

Barry Jenkins' *The Underground Railroad*: "Freed" from important realities of history

Joanne Laurier
31 May 2021

The Underground Railroad, directed by Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*, 2016 and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2018), is a 10-chapter Prime Video series currently streaming. It premiered May 14, 2021 and is based on the 2016 novel of the same title by Colson Whitehead.

The "Underground Railroad" here is not the actual historical network of people, African American as well as white, offering assistance to slaves escaping from the South. Private homes, churches and schoolhouses were called "stations," "safe houses," and "depots," and the slavery opponents operating them were known as "stationmasters."

Abolitionist John Brown was a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad helping fugitive slaves to reach Canada. Former slave and famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass hid fugitives in his home in Rochester, New York, aiding some 400 escapees to make their way north to Canada.

The Jenkins series, on the other hand, imagines an alternative history in which a mysterious—literally underground—railroad exists, complete with locomotives, tracks and tunnels. The railroad, still theoretically an escape route, carries the lead character, Cora Randall (Thuso Mbedu) to several mostly Southern states, in which she undergoes or witnesses one racially motivated atrocity after another.

American slavery, as well as the struggle against it, is a vast and complex question. The most important historical (and artistic) work on the subject has been inspired by the conviction that the battle to destroy slavery was bound up with the universal interests and advance of humanity. Moreover, the suffering of the slaves was seen as part of the general suffering of the oppressed of every color and nationality. Accordingly, the historians and artists demonstrated sympathy toward *all*. In recent years, however, under the influence of identity politics, a number of films and novels have appeared with a far more narrow and racially exclusivist and selfish approach.

Such works speak to the interests and appeal to the sensibilities of more affluent layers of the middle class essentially indifferent to social progress and the distress of others, but acutely interested in leveraging past crimes for their own present benefit. This is a widespread characteristic of petty bourgeois forces who seek to either accommodate themselves to the oppressor or transform themselves into the oppressor.

The so-called alternative history in Jenkins' *The Underground Railroad* sheds little light on actual history but represents a significant distortion in the interest of racial politics. The mini-series is a moralizing treatment of events that does not challenge a global status quo today that exploits and oppresses the working class of every ethnicity but argues implicitly for a separate black capitalism. This is done in the spirit of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, the discredited

effort that contends America's DNA is irrevocably racist and that US history, as the WSWWS explained in its criticism of the project, is "an unyielding racial struggle, in which black Americans have waged a solitary fight to redeem democracy against white racism."

In the Jenkins series, Cora, along with Caesar (Aaron Pierre), escapes the cruelties and inhumanities of a Georgia plantation, including forced breeding of slaves overseen by their owners. Big Anthony (Elijah Everett) is whipped and burned alive after an escape attempt. Engulfed in flames, he shouts, "No more masters, no more slaves." He has been captured by the malevolent slave-catcher Arnold Ridgeway (Joel Edgerton) and his helper Homer (Chase W. Dillon), a free black adolescent mentally yoked to Ridgeway.

The subterranean railroad system takes Cora and Caesar to South Carolina, where blacks walk freely, are taught to read and have some form of employment. In Cora's case, she works in a museum that reenacts degrading scenarios from different episodes of slave life to channel "that African spirit." But under this surface of civility, the black men are being poisoned, the women sterilized, and babies confiscated.

Caesar perishes in Ridgeway's clutches and Cora makes her way to a closed down railroad station in North Carolina. There, in a town touted as God's vision of America, blacks are ritually executed, and those whites inclined to help a refugee meet a terrible fate. Ironically, the Irish have replaced blacks as servants. The road leading to the town is a gruesome vision of bodies swinging from trees. Ridgeway shows up once more; Cora flees.

Eventually, she ends up in an all-black community in Indiana that runs a successful vineyard. A white judge gets his wine, and the slave catchers don't have their warrants served, but this precarious balance between the races does not last. In a pivotal moment, farm founder Valentine (Peter De Jersey) proclaims: "Here's one delusion for you—that we can escape slavery ... We cannot escape slavery. Its scars will never fade ... It will always be with us ..."

"America too is a delusion, the grandest of them all ... The white race believes with all its heart it is their right to take the land, to kill the Indians, make war, enslave their brothers.

"This nation should not exist if there is any justice in the world, for its very foundations are theft, murder and cruelty...The one thing we both know to be true—our color cannot be undone, cannot and shall not be undone ... Nothing was given, all was earned. Hold onto what belongs to you ... I would rather build it up again than give it to them. I would rather burn it to the ground than give it to them. Because if there's one thing I know is that every white that I have ever known, if you give him a piece, he's coming for all of it."

Proving the truth of Valentine's assertions, a slaughter, initiated by

Ridgeway, ensues.

The Underground Railroad is a major television production, financed by multi-billionaire Jeff Bezos's Amazon Studios. It has the official stamp of approval from the *New York Times* ("The Underground Railroad Weaves an Epic Vision"), Bezos's *Washington Post* ("The Underground Railroad is traumatic, unflinching and relentless") and the rest of the establishment media.

The series, however, has little to commend it. Its racist content and demoralized outlook contribute to a muddy, gloomy aesthetic. "White society" proves to be little more than congealed racial hostility, either overt or concealed. Meanwhile, ridiculously, director Jenkins describes "Black folks as completely filled with light." Jenkins has not put 19th century human beings on screen for the most part, but rather has projected contemporary petty bourgeois attitudes onto his cast of characters. It is not pleasant to say, but it seems safe to assume that struggling slaves, including those intent on escape, were never as self-pitying as Jenkins' lead character.

The Underground Railroad does not treat slavery in the US as a system of labor exploitation, as an objective economic and social phenomenon bound up with the development of global capitalism, but rather as the product of white Americans' single-minded belief in their "Manifest Destiny," as Ridgeway claims, their right to subjugate or exterminate other races. He is presumably meant to be a stand-in for ordinary white Americans, past and present.

In its criticism of the *Times*' 1619 Project, the WSWS referred to the latter's fallacious attempt to explain history "from the existence of a supra-historical emotional impulse. Slavery is viewed and analyzed ... as the manifestation of white racism." In *The Underground Railroad*, Ridgeway quite literally becomes the embodiment of that transhistorical "impulse."

American history in this series is made easy: it is nothing more than a succession of attacks by whites against blacks, with events disconnected from their economic and social roots. If the viewer knew nothing of slavery other than what he or she learned from this series, he or she could be forgiven for concluding that slavery was simply a crime committed by "white people" against "black people" because ... they were racist. This is nothing more than a labored and empty tautology.

Nothing good has ever come from such race-and-blood politics, or art. Historically, these are the conceptions and the language of the extreme right.

Underscoring his ahistorical approach, Jenkins asserts in an interview that "by giving the Underground Railroad a fantastical approach, [it allowed] him [Colson] to speak to so much—the Tuskegee Experiment, the sterilization of our women, the Oregon Exclusionary Acts—*freed from the restrictions of American history* [emphasis added]. We got a black author who I'm sure, in school, American history was restricted from him. And now he's like, 'I'm going to repossess it.'" This is an announcement that the "history" on view is subjectively derived and not "restricted" by such things as facts. "History," in other words, can be shaped in any way one chooses in the service of present-day ideology and social interests.

The violence meted out to the slaves and the racist brutality experienced by African Americans once they were freed are part of the history of *class* oppression in America and the defense of the ruling elite and its wealth.

One of the advantages of not treating the *actual* Underground Railroad and related processes is that Jenkins can avoid discussing the self-sacrificing efforts of white abolitionists to end slavery, as well of

course as the hundreds of thousands of white Union soldiers who died in the Civil War.

As we have noted before, in *Capital* Karl Marx pointed with savage irony to the place in history held by US slavery, "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." These "idyllic proceedings," he explained, were key moments in the primitive accumulation of capital.

In the same work, responding to an exposure of the horrific conditions of the slaves in the American South, Marx observed, "For slave-trade read labour-market, for Kentucky and Virginia, Ireland and the agricultural districts of England, Scotland, and Wales, for Africa, Germany." Entire generations were killed off in factories, workshops and mines, or by disease.

In its response to the 1619 Project, the WSWS took note of Canadian historian Paul E. Lovejoy's *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, originally published in 1983, in which the author pointed out that slavery "has been an important phenomenon throughout history. It has been found in many places, from classical antiquity to very recent times. Africa has been intimately connected with this history, both as a major source of slaves for ancient civilizations, the Islamic world, India, and the Americas, and as one of the principal areas where slavery was common."

Indeed, Lovejoy wrote, "in Africa slavery lasted well into the twentieth century—notably longer than in the Americas. Such antiquity and persistence require explanation, both to understand the historical development of slavery in Africa and to evaluate the relative importance of the slave trade to this development. Broadly speaking, slavery expanded in at least three stages—1350 to 1600, 1600 to 1800, and 1800 to 1900—by which time slavery had become a fundamental feature of the African political economy."

These historical realities are a closed book to the overwhelming majority of contemporary artists. Jenkins (born in 1979) has obvious skills and sensitivity, but he has come of age intellectually in a stagnant, retrograde era. Looking at historical events and processes in racial or ethnic terms thoroughly dominates the circles in which the director has traveled. The American Revolution and the Civil War, titanic world events, have come under continuous attack, epitomized by the 1619 Project.

All of this has had deleterious artistic consequences. There is something sad about a figure like Jenkins, whose better aesthetic instincts continually run up against a truly impoverished social outlook. Such artists have been led down a blind alley. In the end, despite *The Underground Railroad's* ambitions, it cannot raise itself for the most part above the level of murky clichés. Notwithstanding the media hoopla surrounding it, the series does not withstand serious analysis.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact