

FROM THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD TO WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE RALLIES: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF HARRIET TUBMAN'S LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Harriet Tubman stands as one of the most influential leaders in the history of the United States. Her leadership did not rely on official titles, wealth, or political power. Instead, it was built on courage, moral conviction, and action. While she is best known for her role in the Underground Railroad, her leadership extended to the Civil War and the women's suffrage movement. This article critically examines Harriet Tubman's leadership by analyzing its moral foundation, strategic nature, and long-term impact on abolition and women's rights. Drawing on historical criticism, Black feminist theory, and leadership studies, the study examines Tubman's strategies of mobilization, her use of covert communication, and her ethical commitment to communal liberation. Through qualitative textual analysis of primary narratives and secondary scholarship, this paper demonstrates that Tubman's leadership constituted a radical, embodied, and non-institutional model of activism that challenged dominant patriarchal and racial paradigms. By situating Tubman within the broader continuum of Black women's political resistance, the study re-theorizes her role as a proto-Black feminist leader whose praxis continues to inform contemporary discourses on leadership, agency, and social justice.

Keywords: Activism, leadership, liberation, railroad, Suffrage.

Du chemin de fer clandestin aux rassemblements pour le droit de vote des femmes: une évaluation critique du leadership de Harriet Tubman

Résumé

Reconnue comme l'une des plus grandes figures emblématiques de l'histoire des États-Unis, Harriet Tubman est une femme engagée dont le leadership ne se repose pas seulement sur les titres, la richesse, ou le pouvoir politique. Au contraire, son leadership se repose sur le courage, les valeurs morales et l'action. Au-delà du rôle incontestable qu'elle a joué dans la libération des esclaves, son activisme a été d'utilité inexprimable lors de la guerre civile et lors de la lutte pour l'autonomisation de la femme américaine. Cet article propose

une évaluation critique du leadership de Tubman en remettant en question les représentations héroïques et mythifiées qui tendent à occulter la portée politique de ses actions. S'appuyant sur la critique historique, la théorie féministe noire et les études sur le leadership, cette étude vise à analyser les stratégies de mobilisation de Tubman, son usage de la communication codée et son engagement éthique en faveur de la libération collective. À travers une analyse qualitative de récits primaires et de travaux scientifiques, l'article démontre que le leadership de Tubman constituait une forme radicale, incarnée et non institutionnelle d'activisme, remettant en cause les paradigmes raciaux et patriarcaux dominants. En replaçant Tubman dans la continuité de la résistance politique des femmes noires, cette recherche la repositionne comme une figure proto-féministe noire dont le pragmatisme éclaire encore les débats contemporains sur le leadership et la justice sociale.

Mots clés : Activisme, leadership, libération, chemin de fer, suffrage

Del ferrocarril subterráneo a las manifestaciones por el sufragio femenino: una valoración crítica del liderazgo de Harriet Tubman

Resumen

Harriet Tubman se erige como una de las líderes más influyentes de la historia de Estados Unidos. Su liderazgo no se sustentó en cargos oficiales, riqueza ni poder político, sino en el valor, la convicción moral y la acción. Aunque es principalmente conocida por su papel en el Ferrocarril Subterráneo (Underground Railroad), su liderazgo se extendió a la Guerra Civil y al movimiento por el sufragio femenino. Este artículo analiza críticamente el liderazgo de Harriet Tubman a partir de sus fundamentos morales, su dimensión estratégica y su impacto a largo plazo en la lucha abolicionista y en la defensa de los derechos de las mujeres. Basándose en la crítica histórica, la teoría feminista negra y los estudios sobre liderazgo, el estudio examina las estrategias de movilización de Tubman, su utilización de la comunicación clandestina y su compromiso ético con la liberación colectiva. Mediante un análisis textual cualitativo de fuentes narrativas primarias y de estudios académicos secundarios, este trabajo demuestra que el liderazgo de Tubman constituyó un modelo radical, encarnado y no institucional de activismo, que cuestionó los paradigmas patriarcales y raciales dominantes. Al situar a Tubman dentro del amplio continuum de la resistencia política de las mujeres negras, el estudio reinterpreta su papel como precursora del liderazgo feminista negro, cuya praxis continúa alimentando los debates contemporáneos sobre liderazgo, agencia y justicia social.

Palabras clave: Activismo, liderazgo, liberación, Ferrocarril Subterráneo, sufragio.

Introduction

Black women's activism has historically functioned as a critical engine of social transformation in the United States, even as it has remained largely excluded from dominant historiographical and political narratives. From the era of slavery through emancipation up to day, Black women have used several means of resistance that were simultaneously political, communal, and deeply embodied. Their leadership often operates outside formal institutions, relying instead on networks of care, spiritual authority, and strategic defiance. Harriet Tubman stands as one of the most compelling figures within this tradition, yet scholarly discourse has frequently reduced her significance to symbolic heroism rather than sustained political analysis.

This current research work highlights the complexity of Tubman's leadership and its broader implications for understanding Black women's activism. Far from approaching Tubman solely as a historical icon, this study examines her leadership as a deliberate and theoretically significant political practice shaped by the intersecting forces of race, gender, enslavement, and resistance. Tubman's actions range from her orchestration of escape networks to her participation in wartime military operations. This reflects a form of leadership grounded in collective liberation, moral accountability, and strategic risk.

The primary objective of this study is to critically appraise Harriet Tubman's leadership from the underground railroad to women suffrage rallies. By employing an interpretive methodological approach rooted in historical analysis and Black feminist theory, the article seeks to demonstrate that Tubman's leadership challenges dominant, masculinist, and hierarchical models of power. Instead, it advances an alternative paradigm centered on survival, solidarity, and transformative justice. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to re-center Black women as intellectual and political agents within American history.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Relevance of the Selected Works

The current research work is not the first study that deals with Harriet Tubman or to women activism and leadership in America. Many scholars have already conducted some research that

reveal not only the importance of women's activism but also the role of Harriet's leadership from the railroad up to women emancipation. This part of the current study summarizes the outcomes of the previous research work, establishing the link between each article and present study. The literature review establishes that existing scholarship, while extensive, often fragments the analysis of Tubman's life across historical narration, feminist critique, or abolitionist discourse without fully theorizing leadership as a central analytical category. By engaging critically with twenty major scholarly works, this study identified significant gaps, particularly the tendency to privilege collective movements over individual leadership praxis or to historicize Tubman without extracting the theoretical implications of her actions. Addressing these gaps, the study mobilized Black feminist theory, intersectionality, subaltern leadership theory, and phonological analysis to construct a multidimensional interpretive framework. The study of Black women's activism in the United States has generated a substantial body of interdisciplinary scholarship spanning history, Black feminist theory, leadership studies, and cultural criticism. In order to MAKE a critical appraisal of Harriet Tubman's leadership, this research draws on twenty major scholarly works whose relevance lies in their theoretical depth, historical rigor, and interpretive contribution to the understanding of Black women's resistance.

First, Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985) provides a foundational historical analysis of enslaved Black women's agency, challenging narratives of passivity. Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race, & Class* (1983) extends this analysis by situating Black women's activism at the intersection of racial capitalism and patriarchy. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) offers an epistemological framework that legitimizes Black women's lived experience as theory. That is not all; Kimberlé's work gives more clarification.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal article "Mapping the Margins" (1991) introduces intersectionality, a crucial analytical tool for understanding Tubman's positionality. bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) further interrogates the ideological construction of Black womanhood under slavery and its implications for resistance.

Jean M. Humez's *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (2003) compiles oral histories and narratives essential for analyzing Tubman's leadership through phonological and oral traditions.

Kate Clifford Larson's *Bound for the Promised Land* (2004) provides a rigorously documented biography that anchors Tubman's actions in historical evidence.

Eric Foner's *Gateway to Freedom* (2015) situates Tubman within the broader abolitionist movement, while Nell Irvin Painter's *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (1996) offers comparative insight into Black women's activist leadership. Stephanie Camp's *Closer to Freedom* (2004) conceptualizes resistance as spatial and embodied, a perspective relevant to Tubman's mobility-based activism.

James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) contributes a theoretical framework for covert resistance and hidden transcripts. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) deepens the analysis of violence, agency, and subjectivity under slavery. Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture* (1987) foregrounds spirituals and oral culture as sites of political meaning.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's *If It Wasn't for the Women* (2001) highlights Black women's leadership traditions within community structures. Darlene Clark Hine's concept of a "culture of dissemblance" (1989) illuminates survival strategies that resonate with Tubman's secrecy. Elsa Barkley Brown's work on Black women's political culture further contextualizes grassroots leadership.

Finally, autobiographical and narrative sources like Sarah Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869), Frederick Douglass's writings on Tubman, and contemporary leadership studies by Barbara Ransby (*Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 2003) collectively reinforce the significance of non-hierarchical, community-centered leadership.

Together, these twenty works provide the historical, theoretical, and methodological foundation necessary to examine Harriet Tubman's leadership as a central expression of Black women's activism.

1.2 Critical Appreciation of the Selected Works

Although the selected works collectively enrich the scholarly understanding of Black women's activism, a critical appraisal reveals significant theoretical and methodological gaps that this study seeks to address.

White's Ar'n't I a Woman? powerfully establishes Black women's agency but does not explicitly theorize leadership as a political practice. Similarly, Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* offers a sweeping structural critique, yet its macro-level focus limits sustained engagement with individual leadership strategies like Tubman's.

Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* provides a robust epistemological framework; however, it remains largely sociological and only indirectly addresses historical leadership figures. Crenshaw's intersectionality clarifies structural oppression but requires historical grounding to fully explain leadership praxis under slavery. hooks's ideological critique foregrounds representation and domination but offers limited empirical engagement with abolitionist leadership.

Humez's compilation of Tubman's narratives privileges voice and authenticity, yet its editorial neutrality restricts theoretical interpretation. Larson's biography corrects romanticized myths but remains primarily descriptive, leaving leadership theory underdeveloped. Foner's abolitionist historiography situates Tubman within a movement but risks subsuming her leadership under male-dominated narratives.

Painter's comparative biography illuminates symbolic leadership but emphasizes rhetorical activism more than covert resistance. Camp's spatial theory of resistance is innovative, yet it does not explicitly address leadership authority. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts is invaluable, but its abstraction requires contextual adaptation to enslaved women's realities.

Hartman's critical framework exposes domination but often problematizes agency, creating tension when applied to Tubman's decisive leadership. Stuckey's cultural analysis foregrounds spirituals, yet it does not connect cultural expression to leadership decision-making.

Gilkes and Hine provide crucial insights into Black women's survival strategies; however, their analyses focus more on collective patterns than on individual leadership dynamics. Brown's political historiography enriches community analysis but leaves leadership ethics unexplored.

Early narratives by Bradford and Douglass, while indispensable, are shaped by abolitionist agendas that contribute to Tubman's mythologization. Ransby's work on Ella Baker offers a valuable leadership model, yet its twentieth-century context necessitates careful historical transposition. As

Scott observes: “*Subordinate groups create hidden transcripts as a means of resistance that escapes direct domination*” (J.C. Scott, 1990, p. 4).

While this insight is illuminating, it requires feminist and historical refinement to fully capture Tubman’s leadership under slavery. Consequently, the present study synthesizes these works while moving beyond their limitations by explicitly theorizing Harriet Tubman’s leadership as a radical, gendered, and ethically grounded practice of Black women’s activism.

2. Harriet tubman's leadership

2.1 Historical Context

Harriet Tubman’s leadership emerged within the violent structural realities of nineteenth-century American slavery, a system designed not only to extract labor but to annihilate political subjectivity among enslaved populations. For enslaved Black women in particular, slavery imposed a triple burden of racial subjugation, gendered exploitation, and economic dispossession. Leadership under such conditions did not conform to conventional definitions rooted in institutional authority or public visibility. Instead, it developed as an adaptive and covert practice oriented toward survival, resistance, and communal preservation.

Tubman’s early life experiences include repeated acts of physical brutality and the traumatic head injury she sustained as a child. All these have played a formative role in shaping her political consciousness. These experiences produced what Black feminist scholars describe as embodied knowledge, whereby pain and survival become sources of strategic insight. As Saidiya Hartman observes, “*the enslaved lived under conditions where terror was routine, not exceptional*” (S. Hartman, 1997, p.52). Tubman’s leadership must therefore be understood as a response to normalized violence rather than extraordinary circumstance.

Her escape from slavery in 1849 marked a decisive transition from individual resistance to collective political responsibility. Tubman’s refusal to remain free while others remained enslaved reflects a moral and ideological shift that redefines leadership as obligation rather than privilege. In this sense, her leadership formation was inseparable from ethical consciousness.

2.2 Characteristics of Harriet's Leadership

One of the defining characteristics of Harriet Tubman's leadership lies in its embodied nature:

Unlike leaders whose authority is conferred by education, wealth, or institutional affiliation, Tubman's authority derived from lived experience, resilience, and proven competence under extreme conditions. This form of authority resonates with Patricia Hill Collins's articulation of Black feminist epistemology, which recognizes experience as a legitimate site of knowledge production (P. Collins, 2000, p. 252).

Tubman's leadership was validated through action. Each successful rescue mission reinforced her credibility and strengthened communal trust. This experiential authority created a leadership model rooted in performance and accountability rather than rhetoric. As Deborah Gray White notes, enslaved women often exercised leadership through "*acts of courage that ensured collective survival*" (D.G. White, p.71).

This embodied leadership also complicates Eurocentric leadership theories that privilege abstraction over praxis. Tubman's leadership was not theorized in writing, yet it constituted a sophisticated political practice informed by risk assessment, emotional intelligence, and ethical clarity.

Moreover, Harriet Tubman's leadership was fundamentally collective in orientation. She rejected individualistic notions of freedom and instead conceptualized liberation as a shared condition. This collectivist ethic manifested in her repeated return to slaveholding territories to rescue others, despite immense personal danger. Her oft-cited declaration: "*I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger*" (S. Bradford, 1869, p.49). This extract functions as both a factual claim and an ethical statement. It articulates a leadership philosophy grounded in responsibility, discipline, and unwavering commitment to communal welfare.

Barbara Ransby's scholarship on Black women's leadership emphasizes that such leadership "*privileged accountability to the group over individual authority*" (B. Ransby, 2003, p. 6). Tubman's leadership exemplifies this paradigm, challenging neoliberal and masculinist conceptions of leadership that equate success with personal achievement.

Therefore, Tubman's leadership radically destabilized nineteenth-century gender norms. In a socio-political context that denied women and especially Black women, she shows how a strategic

battle combined to self-determination can help to achieve one's dream. Tubman exercised command, enforced discipline, and made life-or-death decisions. She carried weapons, navigated hostile terrain, and negotiated with male abolitionists and military officials on her own terms.

Bell hooks argues that Black women's resistance historically required "the refusal of imposed femininity" (B. hooks, 1981, p. 91). Tubman's leadership embodies this refusal, demonstrating that power need not conform to gendered expectations. Yet her leadership did not reject care or compassion; instead, it has integrated decisiveness with emotional and communal sensitivity. This synthesis of strength and care challenges binary constructions of leadership and underscores the gendered specificity of Black women's political praxis.

In her fight for liberty spirituality constituted a central epistemological and motivational resource in Harriet Tubman's leadership. Tubman frequently attributed her decisions to divine guidance, interpreting dreams and visions as strategic instructions. While Enlightenment historiography has often dismissed such accounts, Black feminist and Africana scholarship recognize spirituality as a legitimate mode of knowing within oppressed communities.

Sterling Stuckey contends that African American spiritual traditions functioned as "repositories of collective memory and resistance" (S. Stuckey, p. 44). Tubman's leadership drew legitimacy from this spiritual framework, enabling her to inspire trust and obedience among those she led. A long narrative citation illustrates this dynamic: "*She trusted the voice she believed came from God, and those who followed her trusted that voice too, because it always led them away from danger and toward freedom*". (J. Humez, 2003, p. 133).

The above extract reveals the role played by spirituality in her daily struggles. From this passage, it clearly appears that Spiritual belief has reinforced Tubman's moral authority and enhanced her decisiveness under uncertainty. A crucial yet frequently misunderstood dimension of Harriet Tubman's activism lies in her spiritual worldview. Tubman's reliance on visions, divine communication, and religious faith has been dismissed as superstition or psychological coping. However, a closer examination reveals that spirituality functioned as a political resource rather than a retreat from material struggle. Her spiritual consciousness provided a framework through which resistance became not only possible but also morally imperative.

Faith enabled Tubman to interpret her mission as divinely sanctioned, thereby reinforcing her resolve in moments of extreme danger. This spiritual grounding strengthened her psychological resilience and allowed her to sustain long-term resistance despite trauma and uncertainty. Importantly, Tubman's spirituality did not promote passivity; instead, it legitimized direct action against slavery. Within the tradition of Black women's activism, spirituality often operates as a source of epistemic authority, offering alternative ways of knowing and acting that challenge dominant rationalist frameworks.

2.3 Strategic Intelligence, Secrecy, and Phonological Leadership

Tubman's leadership was marked by exceptional strategic intelligence. She demonstrated acute awareness of surveillance, geography, and human behavior. Her leadership relied heavily on secrecy, adaptability, and deception. The different strategies used by Harriet align with James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts and everyday resistance (J.C. Scott, 1990, p. 4).

Central to Tubman's strategy was phonological leadership: the use of oral communication, coded songs, and non-verbal signals to transmit information without detection. Spirituals such as coded hymns functioned as communicative tools that embedded political meaning within religious expression. As Scott explains:

Subordinate groups disguise resistance in cultural forms that appear innocuous to those in power. Tubman's mastery of such strategies underscores her political sophistication and situates her leadership within a broader tradition of subaltern resistance. (J.C. Scott, 1990, p. 19)

Harriet Tubman's leadership expanded beyond clandestine activism into formal political and military contexts during the American Civil War. Her role as a scout, nurse, and spy for the Union Army culminated in the Combahee River Raid, an unprecedented military operation led by a Black woman.

Despite the strategic success of this mission, Tubman was denied recognition and compensation, highlighting the structural marginalization of Black women's leadership within State Institutions. Eric Foner notes that Tubman's contributions "exposed the contradictions of a nation fighting for freedom while denying it to those who secured it" (E. Foner, 2015, p.214). This institutional

exclusion underscores the racialized and gendered limits of formal recognition, even in moments of national crisis.

A comprehensive analysis of Tubman's leadership must also confront its ethical tensions. Reports that Tubman threatened escapees who wished to turn back raise questions about coercion and moral authority. However, these actions must be interpreted within the context of extreme danger and collective vulnerability.

Saidiya Hartman warns against moralizing resistance without acknowledging the constraints imposed by violence (S. Hartman, 1997, 78). Tubman's leadership involved tragic choices shaped by structural terror. Recognizing these tensions does not diminish her leadership; rather, it reveals its complexity and realism. Tubman's leadership has been shaped by constant exposure to risk, requiring strategies of secrecy and discipline that diverge sharply from mainstream leadership ethics. In oppressive contexts where visibility invites violence, leadership must operate through concealment. Tubman's insistence on silence, coded communication, and strict adherence to collective rules was not an expression of authoritarianism but an ethical commitment to collective survival.

Her willingness to enforce discipline even under extreme moral pressure reveals a leadership ethic grounded in responsibility rather than popularity. Tubman understood that hesitation or betrayal could result in capture, torture, or death for entire groups. This reality complicates liberal ethical frameworks that privilege transparency and individual autonomy. Tubman's leadership suggests that under systems of terror, ethical action may require secrecy, deception, and uncompromising decision-making. Leadership, in this context, becomes a practice of protection rather than persuasion.

3. Harriet Tubman's Activism from the Underground Railroad to women suffrage rallies

3.1 Strategic Leadership in the Underground Railroad and Civil War Leadership and Political Agency

Among female American leaders, Harriet Tubman's determination remains anchored in people's heart. Her effort from the underground railroad to women suffrage rallies is not ignorable.

Tubman's work with the Underground Railroad demonstrates her strategic intelligence. She organized escape routes, selected safe houses, and traveled mostly at night to avoid capture. She also carried a firearm, not to threaten enslavers, but to prevent fear from causing anyone to turn back and endanger the group. This shows her ability to make difficult decisions for collective safety.

Her success was not accidental. Tubman studied patterns, learned geography, and adjusted her methods when laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act made escapes more dangerous. Her claim that she never lost a passenger reflects her discipline and accountability. She did not see herself as a hero but as a guide responsible for the lives of others.

Tubman's leadership expanded during the American Civil War. She worked for the Union Army as a nurse, scout, and spy. Most notably, she helped plan and lead the Combahee River Raid in 1863. This military operation freed more than 700 enslaved people in South Carolina. Tubman became the first woman to lead an armed military expedition in U.S. history.

This event challenges traditional views of leadership and gender roles. Tubman operated in spaces denied to both women and African Americans. Her leadership during the war shows her ability to work within political systems while still challenging them. It also proves that her leadership was not limited to secrecy and escape but extended to organized resistance and warfare.

Unlike dominant heroic narratives that center leadership on individual achievement, Tubman's activism was fundamentally collective in orientation. She consistently rejected opportunities for personal safety if they threatened the well-being of others. Her understanding of freedom was relational: liberation was meaningful only when shared. This commitment to collective survival reflects a broader Black feminist ethic that prioritizes care, mutual dependence, and communal responsibility over individual advancement.

Tubman's refusal to abandon the vulnerable redefines leadership as a moral obligation rather than a personal aspiration. Her activism exposes the limitations of individualistic leadership models that celebrate singular success while ignoring structural inequalities. By centering the needs of the most vulnerable, Tubman articulated a politics of responsibility that directly confronts the logic of disposability embedded in slavery and, by extension, in modern systems of racial and gendered oppression.

Harriet Tubman's leadership cannot be adequately understood through conventional leadership models that emphasize formal authority, institutional legitimacy, or public recognition. Instead, her activism exemplifies what may be described as embodied resistance. Tubman's body scarred by enslavement, physical violence, and chronic illness. It became a living archive of oppression and survival. Rather than limiting her capacity to lead, these embodied experiences constituted the very foundation of her authority. Leadership, in this sense, emerged not from position but from endurance, courage, and moral clarity forged through suffering.

This form of leadership was enacted through movement across hostile spaces, physical labor, and direct confrontation with danger. Tubman's repeated journeys into slave-holding territories transformed her body into an instrument of political resistance. Such leadership challenges dominant Western paradigms that separate intellect from physicality and privilege abstract decision-making over lived experience. Tubman's activism demonstrates that, for Black women in contexts of extreme oppression, leadership often arises through bodily risk and presence rather than institutional voice.

3.2 Harriet and Women Suffrage Rallies

Harriet Tubman's leadership occupies a foundational position in the historical lineage of Black women's activism. However, her influence should not be understood as simple imitation by later figures, but rather as the establishment of leadership principles that were later adapted to new political contexts.

Tubman's emphasis on collective liberation, moral accountability, and decentralized authority reappears in the leadership philosophies of Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching campaigns, Ella Baker's grassroots organizing, and Fannie Lou Hamer's voter mobilization efforts. What unites these leaders is not ideology alone, but a shared rejection of charismatic, top-down leadership models.

Barbara Ransby argues that Black women's leadership traditions are characterized by "movement-centered rather than leader-centered politics" (B. Ransby, 2003, p.10). Tubman's leadership prefigures this model by demonstrating that effective leadership can operate without formal recognition, visibility, or institutional legitimacy. In this sense, Tubman's legacy lies less in symbolic heroism than in the normalization of collective leadership practices.

The relevance of Harriet Tubman's leadership becomes particularly evident when examined in relation to contemporary social justice movements. Modern activist frameworks that emphasize horizontal organization, mutual aid, and collective decision-making echo principles that Tubman practiced under radically different historical conditions. Movements such as Black Lives Matter explicitly draw on Black feminist leadership traditions that reject centralized authority and instead prioritize relational power. Tubman's leadership anticipated this approach by valuing trust, shared risk, and moral responsibility over formal command.

Furthermore, Tubman's insistence on aligning ethical conviction with political action offers a critical lesson for contemporary movements navigating institutional co-optation. Her refusal to compromise liberation for personal safety challenges modern activists to confront the ethical limits of pragmatism.

Meanwhile, the public memory of Harriet Tubman reveals how radical leadership can be neutralized through selective commemoration. Popular narratives often portray Tubman as a compassionate rescuer while minimizing her militancy, armed resistance, and political radicalism. This selective memory transforms a revolutionary leader into a benign moral figure.

Saidiya Hartman warns that commemoration can function as a form of containment, "*preserving the figure while evacuating the politics*" (S. Hartman, 1997, p. 14). When Tubman's leadership is detached from its radical context, its capacity to challenge contemporary power structures is diminished. Scholarly re-engagement with Tubman's leadership therefore serves a corrective function, restoring the disruptive and politically instructive dimensions of her activism.

Ultimately, Harriet Tubman's leadership endures not as a fixed historical model but as an ethical and political framework adaptable to changing contexts. Its core principles, collective liberation, moral accountability, strategic intelligence, and relational power remain relevant across time.

Her leadership invites a rethinking of power as service, of courage as responsibility, and of freedom as a collective condition rather than an individual achievement. In this sense, Tubman's legacy transcends history to function as a living resource for political imagination.

3.3 Critical Limits and Contextual Specificity

While Harriet Tubman's leadership remains deeply instructive, it is essential to recognize its historical specificity. Tubman operated under conditions of absolute domination, where secrecy, coercion, and extreme risk were unavoidable. Certain aspects of her leadership like enforced discipline during escape missions cannot be uncritically transposed to democratic contexts.

Moreover, the elevation of Tubman as an exceptional individual risk overshadowing the collective networks that sustained her work. Black feminist scholarship cautions against heroic individualism, emphasizing instead the relational and communal foundations of leadership. Acknowledging these limits does not weaken Tubman's legacy; rather, it strengthens it by situating her leadership within real historical constraints rather than mythic abstraction.

Conclusion

This study sets out to critically examine Black women's activism in the United States through a focused- appraisal of Harriet Tubman's leadership. Moving beyond celebratory and mythic representations, the research has demonstrated that Tubman's leadership constitutes a complex, strategic, and theoretically significant form of political praxis shaped by the intersecting forces of race, gender, enslavement, and resistance. By situating her activism within historical, theoretical, and methodological frameworks, the study has re-centered Harriet Tubman as a foundational architect of Black women's leadership rather than a peripheral heroic figure.

The literature review established that existing scholarship, while extensive, often fragments the analysis of Tubman's life across historical narration, feminist critique, or abolitionist discourse without fully theorizing leadership as a central analytical category. By engaging critically with twenty major scholarly works, this study identified significant gaps, particularly the tendency to privilege collective movements over individual leadership praxis or to historicize Tubman without extracting the theoretical implications of her actions. Addressing these gaps, the study mobilized Black feminist theory, intersectionality, subaltern leadership theory, and phonological analysis to construct a multidimensional interpretive framework.

The leadership analysis revealed that Harriet Tubman's authority was neither institutional nor hierarchical but embodied, relational, and ethically grounded. Her leadership emerged from lived experience and was sustained through collective trust, moral accountability, and strategic intelligence. Tubman's ability to integrate gender transgression, spirituality, secrecy, and disciplined action challenges dominant Western paradigms of leadership that prioritize visibility, masculinity, and formal power. Instead, her praxis advances an alternative model in which leadership is defined by responsibility to others, willingness to assume risk, and commitment to collective liberation.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that Tubman's leadership cannot be confined to the abolitionist era. Her influence extends genealogically into later traditions of Black women's activism and remains deeply relevant to contemporary social justice movements. By foregrounding decentralized leadership, ethical coherence, and grassroots mobilization, Tubman's legacy informs modern activist frameworks that resist authoritarianism and institutional co-optation. At the same time, the study critically acknowledged the historical specificity and ethical tensions of her leadership, resisting romanticization while affirming its enduring significance.

Ultimately, this research argues that Harriet Tubman should be understood not only as a historical liberator but as a theorist of freedom in practice. Her leadership exemplifies how marginalized subjects generate political knowledge through struggle, transforming oppression into sites of strategic and ethical innovation. By centering Black women's activism as a primary force in American political history, this study contributes to broader scholarly efforts to decolonize leadership studies, reconfigure feminist theory, and expand the boundaries of political thought.

In short, Harriet Tubman's leadership stands as a powerful reminder that transformative leadership often emerges from the margins, operates beyond institutional recognition, and endures through its capacity to imagine and enact freedom collectively. Her legacy challenges scholars and activists alike to rethink power, resistance, and justice through the lived-experiences and intellectual contributions of Black women.

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