In the same way, the Underground Railroad is part of Harriet Tubman's life, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the Underground Railroad lies in the lives and memories of the characters. Sethe's and Denver's escapes are central to their story. In the novel, the Underground Railroad can be interpreted as a symbol of desperate and perilous journey to freedom. Morrison explores the Underground Railroad metaphorically to highlight the historical suffering and spiritual resilience of black slaves. Her fictional work symbolizes the tangible reality of the network as a dangerous and secret system.

During her combat for freedom, Harriet Tubman realized that racial and gender discriminations are enormous barriers to justice and equality, hence, her commitment to join the Underground Railroad in order to help her folks get out of servitude. As a result, she started to advocate the rights of African American women who faced marginalization because of the patriarchal system that governs society.

1.3. Tubman's insight to racial and gender equalities

The intersection of race and gender is central to Harriet Tubman's endeavour for justice and equality. Born in slavery, Harriet faces up the harsh realities of bondage, which is based on her identity as a black woman. She notices that women live under oppressive conditions. They are sexually exploited and silenced in the society. Their rights are denied. Thus, she realizes that gender inequality must be addressed if they want total freedom and equality of opportunity for all american citizens. Therefore, she emphasizes the struggle faced by American women and in particular African American women. As a former slave, she is aware of the value of freedom. Therefore, she uses her personal experiences to draw African Americans' attention on the need for equal rights including women. For her, women deserve the same rights like men. Then, she works alongside prominent suffragists including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Staton.

Both Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton advocate for women's voting rights movement. Although Tubman is not a leading figure in the suffrage movement, she plays a prominent role by touring and addressing speeches about her experiences as a former slave and liberator of others under the bondage of slavery. Her advocacy is especially focussed on the rights of African American women. Despite being illiterate, Tubman's speeches are captivating. Her speeches

left people wanting more. Finally in 1920, women's suffrage is achieved with the nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

In sum, Harriet Tubman played a significant role in both abolition and suffrage movement. As a black woman and conductor on the Underground Railroad, she risked her life to help hundreds of enslaved people. Besides, her contribution was decisive to the success of the Union Army during the Civil War. Beyond her activism on the Underground Railroad and in the Civil War, she strongly advocates for women's rights, including suffrage. She also believed firmly in equality, justice regardless of race and gender. Harriet Tubman's commitment to freedom and justice made her a symbol of courage and a powerful voice for women. Does Tubman's advocacy for women's suffrage, racial justice and community care help shape the foundation for Black feminist activism? In other words, what are the influences of Tubman on Black feminism? To provide an appropriate answer to this question, it is necessary to understand the guiding principles of Black feminism.

2. The rationales of black feminism

Although feminism is known to be a concept that is solely concerned with women, it is necessary to indicate its different variations which emerge from different historical contexts. In this part of our reflexion, the goal is to present some of the main causes that led to the birth of Black feminism.

2.1. The fight against oppression

Oppression is a reality that is embedded in America's history and within this case, African American women are indubitably apprehended as being direct victims of that systemic persecution. This status is much more perceptible through their location at the intersection of racial and gender dominations. Such an opinion is fully sustained by Patricia Hill Collins in so far as she asserts that "black women are uniquely situated [...] at the focal point where two exceptionally powerful and prevalent systems of oppression come together: race and gender" (Collins, 1990, p. 1). In other words, African American women experience two different kinds of oppressions, namely racial and gender oppressions.

Talking about racial oppression, it is undeniable to declare that it negatively displays Black American women with regard to its systemic characteristic. It is dated back to the legalization of slavery in north American states and this turned people of color into significant sources for wealth acquisition through slavery. Therefore, without any gender distinction, Black men and women have been oppressed for more than two centuries regardless of their belonging to humanity. To denounce that inhuman condition, Adam Smith, an abolitionist wrote *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (2007), a famous book in which he vehemently depicts the use of slaves for wealth accumulation and also their ill treatment by their masters during colonial system :

Slaves [...] are very seldom inventive ; and all the most important improvement, either in machinery or in the arrangement and distribution of work which facilitate and abridge labour, have been the discoveries of freemen. Should a slave propose any improvement of this kind, his master would be very apt to consider the proposal as the suggestion of laziness. [...] The poor slave, instead of reward, would probably meet with much abuse perhaps with some punishment (Smith, 2007, p.531).

This passage summarizes two kinds of abuses which slaves were victims of. On the one hand, we have the inhibition of any desire to develop their aptitudes and on the other hand, the punishment which, in most of the cases, was a physical violence. This unhuman treatment include Black women regardless of sexual distinction.

As for the second oppression, it lies at the core of gender issue. It symbolizes the supremacy of patriarchal thoughts over all the social systems, turning into utopia Black women's desire for empowerment. The ultimate consequence is their relegation to the bottom of the social ladder. Even on this ground, their status is still inferior to Black male slave. Such a distinction underlines injustice among slaves.

Moreover, it highlights the degree of oppression underwent by Black women in America's history. In reality, this domination reflects the social stratification, which celebrates patriarchal thoughts that subdues women by preventing their emancipation. Zora Neale Hurston, an African American female writer depicts this aspect of their lives in America:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see (Collins, 2000, p.45)

In this excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2000), Nanny (an elderly Black woman) clearly explains the situation of Black women to her granddaughter. She emphasizes on their relegation to the bottom of society, even among slaves. From the old Black woman's testimony, we can apprehend gender issue as one of the factors that favor Black women's oppression at a large scale. It is also relevant to mention the contribution of African cultural values inherited by African descents enslaved on the American soil. Indeed, those values are known as less inclusive in terms of gender rights. Like wise, African American women are excluded by Black men in the management of their communities in the USA.

In a nutshell, it is crucial to understand that racial and gender oppressions are two factors that significantly contributed to the emergence of Black feminism in order to help Black women fight against the different abuses they are victims of.

2.2. The quest for Racial Equality and political rights

Throughout Black history in America, the heroic actions accomplished by African American women are undeniable realities. In that context, the episode dedicated to the struggle for racial equality and the acquisition of political rights for Black women is full of evidences which reveal the tremendous roles they played in the enrichment of American democracy. It is also necessary to mention activism, a field in which their contribution is much more perceptible with regard to the wide range of Black female figures who contributed to end sexist injustices among black folks. It still draws the attention of Patricia Hill Collins in the passage below where she reveals renowned Black women who significantly played the early role to set up the bases of Black feminism :

Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, and Fannie Lou Hamer are but a few names from a growing list of distinguished African-American women activists. Although their sustained resistance to Black women's victimization within interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression is well known, these women did not act alone. Their actions were nurtured by the support of countless, ordinary African-American women who, through strategies of everyday resistance, created a powerful foundation for this more visible Black feminist activist tradition. Such support has been essential to the shape and goals of Black feminist thoughts (Collins, 2017, pp. 745-746).

The evocation of these black female figures (Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, and Fannie Lou Hamer) is justified by the pivotal role they played in the setting up of black feminist movement's foundations. Yet, we can infer the quest for racial equality as one of their main goals in that movement.

Among them, Sojourner Truth epitomises the idea of Black women's inclusion in the feminist movement which, at the very beginning, was solely concentrated on the defence of White women's causes. Indeed, being born in enslavement, she was much more aware of the dangers related to the absence of rights for Blacks in general and in particular for Black women, hence, the use of her voice to denounce their wrong condition under the patriarchal system. In that context, "Ain't I a Woman?", a famous speech among those which paved the way to African American women's rights' acquisition is known as her speech. In a comparative study on the feminist movement in America, Nakshatra Pathak and Pragya Verma did not keep mentioning that contribution in the struggle for Black women's inclusion :

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in New York in 1797 and later became a powerful speaker against slavery and for women's rights. Her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" delivered in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, challenged the exclusion of Black women from early feminist movements. Her life intersected with major social struggles of the 19th century, including abolition and suffrage, which she approached from the

unique position of a formerly enslaved Black woman (Pathak and Verma, 2025, p.354).

From the above, we can understand the origins of her commitment to defend women's rights. It is also a position that makes her appear among the significant female figures who sowed the seeds of Black feminism.

In the XXth century, the social context characterized by the excessive racial segregation has presented another African American woman, namely Rosa Parks whose resistance against racial exclusion on a bus has won her acclaim from the whole Black community. Although her action is recorded as one of those which contributed to Blacks's civil and political rights' acquisition, it can also be considered as an important factor that helped African American women discover their capacity to fight for their rights. With regard to that heroic action she accomplished, one can well understand the motivation of Jennifer Granholm² when she describes Rosa Parks as "a warrior who fought for equality in African American society" (Babu, 2016, p.52).

As we can observe, Black feminism as both theoretical framework and political tool, foregrounds the intersection of race, gender and class in shaping the lives of Black women. Thus, its complexities lie in challenging not only the patriarchal structures that marginalize women but also the racial hierarchies that defined Black life in America. As Bell Hooks argues, "Sexism and racism have been two forms of domination that reinforce and support each other. Black women have had to struggle against both simultaneously, which has made their fight for liberation all the more complex" (Bell Hooks, 1981, p. 15). Unlike mainstream feminist movements that historical privileged the perspectives of white, middle – class women, Black feminism foregrounds the unique standpoint of women whose lives have been structures by slavery, segregation and systemic exclusion. Patricia Hill Collins deepens this analysis by introducing the concept of "matrix of domination" which describes how intersecting systems of power produce both oppression and knowlewdge. (Collins, 1990, p. 221).

By embodying both the intricacies of intersecting oppressions and the possibility of liberation, Harriet Tubman briges historical memory with present struggles, making her legacy a vital touchtone in Black feminist thought. Tubman, more than an abolitionist and Underground RailRoad conductor, embodies the principles of resistance, collective care, and transformative leadership that remain central to Black feminist thought. For contemporary feminists, her life and work stand as a model that continues to resonate accross generations.

² A Canadian-born American woman and politician known as the sixteenth United States Secretary of energy from 2021 to 2025.

3. Harriet Tubman's enduring legacy

The existence of Tubman in the global memory of American people is symbolized by heroism, commitment and self sacrifice for human life. In other words, she is perceived in American history as an individual whose life was dedicated to the well-being of others and this won her "Black Moses" as nickname. In the last part of this research, the main goal is to show the extent to which, Tubman's life experiences are a source of motivation for African American women as represented at the core of Black Feminism.

3.1. Tubman's influence over Black feminism

In the second major part of this study, the presentation of the historical context and the central ideologies of Black feminism have been the leading goals. Within this context, we discovered that the fight against racial oppressions, the quest for racial equality and the acquisition of political rights for Black women are the main reasons that led to the birth of Black feminism. Likewise, Rose M. Brewer, when dealing with the historical context of that African American women's movement asserts as follow:

It was Black feminism that understood that race is at the center of a gender, sexuality, and class dialectic in a capitalist US and under global imperialism. This feminism challenged a framework rooted in economic exploitation, white privilege and power. It resisted a white feminism too often imposing a conceptual logic on Black women that distorted or misrepresented Black women's experience (Brewer, 2020, p.97).

From these lines, we can clearly understand that a variety of factors led to the birth of Black feminism making it an ideal movement through which Black women in America can defend their rights. Those factors, as Brewer presents them, are race, gender, sexuality and class dialectic.

If it is clear that these are characteristics of the numerous injustices encountered by Black women, then it is necessary to affirm that these motivating factors testify a certain influence of Tubman on Black Feminism. Indeed, historical data reveal that her commitment to help slaves acquire freedom by means of the Underground Railroad is motivated by her opposition to racial exclusion and unhuman treatment against slaves. Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, in her work entitled *A Role Model for Black Feminism : Harriet Ross Tubman* (2014), affirms that :

Harriet Tubman's heroic rescue effort on behalf of slaves before and during the Civil War was a lifetime fight against social injustice and oppression. [...] Over 700 slaves were rescued in the Tubman-led raid against the Confederates at the Combahee River in South Carolina. She became the only woman in U.S. history to plan and lead both white and black soldiers in such a military coup. It is the latter activity which caused black feminists in Roxbury, Massachusetts

to organize themselves during the seventies as the Combahee River Collective³.

As the author sustains in the passage above, numerous actions speak volume about Tubman's engagement. However, the fact for her to be the only woman in the U.S. history to lead white and black soldiers in successful actions during the war of cessation grants her the status of motivator for Black Feminism. In this very context, Tubman's heroic action acts as a myth buster for all African American women engaged in the feminist cause.

In addition, her recognition as model of resilience among Black feminist artists is also a relevant factor that speaks volume in the presentation of her tracks over this movement. For Feminists such as Elizabeth Catlett and Betye Sarr, Tubman is an icon and also a source of inspiration for all Black women who consider the fight against racial injustices as a means for African American to acquire their dignity. The former (Elizabeth Catlett) even pays tribute to those Black female figures who played pivotal roles in Black race's emancipation. We quite understand the reason why she asserts that "Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Phillis Wheatley are heroines who gave people courage and guidance" (Catlett, 2023, p.3). In fact, within a social context characterized by severe racial exclusion and enslavement, those Black women have been able to challenge all kinds of obstacles to achieve great goals that have paved the way to rights' acquisition for their people.

As for Harriet Tubman who is the main figure in the current research, her experiences on the Underground Railroad have become great source of inspiration for modern African American women for they break apart the mythology of men's superpower. During the civil war, her actions among the Union troops also prove the level of her commitment to help white abolitionists put an end to slave trade. The following passage makes an account of this episode of her life : "Harriet Tubman was recruited by federal government to work on behalf of Union troops in the South. Her assignments were to nurse the troops and to spy on and scout out confederate positions⁴".

Still in the same vein of proving her contribution to the settlement of the pillars of Black feminism, The National Museum of African American History and Culture made a Collection Story entitled *Harriet Tubman : Life, Liberty and Legacy*. This collection focuses on the scope of Tubman's activism until the XXth century before her death. As a token of tribute to that Black heroine, the following information is provided:

In the years after her death in 1913, Harriet became a feminist icon for Black women's organizations, and Black women artists including Betye Sarr, Alison Saar, Bisa Butler, Faith Ringgold and Elizabeth Catlett saw in Harriet the

³ <https://blog.oup.com/2014/09/black-feminism-harriet-tubman/>

⁴ National Park Service, *Harriet Tubman Special Resource Study*, 2008, pp. 2-10.

inspiration for the courage and creativity to document the struggle for equality as Black and as women⁵

This passage evokes Tubman as an icon for Black feminists, namely Betye Sarr, Alison Sarr, Faith Ringgold and Elizabeth Catlett whose artistic creations strongly promote Black women identity in the USA. If these above mentioned data allow us to apprehend the legacy of Harriet Tubman in Black feminism, it is also relevant to see a last aspect of this study, namely her influence on women's conception of freedom in American society.

3.2. A model in Black women's conception of freedom

Black American women's conception of freedom is more understandable in the framework of womanism, a concept coined by Alice Walker and other Black female writers. According to her, "Womanish, the root of Womanism, captures the cultural expression of Black women's lives. Black girls are described as Womanish if they act grown, as adult women" (Brewer, 2020, p.93). Here, we quite understand that the author lays emphasis on maturity of Black women, which is all about the recognition of her rights, namely the right to academic education, the right to equal pay, the right to serve in armed forces etc. We can also evoke the "Rejection of universal womanhood" which is a concept developed by the National Black Feminist Organization. It is a group of African American feminists known as initiators of "The Combahee River Collective" which is named after the military action led by Harriet Tubman along the Combahee River in South Carolina in 1863⁶.

For that group of Black feminists, the concept of "rejection of universal womanhood" is tantamount to the refusal of all traditional patriarchal conceptions about women because they solely keep Black women at the bottom of the social ladder. Among the different issues identified as the priorities of the union, we can find "popular media's presentations of Black women as mammy, martiarch, sapphire"⁷. Through this assertion, we can see Black women's objection to traditional positions in society such as maids or house wives.

This rejection is also the expression of freedom as perceived by Harriet Tubman who is a model of resilience in the Black women's collective memory in American history. Indeed, although Tubman's actions on the Underground Railroad are perceived as a sign of courage, they also represent the expression of a quest for freedom, a freedom that is inclined to resist any kinds of obstacles. Within this context, we can clearly affirm that Black feminists' conception of womanism is the reflection of Harriet Tubman's apprehension of freedom. By fleeing servile life in

⁵ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/harriet-tubman>

⁶ *A Black Feminist statement Combahee River Collective*, Boston, Massachusetts April 1977, p.269.

⁷ *Idem*, p.270.

bondage on plantations, she has proven a sense of maturity which Alice Walker makes reference to : “Black girls are described as Womanish if they act grown” (Brewer, 2020, p.93). Moreover, we can mention “The Combahee River Collective”. As one of the most important feminist movements in America, we can clearly state that African American feminists acknowledge Harriet Tubman’s life experiences as a source of inspiration for all Black women who long for emancipation, hence the creation of “The Combahee River Collective” inspired from Tubman’s military successes along the Combahee River in South Carolina as a token of tribute to their ancestor.

Furthermore, several civil rights leaders have cited Harriet Tubman as an inspiration due to her courage, leadership and lifelong fight for freedom and equality. Among them, includes the prominent civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. He sees Harriet as a symbol of fearless resistance and moral conviction. Her legacy inspired his commitment to justice and non violent activism. As one of those who carry on Harriet’s legacy, Susan Burton, a formerly prisoner woman and founder of A New Way of Life Reentry Project is also cited. Indeed, in 1990, she sustained other women leaving prison by providing them with shelter and helping them reconstruct a new life and find jobs.

In her foreword to Susan’s Memoir, *Becoming Ms. Burton* (2017), Scholar Michelle Alexander describes her as “a courageous woman with deep brown skin who freed people from bondage and ushered them to safety changing their lives forever by her heroism. Some people know this woman by the name Harriet Tubman...I know her as Susan”. Through this quotation, the parallel to the Underground Railroad is palpable.

The Time for Change Foundation is another example of organization carrying on the spirit and legacy of Harriet Tubman. Led by Kim Carter, this organization focusing on giving formerly incarcerated women and their children safe housing. It also helps them establish self-sufficiency.

Seeing the aforementioned organizations providing helps and hope through their programmes let us think that there are many true “modern-day Harriets”⁸ who lead people to freedom, to use Kim terms.

CONCLUSION

The main goal in this research is the apprehension of Harriet Tubman’s legacy on Black feminism. To achieve this goal, three main preoccupations have been the guiding points of our reflection. The first was the presentation the socio-political framework of Harriet Tubman’s life and work to appreciate her courage

⁸ Crystal D. Crawford, « These Modern-Day Harriet Tubman are leading people to freedom », In *Call Wellness*, February 18, 2020, Available on <https://www.callwellness.org/stories/these-modern-day-harriet-tubman-are-leading-people-to-freedom/>., consulted on 26 september 2025.

and her pivotal role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. It also allows us to understand how she apprehends racial and gender equality, two values whose quest provided a great sense to Tubman's activism. The second was to highlight Black feminism guiding principles and how Tubman's spirit challenges the complexities due to internal diversity and finally, to scrutinize Harriet Tubman's influence on Black feminism until today. By means of historical data, we discovered that the Underground Railroad is a metaphor which describes a secret network through which Harriet Tubman and other abolitionists helped many slaves to access freedom.

Concerning Black feminism, it is a branch of feminism which includes only African American women. Its core ideology is to fight against racial exclusion and also sexist oppressions which tend to keep Black American women under patriarchal conceptions that prevent their emancipations. As for the last part which is about the identification of the link between Tubman's legacy and Black feminism perplexities in contemporary day, we discover that Harriet Tubman epitomises heroism, resilience and courage in the collective memory of many Black feminists. She exemplifies the resilience, leadership and transformative vision that continue to inspire Black feminist thought today. As a conductor of the Underground Railroad, and later a Civil War strategist, Tubman challenged both racial and gender hierarchies' boundaries. Her courage in leading enslaved people to freedom redefined the role of Black women as agents of change rather than passive victims. Tubman's enduring legacy lies not only in her historical actions but also in her symbolic power : she remains a cultural and political icon invoked by contemporary Black feminist movements. Her life illustrates how the fight for liberation is not bound to one era but continually renewed in the pursuit of equity and justice.

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