

Notes from the Underground

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The Historical Underground

The Underground Railroad

By: Raegan Peck, Dual Credit Student

At the end of the 18th century, enslaved African-Americans began running for freedom to northern states that had recently abolished slavery. The loose network of individuals that sheltered and helped these slaves escape from slavery came to be known as the Underground Railroad. This system rescued tens of thousands and provided optimism for a better tomorrow.

The Ohio River was at the center of the Underground Railroad. Many joined the Railroad because they believed slavery was against Christianity. Some even thought it contradicted what America stood for: freedom. Abolition was also catching on in the North, as every state was legally a free state by the early 1800s, and these ideas were spreading to the West. Participating in the Underground Railroad was dangerous. Every act of assistance was illegal under the Fugitive Slave Acts, and owners often used every means at their disposal to recapture their slaves.

The Underground Railroad officially got its name in 1831, several decades after the system began working. The name symbolized the secret

escorting of slaves across several different roads, rivers, railroads, etc. to get to their goal destination. Most were heading north in general, sometimes all the way into Canada. Other less common destinations included the West, Mexico, the Caribbean, or even some southern cities such as Atlanta, Charleston and Richmond where free black communities already existed, and slaves might be able to blend in. The system was largely organized by African-Americans, who raised money and awareness of the system.

The most common form of transportation along the Underground Railroad was walking. Other forms included train, boat, horseback and wagon. No matter how they traveled though they were always disguised, hidden, or moved under the cover of the night. "Conductors" would help guide runaways, and sympathizers would hide them and allow them to take shelter in their barns, attics, secret rooms, or even underneath their floor boards. Perhaps the most well-known conductor was Harriet Tubman, who escaped a brutal owner on her own and then committed herself to helping others gain their freedom. She eventually guided 300 others to freedom. In the three decades before the Civil War, the Underground Railroad was at its height, and historians estimate that between 1810 and 1850, around 100,000 slaves were guided to freedom by the system. Most of these slaves who escaped were younger men as they had the endurance for a long and dangerous trek. All genders and ages of slaves escaped though. Many could not escape because they were so brutally beaten by their owners that they had no strength left; others simply could not survive as fugitives and had to return to their plantations to face certain punishment.

Tips on the safest ways to travel were passed by mouth among the African-American community. Even though the winters were harsh it was the best time to travel since it had long nights. Furthermore, the Ohio River would also freeze over, making passage easier. The slaves used the Ohio River not only as a guide, but also to help disguise their scent from search dogs. Since some slaves would get a little time off during the Christmas season, many used that opportunity to escape. The only consequence of the winter was the bitter cold, for sometimes they would spend weeks before arriving at their next station. Some

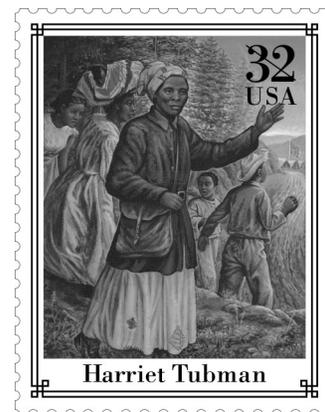
came close or actually did freeze to death. Other tips regarding the North Star, or that the mossy side of a tree faced North, were passed on to help guide slaves. Tips such as these were vital because of slaves' lack of knowledge of northern lands. Gathering knowledge like this did not always happen because some escapes were spontaneous. Without enough knowledge and money, their trek was made much more difficult. Not all slaves survived the escape, as some became sick or were injured along the way and died. Others were caught by slave catchers. The consequences of being caught were severe.

As the Era of the Common Man (1824-1845) unfolded in the North, racism did not disappear. The northern working class began amassing political rights, which gave them a false sense of superiority because African-Americans *could not* vote in most northern states. Therefore, even when the Africans arrived in the North, they were not completely free, but rather living in a state of semi-freedom. Many workingmen would defend the institution of slavery even though it did not directly affect them to make sure their class wasn't at the bottom of society.

Amidst legal barriers and continuing racism, African-Americans persisted in their quest for freedom and rights. The Underground Railroad truly symbolized unity and democracy because the movement did not just have one radical leader but many individuals working together towards a common goal. Blacks and whites united together to destroy this brutal institution.

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N - word Usage and “Django Unchained”

By: Bradley J Bourougerdi, Faculty

For many reasons, “Django Unchained” is a controversial movie. It’s violent, gruesome, shockingly cruel and historically inaccurate. Much of it is fictional, such as Mandingo fighting in the Deep South and victorious triumphs of oppressed slaves against a ruthless Slavocracy. Then there is the amalgamation of reality and fiction, which is embedded in the character of the traveling German, who is highly cultured and has mastered the West the way Karl May’s character had done in the most popular and influential western novel of all time, *Winnetou*. Most importantly for our society, though, is Tarantino’s depiction of N-word usage throughout the film, for it is both historically accurate and culturally misleading.

Let me elaborate on this last point. There is no question that, despite the pronunciation of the word, its meaning throughout the film is clearly understood to be that of the most vicious racial slur in the English language. Sometimes it is pronounced with an “a” at the end, and other times it has an “er,” but the meaning is always the same. Even when Django refers to himself, or Samuel Jackson’s character Stephen uses it to refer to other slaves and himself, the meaning is one of inferiority, self-hate and denigration. In fact, this portrayal is purely accurate. Many slaves during

the time period in which the film takes place had internalized white racism, and referring to each other in this way was a reflection of the psychological impact that slavery left on them. In other words, pronunciation of the word did not change its meaning, as was the case throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century. However, we should be very careful not to apply such a meaning to its use today, for it has evolved to mean something entirely different to the people who use it now.

For reasons I hope to expound upon further in our panel discussion on February 25, we have a massive confusion in communication pervading our society today regarding the use of this word. In fact, it is no longer factually accurate to speak of one word, for the “a” version now means something entirely different than a racial slur. Instead, it has become a multiracial communicative phenomenon with an entirely different meaning that is highly sensitive to tone and context when it is used. This assertion is very difficult for many people to accept; and rightly so, given the amount of hate that so many people grew up with surrounding the use of both of these words. However, those who claim that only black people can use the word n***a in our society, or

that those who do use this word today have internalized white racism and are full of self-hate, fail to accurately understand its use and meaning.

Language systems are very complicated, and often times words and concepts shift meaning and defy boundaries. The phrase “rule of thumb” used to mean that objects no thicker than the width of a husband’s thumb were fair game for beating his wife, but it means something entirely different today. There are many examples of this in all languages, and at some point this word was appropriated and transformed by certain subcultures within black communities throughout America. Now, it transcends racial boundaries and empowers its users. Still, though there is much good to be said about the transformation this word is going through today for its potential to defang the racial slur, those who do use it should respect the fact that many people out there think of “Django Unchained” when they hear it, and therefore will judge you accordingly. And for those of you who didn’t grow up being exposed to its use, it’s best not to even try, for it is not a casual word that can be thrown around loosely and requires a certain cultural feel that really only comes from the lived experience of growing up a certain way.

Club 64 Presents Chess

By: Luisa Vasquez & Ian Ussery, Students

“Sir, Playing at Chess, is the most ancient and the most universal game known among men; for its original is beyond the memory of history, and it has, for numberless ages, been the amusement of all the civilized nations of Asia, the Persians, the Indians, and the Chinese. Europe has had it above 1,000 years; the Spaniards have spread it over their part of America, and it begins lately to make its appearance in these northern states.

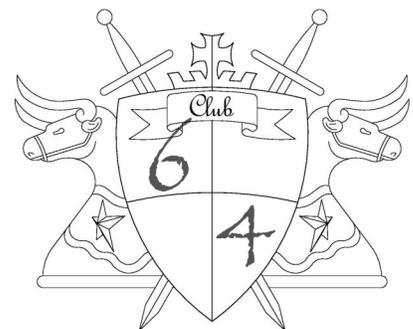
“The Game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement; several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired and strengthened by it, so as to become habits ready on all occasions; for life is a kind of Chess, in which we have often points to gain, and competitors or adversaries to contend with, and in which there is a vast variety of good and ill events, that are, to some degree, the effect of prudence, or the want of it. By playing at Chess, then, we may learn: I. **Foresight**, which looks a little into futurity, and considers the consequences that may attend an action [...] II. **Circumspection**, which surveys the whole Chess-board, or scene of action: – the relation of the several Pieces, and their situations [...] III. **Caution**, not to make our moves too hastily [...]. Lastly, we learn by chess the habit of **not being discouraged by present bad appearances in the state of our affairs, the habit of hoping for a favorable change, and that of persevering in the search of resources**. The game is so full of events, there is

such a variety of turns in it, the fortune of it is so subject to sudden vicissitudes, and one so frequently, after long contemplation, discovers the means of extricating one’s self from a supposed insurmountable difficulty, that one is encouraged to continue the contest to the last, in hopes of victory by our own skill, or, at least, of giving a *stale mate*, by the negligence of our adversary.” ~ Benjamin Franklin, in his article “The Morals of Chess” (1750)

During the Age of Enlightenment, chess was viewed as a means of self-improvement. But today chess is often cited by psychologists as an effective way to improve memory function. Also since chess allows the mind to solve complex problems and work through ideas, it is no wonder it is recommended in the fight against Alzheimer’s. Some contend that it can increase one’s intelligence, though that is a more complex and contentious topic. Performance in chess relies substantially on one’s amount of experience playing the game, and the role of experience may overwhelm the role of intelligence. With these or similar hopes, chess is taught to children in schools around the world today, including all around the United States. Many schools host chess clubs, and there are tournaments where scholarships and cash prizes are awarded. International and professional tournaments are also held regularly in across the world.

Chess has a presence in our popular culture as well.

For example, chess plays a key role in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter plays “Wizard’s Chess,” while the characters of Star Trek (and the cast of “The Big Bang Theory”) prefer “Tri-Dimensional Chess.” The hero in the film “Searching for Bobby Fischer” struggles against adopting the aggressive and misanthropic personality traits of a real chess grandmaster. For more information about Club 64, please contact club advisor Eric Salas at eric.salas@my.tccd.edu.



Club 64 meets Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. in ESEE 1106. Members have participated in regional tournaments.

Integrated Outside/Segregated Inside: Thoughts on “Django Unchained”

By: Eric Salas, Faculty

I am sitting in the theater waiting for the movie to start. There are two empty seats to my right, separating me and a bearded semi-burly white man. Eventually, two older black women occupied these seats. The woman to my immediate right asked me, “Are you ready for this movie? I heard it’s something else!” I responded, “Yeah, but that’s typical of a Tarantino flick.” She then retorts, “I’m not sure about the guy to the right of me (bearded semi-burly white guy) ... I’m gonna have to keep my eye on him ... but you’re okay ... shoot, you’re the majority now (referring to the recent census data on the Hispanic population).” I laughed and said, “We’ll see, let me know.” We were there to see “Django Unchained,” a movie prefaced with controversy not because it was a film about slavery but rather how the topic of slavery was handled (over the top spaghetti-western style), the fact that the director was a white man, and the nonchalant use of the N-word throughout the film. Although it is controversial, “Django Unchained” is important because it brings up a dialogue that is not usually brought up in public. This dialogue I am speaking of is not about race but rather how we truly discuss race and racial matters in private and public arenas. Though this discussion might happen frequently, it is somewhat segregated because it usually only happens around people we feel comfortable with in the confines of our private spaces.

Despite our so-called integrated society, our dialogue is still somewhat segregated. As a Hispanic, other Hispanics might look at me and say, “He’s not a real Hispanic.” I often get

mistaken as white, and when I’m around other whites who’ve mistaken my ethnicity, they seem to have no reservations about using the N-word casually. However, the moment they perceive a person of “color” entering the arena, the word disappears from their tongue.

With this observation in mind, I often gazed over the ethnically diverse audience in the movie theater to see their reactions to the use of the N-word by white and black (both freed and enslaved) characters in “Django”. Interestingly, when the word was used by any black character, the audience received it in silence or with some laughter. However, when the word was used by white characters, it was generally received by an explosion of laughter. In essence, it seemed funnier to more people when used by Leonardo DiCaprio and Don Johnson as opposed to Jamie Foxx or Samuel L. Jackson. Then the thought occurred to me: maybe race did not dictate whether or not the use of the N-word garnered the most laughter, but instead the situation in which the word was used played the most important role. This would suggest that the power of the word lies not with the user but rather the situation in which it is being used. Whereas older generations might have experienced social segregation in a black and white world—where “this means this,” and “that means that”—today’s generation lives in a world of grey (not 50 shades), where though we might physically be integrated, there seems to be some social segregation around who has the right to say, do, and be this or that.

Getting back to my “Django” experience in the theater, I was surprised to see how comfortable those two black women felt expressing themselves to me as a Hispanic, because it reminded me of how some white people have expressed themselves to me when they thought I was white. We all have thoughts that we reserve for certain people because we are afraid of being real and telling people how we feel. We seem locked up in an internal prison with words we’ve never publically said because of some private fear in me of you. Now, what does all this have to do with “Django Unchained”? The public expression of a historically sensitive issue that has typically been reserved for private areas is now stirring the pot to bring about some feelings that still seem raw and unresolved—only because we’ve preferred to ignore the difficulty of being honest for the sake of political correctness. With “Django Unchained”, we are forced to do as Malcolm X suggested when he said that “the only way the problem can be solved [is that] the white man and the black man have to be able to sit down at the same table.

The white man has to feel free to speak his mind without hurting the feelings of the negro. And the so-called negro has to feel free to speak his mind without hurting the feelings of that white man. Then they can bring the issues that are under the rug out on top of the table and take an intelligent approach to get our problems solved.” Honest conversations will bring about honest relationships. Honest relationships will bring about honest action to problems we all face. The first step, though, is to be honest with ourselves.

Melvin B. Tolson:

Forgotten Radical of the Southwest

By John R. Lundberg, Faculty

On March 29, 1965, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson made his way up the winding staircase of the White House, singing to himself “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” Already suffering from cancer at the age of 65, Tolson had come to the White House to present a book of his latest poetry, *Harlem Gallery*, to President Lyndon Johnson, and later to place a signed copy in the Library of Congress. For Melvin B. Tolson, it was a fitting honor for a life dedicated to poetry, education and shaping the minds of the next generation.

Born in Moberly, Missouri, on February 6, 1900, Melvin Tolson grew into a household where intellectualism resided side-by-side with religion. He came from a long line of Methodist preachers, and this influence perhaps more than anything else, shaped his worldview. Tolson believed firmly in the Social Gospel, and once wrote that “He [Jesus] was a radical, a Socialist if you will. His guns were turned on Big Business and religionists. He heralded the dawn of a new economic, social and political order. That is the challenge to all.” It seems that Tolson, in an effort to emulate his Savior, carried these values forward himself.

After receiving a B.A. with highest honors from Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania, in

June 1923, Tolson took a position as a professor of English at Wiley College, a small Methodist school in Marshall, Texas. James Farmer Jr., one of Tolson’s star students at Wiley, remembered that Tolson “stretched the mind of all of those whose minds would be stretched.” Tolson taught English, but in reality he instructed his students in all manner of subjects from his classroom and inspired them to greater heights of intellectualism and activism. In 1930 Tolson took a hiatus from teaching to travel to New York, where he became involved in the Harlem Renaissance, worked on an M.A. in English at Columbia University, and dabbled in writing for the Washington *Tribune*. After returning to Wiley, Tolson guided the debate team to victory over the National champion University of Southern California. Tolson’s Wiley team also happened to be the first African-American debate team in the country to compete against white schools.

In 1947 President V.S. Tubman of Liberia named Tolson the poet laureate of that country, and Tolson left Wiley to take a teaching job at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma. In addition to teaching and writing poetry, Tolson also helped to covertly organize sharecroppers in his spare time. He received numerous prestigious awards over the

years, including the annual award for poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1966, passing away of cancer later that year. His greatest contribution, however, remains the legacy of his students.

Tolson’s former students spearheaded the push for civil rights both in Texas and the nation. James Farmer Jr. founded CORE, Heman Sweatt became the plaintiff in the famous *Sweatt v. Painter* Supreme Court case that integrated The University of Texas in 1950 and Hobart Jarrett went on to become a professor in Greensboro, North Carolina, assisting with the first sit-ins in 1960. Tolson had other students who also went on to achieve great things, including Nathan Hare, who founded the first Black Studies program at San Francisco State College in 1968.

Tolson perhaps summed up his own career best when he wrote in *The Poet*:

A Champion of the People versus Kings—
His Only Martyrdom in Poetry;
A hater of the hierarchy of things—
Freedom’s need is his necessity.



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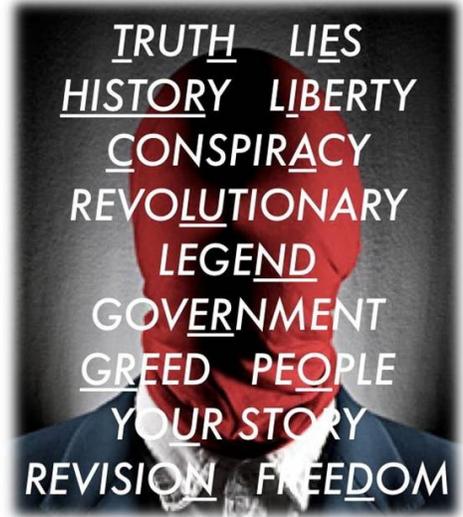
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Letter from the Editors

As part of our formal collaboration with the Dead Artists Society, future issues of *Notes from the Underground* will include art history-themed articles. We hope that these articles will enhance students' understanding of history and cultural trends. Just a reminder to students that relating information from class to class and discipline to discipline is an integral part of the learning process. Another crucial part of the learning process is reaching out, being open-minded, and trying to grow intellectually by attending academic events. There are a series of events relating to Black History Month this month so please keep an eye out for them. One, in particular, on Monday, February 25, from 1-2:30 p.m. in the North Ballroom, will hopefully provoke some serious thought and debate. Dr. William Dulaney from UT-Arlington will give a short lecture entitled, “The ‘N’ Word: The History of a Troublesome Word,” which will be followed by a panel discussion with a variety of TCC professors and a question-and-answer period from the crowd. There is also going to be an Africa art exhibit on February 28 in the North Ballroom that you should all go check out at some point. The following week on Monday, March 4, at 1-2:30 p.m. in the North Ballroom, for Women's History Month, Dr. Stephanie Cole from UT-Arlington will deliver a lecture titled “Problems With ‘The Help’: Race, Gender, and Capital in the Making of Domestic Service.”

In this issue we have dedicated several articles to investigating not only black history, but also to the most culturally significant film in a generation: “Django Unchained”. Films such as Quentin Tarantino's “Django”, whether they intend to or not, make statements about our past (as well as our present). The film has received praise for casting an African-American male lead actor as a heroic figure, but it has also been critiqued for playing into long-standing stereotypes of representing black men as either hyper-violent or submissive under the institution of slavery. Some have also noted that the female lead of Broomhilda was not a particularly empowering character, but one rife with sheer objectification, all of which made the character one-dimensional. Westerns (and spaghetti Westerns) have always promoted the notion of regenerative violence and “Django” certainly turns many of our racial assumptions upside down by granting that power to a black man, but that is about all this film accomplishes. In the wake of the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting, it is incumbent upon all of us to reflect on the meaning of violence and whether we want to continue to indulge in stories that revolve around revenge and violence. These are surely our baser instincts, and our culture has become completely saturated with violence. Even the normally prescient Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert mocked those who have pointed to violent films and video games as being a potential problem for our society, claiming that other societies also have these films and games. Fair enough, but the difference between other cultures and ours is the utter saturation and fetish with violence in every aspect of our popular culture: music, film (mainstream and pornographic), video games, television, and sport. Lastly, this is not to say that guns are not part of the problem, but we cannot as thinking citizens truly claim that the repetitive nature of the violent imagery we are bombarded with on a daily basis has no effect on us. People no longer doubt the connection between overly idealized images of the female body and eating disorders and the pervasive “normative obsession” women suffer from regarding their self-image; yet, we can not bring ourselves to admit that hyper-violent imagery might be exacerbating our issues with violence. The editors have different perspectives on “Django”, and while Eric and Bradley enjoyed the film as demonstrated by their articles, I (Greg) have yet to see it, and I am solely responsible for the above commentary. It is our hope that our thoughts will incite you to discuss this critically important film with your fellow students, your family, and your larger community. If you want to sound your voice on this issue, or any other, you should visit our Facebook page where we encourage responsible debate.

Thank you for taking the time to read *Notes*. If you are interested in joining our organization, we meet Fridays from 1-2 p.m. in ESEE 1224.

~ Bradley J. Borougerdi, Greg Kosc, & Eric Salas