
Jean M. Humez. *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Stories*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. 471p.

ARIANNE BURFORD
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

In her extremely well-researched compilation of historical documents, biographical information, and life stories of Harriet Tubman, Jean Humez provides helpful socio-political historical contexts for the analysis of Tubman's life and the celebration of her heroic feats. *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Stories* is relevant for anyone interested in American history and culture—including black history, slavery and abolition, women's rights, the Civil War, and American literary history—as well as those studying activism and human rights, discourses of resistance, race, gender, exploitation, and resistant religious/spiritual rhetoric.

Humez intertwines what biographers have written about Tubman with historical events and political context, and her main goal is to demonstrate (rightly so) that Tubman deserves further attention as an important historical figure. She begins with a chronological telling of Tubman's life from the time Tubman was enslaved through her escape, her work for the Underground Railroad and the Union Army, Reconstruction, and the years before her death. Part Two includes letters written by amanuenses, stories and memories of her life told by both black and white people who knew her, songs of resistance Tubman created, and stories by biographers. Humez provides a framework for reading the life stories that emphasizes Tubman's resistance as a black woman and her strength and defiant sense of humor that has since inspired numerous African Americans as well as women's rights groups. Part Three includes various newspaper articles about Tubman. Overall, the documents Humez has collected are the products of extensive archival research.

Throughout her study, Humez asks questions about gaps in knowledge concerning Tubman's life and provides possible ideological reasons why biographers contradict each other. Although Tubman did not read or write, Humez argues that “she had a larger part in shaping her history than has yet been understood” (6). Humez asserts that readers can piece things together to “create for themselves the closest possible approximation of her own storytelling voice” (7). One of Humez's main projects is to find the “authentic” voice of Tubman, and yet, when thinking about Gayatri Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?” we might ask whether it is even possible to find the true, authentic voice of Tubman and whether this should be our task. After all, we might want to pursue further to what extent her voice can be heard and how her voice and actions of resistance have been mediated through a complex power dynamic from Tubman's own words through the pens of her biographers and the

memories of her contemporaries. Humez does briefly acknowledge that a power dynamic existed, but more work could be done in analyzing the racialized, gendered, and classed context of putting Tubman's words and life story into print.

Humez's book emphasizes Tubman as heroine, as an individual—her book is valuable in that it brings together numerous accounts surrounding Tubman's incredibly risky and heroic acts, and the bravery with which Tubman rescued relatives and other people (around 300) out of slavery and into what Tubman referred to as "the promised land." As a result, readers can glean a better understanding of how the legends surrounding Tubman's life have grown, and what Tubman's own role in creating these legends was (i.e., how she narrated her own experience). Humez also provides helpful background on such political contexts as the Dred Scott decision, and a detailed account of Tubman's relationship working with Anglo abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and John Brown as well as activists such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. She explains how Tubman labored for low wages to help support her activist work and pay for her journeys to the south as well as how abolitionists helped fund her. Thus, while the book focuses on Tubman's work as an individual, it is also useful for an understanding of her work for social justice and the relationship of such work to various black and white communities.

Humez makes an important contribution historically in that she asks us to re-look at the past. For instance, Humez demonstrates that Tubman's work as a spy, scout, and nurse was crucial in numerous successes of the Union during the Civil War, particularly the Combahee River Raid, despite the fact that Tubman's role has often been erased in historical accounts. After the war, Tubman became involved with the Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, and through its support she hoped to "build a permanent social service institution aimed at providing shelter and nursing care for the impoverished elderly of the African American community" (93). To gather funds for this project she gave public speeches in support of women's suffrage, and Anglo women's rights groups were happy to have her support. She also appeared at the founding of the National Association of Colored Women, where she again garnered funds for her project. The history that Humez provides of the many alliances that Tubman formed is extremely helpful for those interested in interracial alliances, and contributes important information about relationships between black women and Anglo women's rights groups. Such contexts can help us better understand racism within the women's movement and the attempts that were made in the 19th century to build bridges. Looking back can thus help those interested in feminisms to look to the future and think about the politics of alli-

ance building, including an understanding of difference and power that has often prevented alliances between women.

Humez emphasizes that Tubman was well respected by blacks and whites, and yet despite her iconic status as heroine, as “General Tubman” and “Moses,” she did not ever have the privilege of “economic security” (68) and died in poverty. Overall, Humez’s book is an invaluable contribution to the field. It is not only the first biography to provide a compilation of Tubman’s life stories, but it is the first to provide an analytical framework for these stories beyond just simplifying her life for stories told to children. Humez states that her book is not definitive, and that she hopes her book will cause people to be “inspired to continue research” on Tubman (8). Since the book was published in 2003 two other biographies have come out (one by Catherine Clinton and another by Kate Clifford Larson). The questions Humez raises and the issues she addresses should definitely inspire further scholarship on Tubman’s life, her activism, and her role in U.S. history. Although we may wonder about the plausibility of hearing the “authentic” voice of Tubman speak—given the many layers of mediated discourse—her many acts of resistance to oppression speak loud and clear in this celebratory, well-documented, and thorough life account. ✱