Unshackled: Education for Freedom, Student Achievement, and Personal Emancipation

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Harnessing conceptual inspiration through the work of Harriet Tubman and Queen Nanny the Maroon of Jamaica, this book explores the historical and contemporary role that education has – and can continually play as an instrument of personal and group liberation. The book discusses the early formations of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the enslavement of native populations, and the subsequent development of the Underground Railroad and Maroon societies in the Caribbean and Americas as systems of liberation. It investigates the development and maintenance of racial, gendered and class stratification, and provides a personal path to freedom as a context for a broader discussion on using education as a mechanism for dismantling the effects of colonization, miseducation, and social-psychological domination in schools and society. As a contemporary issue, it presents an in depth analysis of the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona, and the controversy surrounding its ethnic studies program as an example of one of the contested sites of curriculum development and student liberation. Additionally, it discusses high performing charter schools as an alternative model of education, which may help to provide a systematic way of unshackling institutional barriers and oppression. Ultimately, this book acknowledges that today the road to freedom is still one we must all travel as: miseducation, school failure, school dropout, unemployment/underemployment, poverty, neighborhood violence, incarceration, and a growing prison industrial complex are all reminders of the work that still must be accomplished. Like those who historically sacrificed their lives to gain freedom and an education, today, with the lingering effects of institutionalized systems of domination, education must continue to be an instrument of social mobility and liberation; if indeed, we are to make schools and society more humane and inclusive towards those who are still waiting to be unshackled. The book presents implications regarding the treaties on education for freedom as a school reform and public policy topic.
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Exploring education as an instrument of social mobility and group liberation in historical and current contexts, the authors raise urgent questions about the promise of school choice that merit the attention of scholars, activist educators and parents. Lucid recommendations for anti-violence curricula for liberation and education policy reform follow this highly original investigation of how education can reverse the socio-psychological effects of domination in schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Taking inspiration from the work of Harriet Tubman and Queen Nanny the Maroon of Jamaica, this book explores the historical and contemporary role that education has – and can continually play as an instrument of personal and group liberation. In chapters one and two, we discuss the early formations of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the enslavement of native populations, and the subsequent development of the Underground Railroad and Maroon societies in the Caribbean and Americas as systems of liberation. However, in the Emancipation period, many former-slaves were forced into post-slavery sharecropping, which was just as exploitative as slavery and colonialism, so education was viewed as a necessary component of their liberation, to be totally unshackled. After the physical aspect of slavery was eliminated, a more advanced psychological system of control was developed to ensure that the oppressed remained in servitude.

In chapter three, illuminating the theme of freedom and liberation, we investigate the development and maintenance of racial, gendered and class stratification, while explaining our personal paths to freedom as a context for a broader discussion on using education as a mechanism for dismantling the effects of colonization, miseducation, and social-psychological domination in schools and society. As contemporary examples of the struggle for access to education and liberation, in chapter four we present an in depth analysis of the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona, and the controversy surrounding its ethnic studies program as an example of one of the contested sites of curriculum development and student liberation. Additionally, in chapter five, although we do not endorse the charter school movement as such, we discuss high achieving charter schools as an alternative model of education, which may help to provide a systematic way of unshackling institutional barriers and oppression. Finally, chapter six concludes with implications regarding the treaties on education for freedom as a school reform and public policy topic. Ultimately, this book acknowledges that today the road to freedom is still one we must all travel as: miseducation, school failure, school dropout, unemployment/underemployment, poverty, neighborhood violence, incarceration, and a growing prison industrial complex are all reminders of the work that still must be accomplished. Like those who sacrificed their lives to gain freedom and an education, today, with these lingering effects of institutionalized systems of domination, education must continue to be an instrument of social mobility and liberation, if indeed, we are to make schools and society more humane and inclusive towards those who are still waiting to be unshackled.
CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD UNDER SIEGE AND THE RAILROAD TO FREEDOM: UNSHACKLED

“If I could have convinced more slaves that they were slaves, I could have freed thousands more.”

Harriet Tubman

The African Diaspora began in 1441 and extended into the mid-1800s (Thompson, 1991). Prior to this, the Arabs had made their entry into Africa and established a slave trading post at Zanzibar off the coast of Tanzania in East Africa (UNESCO, 2006). Back in Europe, Prince Henry of Portugal, also called Prince Henry the Navigator, began to sponsor a number of expeditions to Africa (Prince Henry the Navigator, 1894). Based on the information Prince Henry received from these voyages, in 1418 he started a navigation school in Portugal, which produced a series of maps that outlined the contour of West Africa. As a result of this new knowledge in Europe, the Portuguese (and later the Spanish) would begin to seek a permanent entry into Africa (Beazley, 1910; Davies, 1964). By this time, the Arabs had already extended into the West Coast of Africa. With the Arab and Portuguese presence in West Africa, the conditions were created for the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Slave Route, 1994).

Between 1441 and the mid-1800s, the continent of Africa was under siege by European nations whose primary intention was to obtain gold, spices, natural resources, and secure slaves to work on plantations in the Caribbean, Latin America, and later, in North America (Rodney, 1972; Williams, 1987). In the Western Hemisphere, agitation for freedom and resistance against slavery was an integral part of all slave societies. Slaves’ aspirations and desires for freedom and a better life ignited many uprisings and helped form many social networks that would ultimately lead to their freedom. To be considered more than domestic cattle and more than three-fifths of a human being, African slaves would often have to sacrifice their lives so their children could see the light of freedom. Among slaves, their desire for freedom transcended nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and familial arrangement, for the status as a slave carried a pronouncement and burden that was unbearable. Therefore, freedom was a unifying force that connected slaves in the Caribbean and Latin America with those in North America. In North America, it was the Underground Railroad that held the promise of freedom (Hood, 2010), and in the Caribbean and Latin America it was the Maroon societies (Campbell, 1976; Carey, 1997). The Maroons (or Cimarróns) were runaway slaves in the Americas who formed communities in the mountains where they trained warriors to fight
plantation owners and free slaves (Campbell, 1976, 1988; Nettleford, 2006). These communities were also found in Virginia and in the Carolinas of North America (Leaming, 1995).

Beginning with Portugal and Spain, European explorers strategically designed their voyages to Africa for the express purpose of pillaging the land and people; capturing men, women and children, stealing precious metals, and instigating wars among native tribes. After the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, with the exception of Ethiopia, the entire continent of Africa and its people were colonized and enslaved by Europeans. Edward Hertslet’s three-volume book, Map of Africa by Treaty, which was originally published in 1895, is still one of the most definitive works that shows exactly how the continent of Africa was negotiated and carved up by European nations. In the Caribbean and Latin America, the indigenous people would experience a similar fate of enslavement and colonization as their African counterparts. The natives of the Caribbean islands and Latin America included the Siboneyes, Guanahatabeyes, Arawaks, Caribs, and Tainos, among others (Atkinson, 2006; Lovén, 1935). These indigenous groups predated the arrival of Europeans in the region (Williams, 1962). In addition, Africans also made voyages to Central and South America long before Christopher Columbus came to the region, and they created a civilization among the Olmecs and left artifacts, sculptures (busts), and monuments that have been found by modern researchers (Rogoziński, 1994; Van Sertima, 1976). The large Olmec busts can be found in Mexico, as well as throughout Central and South America. Back on the continent of Africa, Africans were forced to begin their quest for freedom in their own land, and in the Western Hemisphere, it was a mission that began when the first slave ship left the West Coast of Africa heading for the Caribbean islands.

With the ‘blessings’ of Pope Alexander VI, from the entry of Christopher Columbus into the Americas in 1492, the fate of the native population would change permanently. These people were rather naive regarding the true intentions of Christopher Columbus and Europeans in general, for which they would pay the ultimate price. In his logbook, Columbus explains how he was able to manipulate and conquer the indigenous people of the Caribbean. Columbus states (as cited in Cohen, n.d./1969):

On the grounds of information I had given your royal Highnesses concerning the lands of India and a prince who is called the Great Khan – which means in Spanish ‘King of Kings’ – and of his and his ancestors’ frequent and vain applications to Rome for men learned in the holy faith who should instruct them in it, your Highnesses decided to send me, Christopher Columbus, to see these parts of India and the princes and peoples of those lands and consider the best means for their conversion. For, by the neglect of the Popes to send instructors, many nations had fallen to idolatry and adopted doctrines of perdition, and your Highnesses as Catholic princes and devoted propagators of the holy Christian faith have always been enemies of the sect of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies. (Cohen, 1969, p. 37)
Although he thought he was sailing towards India, once Columbus landed in the Caribbean (incorrectly called West Indies), he explains his encounters with the native people. He writes:

In order to win their friendship, since I knew they were a people to be converted and won to our holy faith [Christianity/Catholicism] by love and friendship rather than by force, I gave some of them red caps and glass beads which they hung round their necks, also many other trivels. These things pleased them greatly and they became marvelously friendly to us. They afterwards swam out to the ship’s boat in which we were sitting, bringing us parrots and balls of cotton thread and spears and many other things, which they exchanged with us for such objects as glass beads, hawks and bells. In fact, they willingly traded everything they had. (Cohen, 1969, p. 55)

Once Columbus began to massacre and enslave these people, they realized although late, his true intentions toward them (see de Las Casas’ A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, originally published in 1542). Later, North, South, and Central America were named after the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci.

After the Columbus era under Spain’s direction, Hernán Cortés penetrated Mexico and began a conquest that toppled the Aztecs and expanded the Spanish colonial empire—creating wealth and power that made the country elite amongst European nations (Rogoziński, 1994). This epic event is worth mentioning here. In the early 1500s, when Hernán Cortés came to Mexico he chose a young Mayan slave girl known as Malinche as his translator and sexual servant. Cortés had Malinche baptized Dona Maria and he later had a child with her named Don Martin Cortés, who was now a part of a social class called the mestizos (Norton et al., 2008). Due to the fact that the mestizos were visibly racially mixed, they were placed in a higher social class than their indigenous counterparts who were still being enslaved. This essentially created a social hierarchy in the slave quarters and society, where to have some European features and ethos was a passage to a better life (Campbell, 1976). As part of a White supremacists ideology, stratifying the oppressed along color lines created a caste system, which suggested that racially mixed, lighter complexioned Latinos/Latinas, Blacks and Native Americans were superior and more intelligent than their darker-skinned counterparts, because they apparently had more “white blood” in them.

In 1519, when Hernán Cortés entered Aztec territory, the Mexicans welcomed him. In true Columbus style etiquette, Cortés pretended to be kind towards the Aztecs, even exchanging gifts with them, while eagerly wanting to meet the renowned leader and warrior, Moctezuma (Norton et al., 2008). Anticipating a great battle, Cortés prepared himself to use diplomacy at first to get close to Moctezuma so he could capture him and eventually conqueror the Aztec empire. When the two finally met, Moctezuma surrendered the entire empire to the Spanish without a fight. In essence, Cortés toppled the Aztec empire with less than 500 hundred soldiers, which gave the Spanish a permanent base in Mexico. It is possible that
Moctezuma thought that Cortés was the epic return of a deity, and therefore he felt that he was supposed to be obedient and surrender. This is still a mystery. It is perhaps a tragedy that history may never vindicate Moctezuma from, because he never resisted the capture, enslavement, and colonization of his own people and empire. Nevertheless, Moctezuma gave Cortés all of the Aztec’s gold and treasures, surrendering everything to Spanish control. There was so much gold and treasures that the Spanish were forced to take it in portions. However, history may never be kind to Moctezuma, who was otherwise a great warrior and Aztec leader who fought fearlessly to consolidate his own empire, but surrendered without resistance to the Spanish. Moctezuma was subsequently captured by Cortés and his soldiers, and later killed by his own Aztec people. Seeing the success of the Spanish and Portuguese expeditions, in the mid-1500s, the British entered the slave trade. Later in the 1600s, the British would battle the Spanish and emerge as the supreme colonial power under Queen Elizabeth I (through the expeditions of Captain John Hawkins), and then King Stuart James.

In 1564, during one of Captain John Hawkins’ slave-trading voyages to Sierra Leone, a European sailor named James Pope Hennessy describes an encounter with the Africans. Thompson (1991) recounts the event:

They were surprised by a band of Africans, who attacked them, wounded several and pursued them back to their boats, shooting at them with arrows and hacking to pieces those who floundered fully-armored in the mud. By this time two hundred Africans had gathered on the bank. In the confrontation which ensued, seven of Hawkins’ best men, including the captain of the Salmon [ship], were killed and thirty more wounded. With tidings of further attacks in the offing to be mounted by the ‘king of Sierra Leone’, Hawkins beat a hasty retreat. Moreover, since his crew were sickly for the climate, he set sail at once from the West Indies. (p. 107)

Back on the continent of Africa, Africans formed military teams that were stationed along the West Coast. Watchmen working shifts patiently awaited the sign of European ships. Drums were played to alert community members of invaders, and then the militant warriors would emerge from their hiding places, heading down to the seashores to defend their land and people. The narrative of Olaudah Equiano merits mentioning here.

Equiano was from West Africa, Nigeria, an Ibo born in the Essaka region, who was captured in the mid-1700s and brought to North America as a slave. During his time in slavery, he was able to collect enough money and in 1766, he purchased his freedom and later became an anti-slavery activist. Equiano learned to read and write from empathetic Whites and he wrote an autobiographical account of his life, explaining the experience of being kidnapped in Africa as a child and sold into slavery in North America. In his book, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, he recalls his experience as a captive African on a slave ship moving crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He explains:
I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore…. I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and, although not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet, nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not… (Equiano, 1789/1989a, pp. 72-73)

In North America, Equiano was bought and sold several times. Finally, a ship captain purchased him and he accompanied the captain on his voyages. Equiano explains his quest to gain freedom. He states:

Every day now brought me nearer my freedom, and I was impatient till we proceeded again to sea, that I might have an opportunity of getting a sum large enough to purchase it. I was not long ungratified; for, in the beginning of the year, 1766, my master bought another sloop, named the Nancy, the largest I had ever seen. She was partly laden, and was to proceed to Philadelphia; our Captain had his choice of three, and I was well pleased he chose this, which was the largest; for, from his having a large vessel, I had more room, and could carry a larger quantity of goods with me. (Equiano, 1789/1989b, p. 2)

In 1766, Equiano was finally able to save enough money to purchase his freedom. However, for many slaves, saving money was not an option, so they were forced to use more desperate means to secure and protect their freedom. In spite of the call to end slavery, which was being echoed by Equiano and the abolitionists in Europe, the Transatlantic Slave Trade continued, as it was now the core of the global economy. In an attempt to silence the critics of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, in 1773, the following statement was published in the London Chronicle.

The purchase of these Africans to be labourers in our colonies is really a redemption of them from the most cruel slavery to a milder and more comfortable state of life than in their own country, at the same time it weans them from the wild idolatry of Snakers and other reptiles, it removes them from arbitrary power and barbarity, to live under just and wholesome laws, by which their lives and properties are protected from murder, rape, or theft; and their crimes punished by the same; only with less rigour than in this country…..

Let those orators or advocates for the liberty of the negroes in our colonies look round all the arbitrary governments of Europe and see whether the common
people of their subjects live half as happily and comfortable as our colony negroes. Let them look into Ireland among the common people, where there are no parish taxes, nor any other support for the sick and maimed, but by private charities, and importune beggary. Nay, let us enquire into the state of our labourer in husbandry, even in this our opulent free country. Are they not slaves to necessity? The most cruel of all Egyptian task masters [mythology as told in western theology]; who makes no abatement for sickness or accidents, which disable the husband and father of a numerous offspring, from supplying their wants; save the poor pittance allowed by the parish, very unequal to the occasion, and distributed by those who have no private interest to serve, and perhaps, but little feeling for their poor fellow creature; whole never-ending labours (much greater than those of our colony negroes) continue with life and ability. Is this a life so comfortable as those enjoy? Yet these are called the sons of liberty, who really are the slaves of Necessity. What is their great benefit of liberty, but that of changing their employer? But that can neither mitigate their labours, nor increase their wages; and therefore cannot add any comfort to their existence. (*London Chronicle*, 1773)

With the abolitionists decrying slavery, the British government attempted to paint the slaves in its colonies in a colorful light, either they were saving “Negro” savages (Black slaves) from the depths of hell or they were offering their Black slaves a life of relative luxury. In addition to these lighthearted and inaccurate portrayals of slavery, there were always public references to Egypt and Black people in a negative tone, as the King James authorized version of the Bible, like all others, had made Africa and Black people in general, into heathens who needed to be ‘saved’ (See Nosipho Majeke’s *The Role of the Missionary in Conquest*, and C. P. Groves’ *The Planting of Christianity in Africa, Volumes1-4*). These were fables that were told to justify slavery and keep protesters at bay. Slavery was an international source of capital and it would not end without deliberate resistance.

Back on the continent of Africa, by the end of the 17th century, European nations were less willing to fight and seize Africans. It was too risky and the causalities were too great, as the African warriors were now anticipating the arrival of European invaders. Therefore, instead of using direct force, the Europeans began to negotiate with dissenting tribal groups to help supply them with slaves. During the 400 years of slavery, between 60 and 100 million Africans were captured and brought to the Americas (Clarke, 1998; Du Bois, 1970). These Africans were brought to a strange land, a new world to develop and sustain plantation economies, which created the surplus capital that was needed to finance the industrial revolution (Williams, 1966).

When Africans arrived in the Americas, they maintained their irrefutable desire for freedom, to be unshackled. Thus, they formed support systems similar to those they created back home in Africa. In North America, these support systems formed a human railroad to freedom. Stretching from the North to the South, a series of stations, station keepers, conductors, and passengers created a notorious system of
transportation. This transportation system had more horsepower than a horse and buggy carriage, it was sleeker than a sailing ship, and it carried more passengers than a ferryboat, it was a machine like no other, it was the Underground Railroad (UR).

UNSHACKLED: RAILROAD TO FREEDOM

After many decades of grassroots organizing and petitioning, in 1998 Congress authorized The National Underground Network to Freedom Program [Public Law 105–203] to coordinate and facilitate federal and non-federal activities to commemorate, honor, and explain the history of the UR (United States, 2008). Furthermore, in 2007, the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Amendments Act was passed, which appropriated over two million dollars to educate the public and conduct programs related to the UR. This was a long journey and a major victory that helped to bring honor to those who worked on the UR and fought to free slaves.

It is important to note that in 1619, the first Black slaves arrived in North America. These were slaves who Dutch slave traders removed from the island of Barbados and took to James Town, Virginia, both British colonies, to continue their life of servitude. These were the first Black people who were taken to North America as slaves, which made a permanent historical connection between slavery in the Caribbean and North America. During this time, the Dutch West India Company was a key player in the slave trade, as it supplied slaves to the Portuguese, and even the Spanish and British at times (Raphael, 1983). In 1620, one year after the first Black slaves arrived in James Town Virginia, a group of Christians known as the Pilgrims, who were fleeing religious persecution in Europe, set sail on a ship called the Mayflower and arrived in North America [in present day Massachusetts]. Back in England, the Pilgrims were defectors of the Church of England (Anglican Church), and they formed their own denomination called Puritan or Congregationalist. Prior to this, in the 1500s, the Anglican Church was established as the mother Church of England, when King Henry VIII desired to divorce his wife (Catherine) but was denied permission by Pope Clement VII of Rome. After this disagreement with the Pope, King Henry VIII turned England into a Protestant country by establishing the Anglican Church as the official Church of England. This was an important and strategic move made by King Henry VIII, which would ultimately grant England social, political and religious autonomy. Furthermore, it would no longer need to pay tithes to the Vatican. After making this separation from the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church would create its own set of rules and regulations.

In the case of the Pilgrims, once they defected from the Anglican Church they were forced to emigrate from England to flee religious persecution, and more importantly, to save their lives. The Pilgrims were aware that there was already a colony established in Virginia of North America, and they desired to create a settlement of their own in the new territories where they could practice their religion openly. Once the Pilgrims arrived in North America and surveyed the new landscape,
they would create some of the largest slave plantations in North America. Originally, these plantations included free labor from Native Americans and lower-class Whites from England. In the instance of the White slaves in North America, Bennett (1993) explains:

Like most social systems, white servitude produced and reproduced itself. In the colonies, as in England, the courts manufactured servants by sentencing poor whites to servitude for relatively minor infractions and by increasing the time of rebellious servants.

As the system developed in America, other forms and styles of servitude sprang up. Children born out of wedlock and the children of the poor were routinely bound out until they were twenty-one. It was also common for poor whites to “voluntarily” sell themselves into servitude to pay medical expenses and other debts. In 1675 a Virginia white man named Lambert Groton “voluntarily” sold himself into lifetime servitude in order to satisfy a debt of 3,200 pounds.

Whatever the form, whatever the style, white servitude was a system designed to extract the maximum amount of labor power from poor whites. Some of these whites were artisans, and some were teachers, musicians, and bartenders. Most, however, were field hands, and most—male and female—worked the traditional slave hours from dawn to dusk. (pp. 52-53)

As the plantations grew, the demand for slaves outpaced the supply of White indentured servants/slaves, so plantation owners exclusively sought Black and Brown [Native American] labor, turning slavery into a racialized institution. To achieve their goals, the Pilgrims would massacre and enslave the Native Americans, and purchase and enslave Africans and African Americans (Clarke, 1998). And this would continue for more than two hundred years.

It was this dehumanizing experience of being in bondage that started the UR (Buckmaster, 1958). The UR began in the 1600s and formally continued into the late 1800s. The name is believed to have been first applied to the system in 1831, the year of Nat Turner’s death. During this time, a slave named Tice Davids escaped from slavery in Kentucky, heading to Ripley, Ohio and eventually disappeared in the darkness of the night. Tice’s owner searched diligently but found no trace of him (Anderson Leonard, 1927/1967; Blockson, 1989; Buckmaster, 1958; United States, 2008). After a long exhausting search, the slave master concluded that, “He (Tice) must have gotten away by an underground road” (Strother, 1962, p. 5).

Although the name UR was publicized in the 1800s, it actually began in the 1600s when the first Black slaves were brought to North America. Since that time, slaves have always engaged in some form of resistance and protest against slavery, and many would runaway seeking freedom even if it cost them their lives. Each time the name UR was mentioned, it was the sound of freedom in the ears of slaves, but it was a sound of terror for White plantation owners. By UR, we are referring to
the vast systems of passages, routes and human networks that slaves used to escape from slavery in the South, to freedom in the northern territories of the United States (U.S.) and Canada (Green, 1969). These complex systems are generally referred to as underground because of their hidden and secret routes, which were used to assist runaway slaves on their journey to freedom. Due to the success of the UR, slave owners desired to derail the freedom train that unshackled those who were in bondage, but they could not stop it because generally they could not see it (Hood, 2010; Larson, 2012).

Only a few ordinary citizens have ever glimpsed the UR in operation (Buckmaster, 1958). Its existence was largely publicized throughout the nation, but its visibility was limited to its passengers, station keepers, and conductors. These people were the ones who knew the stations and routes that led from slavery to freedom. A conductor would take the passengers from one stop to the next, and from there another conductor would continue North on the route to freedom. They traveled by foot, by boats, in carriages disguised as servants, and under cargo in the back of wagons (Strother, 1962). Although it was public knowledge that many slaves were escaping to freedom, with all its activity, the UR remained a secret operation.

The men and women who worked on the railroad represented a diverse group of supporters including: farmers, shopkeepers, teachers, physicians, businessmen, and members of the clergy, but the majority were former slaves (Blockson, 1989). In addition to these supporters, a number of Whites, mainly abolitionists and Quakers, extended aid to the UR. Nevertheless, African Americans were the founders and operators of the UR, which was demanding and hazardous work. The agents risked their lives each time they worked on the railroad. When the pursuers were close, they hid in stables, attics, storerooms, under feather beds, and in secret passages.

HARRIET TUBMAN: THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Harriet Tubman
Supporters of the UR included people such as: John Jones, successful Black businessman and agent on the UR; Robert Purvis, head of the Philadelphia UR and abolitionist leader; Frederick Douglass, UR station master and skilled abolitionist orator; William Still, indefatigable agent in Philadelphia’s UR; Thomas Garret, Quaker and UR station master; Levi Coffin, abolitionist, philanthropist and UR agent; Lewis Hayden, agent of the Boston UR; Captain Jonathan Walker, sea captain and abolitionist; Reverend Highland Garnet, station keeper, orator and abolitionist; John Brown, abolitionist and freedom fighter; William Wells Brown, agent of the UR, author and orator; Sojourner Truth, agent of the UR and abolitionist orator; William Lamber, leading agent of the Detroit UR; and of course, the renowned Harriet Tubman who was called the “Moses of her people” because she helped more than three hundred slaves gain their freedom (Newswire, 2012). All of these people, and many others, dedicated their lives to the mission of the UR, but perhaps Harriet Tubman should be considered its national president and most iconic figure because of her service in leading slaves to freedom (Blockson, 1989; Buckmaster, 1958).

Born a slave in Maryland and escaping to gain her own freedom, Tubman knew what life was like being in bondage, an experience that inspired her work, for she was indeed the most revered member of the UR, risking her life to help hundreds of African Americans escape to freedom. As a slave in Maryland with the label of being three-fifths of a human being, Harriet Tubman was subject to some of the most inhumane treatment, working from dust to dawn without pay (Blockson, 1989; Hood, 2010). Tubman would eventually escape to freedom by heading north to Canada. There, she would help other members of her family runaway to freedom by crossing the U.S. – Canada border (Wiggan & Walrond, 2013). On March 27th, 1857, Thomas Garrett, a White abolitionist from Delaware, writes to William Still, who was born a free Black person in New Jersey (and became an important abolitionist), inquiring about Harriet Tubman. Garrett’s letter explains how Tubman’s life was endangered on her rescue missions.

Esteemed Friend, William Still: -- I have been very anxious for some time past, to hear what has become of Harriet Tubman. The last I heard of her, she was in the State of New York, on her way to Canada with some friends, last fall. Has thee seen, or heard anything of her lately? It would be a sorrowful fact, if such a hero as she, should be lost from the Underground Rail Road. I have just received a letter from Ireland, making inquiry respecting her. If thee gets this in time, and knows anything respecting her, please drop me a line by mail to-morrow, and I will get it next morning if not sooner, and oblige thy friend. I have heard nothing from the eighth man from Dover, but trust he is safe.

(Garrett, 1857, March 27th)

As Thomas Garrett explains, even in Ireland people knew about the work that Harriet Tubman was doing. Later that year [1857], Garrett follows up his correspondence to William Still regarding Tubman. He reports:
I was truly glad to learn that Harriet Tubman was still in good health and ready for action, but I think there will be more danger at present than heretofore, there is so much excitement below in consequence of the escape of those eight slaves. I was truly sorry to hear of the fate of that poor fellow who had periled so much for liberty. I was in hopes from what thee told me, that he would recover with the loss perhaps of some of his toes. (Garrett, 1857)

Harriet Tubman and her followers encountered great perils on their journey to freedom. As hunters and dogs pursued them, they experienced the harsh realities of a racialized society and a booming southern plantation economy, wherein Black slaves were a central commodity. On December 1st, 1860, Thomas Garrett writes to William Still again, this time to explain the work that Harriet Tubman was doing to help her people achieve freedom. He writes:

Respected Friend: -- William Still: -- I write to let thee know that Harriet Tubman is again in these parts. She arrived last evening from one of her trips of mercy to God’s poor, bringing two men with her as far as New Castle. I agreed to pay a man last evening, to pilot them on their way to Chester county; the wife of one of the men, with two or three children, was left some thirty miles below, and I gave Harriet ten dollars, to hire a man with carriage, to take them to Chester county. She said a man had offered for that sum, to bring them on. I shall be very uneasy about them, till I hear they are safe. (Garrett, 1860, December 1st)

Garrett continues:

There is now much more risk on the road, till they arrive here, than there has been for several months past, as we find that some poor, worthless wretches are constantly on the look out on two roads, that they cannot well avoid more especially with carriage, yet, as it is Harriet who seems to have had a special angel to guard her on her journey of mercy, I have hope. Thy Friend, THOMAS GARRETT. (Garrett, 1860, December 1st)

Although she was uneducated, because African Americans were generally not permitted to attend school or learn to read and write, Harriet Tubman was the most important leader of the UR (Newswire, 2012). She did the work of organizing and transporting slaves to freedom. Even though White abolitionists such as Thomas Garrett and Levi Coffin were helpful and benevolent to runaway slaves, White historians have given most of the credit for the success of the UR to these figures, who were helpers, while rewriting history to suggest that Blacks played a minimal role in their own freedom (Larson, 2012; Thornburg, 1972). In fact, some researchers have falsely validated Levi Coffin’s claim as president of the UR (Coffin & UNC, 2001; Ludwig, 2004), a title that only Harriet Tubman is worthy of. Perhaps because she was uneducated and produced no major writings, while the White abolitionists who were White, privileged, educated, and having never been enslaved themselves,
wrote many letters about Black enslavement and how they offered their support, and perhaps this was enough affirmation to write them into history while relegating Harriet Tubman and other African Americans as lesser players (For example, see the book, Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the Underground Railroad). This is another tragic example of institutionalized racism.

Most members of the UR who actually rescued slaves were themselves former slaves. It is important to note that Harriet Tubman’s work did not begin and end when she secured her own freedom from slavery, because at that point she was only beginning her work. Tubman, who was internationally known, risked her own life and rescued more than three hundred slaves, which is more than any single member of the UR ever rescued. While other members of the UR like Levi and Catharine Coffin, Thomas Garrett, and Captain Jonathan Walker, among others, offered much needed assistance to many slaves, which was important work, Harriet Tubman continuously endangered her own life, traveling to the South and rescuing more than three hundred slaves. For this, she rightly deserves the title as president of the UR.

THE EXPANSIVE UR

The UR had a geographical span that extended from the southern states, throughout the Midwest, along the East Coast, and all the way into Canada. Due to the expansiveness of the railroad, the routes to freedom led across land, overseas, rivers, and lakes (Hood, 2010). Along the Atlantic Coast, long railroad lines connected the South to the North. Some of these lines went up the Atlantic Coast where many ports were positioned along the way and continued into the northern states. The UR was one of the major systems that helped to unshackle those who were in bondage (See Carter G. Woodson’s Free Negro Heads of Families in the United States in 1830).

Through the UR, slaves secured passage on ships either secretly or with the consent of the ship’s captain. They traveled in trading vessels that transported them to ports in the North. Sea captains like Austin Bearse and Jonathan Walker played an active role in transporting slaves from Florida and North Carolina, and from Virginia to Boston and New York. However, most captains did not show a great deal of empathy, so slaves were forced to escape by hiding among a ship’s cargo. For example, boats that were used for lumber-trade sometimes brought slaves from New Bern, North Carolina to ports in Philadelphia (Siebert, 1968). Slaves were tucked away in these vessels for several hours as the ships moved up the Atlantic Ocean. These were dangerous and desperate actions.

What would cause a human being to want to be sealed in a container, hidden on a ship with only a few breathing holes for more than seven hours, or why would someone want to lie down between two tons of lumber on a steamship and risk getting crushed to death; an irrefutable desire to escape to freedom. African Americans
sought freedom from a system of oppression that gave them no opportunities for advancement, instead typecasting them as being three-fifths of a human being. The desire for freedom gave them the courage to encounter adversity that could ultimately result in their death.

While slaves who lived along the East Coast used land and ocean to escape to freedom in the northeast, those who lived in the interior states utilized rivers and lakes as a source of transportation. At night, when the plantation owners were sleeping, many slaves would slip away on the UR, leaving neither a trace nor track. In many instances, conductors would lead a group of eight-to-twelve slaves to a river where another conductor was waiting in a small boat. The passengers would quickly board the boat and away they went into the darkness of the night. This type of get-away was useful and it was sometimes repeated two times each night, as slaves were being unshackled.

In the North, the Connecticut River served as a guide to fugitive slaves on their way to Canada. The Mississippi, Illinois, Ohio, Allegheny, and Hudson rivers provided passages to freedom. Similarly, canals that formed convenient highways were used to transport slaves to freedom (Strother, 1962). Abolitionists in Indiana would use the Wabash and Erie Canal as a thoroughfare to transport runaway slaves. The ex-slaves would follow the rivers and canals from the vicinity of Evansville, Indiana until they reached Ohio, probably in some instances going as far as Toledo and then diverting off on one of several established lines of UR in central and northern Indiana. James Bayliss, an abolitionist of Massillon, Ohio explained that fugitives used canals from Indiana that led to Cleveland, and from there they took boats into Canada (Siebert, 1968). The water routes were popular because they were often safer than public roads, which were filled with hunters searching for runaway slaves.

Although the water routes of the UR were convenient and somewhat safer than the land routes, many slaves were forced to escape on foot. A boat or ship was not always readily available for slaves eagerly awaiting freedom, so a number of them took land routes. The UR was unique in that there were always two or more established routes from any region that could lead to freedom. This made it increasingly difficult for hunters and patrols to track the railroad. In addition to the various passages, conductors used zigzag routes to evade pursuers.

The zigzag routes were a common strategy when slave catchers were close. When the pursuers were closing in, conductors would switch passengers from one route to another, or they would backtrack and after a few days of waiting, proceed forward (United States, 2008). Routes from Toledo, Ohio to Detroit were very dangerous because slave-owners and patrols were known to be on the lookout along the roads. These routes were under heavy surveillance by slave-owners, so conductors used alternate zigzag routes that led through Indiana and then up into Detroit.

Working on the UR was a hazardous job, and only dedicated agents could handle the pressure. One had to be courageous to work on the railroad because there was no tolerance for cowards. The expeditions were governed by strict rules. If
anyone acted as an informer for slave-owners, a railroad agent would execute that person.

Harriet Tubman, who was the most iconic person of the UR who rescued over three hundred slaves including her parents, rightly deserves to be called “the Moses of her people” (Newswire, 2012). On one of her voyages, Tubman recalled an incident when she rescued about eight slaves and they were traveling on foot for two days. On the second night of the voyage one of the fugitives decided that he was too tired to continue. The man’s feet were sore and swollen and he decided he could not go any further, he just wanted to go back and die. The members of the UR tried to persuade him to continue, they bathed his feet, but it did not work, he wanted to go back. Then Tubman intervened, she stated, “I told the boys to get their guns ready, and shoot him. They’d have done it in a minute; but when he heard that, he jumped right up and went on as well as any body” (Blockson, 1989, p. 105). When Tubman was asked if she would have allowed the man to be shot, she replied, “Yes, if he was weak enough to give out, he’d be weak enough to betray us all, and all who had helped us; and do you think I’d let so many die just for one coward man” (Blockson, 1989, p. 105).

Nevertheless, in spite of a few people who were faint in heart, most of the members of the UR were disciplined and courageous, and they often used churches to plan their missions. Churches became support centers for the railroad. Many Southern Quakers moved to the North on account of their disagreement with slavery. When the Quakers gathered for service, they would discuss and share ideas about freeing slaves. In 1780, the Methodists began to take action against slavery. At a conference in Baltimore, Methodist church leaders addressed slavery directly. At the conference, the question was posed: “Ought not this conference to require those travelling preachers who hold slaves to give promises to set them free?” (Siebert, 1968, p. 94). In posing this question, the clergy took a stand against slavery. The clergy reported, “We pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves; and advise their freedom” (Siebert, 1968, p. 94). Later, in 1842, Methodist preachers such as Luther Lee, Orange Scott and La Roy Sunderland founded a church organization to help African Americans called the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America (Siebert, 1968).

Similarly, Presbyterian ministers like David Nelson and John Rankin also extended aid to African Americans. They gave money to help fund the UR and during Sunday services, they often sermonized about the evils of slavery. In addition, many Southern Baptist churches also gave assistance to the UR. Slaves were often permitted to meet together by themselves for Sunday worship, while slave-owners attended church in segregated buildings. This was an important time for slaves to share information about the UR.

Among the many ministers who helped the UR, there were also other prominent helpers. Frederick Douglass explains: “My connection with the Underground Railroad began long before I left the South, and was continued as long as slavery
continued, whether I lived in New Bedford, Lynn [both in Massachusetts], or Rochester, N.Y. In the latter place I hid as many as eleven fugitives under my roof at one time” (Siebert, 1968, p. 104).

In the late 18th century, the UR began to expand deeper into the South and further into the West. This was a threat to slave-owners who needed slaves to work on their plantations. In an effort to impede the railroad, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850, which made the UR constitutionally illegal. The purpose of the laws was to guarantee the delivery of fugitive slaves. Under these laws, anyone who was caught assisting a runaway slave would be charged five hundred dollars. The laws gave Whites the authority to arrest Blacks without warrants. A provision for fugitive jury trials was purposely omitted from the laws. This essentially meant that many free Blacks from the North would be arrested and brought to the South as slaves. Blacks were guilty from the moment they were abducted and there was no hope for a fair trial. Despite the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Laws, the UR continued to be a vehicle to transport slaves to freedom.

After the War of 1812, African Americans learned that Canada had emancipated its slaves. Therefore, Canada was the place where slaves in the South desired to go. During this time, a number of new escape routes were developed and several existing routes were connected together, all leading to Canada. Slave-owners were even more upset as they saw the number of fugitive slaves triple during this period. In 1850, an amendment to the Fugitive Slave Law was signed by Congress. The amendment was created to extend the authority and power of slave-owners to find runaway slaves. To achieve this goal, the amendment created commissioners who received authority like judges of the circuit and district courts of the U.S. (Siebert, 1968). These commissioners issued warrants for the apprehension of runaway slaves and granted certificates for the removal of slaves, sending them back to the state or territory from which they escaped. In many ways, the Fugitive Slave Laws were not only a response to the UR, but also to the many uprisings among slaves. The slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822 [Vesey was originally from the Caribbean island of Saint Thomas], who led the largest slave revolt in North America, and the notorious Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, were all human sacrifices that sought to dismantle slavery and give future generations an opportunity to live as free human beings. In 1831, Nat Turner’s revolt captured the attention of slave owners across the nation. In this same year, word began to spread about the major slave uprising led by Sam Sharpe in Jamaica. Sam Sharpe’s revolt overlaps with Nat Turner’s revolt in North America. Although they were in different places, in 1831, Sharpe and Turner, who were both clergymen, led major uprisings that helped to free their people. Perhaps both men connected cosmologically through suffrage to time their resistance to make the greatest sacrifice towards the abolition of slavery. Subsequently, both men were hung, but Turner’s skin was stripped and removed from his body as a public sign to all slaves who might consider resisting their White plantation owners. Before he was killed,
Nat Turner was imprisoned where he made the following confession before being taken to court. The confession of Nat Turner has been documented in several places, but most notably in John Henrik Clarke’s *The Second Crucifixion of Nat Turner*. In the confession, Nat Turner states:

> I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, “Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.” I now withdrew myself as much as my situation would permit, from the intercourse of my fellow servants, for the avowed purpose of serving the Spirit more fully—and it appeared to me, and reminded me of the things it had already shown me, and that it would then reveal to me the knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of tides, and changes of the seasons. (Clarke, 1997, p. 102)

Once he was tried and found guilty, Nat Turner was skinned and hung. In addition to these savage attempts at instilling fear in slaves, in North America, laws such as the Fugitive Slave Laws prohibited empathizers from assisting runaway slaves. Furthermore, many hunters, patrols, and law enforcement officials were stationed along some of the routes of the UR. Hunters were able to catch some fugitive slaves, but the railroad remained unstoppable. Slave-owners were unable to stop the railroad because it was not always noticeable, it was only visible to the conductors and passengers. As laws were passed to derail the train, the conductors became more ingenious on their travels from slavery to freedom.

In this chapter, we discussed the historical background and social context of the African Diaspora, as well as the global struggle for freedom, and resistance against slavery and colonialism. While the physical aspects of being in bondage often demanded the ultimate sacrifice from slaves, even if it meant death, to gain their material [physical] freedom, however, the psychological dimensions of enslavement and group domination would prove to be the most enduring battle; that is to reverse the psychology that created the slave. Globally, it was a common practice among all slaveholders to deny slaves access to education and accurate information, preferring instead to indoctrinate them psychologically with western theology, and ruling them through a combination of force and ideology. In spite of these dehumanizing systems of social control, in North America the UR would provide the most expansive system of passage to freedom, allowing slaves to be physically unshackled. With Harriet Tubman as the president of the UR, thousands of slaves escaped to freedom. In the next chapter, we discuss the growing desires of many slaves to reconnect with Africa, as we address the conditions that ultimately led to the abolition of slavery. In the Reconstruction period, we discuss the crucial role that education would play in the social, political, economic, and personal freedoms of ex-slaves.
NOTE

If the UR is understood to be the secret systems of liberation that are used to help Blacks and other oppressed groups gain freedom and equal rights and opportunities, then these systems continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. Since institutionalized racism and oppression against Blacks continues in the 21st century, informally, the UR continues to exist. It could be argued that the UR became more international in the 20th century as the global Black struggle movement coalesced surrounding the colonization of Africa, Ethiopia’s freedom, Ghana’s independence from British rule, the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., the fight against Apartheid in South Africa, and the neo-colonial system of debt bondage ushered in by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. Racialized systems of poverty and class stratification would force many Blacks to migrate to new regions of the world, seeking freedom and a better life, much like those who sought freedom from the plantations of the South. Although there has been global progress in the social conditions of Blacks, however, in the 21st century it is still obvious that locally and internationally, they face the direst social, political and economic conditions. Therefore, the pursuit of freedom and equality continues, but perhaps in more modernized forms.