

FROM BLACKFACE TO BESTSELLER AND BACK AGAIN: THE INFLUENCE OF
MINSTRILSY ON HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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Almost immediately after its 1852 publication, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a popular culture phenomenon. Throughout America and Europe, readers took to the novel more enthusiastically than to any previous abolitionist text. Yet, despite being the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fell sharply after the Civil War, its antislavery message no longer relevant. A century after its initial release, Stowe's most famous work had become a subject of minor study to literary critics, seen as more valuable for its historical value than any literary merit, and Civil Rights activists further degraded the novel's reputation by accusing it of creating and perpetuating African American stereotypes. In recent years, literary critics have become more favorable towards Stowe, appreciating her novel as a work of persuasion and a vital abolitionist tool. Still, contemporary critics marvel at the overwhelming popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and theorize on why it was so successful. I submit that one of the key reasons

is the book's connection to the nineteenth century's other favorite form of entertainment: blackface minstrelsy.

Throughout the antebellum era, white performers would transform themselves into grotesque parodies of African Americans with burnt cork and ragged clothing. Nobody living in America during the time could avoid minstrelsy's influence, and many contemporary black stereotypes first became popularized on the minstrel stage. Even a casual reader can determine that Harriet Beecher Stowe was influenced by minstrel shows when writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Many of the popular stock minstrel characters are present in her novel, as are reenactments of common blackface sketches; however, what is often overlooked is how Stowe subverted minstrel stereotypes to play with reader expectations and make them reconsider their preconceptions of African Americans. It is my intention to show how Harriet Beecher Stowe employed and reconfigured minstrel tropes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and how minstrelsy in turn appropriated Stowe's characters for its own use.

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Dedication

This thesis dedicated to Linda Freed and the memory of Martin Freed.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Abstract..... | iv |
| Acknowledgments..... | vi |
| Dedication | vii |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe | 6 |
| Chapter 2: Minstrelsy's Prevalence in Antebellum American Culture..... | 21 |
| Chapter 3: Minstrel Characters in <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> | 38 |
| Chapter 4: Racial Essentialism in <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> | 56 |
| Conclusion | 66 |
| Works Cited | 72 |
| Vita | 77 |

Introduction

Long before mass communication facilitated the pop-cultural phenomena of the twentieth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a mass-market sensation. From its publication on 20 March 1852 and years after, millions of readers in America and Europe were entranced with the sentimental antislavery novel, spending outrageous amounts of money on the book, merchandise created in its image, and theatrical adaptations. The first book written by an American to sell over one million copies, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the best-selling novel and the second most widely read book of the nineteenth century, behind the Bible. The success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not limited to the United States: the 18 November 1853 edition of the French satirical magazine *Le Charivari* featured a cartoon in which a woman proposed to her friends, "We should take advantage of the opportunity. Uncle Tom is in vogue. . . . Let us hasten and write a novel called Aunt Tom" (Daumier 3).

Even taking into consideration the publishing boom of the 1850s and the century's dramatic increase in female reading and writing, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was abnormally successful. Stowe's novel sold 300,000 copies within its first year (Mott 142). Maria Cummin's sentimental best-seller *The Lamplighter* took a decade to sell 100,000 copies and Susan Warner's popular *The Wide, Wide World* took even longer to reach 500,000. Determining why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* took off with such force became a common topic among publishers. One theory was that its impact as an antislavery novel came from its being published so soon after the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Resentment of the law

had been building throughout the northern states, so a powerful antislavery novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Stowe wrote in response to the offensive Act, was highly appealing. No abolitionist publications up to that point had come close to achieving the overwhelming popularity of Stowe's work. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, for example, sold only 30,000 copies in the five years after its 1845 debut, and that was after extensive European promotional tours. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold ten times that number in a fifth of the time without any such touring. Stowe also managed to tap into the fashionable sentimentalism of mid-nineteenth century American writing, masterfully toying with the emotions of her readers. *Putnum's Monthly* ran an article in 1853 playing off the common audience response to the novel's sentimentalism: "Being annoyed by hearing somebody in the adjoining chamber alternately groaning and laughing, he knocked upon the wall and said, 'Hallo, there! What's the matter? Are you sick, or reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?''" (Briggs 101).

In analyzing the novel's success, what many critics missed was the novel's connection to the century's other cultural phenomenon: blackface minstrelsy. It cannot be overstated how pervasive minstrelsy was in antebellum America. As early as the 1820s, white entertainers began appearing before audiences in rags and ash-smeared faces, turning themselves into grotesque parodies of African Americans. These early minstrel figures made a living by appealing to poor whites, telling bawdy jokes, singing ridiculous songs, and dancing like acrobats. Among this low-brow type of performance art, the best performers, most notably T.D. Rice and E.P. Christy, rose to the top and were rewarded with fame. Comprehending the appeal of a racially incendiary art form such as minstrelsy is difficult for the contemporary world. But minstrelsy was appealing to nineteenth-century Americans in

deeply significant ways. Working-class white audiences enjoyed having their preconceptions of black inferiority reinforced onstage by buffoonish characters like Sambo and Jim Crow. Similarly, the foolishness of faux aristocratic characters like Zip Coon and Long Tail Blue soothed northern white fears of free blacks competing for jobs and infiltrating local government. However, black inferiority was only one part of minstrelsy's appeal. As much as blackface performers ridiculed African Americans, these same performers poked fun at the pretensions of the white establishment, just as Shakespeare's fools used their low status to freely insult the powerful. Impoverished youths identified with the ever-oppressed black race, as depicted by blackface performers. "Thus," says W.T. Lhamon, "the minstrel show was the first among many later manifestations, nearly always allied with the images of black culture, that allowed youths to resist merchant-defined external impostures and to express a distinct style" (44). Minstrelsy was a contradictory, ambivalent art form which "continually acknowledged and absorbed black culture even while defending white America against it" (Lott 41).

Blackface minstrelsy became overwhelmingly popular, and would become even more so when combined with parlor music in the 1840s and 50s by the likes of Stephen Foster. Harriet Beecher Stowe, I will argue, was fully aware of minstrel tropes and incorporated them into her most famous work. As I intend to demonstrate, part of the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was owing to its blackface roots. This analysis is a cultural study, observing the many ways Stowe borrowed from blackface. Minstrelsy permeates the novel from start to finish, sometimes overtly, as when Mr. Shelby called Harry "Jim Crow" in chapter one. Other times, the inspiration Stowe took from the minstrel stage is more obscure. Eliza, for example, first appears as more of an abolitionist's stereotype than a minstrel one: a "mulatta

Madonna” best remembered for crossing the Ohio River by jumping from one ice cake to another in her desperate bid to get her child to a free state. But as W.T. Lhamon notes, “what made her legendary was Stowe’s addition of minstrel leaps and contorted twists” (97).

Stowe certainly borrowed archetypes from minstrelsy, but she did not portray them in the same simplistic manner as stage performers. As we shall see, the author subverted the minstrel form to play with audience expectations. Stowe’s Sambos and Mammies and other stereotypes were not the same in her book as they were on stage. To make readers reconsider the preconceptions which minstrel shows encouraged, Stowe enriched these borrowed characters with unexpected intelligence and surprising emotional depth. In this way, she retained much of the entertainment value of minstrel shows while subtly criticizing the simplistic and hurtful image of African Americans they presented.

Just as the novel borrowed from minstrelsy, minstrelsy borrowed from the novel, for the minstrel roots of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made the novel particularly suitable for blackface adaptations. Thanks to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, blackface performers had enough material to last the rest of the century: entire troupes became dedicated to re-enacting scenes from the book. But rather than doing justice to Stowe’s source material, these “Tom Shows” frequently ignored (or willingly reversed) the novel’s antislavery message. Many of the misconceptions people still have about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—that its protagonist is a servile, fawning old man; that it trivializes slavery—come from the unauthorized adaptations, which often were but poor, unfaithful imitations of Stowe’s work.

Both minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are unpalatable to contemporary tastes, the former for its grossly insensitive portrayal of African Americans and the latter for its sentimentality and racial essentialism. I will make no justifications for minstrelsy’s racism,

but will critique the ambiguity and complexity the performance art represented from a cultural perspective. As incompatible as blackface is to the modern era, we can glean valuable insights from its audience appeal and popularity.

The twentieth century was not kind to Harriet Beecher Stowe's reputation. Until recently, the scholarly consensus on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could be accurately summed up by J.W. Ward, who wrote in 1961, "For the literary critic, the problem is how a book so seemingly artless, so lacking in apparent literary talent, was not only an immediate success but has endured" (75). Scholarly opinion became far more sympathetic in the 1980s, largely because of Jane Tompkins, who advised readers not to evaluate sentimental novels as they would a modernist work, but "as a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (126). It is with this mindset that I have approached Stowe and her work. My goal is to present *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an example of highly persuasive rhetoric and showcase how its use of minstrel tropes made its message more agreeable to nineteenth century readers. More generally, this project displays the interactive relationship between literature and the performing arts during the antebellum period, especially in molding the nation's perception of race.

Chapter 1: Biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe

Few nineteenth century New England families reached the same level of fame as the Beecher clan. Initially headed in East Hampton, Connecticut, by Lyman Beecher, the family produced several nationally renowned preachers, authors, and activists. Lyman dedicated his long life to spreading Protestantism throughout North America, becoming the continent's most famous preacher in the process. A man who understood the opportunity presented by the founding of the United States and the process of westward expansion, Lyman drafted his family into a war against Catholics, secularists, and "infidels" of all kinds. His chief weapons were sermons, packed with apocalyptic imagery and detailed descriptions of Hell and its tortures. During the 1810s, Lyman hosted revival meetings each Saturday at the Litchfield Female Academy.

When searching for the first of his three wives, Lyman found himself interested in the granddaughters of General Andrew Ward, who served under George Washington during the Revolution. While tempted by the witty and intelligent Harriet, he ultimately decided upon her quiet sister, Roxana. A stark example of the angel in the house's dangerous ideal, Roxana Beecher was meek and constantly overwhelmed by the duties of an influential preacher's wife. During nineteen years of marriage, Roxana gave birth to nine children, the fifth of which was a girl named after Harriet, born in 1808. The child was dead from whooping cough within a month.

Two years later, after the family relocated to Litchfield, Roxana gave birth to another girl, also named Harriet. When she was five, Harriet Beecher experienced the death of her

mother from tuberculosis. Years later, Harriet had few solid memories of Roxana, but her father's habit of invoking her name left a profound impact on the girl. "In every scene of family joy or sorrow," she later wrote, "or when father wished to make an appeal to our hearts which he knew we could not resist, he spoke of mother" (Beecher I:226). The myth of Harriet Beecher's mother became a source of competing influences throughout the author's life, alternatingly a symbol of sacrifice to be emulated and of weakness to be avoided. Harriet encountered other mother figures throughout her childhood, including her Aunt Harriet and Grandmother Foote, who she visited in Nutplains, Connecticut. These childhood visits provided young Harriet Beecher with an easygoing contrast to her competitively rigid evangelical home life, and she would count them among her most cherished memories.

It was also in Nutplains that Harriet first became acquainted with an African American servant, about whom she would reminisce in an 1889 letter: "Then there was the colored woman Dine was a great friend of mine & we had many frolics & capers together—she told me lots of stories & made herself very entertaining" (Foote Collection). Back home, Harriet began conversing with her father's kitchen help, including Zillah and Rachel Cooke. After her mother's death, while the family was engaged in a prayer service, she was comforted by a black laundry woman named Candace who "held me quite still till the exercises were over, then she kissed my hand, and I felt her tears drop upon it" (Beecher I:225). Thus Harriet Beecher's earliest African American associates were all female servants with whom she shared a deep sense of companionship.

Young Harriet Beecher felt out of place in the crowded household and often escaped into reading. Unfortunately for her, Lyman was skeptical that any value could be found in novels, and reading materials often became scarce. This eventually changed due to the

influence of her uncle Samuel Foote, a world traveler who would frequently visit the Beecher home to debate Lyman on matters of religion and world politics. With each visit, he brought stacks of romantic novels and poetry, which he would read to the gathered family.

Eventually, Lyman had a change of heart, and Harriet recalled him declaring, "I have always disapproved of novels as trash, but in these is real genius and real culture, and you may read them" (Beecher I:391). Milton's *Paradise Lost* soon became a favorite of Lyman Beecher who, ironically, was fond of the character Lucifer (Hedrick 21).

Several important changes came to Harriet Beecher in 1824, when she was age thirteen. Firstly, she announced to her father that she had finally decided to become a Christian. Lyman was ecstatic, because for all his evangelical activities, he had always lamented that his children remained, religiously speaking, "all stupid" (Beecher I:353). Secondly, Harriet relocated to Hartford, where she became a subject of her sister Catherine's experiment in female education, The Hartford Female Seminary. It was Catherine's opinion that women need to receive an education similar to that of men, thus her school provided a broad curriculum including literature, mathematics, and daily rounds of calisthenics. Catherine deputized promising students, including Harriet, to compensate for its lack of staff.

Most significant about her time as an assistant pupil was Harriet's opportunity to develop her own method of pastoral counselling. During her time at the school, she wrote a series of letters describing her early attempts at counselling religiously troubled youths, which show her strongly diverging from her father's judgmental and analytical approach to religion. Instead, she often attempted to bond with fellow students by telling them of her past spiritual difficulties. Once, she advised a correspondent not to think of Christ as a "master" so much as a "near & confidential friend" (Stowe-Day Library Acquisitions, 12 December

1832). Harriet's later success in writing was partially due to her ability to connect with the reader on a personal level and express her personal feelings on Christian philosophy. No doubt, her days as a counselor at the Hartford Female Seminary helped her build this talent.

Lastly, the Seminary's all-female environment afforded Harriet experiences she otherwise would have been denied, including an editorship at the school's paper, the *School Gazette*. As insignificant as her involvement with a little-read school paper may seem, it gave her early practice at editing, which would later prove invaluable to her writing career.

In 1828, fifteen-year-old Harriet Beecher had completed her studies at the Hartford Female Seminary, only to discover that her education could not be put to use due to the harsh limitations placed on women's employment in the early nineteenth century. She moved to Boston to be with the other Beechers, her father having relocated there in 1826 to fight off the city's growing Unitarian influence. Over the next year, Harriet had little direction in life and fell into depression. Catherine recognized her sister's apathy and proposed to bring her back to the seminary as a full-fledged teacher and pastoral councilor. Harriet agreed, her mood immediately improved, and she remained in the position until 1832. During her time as a teacher at Hartford Female Seminary, Harriet Beecher taught Sara Willis, who would later become a successful columnist and author using the pseudonym Fanny Fern. Catherine was often absent due to stress-induced health problems, during which time she left Harriet in charge. Through her experiences as a moral authority figure, Harriet Beecher began to recognize the power of combining writing and religion, writing to her brother in 1829, "You see my dear George that I was made for a preacher—indeed I can scarcely keep my letters from turning into sermons. . . . Indeed in a certain sense it is as much my vocation to preach

on paper as it is that of my brothers to preach viva voice (Stowe-Day Library Acquisitions, 20 February 1830).

Before leaving the seminary, Harriet had an important visitor when, in 1831, the Quaker and activist Angelina Grimke toured the school for a week. Grimke was impressed by Harriet's sociability and the two had many conversations about Quakerism, the antislavery movement, and women's rights. These meetings not only helped spark Harriet Beecher's interest in such subjects, but likely was the inspiration for her positive portrayal of Quakers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Harriet's time at the seminary came to an end in October 1832, when she and most of her siblings joined their father in relocating to Cincinnati. Lyman Beecher felt that if the United States was to become an evangelical nation, it was important to keep religious pressure on the western frontier. Before the move, the entire clan gathered together in New York City, where Lyman raised money for the trip by preaching in several locations, including the famous minstrel stronghold, the Chatham. After travelling for eight days, the Beechers arrived in Cincinnati. At the time, the frontier city was one of the fastest growing in the country, having gone from a population of approximately 10,000 ten years prior to 25,000, largely thanks to an influx of German and Irish immigrants (Cist 35). In this city, Harriet Beecher would spend eighteen years, during which time she would marry, give birth to most of her children, and begin writing in earnest.

To make herself useful and to earn some money, Harriet wrote her first book with the assistance of Catherine, *Primary Geography for Children*, published in March 1833. In the book, readers can see the development of Harriet's comprehension of the world's vastness and diversity. For example, the segment on the Mississippi Valley reads, "You may hear the

sound of all sorts of languages, French, Spanish, English, and German, spoken by negroes, mulattoes, or white people,—for here are people from almost every country” (104). Within three months, the book went through four editions and earned the sisters \$187; however, the real prize for their efforts was the positive attention they received from Cincinnati’s literary community. In a review, *The Western Monthly Magazine* called it “a capital little book” and praised the author by saying “[w]riting books for children is one of the most difficult, and surely one of the most useful branches of authorship” (qtd. in *Primary Geography*, fourth edition). More importantly, *Geography* caught the interest of the Semi-Colon Club, Cincinnati’s premier parlor literature organization. So impressed were the members with the book that they invited the Beecher sisters to join their ranks. The fact that the Beechers’ uncle, Samuel Foote, provided the club with his mansion for their meetings may have also been a deciding factor.

The Semi-Colon Club featured many people of authority, including future chief justice of the Supreme Court, Salmon P. Chase, and medical educator Dr. Daniel Drake. Every Monday, the group would meet and share their most recent writings. Harriet Beecher stood out because rather than adhering to the formal eighteenth century style employed by most Semi-Colons, she developed a more sentimental and occasionally satirical tone in keeping with the countless letters she wrote to friends and relatives. Her new style impressed her companions, some of whom had connections with *The Western Monthly Magazine* and asked to publish her pieces, to which she agreed under the condition that her real name not be used.

While Harriet Beecher’s literary career was taking off, Cincinnati erupted in a series of anti-abolitionist controversies, the first of which involved her father. During February

1834, Lyman Beecher took a money-raising trip to the east, leaving his Lane Seminary in the hands of abolitionist Theodore Weld. During this month, Weld organized an eighteen-day slavery debate. The first half was dedicated to the prospect of immediate abolition, regardless of the aftereffects; the second considered the colonization movement, whereby slaves would gradually be relocated to Africa, where they could be free. Students were radicalized by the debates, forming several different organizations in favor of abolition and colonization. With Lyman Beecher still away, the seminary's board of trustees took it upon themselves to change the school's rules, specifically prohibiting the meeting of antislavery organizations.

Lyman returned from the east to discover that his school was in chaos. He attempted to calm the student body, but was shocked that many of them were getting into regular contact with Cincinnati's black population. He addressed the students: "If you want to teach colored schools, I can fill your pockets with money; but if you will visit in colored families, and walk with them in the streets, you will be overwhelmed" (Beecher II:244). Such rhetoric did not sit well with the students, many of whom left for the competing Oberlin college. Meanwhile, Lane Seminary took a public relations beating. Trustees and the largely anti-abolitionist Cincinnati populace now considered the seminary a hotbed of racial mixing and radicalism. On the other hand, the abolitionist press condemned the school for opposing free speech. Famous abolition activist William Lloyd Garrison described the school as "A Bastille of oppression—a spiritual Inquisition" (qtd. in Wilson 149). The incident marked the decline of Lane Seminary, which struggled for years before closing in 1845.

As the slavery debate grew in fervor throughout the 1840s, Harriet Beecher continued to grow as a person. The Semi-Colon Club not only advanced Beecher's writing career, but her personal life as well. In 1834, the club lost one of their most treasured members, Eliza

Tyler Stowe, to a cholera outbreak. Feeling sympathy for Eliza's widower, religious lecturer Calvin Stowe, Harriet wrote him a series of comforting letters. Stowe appreciated the gesture and the two began a correspondence that lasted long after the mourning had ending. Before long, Beecher and Stowe were courting. Harriet was fascinated by Calvin's religious teachings, a sentiment shared by much of Cincinnati's literary community. Harriet's cousin Elizabeth Lyman attended Calvin Stow's lectures and wrote on 24 December 1834:

Professor Stowe of Lane Seminary...is now delivering a course of most interesting discourses on the Bible—various proofs of its authenticity—proper [sic] mode of its interpretation . . . I suppose Prof. Stow is the greatest scholar this side of the mountains. He's a delightful lecturer—not at all eloquent—but jsut [sic] what you can't help liking” (Middlesex County Historical Society)

Harriet Beecher and Calvin Stowe were quietly married in a small ceremony on 6 January 1836. Immediately afterwards, Calvin left for a scholarly European trip from which he would not return until the following February. The now Harriet Beecher Stowe was left in Cincinnati. Their marriage would be peppered with many such separations, but the couple remained together for fifty years.

In late 1836, while Harriet Beecher Stowe was in Cincinnati alone, expecting her first child, the city once again erupted in controversy, this time in the form of an anti-abolitionist riot. On night of 21 July, after numerous warnings and with the compliance of the city government, a pro-slavery mob broke into the office of James Birney, publisher of abolitionist paper *The Liberator*, and stole the press. After dragging it into the Ohio River, the mob moved to the Franklin Hotel, Birney's last known whereabouts, only to discover one of the publisher's biggest defenders waiting at the entrance. The defender was Salmon P.

Chase, who refused to allow them entrance. Rather than attack such an influential and powerful man, the mob loosed their frustration against black homes and businesses. For the next three nights, a vigilante force enlisted by the mayor patrolled the streets and put down any further rioting.

Harriet Beecher Stowe watched the riots unfold and was so inspired by Chase and Birney that she began writing abolitionist fiction for the *Cincinnati Journal*, then under the temporary editorship of her brother Henry Ward Beecher. Using the pseudonym “Franklin,” Stowe published her first piece was a letter to the editor, in which she related a conversation between herself and a pro-slavery dinner guest, “Mr. L.”

“Now, my friend, do you think the liberty of the press is a good thing?”

“Certainly—to be sure.”

“And you think it is a good article in our Constitution that allows every man to speak, write and publish his own opinions, without any other responsibility that [sic] that of the laws of his country?”

“Certainly, I do.”

“Well, then, as Mr. Birney is a man, I suppose you think it’s right to allow him to do it in particular?” (qtd. in Wilson 184-185)

At this point in her career, Harriet Beecher Stowe was still uncomfortable speaking publically about slavery without the safety granted by a pseudonym. Her change of heart would come over the course of the next decade, during which time the slavery debate continued to escalate in violence.

Upon returning from Europe in January 1837, Calvin Stowe was informed that his wife had given birth to twins, not the single child he expected. “Bravo! You noble creature,”

he wrote her from New York City, before making his way back to Cincinnati (Stowe-Day Library Acquisitions 23 January 1837). Despite the satisfaction the couple enjoyed in their newfound domestic life, the Stowes would soon be tested by economic hardship. Wild land speculation had led to the failure of over six hundred banks, resulting in the Panic of 1837. Arthur Tappan, financial backer to both Lyman Beecher and Calvin Stowe, struggled to avoid bankruptcy and supplied his beneficiaries with considerably less funding. Fortunately, Harriet's *Geography* was still successful, having already sold over 100,000 copies (Wilson 181). Within a year, though, the family's financial problems returned due to the birth of a third child.

To free up time for writing, Harriet employed two female servants, a German immigrant and a former slave from Kentucky. Both provided the writer with material. From the German, Harriet wrote the short "Trials of a Housekeeper," her first work published to be published in *Godey's Lady's Book*. In this story, she showed affection and condescension towards immigrants by portraying the young woman as honest but bumbling. After several months on the job, the Stowes' black servant was at risk of being retaken by her former owner. Family history has it that Calvin Stowe and Henry Beecher drove the girl twelve miles to a stop on the Underground Railroad, partially inspiring Harriet's account of Eliza's escape in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Hedrick 121).

Meanwhile, Harriet's work was selling well in diverse publications: comic domestic tales for *Godey's Lady's Book*, moral instruction for the *New-York Evangelist*, romanticized accounts of rugged frontiersmen in the *Western Monthly Magazine*. Harriet Beecher Stowe was honing her ability to entertain different groups of people, though she was slow to experiment with addressing multiple audiences in the same work, one of many important

factors contributing to the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While most authors in the *New-York Evangelist* only gave their initials, Harriet was always credited as Mrs. H. Beecher Stowe, both names implying authority and influence.

Although her career was on the rise, Harriet's physical and psychological health was noticeably deteriorating by 1843. Her closely spaced pregnancies had worn out her body to the point that the couple had decided upon long periods of sexual abstinence. Emerging Victorian sentiments were also taking their toll on the young writer. Although Calvin encouraged Harriet to write, he still insisted that she act the part of a True Woman—that is, spending her days in the home, caring for children. This mode of thinking was also expressed by her sister Catherine, who had published her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* in 1841. Harriet's new home-centric lifestyle was not compatible with her active spirit and her body became enfeebled. As well, years of being prescribed calomel had given her chronic mercury poisoning.

Years earlier, Harriet had become a Christian, but at the age of thirty-one she desired spiritual renewal. As she wrote to Calvin, "Now by the grace of God I am resolved to come & live for God— It is time to prepare to die—the lamp has not long to burn—the hour is flying—all things are sliding away & eternity is coming..." (Beecher-Stowe Collection, SchL. 4 September 1842). In an attempt at spiritual renewal, Harriet experimented with Perfectionism, a mid-nineteenth century religious practice by which believers obsessively guarded their thoughts and actions to become Christ-like. This fixation on avoiding vice at all costs only enflamed Harriet's stress and her experiment ended when her brother George, also an adherent of Perfectionism, committed suicide on 1 July 1843. Several weeks later, Harriet gave birth to her fifth child, named Georgiana in memory of her brother, but was too

exhausted to care for the newborn. At this lowest point, she had another spiritual awakening, this time focusing on human suffering. It was not through perfection, she figured, that one became Christ-like, but through enduring hardship, a philosophy on full display in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, among her other works.

Her spirit was healed, but her body was in desperate need of renewal. Alternative medicinal therapies were in ready supply during the 1840s, with many fads claiming to have revolutionized Western health practices. In 1846, Harriet became curious about hydropathy, a practice revolving around healthy eating, exercise, and the heavy ingestion of water. She travelled to the Battleboro Water Cure and stayed for over a year, slowly regaining her strength and expunging the toxins from her system. The treatment worked wonders and her next child, Charley, born in January 1848, was by far her healthiest.

Just as things were looking up, hardship once more found its way into the Stowe household. Charley died of cholera in July 1849. Feeling she needed to leave the scene of the tragedy, early the following year Harriet gathered her three eldest daughters and Aunt Esther, and travelled to Brunswick, Maine, to set up housekeeping. Along the way, she stopped in Boston to visit her brother Edward, who was deeply involved in the abolitionist cause. He had been infuriated by the proposed Fugitive Slave Act and spread this anger to Harriet. Under the law, white northerners were expected to aid in the capture of escaped slaves. For the next decade, most of her writing would relate to abolition in some way.

After reaching Brunswick, Harriet supported herself by writing and tutoring in her home. Finally removed from the scene of so much grief, she could mourn her lost loved ones in relative solitude. “The pain of this double loss was one of the twin engines of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,” explains biographer Joan Hedrick. “The other was a white anger” (201). Stowe got

in touch with Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the abolitionist paper *The National Era*, and started supplying him with stories. They were short at first, but Harriet soon discovered she had much to contribute to the slavery debate. Her sister Isabella frequently wrote, describing the latest tragedies of the Fugitive Slave Law in Boston. And she urged on Harriet's writing: "Now, Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is" to which, the story goes, Harriet rose from her chair and announced "I will write something. I will if I live" (Charles Stowe 145).

On 9 March 1851, Harriet wrote a letter to Gamaliel Bailey, proposing a three-to-four part fiction piece decrying slavery:

Up to this point I have always felt that I had no particular call to meddle with this subject, and I dreaded to expose even my own mind to the full force of its exciting power. But I feel now that the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak.

(Boston Public Library)

What began as a brief exposé on the horrors of slavery would grow into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, initially published in weekly instalments in *The National Era* from 5 June 1851 to 1 April 1852 then compiled into a novel later that year. In the same letter to Bailey, Stowe gave her intention of portraying "the negro character, which I have had ample opportunities for studying" (Boston Public Library). What she did not consider was that most of her interactions with African Americans had been in the context of an affluent white woman and her exclusively female servants. While Stowe designed her black characters to be sympathetic, they were also informed by her limited experiences and racial romanticizing. This partially explains her portrayal of African Americans as childlike, sometimes feminized,

and unusually taken by religious conviction. Stowe's complicated relationship with blacks would fuel conflict over her intentions for over a century.

Initially, Harriet Beecher Stowe approached her publisher, Phillis, Sampson, & Co., to publish the stand-alone release of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but they refused on the (now ironic) grounds that books about slavery written by women didn't sell (Hedrick 223). Instead, she entered into contract with John P. Jewett, who convinced her and Calvin to accept a contract giving them only ten percent of the sales. Jewett assured them that letting him have such a substantial cut of the profits would ultimately benefit the pair, because he could invest more money in advertisement. Once *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a runaway hit, the Stowes regretted accepting so little, and Catherine Stowe briefly planned a book exposing Jewett's business practices, only to be dissuaded by Harriet.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was soon a popular culture phenomenon. Reaction in the northern states and abroad was favorable, but southerners raged and the book was banned in much of the South. The hatred southerners expressed for Harriet Beecher Stowe was highly personal. On 28 August 1852, the editor of *New Orleans Daily Picayune* verbally thrashed Stowe:

It is deplorable [he wrote] that a woman should be the principal agent in this labor of mischief...She has too much mind not to comprehend the wicked injustice and dangerous consequences of the distorted picture she has drawn of slave life and Southern morals" (qtd. in Roppolo 348-9)

Such was a common response among southern editors, who vilified the author as dishonest and unsexed.

The rest of the country was far more favorable. Jane Tompkins describes the book as "the summa theologica of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant

redaction of the culture's favorite story about itself—the story of salvation through motherly love” (125). Domestic appeal certainly played a major role in the novel's success, as did the rise of new printing technology, better distribution through railroads, and increased antislavery sentiment in the North following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. However, an often overlooked factor in the novel's success is the entertainment value Stowe lifted from minstrelsy. Without the familiar minstrel setups and character types, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have lost much of its humor and much of its abolitionist suasion, and it would not have engrossed readers as effectively. There is no doubt the author took from minstrelsy, but how she employed blackface tropes was varied and subversive, as we shall see.

Chapter 2: Minstrelsy's Prevalence in Antebellum American Culture

During Stowe's early life, a new style of performance became the most successful form of entertainment in the United States and much of Europe. From the 1830s until the turn of the next century, this new entertainment, blackface minstrelsy, was celebrated by people from all walks of life. Some unusually skilled blackface entertainers, such as T.D. Rice and George Christy, became international celebrities while their characters became some of the first American popular culture figures. By the time Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, blackface minstrelsy had permeated American culture and had become an important force in shaping white Americans' ideas about blacks.

Blackface minstrelsy was made popular by white performers smeared with the ashes of burnt cork to turn themselves into ghastly caricatures of African Americans. To the delight of Caucasian audiences, these blackface performers would dance, tumble, sing nonsensical songs, and engage in comedy sketches, all fallaciously advertised as representing genuine slave culture. Just a few years before Stowe began her novel, Frederick Douglass, in the 27 October 1848 edition of the *North Star*, described minstrelsy as "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens." To an extent, the definition of minstrelsy as a racist trivialization of slavery is accurate, but it ignores much of the story. Confusion over what to make of minstrelsy is unavoidable, because ambivalence was built into its form. Inspired by equal parts revulsion and fascination with black culture, minstrel entertainers could make African Americans look foolish or clever, devious or

sympathetic, contented or rebellious. Another point of confusion is that minstrel shows changed over time; the working-class minstrel satires of the 1830s were a far cry from the sentimental musicals of the 1850s or the black-dominated plays of the late nineteenth century. There is simply too much conflicting information to broadly declare minstrelsy as vile racism or valid entertainment. What is indisputable, though, is the overwhelming popularity of minstrelsy and its influence on popular culture, including novels about slavery such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Minstrelsy's historical origins are obscure, but the behavior of blackface performers indicates a loose relationship to clowning. As early as the sixteenth century, clowns were prominent on European stages. Many of these performers' most recognizable traits reappeared in their later American counterparts, not only in the makeup and tumbling, but their role of mocking the powerful. European stage fools often came across as highly intelligent men using the disguise of idiocy to poke fun at authority without consequences. Similarly, blackface performers used the personas of ignorant slaves to challenge the authority of the white establishment. For example, "Jim Crow" song sheets published by E. Riley in the early 1830s included lyrics related to Southern dissatisfaction with the federal government:

Dey hab had no blows,
 And I hope dey nebber will,
 For its berry cruel in bredren,
 One anoders blood to spill.

Should dey get to fighting,

Perhaps de blacks will rise,
 For de wish for freedom,
 Is shining in deir eyes. (qtd. in Dennison 55-57)

Jim Crow's uneducated dialect undercut his provocative speech, soothing white audiences' fears of black violence, but the intimidating nature of a black man speaking openly about regional combat and black desire for freedom should not be ignored. "The black mask," Eric Lott explained, "offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them" (25).

Other possible inspirations for blackface include the militia known as the "Whiteboys" of Ireland. As historian Natalie Davis reports, during the 1760s, their chosen uniform consisted of blackened faces and long frocks, identifying them as an "armed popular force to provide justice for the poor, 'to restore the ancient commons and redress other grievances'" (149). America also has a history of rebellious racial fakery in the form of the Boston Tea Party, famous for its howling "Indians" and "blacks."

Despite these similarities, it is difficult to affirm a direct line of causation between these practices and blackface minstrelsy. Perhaps the best place to start our investigation is with the mindset of Americans in the early nineteenth century. The country was young and struggling with the embarrassment of never having produced a distinctly American art form. Meanwhile, African American slaves were creating music previously unknown by white society. Cannibalizing elements of black culture in the name of American inventiveness must have been tempting to white performers. In an 1842 issue of the *Dial*, Margaret Fuller recalled:

Our only national melody, Yankee Doodle, is shrewdly suspected to be a scion from British art. All symptoms of invention are confined to the African race. . . . “Jump Jim Crow,” [sic] is a dance native to this country, and one which we plead guilty to seeing with pleasure, not on the stage, where we have not seen it, but as danced by children of an ebon hue in the street. Such of the African melodies as we have heard are beautiful. But the Caucasian race have yet their rail-roads to make. . . . (52)

Fuller not only voices the frustration over white America’s lack of creativity, but also illustrates the mistaken belief in Jim Crow and his dance as accurate representations of black life.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the authenticity of minstrelsy was taken for granted. In his autobiography, Mark Twain fondly recalled the “happy and accurate” depictions of slavery to be found in minstrel shows (62). Minstrel performers marketed themselves as something akin to cultural anthropologists and experts in slave life. Stephen Foster is said to have accompanied a family servant, Olivia Pise, to a “church of shouting colored people” and become enamored with their music (Foster 83). Popular legend has it that E.P. Christy based his act upon a black church singer named One-Legged Harrison (Toll 46). The repeated assurances of authenticity indicated not only a public interest in black culture, but a means of soothing northern guilt over slavery’s continuation. Northerners need not fret about the treatment of slaves just beyond their borders, because they were dancing and singing. Today, historians understand the fallacy of this presentation. Rather than an expression of genuine slave life, minstrelsy was cobbled from

black lore interspersed with south-western humor . . . black banjo techniques and rhythms interrupting folk dance music of the British Isles . . . the vigorous earth-slapping footwork of black warring with the Irish lineaments of blackface jigs and reels. (Lott 97)

Adding to the confusion over minstrelsy's origins is the reality that despite its rustic southern settings, the minstrel performance style was a product of the northern states. Most of the craft's pioneers came from northern and frontier cities including Louisville, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and especially New York City. Most accounts of how blackface performers became acquainted with slave entertainment should be treated as suspect, though many entertaining variants exist.

If only a single performer can be called minstrelsy's originator, Thomas Dartmouth Rice would unquestionably claim the title. Few details of Rice's early life or the formation of his act remain available, but we know that he was born in New York City in 1808. By the age of twenty he was working at struggling theatres such as Chatham and Lafayette, both early adopters of blackface entertainment. By 1830, Rice was known far and wide as the creator of the character Jim Crow, who would eventually become the face of minstrelsy as a whole. A jolly slave in ragged clothing, Jim Crow would sing, dance, and tell raunchy stories for the audience. His catchphrase and the chorus of his signature song went: "Wheel about, and turn about, and do just so; and every time I wheel about, I Jump Jim Crow."

Like most minstrel characters, Crow spoke in an exaggerated African American dialect designed to make him look unintelligent, but central to the character's success was his likability and subversive wit. Take, for example, his early act, in which Rice would portray the character wearing red and white striped pants and a blue overcoat with star-spangled

collar. Across his back, Rice carried a gunny sack inhabited by an identically dressed four-year-old, who hopped down and danced a jig imitating Jim Crow. Besides the obvious spectacle, the intelligence of the act lay in forcing the audience to confront the hypocrisy of their culture. Rice's act embodied two contradictory notions: his clothing evoked the image of Uncle Sam, the human representative of American identity and liberty, but his blackened face reminded the audience of slaves denied the most treasured American rights. At the same time, the act mocked the association of national purity with whiteness by insinuating that blacks had claim to an American identity. Jim Crow's presentation of his miniature self could even be a sly attempt to convey the audience's fear of black Americans slowly reproducing to the point of no longer being a minority. It could even be a message on how identity comes from imitation, like how early Americans based much of their culture on those of England: "Rice's giving birth to a replicate red, white, and blue self punned brilliantly on American self-making through blackface, illustrating how self-creation was, paradoxically, an imitative process" (Richards 206).

From Jim Crow sprang the Sambo figures, which would become one of the nation's most prevalent and hurtful stereotypes of black males. Where one character stops and the other begins is difficult to say, but one difference is that Sambo foregoes much of Crow's wit and replaces it with humorous stupidity and perpetual adolescence. One psychological explanation for the cultural popularity of this association of youthfulness with imagined African Americans comes from Leslie Fiedler, who wrote: "Born theoretically white, we are allowed to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more" (134). Another reason for the easy assumption that the stereotype reflected reality was its

value for pro-slavery advocates: if black males are in reality Sambos, then slavery provides a structure to ensure that these adult children are provided homes and are taught a work ethic.

The only other performer to rival T.D. Rice in popularity was George Washington Dixon. Details of Dixon's early life are, like those of Rice, obscure. Born in New York City in 1801, the performer got some of his earliest gigs at the Chatham and went on to national stardom. Dixon was the originator of two similar characters, Long Tail Blue and Zip Coon. Unlike the rustic and rural Jim Crow, Long Tail Blue (so named for his extravagant attire), was strictly urban. A representation of free blacks succeeding in the northern states, the character's humor was in the image of a black man imitating the dapper ways of white high society. Barbara Lewis describes the character as "a man of substance and perhaps even property" and "the epitome of propriety, with his formal dress and restrained mannerisms" (259). Long Tail Blue may have struck too close to audience fears of black ambition, because Dixon soon changed the character into the more popular Zip Coon. While both characters attempted to fit into white high society, the key difference was that Zip Coon failed and was invariably put in his place. In this way, the audience's fear was soothed as Dixon poked fun at northern blacks' attempts to live a middle class lifestyle. Black ambition to enter into America's political arenas was especially ridiculed: Zip Coon helped popularize the mock stump speech and was often cast as a political, even presidential, candidate. The absurdity of such a buffoon achieving public office was portrayed as humorous, but the fear of blacks inevitably gaining positions of power was not.

Such a concern was slowly becoming reality as the black population of the north had become significant by the early nineteenth century. In 1820, African Americans made up sixteen percent of the New York City's population (Lhamon 16). Many were slaves, though

New York became a free state on 4 July 1827. Thousands of freed blacks and runaway slaves lived in the same districts, slowly developing their own dialects, naming patterns, hairstyles, and other distinct characteristics.

In all of New York City, perhaps the most obvious source of interracial comingling and the location most directly connected to the development of minstrelsy was Catherine Market. Located across the East River from Long Island and midway between what would become Manhattan and Brooklyn, the market was a major provider of goods during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Culturally, the market was a place where New Yorkers of all walks of life, including those of differing ethnicities, met and conversed. In 1820, a sickness, possibly typhoid fever, ravaged Catherine Market and its surrounding areas, so the New York Board of Health issued a report containing a door-to-door description of the neighborhood's occupants. From this report, we see that interracial sex, relationships, and marriage were commonplace in the area:

At No. 85 Lombardy-street, in the third story, were 5 white females, and a black man, husband to one of them, and all of whom were sick of the fever. . . . At No. 89 Bancker-street, in the front cellar, where a white woman and her black husband lived as boarders in a black family consisting of 6 persons, all of whom had the fever, and 4 of the blacks died. (Statement 17)

Despite the comingling between races, things were far from equal, as blacks were far worse off than their impoverished white counterparts: “Out of 48 blacks, living in 10 cellars, 33 were sick, of whom 14 died; while out of 120 *whites*, living *immediately over their heads* in the *apartments of the same houses*, not *one* even had the fever!” (Statement 15)

In the decades prior to minstrelsy's rise to prominence in the 1830s, slaves were often hired out by shop owners in Catherine Market to attract customers in exchange for food or small pay. Thomas F. De Voe observed, "The negroes who visited here were principally slaves from Long Island, who had leave of their masters for certain holidays, among which 'Pinkster' was the principal one" and they were ready "by their negro sayings and doings, to make a few shillings more" (137). Most commonly, these slaves would wrap their hair in eel skins and dance on shingles. As a dozen black men, many coming from far beyond the East River, competed with each other for the attention of customs, they represented their regional affiliations with distinct rhythm and style. These dancers made a lasting impact on urban black culture in the city. W.T. Lhamon hypothesizes that "Team jump-roping as it is still acted out in urban squares with rhymes and competitive steps is probably related to this dancing. So is tap dancing" (13). And of course, the dancing was highly important to the development of minstrelsy. Black and white customers stopped and watched these dancers with fascination. It would only be a matter of time before white performers imitated their style.

Obviously, race played an overwhelming role in defining minstrelsy, but what is often overlooked is how the performance style was equally informed by class tensions. Denizens of American cities in the early nineteenth century were conscious of the disparity between the working and ruling classes. Low and high classes established their identities by opposing each other. While the well-off and middle class attended "legitimate" operas in expensive venues like Manhattan's Astor Place, laborers enjoyed the minstrels at the likes of Chatham Theatre. Minstrel shows of the 1820s and 30s reinforced their own value while openly mocking the pretensions of upper-crust entertainment:

De Chatham keeps among de rest—

Entertainments ob de best.

In public favor dis place grows,

‘Specially on account ob Mose.

De Astor Opera is anoder nice place;

If you go thar, jest wash your face!

Put on your “kids,” and fix up neat,

For dis am de spot of de eliteet! (“Pompey’s Rambles,” *White’s* 15-16)

None of this is to say there were no class divisions within minstrel theatres, which were usually divided, like most theatres of the time, into the fashionable boxes, cheap gallery, and pit seats (gods, gentlemen, and groundlings). Although these theatres were typically located in impoverished districts and featured entertainment clearly aligned with the working class, there is evidence that the rich were in attendance. An 1820 account of a low-class Boston theatre described the gallery as “the resort of the particolored race of Africans, the descendants of Africans, and the vindicators of the abolition of the slave trade,” the central boxes inhabited by women who were “equally famous for their delicacy and taciturn disposition,” and the rest of theatre as a place for “none but the dandies, and people of the first respectability and fashion” (quoted in *Grimsted* 52-53). The references to “dandies” and “Africans” in this passage raise questions about the appeal of lower class theatres. In the 1820s, prior to minstrelsy’s rise to prominence, rich whites and poor blacks apparently felt comfortable in such venues. The anti-rich and racially inflammatory nature of minstrelsy could have been an expression of worsening class and race relations in the culture.

By the 1840s, theatres were aligned with specific classes based upon their districts and audiences. Performance art had become an expression of class warfare. For example, the Astor Place riot of 10 May 1849 began as a feud between two Shakespearean actors. The working class had selected American actor Edwin Forrest as its theatrical champion, while the upper class preferred the Englishman William Charles Macready. After public bickering between the two over who was the superior actor, Forrest's impoverished fans began to sabotage Macready's performances with boos and thrown objects. On the night of the tenth, Macready was scheduled to play *Macbeth*, when a crowd of over five thousand gathered outside Astor Place shouting phrases like "Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!" (Lott 70). A militia of two hundred was called to keep order, only to fire into the crowd. During the ensuing riot, twenty-two were killed and over one hundred and fifty were wounded. Not only does the incident hint at increased class antagonism, but shows that the classes took performance artists seriously as their cultural representatives. Astor Place and Macready had become avatars of the upper class, so frustrated laborers took out their aggression on both.

Lower class theatres served as testing grounds for experimental forms of theatre, including minstrelsy. Among the earliest theatrical venues for minstrel shows was the 1,300-seat amphitheater known as the Chatham. Located a few blocks south of New York's Bowery district, the Chatham was designed as a theatre of class: it was the first theatre in the city to use gas lighting and played host to the first American opera, Micah Hawkin's *The Saw Mill* (1825). However, the Chatham couldn't compete with the Bowery and Park Theatre. Although both George Washington Dixon and T. D. Rice gave early performances at the Chatham, by 1828 this theatre was regarded as minor and unsuccessful due to its inability to attract upper class customers. In May 1832, evangelical activists bought the Chatham and

turned it into a chapel. During its seven years being run by religious abolitionists, the Chatham was rumored to have been the starting place of various riots, including a May 1834 attempt at an anti-colonization presentation and a July 1834 non-alcoholic celebration of Abolition Day.

In September 1839, the Chatham was again made a theatre and immediately began showcasing minstrel acts. The 1840s saw blackface minstrelsy transform and the Chatham was one of the key locations of its development. 1843 was when the Virginia Minstrels began performing at the theatre, marking what is called “the beginnings of the classic minstrel show with its street stories and staccato rhythms” (Lhamon 31). After several decades as practitioners of a rough art form, minstrel performers began experimenting with more professional methods. During this decade, many hallmarks of minstrel shows, including improvisation and audience participation, were pioneered by performers like Rice and the Virginia Minstrels.

During this time, minstrel troupes began marketing their acts as authentically representing slave life, which was completely false. Announcing an upcoming performance in 19 June 1843, the Virginia Minstrels published the following description of their fare:

In their delineations of the sports and pastimes of the Southern slave race of America they offer an exhibition that is both new and original. . . . Their melodies have all been produced at great toil and expense, from among the sable inhabitance of the Southern States in America, the subject of each ascribing the manner in which the slaves celebrate their holidays, which commence at the gathering-in of the sugar and cotton crops (qtd. in Lhamon 31).

An important minstrel figure would take over the Chatham late in the decade. Born near Catherine Street in 1821 to French immigrant parents, Frank Chanfrau grew up watching the market dancers and early minstrel performers and decided to try his hand at blackface. His success came in 1848 when he created the popular character Mose the rascally firefighter. Chanfrau's friend and associate Benjamin A. Baker wrote *A Glance at New York* to showcase Mose and the play ran at the Chatham. After a mere two weeks, the play earned Chanfrau so much money that he bought the theatre. A month later, Baker finished a sequel entitled *New York as It Is*, which focused the action on Catherine Market. The mix of minstrel performance and local charm was a winning combination. By May of that year, the *Herald* was reporting that over 40,000 customers had seen *New York as It Is* (Lhamon 28) and the now successful theatre was soon renamed Chanfrau's New National Theatre, formerly Chatham.

Despite not being a minstrel character in the strictest sense, Mose helps to show the association between blacks and poor whites. While no specific ethnicity is ever given for the character, most depictions of Mose present him with pale skin, because Mose was a representative of the Bowery b'hoys subculture of the mid-nineteenth century. The b'hoys were a loose group of poor young men of various ethnicities, though often associated with Irish immigrants, who grew up in the Bowery district. *A Glance at New York* and its sequel's success can be attributed to the youth-based subculture supporting Mose as their personal symbol. A rascally fireman and ruffian, Mose balanced his rough and tumble persona with redemptive qualities, to the delight of the b'hoys. However, aside from their white protagonist and urban settings, Chanfrau's plays were practically blackface minstrelsy. Mose's uneducated speech bore more than a passing resemblance to the dialects employed in

minstrel acts and his good-natured trickery cast the b'hoy as an urban Jim Crow. A memorable scene from *A Glance at New York* features Mose's "g'hal" Lize complimenting minstrel legend George Christy:

Mose: There's goin to be a first-rate shindig; some of our boys will be there.

Lize: ...I'd rather go to Christy's. Did you ever see George Christy play the bones? Ai'nt he one of them?

She then did her best impression of Christy, singing loudly with Mose listening in approval.

Not only was Mose inspired by minstrelsy, but minstrelsy took the character as its own. Blackface performers reinterpreted the character as African American, but left his name, personality, and fire-fighting occupation intact, for example in the minstrel tune "Wake Up, Mose!" (1848):

Wake up, Mose! De fire am burning;

Round de corner de smoke am curling.

Wake up, Mose! The engine's coming;

Take de rope and keep a running! (qtd. In Campbell 25)

The ease with which performers adapted Mose to minstrelsy is not surprising when one considers the close association in the minds of nineteenth-century urbanites between poverty and blackness. One explanation for blackface's popularity among impoverished, exploited audiences is that they could see themselves in the ever-degraded black slave. Despite their various ethnic backgrounds, poor audiences "could all together identify in the 1930s with Jim Crow, Bone Squash, and Jumbo Jim, then in the forties with Tambo and Bones." To them, the black figure was not only sympathetic, but liberating, as the perpetually underestimated Jim Crow subverted the establishment with cleverness and wit: "Hated

everywhere, he could be championed everywhere alike” (Lhamon 44). However, this line of reasoning must be taken in balance with the truth that blackface performers portrayed many of their characters as unintelligent, and that the nature of minstrelsy was to trivialize slavery. A major draw of minstrelsy was in its ability to ridicule African Americans, thus soothing working class whites’ anxiety over black domination of the workforce. How much appeal was in ridicule vs. identification was dependent upon audience tastes and the style of individual performers.

Poor whites and blacks were tied to each other in antebellum culture, most especially in regards to Irish immigrants and their children. In many American cities, Irish and African Americans communities shared complicated relationships, alternating between friendship and hatred. The scorn cast on these groups by mainstream American opinion and their similarly high levels of poverty led the two groups to have much in common, including frequenting the same social settings. According to Robert Cantwell, the slang term “smoked Irishman” was synonymous with “Negro” in the nineteenth century (262). However, closeness did not always equate to friendliness, and frequently violence broke out between the groups. Irish Americans tended to vote for proslavery Democrats and competed for the same jobs as blacks. In 1833, an Englishman visiting Boston remarked, “nearly all of [the Irish], who have resided there any length of time, are more bitter and severe against the blacks than the native whites themselves” (qtd. in Runcie 198). Regardless, cultural exchange between the two communities was inevitable and became yet another source for minstrelsy. Many minstrel pioneers, including Stephen Foster and George Christy, were of Irish ancestry and grew up observing elements of both Irish and black culture. Observable elements of Irish tradition in

minstrelsy include the rowdy buffoonery of low comedies and the incorporation of brogues into the acts.

After spending most of the 1830s and 40s as the entertainment of the lower class, minstrelsy underwent a rapid transformation around 1850. National tastes were changing. The slavery debate was intensifying, creating a demand for the portrayal of sympathetic slaves in not just abolitionist tracts but also in popular media, including novels. Enterprising minstrel performers, chief among them Stephen Foster, altered the minstrel form to satisfy changing cultural desires. The new minstrelsy was emotional, downplaying sex and crudity in favor of nostalgia and romanticism. While plantation life was still often portrayed as happy and charming, slaves were more likely than ever to express a desire for freedom, although skits did not depict them as actively working towards that end. Antislavery in minstrelsy was usually not a call for social change, but an appeal to the audience's emotion, as Robert Nowatzki recounts: "In general, minstrel songs using this antislavery trope did not seriously threaten the moral basis of slavery or argue for abolition; rather, they demonstrate how minstrelsy shared tropes and rhetoric with abolitionism without committing itself to the movement" (15). It was a winning formula. Within the space of a few short years, minstrelsy grew from the pastime of the underprivileged to an international phenomenon.

Successful blackface performers took in enormous earnings and were given previously unheard of job security: Christy's Minstrels performed at New York's Mechanics' Hall for a full seven years (March 1847 to July 1854). Minstrel merchandise began to appear, most notably songbooks filled with popular ditties. This was how Firth and Pond, best known as Stephen Foster's publisher, brought in a yearly revenue of \$70,000 (Lott 176). An 1854 article in *The Journal of Music* lamented, "Fashion sent her cohorts to mingle with the

unwashed million at the shrine of Gumbo, and negro sheet-music had immense sales, being found upon almost every piano in the land” (Obituary 118). Minstrelsy would continue to grow after receiving its most influential source material: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Minstrelsy developed side-by-side with American abolitionism and elements of one often found their way into the other. Both portrayed African Americans as likable, if simple-minded and it was not unheard of for abolitionist meetings to incorporate song and humor. Before long, anti-abolitionists would mock abolitionists by comparing their meetings to blackface performances. An anonymous letter contained in the Harvard Theatre Collection entitled “Negro Minstrelsy” includes the quote: “Ive [sic] often paid a quarter to see a white man blacked up, but it’s the first and last I shall ever shell out to see a regular blackamoor,’ said a friend of ours who went to see Fred Douglass the other night.” For all her work to end slavery in America, Harriet Beecher Stowe, like many other abolitionists, presented black people in a condescending manner not unlike minstrel performers.

Chapter 3: Minstrel Characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Uncle Tom's Cabin enjoyed success far beyond any previous abolitionist writing, perhaps because the novel was a mixture of already popular literary styles, such as sentimentalism and domestic fiction. But much of the novel's appeal can be traced to its mingling of familiar minstrel entertainment with abolitionist principles. At first glance, the two formats seem incompatible. Minstrel shows often portrayed an idealized vision of slavery, while abolitionists chronicled the cruel reality of slave life. Yet the rhetoric of both parties comes together in surprising ways. Both minstrel practitioners and white abolitionist writers implicitly assumed the inferiority of African Americans, the former through mockery and the latter through condescension. Blackface minstrel characters, before and after the performance style's shift to sentimentality, invariably spoke in a dialect designed to showcase their lack of education, and they were often portrayed as being simple minded and juvenile. Such characterization remained a staple of minstrelsy throughout its existence, but was joined by a new wave of characters several years before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made its debut. In addition to the wisecracking Jim Crows and Sambos were likable, if unintelligent, slaves yearning for freedom. For example, William Clifton's 1849 number "Dearest Lilla" presents a slave's sorrow at being separated from his loved one:

I hab but dese few moments,
 To bid a last farewell;
 De grief dat dis poor darkie feel,
 Dis heart alone can tell.

Tales of slavery's division of families and lovers was a common topic exploited by abolitionists as well as sentimental blackface performers. In this way, minstrelsy shifted its focus from mockery to pity and began to more closely resemble abolitionist rhetoric, though minstrel performers did so to move audiences to tears, not political activism; however, these pitiful slaves were attractive to Stowe and became the model for many of her characters, most notably Uncle Tom.

When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published as a standalone novel in 1852, minstrelsy was more popular than ever before. Evangelically-minded Americans like Stowe were often critical of the theatre. Upon being asked by publisher Asa Hutchinson for permission to dramatize Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe replied in a letter:

If the barrier which now keeps young people of Christian families from theatrical entertainments is once broken down by the introduction of respectable and moral plays, they will then be open to all the temptations of those who are not such, as there will be, as the world now is, five bad plays to one good (qtd. in Wagenknecht 132)

However, despite her aversion to "theatrical entertainments," Stowe would have been familiar with minstrel conventions because it had saturated American culture. Blackface was big business. Merchants made fortunes from minstrel show merchandise including minstrel sheet music, make up kits, posters, cookie jars, collectable plates, confectionaries, toys, banks, and statuettes. Nathaniel Hawthorne famously includes Jim Crow gingerbread men in *The House of the Seven Gables*. For a time, it was trendy among aristocrats to play the banjo. As Stowe scholar Sarah Meer wrote in *Uncle Tom Mania*, "By the time Stowe began her book blackface had permeated U.S. culture, and both its icons and versions of its acts could

be found everywhere. . . . Moreover, minstrel show songs were available as sheet music, its jokes and sketches were published in books, and devotees admiringly repeated its material on the streets” (23). Regardless of Stowe’s opinion on the theatre, minstrel shows are well-represented in her novel.

Minstrelsy appears in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* during the first scene of the first chapter, in which Mr. Shelby introduces little Harry to the slave trader Haley as “Jim Crow” and entices the boy into performing what could accurately be called a miniature minstrel show. Harry’s performance begins with a round of singing and dancing with “one of those wild, grotesque songs common to the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.” Immediately thereafter, the boy presented a round of mimicry, another staple of minstrel shows. In this case, he adopted the guise of a black prayer leader, a frequent minstrel character: “The boy drew his chubby face down to a formidable length, and commenced toning a psalm through his nose, with imperturbable gravity.” As in all minstrel shows, the performer was paid, in this case with raisins and a wedge of orange (3-4).

Mr. Shelby may have been humane in comparison to Stowe’s other slaveholding characters, but the condescension he shows in the first chapter complicates his character. He throws small treats on the floor for Harry to pick up, as if the boy were an animal. Perhaps Mr. Shelby thought of Harry only as a source of entertainment, making it easier to remove him from his mother’s custody. This could easily be interpreted as Stowe’s critique of minstrelsy’s dehumanizing nature, desensitizing northern whites from the cruel realities of slavery. Robert Nowatzki noted that both “Topsy and Harry are compared to Jim Crow, and,

perhaps not coincidentally, these comparisons come at times when their status as chattels is foregrounded—right before Harry is sold and just after Topsy is purchased” (162).

Chapter one’s first scene shows that Stowe was familiar with typical minstrel fare, though it also raises the question of whether Stowe thought she was realistically depicting black culture, since her comment that Harry performed “wild, grotesque songs common to the negroes” seems to be meant sincerely, not as a tongue-in-cheek description. However, it wouldn’t be like Stowe to present minstrelsy without some sort of complication. We shouldn’t forget that Harry’s performance is what convinces Haley to buy the lad, leading to Eliza’s desperate flight, or that Shelby’s treatment of Harry more as a performing pet than a child ends with him quickly, if reluctantly, agreeing to sell the boy.

W.T. Lhamon believes Harry held a special meaning for Stowe, that his amateur attempts at minstrelsy mirrored her own. According to his reading,

the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* projects herself into one of its least powerful characters. She portrays his plight—and escape—as her own. Harry is rewarded for playing at blackness with being sold down river. Then he is rewarded for playing at femaleness [his final escape disguise] with being delivered to Canada, finally a free person (98).

Harry was a character defined in the novel by mimicry. Whether or not Stowe used Harry as a stand-in for her own anxieties over co-opting minstrelsy, the character throughout is associated with mimicry in one form or another. Lending support to Lhamon’s theory, Harry briefly takes on a new name while in his female disguise: Harriet.

Following the opening nod to minstrelsy, Stowe continues to infuse her novel with minstrel influences, especially in her characterization of blacks. Many of these share traits

with black stereotypes in popular culture and with the black characters who were staples on the minstrel stage.

It does not take an experienced critical theorist to notice the similarities between the characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and stock minstrel characters. Aunt Chloe, who seemingly values her master's son more than her own children, perfectly fills the role of the mammy. Sam and George are both Sambos, though Sam later channels Zip Coon by giving a mock stump speech to his fellow slaves. Then there is the troublemaking, hyperactive pickaninny Topsy, who would become one of the most recognizable and heavily marketed of Stowe's characters. Stowe's use of minstrel characters has opened the novel to severe criticism. Contemporary readers may be tempted to take the view of J.C. Furnas, who lamented Stowe's "wrongheadedness, distortions and wishful thinkings about Negroes in general and American Negroes in particular that still plague us today" (8). This line of reasoning is not without justification. Stowe, like most white abolitionists, held romantic visions of black people. By borrowing from minstrelsy, Stowe appeared to be endorsing stereotypes as having a basis in reality.

However, a close reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reveals deceptive complexity behind Stowe's black characters. "Today, [Stowe's] black characters such as the almost savage Topsy and the saintly Uncle Tom strike us as flat caricatures," writes John Rausbaugh. "But in light of much of the minstrel-show foolery that was happening onstage when the book first appeared, Stowe's insistence on their humanity was quite a progressive statement" (156-57). For example, Sam and Andy, as mentioned above, are Sambos. This particular stereotype was characterized by a state of perpetual adolescence, laziness, and the inability to think of a life outside bondage. Sambos alleviated white guilt, both northern and southern, of the

mistreatment of slaves by portraying them as comical and carefree. Equating slaves to overgrown children was also central to the “paternal institution” argument of slavery, that the institution gave the simple, defenseless creatures protection and made them useful members of society.

Stowe manipulates her readers by initially presenting Sam and Andy as lazy and carefree, only to reveal that the slaves were using the Sambo stereotype to avert attention from their intelligent schemes. Much of this character development happens in chapter six, wherein the Shelby family find out that Eliza has run away with her son rather than leaving him at the mercy of the slaver Haley. Sam and Andy are instructed by Mr. Shelby to help Haley track down Eliza. But before they leave, Mrs. Shelby, who favors Eliza’s escape, has a word with Sam: “Well, Sam, you are to go with Mr. Haley, to show him the road, and help him. Be careful of the horses, Sam; you know Jerry was a little lame last week; don’t ride them too fast” (41).

Obviously, Mrs. Shelby is asking Sam to impede the search for Eliza and Harry, an insinuation which Sam understands: “Missis wants to make time,--dat ar’s clar to der most or’nary ‘bserver. I jis make a little for her. Now, you see, get all dese yer hosses loose, caperin’ permiscus round dis yer lot and down to de wood dar, and I spec Mas’r won’t be off in a hurry” (42). The pair take their time capturing the horses, then cause Haley’s horse to throw him off by way of a beech nut under the saddle, delaying the search for several hours. Later, in chapter seven, Sam and Andy use misdirection to slow Haley’s progress, but are unable to keep the search party from arriving at Eliza’s location. By contriving to have his hat blown off, Sam alerts Eliza to the danger, allowing her to keep one step ahead of her pursuers and cross the nearby Ohio River into the free states. Thus, Sam and Andy succeeded

in helping their friend escape enslavement and the heartache of losing a child. Haley, however, continues to view the two as simpletons, unaware that they were the instruments of his defeat. Stowe's reversal of the Sambo from bumbling simpleton to clever trickster challenges the assumption of black stupidity and proposes that African Americans are more intelligent than they are given credit for being. Slaves are far from helpless, the author asserts, and the patriarchal institution is not only unwarranted, it leads intelligent blacks to feign Sambo-like personalities.

Sam later adopts the minstrel presence of Zip Coon when recounting the day's events to his fellow slaves. Zip Coon's function was to lampoon free blacks in the north, which allayed northern whites' fears of enterprising blacks assuming control over communities and providing employment competition with their Caucasian counterparts. To southerners, the stereotype was reassuring, because it backed up common wisdom that blacks could not succeed on their own and needed white guidance to serve a worthy purpose.

From the moment Sam hears of Uncle Tom being sold to Haley, he sets about conspiring. While Sam never uses his creativity to attempt escape, he does wish his position in servitude to be as comfortable and respected as possible. As Jason Richards points out,

Tom's absence has created a "political" opening on the plantation, and Sam thinks that by helping Mrs. Shelby he can fill that vacancy. His instincts are correct, because after he helps Eliza escape, Mrs. Shelby sends him to Tom's cabin for a victory feast . . . [where he commands] as much attention as Tom had when he once ministered prayers for the cabin. Critics, however, have missed the extraordinary implication of Sam's usurpation. By replacing Uncle Tom, Sam in effect becomes "Uncle Sam." (210)

Likening Black Sam to Uncle Sam not only challenges the notion of a slave as simple minded, but also presents the reader with the provocative image of a black man entering a political environment. In short, Sam hid behind caricature to slyly achieve his goals.

Meanwhile, George Harris, Eliza's mulatto husband, literally hides his face to reach freedom. In chapter eleven, the reader is introduced to an elegant stranger, "very tall, with a dark, Spanish complexion, fine expressive black eyes, and close-curling hair, also of a glossy blackness" (97). Before long, it is revealed that the stranger is, in fact, George Harris in makeup. A black (or mulatto) man having to blacken up to pass as white lampoons the absurd nature of color-based assumptions. It also subtly recalls the image of yet another minstrel archetype, as Jason Richards again notes:

George's cool charade conjures the potent energies of Long Tail Blue, the more serious representation of free and enterprising blacks, who later morphed into the laughable Zip Coon in response to fears of black ambition. . . . George Harris in blackface epitomizes the kind of self-mastery Blue embodied. Because George exemplifies self-achievement, Blue is his logical minstrel equivalent. And, in keeping with George's northern character, Blue is wholly urban, the embodiment of free blacks succeeding up north. (215-16)

Stowe's employment of Zip Coon is troublesome, though, because she does not wholly subvert the stereotype. Sam is, from start to finish, a self-centered character and his plantation politics are both disingenuous and comical. Yet Stowe later presents freed slaves succeeding in the north with George Harris, his family and friends. These successful characters are, however, all mulattos and quadroons, as opposed to "pure black" characters like Sam. Stowe, like most white abolitionists, believed that blacks with prominent African

features were less likely to succeed because of white prejudice, although they vigorously opposed enslavement as a solution.

Long Tail Blue is also present in Adolph, the personal manservant of Augustine St. Clare. While Adolph is a slave, unlike Blue, he enjoys the high-society afforded to the chattel of New Orleans. Adolph is a dandy, always dressing in style and speaking with eloquence. With Adolph, Stowe takes Long Tail Blue and set him aside a white slave-owner. Ironically, Adolph fit the role of master better than St. Clare. Adolph never appears drunk, he does what he can to keep the house in order while his master neglects imposing discipline, and he looks down on other, darker slaves, including the suicidal, alcoholic Prue: “Disgusting old beast!” said Adolph. “If I was her master, I’d cut her up worse than she is” (196). While Adolph is largely a comic relief character, Stowe also used him to blur the lines between master and slave, destabilizing the theory behind race-based slavery. “Adolf,” says Jason Richards, “simultaneously subverts and complies with racial hierarchies. He challenges the color line through mimicry, yet he is highly conformist in his genteel attitudes” (214).

More importantly, Adolf engages in the sort of mimicry and impersonation central to minstrelsy. When we first meet him, the slave is dressed in his master’s clothing; as he explains, “this vest all stained . . . of course, a gentleman in Master’s standing never wears a vest like this” (151). Everything about Adolf, from his clothing to his manner of speech, is a co-opting of upper-class white society, a reversal of the white performers mimicking the personae of black slaves. Augustine St. Clare comments that Adolf “has so long been engaged in imitating my graces and perfections, that he has, at last, really mistaken himself for his master” (160). When St. Clare dies, this delusion breaks down and Adolf panics, realizing he has all the vulnerabilities of any other enslaved chattel. His fears are justified:

he is soon stripped of his fanciful attire and sold to an unknown buyer. Stowe's use of Adolf is troublesome, because his cruelty towards fellow slaves makes it tempting to say he got what he deserved. Moreover, the character doesn't stray far from his minstrel roots, for he remains throughout a mockery of blacks who attempt to infiltrate the upper class. But delusions of grandeur aside, Adolf showed genuine talent for organizing a household and, if his situation had been different, it seems clear he could have been far more productive as a free man. And the pathos of his eventual fate leave readers with an unexpected compassion for Adolf that they were never asked to feel for the minstrel Zip Coon.

Sambo and Quimbo, Simon Legree's vicious overseers, owe less to minstrelsy than most of the preceding examples, but subtle blackface elements can be found in their presentation. Together, they are the most bestial and frightening black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with descriptions focusing on their "coarse, dark, heavy features; their great eyes, rolling enviously on each other; their barbarous, guttural, half-brute intonation; their dilapidated garments fluttering in the wind" (315). Of particular note in this excerpt is how the reference to "great eyes" conjures images of racist art and minstrel merchandise which grotesquely caricatured black people with pop eyes peeking out from solid black faces. Stowe later describes Sambo and Quimbo as "sooty wretches" (323), appropriate considering soot and burnt cork were essential to the minstrel performer's make-up kit. The two are also associated with a shamanistic kind of performance, as Legree orders Sambo and Quimbo "to sing and dance one of their hell dances [to] keep off these horrid notions" of guilt that he is experiencing (341).

As stereotypically as the pair is presented, however, they too subvert expectations. Rather than pure evil, the two are depicted as men corrupted into beasts by a white owner

who deliberately transforms his chattel into creatures who reflect his own perversions. In his “paternal” care, they take on the “fiendish character which Legree gave them” (323), making them victims as much as perpetrators. But reformation and conversion to Christianity at the hands of Uncle Tom show them to be men with the potential to hold Christian values; it is slavery that has turned them from virtuous men to licentious sadists.

Stowe’s manipulation of stereotyping and reader expectations was not limited to male characters. Aunt Chloe is introduced as a classic Mammy, a stereotype with unusually long-lasting appeal thanks to its use in food and household product advertising. The Mammy is motherly, combining maternal love with stern domestic principals. Her loyalty towards her owners usurps even that of her own children and she takes joy in serving the white family, never questioning her enslavement. Northern and southern whites alike were assured through this stereotype that slave women were happy in their roles. The Mammy’s “mythology was created, according to scholars, before the Civil War, as a southern rebuttal to Northern charges of sexual predation on black women—she was a counterbalance to the octoroon mistress” (Patton). In place of the victimized woman bound to sexual servitude, northerners could imagine the jolly, overweight, non-sexualized Mammy, loved by all as the second mother to the grateful slaveholding family.

In reality, most black women could not hope for such esteem, and the Mammy caricature was almost entirely fictional. Frederick Douglass took particular offence at the stereotype and recounted the more common fate of his grandmother in his 1845 autobiography:

She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; . . .

they took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die! (283-84)

Aunt Chloe, it first appears, need not fear such realistic ingratitude. As a representative of the Mammy archetype, she was practically assured protection by her master and mistress. To Chloe, members of the Shelby family are more akin to friends than oppressors. When her husband is sold, however, we see something new and seemingly uncharacteristic. While she has no power over the situation and does not interfere in the loss of her husband Tom, she does make her outrage known. In one memorable scene, she expresses her anguish to her baby daughter: “Ay, crow away, poor critter!” said Aunt Chloe; “ye’ll have to come to it, too! Ye’ll live to see yer husband sold, or mebbe be sold yerself; and these yer boys, they’s to be sold, I s’ pose, too, jest like as not, when dey gets good for something’; an’t no use in niggers havin’ nothin’!” (87). For all the sentimental ballads and appeals to pathos for which minstrel shows were known, it would have been highly unusual for a perpetually happy Mammy to protest the actions of her masters and lament her family’s enslavement. Stowe introduces what seemed a stock character in Chloe, only to reveal a depth of emotion in her. Chloe’s sorrowful reaction shows that black women, even in the mildest forms of slavery, are vulnerable to being tragically affected by the institution.

Of all the memorable characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, few received as much public attention as Topsy, the mischievous, yet charming pickaninny. “One Topsy is worth a dozen little Evas” declared a book review in *Putnam’s Monthly* (qtd. in Briggs 101) and the character remains among the most memorable today. As much as audiences were meant to rejoice at Topsy’s eventual reform, they also took a secret delight in her prior antics. For

several chapters after her introduction, Topsy is portrayed as a menace, tearing up the St. Clare estate and humorously confounding her would-be savior, Miss Ophelia. Topsy's athletic and comical nature would be right at home on the minstrel stage, carrying all the classic traits of a minstrel performer: "Her talent for every species of drollery, grimace, and mimicry,—for dancing, tumbling, climbing, singing, whistling, imitating every sound that hit her fancy,—seemed inexhaustible" (Stowe 226).

Topsy also takes part in a common minstrel sketch, the comic verbal sparring match between the end man and interlocutor. This act, as done by minstrel performers, was a parody of the Platonic rhetorical scenario wherein two equally matched intellectuals (interlocutors) debated over control of the state. In minstrelsy, one of the interlocutors was replaced by an "end man," an uneducated black person with poor language skills. What made this act so subversive was that the interlocutor invariably loses to the interlocutor. "As with most blackface," explains Meer, "the weight of the comedy varied in different performances, but often the jibes were not only directed at 'black' misuse of language but also worked to undercut the genteel airs of the interlocutor" (31). So it was with Topsy (end man) and Miss Ophelia (interlocutor). For example, when Miss Ophelia recites for the girl a line from the *New England Primer*—"Our first parents, being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the state wherein they were created"—Topsy responds by asking if the state was Kentucky: "Dat state dey fell out of. I used to hear Mas'r tell how we came down from Kintuck" (329). Yet Stowe occasionally subverts Topsy's minstrel wordplay to disturb the reader, as when the girl declares she "Never was born" (221). The absurdity of her statement "is intensified by pathos: she has been 'raised by a speculator,' and so her ignorance of her birth reflects the slave owner's indifference to her humanity" (Meer 40).

Stowe implies that Topsy's earliest years were defined by abuse, which explains the girl's destructive behavior. Love, long denied her by the cruelties of slavery, is the missing ingredient needed for Topsy to change from caricature to a character white readers could identify with their own children.

At first glimpse, Topsy seems like a one-dimensional minstrel acrobat, but she begins to change when Eva avows that she loves Topsy and desperately wants her to be good. All at once, Topsy transforms: "The round, keen eyes of the black child were overcast with tears;—large, bright drops rolled heavily down, one by one, and fell on the little white hand. Yes, in that moment, a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of her heathen soul!" (258) From then on, Topsy tries to give up her aimless, troublesome ways and please Miss Ophelia. Likewise, Ophelia redoubles her efforts to raise Topsy right, this time basing their relationship on love. She tells the child, "I can love you; I do, and I'll try to help you to grow up a good Christian girl" (273).

Readers were used to seeing minstrel characters like Topsy, who lived only to satisfy their hedonistic desires, but seeing actual depth in this type of character was something new. Stowe portrayed Topsy not as a one-dimensional brat, but a perpetually abused child who simply needed to be shown kindness and Christian goodwill. Tearing down the façade of an acrobatic minstrel character to reveal the emotionally damaged personality surprised readers and made clear the effect of slavery's physical and emotional abuses. Miss Ophelia, meanwhile, mirrored the false judgment readers were meant to give Topsy, assuming she was simple and amusing only to be confronted with complexity and a character who elicited their compassion. Rather than believing slaves to be the two-dimensional stereotypes of

minstrelsy, Stowe argued, readers should see them as people diminished and defined by slavery, who needed and merited compassion, love, and freedom.

By far Stowe's most controversial character was Uncle Tom. For most of the novel, readers follow him as he is shunted from home to home, each worse than the last. Like many of Stowe's characters, Tom is a representative of a concept, Christian selflessness in his case. Critics often point to him as simplistic, having no personality beyond that which he symbolizes. Even more frequently, Uncle Tom is criticized for his submissiveness, which causes commentators to call him just that, an "Uncle Tom," a black man who loves his oppressors and unquestioningly follows their commands. While this criticism is not without merit, it ignores important details. Likewise, Uncle Tom's association with minstrelsy is troublesome, because the character was not based upon any minstrel archetypes but became deeply imbedded in the minstrel tradition after the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is good to remember that historically the term "Uncle Tom" does not reflect the character as he appeared in Stowe's novel, but the heavily altered variant that later appeared on the minstrel stage. It may be true that Stowe's Tom loved and obeyed his masters, but context separates him from the stereotype.

From his introduction in chapter four, Tom shows no ill-will towards those who have enslaved him, nor does he ever attempt to escape. However, this resignation is due less to feelings of natural inferiority than to genuine paternal affection. His role within the Shelby household is not just as a servant, but also a father figure for two generations of the family. When Chloe laments the injustice Mr. Shelby has done by selling Tom, he reprimands her: "And I tell ye, Chloe, it goes agin me to hear one word agin Mas'r. Wan't he put in my arms a baby?—it's natur I should think a heap of him. And he couldn't be spected to think so

much of poor Tom” (85-86). While this seems very close to the servile attitude of the twentieth-century Uncle Tom’s stereotype, Stowe mitigates this image by reminding readers that Tom has been Mr. Shelby’s caretaker and friend since Tom was a young boy and Shelby an infant.

Another common complaint about Stowe’s characterization of Tom is that she strips him of masculinity. This is true: Uncle Tom’s interactions with young George Shelby, for instance, come across as motherly and feminine. Just before being driven out of Kentucky, Tom shares a tender moment with the young master, “stroking the boy’s fine, curly head with his large, strong hand, but speaking in a voice as tender as a woman’s” (91). During this powerful scene, he fusses over George like a mother sending her child to school: “And be careful of yer speaking, Mas’r George. Young boys, when they comes to your age, is willful sometimes—it’s natur they should be” (91). Later, Tom will seem equally womanly in his relationships with Eva and Augustine St. Clare. A possible explanation for the feminization of Uncle Tom is that Stowe’s understanding of African Americans was limited to her friendships with female servants. Perhaps she gave her title character personality traits and relationship ties based on those blacks she knew best and felt closest to. If so, then she must have felt deeply about these women from her childhood, for in her novel, the love Uncle Tom felt for young master George was reciprocated: “before [Tom] could fairly awake from his surprise, young Master George sprang into the wagon, threw his arms tumultuously round his neck, and was sobbing and scolding with energy” (90).

Another reason for Tom’s lack of hostility towards his oppressors comes from his status as a Christ figure, defined by sacrifice and a love for everyone, including those who have enslaved him. Almost immediately after his introduction, Uncle Tom is associated with

the Scripture, leading the Shelby slaves in prayer. Stowe writes, “Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself” (27). Soon afterwards he begins to take on his Christ-like role of sacrificial victim. By allowing himself to be separated from his family, Tom ensures that the rest of the slaves will not suffer the same fate and the Shelby household won’t fall into bankruptcy. Early on, he is given the opportunity to escape his fate by running with Eliza and her son, which he refuses, saying “If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold. I s’pose I can b’ar it as well as any on ‘em” (36).

Stowe makes clear that Tom’s unwillingness to run or fight his oppressors should not be read as a sign of weakness. During his time on the Legree plantation Tom bravely adopts a lifestyle of resistance, but does so through Christian non-violence. He consistently defies the will of Legree by refusing to behave cruelly towards his fellow slaves and doesn’t fight Sambo and Quimbo because he felt to do so would betray his beliefs. From Stowe’s point of view, Tom is not a meek slave to be pitied, but a strong man to be emulated.

As tempting as it is to declare Harriet Beecher Stowe was free from prejudice, to dismiss all her racial romanticism as subversions of minstrelsy’s conventions, this claim would be excessive. Stowe was informed by the culture of her time, including the near-universal (at least among white society) assumption that blacks were an intellectually inferior race. Although the author thought herself something of an expert on black people and their ways, her interactions with African Americans were mostly limited to female servants. Taking inspiration from minstrelsy was one convenient way for Stowe to fill in the gaps of her understanding of the people she was trying to help, as well as a skillful technique for

entertaining and playing with audience expectations. Minstrelsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the attractive and complicated packaging Stowe uses to make her abolitionist arguments more palatable to readers. Beneath the comical, though subverted, minstrel characters lies a vast array of anti-slavery messages, each countering proslavery claims.

Chapter 4: Racial Essentialism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

The meeting point between blackface minstrelsy, white abolitionism, and Harriet Beecher Stowe is racial essentialism, the belief in biologically inherited traits peculiar to each race. Like minstrel depictions of blacks, many pieces of abolitionist propaganda—including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—were dependent on the notion that blacks were inherently more simple than whites. In minstrelsy, this belief manifested itself in comic skits; in abolition literature this belief underlies the paternal tone of many publications. Harriet Beecher Stowe's racial essentialism is evident in this statement from *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "The Negro race is confessedly more simple, docile, child-like and affectionate, than other races; hence the divine graces of love and faith, when in-breathed by the Holy Spirit, find their natural temperament a more congenial atmosphere" (25).

As this quote demonstrates, Stowe's essentialism was usually meant to be complimentary, unlike its role in minstrel entertainments. Nonetheless it distanced black people from their intellectual potential, an unintended disservice to both Stowe's novel and the abolition cause in general. Scholar Lynda Hinkle explains it thus: "Stowe's work capitalizes on and enervates the dominant abolitionist rhetoric of paternalism and the moral superiority of the white abolitionist to not only the slave-holder, but in many respects to the slave" (1).

Race was a defining trait for all of Stowe's characters, so she made sure to indicate the degree of "blackness" of those of African descent. Uncle Tom, for instance, is described as having "a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave

and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence” (19). Similarly, Mr. Haley’s field hand Sam is introduced as “Black Sam, as he was commonly called, from his being about three shades blacker than any other son of ebony on the place” (39). A memorable example of this essentialism comes during the first meeting between Topsy and Eva: “There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor” (224-25). While this description attributes some positive qualities to Topsy, the comparison plays up the physical differences between the two and Eva comes across looking far more attractive.

Stowe’s judgments about the links between race and character did not apply just to her fully black characters, but also to those of mixed-race, who she usually portrays as intellectually superior to the dark-skinned characters. Their superiority includes social as well as intellectual development: the defining characterizations of Eliza and George Harris, for instance, are explained thusly: “The traveler in the south must often have remarked that peculiar air of refinement, that softness of voice and manner, which seems in many cases to be a particular gift to the quadroon and mulatto” (10).

Stowe made clear her African American characters’ skin tones because their personalities reflect their ancestry. Dark-skinned characters speak in thick, uneducated dialects and make the best they can out of slave life rather than run or resist oppression. Mulattos and quadroons, however, typically speak eloquently and are the only characters to attempt escape. Stowe’s intelligent mixed-race characters—Eliza, George Harris, Emmeline, Cassy—embody one of her most powerful arguments against slavery, that the institution stifled the potential ingenuity of geniuses like George Harris, an inventor not allowed to

pursue his aptitude, or the potential maternal instincts of women like Cassy, a mother who kills her infant to spare him the pains of enslavement. Topsy, however, is an exception to Stowe's stereotyping of dark-skinned blacks: she begins by speaking in heavy dialect and misunderstanding much that Ophelia tries to teach her. But by the novel's end, she has proven herself to be one of the most intelligent of the novel's black characters, so adept at learning that Ophelia plans to send her to good Northern schools.

Skin color also seems to explain why some of Stowe's slaves ran from bondage and others did not, as when dark-skinned Uncle Tom refuses to run but encourages fair-skinned Eliza to flee, saying it "an't in natur for her to stay" (36). George and Eliza, Cassy and Emmaline are the only slaves who try to flee enslavement in the novel—and all are mulattoes who are almost light enough to pass. And George is the only character who expresses a willingness to harm, even kill, any white person who tries to re-enslave his fugitive family members.

However, Stowe doesn't reflect the belief that light-skinned blacks were more courageous than those with distinctly African appearances: Uncle Tom, the Christian martyr, is the bravest character in the novel. As the property of Simon Legree he chooses time and again to suffer so that other enslaved victims will be spared punishment. Legree delivers an ultimatum in an attempt to erode the protagonist's principles: if Tom doesn't reveal the location of Cassy and Emmeline's hiding place, warns Legree, he will have Sambo and Quimbo beat him to death. Tom is never tempted to betray his friends, and his concern is not for his own well-being but for the spiritual state of his oppressor. He tells Legree, "Do the worst you can . . . my troubles'll be over soon; but, if ye don't repent, yours won't *never* end!" (376). Although Legree is momentarily stunned by these words, his rage overcomes

him and he begins the beating himself. However, Tom's courage and forgiveness make such an impact on Sambo and Quimbo that after they savagely finish the beating Legree began they repent their evil ways. They minister to the dying Tom, admitting that "Sartin, we's been doin' a drefful wicked thing!" (377). They ask Tom to tell them about Jesus, and despite being near death he does his best to convert them. His deathbed wish is for their spiritual salvation: "I'd be willing to bar' all I have, if it'll only bring ye to Christ! O, Lord! Give me these two more souls, I pray!" (378). Not only does this scene showcase Tom's Christ-like forgiveness and dedication to his faith, but the power of Christianity to redeem even the most violent and brutish. The scene has all the sentimentality of the most maudlin of minstrel skits, but in Stowe's hand the sentimentality is not just to evoke tears but to effect social change.

Often Stowe's essentialism took the form of condescending compliments paid towards African Americans. Peppered throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are sentences postulating Stowe's theories on the nature of black people. Never does she claim these black traits to be the results of social constructs or imposed limitations, but instead posits that they are naturally inherited. One striking example occurs during the religious meeting in chapter four, when Stowe explains that the black guests were fond of "Jordan's banks," and "Canaan's fields," and the "New Jerusalem," because "the negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature" (26). Interestingly, all these songs have to do with the Hebrews escaping bondage, perhaps a subtle expression of the otherwise contented slaves' desire for freedom. Yet if Stowe meant for her readers to catch the import of the song selection, she doesn't do much to aid

comprehension, for none of her dark-skinned characters articulate any ulterior motive for their choice of spirituals.

Another trait Stowe attributes unquestioningly to people of African ancestry is loyalty rooted in affection. She writes that “all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong. Their local attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate (86). Tom is her greatest example of a black who exhibits these traits. Despite Stowe’s obvious attempts to compliment blacks here and elsewhere, however, she often makes members of the race seem childlike, a sentiment Stowe makes explicit in chapter eight, where she tells the reader “there is no more use in making believe be angry with a negro than with a child; both instinctively see the true state of the case, through all attempts to affect the contrary” (67).

Romanticizing black people as emotional served an important abolition purpose for Stowe, that of combating the proslavery argument that Africans were incapable of the same depth of feelings as whites. Stowe undercuts this claim in her first chapter by way of Mr. Haley, who justifies his slave trading by saying, “These critters an’t like white folks, you know; they gets over things, only manage right” (5). Her prior description of Haley as crude and offensive makes readers immediately unsympathetic to all he says and stands for. Stowe goes on to litter her novel with examples of blacks who express deep parental and spousal love and intense and lasting grief when their families are separated.

Stowe’s racial essentialism unintentionally widened the gulf between white readers and black slaves—a gulf minstrel shows helped to promote but one the author clearly hoped to lessen. To help bridge that gulf, at key moments in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* she addresses readers directly and invites them to envision themselves in a black character’s position. One

such passage occurs when Tom learns that he has been sold. The slave breaks down in tears as he realizes he will likely never see his wife or children again. Stowe then speaks directly to her readers saying that Tom's tears were

just such tears, sir, as you dropped into the coffin where lay your first-born son; such tears, woman, as you shed when you heard the cries of your dying babe. For, sir, he was a man,—and you are but another man. And, woman, though dressed in silk and jewels, you are but a woman, and, in life's great straits and mighty griefs, ye feel but one sorrow! (36)

The blatant use of plot-evoked (rather than characterization-evoked) emotion to sway readers' sympathies was a standard strategy in the sentimental literature which Stowe emulated and helped popularized, and she uses the genre of sentimentality over and over again not just to promote pity for the enslaved but also to note that basic human responses are the same across the races. Minstrel shows also took advantage of the popularity of sentimentality in creating their skits, which often were designed to evoke tears from audiences, but minstrelsy played on emotion only for the sake of entertainment while Stowe's use of sentiment lent powerful support to her abolition agenda.

Another effective strategy that Stowe used in her novel to bring white readers into the abolition camp was to demonstrate over and over how slavery undermined the values of some of America's most important cultural ideologies—the cults of domesticity, motherhood, and True Womanhood. She shows time and again, for instance, how slavery prevents black women from fulfilling their roles as mothers. In doing so, Stowe assumes that her readers so strongly believe that motherhood is the most important God-given role assigned to women—indeed, that this role defines the gender—that protecting the institution

of motherhood, even black motherhood, trumps protecting the interests of slavery. To help readers think of motherhood as a value that crosses racial barriers, she often asks white mothers to put themselves in the place of their black counterparts. Stowe exploits this strategy to its full effect, for instance, when describing how Eliza marched for hours to protect her child: “If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader to-morrow morning—you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered . . . how fast could *you* walk?” (46).

Throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, stories of mothers being forcibly separated from their children drive home Stowe’s point that slavery attacks the treasured institution of motherhood. Early on, Mr. Haley describes a scene at a slave auction where a mother “squeezed up her child in her arms” until her sold child was forcibly removed, after which “she jest went ravin’ mad, and died in a week” (5). Later, the slave hunter Marks speculates, “If we could get a breed of gals that didn’t care, now, for their young uns...tell ye, I think ‘t would be ‘bout the greatest mod’rn improvement I knows on” (58). By positioning maternal protectiveness as an obstacle to slavery, Stowe hoped to force readers to make a choice between the institution they tolerated/exploited and the womanly quality they so valued.

Stowe likewise demonstrates that slavery is a poison to marriage and domesticity. The sanctity of marriage was constantly under attack by slavery, she shows. One of the biggest motivating factors in George Harris’s decision to escape is the threat that his marriage to Eliza will be dissolved. “Don’t you know” he informs his wife, “that a slave can’t be married? There is no law in this country for that; I can’t hold you for my wife, if [my master] chooses to part us” (16). He then tells Eliza that he has been ordered to “live with another woman” (102)—readers would understand the economy at work here: the new

“marriage” would insure that all resulting offspring will belong to George’s master, not Eliza’s. Slavery’s perversions of marriage, Stowe suggests, undermines one of Americans’ most fundamental institutions.

Slavery does equal damage to another foundational American institution: the family. One of the novel’s opening abolitionist arguments comes when Stowe uses Uncle Tom, Chloe, and their children to demonstrate how slavery brings ruin to their family life. Initially she paints their home life as bucolic: Chloe happily cooks supper while Tom bounces the baby on his knee and the other children play. Young Master George is also present, obviously a frequent and welcomed visitor to the cabin. Slavery is presented here as Southerners often portrayed it, with the affectionate bonds between the farm’s white family and black families in place. Moreover, the uplifting influence of the white family upon their blacks is made clear: Master George is teaching Tom to write. The cabin is comfortable and nicely furnished. The meal is plentiful and more appealing to young George than the one he would have in his own house. Chloe and Tom’s children play and the baby bounces on his father’s knee. Readers will soon realize, however that this scene is designed to portray domestic perfection for the purpose of heightening the emotional impact when Uncle Tom is forced to give up his family.

Stowe’s outrage at slavery’s decimation of the family continues through the entire book, with story after story of husbands sold away from wives, babies pulled from their mother’s arms, siblings separated, children born into enslavement who never know parental love or family life. And she makes clear that because slavery is an economic institution, its operational imperative is profit—and that the exchange of human merchandise is the lifeblood of its profit.

Stowe also argues that slavery is incompatible with the kind of domesticity advocated by her sister Catherine Beecher, whose groundbreaking work on household management elevated housework to a science. Well-run homes, the sisters believed, were not just patriotic—they were as important to national success as well-run businesses. Yet the goals of domestic management are opposite of businesses' money-making practices. Well-run homes are spaces that nurture not only the physical comfort of the family but also its spiritual and ethical values. Stowe's character Dinah, Augustine St. Clare's cook, illustrates slavery's toll on household management. Like all slaves in the St. Claire household, Dinah is pampered and allowed to do as she wishes, making her arrogant and unorganized: "Dinah was mistress of the whole art and mystery of excuse-making in all its branches. . . . [I]f any part of the dinner was a failure, there were fifty indisputably good reasons for it; and it was the fault undeniably of fifty other people" (189). Dinah's satisfaction with sub-par cooking and poor household organization stems from the sanctuary of the home being corrupted by commerce. As Gillian Brown says: "Slavery disregards this opposition between family at home and the exterior workplace. The distinction between family and work is eradicated in the slave, for whom there is no separation between economic and private status" (505). Dinah was not just an eccentric comic relief character, but a quiet warning of the dangers slavery presented to the reader's home-life and all that life represented.

Stowe also stresses how slavery goes against the century's endorsement of True Womanhood, most disturbingly through the sexual abuse of female slaves. On this subject, Stowe is careful not to offend her readers' sense of Victorian decorum while still being truthful about the sexual dangers facing enslaved girls and women. Subtle references to sexual abuse appear in the early chapters, as when George Harris discussed the fate of his

sister who “was whipped, sir, for wanting to live a decent Christian life, such as your laws give no slave girl a right to live” (101). Never once does Stowe include the word “rape,” even when the subject becomes more prominent in the Legree chapters. Emmeline is clearly purchased to serve as Legree’s latest sex slave, and he frequently terrifies her by touching her shoulder and making comments about the role he intends her to fill on his plantation: “I don’t mean to make you work very hard” he tells her. “You’ll have fine times with me, and live like a lady,—only be a good girl” (313). Cassy, the woman Emmeline replaces, is emotionally hardened after years of abuse. She tells Tom, “I could make one’s teeth chatter, if I should only tell what I’ve seen and been knowing to, here,—and it’s no use resisting. Did I *want* to live with him? Wasn’t I a woman delicately bred; and he—God in heaven! What was he, and is he?” (327). Like minstrelsy, Stowe’s novel certainly has its comic moments, but its overall message is grim: slavery will undo the most foundational values that Americans cherish—True Womanhood, domesticity as the conveyor of virtue, marriage, and Christianity itself.

Stowe was willing to consciously borrow characters, humorous skits, stereotypes, and sentimentality from both the American popular culture at large, and specifically from minstrel entertainments. She also unconsciously infused her novel with racial essentialism, some complimentary, some degrading. But throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* she works to make all elements of the novel lend weight to her passionate refutation of slavery as a moral enterprise. In doing so, she bequeathed into popular culture characters that would become as famous as the minstrel show’s blackface Jim Crow. Such popularity soon resulted in the circle of cultural influences becoming completed, as minstrel performers jumped at the opportunity to make Stowe’s characters their own.

Conclusion

Considering the overwhelming success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is not surprising that nineteenth-century entrepreneurs took the initiative and merchandised Stowe's characters. Before long, Uncle Tom products of all varieties were being in stores, including artwork, sculptures, toys, and cookware. The author did not authorize this merchandise nor did she receive compensation, American copyright laws being less stringent in the nineteenth century. No doubt, the lack of income the author received from her bestseller was irritating, but what frustrated her most of all were the countless minstrel adaptations. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* owed a debt to blackface for all the material it co-opted. In return, minstrel performers latched onto the story and its characters, reinterpreting them for decades to the point that the general public forgot what was in Stowe's book and what was created later. According to Kendra Hamilton, "fifty people saw the stage show for every one person who bought or read a copy of the book" (qtd. in Strausbaugh 162). To combat the misinterpretation of her work at the hands of minstrelsy, Stowe produced a dramatic reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, presented by the mulatto actress Mary E. Webb, which was met with mild success (Strausbaugh 165). Despite Stowe's efforts, Uncle Tom became a common minstrel character. The *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, written by Frank Dumont in 1899, even suggests *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a potential sketch (37), and instructs readers how to blacken their faces, and recommends impersonators to add a bald cap and brass spectacles. The result: "you've got an old 'Uncle Tom'" (15).

Scholarship on the “Tom Shows” tends to focus on those which reverse the source material’s antislavery message, and not without good reason: these shows were critical in distorting the general public’s understanding of Stowe’s work. However, there was great variety in Tom Shows, ranging from faithful to the novel, to politically neutral, to proslavery. Perhaps the most accurate retelling of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to appear during Stowe’s lifetime was that of the Boston minstrel troupe Ordway’s Aeolians in 1853. The playbill assured audiences was “in strict Accordance with the Book.” It was also ten tableaux long, making it one of the lengthiest Tom Shows and among the most elaborate, featuring music, dance, Chromotrope, and multiple magic-lantern projections. Ordway’s *Uncle Tom* was explicitly antislavery. Atop the playbill was written a quotation from the novel: “Men do not know what Slavery is and from this arose my desire to exhibit it in a living reality” (403). Most of the book’s main plot points were presented in the various tableaux, including George Harris’s impassioned speech at the Inn and Uncle Tom’s death. Along the way, black characters were not mocked, but portrayed as sympathetic (Meer 69).

Ordway’s take on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a rare example of a minstrel troupe doing justice to Stowe’s message. More often, Tom Shows took neither a pro- or antislavery approach, instead opting for pure entertainment value. Some performances with titles like “Old Dad’s Cabin” and “Aunt Dinah’s Cabin” were not straight adaptations so much as attempts at capitalizing on name recognition and had virtually nothing to do with the original work. When Uncle Tom was employed, he was not portrayed as a serious Christian martyr, but a joking banjo-player having a jolly time on the plantation. Sarah Meer explained explains of these politically neutral Tom Shows: “By not commenting on slavery in such ‘celebrated plantation scene[s]’ they implied that it was unremarkable” (61). By not tackling

the slavery issue while setting these productions amidst slavery, the producers of politically neutral Tom Shows condoned slavery as something innocuous, even fun.

Far more explicit were proslavery Tom Shows. Some, like Sam Sanford's *Happy Uncle Tom; or, Life among the Happy*, openly expressed a division from the source material. The closing song contained the lyrics, "Oh, White Folks, we'll have you know / Dis am not de version of Mrs. Stowe...Wid her de Darks am all unlucky, / But we am de boys of Old Kentucky" (qtd. in Meer 63). The production debuted in 1853, with revivals in 1855 and 1859, and contained many recurring traits of the proslavery Tom Shows. To eliminate the hardship slavery placed on the characters, *Happy Uncle Tom* reversed the novel's tragedies: Uncle Tom doesn't die; George and Eliza are not parted, but married during the performance. Sanford's play is openly hostile towards abolitionists who tempt slaves into running away to misery up north. Sanford's happy darkies sing, "And we care not what de white folks say, / Dey can't get us to run away."

Abolitionists became the antagonists of the Bowery Theatre's 1860 production which, like *Happy Uncle Tom*, was radically different from the source material, though less open about it. In the Bowery version, Uncle Tom is sent into the Free states to rescue a new character, Daisy, who had been kidnapped by abolitionists. There he encounters starving fugitives and uppity blacks before securing Daisy from her captors. The final scene, according to the playbill, is centered around "Uncle Tom's delight in getting back to de Bressed Old Souf" (qtd. in Meer 65). Altering Uncle Tom's opinion from dissatisfaction with slavery to rejection of the abolitionist agenda was common in these plays. Another example is the adaptation performed by Baltimore's Nightingale Serenaders, which included the curiously named song "Aunt Harriet Becha Stowe":

Oh! When I was a picanin, Old Uncle Tom would say,
 Be true unto your Massa, and neber run away,
 He tole me dis at home, he told dis at partin'
 Ned, don't you trust de white folks,
 For dey am quite unsartin. (Soran and Hewitt)

Portraying Uncle Tom as fiercely loyal to his master and content in servitude predicts much of the negative criticism the character received in the twentieth century. Such criticism is just one of many issues plaguing Stowe scholarship. For decades, literary critics have struggled to conclude how to handle *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book seemingly out of place in the contemporary world. Removed from the environment it was designed to change, it is a work which incites mixed emotions in modern readers, both because of its sentimentality and its racism. Similarly, minstrelsy is now universally condemned, but theatrical and literature critics point out the dangers of imposing contemporary values on past art-forms: we become so distracted by the difference in sensibilities that we don't notice the subtleties. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not just a sappy relic loaded with racist stereotypes, just as minstrelsy was not wholly an expression of mockery. Both contained complicated redeeming qualities which nineteenth century audiences were perhaps better equipped to understand than today's consumers.

Yet, even if we attempt to approach these art forms from a nineteenth century perspective, it is still difficult to determine exactly where they stood on race relations. Eric Lott explains this same conundrum:

The reader will have noticed the equivocation in my account: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a break from but also a continuation of blackface minstrelsy;

minstrelsy and Uncle Tom as of equally uncertain provenance. I have found this ambiguity an unavoidable product of the revolutionary 1850s. The fact is that the Tom plays fully revealed this decade's social and racial contradictions, and thus finished off what the minstrel show had unintentionally begun (219).

Nineteenth-century Americans could not decide how to feel about black people or slavery. Southerners could not recognize the sovereignty of blacks without damaging their economy. Northerners looked down at their slaveholding neighbors, but were nervous about the competition of successful African Americans in their home territory. Americans' internal conflict grew only more intense as the century advanced and produced ambiguous forms of entertainment. There was minstrelsy, which ridiculed black people even as it made them sympathetic; there was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other abolitionist publications, which argued for emancipation while trading in stereotypes. An often repeated urban legend suggests that Abraham Lincoln, upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, remarked, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" or some variation thereof (Whicher 563). Fact or folk story, this statement is not too far from the truth. The outrage and confusion which inspired *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were the same bottled emotions which would eventually explode as the Civil War.

From this point of view, minstrelsy and Harriet Beecher Stowe's writing were both expressing the tensions that was building from the perpetually unanswered slavery question. A key difference between minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was that blackface entertainers attempted to ease the tension through comedy, while Stowe inflamed it by tackling controversy head on. In this way, entertainment was both an expression of, and

contributor to, a building national crisis. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and blackface minstrelsy shared so much in common because they were closely related parts of a single concept, expressions of America's contradictory inner-monologue. Entertainment was an early indicator of looming disaster, but few heeded its warning.

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Manuscript Collections

Arthur E. and Eliza Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe

College, Cambridge Massachusetts

-Beecher-Stowe Collection

Boston Public Library

-Anti-Slavery Collection

Harvard Theatre Collection. Houghton Library. Harvard U. Cambridge, Mass.

Starr Sheet Music Collection. Lilly Library. Indiana University. Bloomington, Ind.

Stowe-Day Library, Hartford, Connecticut

-Acquisitions

-Foote Collection

Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown, Connecticut

Vita

Ephraim David Freed was born in Ocala, Florida to Martin and Linda Freed. In December 2010, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Professional Writing from Western Carolina University. He enrolled in Appalachian State University in August 2012 to pursue a Master of Arts degree in English. The M.A. was awarded in May 2014. During his time at Appalachian State University, Mr. Freed worked as a teaching assistant for two semesters before spending a year in the University Writing Center as a consultant.

Mr. Freed currently resides in Maggie Valley, North Carolina and is exploring employment options in education and publishing.