

Re-Arming an American Heroine

Harriet Tubman in Contemporary Popular Culture

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1. Introduction

Harriet Tubman is firmly enshrined in the collective memory of the United States and generally embraced as an American heroine of mythical proportions. Through children's books, statues, and other products of memorial culture, she is predominantly known as a formerly enslaved activist, who was born Araminta »Minty« Ross in 1822 and successfully escaped to liberate and remake herself as Harriet Tubman. She became a prominent abolitionist, as well as one of the most effective »conductors« on the Underground Railroad, i.e. the network of routes, safe houses, and anti-slavery activists that helped enslaved people escape from the US South. Known as »Moses« at the time, she led around 70 people into freedom, and she was turned into a heroine of biblical proportions and a powerful icon of resistance, defiance, and bravery. Despite her omnipresence in US culture, depictions frequently reiterate a standard narrative of her biography, centering on her abolitionist work. More recent discourses, however, have begun to turn to her later life in substantial ways, covering her activism for women's rights, her advocacy for disabled persons, as well as her involvement in the Civil War.

The Combahee River Raid (1863), for example, made her »the first woman to plan and execute an armed expedition during the Civil War« (Larson *Harriet* 2004: 212). This event inspired the name of the Combahee River Collective, an influential Black feminist organization active in the 1970s, and it offers a compelling historical origin narrative for Black feminism in the US. In contemporary culture, Tubman's role in the Civil War is broadly recognized: It is acknowledged in Arlington Cemetery's Military Women's Memorial, fictionalized in Elizabeth Cobbs' 2019 novel *The Tubman Command* (Arcade), and covered in scholarship such as Edda L. Fields-Black's forthcoming study *Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War* (Oxford UP 2024). Recent revisionist depictions of her life and work in popular culture may still resort to the well-known aspects of her life, but they significantly modify the way Tubman is remembered by re-arming her. In doing so,

they not only work towards normalizing Black female (radical) agency within mainstream popular culture but also offer ambivalent, less sanitized portrayals of Tubman that seek to humanize the legend at the same that they affirm her (legendary) status as American heroine. Drawing on select case studies, I will analyze how exactly they instrumentalize firearms to re-negotiate the meanings of Tubman in US culture. These recent texts build on long-standing scholarly and activist efforts to provide an account of Tubman's life that does not merely re-hash the established narrative but rather indicates its full scope and complexity. In 2004, leading Tubman scholar Kate Clifford Larson asserted that

[w]e all *believe* we know Harriet Tubman [...]: slave, famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, abolitionist, spy, nurse, and soldier. Her dangerous, yet successful secret journeys into the slave states to rescue bondswomen, men, and children have immortalized her in the minds of Americans. [...] Yet, very little is *really known* about Harriet Tubman. («From» 45, emphases mine)

With only a few historical sources and studies dominating the discourse, Tubman's life and work have become shrouded in myth, and there has been »a need to rediscover Harriet Tubman, to separate reality from myth and to construct a richer historical account of her life« («From» 2004: 50). Larson's own work as well as biographical studies by Jean M. Humez (*Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*, 2003), Catherine Clinton (*Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, 2004), or Kerry Walters (*Harriet Tubman: A Life in American History*, 2020), and the collection *Harriet's Legacies: Race, Historical Memory, and Futures in Canada* (ed. by Ronald Cummings and Natalee Caple, 2022) have been essential to this ongoing reassessment of Tubman's life and activism. Milton Sernett points out the magnitude of this endeavor even within the national context of the US as he explains that »by learning about Harriet Tubman and her place in the American memory, we learn about ourselves as American people«. Referencing David Blight, he argues that she »may be America's *most* malleable icon, with significance for much more than how we are to remember the nation's struggle with the issue of slavery« (2007: 3, emphasis mine). Walters elaborates that Tubman had, in fact, »disappeared for years from public memory after her death in 1913 – the first disremembrance – only to be further hidden from view, when she finally resurfaced as a heroine in children's books, by fanciful stories and charming legends that often have little grounding in fact – a second disremembrance« (2020: vii).¹

As cherished and mostly uncontroversial heroine celebrated in countless children's books and in US memorial culture, she was literally and metaphorically dis-

1 Milton Sernett explains that, in fact, »Tubman is the subject of more children's books than any other African American historical figure« (2007: 22).

armed: Juvenile literature tends to focus on her youth and her work on the Underground Railroad and, in this context, the pistol she actually used to carry is frequently substituted by a lantern, or she is even left empty-handed in order to make her into a decidedly non-violent role model ›appropriate‹ for young readers. Similarly, memorial culture works to minimize her radicalism and militancy as it turns her into a non-threatening symbol of Black liberation. Franco Barchiesi and She-neese Thompson explain:

[A]dding firearms to representation would harm the master's narrative, for which such details are specifically troubling to the extent they hint to the radical agency of Black people. Harriet Tubman cannot be, without disrupting America's white popular narrative, the palatable »Moses« of the Underground Railroad, and an armed fugitive who liberated other bonded people. [...] Distance from Blackness and Black self-determination, and the exorcising of Black revolution [...], is what makes Tubman legible enough to be memorialized. (2018: 423)

The symbolic disarmament denies parts of Tubman's identity, limits her agency, and molds her legacy into forms that avoid white discomfort by negating Black radicalism. It also risks distorting and whitewashing historical reality: It is well known, for example, that Tubman used to carry a pistol on her trips to the South (see, e.g. Walters 2020: 94) – for her own protection as well as allegedly to ›motivate‹ her fellow travelers if they would seem to give up during the challenging trip to the North. As a soldier and veteran of the Civil War, she was obviously familiar with the use of firearms *and* willing to fight for freedom. While there are only a few photographs of Tubman, early depictions also include an iconic image that served as frontispiece to Sarah H. Bradford's 1869 biography *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* and that shows her with a rifle prominently and symbolically displayed (fig. 1).

In recent years, and particularly around the 200th anniversary of her birth in 2022, Tubman's appeal as an all-American heroine has been evinced, for example by the efforts to place her statue in the US Capitol² and the plans to put her portrait on the \$20 bill. Yet, so far, the statue has not been erected, and the plans for the redesign of the US paper currency announced by the then Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew, in 2016 were notoriously delayed under the Trump administration.³

2 See: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7062/text?r=67&s=1>. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

3 See: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/j10436>. Accessed on 25.02.2023.



Fig. 1: Frontispiece of Sarah H. Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869)

Current Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told *The Washington Post* in 2022 that the new \$20 bill is scheduled to be out in 2030.⁴ Even if or when these new representations further consolidate the status of Harriet Tubman in the collective memory of the United States, they exclusively celebrate the limited, unthreatening, and ›disarmed‹ version of her life and work, a celebration that runs the risk of deflecting from the hardships Black women navigated and continue to face in a systemically racist society. Keisha N. Blain explains that

[a]lthough Tubman's face will eventually grace the \$20 bill, the irony is that her life story brings into bold relief the economic struggles Black women face in American society and the creative ways they have managed to use limited material resources to help – and indeed liberate – others. Harriet Tubman's lived experiences reflect the broader challenges that Black women endured in American society: often celebrated, but hardly ever protected. (2022)

4 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRZNp8IzNuY>. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

While the competing dynamics of sanitizing her image and emphasizing her radicality, mirrored in dis-arming and re-arming Tubman, have shaped the long history of her commemoration in the US, contemporary popular culture has offered a preferred venue to complicate the dominant representation of Tubman. Ms. magazine's 2022 Harriet Tubman Bicentennial Project, an online initiative celebrating the 200th anniversary of Tubman's birth, illustrates this trend. It seeks to »[shed] light on the history and legacy of this groundbreaking feminist icon through a history timeline; an essay series by scholars in diverse fields; conversations with Tubman descendants, creatives and experts; a slavery reparations calculator; and original art and poetry« (2022).⁵ Similarly, Erica Armstrong Dunbar's popular 2019 biography marks Tubman's agency and determination already in its title: *She Came to Slay: The Life and Times of Harriet Tubman*. The cover art features Tubman with a pistol in hand, and the book is structured into parts entitled »Minty's Story«, »She Ain't Sorry«, »Bawss Lady«, and »Call Me Mrs. Davis«, all of which emphasize empowerment rather than accommodation. The following two case studies, as I will show, similarly intervene into the established narrative of Harriet Tubman's life and attempt to re-shape her public image. With their focus on the Underground Railroad, both the WGN series *Underground* (2016–2017) and Kasi Lemmons' 2019 feature film *Harriet* reiterate the well-known, abolitionist part of Tubman's biography. Both, however, also deliberately re-arm Harriet Tubman as they create a (visual) space for Black female agency on screen. By depicting Tubman as a complex individual, a militant activist, and a gun-carrying freedom fighter, the TV period drama and the Hollywood biopic revise her sanitized public image and, at the same time, bolster her status as historical figure of national importance and as representative of contested »American« values and norms, such as freedom, self-reliance, and the right to bear arms.

2. Larger-than-Life? Harriet Tubman on *Underground*

The first season of the short-lived but critically acclaimed period drama *Underground* (created by Misha Green and Joe Pokaski) follows a group of enslaved people, who come to be known as the »Macon Seven«, on their escape from a Georgia plantation in 1857. It tells the story of the Underground Railroad as an action-packed suspense drama that connects its historical storyline with the viewer's present by, for instance, featuring a soundtrack that includes modern popular music. This extradiegetic music not only draws attention to the fictionality of the show but also comments on the action and connects it in implicit and explicit ways to the contemporary moment. The series' first season opens to Kanye West's »Black Skinhead«, for its second season Beyoncé's »Freedom« sets the tone. Episodes feature songs that cover a range

5 See: <https://msmagazine.com/tubman200/>. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

of genres (hip hop, rock, pop) by artists such as The Weeknd, X Ambassadors, or John Legend, who serves as executive producer of the show. Legend also co-wrote the theme song »Heaven's Door« which epitomizes the mixture of traditional and contemporary music that is characteristic of the show's score (Butler »What's« 2016).

The music confirms what Legend proclaimed in terms of the connection between *Underground*'s historical setting and current discussions around systemic racism and anti-racist activism: »You can't divorce what's happening now in American race relations from the period of slavery because so much of the context for how the country thinks about race was established during slavery« (quoted in Butler »What's« 2016). Vann R. Newkirk II writes in *The Atlantic* that *Underground* constitutes »perhaps the most watchable and rewatchable media about slavery yet« that »[explores] America's most autobiographical apocalyptic quest story« (2016); and Mary McNamara states in the *Los Angeles Times* that the show »tells a story we have not seen, a story we need to see: how so many overcame such large obstacles to not just escape, but to also help others to escape« (2016). Combining elements of prison-break, heist, and quest stories as well as of action thriller, period drama, and soap opera, *Underground* indeed turns to a neglected aspect of the well-rehearsed story of enslavement as told through Hollywood films and television. It does feature the expected scenes depicting the cruelties of plantation life and chattel slavery and includes white supporters of the abolitionist cause as identificatory characters for white (liberal) viewers. Yet, the agency of the enslaved characters, their individual complexity, their community, as well as their plans to escape and fight for liberation take center stage.

Harriet Tubman appears as a character that is legendary and larger than life and, at the same time, firmly embedded in a community of mostly Black and female activists. This representation affirms her status as a historical figure of mythical proportions while also indicating the human being »behind« the myth. Nominally a marginal member of the show's cast, Tubman's presence is frequently invoked by other characters and looms large over the narration. The show thus creates suspense, critically comments on the myths surrounding her, and asks viewers to interrogate their previous knowledge about the historical figure. The audience first encounters the fictional Tubman in the final scene of season one: Rosalee (played by Jurnee Smollett-Bell), a lead character and one of the Macon Seven, has successfully escaped and meets Tubman in a scene that links the two women and foreshadows that Rosalee will step into Tubman's shoes and become an infamous »conductor« on the Underground Railroad in her own right in season two. The first appearance of the historical figure clearly marks Tubman's mythical dimensions (fig. 2). We only see her silhouette against the sun, in a low angle shot that has her towering over Rosalee (and us as viewers). As she promises Rosalee to teach her the abolitionist work of the Underground Railroad (»how to steal slaves«), her face cannot be seen. Tubman reaches out to Rosalee (and viewers) and invites her (and us) to join her in the Black liberation struggle. The camera shows the two women's hands locked into

each other as Tubman helps Rosalee out of the carriage, in which she was hiding, and viewers only catch a quick glimpse of Harriet Tubman as it zooms out of this final scene. The rifle is crucial for viewers to identify Tubman even before she says her name; it makes her silhouette immediately recognizable. Her larger-than-life image literally precedes her introduction, her outreached hand, and her joining the recurring cast of characters in season two.



Fig. 2: Tubman's first appearance
Underground, S1 E10: »The White Whale« (43:42)

Tubman (played by Aisha Hinds) shows up in the very first episode of season two helping Rosalee escape with her »cargo« (S2 E1: »Contraband«). She is, again, heavily armed, pointing her gun at the slavecatcher; ultimately, in this stand-off scene, she negotiates the »sale« of the escapees (»ten dollars or two bullets – it's your choice« 05:34). The season is set in 1858 and focuses on women as agents of the Underground Railroad and as determined fighters for Black liberation: Rosalee takes on the dangerous task of guiding enslaved people to freedom. She seeks to free her family as well as her partner Noah (played by Aldis Hodge), who is charged with murder after he sacrificed himself for the sake of Rosalee's successful escape. The women of *Underground* are, in general, unafraid, determined – and armed. This is exemplified by the decoy sewing circle that white abolitionist Elizabeth Hawkes (played by Jessica De Gouw) joins and where women, Black and white, organize to promote abolitionism, assist enslaved people in their escape, steal from a church to aid the cause, and do shooting practices (for their protection and self-defense). The group allows for the show to imagine female solidarity across the color line, and it reveals how notions of respectable femininity and an ideology of separate spheres can provide a cover for political activism. Collectively and individually, the women use, but at the same time defy, such gendered logics as they lobby for the cause in public *and* in pri-

vate as well as through emotional appeals *and* audacious actions. Female agency is further showcased in the notorious and ruthless slave catcher, Patty Cannon (played by Sadie Stratton), who is trying to capture »the most notorious runaway«, i.e. Harriet Tubman, to secure her own legacy (S2 E2: »Things Unsaid«). And, of course, it is epitomized by Rosalee, who gains notoriety as the »Black Rose«⁶, and Harriet, who becomes her mentor, offers advice, and even guides her on a mission through voice-over (S2 E2). Especially in the (brief) interactions of these two characters, Tubman is humanized and depicted as a complex individual: The show, for example, references her marriage with John, who re-married after she escaped (S2 E1), it depicts her spells, caused by a head injury, which she reads as God-sent visions (S2 E2), and it makes explicit her resilience and her unwavering belief in God as well as her doubts and hesitations about be(com)ing a leader (S2 E9: »Citizen«).

Most importantly, in episode six entitled »Minty«, *Underground* digresses from its usual script and style and breaks with television's conventions. The highly theatrical episode leaves behind the fast-paced action and suspense-driven stories characteristic of *Underground*. The complete episode, which was labelled »Harriet Tubman's TED Talk« on set (Berman 2017), takes place in a single location, exudes an atmosphere of quiet and somberness, and consists of Tubman giving a speech in front of (mostly white) abolitionists, a crowd which we as television audience join. We listen to her almost hour-long account of her life, which offers a forceful abolitionist plea and takes on the myth-making that surrounds her (Berman 2017). In content and performance, the scene evokes the African American literary tradition of slave narratives as well as the oral testimonies often provided by speakers, who had experienced enslavement firsthand, on the anti-slavery lecture circuit. The episode's beginning already indicates that viewers will get an intimate perspective on Harriet: The camera comes up from behind her as she gets dressed for her appearance – we see her scarred back, witness her button up her jacket, her »armor for the battle ahead« (Framke 2017). The episode then turns into a long monologue that elaborates in a captivating way on Tubman's life journey from enslavement to freedom and its many disappointments. Symbolically, the room turns from gray monochrome to a golden hue as Tubman ends her story of how she escaped enslavement. She defends the controversial stance of John Brown and proclaims: »Slavery ain't just a sin. It's a state of war, profitin' off the bodies of others. Rapi'n' the bodies of others. Killin' the bodies of others. Those are all acts of war.« And, she ends with a call to arms directed at her audience in the room and in front of the TV sets:

6 The name »Black Rose« clearly evokes another African American female activist, organizer, and educator, Mary McLeod Bethune, for whom the black rose represented independence and beauty, and who herself was »a black rose in the midst of American racism« (Gates/West 2000: 45). Rosalee is thus even further positioned within a long history and genealogy of Black female activism.

You gotta find what it means for you to be a soldier. Beat back those that are trying to kill everything good and right in the world and call it ›making it great again.‹ We can't afford to just be citizens in a time of war. That would be surrender. That'd be giving up our future, and our souls. Ain't nobody get to sit this one out, you hear me? (53:23)

The reference to President Donald Trump's well-known rhetoric is obvious. It indicates the continuing systems of oppression that shape US society as well as the urgency to fight them in the present moment.

On *Underground*, a militant Tubman promotes a push for violent revolution. This is fleshed out by the series' presentation of Tubman's relation to white abolitionist John Brown, whose legacy and commemoration continues to be contested and who has also received renewed interest in contemporary popular culture, such as in James McBride's 2013 novel *The Good Lord Bird* that has also been turned into an eponymous 2020 drama mini-series (see, for example, Haase/Schäfer 2019). Brown was convicted and executed for treason and is still sometimes labelled a terrorist and madman. However, more often he is seen as a religious zealot and staunch abolitionist, who is at least partially recuperated as »America's Good Terrorist« who committed »patriotic treason« or celebrated as a hero, »the man who killed slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded Civil Rights«⁷. On *Underground*, Tubman endorses Brown's agenda and plans for violent insurrection, the capture of the arms depot at Harper's Ferry in 1859, which is often seen as a major prelude to the Civil War. This depiction of Tubman, which is characterized by militancy and militarization indicated through her pronounced use of firearms and her rhetoric of war, stands in stark contrast to the palatable image of her that is fashioned in children's stories and textbooks. She challenges the white privilege of her listeners as well as any comfort they may find in imagining themselves on the ›right side of history‹ – then and now. Actress Aisha Hinds explains the episode in an interview:

The theme of this entire season is ›citizen versus soldier.‹ So while Harriet is talking to this intimate group of abolitionists, she's also talking to the [...] audience outside the television screen. [...] [S]he is talking to our entire nation, to this entire world, and challenging people to consider what their position is: Are you just going to be a citizen and observe the injustices that are rampant in our world, or are you going to be a soldier and engage in a way that is necessary for us to break down the systems that are trying to oppress us as a people? (Berman 2017)

7 See, for instance, Charles P. Poland's *America's Good Terrorist: John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Casemate 2020), Evan Carton's *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (Free Press 2006), and David S. Reynolds's *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (Knopf 2009).

Underground celebrates the actual heroes and heroines of the Underground Railroad and the fight for freedom, predominantly through its Black, female, armed protagonists. Laura Dubek argues that its »significance [...], beyond its portrayal of black people actively resisting oppression, lies in its insistence that freedom is a choice and that slavery, and by extension all institutions of oppression, damages everyone« (2018: 73). Harriet is shown building a legacy as a fighter for Black freedom and mentor to Rosalee (and others), as the mastermind behind many abolitionist activities, and as the fabled target of slave hunters. With the exception of episode six and her mission to rescue Rosalee in the penultimate episode, she is a character with comparatively little screen time, which is also indicated by Aisha Hinds being credited as »guest star« rather than as part of the regular cast of the show. However, Tubman is frequently »present« in the narration as looming spiritual leader even without actually appearing – e.g. as characters refer to her advice or recall her instructions while on a mission.

As a form of »resistance TV« (McFarland 2017) that shows »what revolution looks like« (Butler »Want« 2017), *Underground* carefully balances its representation of violence, and Tubman stands at the center of this dynamic: While the women of the sewing circle are initially portrayed as less militant than John Brown's men (see esp. S2 E3: »Ache« and S2 E4: »Nok Aaut«), Elizabeth, fueled by anger, slowly adopts a more radical and potentially violent stance. In »Citizen« (S2 E9), Tubman tells Noah: »This war we're fightin' need man [sic] like you« (34:58). And: »Ain't nothin' great ever happen based on fear or sense. You gotta be desperate and insane. You got to believe« (35:10). This statement resonates with John Brown's raid and the struggle to classify his actions, and it fits well with Tubman's endorsement of his plans as she advocates for setting what usually counts as good reason aside in a fight that requires firm belief. Following »Citizen«, the final episode of season two is entitled »Soldier«, marking the contrast between citizens and soldiers as well as the possible transformation of regular citizens into soldiers forced to fight for their freedom from oppression by any means necessary. It escalates the war rhetoric and narrative, especially as the resistance group picks up guns instead of trying to run in a desperate situation (»We ain't running. We got guns« 27:14). The episode is framed by John Brown's infamous raid on Harper's Ferry – Tubman learns about his plans at the very beginning through a messenger, but we do not see her response to Brown's request to join her. Instead, in the final flashforward of the season, it is Elizabeth who is placed at the scene of the raid. Tubman is depicted as a heroine of mythical proportions, but the show equally portrays her as a complex individual, a militant activist, and a gunwoman who follows her religious belief to save herself, her people, and core American values as enshrined in the »Declaration of Independence« and violently fought for in the revolution. Perhaps most importantly, the period drama places the historical figure within a community of fictive and fictionalized like-minded peo-

ple. In doing so, *Underground* emphasizes the collective efforts to end enslavement in addition to celebrating the individual heroism of Harriet Tubman.

3. »To Be Young, Gifted, and Black«: *Harriet*

Kasi Lemmons' 2019 film is the first feature-length film to focus solely on Tubman. It casts its protagonist in a way that intervenes in mainstream depictions by humanizing the icon, providing her story with context and background, and emphasizing her inner life and revolutionary spirit. At the same time, as a fairly generic biopic, it lionizes its heroine as epitome of American values, and it rehashes the well-known highlights of her escape and her involvement in the Underground Railroad at the expense of depicting her later life in detail. Lemmons outlined her task in the following words: »One of the things that sometimes happens with African American heroes is that their edge gets taken off. They get kind of warm and fuzzy. My mission was to bring Harriet Tubman to life as a young woman when she's doing the most heroic work« (quoted in Hart 2019). Robert Ito notes along similar lines in *The New York Times* that Tubman is portrayed not as the »old woman in a kerchief« that many people might immediately associate with her name:

Perhaps most jarring, this Tubman is armed and ready to start blasting, something you certainly don't see in all those children's books about her. »Those books defanged her, declawed her, to make her more palatable«, Kasi Lemmons [...] said. »Because there's something quite terrifying about the image of a black woman with a rifle« (2019).

In contrast to *Underground*, *Harriet* refrains from »dramatic anachronism or frame-breaking« and »addresses more than the monstrous institution of slavery [...]. It also addresses the underlying presumption of white supremacy and its ongoing influence in American politics and culture« (Brody 2019). *Harriet* employs some elements of the action film (esp. in the scenes when Harriet is running, chased by or confronted with slave catchers), but the film's story is mostly told in a melodramatic mode. This becomes obvious with regard to the centrality of music, the visual aesthetics, the depiction of emotions, and its focus on a heroine who fights against external forces and its emphasis on kinship and family (separation) as a venue to negotiate socio-political issues.

The narration hinges on Harriet's transformation from an illiterate slave to an activist and abolitionist leader. »General Tubman« – as John Brown famously called her (see Humez 2003: 34) – is depicted as a steadfast religious believer, an unwavering fighter, and revolutionary. The firearms that Tubman learns how to use, carries, and is clearly unafraid to shoot not only signal historical accuracy, but also

Black female empowerment and radical militancy. Harriet Tubman (played by Cynthia Erivo) receives her first gun – almost 45 minutes into the film – from the free Black abolitionist Marie Buchanon (played by Janelle Monaé) in an etiquette lesson that really represents gendered spy training. This crucial scene features two empowered and empowering women: The free-born Marie initiates the young Tubman into approximating the ideal of mid-19th-century white, privileged womanhood; an ideal that Barbara Welter has aptly termed »True Womanhood«, the conglomerate of »attributes [...] by which a woman judged herself and was judged« encompassing the »four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity« (1966: 152). The scene is revealing with regard to these respectability politics of white womanhood – and their exclusion of Black women. Black women's hyper- and invisibility in different spaces can offer a cover or add to their precariousness, and Tubman receives some hints at how to blend in. It is this appropriation of feminine-coded behavior deemed appropriate for a Black woman that promises to keep her safe during her travels. If she still encounters any problems, Tubman will be prepared by carrying the gun Marie puts into her hand. The firearm is immediately associated with power and freedom, and it provides a stark contrast to any performance of True Womanhood. Harriet's »feminine« cover and the »masculine« prop of the pistol emphasize the double standards and ambivalences in contemporaneous discourses on race and gender. Buchanon shows Tubman how to point the gun – first almost, but not quite at the camera (and thus at us as viewers) and then, as the camera cuts to a different perspective, to the mirror that frames the two women and, in standard melodramatic fashion, reflects Tubman's transformation from fugitive slave to activist liberator (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Harriet points a gun provided by Marie Buchanon
Harriet 2019 (00:44:21)

It is significant that Tubman only *poses* with the gun here – we do not see her firing it or actually training how to shoot. When she departs on her first rescue mission to liberate her husband John, she is asked for her papers by a white man and puts her training into practice. She reaches for her firearm when he questions her about the information on her forged free papers, but ultimately manages to talk her way out of this situation without pulling the gun. Since John has re-married and started a new life without her, Tubman leaves Maryland without her husband, but instead takes a group of enslaved people, family and friends, with her on the way to the North. When some of them refuse to cross a river, she points her gun at her fellow travelers and lays out the options: »be free or die« (1:06:04).⁸ It is not the gun, though, that makes the others follow her: She holds it up and over the water – almost in a gesture of surrender – and starts crossing the river alone, making it through with a prayer that implies God's guidance. Afterwards, she re-asserts her »freedom name« as well as her status as the leader of the group. The scene is crucial for establishing her as *the* Harriet Tubman of Underground Railroad fame. She had taken on this new name following the suggestion of William Still (played by Leslie Odom, Jr.), when he took down her information for his famous Underground Railroad records upon her first arrival at Philadelphia: The last name is her husband's, and the first name honors her mother. As many other formerly enslaved people before and after her, she thus symbolically leaves behind her enslaved self in order to forge a new and empowered identity.

This identity is also increasingly tied to her being armed, and Tubman is repeatedly shown carrying and using firearms to defend herself. In a key scene towards the end of the film, she seeks to facilitate her family's escape and confronts Gideon Brodess (played by Joe Alwyn), the son of her former master and a fictional character not based on a historical person. Harriet draws her pistol, shoots at, and successfully disarms Gideon. In a next step, she not only points his own rifle at him, but also makes him come off his white horse and kneel in front of her, a gesture that clearly has an emasculating effect. The firearms provide the means for Tubman to reverse the usual racialized and gendered social hierarchy between the two characters, and they symbolize this reversal as Tubman exchanges her pistol for the white man's shotgun (fig. 4).

8 This line invokes, of course, New Hampshire's state motto, a phrase that is assigned to General John Stark and conjures up the spirit of the American revolution. It contributes to the film's overall agenda to cement Tubman's status as a quintessential American heroine by aligning her radicalism and militancy with the well-known narrative of the nation's founding.



Fig. 4: Harriet pointing a rifle at Gideon
Harriet 2019 (1:46:31)

Their dialogue, once again, picks up the question of Harriet's acceptance of social positions, structural oppression, and behavioral norms, such as respectability, when Gideon states: »You could have stayed with us if only you knew how to behave. But you are unruly and untamed« (1:46:39). He further claims not only Harriet as his property, but also fantasizes about their mutual attraction invoking what Christina Sharpe has aptly termed the »monstrous intimacies« (2010) of enslavement. Harriet contests his story, revealing his fantasy work for the distorted illusion that it is and reiterates the essential choice and right for her (and, by extension, other enslaved people) as being »liberty or death« (1:47:33). When he tries to get to her by imagining how she will be lynched for her presumed transgressions, she powerfully prophesies his death on the Civil War battlefield as he fights for the »Lost Cause« and the »sin of slavery«, before she rides away on his horse. The film straddles the difficult balancing acts that many slave authors and orators, including Tubman, also had to perform: telling an exceptional story that can still be seen as representative, emphasizing individual heroism without denying collective efforts, and appealing to a potentially white audience without compromising the efforts and agendas of the Black liberation struggle.

Throughout the film, Harriet's perspective dominates: Many of her visions or premonitions are visually depicted for the audience. The film begins with her lying in the grass before celebrating a moment of joy and hope with her husband when the papers arrive that promise to legally secure her freedom, and it ends not only with the formulaic text inserts that recount a substantial part of Tubman's life in a few sentences, but also with Harriet closing the door to her family home on us to live happily ever after before the closing credits start rolling. *Harriet* celebrates Tubman's determination, her religiosity, and her bravery, and it includes a powerful scene around the Combahee River raid that shows her as a military leader in the Civil War. Its protagonist is depicted as a »young superheroine« (Lemmons quoted in Ito

2019) and a »militant radical« (Larson quoted in Ito 2019) who did not shy away from the use of guns and violence for the sake of liberation and self-defense.

Kasi Lemmons declared *Harriet* to be not a film about enslavement, but a »freedom film« (Sims 2019) – and the firearm is a central prop intimately connected to freedom. It places Tubman in a tradition of those armed Americans prominently commemorated in the foundational mythology of the US such as settler-colonialists, revolutionaries, and pioneers and within a discourse emphasizing their presumed God-given right to claim and to rule the land. Wielded by those who are chosen by God and represent »true« American values, Harriet's use of arms seems to suggest, the gun or rifle does safeguard more than it endangers; it secures individual (and collective) liberty rather than destroying it. The film draws on the highly visible and straight-forward symbolism of the gun or rifle to mark its protagonist's empowerment, her determination, and her growing radicalism. In doing so, it normalizes female Black militancy and offers a fresh version of Tubman in popular culture, even though A. O. Scott compared it to »those biographies of historical figures intended for young readers: accessible, emotionally direct, and artfully simplified« (2019). While family-friendly in its depiction of enslavement's dehumanizing brutality and, at the same time, bold in its representation of a militant Tubman, *Harriet* also runs the risk of marking the use of firearms as a precondition and armament as a guarantor for freedom. However, showing Harriet Tubman as the precursor of »revolutionary divas« of the Black Power era such as Angela Davis is an important intervention into the way (19th-century) Black womanhood has figured in the cultural imaginary and how it has been constructed on screen (Brown 2010: 116). What Kimberly N. Brown states about Davis' negotiation of her public image also holds true to some degree for the depiction of Harriet Tubman in Lemmons' film:

Davis enacts Diva Citizenship to achieve »expansive self-actualization« or a radical subjectivity. [...] [S]he conceives of her public persona as a performative stance – one in which she not only models revolutionary behavior for women who might want to follow in her footsteps, but actively attempts to counter media portrayals that highlight her »enigmatic« nature rather than show the connection between her personal life and her politics or depict all facets of her life as »inseparable from struggle.« (2010: 117–118)

The filmic representation of an armed, militant, and determined Tubman can easily be aligned with a long history of Black revolutionary womanhood, but it also connects her further with some of the foundational mythologies of the United States that claim violence as redemptive and armed resistance as essential to securing (white) freedom (e.g. with regard to American independence or the frontier, see Paul 2014). It affirms her status as an American heroine as much as it casts her as a radical fighter for Black freedom.

4. Conclusion

Both *Underground* and *Harriet* serve as case studies from contemporary popular culture in this chapter to showcase Harriet Tubman's significance as American heroine, the ongoing challenges to her established iconography as (unarmed) conductor on the Underground Railroad, and the increasing recognition of her militant activist work and military service. These representations signal a shift from the mythmaking and the sanitized narratives of her life that have turned her into a powerful symbol yet have confined her life's story to her escape from enslavement and her abolitionist work and/or deprived her public image from her youthfulness, her militancy, and her radical social activism. While both case studies are part of an emerging discourse that provides a much-needed corrective to the dominant image of Tubman, their cultural work is more complicated: The gun-carrying female revolutionary in contemporary popular culture is also a sensationalist figure used to generate attention, and her story is still to a large degree safely contained within the genre of the Hollywood melodrama, the historical context of the mid-19th century, and those canonical stories of Black enslavement and freedom that white America tends to be comfortable with. Within these limits, the two case studies might indicate a growing acceptance of images of Black female radicalism and militancy on big and small screens, and they can be read as an emancipatory move from the controlling images and stereotypes that have dominated Black womanhood in popular culture.

And yet, the question remains how much the militarization of Harriet Tubman and Black womanhood can be viewed as emancipatory if it resonates with the militarization of everyday culture and the precarity of women's lives that – as many (feminist) scholars have shown (e.g. Enloe 2000) – has been ongoing for decades. Black women have recently become the fastest growing group of gun owners in the United States (Aning 2022); and Tubman is embraced by organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) or the Second Amendment Foundation (SAF) as a symbolic figurehead of second amendment rights. An official NRA outlet, for instance, argues that for freedom fighters like Tubman »the right to arms was part of the difference between slavery and freedom« (Kopel 2016), and the SAF, on their website, hailed her as an excellent choice for the \$20 bill.⁹ The ambivalent, less sanitized image of Tubman that is emerging not only in the scholarship on this important historical figure but that also begins to take hold in popular culture and political discourses reinforces her status as a celebrated American heroine. It also reveals her to be a symbolic figure that can be appropriated for quite different purposes, agendas, and ideologies – ranging from revolutionary heroism to militant protest and from Black (female) empowerment to gun rights.

9 See: <https://www.saf.org/saf-says-image-of-gun-owner-harriet-tubman-on-20-bill-is-good-choice/>. Accessed on 25.02.2023.

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