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# Harriet Tubman – Fact and Fiction

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**How has the way in which Harriet Tubman is depicted in American Children's literature changed between the 1950s and today, and to what extent are these depictions historically accurate?**

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## Introduction

'I had reasoned dis out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a *right* to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have de oder; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when de time came for me to go, de Lord would let dem take me.'<sup>1</sup>

These words were spoken by Harriet Tubman, a woman who escaped slavery in 1849 but traveled back into slave territory in order to help others escape as well. Tubman's heroic actions contributed to, and made use of, what was known as the Underground Railroad in the antebellum period. The Underground Railroad was a complex network of free blacks (some of them former slaves) and white abolitionists that helped runaway slaves to get to the Northern states of the United States, where slavery had been abolished during the Revolutionary era, by leading them from safe haven to safe haven. The Underground Railroad was operational in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the final abolition of slavery in 1865. The quote above reveals just how much risk Harriet Tubman ran on her journeys back into the slave South to carry out her dangerous work. She always ran the risk of being caught and imprisoned or killed, but she continued on what she considered to be her task. Still determined to work against the institution of slavery, she served the abolitionist cause again during the Civil War between 1861-1865, as both a nurse and a spy for the Union. She was recruited for this role because she knew the Southern land on which she was born so well.<sup>2</sup>

Even though Harriet Tubman was not alone in her willingness to risk her life in order to help southern slaves escape bondage, her remarkable story formed a major part of the legend of the Underground Railroad and until today, the story inspired several journalists and biographers to record her life story. Tubman's story has not only found its way into the scholarly literature about the Underground Railroad, but also into more popular literature, both for adults and for children. Indeed, Harriet's somewhat mythical story is interesting enough to fascinate young children, and her tale has been used by children's authors of several generations in order to educate young Americans about the country's slavery past and to teach them important values such as courage and self-sacrifice.

In this study, the way Harriet Tubman is depicted in American Children's literature, and the way this depiction changed between the 1950s and today will be examined. This research will also explore to what extent these depictions are historically accurate.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People* (New York: Go. R. Lockwood & Son, 1886), 29

<sup>2</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)

In order to conduct this research, children's books written between the 1950s and today have been studied. From the 1950s two books have been examined: *The Story of Harriet Tubman*, written by Dorothy Sterling in 1954, and *Harriet Tubman – Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, written in 1955 by Ann Petry. This study will also examine the book by J.G. Gittings, *Let My People Go*, written in 1971 and *Go Free or Die – A Story About Harriet Tubman*, written in 1988 by Jeri Ferris. The latest two works are *Aunt Harriet's Railroad in the Sky*, written by Faith Ringgold in 1992, and *Moses – When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, written by Carole B. Weatherford in 2006. The portrayals of Harriet Tubman in these works will be compared to the actual information that can be found in early biographies and primary source material about Harriet Tubman, in order to gauge their historical accuracy. The differences in the way Harriet is described in the children's books are explained by examining the context in which they were written and by focusing on modern developments in the United States and in the African-American community in particular.

In order to properly answer the research question on which this study is based, three separate subjects will be covered in three thematically arranged chapters. The first chapter will cover Harriet Tubman's femininity. The work she performed on the Underground Railroad was usually done by men and many people who knew Harriet credited her with 'male' characteristics. In the first chapter we will explore in what way these characteristics are portrayed in the children's books from various eras. In the second chapter, the role played by Harriet's African heritage and certain matters inherent to African (American) culture will be explored. Some of the themes that will be discussed in this chapter are skin color, strong family ties and physical African elements such as a bandana. The final chapter covers the subject of religion. In this chapter, the role played by religion in Harriet's life will be explored and the portrayal of Harriet as a religious woman in the children's books will be compared to the available primary source material.

Different ideals and morals prevailed in different decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These dominant ideals influenced the way stories for children were written, even stories that were about an important and much-discussed chapter in history, such as the Underground Railroad. Therefore, this research will provide insight into the importance of several ideals in various decades of postwar America, by showing which of these found their way into the literature for children.

More importantly, by examining children's books, which give a somewhat simplified account of Harriet Tubman's complex life story, we can discover what elements of her story authors deemed important enough to convey in different periods of time. Since most of the authors of the discussed books are from the African-American community, this tells us which elements of slavery were considered important enough by the African-American community in different decades to teach to

their youngest generation. In other words, it gives us insight into the way in which slavery is remembered as well as how this memory has changed over time.

Slavery is often considered a cultural trauma that still determines the way the African-American community sees itself and its place in society. The fact that, and the way in which, slavery is remembered attributes to a sense of identity within the African-American community. This study aims to provide insight into how this common identity is formed, as it shows us what images of slavery are shown to the youngest generation of African Americans.

**'The most of a man I ever met with.'**

### **Harriet Tubman and her femininity**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Underground Railroad was expanding rapidly and many abolitionists, both black and white, were active on it. Some of them, like Harriet Tubman, performed the dangerous task of going back into slave territory to lead others to the free North. However, almost all of these people were men and almost all were white. To perform this hard and risky task, Harriet must have been both courageous and tough. In the antebellum period, these characteristics were considered very masculine.<sup>3</sup> The female personality was supposed to be limited to other traits, such as an interest in romance, and a willingness to stay at home and care for a family. The available primary sources, provide interesting information on Harriet's character, which was very different from what was considered normal during her lifetime. In what way is Harriet's character, and in particular her femininity, described in the children's literature? In what way does this differ from the available primary source information and to what extent did the descriptions change over time?

It is remarkable that in biographies and primary source material about Harriet Tubman, she is often compared to a man, or even called a man. In most of these comparisons, it is not entirely clear whether the authors mean that she looked like a man physically or that she behaved like a man. However, some comments seem to be clear descriptions of her male appearance. Sarah Bradford wrote in her 1886 biography of Harriet Tubman that the years of hard fieldwork had given Harriet a remarkably strong appearance. She states that her power of muscle was so developed, 'that her feats of strength often called forth the wonder of strong laboring men'.<sup>4</sup> She describes Harriet as even stronger than the average men. This means she clearly imputes to Harriet male characteristics. Frank C. Drake, a journalist of the *New York Herald*, who wrote down Harriet's story in 1907, does the same. He writes that Harriet was a match for the strongest man on the plantation before she was nineteen. Again, emphasis is placed on her physical strength, which was considered a male quality at the time these biographers wrote Harriet's story. In letters written about Harriet Tubman by those who knew her, she is also often compared to a man. For example, John Brown mentions Harriet

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<sup>3</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan – The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Amistad, 2005), 346-347

<sup>4</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People* (New York: Go. R. Lockwood & Son, 1886), 9

Tubman in one of his letters, and states that 'He was the most of a man naturally that I ever met with'.<sup>5</sup>

In most children's books, mention is made of Harriet Tubman's masculine appearance as well. The early books, written by Sterling in 1954 and Ann Petry in 1955 both emphasize the contrast between Harriet's appearance as a young woman, and the hard work she performed. They both describe her as a strong, muscular, slender woman, wearing long skirts that she had to loop up around her waist while working.<sup>6</sup> It seems as if the image of the long skirts is used to illustrate the feminine side of Harriet Tubman, which stands in sharp contrast with the hard, manly work she performs in the field, giving her the muscular body. In the book written by Gittings in 1971, *Let My People Go*, this is very different. In this book, the feminine side of her appearance is not mentioned at all. She is described as being different from 'regular' colored girls. 'Harriet was not tall or beautiful, like many negro girls. She was only five feet high with ugly, flat features and a sullen look, but she was very strong. She could do man's work, digging, ploughing, loading heavy logs of wood'.<sup>7</sup> According to this book, Harriet did not look much like a regular female, and she was physically capable of doing men's work. The same goes for Jeri Ferris' work, written in 1988. In this book the only mention made of Harriet's appearance is that she was small but strong, thanks to all the plowing, hoeing and chopping, and that her feet became tough and hard in the rocky soil of the field. Again, these are not very feminine characteristics. This appears to change in the book written in 1992 by Ringgold however, in which no mention is made of Harriet having male characteristics.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, female characteristics are not mentioned either. Also, in Weatherford's work from 2006, Harriet is described as chopping wood and wielding a heavy ax, but in this book this is not considered a man's task, so no special attention is given to it.<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting that Harriet's masculine look is given different amounts of attention in these children's books. The fact that in the books written in the 1950s the emphasis lays on the combination of Harriet female appearance and her masculine characteristics can be explained in two different ways. The first explanation is that these books emphasize Harriet Tubman's strength and muscular look, simply because they want to stay close to the stories told by Harriet's early biographers. Then the real question becomes why these early biographers focused on Harriet's masculinity. The explanation that Jean Humez gives for this is that to portray a woman as a man in

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<sup>5</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 295

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train* (New York, NY: Scholastic Inc., 1954), 39  
Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1955), 75

<sup>7</sup> J.G. Gittings, *Let my People Go* (Amersham: Hulton Educational Publications Ltd., 1971), 7

<sup>8</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, n.p.

the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (the time at which her early biographies were written), represented respect for the woman. This is probably also why John Brown used the masculine pronoun he, when he described Harriet.<sup>10</sup> The authors of the children's novels written in the 1950s may not have realized this and simply tried to find a way to incorporate the descriptions of Harriet as a masculine woman in their own stories. This explains the combination of female and male qualities that is prevalent in the description of Harriet's appearance in these books. Another explanation for the fact that in the books from the 1950s the focus is on the mixture of male and female characteristics, is that after 1945 the United States experienced an outburst of domestic ideology. The traditional ideals of the place of woman in the household revived, even though at the same time the demand for women in the workplace increased. This created so-called 'split characters': women who struggled with the demands of labor and the wish to fulfill their female duties in the household.<sup>11</sup> This struggle might be projected onto Harriet Tubman in these children's books, because she, even though she is a female, has to meet everything that was demanded of men. Especially in the African-American society, this was a source of discord within the community, because African-American women had historically been forced to work outside of their homes, even though society's dominant ideology held that the woman's place is in the home.<sup>12</sup> The books may therefore emphasize the fact that despite doing men's work, Harriet was still a female who, if she could choose, would live up to what was expected of women.

In the later books, this attitude changed. Especially the books written in the 1990s and the 2000s, leave out this masculine side of Harriet Tubman. A reason for this might be that the late 1980s and the 1990s saw a so-called third wave of feminism. These 'new feminists' were different from those of the earlier feminist waves, because they no longer considered themselves victims. The third wave feminists did not want major social change, but they wanted to show how strong women were when they simply behaved as women.<sup>13</sup> This idea explains why in the books from 1992 and 2006, Harriet Tubman is shown as a very feminine woman, and little attention is paid to her masculine characteristics. The books written in the 1970s and the 1980s may have been more influenced by the earlier feminist wave of the 60s and 70s in which women were trying to show they could do anything men could do.<sup>14</sup> Since, according to these feminists, there was no difference between men and women, there was no need to expand on the fact that Harriet looked different from other girls or

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<sup>10</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, The Life and the Life Stories*, 32

<sup>11</sup> Neil Campbell and Alasdair Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 197-199

<sup>12</sup> Leith Mullings, "Images, Ideology, and Women of Color," in *Women of Color in U.S. Society*, ed. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 238

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Gilley, "Writings of the Third Wave – Young Feminists in Conversation," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 44 (2005): 187-188

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 188

that she was very muscular and there was no need to explain that beside her masculine characteristics, she still had a feminine side as well.

Not only was Harriet's appearance sometimes described as manly, in both the primary source material and the children's books, but some aspects of her character were also considered masculine and these are described in the primary sources and the children's literature as well. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, a woman doing the dangerous work of going back into slave territory to help runaway slaves escape bondage defied every notion of what women were supposed to be.<sup>15</sup> For example, one needed to be tough and possess an enormous amount of courage in order to do this work, and both toughness and courage were not considered to be female characteristics. Still, Harriet Tubman must have had these characteristics.

Several quotes from primary source material about Harriet suggest this. For example, in letters written by John Brown, Harriet is referred to as 'General Tubman'. By calling her a general, Brown gives the impression that Harriet acted rather militaristically. Of course, only men were in the military, so this is remarkable. John Brown is not the only one who points towards Harriet's manly characteristics. Jean Humez, who compared almost all available primary source material about Harriet Tubman, comments on Harriet's military-like strictness by stating that she had 'a very short and pointed rule or law of her own, which implied death to any who talked of giving out and going back'. According to Humez, Harriet indulged no foolishness on the road. Some of the slaves in her party would have been invigorated by Harriet's blunt manner and the threat of extreme measures, such as death.<sup>16</sup> Sarah Bradford also refers to Harriet's bluntness in her biography. She describes how, whenever runaway slaves were reluctant to move on, Harriet took out her revolver and pointed it at their heads. She would say: 'dead niggers tell no tales; you go on or die', and then usually the runaways got back on their feet and continued to follow Harriet. Bradford describes Harriet as a 'bold and daring pioneer'.<sup>17</sup>

Many people who knew Harriet and mentioned her in letters, describe her as being fearless and courageous. Wendell Phillips, a Bostonian abolitionist, wrote that in his opinion 'there are few captains who have done more for [...] the colored race, than our fearless and most sagacious friend, Harriet'.<sup>18</sup> Others, like Gerrit Smith, another leading abolitionist and presidential candidate, praise Harriet for her bravery as well.<sup>19</sup> Finally, William Still, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, wrote about Harriet that 'she seemed wholly devoid of personal fear. The idea of being captured by

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<sup>15</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 347

<sup>16</sup> Jean M. Humez, 288

<sup>17</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of her People*, 33

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

slave hunters or slaveholders seems never to enter her mind.<sup>20</sup> So, from the primary source material and the early biographies it becomes clear that Harriet was considered to be an especially brave and fearless woman with a military-like strictness.

These characteristics can also be found in most of the children's books. In Dorothy Sterling's book from 1954 Harriet is portrayed as being very courageous. When she starts working for the Underground Railroad after her initial escape, she is warned by William Still that it is very dangerous work that is usually done by men. According to this book Harriet reacted by saying: 'I been doing man's work all my life. I'm not afraid'.<sup>21</sup> References are also made to Harriet's blunt, military-like behavior. It is described, for example, that Harriet bought a heavy silver pistol for Christmas.<sup>22</sup> The way Harriet dealt with runaways that wanted to go back, is described as following: 'If terror made strong men weak and brave women faint of heart, Harriet permitted no turning back. With her pistol at their shoulder blades, her voice was firm and her meaning *clear*'.<sup>23</sup> In the other book from the 1950s, Ann Petry's *Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, a little more attention is given to the fact that Harriet was also afraid sometimes. For example, she doubts whether she should run away, because after an accident as a young girl, she sometimes experiences trancelike moments of sleep, and the knowledge of that weakness made her scared to run away.<sup>24</sup> However, later in the story, after she made the decision to flee, it is described how Harriet was 'surprised at her own lack of fear'.<sup>25</sup> So, as in Sterling's book, Petry also describes Harriet as rather courageous. However, the description of Harriet's military discipline in case one of her followers wanted to turn back, is different in Petry's work. In this book, Harriet also lifts her gun and aims it at the runaway in order to make him or her change his mind, but she is said to feel guilty while doing this.<sup>26</sup> In this book, more attention seems to be given to Harriet's manly characteristics conflicting with her feminine side.

In *Let My People Go*, written in 1971, a great deal of emphasis is placed on Harriet's courage. The author wonders how Harriet was able to make so many difficult and dangerous journeys. The answer to this question is given in the book as well: 'by being so utterly fearless herself that she gave courage to others'.<sup>27</sup> Like in the books from the 1950s, Harriet's strict reaction towards people in her party that want to go back, is described in detail. The book tells us that she always carried a loaded gun, which she would hold to a runaway's head while saying: 'Dead niggers tell no tales', whenever a

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<sup>20</sup> William Still, *Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, etc.* (Philadelphia, PA: Porter & Coales: 1886), n.p.

<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman – Freedom Train*, 89

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 79, 85

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 131

<sup>24</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman – Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, 74

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141

<sup>27</sup> J.G. Gittings, *Let My People Go*, 13

runaway wanted to go back. The image is made even more extreme by describing how she would prod the gun in the runaways back while walking behind them. This book however does give an explanation for Harriet's military-like behavior, namely that 'her childhood had been so cruel that she could bear any hardship without flinching'.<sup>28</sup>

In the book written by Jeri Ferris in 1988, the focus is on Harriet's fear instead of on her braveness. This book gives several accounts of Harriet being afraid while she is on the run. 'She saw a man walking among the tombstones, and her heart almost stopped. Was he a ghost? Was he a slave catcher?'<sup>29</sup> Later in the book, her fear is discussed again. This time the story tells us that Harriet used her fear, as a natural way to tell her when to hide. Her fear was not always rationally explainable, but she always listened to it and made sure to hide whenever she suddenly felt afraid, and this kept her out of trouble.<sup>30</sup> In Ringgold's work, written in 1991, the emphasis is also on Harriet's fear. She is not really portrayed a strong, brave woman, who one might compare to a general. This is already evident in the title of the book, in which Harriet is called Aunt Harriet, which does not sound make her sound very strong and courageous. In this book, Harriet's story is told through the eyes of two young children. These children are described as being scared on numerous occasions. For example, the little girl, Cassie, is described as being 'too afraid to cry'. Cassie's younger brother Bebe, writes to his sister that: 'He is very frightened but he will not turn back'.<sup>31</sup> It seems as if Faith Ringgold decided to write the story through the eyes of children, in order to illustrate how dangerous and scary Harriet's journeys were. However, the children are the ones that are described as being scared, not Harriet herself. Still, there is no emphasis on Harriet being particularly brave either.

The same goes for the book written in 2006 by Carole Weatherford. In this book, Harriet is guided by God in everything she does. She is sometimes portrayed as being scared, but then God's words give her the strength to continue. Most problems she encounters are solved through prayer; when she is scared by the sound of hoof beats in the darkness, she prays to God and the men on horseback pass by without noticing her.<sup>32</sup> In this version of the story, there was no need for Harriet to be particularly brave, because she was protected from troubles by God.

When looking at the way male characteristics, like courageous and braveness, are portrayed in the children's literature, it is remarkable that in the three most recent books, Harriet's braveness is less emphasized than in the earlier books. Whereas in the first three books, she is described as being brave, tough and having a military like discipline, in the three later books, she is described as being rather afraid of all the dangers she encounters on the way. Given the fact that in the more recent

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>29</sup> Jeri Ferris, *Go Free or Die – A Story about Harriet Tubman*, 47

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>31</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman Led her People to Freedom*, n.p.

decades feminism became a bigger factor of influence and it was no longer expected of women to behave in a mere feminine way<sup>33</sup> it is strange that Harriet's more manly characteristics are less emphasized in the later books. The reason for this might be that in these later decades, Harriet more and more became exemplary for all African-American women during slavery.<sup>34</sup> When we look at the way slavery is remembered in American literature, we see that in the course of the 19th century, individual biographies, such as Harriet Tubman's, were connected with others and formed into a unified, collective biography. The characters that were described in these 'biographies' were usually made into characters with whom the public could easily identify themselves. This often meant that specific characteristics were left out of the character description in order to create a more standard image of how women that resisted slavery behaved.<sup>35</sup> Even though the recent children's books about Harriet Tubman do clearly focus on Harriet herself and do not present a collective biography, it is possible that the authors did decide to make Harriet into a less eccentric person, in order to make it easier for the young readers to identify themselves with her.

Another remarkable thing in the children's books is that many of them address Harriet's military-like behavior, especially towards members of her party that refused to move on. However, in the book written in 1955, Harriet is described as feeling guilty while doing this and in the book written in 1971, this behavior is explained by stating that Harriet experienced so much cruelty as a child that she was able to endure any hardship. It seems as if the authors of these two books both tried to find a way to excuse Harriet for her strict behavior, by blaming it on her past or by stating that she felt guilty about it. An explanation for this can be found in the fact that in the 1950s America saw a revival of traditional ideals. Women were expected to devote themselves to caring for their families and loved ones.<sup>36</sup> A woman like Harriet, who first of all never started a family and second of all did not always respond in a caring way towards the people that were close to her, did not fit into this ideal. The authors of the books decided to stay true to the historical documents about Harriet Tubman, but also decided to create a slightly different image that was more fitting to the period in which they wrote their works, by not simply describing Harriet as strict and military like towards her fellow man.

As stated in the introduction, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were expected to be loving wives and caretakers for their families. Marriage and romantic love formed an important part of life, especially

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<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Gilley, "Writings of the Third Wave – Young Feminists in Conversation," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 44 (2005): 187-188

<sup>34</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 348

<sup>35</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity* (New York, NY.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10

<sup>36</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 197-198

in the female sphere, not only for white women but for slaves as well.<sup>37</sup> Despite the fact that Harriet is said to have had many male characteristics, she was no exception to this. In 1844 she married a free black man, called John Tubman, when she was around twenty-four years old. According to Jean Humez, who compared most written sources about Harriet Tubman's life, nothing is known about how they came to marry and what their feelings may have been on the occasion. There are only some suggestions that Harriet's feelings of attachment to him were stronger than his feelings for her.<sup>38</sup> Sarah Bradford does not paint a very positive picture of John Tubman. In her biography about Harriet Tubman we read that John Tubman was not very considerate when it came to Harriet's feelings of longing to be free. He did not share her concern of being sold to the South and he even 'did his best to betray her, and bring her back after she escaped'.<sup>39</sup> However, Bradford gives no further proof of this being the case, and we should keep in mind that Bradford is not an unbiased source.<sup>40</sup> If it is true that John Tubman betrayed Harriet, it is rather strange that two years after her initial escape to the North, Harriet went back to Maryland to persuade her husband to go to the North with her. However, she then found him married to another woman, named Caroline.<sup>41</sup> It is unclear how she found this out exactly. According to some, she sent him a message from a nearby hiding place to inform him that she had come. He then replied, through an intermediary, that he had taken another wife and that he had no intention of leaving.<sup>42</sup>

Little is known about the way Harriet felt about this situation. According to Sarah Bradford, 'she did not give way to rage or grief, but collected a party of fugitives and brought them safely to Philadelphia'.<sup>43</sup> Other sources tell us that 'only after a mighty struggle with her own feelings of anger and jealousy was she able to change course and abandon her former strong attachment to John Tubman'.<sup>44</sup> Another version even tells us that Harriet's first instinct was to invade John's house and 'make as much trouble for him as she could'.<sup>45</sup>

Some authors mention this event as a defining moment in Harriet's life. A close friend of Harriet, Ednah Dow Cheney, wrote about her experiences in her reminiscences. According to this woman, the moment Harriet realized that she could do without her husband was a turning point because after this she was more determined to give her life to brave deeds and her personal aims were no longer what motivated her. It is remarkable that, whereas the fact that John Tubman

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<sup>37</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity. A history of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 195

<sup>38</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories*, 15

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 357

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 357

<sup>41</sup> Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, 111

<sup>42</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 350

<sup>43</sup> Sarah S. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, 112

<sup>44</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* 22-23

<sup>45</sup> Fergus R. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 350

married someone else after Harriet left him is usually considered to be an unfaithful deed, Cheney writes that 'the husband had, according to slave custom, taken another wife at his master's command'.<sup>46</sup> From this, we might conclude that Harriet Tubman probably never blamed John Tubman for these happenings. However, Cheney seemed to have overlooked the fact that John Tubman was actually a free man. Her information is not entirely correct and can therefore not be seen as exemplary for the way Harriet truly felt about the events involving her husband.

In most of the children's books the marriage to John Tubman is mentioned, as is the fact that he remarries another woman. However, it is remarkable that there are so many differences in the way this event in Harriet's life is told. In most cases, John Tubman is termed unfaithful and infidel. This is most clear in the earliest children's books. In Dorothy Sterling's 1954 book, Harriet is described as loving John Tubman with all her heart. However, the couple bitterly quarreled over Harriet's desire to be free. John Tubman mocked this desire. Her husband tells her not to run away, but she does this anyway. She decides that she can not trust John enough to involve him in her escape plans.<sup>47</sup> Later however, she decides to go back to Maryland, but learns from a woman in Bucktown (the town near the plantation where John lived), that he is married to someone else. Harriet reacted with great disappointment to this as we can see in this quotation: 'Harriet had to turn away to hide the disappointment in her face'.<sup>48</sup> In the other children's book from the 1950s, written by Ann Petry, even more emphasis is laid on Harriet's feelings of disappointment after discovering that her husband married someone else. On several occasions, this book tells us that Harriet truly loved John. Like in Sterling's book, Petry also describes John as mocking Harriet and her plans to find freedom. He even threatens to tell the Master when she leaves.<sup>49</sup> Extra emphasis is put on the fact that John was no longer the man Harriet had fallen in love with, through the following sentence: 'For the tall young man with the gay laugh, and the merry whistle had been replaced by a hostile stranger'.<sup>50</sup> In this story, Harriet also goes back to Maryland because she forgave John for his threat to betray her and remembered the things that had made her fall in love with him. Upon entering John Tubman's cabin she realizes that there is another woman with him.<sup>51</sup> Petry describes in her book how Harriet felt an emptiness inside her for the rest of her life. She had a hard time 'not thinking about John Tubman, and marriages and children, and engagements and the tenderness in a man's voice'.<sup>52</sup> In this book there is a lot of emphasis on Harriet feeling lonely and missing her

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<sup>46</sup> Ednah Dow Cheney, *Reminiscences of Ednah Dow Cheney (born Littlehale)* (Boston, Mass: Lee & Shepard, 1902) p.6

<sup>47</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train*, 55-57, 61

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 92

<sup>49</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, 80, 81, 84-85

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-118

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 121, 157

husband during her entire life. Also, the fact that John Tubman was unfaithful to Harriet is repeated several times.

The book written in 1971 by Gittings, gives a very different account of Harriet's marriage to John Tubman. In this book the marriage is described as a forced marriage. Since Harriet was such a strong woman, her master decided to breed from this strong stock, and therefore forced her to marry another strong negro, John Tubman. The only other comment on the marriage is that they had no children and that they separated. This is remarkable, because there is no evidence that Harriet was forced to marry John and there is also no evidence that the couple ever separated before Harriet fled North.

In the book from 1988 the marriage is described similar to the way it is described in the books from the 1950s, but less emphasis is put on this element of Harriet's life story. According to this book, Harriet was rather happily married, even though John Tubman did not want to hear about Harriet's dream for freedom.<sup>53</sup> Later in the book, after she fled, returned and discovered that John had remarried, Harriet is described to be terribly sad, then terribly angry, and finally she decided to forget about John altogether.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly enough, Harriet's marriage to John Tubman is not mentioned at all in the two most recent children's books (the ones written in 1992 and 2006). Harriet is not described as a married woman and there is also no mention of John Tubman marrying someone else.<sup>55</sup>

When we look at the way Harriet's marriage is described in the children's literature, a number of things stand out. First of all, both books from the 1950s emphasize the fact that Harriet was not treated right by her husband because he was unfaithful to her. Also these books both describe how Harriet felt lonely during her life, even though the primary sources about Harriet Tubman give no evidence of this. The reason for this might be that in the 1950s, as mentioned before, America experienced a period of revival of traditional ideals. Women were expected to find a husband and give birth to children.<sup>56</sup> Harriet, of course, did not completely fit in this ideal picture, since she ran out on her husband. The authors of the children's books may have decided to provide a clear excuse for why Harriet left her husband and remained unmarried and childless her entire life. They both chose to blame the husband, John Tubman, for this fact. In these books, Harriet is in love with John her entire life, but he betrayed her. She, therefore, did not do anything wrong. Another, very different explanation for the fact that these books focus on Harriet's loyalty to her husband,

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<sup>53</sup> Jeri Chase Ferris, *Go Free or Die, A Story about Harriet Tubman* (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 1988), 33

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

<sup>55</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman Led her People to Freedom* (New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006), n.p.

Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (New York, NY: Dragonfly Books, 1992), n.p.

<sup>56</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture, 197-198*

might have to do with the migration of blacks into the Northern cities. The 1950s were the period of the great migration. Many African Americans who were born in the South left for the North during these years, making the total percentage of Southern born African Americans living in the North rise to more than 20 per cent. This immigration was resented by many Northern whites but also by African Americans who already lived in the North. The newcomers were blamed for several social ills, but especially for the disintegration of family life. The new immigrants were said to have instable family lives and a negative influence on the community as a whole.<sup>57</sup> If these books would portray Harriet as a woman who ran out of her husband and never had a structured family life, the stereotypical image of Southern African Americans going North would be reinforced. In order to prevent this, these authors decided to focus on the fact that Harriet desired a normal, married life, but was sadly betrayed by her husband.

Another remarkable element of the children's literature is that the marriage was described very differently in the book written by Gittings in 1971. According to this story, the marriage was forced and the couple separated before Harriet went to the North. Why Gittings decided to write that Harriet and her husband separated is unclear. Perhaps the author decided to write this because she too, like the 1950s authors, looked for a way to excuse Harriet for the fact that she ran out on her husband. In the early 1970s it was becoming more common for couples to separate, especially in the African-American community. The rates of separation and divorce between 1965 and 1979, show that 47 per cent of black married women separated from their husbands in the first 10 years of the marriage. Also, on average African-American women spent only 22 per cent of their lives happily married. These numbers show an enormous increase in separations compared to earlier decades. Separation was so common in the early 1970s that it made sense for Gittings to use this as an explanation for the fact that Harriet left her husband.

Another possible explanation of the way the marriage is described in 1971 has to do with feminism. Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s argued that women should discover themselves outside of the control of men. They felt that men, including boyfriends and husbands, possessed and oppressed women. This strand of feminism was especially appealing to African-American women because they felt oppressed not only by the other gender but also by the other race.<sup>58</sup> The way Sterling tells the story of Harriet emphasizes the fact that Harriet did not need a man. She 'simply' separated from the man she did not like in the first place, and she made her own decisions from that point on. This story fits with the feminist ideas of the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, it is remarkable that in the children's books from the 1990s and the 2000s, Harriet's

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<sup>57</sup> Tolnay, Stewart E. "The great Migration and Changes in the Northern Black Family, 1940 to 1990." *Social Forces* 75 (1997): 1216

<sup>58</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 203-204

marriage is not mentioned at all. One possible explanation for this has to do with feminism again. The earlier mentioned 'third wave feminists' who became active starting in the late 1980s, wanted to show the strength of women.<sup>59</sup> Influenced by that idea, the authors of the children's books from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century may have wanted to focus their books only on Harriet Tubman herself in order to show her true independence.

In this chapter we have discussed Harriet's male features in both her appearance and her character and Harriet's approach towards marriage. It is clear that there are differences between the historical documents and the children's books when it comes to the way these subjects are portrayed, but there are also differences between the children's books from different periods.

Regarding Harriet's male physical features, these are mentioned several times in the historical documents, but in the children's books from the 1950s, attention is also given to Harriet's feminine physical characteristics. Portraying her as merely manly would not fit in the domestic ideology of the 1950s. Due to feminist ideas, Harriet's masculine features were not portrayed as anything out of the ordinary in the 1970s and 1980s. According to feminists, women could do anything men could do, so attention to male characteristics was not considered necessary. In the 1990s and 2000s, the children's books also appear to have been influenced by feminism and the male qualities were left out entirely in order to emphasize the strength of women.

In the historical documents, the manly aspects of Harriet's character are emphasized, since in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, comparing a woman to a man was considered a way of showing respect. The authors of some of the children's books however, felt the need to find an excuse for Harriet's manly behavior. The reason for this might be the domestic ideology of the 1950s again. In the more recent books, Harriet's specific male characteristics are left out and replaced by more common characteristics in order to create a character with whom readers could easily identify themselves.

Finally, the primary documents give a detailed, albeit varying, account of Harriet's marriage to John Tubman and the fact that he took on another wife after Harriet fled North. In the early children's books, Harriet is described as deeply in love with John, who sadly betrayed her. This way, Harriet could not be blamed for leaving her husband, which was not acceptable in the 1950s. In the book written in 1971 the marriage was described as a forced marriage and Harriet was said to have separated before she left. Separation was increasingly common in the 1970s, so this story fitted logically in the image of that time. In the latest children's books from the 1990s and 2000s, the marriage is not mentioned at all, possibly in order to emphasize Harriet's independence.

It appears that the images in the children's books were influenced especially by the domestic

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<sup>59</sup> Jennifer Gilley, "Writings of the Third Wave – Young feminists in Conversation," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 44 (2005): 187-188

ideology of the 1950s and several strands of feminism that were widespread during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the books did not simply copy the 'facts' that can be found in the primary documents, but include ideals from the time in which they were written, indicates that the way Harriet's story is remembered still continuously changes.

## **‘Darker than any of the others, and with a more decided woolliness in the hair’**

### **Harriet Tubman’s African features**

In the beginning years of slavery, most American slaves were African-born and transported to America by ship. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, most slaves were born on American soil. This was the case for Harriet Tubman as well, who was born in Dorchester County, Maryland, in 1820, 1821 or 1822 as Araminta “Minty” Ross.<sup>60</sup> Although born in America, most antebellum slaves considered their shared African heritage to be of great value, because it strengthened their sense of community and provided them with their own unique identity.<sup>61</sup> In some of the children’s books emphasis is placed on distinct features of African (-American) culture in Harriet’s life as well. To what extent is this historically accurate? Did Harriet’s African heritage actually play a role in her life? And why does the portrayal of Harriet’s African heritage differ in the books written in different decades?

One of the first things that comes to mind when thinking of African heritage is a dark skin color. Harriet Tubman’s skin color is mentioned in several documents written by those who knew her. For example, Thomas Garrett, abolitionist and a close friend of Harriet’s, describes her as ‘a noble woman, but a black one, in whose veins not one drop of Caucasian blood’<sup>62</sup>. This is one of the first times Garrett mentions Harriet Tubman, and it is remarkable that he emphasizes her dark skin color. The same goes for a letter written by a friend of Lydia Maria Child, an antislavery writer, in which she describes the first time she saw Harriet Tubman at a friend’s house. ‘Where Cheney [the woman organizing the event] found her, I do not know, but her name is Harriet. She is coal black’. This quote again shows how distinctly black Harriet’s complexion was, as those who saw her clearly noticed and remembered it.<sup>63</sup> Other evidence that points to Harriet Tubman’s dark complexion can be found in Sarah Bradford’s biography entitled *Harriet Tubman, The Moses of Her People*. In the introduction to this work, written by professor Hopkins, a comment that suggests Harriet’s distinct African appearance is made: ‘She has all the characteristics of the pre-African race strongly marked upon her’.<sup>64</sup> Sarah Bradford herself takes it even a step further, by stating that Harriet was more ‘African’ than other slaves. ‘Apart from the rest of the children [...] sat a little girl of perhaps thirteen years of age; darker than any of the others, and with a more decided woolliness in the hair; a pure

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<sup>60</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan – The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad*, 347

<sup>61</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A history of African-American Slaves*, 153

<sup>62</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 290.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

<sup>64</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People* (New York: G. R. Lockwood & Son, 1886), 9

unmitigated African'.<sup>65</sup> Jean Humez, who compared the data from different biographies written on Harriet Tubman, points towards the contradiction concerning Harriet's lineage, and the color of her skin. She explains that a biographer in 1863 stated that Harriet had 'not a drop of white blood in her veins', whereas in a biography written in 1912 it is stated that her mother was the daughter of a white man and her father a 'full-blooded Negro'.<sup>66</sup> However, given the examples of primary documents provided above, in which Harriet is described as distinctly African, it is most probable that both of Harriet Tubman's parents were descendents of Africans. Jean Humez herself is also inclined to conclude this.

Interestingly enough, despite all of the attention given to skin color in the primary documents about Harriet Tubman, in almost none of the children's books is her skin color even mentioned. The books clearly imply that she was a woman from African descent, but there is no mention of her dark complexion. In the later, richly illustrated books (the ones written by Weatherford in 2006 and by Ringgold in 1992), we do see Harriet portrayed as a woman with a very dark complexion.<sup>67</sup>

This leaves us with the question why in the early children's literature, Harriet's skin tone is almost entirely left out, even though in the primary sources such emphasis was placed on it. Part of the answer may lie in the fact that historically, slaves with a lighter skin tone were privileged over darker skinned slaves. Not only did the white slave owners consider slaves with a light complexion more intellectually developed and more beautiful, also within the black community, people with a light skin tone were considered to be of a higher standing. Research shows that this relationship between skin color and status was still present before and during the era of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>68</sup> This changed in the 1960s, when African Americans experienced unprecedented economic progress, and a surge of black nationalism occurred. Black nationalists proclaimed that 'black is beautiful' and this meant that the differences between dark and light colored African Americans became less important.<sup>69</sup> These developments may explain why little attention is given to skin color by the authors of the books written in the 1950s whereas in the later books, especially those from the 1990s and the 2000s show Harriet Tubman's as being very dark colored in the pictures.

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<sup>65</sup> Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, 13

<sup>66</sup> Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories*, 12

<sup>67</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman led her People to Freedom* (New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006), n.p.

Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (New York, NY: Dragonfly Books, 1992), n.p.

<sup>68</sup> V.M. Keith and C Herring, "Skin tone and stratification in the Black Community," *The American Journal of Sociology* 97 (1991): 761

<sup>69</sup> V.M. Keith and C Herring, "Skin tone and stratification in the Black Community," *The American Journal of Sociology* 97 (1991): 762

Another thing that is remarkable when we read the biographies and primary sources about Harriet Tubman is that some rather important elements of life are left out. Harriet Tubman does not seem to have commented on sexuality, relationships with her family or her feelings towards friends and 'enemies' such as her (former) master. According to Jean Humez, who noticed this as well, this has to do with the strategy used by many men and women in slavery called 'wearing the mask'. By concealing the inner self and any feelings about themselves, slaves hoped to protect their feelings from outside (white) intruders. 'Wearing the mask' meant that slaves would smile and sing whenever their owners were near, in order to keep them satisfied, without revealing any part of their actual feelings. Perhaps this strategy was so natural to Harriet Tubman, that she also used it when speaking to journalists and friends.<sup>70</sup> 'Wearing the mask' is a strategy that is sometimes considered a skill, and a valuable part of African-American culture.

It is not known how Harriet herself truly felt about the strategy of 'wearing the mask' but interestingly enough, some of the children's books do comment on this issue. In the book written in 1954 by Dorothy Sterling, it is described how Harriet could at some point no longer act nicely towards her master, to the regret of her mother: 'Since you been a baby I keep telling you, "smile at the white folks". But you won't even try.' Ben [Harriet's father] took his daughter's side. 'Can't smile always, Rit. I been working all my life with my mouth shut'. The book written in 1988 describes a similar situation. According to this story, Harriet at some point in her life could no longer 'live the way the other slaves did'. She refused to keep smiling at the master just to stay away from his whip.<sup>71</sup>

It is interesting that the children's books from the 1950s and the 1980s discuss this matter. One might see the fact that Harriet refuses to 'wear the mask', as a refusal to follow a distinct African-American mechanism. This would indicate that she did not have very strong ties to the African-American culture. However, this is probably not what the books are trying to state. A reason for the fact that these books focus on Harriet's refusal to remain silent and smile at her master, might be that in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting in the Civil Rights era, expression was considered more and more as a means of resistance within the African-American community.<sup>72</sup> So, by stating that Harriet refused to remain silent, these books are emphasizing that she was resisting the master-slave culture, instead of resisting the African-American cultural strategy of 'wearing the mask'. The description of this act is not supposed to portray Harriet as less 'African', but as a strong women who chose to resist her owners.

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<sup>70</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 160

<sup>71</sup> Jeri Chase Ferris, *Go Free or Die, A Story about Harriet Tubman* (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 1988), 23

<sup>72</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 81

As stated in the previous paragraph, in the early biographies and the primary sources information on various subjects can not be found, including information on Harriet's looks. However, some of the children's books do expand on the way Harriet looked. They especially focus on elements of her appearance that are part of her African culture. This is the case especially in the book written in 1988 by Jeri Ferris. In this book much attention is given to Harriet's African looks and the way this look changes when she reaches maturity. A colorful bandana that she wears on her head is mentioned several times. According to the book 'this was a sign to everyone who saw her that she was growing up'.<sup>73</sup> Later, this bandana is mentioned again, this time as a way for Harriet to hide the scar on her forehead, inflicted by her master who threw a weight at her head when she was a young girl.<sup>74</sup> The fact that Harriet has to hide her own look, including her bandana, when she is on the run, is given much attention in this book.<sup>75</sup> In the book written in 2006 by Carol Weatherford, the colorful bandana is shown again in almost all of the pictures. The only picture in which Harriet is not shown with her bandana, is one in which she is dressed as a housemaid and looks very sad. The text besides this picture reads that she doesn't feel at home in the north and that she 'is a stranger [t]here'.<sup>76</sup>

The image of the bandana seems to have played a major role in the construction of Harriet's African identity, especially in Ferris's book from 1988, as it is generally conceived as a typically African-American piece of clothing. During slavery, but also long after slavery was abolished, African-American women wore bandanas. There are different explanations of their cultural meaning. According to some scholars, these bandanas were used to express status difference; different colors indicated different statuses. According to others, the bandana was worn by mature women to cover up untidy hair, or, to cover up neat hair which was only to be seen by one specific man. Regardless of the exact reason, the bandana was worn by sexually mature women of African descent as a part of their culture.<sup>77</sup> In Jeri Ferris's book, attention is drawn to the fact that Harriet had to hide her bandana in her later life, because she had to disguise herself while she was flying North or returning South. The reason for this particular focus on her bandana might have to do with multiculturalism, which was becoming more and more accepted in the 1980s. In this period, cultural differences no longer had to be hidden.<sup>78</sup> By showing that Harriet had to hide her bandana, a clear symbol of her African culture, she illustrates the contrast between then and now and she wants to show how wrong it was that slaves had to hide their true identity. A similar sentiment can be found in

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<sup>73</sup> Jeri Chase Ferris, *Go Free or Die, A Story about Harriet Tubman* (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 1988), 23

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>76</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman led her People to Freedom* (New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006), n.p.

<sup>77</sup> Helen Bradley Griebel, "The African-American Woman's Head wrap: Unwinding the Symbols," in *Dress and Identity*, ed. Mary Ellen Roach Higgins (New York, NY: Fairchild publications (1995), 7

<sup>78</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 79

Weatherford's work from 2006, in which the bandana appears to represent Harriet's connection to her African heritage. When she is working as a housemaid in the North she can not wear her bandana; she is forced to look and behave different from her true self. This makes her very unhappy and eventually it makes her decide to go back to the South to rescue 'her people' in order to have those who share her culture close to her. Weatherford's book was written in a period of post-multiculturalism. The idea that different cultures lived together was mostly accepted and people were encouraged to 'celebrate' their backgrounds.<sup>79</sup> Therefore Weatherford chose to emphasize the things that distinguished Harriet from white Americans. The book tries to show that these differences are logical and should not be denied or hidden.

In the 1950s and early 1960s a new wave of black nationalism occurred in the United States. Many African Americans 'turned to Africa', which meant that a great deal of attention was given to African cultural symbols, as a means to clarify the distinction between African Americans and European Americans. The focus on African culture could be seen clearly in art and religion, but also in forms of dress. Symbolic forms of dress, such as the bandana, gained popularity. Some scholars state that these so called African symbols, were actually invented in America and formed to suit the needs of the new generation of urban black communities. Whether these symbols were actual remainders of a shared African history or merely products of the modern African-American society does not change the fact that since the 1960s these symbols were used to solidify an African-American identity in the United States.<sup>80</sup> It is probable that the children's books written in 1988 and 2006 give attention to these African symbols such as the bandana, in order to help construct or simply to connect with the African-American identity that has been forged in the 1950s and 1960s.

It is interesting to investigate the role that family played in Harriet Tubman's life. In general, family played a major role in the life of slaves on plantations. The most important goal that many slaves had in their lives during slavery, was to be a good son, daughter, father, mother, husband or wife, instead of becoming a good field hand or domestic help. Therefore, strong family ties are often considered a part of African (American) culture.<sup>81</sup> In Harriet Tubman's case, not much is known about her ties to her family from the early biographies and the primary source material that is available about her. However, some clues can be found. Based on an early sketch of Harriet's career, written by Thomas Garrett, we could conclude that Harriet's strong ties to her family drove her to run the risks of going back to the South several times. Garrett wrote in 1855 that Harriet Tubman made '4 successful trips

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<sup>79</sup> Desmond King. "Facing the Future. America's Post-multiculturalist Trajectory." *Social policy & Administration* 39 (2005): 118

<sup>80</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity* (New York, NY.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 193

<sup>81</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity. A history of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 191

to the neighborhood she left on which she rescued 17 of her brothers, sisters and friends'. He also writes that Harriet focused on rescuing a niece and a sister-in-law including their families and that she declared that she would be content if she got them away safely.<sup>82</sup> From this Jean Humez, the author of *Harriet Tubman – The life and the Life stories*, concludes that Harriet's goal was primarily to save her own extended family, rather than 'her people' in general. This points towards a very strong attachment to her family.

A similar sentiment can be found in the biography written by Sarah Bradford. A famous quotation that is incorporated in this biography is: 'I am a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in Maryland; because my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were there.'<sup>83</sup> This quotation clearly shows how important Harriet considered her family to be, since she does not feel at home anywhere without them. However, from this biography one might get the impression that, even though family was important to Harriet, she considered freedom to be more important. A scene is described in which Harriet goes back to her old plantation to rescue her brothers. Before Harriet and her brothers left, they went to the cabin to 'take a silent farewell of the poor old mother'. As it is described in Bradford's biography, tears were streaming down Harriet's face as she was watching her mother. However, Bradford also described that Harriet only watched her mother for a little while because 'time was precious, and they must reach their next underground station before daylight'.<sup>84</sup> This statement also shows that even though she loved her mother and felt emotional when she saw her, her mission of leading people to the North was more important to her.

The children's books all pay attention to Harriet's relationship with her family, but some books focus more strongly on this than others. In some of the books, like in Humez's work, the strong ties to her family are given as a reason for Harriet's journeys back to the South, while in other books Harriet is said to care about 'her people' in general and not merely her family.

In the book written in 1954 by Dorothy Sterling, family ties are described as a factor that made Harriet doubt whether she should flee to the North. At some point in the book a fellow slave named Jim tells her about the Underground Railroad, but she doubts whether that is the way to go for her: 'Jim's path was lonely and there was danger there. Ben's [her father's] would keep her close to her family and the rich, green country-side which she loved'.<sup>85</sup> Also, Harriet's quotation from Bradford's biography, about being a stranger in a strange land, is used in this book. A small change has been made, because in the real quotation Harriet also mentioned that she missed her friends who were still down in Maryland, but in this book only her 'old folks and brothers and sister' are

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<sup>82</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories*, 24

<sup>83</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, 20

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

<sup>85</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train*, 51

mentioned.<sup>86</sup> This shows how this book portrays Harriet as being very strongly committed to her family and it states that Harriet went back to the South because she missed her family. However, it is not clearly suggested in this book that Harriet went back to the South primarily to save her family. In the other book from the 1950s, Ann Petry's *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, very strong family ties are suggested as well. The book strongly emphasizes the cheerful moments that Harriet experienced as a young child whenever she was with her family. The book illustrates that, even though Harriet experienced hard times as a young girl, her family saw her through.<sup>87</sup> It is interesting that in this story, it is described how Harriet tries to flee to the North together with her brothers, but these brothers are scared and want to go back. In many other books, this scene is described as well, but Harriet always continues alone. In Petry's work however, Harriet is said to have gone back to the plantation with her brothers. However, it is not clear whether she does this because she doesn't want to leave them. A fight between her and her own brothers is described as well, so maybe she went back with them simply because she was no match for her three brothers.<sup>88</sup> Also in this book, it is said that Harriet missed her family and her life in the slave quarter after her escape to the North: 'She knew moments of homesickness when she longed for the quarter, remembering the old familiar smokey smell of the cabin'.<sup>89</sup>

It is very remarkable that in the book written in 1971 Harriet's relationship with her family is barely mentioned. Little is told about Harriet's life before her escape to the North and after her escape, her family is no longer mentioned. In the book written in 1988 by Jeri Ferris, Harriet's family is also barely mentioned after the moment of her escape. However, in this book there is a strong focus on Harriet's connection to her family as a young girl, before she escaped. It is described how Harriet dreamed of her family during the time she was hired out to another plantation. When she gets sick and is sent back to her own plantation, she 'laughed out loud with happiness', because she was finally reunited with her family.<sup>90</sup> So from this book it becomes clear that family was important to Harriet as a young girl and that she felt at home at the plantation on which she was born. It does however not become clear what role family played in her later life, after her decision to escape to the North.

The book written in 1991 by Faith Ringgold differs from the rest because Harriet's life is described through the dreams of a little girl. This girl makes the same journey that Harriet made to the North and she does this because she is going after her brother, who got aboard 'the freedom train' going North. So, for the little girl, who in a way represents Harriet Tubman, family is important.

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<sup>86</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman - Freedom Train*, 84

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 and 30

<sup>88</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, 93

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

<sup>90</sup> Jeri Chase Ferris, *Go Free or Die, A Story about Harriet Tubman*, 17

She goes through a lot of trouble in order to be reunited with her little brother. Emphasis is also laid in this book on the fact that not only direct family members should be helped, but others too. The little brother, Bebe, writes to his sister that he now takes care of a new baby sister, he met on his journey North.<sup>91</sup> The book written in 2006 by Weatherford, does not expand on Harriet's childhood. The book starts at the moment Harriet decided to run away, which she did when she was about 24 years old. Therefore, the connection Harriet felt with her family as a young girl is left out of this work. There is also little emphasis on her family ties after she escaped. It is however suggested that she returns to the South because she misses her family so much.<sup>92</sup>

In almost all of the children's books attention is given to family life on the plantation and to Harriet's feelings of attachment to her family. This is interesting, especially considering the importance of family life in the modern day African-American society in general. The structure of African-American family is based on the African structure which means that it has always been, and still is, different from the structure in European and white American families. The major difference is that African-American families are organized around adult siblings of the same sex, instead of around a married couple. The families that form around these 'core members' do include husbands, wives and children. Another interesting characteristic is that upon marriage, Africans did not usually form new households, but joined the extended family of either the bride or the groom. This pattern could still be seen in most African-American families up until the 1960s and until today many African Americans consider this structure to be the ideal.<sup>93</sup>

Even though it is often considered to be the ideal, demographic changes within the African-American society caused the traditional African family structure to become less common. Between 1960 and 1990 an increasing number of African-American women were in nontraditional family situations. This is especially due to the fact that many women are single mothers and therefore become the head of the family. Besides this change, it also became less common for African Americans, married or unmarried, to continue to live with their families. The large, extended family became less common and more African Americans started living on their own when starting a family.<sup>94</sup> This is dramatically different from the way African-American families used to be organized and from the way many African Americans still want families to be organized. Especially since studies in the 1990s proved that children from single parent households were less successful in later life, the traditional way of living was considered much better and people tried to stimulate young members

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<sup>91</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Railroad in the Sky*, n.p.

<sup>92</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses - When Harriet Tubman Led her People to Freedom*, n.p.

<sup>93</sup> Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltis Garey, *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 94

<sup>94</sup> Robert J. Taylor, James S. Jackson and Linda M. Chatters, *Family life in Black America* (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997), 41-43

of the African-American society to this ideal.<sup>95</sup> This might be an explanation for the fact that in most children's books, Harriet is portrayed as having very close ties to her family. If she were portrayed as an independent woman who went North without caring much for her family, this would contradict with the African-American cultural ideal of extended families living together.

It is remarkable that in both books from the 1950s and in the book written in 2006, Harriet is said to have gone back to the South in the first place because she missed her family and wanted to bring them to the North as well. In the book's from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Harriet is said to have gone back to the South to help her people in general. This might have to do something with the fact that Harriet Tubman became more and more exemplary for all African-American women, and for African-American resistance during slavery in general.<sup>96</sup> This reason is mentioned in the first chapter to explain why in some of the children's books, Harriet's specific characteristics were left out. One might say that in a similar way, some books leave out Harriet's personal motivations, in order to create a more stereotypical image of a black woman who resisted slavery. The Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s sparked new attention to the stories about slave resistance and about the Underground Railroad in particular. People started seeing the Underground Railroad more and more as America's first Civil Rights movement.<sup>97</sup> When one considers the Underground Railroad to be a Civil Rights movement, then those active on it should be working for the entire race, and not just for a selective group of people. Therefore it is very well possible that the authors of the children's books did not want to make it seem as if Harriet went back to the South 'only' to rescue her family. A woman going back to save her family does not speak to the imagination as much as a woman who feels the urgent need to rescue all of 'her people'.

The authors of the books written in the 1950s were perhaps more interested in giving an account of Harriet Tubman's life which was as close to the truth as possible, whereas the later authors tried to connect Harriet's story to the broader story of people fighting for their civil rights. Why Carole Boston Weatherford, who wrote her book on Harriet Tubman in 2006, decided to create the impression that Harriet went back to the South merely to rescue her family, is unclear.

This chapter has dealt with the way Harriet's African features are portrayed in the children's books written about her. We have looked at elements that are connected with African (American) culture, such as skin color, the strategy of 'wearing the mask' (concealing your emotions), African elements in clothing and family ties. When it comes to skin color, we can conclude that Harriet's dark skin color received a lot of attention in the primary source documents and biographies, but almost non in most

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 49-56

<sup>96</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan – The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad*, 348

<sup>97</sup> Ann Malaspina, *The Underground Railroad: The Journey to Freedom*, (New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 109-110

of the children's books, except in the most recent books. The reason for this might be only after the 1960s, under influence of Black Nationalism, being black was considered something to be proud of. Before that, people of a lighter skin color were usually considered more beautiful and more successful.

When it comes to the 'wearing the mask', a strategy used by slaves to hide their emotions, it is remarkable that some of the children's books refer to this. In the books written in 1954 and 1988, it is described how Harriet refused to keep 'wearing the mask'. The reason that these books emphasize this fact is probably that since the 1950s expression was seen as a way of protest among African Americans. So the books try to state that Harriet was courageously protesting the situation she was in, instead of protesting against an element of her own African culture.

Especially the book written by Jeri Ferris in 1988 focuses on the physical African element of the bandana, which is worn by Harriet. The reason for this is probably that in the 1980s multiculturalism was commonly accepted, which meant that cultural differences no longer had to be hidden. The bandana worn by Harriet is used as symbol of her culture, and the book tries to state it was wrong that she had to hide this symbol.

Finally this chapter has examined Harriet's ties to her family. Some of the primary source documents indicate that Harriet felt strongly connected to her family, and some sources even state that her reason to go back to the South was primarily to save her family. All the children's books give attention to Harriet's connection to her family as well. This makes sense considering the fact that a large, extended family still is the ideal in the African-American community, even family structures changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Harriet would not fit into the ideal if she would not be close to her family, so the authors emphasize on the good relationship she had with her family. It is remarkable that according to most books, except the ones from the 1950s and the one written in 2006, Harriet did not go back to the South only to rescue her family. This might be explained by the fact that the Underground Railroad came to be seen as the first civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Someone active in a civil rights movement should fight for the entire community, which is probably why the books emphasize that Harriet tried to rescue 'her people' and not only her family.

We might conclude that the children's books are not entirely historically accurate considering features of African culture. Particularly under influence of Black nationalism and the Civil Rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s, the authors of the books decided to emphasize on, or leave out, certain aspects of Harriet's African heritage, such as her skin color, the bandana and a strong connection to her family.

## 'Go Down Moses'

### Harriet Tubman and religion

After fleeing to the North, Harriet Tubman felt like she had to do something to change the fate of other African Americans held in bondage in the Southern states of the United States. Often, the decision made by a slave to revolt or resist slavery in any form, was sustained by religious faith.<sup>98</sup> This was, for example, the case with Nat Turner, who led one of the most famous slave revolts in U.S. history in 1831. When he was asked about his motives, he explained that he had been directed to act by an omen from God.<sup>99</sup> One may ask if, in the case of Harriet Tubman, religion played an equally important role. The religious aspects of her life and her mission are emphasized in some of the children's literature that has been written about her. To what extent is this historically accurate? Was Harriet Tubman a deeply religious woman, or was she driven by other motives?

Very little is known about Harriet Tubman's personal ideas on religion. However, from the few interviews she gave it becomes clear that she and her family definitely received religious instruction from their owners, probably in a Methodist church setting. In the 1860's Harriet Tubman told Sarah Bradford in an interview that her parents used to fast on Fridays and Saturdays. When Bradford asked Tubman whether or not this meant that they were Roman Catholics, Tubman responded by saying 'Oh no, Misses; he [her father] does it for conscience; we was taught to do so down South'.<sup>100</sup> From this it does not become clear whether Harriet's family was truly religious, or simply following the religious 'rules' they were taught by their master. It is however remarkable that another interviewer in 1899 noted that Harriet still fasted until twelve o'clock on Fridays.<sup>101</sup> She apparently did take with her the religious ideas that she and her family acquired from their master. For Harriet and her brothers these religious beliefs and practices were important for their psychological survival.<sup>102</sup>

Yet religion does not appear to have been a central motive in her journeys to the South. During her life, Harriet Tubman gave a few testimonies that were recorded and in none of these religion is mentioned. Also, she, not being able to write herself, dictated some letters, usually with the purpose of raising funds for her journeys to the South. In none of these letters does Harriet Tubman

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<sup>98</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion. The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 305

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164

<sup>100</sup> Sarah S. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People* (New York: G. R. Lockwood & Son, 1886), 108-109

<sup>101</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 356

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

mention religion as something that motivates her in her struggle to save her people.<sup>103</sup>

However, in some of the children's books Harriet is described as being very religious. This is interesting, especially because, from historical accounts about Harriet Tubman we learn that, although religion was important to her and her family, it never played a major role in her life and it did not inspire her to make her journeys to the South. Also, when looking at the religion of slaves in general, an important fact that comes up is that many slaves did not accept belief in a God who permitted slavery. Quite a number of slaves were probably doubters or atheists.<sup>104</sup> In these children's books no attention is given to this fact. Harriet and her family are described as Christians with an almost unconditional trust in God.

It is interesting that her religious faith seems to be exaggerated in some of the books. A good example of this is the following sentence from the book written by Ann Petry in 1955: 'She had never lost a passenger, never run her train off the track, they were safe with her, the Lord would see them through'.<sup>105</sup> This sentence is based on a famous quote from Harriet herself: 'I was the conductor on the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say – I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger'.<sup>106</sup> It is clear that the author, Ann Petry, decided to add a religious element to this sentence, by adding that the Lord would see them through.

The fact that in this book from the 1950s the religious elements of Harriet Tubman's story are slightly exaggerated, may be due to a period of religious revivalism in the U.S. at the time the book was written. The religious revivalism in the 1950s and 1960s included a collective enthusiasm for religion, charismatic preachers, belief in miracles, and emotional conversion experiences. The key figure that is connected to this period of revivalism is Martin Luther King. Just like Harriet Tubman, King was sometimes called a 'modern day Moses'.<sup>107</sup> Some scholars even consider this period the start of the 'Fourth Great Awakening'.<sup>108</sup> Stories that focused on faith in God, and that portrayed faithful Christians, were probably popular in this period.

Interestingly enough, in a different book, written at the same time, the very opposite can be found. In Dorothy Sterling's 1954 book *The Freedom Train*, a situation is described in which Harriet and a group of runaways have to cross a deep, icy river, because they were followed by bloodhounds

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<sup>103</sup> Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman, the Life and the Life Stories*, 277-343

<sup>104</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. 314

<sup>105</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1955), 160

<sup>106</sup> Laurie Calkhoven, *Sterling Biographies: Harriet Tubman: Leading the Way to Freedom* (New York, NY: Sterling Publishing Company, 2008), 85

<sup>107</sup> David L. Chappell "Religious Revivalism in the Civil Rights Movement," *African American Review* 36 (2002): 582

<sup>108</sup> Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 26

in the forest. Harriet is described as courageous and plunges in the river without doubting this, whereas the rest of the party refused to move.<sup>109</sup> A great deal of emphasis is laid on her strength and courage. This same situation was described by Harriet Tubman herself in an interview with Sarah Bradford, but in Bradford's description of the event, a religious element is included. 'He (God) told her to leave the road, and turn to the left; she obeyed, and soon came to a small stream of tide water; there was no boat, no bridge; she again inquired of her Guide [God] what she was to do. She was told to go through'.<sup>110</sup> In this case, the idea to wade through the river did not come from Harriet herself, but was given in by God. So one might say that, as opposed to the many children's books in which religious aspects of Harriet's life are exaggerated, in this case Harriet's own description was more religious than the description in the children's book.

The reason that, even though religion was important in the 1950s, this book does not emphasize especially the religious elements of Harriet Tubman's life story, might be the fact that African Americans, especially women, in this period were struggling to create an identity for themselves. By focusing on Harriet's personal strength and courage, the author, Dorothy Sterling, was trying to create a role model for African-American women in the 1950s. She decided to write down her own message to her community instead of what the whites would like to hear.<sup>111</sup>

Religion played a central role on plantations at the time Harriet grew up. The general importance of Christianity for slaves is reflected in the children's literature. It is interesting that most books merely focus on Harriet's personal religious experience, and not on a common religion shared by both the slaves and the slave owners, even though in reality both slave owners and slaves usually shared the same religion. In most books it is mentioned that Harriet often prayed to God while on her journeys into slave territory. In the book written by Ann Petry in 1955, for example, these personal prayers are mentioned rather often. However, there are no descriptions in this book of Harriet attending public religious meetings held on the plantation before she escapes.<sup>112</sup> The same goes for Dorothy Sterling's work, *The Freedom Train*, written in 1954. In this work, the importance of religion for black slaves is clearly emphasized. It is stated that 'The Bible was the slaves' storybook and inspiration for their songs'.<sup>113</sup> Also, in this book gatherings are described where slaves tell each other religious stories. These are gatherings to which no whites attend. The book creates the image of an African-American religious experience separate from the white experience. In Faith Ringgold's picture book from 1992, one page is used to explain how slaves were not allowed to 'have a meeting, even to preach the

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<sup>109</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train* (New York, NY: Scholastic Inc., 1954), 91

<sup>110</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People* (New York, NY: Go. R. Lockwood & Son, 1886), 50

<sup>111</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 76

<sup>112</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*,

<sup>113</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train*, 28

word of God'.<sup>114</sup> This also illustrates a difference between Christianity as the religion of the white men, and the Christianity of the slaves.

The fact that this difference is shown so clearly in the children's literature, both in the early 50's and still in the 90's, can be explained by looking at the views held by scholars on the role of religion on plantations and, after the emancipation, in the lives of free African Americans. It is sometimes argued that slave owners were happy to teach their slaves all about Christianity, because they hoped that Christianity would pacify the relations between slaves and masters and therefore they encouraged their slaves to attend church meetings and they taught their slaves sermons.<sup>115</sup> As the above mentioned examples show, this view cannot be found in the children's literature. This is probably because the view most probably held by slaves and by African Americans until this day, is that African-American Christianity consisted of distinctly African-American beliefs and practices. African Americans did not simply copy the religion of their owners, but they acted for themselves and created a new religion from within their community. This was, and still is, extremely important for creating a sense of identity.<sup>116</sup> This might very well explain why the children's books, especially the ones written by African-American authors, emphasize the importance of religion for slaves but at the same time show how this religion differed from the religion held by the slave owners. It is a way of creating a separate identity. In the 1990s, when multiculturalism was widely accepted in the U.S. it makes sense that the children's novel written in 1992 emphasizes elements that are distinctly African-American, such as their separate religion. The difference between cultures was celebrated at this time in history.<sup>117</sup>

This idea of African Americans creating an identity by separating themselves from the mainstream white religion was also taken very seriously by Malcolm X. This activist argued in the 1950s and early 1960s that African Americans should choose a new religion in order to be truly free and independent. Christianity was the religion of slavery and segregation, according to Malcolm X. The ideas on African-American religion in the late 1960s and early 1970s may have been influenced by Malcolm X's idea that white men's Christianity was not right for African Americans. This might explain why, in the work written by Gittings in 1971, remarkably little attention is given to Harriet's Christian beliefs. It is mentioned that Harriet was a religious woman, but immediately after this, Gittings states that 'she did not believe what was always preached to the slaves, that they should bear their sufferings on earth patiently and they would find their reward in heaven'.<sup>118</sup> This view,

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<sup>114</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (New York, NY: Dragonfly Books, 1992), n.p.

<sup>115</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 164

<sup>116</sup> Campbell and Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 116

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 124

<sup>118</sup> J.G. Gittings, *Let my People Go* (Amersham: Hulton Educational Publications Ltd., 1971), 10

held by Harriet Tubman in reality as well,<sup>119</sup> emphasizes that Harriet's belief in God was fundamentally different than the belief of the white slave holders.

The idea that one should resist slavery in this world rather than wait for something to be different in the next world, was commonly held by slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were inspired by the Bible (Exodus and Daniel) to resist immediately and not wait for things to get better without acting. The appropriation of the Exodus story to their own situation, gave the slaves a sense of historical identity, which was very important to them.<sup>120</sup> The fact that this view is expressed in a work from 1971 makes sense, since shortly after the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans were still searching for an identity.

Interviewer Sarah Bradford states that even after several conversations, she was not yet sure about Harriet's religious character. According to Bradford, Harriet did not know anything else than to trust God, because that is what she was taught to do by her parents. Bradford explains how Harriet simply prayed whenever she needed something. She did not believe in prayers at stated times in the morning and evening.<sup>121</sup> We could say that Harriet had faith in God but she did not live by the rules of any religion. Her faith in God was strengthened when she started praying for her master's death, which followed very soon after she started these prayers. She was not happy about this and wished that she hadn't prayed for his death but it did make her believe that her prayers were heard.<sup>122</sup> This continued in her later life. Whenever she was taking a group of escaped slaves to the North, and she would for a moment not know what to do or where to go, she would pray and the answer would present itself. Harriet herself did not consider this mysterious at all; she simply expected an answer to her prayers.<sup>123</sup> The fact that Harriet counted on her prayers being answered, is also depicted in the children's literature. The book that most clearly expands on this is Ann Petry's work written in 1955. In this book Harriet's prayers for the death of her masters are described. The fact that the master actually died after Harriet started praying left her 'with the conviction that prayer was always answered'.<sup>124</sup>

In some of the children's books, it is described how Harriet depended on God for giving her directions and hints along the way to the North and on her journeys back South. In Carole Weatherford's book, written in 2006, God is the one who tells Harriet to seek out 'the woman in the

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<sup>119</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet, The Moses of Her People*, 112

<sup>120</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 311

<sup>121</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet, The Moses of Her People*, 23

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57

<sup>124</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, 71

wagon who always spoke kindly to her'.<sup>125</sup> This woman is a Quaker who lives nearby. However, in another book, written in 1988 by Jeri Ferris, it is explained that Harriet realized herself that she should seek out this Quaker woman, because she had learnt that Quakers were against slavery and therefore willing to help runaways.<sup>126</sup> In *The Freedom Train*, written by Dorothy Sterling in 1954, it is also explained that Harriet learned about the Underground Railroad and about the Quakers' willingness to help runaways from other (free) slaves that she met in her hometown, Bucktown.<sup>127</sup> This is the rational explanation of how Harriet knew where to go in order to be safe. In the book from 2006, this rational explanation is replaced by a religious explanation.

A similar discrepancy in the books can be found when we look at the ways in which the books describe how Harriet was able to survive on the long trip to the North after she ran away. Again, in the book written by Carole Weatherford in 2006, a religious explanation is given. Whenever Harriet is lost, she prays and God answers her in some way and tells her where to go or what to do.<sup>128</sup> In other books, like Sterling's book *The Freedom Train* (1954), it is suggested that Harriet's father, Ben, taught his daughter survival techniques: 'Deep inside herself Harriet knew what Ben was doing. He was, in his own fashion, training her for the day when she might become a runaway [...]'.<sup>129</sup> Later, when Harriet has escaped she uses all the tips her father gave her in order to survive. There is however still a role played by God. While on the run, Harriet is constantly reminded of her father's tips, by God. Her regular prayers to God are described in this book as well. This is different in Jeri Ferris' work (1988). This book also describes how Harriet's father teaches Harriet survival techniques when she is little. When she is on the run, she remembers the tips he gave her. God is not mentioned at all. 'Then she remembered Daddy Ben's words. "When the North Star is gone, look for the soft green moss growing on one side of the trees"'.<sup>130</sup>

So it is clear that in the book written in 2006 there is an extreme emphasis on religion. More than in all the other children's books, this book describes how all events in Harriet's life were led by God. God is credited with enabling Harriet to accomplish the 'mission' of helping her people. A possible explanation for the fact that the book from the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century focuses on religion is the overall heightened interest in religion that can be seen in the U.S. in this decade. Christianity was very popular during this time, and many people also believed in the kind of fatalism that can be found in Weatherford's 2006 book. During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century many believed that ultimately, events are in God's hands. Especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 this notion gained

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<sup>125</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman Led her People to Freedom* (New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006), n.p.

<sup>126</sup> Jeri Chase Ferris, *Go Free or Die, A Story about Harriet Tubman* (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 1988), 34

<sup>127</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train*, 41,42, 59

<sup>128</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman led her People to Freedom*, n.p.

<sup>129</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Freedom Train*, 76

<sup>130</sup> Jeri Chase Ferris, *Go Free or Die, A story about Harriet Tubman*, 40

popularity. Exemplary for this heightened interest in religion was the president at the time, George W. Bush, who was a very religious man himself.<sup>131</sup> This might explain why a children's book written in this decade, emphasizes on religion as well. The message of this book, that as long as you rely on God you can reach your goals and you will be safe, suits the hectic and fearful time that followed on the 9/11 attacks.

Another interesting aspect of Harriet Tubman regarding religion is the fact that she is said to have had several visions or dreams which showed her the future. Before her escape to freedom she had 'dreams' in which she saw horsemen coming to take slaves away further to the South. She also saw a line dividing the land of slavery from the land of freedom and she saw white ladies waiting to welcome her on the other side of this line. Throughout her life Harriet continued to see these 'glimpses of the future' and she described one of these occasions to Sarah Bradford. Three years before the emancipation of slaves was proclaimed, Harriet had a dream and after this she was sure that her people were free. At the time of this dream she was staying with Mr. Garnet, who did not believe her. She however responded to his disbelief by saying: 'I tell you, sir, you'll see it, and you'll see it soon'.<sup>132</sup> Bradford states that it was never clear to her whether this was a dream or a vision sent by God. Apparently, Harriet never told Bradford this. If she herself was convinced that these dreams were in fact vision sent to her by the Lord, she would probably have mentioned it. It is more likely that Harriet herself believed that she was born with the ability to 'see things' in her dreams. She also explains that she was able to sense danger, by a 'fluttering' sensation of her heart. Her explanation for this mysterious ability is that she inherited this power from her father, who could always predict the weather and who foretold the Mexican war.<sup>133</sup>

When we look at the way these dreams or visions are depicted in the children's literature, we see a difference in the depiction in different periods. In Ann Petry's work, written in 1955, little attention is paid to the dreams, and they are simply described as recurring dreams. It is not mentioned that these dreams might be visions sent by God. It is acknowledged that the dreams are somewhat mysterious, because at some point it is described that she sees John Brown's face in a dream, even though she had never met him at the time of the dream. She also knows what happened to John Brown the day of his act of resistance at Harper's Ferry before she actually heard of it. Still, none of this is explained in a religious way.<sup>134</sup> This is starting to change in the book written by Faith Ringgold in 1992, titled *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. In this work, there is

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<sup>131</sup> A.J. Bacevich and E.H. Prodromou, "God is not Neutral: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy after 9/11." *Orbis: a Quarterly Journal of World Affairs* 48 (2004): 46-48

<sup>132</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, 26

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 115

<sup>134</sup> Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, 83 and 198

a lot of emphasis on the magical and mysterious aspects of Harriet's life. The theme of this book is dreaming, and the story is told based on the dream of a little girl. In this dream she flies in the air, sees a train full of slaves that takes away her little brother, Be Be, and meets Harriet Tubman who tells her all about the Underground Railroad. The story is based on Harriet's own dreams. This becomes clear in the end of the book, when the little girl is reunited with her brother and says: 'I could see Aunt Harriet and Be Be the passengers on the Underground Railroad, and women all dressed in white flying in a huge circle around them.' This refers to the women in white that Harriet saw in her dreams about the free North. The religious element of the dreams that Harriet had is not mentioned in this book, but the mythical element of the story of Harriet Tubman is given much attention in.<sup>135</sup> In the book written by Carole Boston Weatherford in 2006, the connection between these dreams and religion is made. In this book, almost everything that happened in Harriet Tubman's life is described in a religious way. The dreams that Harriet had are described as instances in which God spoke to her and told her what to do and where to go. Whenever she was lost, God spoke to her and told her that 'she had already glimpsed the future'. It is clearly suggested that Harriet's predictive dreams were sent to her by God. But not only the Harriet's dreams are explained in a religious way; religious occurrences of which there is no proof that they ever actually happened to Harriet, are added as well. And some point in the book, Harriet is praying while sweeping and then her broom changes in a rifle as a sign that God will arm her against her enemies. Later she also sees the faces of her family members in a dust cloud while sweeping. These mysterious, supernatural events are all linked to religion in this book.<sup>136</sup>

This forms an interesting contrast with the earlier work. In studies from the 1970s, mythical, supernatural elements like the recurring dreams, were treated as magic and therefore disconnected from religion. However, in 2006, a scholarly work called *Black Magic*, written by Yvonne Chireau, challenges the idea that supernatural elements were in conflict with religion. She states that the supernatural traditions common in African-American religion are an adaptation of older beliefs within the new cultural context of Christianity. In this view, mythical elements are part of the distinct African-American Christian tradition.<sup>137</sup> This probably explains why there is so much emphasis on the supernatural in the more recent children's novels. Before, not much attention was given to this because it was considered unreligious.

The tactic of describing a dream, as used by Faith Ringgold in her book, is used by other African-American authors as well. She describes a dream and through this dream she is able to tell the story from the past, without setting the book in the past. The little girl in Ferris' book has to listen

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<sup>135</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, n.p.

<sup>136</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman led Her People to Freedom*, n.p.

<sup>137</sup> Chireau, Yvonne, "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African-American Magic," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7 (1997): 12

to this story and is forced to learn about the past of her people. In Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*, a ghost from the past returns to the present to tell the black community about past horrors. The idea is not that the characters in the book should dwell in these horrors, but they can learn who they are and use this to move forward with more certainty.<sup>138</sup> It is interesting to see how this tactic is used by Faith Ringgold as well. She wants to tell the African-American community a story from the past, in order to make them grow and provide them with their own identity.

As described in the introduction to this chapter, the decision made by slaves to resist slavery was often based on religion. There is debate about the question whether this was the case for Harriet Tubman. The things she said about this seem contradictory. When she decided to go back to her old plantation, her friends warned her that this might be too dangerous. She then replied: 'The Lord who told me to take care of my people meant me to do it just so long as I live, and so I do what he told me to do'.<sup>139</sup> From this we could conclude that Harriet's decision to save 'her people' from bondage was based on her faith in God. However, in other instances she stated that she felt like a stranger in a strange land after fleeing to the North. She realized 'her home was down in the old cabin quarter'. She then decided to try and move her family to the free North as well.<sup>140</sup> We cannot state with certainty what motivated Harriet Tubman to go back South on a mission to 'free her people'. According to the book written by Carole Weatherfield in 2006, Harriet's decision to flee North and the decision to go back to the South to save her family, were both influenced by religion. According to the book Harriet decides to flee after 'speaking with God'. God tells her she is meant to be free. Her response to this is 'My mind is made up. Tomorrow I flee'.<sup>141</sup> The decision to go back to the South after her successful flight, is also made after God spoke to her. God tells her: 'Harriet, be the Moses of your people'.<sup>142</sup>

This is the very opposite from the way Harriet's decisions are described in other books, for example *The Freedom Train* by Dorothy Sterling (1954). In this book, it is explained that Harriet decides to flee after she realizes her master has plans to sell her down South.<sup>143</sup> The decision to go back to the South after reaching the free North also comes from Harriet herself and is not influenced by God, according to this book. Harriet herself states that she 'must go down, like Moses in Egypt'.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Neil Campbell and Alasdair Keane, *American Cultural Studies. An introduction to American Culture*, 86

<sup>139</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 350

<sup>140</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, 32

<sup>141</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses – When Harriet Tubman Led her People to Freedom*, n.p.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>143</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *The Story of Harriet Tubman - Freedom Train*, 57

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 88

In this chapter the religious aspects of Harriet's life are discussed. Several themes regarding religion have been explored, such as religion as a motive for Harriet to flee and to go back to the Southern states, the importance of prayers, the difference between African-American Christianity and the Christianity of 'the whites' and mythical elements of religion.

In general we can state that it is remarkable that some of the books seem to exaggerate Harriet's religious belief. In the primary source documents and the early biographies, religion is mentioned, but none of these documents state that it was the most important thing in Harriet's life and religion is also never mentioned as a motive for Harriet to go back to the South after her escape. However, in some of the books, a lot of emphasis is put on religion, especially in the books written in 1954 and 1955 and the one written in 2006. This might be explained by periods of religious revivalism in the United States at the times the books were written.

In the books written in 1971 and 1988, a relatively minor role is played by religion. This might be explained by the fact that the ideas of Malcolm X, that Christianity was the religion for the white men, was popular in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Due to the controversy around religion, the author may have decided not to focus on this aspect of Harriet's life too much.

The book from 1992 focuses on the 'magical' elements within religion. According to the primary source documents and the biographies, Harriet had recurring dreams and could 'feel danger' whenever it was near. Since the 1970s, mythical elements were more and more considered to be part of African-American religion, so it became accepted to talk about these elements. They were a clear part of African-American religion, so this explains why in the 1990s, a period of multiculturalism, emphasis was put in the children's book on this distinctly African-American part of religion.

Furthermore, it is interesting that some of the children's books put emphasis on the differences between 'white Christianity' and African-American Christianity. This is important in creating an African-American identity. The same goes for the fact that Harriet's story is linked to the story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt (Exodus). By linking a story from the period of slavery to an older, biblical story, a sense of historical identity is created.

## Conclusion

The intention of this study was to answer the question ‘How has the way in which Harriet Tubman is depicted in American Children’s literature changed between the 1950s and today, and to what extent are these depictions historically accurate?’ After discussing several themes that played a role in Harriet Tubman’s life story, we can state that there are clear differences between the way these themes are described in the historical documents and in the children’s books and there are also differences between the children’s books from different periods. These differences can be explained by several ideologies that prevailed in (African-) American society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most notably, different strands of feminism, domestic ideology of the 1950’s, the civil rights movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s, different periods of religious revivalism, and multiculturalism in the 1980’s appear to have influenced the children’s books.

Harriet Tubman’s femininity was discussed in the first chapter, by looking at male features in both appearance and character and by looking at her approach towards marriage. In the early children’s books, there is more emphasis on Harriet’s feminine side, which can be explained by the domestic ideology of the 1950s . Furthermore, several strands of feminism that prevailed in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, caused Harriet’s portrayal as a woman to differ. Also, Harriet’s specific characteristics appear to have been left out of the more recent books in order to create a more stereotypical character with whom readers could easily identify themselves.

In the second chapter, different elements connected with African culture were examined, such as skin color, the strategy of ‘wearing the mask’, African clothing and strong family ties. One of the factors that influenced the portrayal of these elements in the children’s books was the Black Nationalism of the 1960s, which gave African Americans a sense of pride in their heritage, and caused Harriet to be portrayed in a more African way. Also, the multiculturalism of the 1980s and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s induced author’s to emphasize Harriet Tubman’s African features. Finally, the changing family structure within the African-American community during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, caused authors to emphasize on Harriet’s ties to her family.

The final chapter analyzed the religious aspects of Harriet’s life. The way Harriet’s religious ideas were described in the books also varied, because the authors appear to have been influenced by factors that were important in the African-American society. First of all, periods of religious revivalism in the 1950s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century caused Harriet to be portrayed as a very religious woman, whereas the controversy around religion caused by Malcolm X in the 1960s, caused author’s to focus less on Harriet’s religious ideas in the children’s literature.

We can conclude from this research that the way Harriet Tubman's story, and in a broader sense, slavery, is remembered changes constantly throughout time. The authors of the children's books changed the details of Harriet Tubman's story in order to make it more fitting to the time in which they wrote their version of the story. This indicates that the story is continuously considered to be an important part of the shared history of the African-American community. The story appears to be used as a vehicle through which several elements of society that were deemed important at different moments in time, are taught to the youngest generation of African Americans.

The fact that the story has undergone slight changes through time tells us that the memory of slavery is very much alive in the African-American society. The institution of slavery might be a thing of the past, but the way in which slavery is remembered still plays a role in the present community. This memory is still undergoing changes in order to fit the spirit of the time. Whenever the cultural values of the African-American community change, the memory of slavery apparently changes with it.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study of children's books, is that the story of Harriet Tubman has been, and is still being, used as a means to create a historical identity. A good example of the way in which this happens is the fact that Harriet's story is linked to the biblical story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt (Exodus). Also, the fact that some of the children's books appear to leave out some of Harriet's specific characteristics in order to create a more stereotypical character that can function as a role model for all women (or perhaps men and women) in African-American society, shows us that Harriet's story is used a way to solidify a shared, cultural identity. Harriet Tubman is considered an exemplary figure for the generations of African Americans that were confronted with slavery but she is also made into a role model for later generations of African Americans.

From the day Harriet Tubman decided that 'there was one of two things she had a *right* to, liberty, or death', she exhibited an enormous influence on 'her people'. During her life this was a very direct influence, since she changed the lives of the slaves she helped escape, she helped save the lives of soldiers when she was a nurse during the Civil War and she had an effect on many more lives as a spokeswoman for the abolitionist movement. But even after her death, her story still has an influence on the way the (African-) American society remembers slavery and thereby on the way this society sees itself.

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