

Harriet Tubman: An “Irrepressible, Stealthy Double Agent”

In addition to her mythologized association with narratives about the underground railroad, Harriet Tubman’s name and image also began to recirculate in the popular imagination in 2016 after the Department of the Treasury announced that Tubman’s likeness would replace Andrew Jackson’s on the front of the \$20 bill (Masunaga). In this paper, I argue that one of the reasons Tubman’s story has had such purchase in American culture is that it is structurally similar to a very familiar story in American lore: that of the dedicated, motivated individual on a moral mission to end injustice. What kind of work toward racial justice does this kind of story allow, and what limitations does it place on the kind of work that seems possible? What does this narrative structure suggest about the kinds of stories Americans like to tell and hear about their historical and political heroes? Texts I analyze include picture books, such as *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold, and books for older children, such as *Who Was Harriet Tubman?* by Yona Zeldis McDonough, and *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* by Dorothy Sterling. Ultimately, I seek to illuminate how Tubman has been mythologized as a dedicated individual on a moral quest to end injustice--a narrative that implies black individuals were in control of their destinies during slavery, rather than at the mercy of a white supremacist legal system. Additionally, the figure of the motivated individual on a moral mission separates the individual’s work from larger political movements at the time, creating the illusion that the individual was working alone, rather than highlighting broad-based grassroots activism as a potential mode of political engagement. What is the impact of overwhelmingly teaching children that individual dissent is the only available political demonstration and what does this tell us about what adult society values?

Works Cited

Masunaga, Samantha. "Harriet Tubman is the next face of the \$20 bill; \$5 and \$10 bills will also change." *The Los Angeles Times*, 20 Apr. 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-harriet-tubman-20-bill-20160420-story.html>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2018.