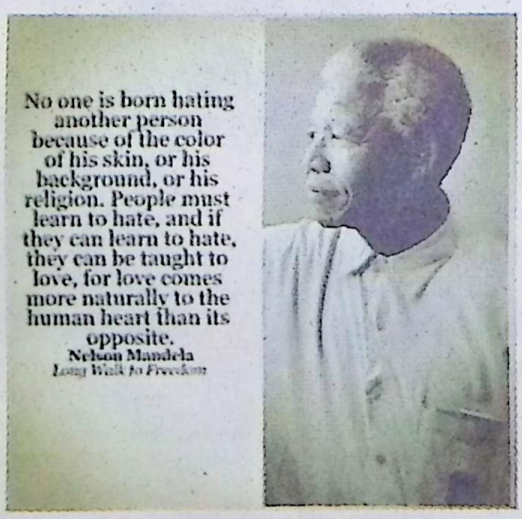
(Misplaced) Pride and (Outdated) Prejudice

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I recently came across an article that made me think of the author Jules Verne's assertion that "reality provides us with facts so romantic that imagination itself could add nothing to them." Given the fantastic stories that Verne himself came up with, among them "Journey to the Centre of the Earth" and "Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea", that's really saying something. But the story of Ellen and William Craft is enough to convince me that life is all too often *much* stranger than fiction.

In 1848, the couple resolved to flee slavery in the American South, and to leave Georgia for the Free States in the north of the US. Because Ellen's skin was fair enough for her to pass as white, they decided that William would pretend to be her slave. But of course it was unheard of for a lone white woman to travel with a *male* slave. So Ellen disguised herself as a white male cotton planter, and bound her arm in a sling to avoid her illiteracy being discovered. The two of them took permission to be away for the holidays, and set forth on their dangerous journey.



Along the way, they had a number of close shaves - including the time that Ellen found herself sitting next to a friend of her master on a train, when she pretended to be deaf in order to ward off his attempts at conversation. On one occasion, the captain of a steamer complimented Ellen on her "very attentive boy" and warned her against the "cutthroat abolitionists" in the north, while a slave trader offered to buy William. They slipped up when a military officer scolded Ellen for saying "thank you" to her slave, and nearly landed in trouble when a white woman confronted William during their journey, mistaking him for her own runaway slave!

Despite all of this, four days later and after a journey of over 800 miles, they arrived safely in Philadelphia. The Crafts later went on a speaking tour of New England to share their story with abolitionists, subsequently moving to England to evade recapture. They returned nearly 20 years after their initial escape, in 1868, to establish a school in Georgia for newly freed slaves.

But if the legal slavery of African-Americans is now part of history, the legacy of racism and inequality can clearly be seen in the disproportionate representation of blacks in impoverished inner city areas and within the penal system of the US. Not that racism or institutionalised inequality is limited to the underbelly of the American Dream, of course. It is a recurrent phenomenon across the globe, even in the 21st century. And it is not as rare as one would like, even in parts of the world where people have long been on the receiving end of discrimination themselves.

For instance, in 2009 an investigation found that racism against foreign workers - mainly Asians and Africans – was widespread in Lebanon. Working as domestic aides, these workers were only allowed onto beaches when accompanied by their employer, and even then were frequently told to stay out of the water because "people are not used to the sight of workers swimming". In rare instances when a foreign worker taking the day off was given entry to a resort , generally due to being accompanied by Lebanese friends - the situation remained uncomfortable. Hardly strange when one considers