Speaker 1: Oh my gosh. That performance by the Forensics group, I was gonna cry. It was so moving, so evocative, it was awesome. I think the whole campus should see it.

Liesel Reinhart: Welcome to the Magic Mountie Podcast. This is a podcast that's dedicated to helping faculty and other college employees as they try and navigate the challenging fabric of serving students. Especially at Mt. San Antonio College, but everyone's welcome.

Liesel Reinhart: This is gonna be a quick intro because we've got a jammed pack episode today as we continue our work around the visit of Pulitzer Prize winner Colson Whitehead, author of The Underground Railroad to the Mt. San Antonio College campus. We'll begin with the workshop that I did before Colson's lecture and then we have some reactions to the lecture. Sorry we couldn't record it, and we also have an amazing performance by some Forensic students that has everyone talking. And finally, just a few minutes with Colson Whitehead himself. So, I hope you enjoy it.

Juan Mesa: My name is Juan Mesa. I'm an adjunct history instructor here and I got an email that Mr. Whitehead was going to be here. Me, teaching history and of course the Underground Railroad being a topic of interest for myself and our students, it allows us to further understand each other, being a campus that's diverse. I think it's important to touch on these topics. Could be sensitive topics, however I think it's extremely important for us to really dig in and look into this further.

Liesel Reinhart: Thank you all so much for coming out today and joining us for this session we're calling Leading for Equity. Our equity gaps for student achievement have persisted for years and little tiny changes are not going to make a difference ultimately. They can help individual students or small cohorts of students, but to scale success to really reach all of our student groups means that we need big change and big change requires leadership. I'm Liesel Reinhart. I am not a critical race scholar. I'm not a history professor. I'm not a literature professor. I'm a communication professor. I have no particular expertise to share with you on the academic topics that we're approaching today, but it is my job to try and think about professional development for faculty.

Liesel Reinhart: This session is intended to speak to and hopefully motivate a core hardcore group of our campus members who have a leadership focus in your work when it comes to our student populations, or are interested in finding out more about what that means. I think it can mean a lot of individual things for different people.

Liesel Reinhart: Let me tell you a little bit about the structure of how today's going to go. I wanted to sort of tell you the story of how we ended up with Colson Whitehead on our campus and also I wanted to challenge you to think about some of ways in which the stories and episodes that are discussed in the book and our related history of this era, can influence our thinking about today. What are some of the legacies of this era? How do they still impact the lives of our students right now.

Liesel Reinhart: Additionally, at the end of our session, we have a special performance from our Forensics team. There was a performance this year that three of the students did and Roger was one of the faculty who directed the performance. Jasmine McCloud was our other faculty member who directed it. They won the national championship in readers theater performance. This past weekend they won the American Readers Theater Championship with straight ones from all 11 judges in the final round. It's a remarkable performance and I think you'll really, really enjoy it.

Liesel Reinhart: Let me tell you briefly the story of why we ended up with this presentation. Last year, I was invited to go to a Pathways Conference. Pathways, for those of you who don't know, or guided pathways is a new way in which we're going to be structuring the college and we're trying to help students move more quickly and easily through their academic program. There's a lot of reasons why we're doing it. We don't need to get into all of that today, except to know the pathways are here, they're happening and it's a major new initiative. Which, one of the first things I thought was, "Well, what about equity? We were doing equity. We were two and a half years into equity. We barely got going and now we've got this new initiative." Thankfully when I got there some other folks had thought of that as well. So the speaker, the keynote speaker at the Pathways Conference was a man named David Dodson and he spoke about equity and pathways together and tried to give us a thematic bridge so that we might start to think about, even though they're different initiatives, what they have in common, what is the Venn diagram of them.

Liesel Reinhart: I tried really hard to get David Dodson to our campus. My dream was ... Because he actually talks extensively about the Underground Railroad in his lecture and that's where this book presented itself to me and he spoke about it at length and I thought, what a perfect bookend! We'll start with him at the beginning of the semester and then at the end of the semester ... But we just could not book him. But I found ... He wrote a blog post after he did our talk and he actually wrote some of the key ideas that I wanted to share with you. I hope you don't mind, because we didn't get him, but I think it's so important and because, again, I'm not an expert here, I thought I would refer to the words of someone who is an expert. So I'm just going to share a little bit of this with you. Then I'd love it if some of you could respond to it and give me some thoughts, especially if this is something you know more about than I do.

Liesel Reinhart: So, David Dodson: "As I considered my remarks for today, my thoughts went to an extraordinary new novel by Colson Whitehead, The Underground Railroad, a magical work. The historic Underground Railroad was a series of well-concealed way stations that gave sanctuary to enslaved Africans fleeing to freedom in the North. In Whitehead's tale the Railroad becomes an actual, subterranean rail line, a marvel of technical engineering that literally burrows under the slaves states of the Antebellum South, a pathway to safety and salvation, complete with actual locomotives and rail cars."

Liesel Reinhart: As described by Whitehead, “The Railroad itself is a work of genius." Then he reads an excerpt from the book. "The stairs led onto a small platform. The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been 20 feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern. The sheer industry that had made such a project possible. Cora and Caesar noticed the rails. Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus.”

Liesel Reinhart: He continues, as himself, "But the path is still not easy for those who view it as one great hope for their liberation. The rules of passage on this railroad are mysterious, opaque for people who have spent their lives in the closed and cruel system of slavery on plantations. Trap doors and dead ends make the path perilous. For those who do get on the Railroad, like the novel’s heroine, Cora, the danger of being captured and returned to the plantation, and to violent punishment, is a constant reality."

Liesel Reinhart: "For Cora, the beautifully engineered path of the railroad is a strange gift. Nothing in her life has prepared her to navigate it. Throughout the novel, she is truly dependent on the kindness of strangers, like station agents and conductors, to get to safety. Station agents, who shepherd escapees to railway stops, pair their knowledge of the path and their courageous spirit to help the enslaved enter the pathway to freedom. Conductors rely on their own lived experience and geographic expertise to lead the train away from the cruel system of slavery and toward a land where survival and autonomy could become Cora’s reality."

Liesel Reinhart: "The Underground Railroad is about the unconquerable, existential human drive for the dignity of a better life. It is about the essential role that a brilliantly engineered salvific pathway plays to deliver a young woman to freedom and the fulfillment of her dreams. It is about the station agents and fellow travelers without whose leadership, courage, guidance, and wisdom Cora’s aspirations and even the pathway itself would have been insufficient to deliver a young enslaved girl to the threshold of freedom. It is, in many ways, a metaphor, for all that our work as educators requires."

Liesel Reinhart: At this point he told an extensive story about his own family. His great-grandfather in fact, had escaped slavery multiple times before he finally was able to purchase his own freedom and went on to move North and met his grandmother, who was one of the first people to go to college in her community. He went on to be quite successful.

Liesel Reinhart: He continues, "Every family has a mobility story. And today the narrative of upward economic mobility and liberation is unquestionably dependent on attaining a post secondary credential that prepares its holder to access, navigate, and advance within employment that offers meaningful, living-wage work. Like Cora and the Underground Railroad, the pathway from foundational education to a post secondary credential to living-wage employment, even when brilliantly engineered, is fraught with pitfalls, trapdoors, headwinds, and rip-currents. Success in navigating the pathway requires the vigilant encouragement of others at every step of the way, others who are committed to equity outcomes for each and every traveler."

Liesel Reinhart: "And while Cora’s story offers a tale of overcoming, it offers a tale of caution. The Underground Railroad was a beautifully engineered system for ushering people to freedom. But its engineering was compromised by a surrounding culture that was not supportive and, in fact, often hostile toward, people making the journey. In the absence of a fully supportive culture, Cora’s success depended on a high degree of personal heroism on her part that was exacted a very high cost. The best engineered strategy for success along the pathway to economic mobility will run aground unless it is supported by a reinforcing culture of equity across the institutions that touch it. Otherwise the burden of success requires an unreasonable level of heroism on the part of individuals trying to make their way forward. And the cost of heroism can be toxic."

Liesel Reinhart: "There is a phenomenon known as “John Henryism,” so named by the brilliant scholar of public health, Sherman James. According to legend, John Henry was one of the “steel drivers” who hammered down spikes used in the railroad expansion that made America big and rich. With the coming of the steam-powered drill, the livelihoods of the steel drivers like Henry were threatened. Henry, full of bluster, challenged the owner of the railroad to a contest pitting him against the new drill. Henry won the contest, but he died from the physical strain. John Henryism reminds us of the unacceptable personal burdens that fall on underrepresented people. The price of success can be a harrowing journey like Cora's. And it persists."

Liesel Reinhart: We've heard many stories, but he referenced a New York Times article about first generation Latino college students, able to obtain Social Security numbers through DACA. The title of the article though, "The Only Way We Can Fight Back is to Excel. He said, "That headline hit me in the gut. Excel at what cost?"

Liesel Reinhart: "We need less personal heroism and more equity and systemic support if the pathways we are dedicated to building are to deliver their promise: Equity at every turn, for every individual on the pathway to opportunity. This work has existential importance for our young people and our institutions and our nation. Let’s let nothing stand in its way."

Liesel Reinhart: We're beginning our work right now to try and figure out what is the professional development piece that goes along with this. Student engagement, we know, is a variable that can help students move forward on academic pathways, while also is very helpful to many equity populations. If we can increase student engagement ... We've been trying to do some work in this area. Emily Versace is doing Training from the Back of the Room and she's offering her first workshop starting next week. It's a 12 hour workshop. She'll be offering it a few times next year. It's just excellent about increasing the dynamics within the classroom to make it more engaging. We also had a workshop on experiential education and getting your students out of the classroom. Project based learning is something we'd like to bring in. These are all ways in which we can hopefully increase engagement in our classrooms and flipped classrooms is another model.

Liesel Reinhart: Resilience, we know, is something that is really important. For some of our equity populations, this is a big challenge and also for students on pathways. Pathways are not clean and as Whitehead said, "are fraught with trap doors, rip tides and other kinds of challenges." So, we can try and smooth those over, but the resilience is the life skill that students will need to handle those as they continue in life. So how do we increase resilience, to help students to overcome some emotional stressors, but also practical stresses that they have in their lives. We have a wonderful new program that's working on food insecurity and homelessness for instance. That's a resilience factor and that's some of the work that we can do, but we can also talk to students about emotional well being. We'll be doing some mental health initiatives next year to talk about that, including our own.

Liesel Reinhart: Finally, the one that interests me the most is agency. That really, to me, it speaks to also what's happening in the world. I don't know if you were inspired by the young people that were coming out of Florida after that horrible tragedy ... But just to see young people finding their voice and figuring out they can have an impact in the world. How do we convince all of our students that they have control over their lives? That they have not just the confidence in knowing, but also the capability, that combination to be the author, the auteur of their own experience, that they don't have to be a story that someone else has written. They can define that for themselves. How do we do that? How do we build that? That's one of the big challenges I would love to tackle. I do not have the answer. I hope some of you do. I think listening to our students is also a great way.

Liesel Reinhart: Hey everyone, this is Liesel interrupting myself to tell you that on the subject of listening to students, we're now going to step into the section of our workshop where the Forensic students came and performed for us. Three young men who did just an amazing job with their performance entitled, "Thirteen." It's a combination of literature and music and nonfiction and some original text. I know everyone wants to see this performance, now that they did this for a small group of people on campus. We're working to make that happen, but for now, here's a sample of "Thirteen" with performers Aaron Evans, Grayson McGee and Julian MacDonald.

Forensics Group: (singing) "The Devils gonna make me a free man, Oh, the devils gonna set me free"

Forensics Group: (singing) "Aint got no place to call my home! Only chains and broken thoughts, aint got no place to call my home, so come on Lord won't you set me free."

Forensics Group: President Barack Obama.

Forensics Group: Now let's look at the statistics. The United States is only five percent of the world's populations, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Think about that.

Forensics Group: Wait, one out of four? One out of four human beings

Forensics Group: with their hands on bars. Shut! Are locked up here-

Forensics Group: ... in the land of the free.

Forensics Group: 40 percent of that population is Black.

Forensics Group: But history is not just stuff that happens by accident.

Forensics Group: We are the pilots of that history.

Forensics Group: The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution declared ...

Forensics Group: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Forensics Group: In other words, it grants freedom to all Americans. (laughter) Yeah, almost.

Forensics Group: There's a clause, a loophole.

Forensics Group: It's there to be used as a tool.

Forensics Group: We have to remember that slavery was an economic system and the demise of slavery ...

Forensics Group: Peace.

Forensics Group: At the end of the Civil War left the southern economy in tatters.

Forensics Group: There were four million people who were formerly property and they were integral to the economic production system in the South.

Forensics Group: So what do you do with these people. How do you rebuild your economy?

Forensics Group: The Thirteenth Amendment loophole was immediately exploited.

Forensics Group: Black men were arrested in mass for petty crimes like looking at a white woman.

Forensics Group: Forced into prison labor.

Forensics Group: We were slaves again.

Forensics Group: (singing) "I will not run over tracks. Make us all a chain gang, used to do that, HUH! Way....back."

Forensics Group: We are not names but numbers. Price tags for the economy, even our souls are sold to the workforce.

Forensics Group: Am I next? Far enough from family to be forgotten. In the state penitentiary, five to ten can feel like an eternity. Unable to erase the life sentences in the stands ...

Forensics Group: Am I next? The bars they closed, the shackles they lock, the duration is more like fantasy. Our idle time turns into assembly lines.

Forensics Group: Complete the task before the day is up! Try to avoid punishment. Take the clothing. Pull, tie, fold, box the shipment, minimize the labor. 40 cents an hour in return for your transgressions. I am next.

Forensics Group: In this interpreter's theater we will be exploring the long standing impacts of the exploitation of the Thirteenth Amendment loophole.

Forensics Group: We begin with the inception of the Civil Right movement, as a necessary answer to the way Black people were exploited by the Thirteenth Amendment.

Forensics Group: Next, explore how the American legal system is set up to force minorities, specifically Black men, into the prison industrial complex.

Forensics Group: And finally ...

Forensics Group: ... Examine the implications of mass incarceration today.

Forensics Group: Lifetime likelihood of Black men in prison? One in three.

Forensics Group: That means that one of us, standing in front of you here today, statistically, will end up in prison.

Forensics Group: The private prison complex relies, historically, on the inheritances of slavery.

Forensics Group: (singing) "I will not run over tracks, leave us on a chain gang, used to do that. HUH! Way...back."

Julie Bradley: It's Julie Bradley and I'm a counselor for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. My impression is that everybody needs to see that performance. Those students are amazing and I think it's something that people don't know. It's very, very powerful.

Joyce Dillon: Hi, I'm Joyce Dillon. I work in the writing center. We were just talking about the young men and it's world class, you know. I really like the way they combined singing and speaking and acting. It was just a really intense experience. I was in the second row, so sometimes I got someone's eye contact and it's just very powerful.

Liesel Reinhart: I work with these two every day.

Elda Blount: Hi, my name is Elda Blount and I work in professional development and I thought the performance was amazing. The students were really into the performance. You can see their emotion. It was just great. It was all around great. I couldn't keep my eyes off of them, really. It was just a stunning event.

Liesel Reinhart: How did it make you feel about the work that you do? You've supported this. You typed up everything and did all the advertising and the scheduling. You even ordered the food that we're all enjoying right now. How did you feel about being a part of it?

Elda Blount: It really made it come full circle. It makes ... it gives your work more meaning. It really makes you want to be a part of more events like this.

Liesel Reinhart: Oh great and thank you for everything you do.

Elda Blount: Thank you.

Eliseo Marshall: I'm Eliseo Marshall. I'm a student worker for the professional and organizational development department.

Liesel Reinhart: And you've also worked to support this event. Are you looking forward to seeing the speaker tonight?

Eliseo Marshall: I am. I'm just ... This is something that's important to the Black community, so it's something I really look forward to.

Liesel Reinhart: Okay, Liesel one more time. This is the hardest part of my job, but I have to tell you we can't bring you the lecture from Colson Whitehead. We hope many of you were able to come and see it in person, but it was just terrific. He shared some excerpts from the book, some stories about his personal experience and took questions from the audience, then did a book signing. But we do have some responses that I think are really outstanding and just a few minutes with Colson himself at the end of the podcast.

Maya: I'm Maya. I teach English and Speech and what did I think? Oh, I was really glad some of my speech students were here. He was a great speaker.

Liesel Reinhart: It was really funny, right?

Maya: Yeah, he was really funny. He was really funny, like legit funny.

Liesel Reinhart: He was legit funny. I mean, I was really kind of surprised by that, given how serious this book is and I want to read all of his other books, because I have a feeling, especially the book about the 80s, that sounds really fun.

Liesel Reinhart: What was your takeaway? Tell me your name too.

Latasha: My name is Latasha and I'm one of Maya's students.

Liesel Reinhart: Very cool. Maya's always dragging students around, I love it. Alright and what was your takeaway tonight?

Latasha: He was pretty funny. I enjoyed his humor and it was so much of a different from what the chapter read was. It was refreshing to hear that he was ... Even though his book is serious, even though it's a novel, he himself is a pretty good comedian.

Liesel Reinhart: Are you a writer?

Latasha: No.

Maya: Yes.

Latasha: Am I?

Maya: She's an emerging writer.

Linda Chan: My name is Linda Chan and I teach Math as an adjunct and I've been here for 20 years.

Liesel Reinhart: Yes, you are one of our adjunct superstars. You are an amazing representative all across campus. And you're also on the FPDC, Faculty Professional Development Council. What'd you think? How'd we do tonight?

Linda Chan: I thought we did fantastic. Loved his speech that ... He was very colorful and imaginative and it was very successful, looking at the audience. There was a lot of people, I think, that was really good. I hope to have more of these type of events. We really get to know each other on a more personal basis, rather than just what we do as instructors every day. We get to connect through a vehicle like this book.

Bruce Nixon: Hi I'm Bruce Nixon, I'm the program director for the psychiatric technician program. I was thinking about how powerful the need for conductors ... You know, that whole analogy that was used, because a lot of our students do come from low income, first ones to go to school, have basically been told their whole lives that they're never going to amount to anything. We really have the responsibility to let them know that they do have the ability.

Eric Lara: Eric Lara. I'm the Associate Dean of Student success and Equity.

Liesel Reinhart: Eric, you know, you're helping because you approve the funding for this actual podcast that you're listening to right now.

Eric Lara: Yes, that is correct.

Liesel Reinhart: So can you tell us a little bit about the performance that you got see earlier and the event that you had before this with students?

Eric Lara: Definitely. So, through Student Equity funds, we try to promote all things equity, both on and off campus. So tonight's event, with Colson Whitehead, many students weren't familiar with the Underground Railroad, the history of slavery, so we wanted to provide an opportunity to do a pre-meeting with them before they came to the lecture. Through Equity funds, we were able to provide dinner for them and we were fortunate to have the Forensics team come out and do the readers theater performance on the history of slavery and where is that today. So the students were definitely engaged. They learned not only about slavery, the events for tonight, but also readers theater and what that opportunity is to be able to participate on campus.

Eric Lara: We have a lot of students, the hidden student, the hidden voice. They're afraid to speak up with the culture that we're having, the climate we're having in the U.S. But to see this performance, to know that you're able to have spoken word, to be able to share your story in a public, safe forum, public safe setting, hopefully more of these students will come out or they'll be willing to share, be willing to open up and just be able to express their frustration, their fear. It helps them in the long run.

Aaron Evans: My name is Aaron Evans and I'm a student at Mt. San Antonio College.

Liesel Reinhart: So you came earlier today and you did two performances, how did they respond to it?

Aaron Evans: They responded really well actually. They were actually seeking for us to go and perform this for other bodies of people because they felt like everybody had to see the message.

Liesel Reinhart: What kind of journey has been for you to have this performance and be doing this performance? I mean, has it changed you in any way.

Aaron Evans: Oh, definitely. Every time I perform this, it changes me in some type of way, because performance of a serious topic with this much heavy, just heavy topics within it, like Kalief Browder, Emmett Till, giving these characters life once again, it just takes a lot out of you. Performing this, it changes you every single time. There's no way you can stay the same after doing this.

Janice Willis: Janice Willis, psychology professor.

Liesel Reinhart: What brought you out to this event? Was there any particular reason?

Janice Willis: The topic. I used to teach a class, when I worked in Pennsylvania, Issues of Race and Ethnicity. We dealt with these topics all the time. He mentioned slave narratives. I have the video HBO had done and I'd shown it in class, so it was a topic that was of great interest.

Liesel Reinhart: Terrific. And did you get to see the student performance earlier?

Janice Willis: Outstanding. Underscored. They were really fantastic. I had mentioned then that I used to have Forensic Psychologist come to my class and he had all those statistics on PowerPoints, etc. But to see it embodied was just phenomenal.

Liesel Reinhart: Yeah, they're quite impressive. How can we move the campus forward?

Janice Willis: In my class, when I talk about this topic, I bring it down to the power of one and I tell them I didn't originate that, but I love the concept, because to the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world. How you interact and how you encourage people can make all the difference. It starts there.

Liesel Reinhart: Aaron's back. Did you get your book signed?

Aaron Evans: Yeah, I got my book signed.

Liesel Reinhart: So are you going to read it now.

Aaron Evans: Heck yeah I'm going to read it now. I got a signed book, I'm happy.

Liesel Reinhart: So we just had a terrific event and I'm here talking to Colson Whitehead. He's given us just a few minutes as we get him back out the door and over to the airport to get on to his next city.

Liesel Reinhart: What is the life of someone who writes a book and suddenly finds that a lot of people want to talk to you? How do you balance talking about your work that you finished, with trying to create new work?

Whitehead: I think, you know there's always something. Life intervenes in different ways. I have two kids and when they were younger, I definitely didn't work for years. I was too tired. I'm teaching a lot sometimes. Sometimes I'm promoting. But it always dies down and the work is always waiting for you, so this has been a year and half of travel and it's more than I've ever done before, but it's actually my last week of going around. Next week I get to go back to work. That's sort of the natural ebb and flow of things.

Liesel Reinhart: You've talked a lot tonight about some of your early struggles and even outright failures. Having 25 publishers reject your first book.

Whitehead: All of the nice things that happened with this book are sort of once in a lifetime and I sort of realized that. It definitely is nice to have a book like this change my life. Then I go back to work.

Liesel Reinhart: A rabbit just ran across our path. It's a little rural out here. Do you notice a big difference in the audiences when you travel around of the response or is it pretty similar?

Whitehead: No, I think if you come out you're enthusiastic about the work. I think if you write non-fiction people protest, or whatever but pretty much if you write a book, a novel, people show up, take the time to come out at the evening, they're on your side and they're engaged so ...

Liesel Reinhart: Nobody's protested you or anything?

Whitehead: No, not yet. There's always a first time.

Liesel Reinhart: Have you been to Kansas? They protest almost everything in Kansas.

Whitehead: Actually, I have not been to Kansas, but yeah, we'll see.

Liesel Reinhart: Hey, thanks so much for joining us for the Magic Mountie Podcast. We love your likes, we love your shares, and we love your comments so please engage with our community. Download from wherever you love to get your podcasts, iTunes, Google, RateMyProfessor, we're there and we want you to be back with us next week. Remember any opinions that are expressed in this podcast do not necessarily represent Mt. San Antonio College or any of its agents. We'll see you next time.