

# Barry Jenkins: I Want To Unpack The Generational Trauma of Slavery

The 'Underground' director tells Momentum how his Amazon Prime series tells a different slavery story.

Barry Jenkins' 10-part adaptation of Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel [\*The Underground Railroad\*](#) had me drinking wine, burning candles, chanting psalms, and asking for guidance on ancestral wound healing. Jenkins won an Academy Award in 2017 for the film *Moonlight*. In his new Amazon Prime series, he explores the impact and violence of slavery on the human soul.

*Underground* takes us on the journey of protagonist Cora (Thuso Mbedu) and her escape from the brutality of chattel slavery using a literal underground railway line. Her harrowing story begins on a Georgia plantation and forces us to take a hard look at the dreadful social, cultural, and political impediments placed on Black people whether enslaved, runaway, or freeborn.

Jenkins talks to *MOMENTUM*'s Nadine Drummond about this groundbreaking series:

***MOMENTUM*: I watched all 10 episodes of the**

***Underground* series, and it made me want to have this deep drive and desire to connect. Was that your intention?**

**Jenkins:** When you make art, you do hope that it moves people to experience a range of emotions. I wanted to tell the story and honor my ancestors and create something that would inspire people to think and even maybe to act.



'Underground.' Image courtesy of Amazon Prime.

**You said that you didn't want to look at your ancestors with shame. You wanted to be able to look at them with pride and not horror. Of course there's a sense of pride because we survived and we were not meant to. But I'm still horrified.**

We can't change the fact of what happened. We can't change the facts of the past. When people talk about generational trauma, I understand it intellectually, but I also want to unpack it intellectually. I don't want someone to

believe that if you punch my great-great-great-grandfather in the face 200 years ago that I still feel the effect of that blow 200 years later. But it's more to the point that every generation, your descendants are repeatedly punching my descendants in the face. I can't change the horrors of what happened, not to distance myself from it, but we can recontextualize it. Yes, that thing was horrific, but look at all that's come after it. Look at what my ancestors endured and what they created. And so in that way, seeing these images doesn't horrify me. If anything, what's horrific to me about it is seeing very clearly the systematic choice to enact these punishments, the systematic choice to dehumanize my ancestors. That side of it is still horrific to me, but my ancestors and what they did with their agency doesn't horrify me at all.

**I felt like I needed an ancestral healing. I feel like you need to say sorry to me for causing me this pain.**

Did I cause it? Did I cause it? I will say these things are factual. They happened, and yet I think because of the way history is related to us and because of who controls the version of history that we receive, we have been allowed to not engage with these things. I didn't do these things; you know I did not. I created a work of art. I will say it's an elective process, and I have made it very clear that people can choose or not to engage with these images.

I don't want to get to the point where some person younger than me has something they want to say about our

ancestors but because they've seen me apologize for creating an art that honors our ancestors, they might be discouraged from doing so.

**What I really liked about this series, and a theme throughout your work, is that you show nuanced images of all kinds of Black love. It was beautiful, how we love and how we connect and how we care, not just across generations but across universes, across spiritual planes. It was such a spiritual film.**

Only one and a half of the 10 episodes take place on a plantation, and yet that imagery is so loud that it overwhelms all the other really lovely things that you're talking about right now. The love between Caesar (Aaron Pierre) and Cora is magnificent. The idea that we can create a story about our ancestors that's set during the time of chattel slavery and affirm to this woman (Cora) that she is worth loving and house that within this story I think is very affirming and very positive and powerful.



Jenkins' visuals are a work of art, even in a television series. Image courtesy of Amazon Prime.

## **Are you a Pan African?**

I'm not necessarily a Pan African, but as someone who's been all over the world and who has been uncomfortable in most places in the world where I've been, I have found comfort in the faces of other Black folks. I think there's something very unique about being Black on this planet, something very singular about it.

**From my experience in Miami, I found that most of the people that are native Miamians have ancestors from the Bahamas. Do you have any ancestors from the islands?**

My family tree is very complicated. My mom was born and

raised in South Carolina. She migrated down to Miami, and she was taken into the home of a woman, Miss Minerva Hall, who was Bahamian.

My grandma was Bahamian, and she had certain rituals that we did carry over into the show. Okra was something that my grandma used to love making. I'll be honest, I hated it because it was so slimy, but I didn't know the history of it. In making the show, I learned the history of [okra], and it's interesting.

(Cora) buries the seeds. Does she bury them or does she plant them? She plants them because someone else is going to come out of that tunnel behind her, and they're going to look around, and there's going to be a little bit of sustenance there. Here's this thing that came from the continent to the Bahamas to Haiti to Jamaica to Miami to Georgia and like the man says (Ridgeway the slave catcher), no matter how dry [the land], this is always going to grow.

### **How did the relationship with the women who raised you manifest itself in the series?**

The most direct way it manifested itself was I didn't understand why my mother had abandoned me when I was a child. I didn't understand it. And one of the really lovely things that happened in reading Colson's book is that you get to the end, and you learn what actually happened with her (Cora's) mother. I had a very similar ordeal where I didn't

learn the truth of my mother's life until I was maybe 24 or 25. I didn't have the biography to fill in this cavity, this sense of abandonment.

That sense of abandonment was allowed to grow and fester and metastasize. This idea of not understanding the sacrifices that our mothers make for us especially given the conditions they are forced to deal with. I'm not comparing the epidemic of crack cocaine in the 1980s to the conditions American slavery, and yet here were these women dealing with these incredibly difficult things that had nothing to do with them personally but was the condition they were born into.

I understood that relationship immediately. I didn't want anyone to watch this show and believe anything other than that these Black women did everything they could to protect their children.

**One of the quotes that resonated with me was "You are the future of the Negro."**

I thought that line was important. There are these ways in which we are taught that if you assimilate, if you do this, if you do that, then yes, you can be acceptable. You can be a Negro and still be one of us. A friend of mine wrote a text to me about the South Carolina episode. She said, "South Carolina is a world I recognize everywhere we go around the world — conditional acceptance, hidden controls." And I think that's what that line is about.

## **What advice would you give a young person who wants to be a storyteller?**

I think you have to be patient with yourself and learn by doing to a certain degree. One of the things about the current time we're living in now, especially someone like me, I'm very active on social media, people have direct access to you. And so they see this person is no different than me; if so, I should be able to do what they do. And sometimes I believe we have to be open to finding what our calling is through the process of exploring. So I think exploration is key and being open to allowing yourself to see the space that it is for you to explore, to see the artist that you will become. I had no idea I would go on to make the things in the way that I make them. I first went to film school just as a joke almost. Be open. Don't be beholden to becoming exactly what you feel like you were meant to be. Just be open to the process of exploring and finding what it is you were meant to be.