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# A Family Dispute: The African-American Community's Response to Uncle Tom

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A FAMILY DISPUTE:  
THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO UNCLE TOM

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The Graduate School of  
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Of the Requirements for the Degree  
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### Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to understand the complex relationship between the African-American community and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It argues that a large reason for the negative connotation of "uncle Tom" within the African-American community was caused by conflicts between intellectual patterns and traditions of the community and Stowe's vision in her novel. This thesis looks at the key texts in the intellectual history of the African-American community, including the literary responses by African Americans to the novel. This thesis seeks to fill gaps in the history of the African-American community by looking at how members of the community exercised their agency to achieve the betterment of the community, even in the face of white opposition.

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## Introduction

This thesis is driven by a question containing one of the more powerful developments in African-American intellectual and cultural life in the modern era: how is it that the term “Uncle Tom” came to be a degrading pejorative? In modern America, to call an African-American an Uncle Tom is to completely call into question his or her character and identity as an African-American, a term of derision and contempt used by African-Americans to self-police their community. African-American leaders such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X used it prominently against their opponents during the twentieth century as they fought for civil rights. They used it against African-Americans, such as Martin Luther King Jr., for example, who they deemed to be too accommodating to white Americans. However, the smear of “Uncle Tom” as a racial pejorative was not the original usage or image of Uncle Tom. Harriet Beecher Stowe portrayed the character Uncle Tom as a noble Christ-like figure who sacrificed his wellbeing for the greater good of his fellow slaves. Stowe sought to portray Tom as a model for African-Americans to emulate, as well as an example of suffering to engender support from white Americans for the abolitionist cause.

The collision is perhaps easier to see in the modern era. According to Merriam-Webster, an “uncle Tom” is an African-American who is overeager to win the approval of whites. Merriam-Webster first defined “uncle Tom” in the 1920s, decades after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written. But, perhaps surprisingly, the conflict between the pejorative usage of Uncle Tom and Stowe’s Christ-figure protagonist did

not begin in the twentieth century with the Garveyites or with Malcolm X. Rather, it began concurrently with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the nineteenth century. Indeed this thesis argues that change in the connotation of Uncle Tom was rooted to conflicts between Stowe's vision and ideological and intellectual continuities and patterns within the African-American community that existed even before the novel's publication in 1852. The novel, and the image it created, was essentially an interloper in decades of thought and debate among African-Americans.

Stowe's vision came into conflict with these continuities and patterns over issues such as the place of African-Americans in American society, the ways and means of ending slavery, African-American identity, and the ability of African-Americans to improve their station in the United States. Their roots can be traced back as early as the late eighteenth century, to African-American involvement in both the American and Haitian Revolutions. Because of the tension between Stowe's vision and the long-held intellectual continuities in the African-American community, many of the African-American responses to her novel, such as those of Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, sought to counter Stowe's visions and arguments with responses and images of their own.

The general nature of responses to Stowe from African-Americans was often contradictory. For example, Frederick Douglass used "Uncle Tom" in a negative manner when talking with African-American soldiers during the Civil War; but he also offered to play Tom in a theatrical version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the 1893

World's Fair in Chicago. Such contradictions suggest that Uncle Tom was somewhat of a necessary evil for African-Americans. He was a talisman that brought support from white Americans to the plight of African-Americans, but African-Americans also rejected him as a model for their own actions and behavior. Tom was an ideal, but not the ideal that African-Americans desired for themselves. He could be used to show the humanity of African-Americans, especially those enslaved, to white Americans. Douglass, and other African-American leaders, wanted their followers to realize that they could achieve more in life than the loyal and pious servant Tom represented: they could strive for full equality as free Americans. Their greatest earthly goal should be higher than what Tom aspired to be. They could admire some of his qualities, but they did not want to admire him as a whole.

And Uncle Tom was not the only character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rejected by the African-American community; they also turned their backs on one of the novel's other protagonists, the fiery mulatto George Harris. Because his mixed heritage raised implications that he was only successful because of his white father, and because Stowe used Harris to argue for the colonization of African-Americans in Africa, Harris was viewed as potentially harmful to the mission of many black abolitionists and early black nationalists who sought to affirm the identity of African-Americans and their place in the United States. Douglass and Delany both wrote novels of their own that countered Uncle Tom and George Harris with protagonists fully American, fully African-American, and also more aggressive in fighting for their equality and freedom.

It is clear that the conflicts between twentieth-century African-Americans and the novel's archetype were part of the same earlier continuity and pattern. The notions of black power and nationalism that were promoted by Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, and Malcolm X were rooted in the earlier arguments of black abolitionists such as David Walker, Douglass, and Delany. Both the abolitionists and the later nationalists sought to convince African-Americans of the necessity for self-improvement and self-reliance during periods when white Americans viewed them as inferior. Despite the shift of meaning associated with the term "Uncle Tom" in the early twentieth century, the nationalists did not represent a sudden change within the African-American community. Instead, the shift toward the solely pejorative connotation of the term in American culture was a gradual development seeded in the history of the African-American community. It can be argued that black power and black nationalism were products of the nineteenth century and the fight to end slavery.

The work of African-Americans in the earliest years of the abolitionist movement has been generally overlooked in favor of the biracial abolitionist movement of the 1840s and 1850s. That movement—the movement of William Lloyd Garrison, Fredrick Douglass, and John Brown—helped to give rise to the Republican Party and is often treated as a precursor to the Civil War. At a time when the vast majority of anti-slavery whites believed in gradual emancipation, and many in colonization, the earliest African-American abolitionists were some of the first members of the anti-slavery movement to advocate for the immediate end of slavery.



Also, slave revolutionaries such as Nat Turner, the German Coast rebels of Louisiana, and Gabriel Prosser are often not considered as part of the same continuity as the early African-American abolitionists. However, not only were slave rebels and the earliest African-American abolitionists connected to one another through their beliefs in natural rights and liberty, they were also part of the same intellectual patterns as later African-American abolitionists like Douglass, James McCune Smith, and Martin Delany. When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came into conflict with these African-American intellectual continuities, it came into conflict with nearly the entirety of the African-American experience over the previous century. By exploring this continuity at its roots, and in its confrontations with Stowe's vision in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one is able to gain a deeper understanding of the development of black nationalism, the black power movement, and abolitionism.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one of the most popular and influential books of the nineteenth century and of American history. It has been widely discussed in scholarly literature. However, the majority of that discussion has concerned the cultural impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a transatlantic context, the adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in different forms of media such as theater and film, the literary elements of the novel, and the relationship between the novel and Garrison abolitionists.

It is true that the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not limited to the United States, but was also a transatlantic cultural phenomenon. It was one of the first American novels to find any success, let alone best-selling success, in the United

Kingdom. That can be attributed to the strong abolitionist sentiment within the United Kingdom at the time *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written. In fact, numerous American abolitionists went on speaking tours across the United Kingdom, seemingly as a right of passage. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* even had its characters and elements incorporated into the marketing of commercial products that had no relation at all to the novel, or to abolitionism itself—a kind of marketing that would not be out of place in the twenty-first century. The success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also led to numerous reproductions of the novel in theater and, later, in film. The reproductions, especially the theatrical ones, were incredibly popular among all members of society and had a large impact on making the plight of the slaves apparent to all in attendance. However, they also took numerous artistic freedoms with the content of the novel, often changing numerous plot points or characters to fit the desires and wants of the directors. Many of the theatrical reproductions even had racist, if not outright pro-slavery, messages. These productions depicted Uncle Tom as an old, weak, and stooped man, and turned Eva St. Clare, the daughter of Tom's second master who convinced her father to purchase Tom, into the work's principle Christ-figure, with her death scene full of melodrama and sentimentality.

A key nuance in Uncle Tom's faith was Stowe's emphasis on the femininity of his piety. A belief in feminine piety was widespread among Garrisonian abolitionists; they believed that women were naturally more pious and moral than men. Because of their belief in the moral superiority of women, many Garrisonians were also feminists and simultaneously advocated for equal rights for women. That element of

Garrisonian abolitionism has also been a focus of many of the studies on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, since Tom was one of the few male characters to exhibit strong faith throughout the novel. The Christ-like sacrifice of Tom also went hand in hand with the novel's sentimentality; Stowe's audience was able to relate to Tom's experience because of his strong faith. Indeed a decent amount of analysis has also been done on the literary elements of the novel, among them its mawkish sentimentality. Stowe used the breakup of multiple families and sexual exploitation of slaves inherent in slavery to sway her audience and illustrate the truly harmful nature of the peculiar institution. It self-evidently relied on emotion, rather than reason, to persuade its readers. Even though its sentimentality drew criticism from some, such as Louisa McCord, it was one of the most popular literary styles of the day.

Despite all of the scholarly attention given to the contemporary influences on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as well as the novel's long-lasting impact, the starting point for inquiry is usually the publication of the novel in 1852. Also, relatively little attention has been paid to the African-American community's interaction with the novel; what attention there is in the literature primarily has been cursory, viewing African-American responses as individual circumstances with very little continuity or pattern. When these African-American responses have been viewed as part of a wider pattern, they are seen as a small part within the massive cultural phenomenon that accompanied the novel. The views of African-American interactions with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly the implications of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when compared to

the intellectual continuities in the historical African-American community of the antebellum era, have been myopic at best.<sup>1</sup>

A clearer understanding of why African-Americans in the twentieth century began to use “uncle Tom” as a pejorative, self-policing term is best achieved by looking at interactions between *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and antebellum African-Americans, particularly the competing visions of Stowe and leading African-Americans. Secondly, instead of starting chronologically with the publication of the novel, it is far better to start with the development of intellectual continuities in the African-American community during the late eighteenth century. The belief in self-help and racial equality that motivated Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey to look down upon Uncle Tom stretched back more than a hundred years to the earliest African-American abolitionists. Stowe’s vision came into direct conflict with African-Americans due to its differences with the African-American community’s intellectual history and traditions. Black abolitionists such as David Walker believed that African-Americans should not rely on white Americans because self-reliance was the only way that African-Americans, free and enslaved, could achieve racial uplift. Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delany, and numerous slave rebels believed that violence was a redemptive way for African-Americans to combat the evils of slavery. Other African-Americans, such as Frederick Douglass, believed that African-

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011). Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, & the Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005). Both view African-American responses as completely positive. The only negative responses included are from whites, particularly Southerners.

Americans had a right to live in the United States, and that they could achieve equality in the United States; colonization in Africa was anathema to them.

In short, African-Americans of the twentieth century emphasized and eventually captured the pejorative Uncle Tom because Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been in conflict with the African-American community ever since the novel was written. The conflict existed because the African-American community had intellectual continuities and traditions that dated back as far as the late eighteenth century, and Stowe's arguments in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about the place of African-Americans in the United States—embodied in her main character—and their ability to find equality in the United States, the role of violence in ending slavery, and the very identity of African-Americans, ran counter to the development of intellectual continuities and patterns in the African-American community that date back as far as the eighteenth century. Uncle Tom, rather than a prototypical embodiment of a midcentury fight, might be better understood as the mature, antithetical archetype of attitudes and prejudices long fought by black abolitionists. So, understood in this context, he was far less childlike—and far from being the representative figure of an argument in its youth, yet not mature. He was closer to being a transitional figure whose name meant something different than it had half a century before, and had grown into a far different context in American life. Nevertheless, those pejorative features were ever-present in his birth as a character. In black abolitionism then, and in the continuities of African-American intellectual life that sustained it, were also

the black nationalist, black power, and civil rights movements of the twentieth century. All three were reared in the earliest days of African-American abolitionism.

## Chapter 1: African-American Identity

African American identity was the foundation for all other aspects of the intellectual continuities and patterns within the African-American community. African-Americans had specific beliefs about issues concerning their identity such as skin color, their place in the United States, their inherent abilities, or their religious faith. These beliefs influenced the way African-Americans interacted with one another and with the rest of the world. Their beliefs often differed from what white Americans believed on the same issues. African-Americans had been combating these differences for nearly a century by the time *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852. Many of the ideas that Harriet Beecher Stowe supported in her novel were similar to the ones African-Americans had fought against during the nineteenth century. Stowe unwittingly entered into an old conflict against African-Americans over their very identity.

David Walker and his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* are the clearest manifestations of African-American beliefs about identity. Walker wrote his *Appeal* to challenge notions of African-American inferiority that were widely held by whites and had been absorbed by the African-American community. Walker wanted his African-American audience to know that they were not inferior and that white Americans did not have their best interests in mind. He viewed his brethren as worthy of full equality because they were fully American, children of the Lord, and capable of self-improvement and uplift. Walker's *Appeal* explicitly sought to address Thomas Jefferson and his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, one of the nation's most

widely read commentaries on slavery and African-Americans. By addressing Jefferson, Walker positioned his *Appeal* to address many of Harriet Beecher Stowe's arguments in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and to also draw unintended connections between Jefferson and Stowe. Even though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a powerful anti-slavery novel, it shared many similar implicit arguments and biases with a pro-slavery and anti-African-American work.

The most vital argument in Walker's *Appeal* was his belief that African-Americans could and should be self-reliant. This belief supported the rest of his arguments and was the argument that was most fundamentally in conflict with Jefferson and Stowe. Walker's belief in self-dependence was heavily influenced by his own personal experiences, especially as a member of the Prince Hall Masons and the Massachusetts General Colored Association. Both organizations were run by African-Americans for the improvement of African-Americans so that the black community would no longer be kept from "rising to the scale of reasonable and thinking beings" by those who "delight[ed] in [their] degradation."<sup>2</sup> Whites did not have the best interest of the African-American community in mind, and often prevented African-Americans from rising above their lowly station.

Walker saw firsthand during his time in Boston how African-Americans were restricted to the lowliest of positions by whites. The relegation of blacks to the lowliest positions created a negative feedback loop about the perceived inferiority of African Americans. The more African Americans worked in the lowliest of positions,

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<sup>2</sup> David Walker, and Peter P. Hinks, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 51.



the more white Americans believed that blacks were only suited for the lowly positions. Walker argued that African Americans should always “be looking forward...to higher attainments” and “nobler ideas” of “liberty, equality, and human brotherhood” in order to combat the attitudes of white Americans.<sup>3</sup> According to Walker, African-Americans needed to work out their own improvement if they wanted the support of whites.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, the only slaves that sought to better their position in life were the mulatto slaves. The mulattoes, specifically George Harris, also appeared to be more intelligent than the African-American slaves. This inequality between slaves appeared to be based on their racial heritage, a fact that posed troubling implications for the African-American community. It appeared as if the mulattoes were superior to African-Americans because of their white heritage and inferior to whites because of their African heritage. There was evidence for the implied racial disparity throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Not only did Harris speak eloquently and in perfect English, he also invented an entirely new machine that increased efficiency and production at the factory he worked. The creation of this machine was a major plot point in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; it set in motion a chain of events that led to Harris making the fateful decision to run away from his master. Harris' intelligence was contrasted with the apparent ignorance of many of the African slaves, most of whom spoke in heavily accented and broken English.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The speech pattern differences clearly divided the different groups of slaves and effectively aligned the mulattoes closely with the whites. The alignment was further reinforced by Harris' decision to disguise himself as a European traveler during his escape to the North. Rather than making his skin lighter, Harris actually had to darken his "yellow skin" to a "genteel brown" to complete his disguise.<sup>4</sup> He also had thin lips and an aquiline nose, qualities that differed from the public caricatures and stereotypes of African American appearances. When Harris moved to Europe to pursue an education he was able to associate closely with groups of whites because his "shade of color was so slight."<sup>5</sup>

The implied intellectual discrepancy between Africans and mulattoes can also be observed when comparing Harris to some of the slaves on the Shelby plantation, such as Sam and Andy. Sam and Andy helped stall the slave trader Haley from pursuing the fleeing Eliza Harris, allowing the runaway to make it across the river to Ohio. Contrasted with the light-skinned George Harris, Sam was described as being "three shades blacker than any other son of ebony on the [plantation]."<sup>6</sup> And while Harris had sped up production at a factory, the "mechanical genius" of Sam's pride was rigging a nail to substitute for a missing button on his suspenders.<sup>7</sup> Sam's primary role in the novel was that of a mischief-maker: he stalled Haley from chasing after Eliza. He also played a fairly recognizable character found in later

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4 Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Ammons, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton &, 2010), 98.

5 Ibid., 393.

6 Ibid., 39.

7 Ibid.

blackface minstrel shows. Sam represented the Bones or Tambo characters whose role was to lampoon white culture. But they also existed as caricatures of African-Americans comedic relief of white audiences. Sam frequently misunderstood aspects of white culture and speech, and tried to incorporate them as his own in order to appear wiser than he actually was. His broken speech only enhanced the comedic relief of his misinterpretations.

A second issue was resistance. The only slaves who decided to run away or take up arms to fight for their freedom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were mulattoes. George and Eliza Harris both ran away from their masters; Cassy attempted to murder Legree before she ultimately ran away. In no instance in the novel did fully African slaves decide to run away or fight back. On the contrary, Tom famously decided to sacrifice himself for the greater good of the slaves on the Shelby plantation rather than running away before he was sold. Tom also refused to help Cassy with her plot to murder Legree and even talked her out of following through with her plan. However, she ultimately ran away with another mulatto slave, while Tom once again declined to seek his personal freedom because of his sense of duty to the other slaves on the plantation. The only reason Sam and Andy helped Eliza Harris run away was because Mrs. Shelby instructed them to do so. If Mrs. Shelby had not given Sam and Andy her tacit permission and encouragement it is doubtful they would have thought about stalling the slave trader. Because the only slaves to fight back or run away were mulatto slaves, it appeared that African slaves were more than happy in to remain enslaved.

A troubling aspect about the mulattoes' decisions to run away or fight was that their decisions only came after grievous injustices were committed. George and Eliza Harris only decided to run away when their family was on the verge of being separated by sale to different slave traders and slave markets. George only took up arms against slave catchers when he had no other option if he wished to remain free. Cassy decided to fight back violently and run away because of the sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of Legree and other white masters. If not for these atrocities, the mulattoes would have apparently been content in slavery, just as the African slaves seemingly were. They did not seek freedom for freedom's sake. If the intelligence of the mulattoes had seemingly been due to their white heritage, then their submissiveness appeared to have been caused by their African heritage.

Throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Stowe implied that African-Americans were inferior and incapable of improving their position in the United States. Surprisingly, Stowe's implications bear a resemblance to many of Thomas Jefferson's arguments about the nature of African-Americans. Both Stowe and Jefferson questioned the ability of African-Americans to improve their lives and their future in the nation. Walker believed that Jefferson's arguments were so harmful to the African-American cause he wrote his *Appeal* to directly address them. Thomas Jefferson's writings, particularly *Notes on the State of Virginia*, were some of the most widely read commentaries on slavery and slaves in the United States.<sup>8</sup> As one of the nation's founding fathers and premier politicians, Thomas Jefferson's opinions and

<sup>8</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 429.

arguments carried a tremendous amount of influence with the rest of the nation and beyond. His arguments laid the groundwork for decades of belief and discourse on the subject of slavery and African Americans.

Jefferson had a personal and “heartfelt hostility” towards slavery but he also had a “deep conviction” that African Americans were inferior to whites.<sup>9</sup> Jefferson’s hostility towards slavery was not because of any feelings he had about the suffering of individual African slaves. Rather his hatred of slavery was due to his belief that slavery was an insult to humanity and the equal natural rights of all men, as well as a “blight” on white masters and white society.<sup>10</sup> Slavery was worse for whites than it was for Africans. Slavery was not an evil because of its real impact on the lives of the enslaved, but because it was an abstract and theoretical danger to liberty, a possession that in his thinking seemed natural only to whites. It had the potential to create all sorts of vices among the white population. Even those white Americans who actively opposed slavery during Jefferson’s era saw it as an evil solely because it was a “calamity” for slaveholders, a disease that the latter needed help to eradicate. They did not consider slavery to be a “crime” because of the effects it had on African-Americans, but because of the impact it had on white Americans.<sup>11</sup>

Following Jefferson, white Americans argued in favor of black inferiority in the early days of the republic because black inferiority helped to justify enslavement

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9 Ibid.

10 Jordan, *White over Black*, 433.

11 William Channing, *Letter to Daniel Webster*, May 14, 1828. Accessed via “Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive,” <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/>.

of Africans in a democracy. In fact, African slavery and the racial status quo helped to safeguard American democracy, liberty, and society by keeping the two races separated from one another. Because of African inferiority, miscegenation of the two races posed a grave threat to whites and the United States, and went against the “ordinances of nature.”<sup>12</sup> African-Americans were destined to “become a corrupt and degraded class” that needed to be kept separate from the noble white race.<sup>13</sup> According to Jefferson, African-Americans would never be able to lift themselves out of their lowly position. Racial intermixture was inevitable in the minds of many white Americans; it was a natural outcome of widespread emancipation. Miscegenation would only result in the downfall and degradation of the white race as it became a mulatto race, a “mungrel breed.”<sup>14</sup>

A “darkened” America would show that the nation had gone over to being governed by “sheer animal sex,” that the “basest of energies” guided the destiny of the nation and that “civilized man had turned [into a ]beast in the forest.”<sup>15</sup> Racial intermixing would be “tantamount to extermination” for white Americans.<sup>16</sup> The new American nation had been founded upon ideals of republicanism and natural rights such as liberty and equality. It was believed that African-Americans needed to be placed in a “state of dependence and discipline” to ensure that they would one

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12 William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Boston: Garrison & Knapp, 1832), 114.

13 American Colonization Society, *The African Repository* (Washington: American Colonization Society), v. 2, 1825, 188.

14 Jordan, *White Over Black*, 544.

15 Jordan, *White Over Black*, 543.

16 Jordan, *White Over Black*, 545.

day be ready for freedom since they were not naturally equipped for it.<sup>17</sup> If African Americans were freed they would wind up in a heathen state of poverty and ignorance, no better than the life they had lived in Africa. One white American in particular remarked that it would have been just “as humane to throw [Africans] from the decks in the middle passage, as to set them free in our country.”<sup>18</sup> A republic required its citizens to be caretakers of the flame of liberty, always watchful for the threat of corruption.

Many white Americans believed that any attempts to fully incorporate African-Americans into American society would only result in the “extermination of the one or the other race” due to the “deep rooted prejudices” of the whites and the “ten thousand recollections” that African-Americans would have of their time as slaves.<sup>19</sup> Africans were “repugnant to...republican feelings and dangerous to... republican institutions.”<sup>20</sup> Whites believed that African-Americans did not yet have the capabilities to be participants in the American democratic experiment. The latter group was “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of the body and mind.”<sup>21</sup> Because African-Americans were naturally inferior to whites they would be wiped out in a potential race war.

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17 Moses Fisk, *Tyrannical Libertymen: A Discourse upon Negro Slavery in the United States* ( Hanover, N.H.: Dunham & True, 1795).

18 American Colonization Society, *Repository*, v. 4, 1825, 226.

19 Jordan, *White Over Black*, 458.

20 American Colonization Society, *Repository*, v. 2, 1825, 188.

21 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard & Hall, 1788), 143.

The inferiority of Africans, according to many white Americans, was not caused by the horrendous conditions of slavery, imposed by their masters, but due to “real distinction[s]” made by nature.<sup>22</sup> Jefferson held up the example of slaves in the ancient world, specifically Greece and Rome, as slaves who were able to overcome their condition to become respected teachers and artists in the highest level of society. Not only were these slaves subjected to harsher conditions than African slaves, but the ancient slaves overcame these circumstances to become renowned in numerous fields. If African slaves were inferior then mulattoes must have been superior, morally and intellectually, to fully African because of the white heritage present in mulattoes.

Walker directly countered Jefferson’s arguments about the inferior nature of African-Americans by first pointing to the example of Egypt’s Israelite slaves, specifically Joseph, the ancient patriarch. Walker attempted to show that African-American slaves lived in far worse conditions than did ancient slaves. Walker argued that Joseph, though a slave, was second only to the Pharaoh in power in Egypt, and even then Egypt was governed under Joseph’s word.<sup>23</sup> Walker then rhetorically asked if it were conceivable for an African American slave to achieve even the lowliest positions in American civic life, such as juror. He pointed out that Joseph was able to marry his master’s daughter and was given land to give to his family in their time of need, events that would not occur in the United States because whites

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<sup>22</sup> Jordan, *White Over Black*, 436.

<sup>23</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 10.



had “instituted laws to prohibit [blacks] from marrying among the whites.”<sup>24</sup> White Americans were terrified of racial intermarriage and would not have granted a free slave any lands. Walker argued that he could not find any action by African forefathers to “merit such condign punishment” upon African slaves by white Americans, so then his “immovable” conclusion was that African Americans were enslaved solely for “enriching” whites.<sup>25</sup>

Walker also countered Jefferson’s argument about the nature of African inferiority; inferiority was the result of the conditions of their bondage, Walker maintained, not of nature. In ancient Greece and Rome, Walker wrote, slaves were used as tutors for the children of the aristocrats; in the United States, however, slaves were prevented by law from even learning how to read. Slaves in the United States were “the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived,” surviving in conditions more miserable than those in the ancient world.<sup>26</sup> Because African-Americans were prevented from holding political power of any sort, prevented from owning lands, prevented from reading or receiving an education—and worse, because all of this was done to them by other Christians—the conditions for slaves in the United States was far more oppressive than for slaves in the ancient world, even though ancient slave masters had been heathens or pagans. And unlike white Americans of the nineteenth century, ancient slave masters did not tell did not

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24 Walker, *Appeal*, 11.

25 Walker, *Appeal*, 16.

26 Walker, *Appeal*, 9.

develop a civilizationist ideology that positioned their slaves that the slave as brutes and beasts of burden outside of the human family.<sup>27</sup>

Walker and other prominent African Americans often grounded their arguments for African-American equality in Christianity. In his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* Walker argued that God had created Africans as the equals of whites; he wanted African-Americans to remember that they were children of God and were loved by the Almighty despite what pro-slavery whites might have said. According to Walker, God created African-Americans “to serve Him *alone*,” not to be the slaves of other men, and that God would “condescend to hear their cries and see their tears in consequence of oppression.”<sup>28</sup> Walker also believed that African-Americans should feel fortunate, rather than unfortunate, that God had created them as black, because it “pleased Him to make [them] black.”<sup>29</sup> Walker believed that it was folly for whites to believe that African-Americans would rather be white than be black, that they would hate their skin color because of the disadvantages associated with it.<sup>30</sup> The skin color of African Americans, and the sufferings brought upon them by whites because of it, was merely a part of God’s plans for His children. Walker exhorted his fellow African-Americans to “fear not the number and education of [the] enemies” because God had “guaranteed” freedom to African-Americans and would continue to be on their side.<sup>31</sup> Walker believed that African-Americans should

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27 Walker, *Appeal*, 12.

28 Walker, *Appeal*, 6.

29 Walker, *Appeal*, 14.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

emulate the Israelites and look to God throughout their suffering. African Americans were the “suffering people” of the Lord that “call[ed] loudly on the God of Justice, to be revenged.”<sup>32</sup> Their rescue would not be in the life to come, but a physical rescue from their bondage.

Walker firmly believed that, like the ancient Israelites, African-Americans were the long-suffering children of the Lord. It is not surprising that Walker’s views on the religious identity of African-Americans were in contention with pro-slavery whites. What is surprising is that Walker’s beliefs would later lead him into conflict with white abolitionists. Both pro-slavery whites and white abolitionists believed that African-Americans were morally inferior to whites. Walker’s belief that Christianity could lead to the earthly rescue of African-American slaves, and that it also called for the equal treatment of African-Americans, was contrasted with the faith of Uncle Tom and other African-Americans in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The Christian faith of many slaves in the novel appeared to reinforce slavery and the apparent submissiveness of slaves. Tom’s faith kept him from running away from the Shelby plantation, even on the eve of his sale. His faith also kept him by the side of the St. Clare family, and from running away from Legree’s plantation. He felt a powerful sense of duty to evangelize the St. Clare family and the hopeless slaves on the Legree plantation. When Tom recovered from a crisis of faith on the Legree plantation, he was even more committed to staying there because of this sense of duty to the slaves. While Tom’s decisions are noble, they presented a troubling dilemma; Tom’s

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<sup>32</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 51.

actions argued that faithful slaves should be content in their bondage, to simply look toward heaven, and endure their trials and tribulations. Through Tom, Stowe argued that the hope the slaves needed to look for was a hope in the life to come, not a hope in a better and free life in the present.

Walker's beliefs in the necessity of self-reliance and inherent African-American equality went hand-in-hand with his beliefs on African-American religion. Many whites viewed African-Americans and Africans as lost and childish souls that required a guiding hand. Whites wanted Christianity to completely change the nature of African-Americans. What whites wanted for African Americans was to become adherents of a "white" Christianity devoid of any aspects of African culture. The "civilizing mission" aspect of slavery became an important cog in defense of slavery during antebellum America; it helped to reinforce the paternalism that many slaveholders believed in. The "civilizing mission" also helped to reinforce notions of African-American inferiority by promoting a vision of African-Americans as an infantile and ignorant race. It argued that African-Americans were incapable of understanding Christianity if they were left to their own.

Walker addressed the "civilizing mission" defense of slavery when he pointed out the hypocrisy of American Christians, particularly the slave owners who prevented their slaves from reading the Bible or seeking other ways to strengthen their faith. He firmly believed it was hypocritical of whites to criticize the perceived inferiority and ignorance of African-Americans while also preventing African-Americans from attempting self-improvement. Walker argued that Europeans and

white Americans were in “open violation” of the will of God by using Christianity to make “merchandise” out of Africans. According to Walker, American Christianity had been “designed by...the devils” with the sole purpose of oppressing Africans.<sup>33</sup> While other religions attempted to make converts of nonbelievers, American Christianity, at best, attempted to hinder Africans from coming to the faith. At worst, white Christians would beat African-Americans to death for “supplicating the throne of grace.”<sup>34</sup> American pastors and preachers were in “open violation” of Biblical principles when they oppressed slaves and had reduced African-Americans into the most “wretched, ignorant, miserable, and abject set of beings in all the world.”<sup>35</sup>

The “civilizing mission” of white American Christianity was also a large part of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. One of the novel’s most iconic characters was the wild and uncontrollable slave girl Topsy. However, Topsy was eventually brought to Christianity and civilized by the pious New Englander Miss Ophelia. Topsy moved to New England with Ophelia and was essentially taken in by New Englanders, where she learned more about Christianity and proper Western civilization. Topsy eventually moved to Africa in order to evangelize the poor, heathen continent. George Harris’s opined longingly about the potential for African-Americans to “roll the tide of civilization and Christianity” across all of Africa if they returned to the continent.<sup>36</sup> The faith of Harris and Topsy was essentially a “white” faith because it

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33 Walker, *Appeal*, 37.

34 Walker, *Appeal*, 39.

35 Walker, *Appeal*, 40-42.

36 Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Ammons, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*. (New York: W.W. Norton &, 2010), 394.

was also the faith of Stowe and the other abolitionists. It was restrained, feminine, domestic, and it eschewed violence of any sort. George Harris even admitted that his wife was the leading Christian influence in his life, the one that kept him on the straight and narrow path. The femininity of Stowe's Christianity was apparent even among white characters. Eva St. Clare was far more certain in her faith than her father. Mrs. Shelby was the guiding Christian light in her husband's life.

Unsurprisingly, the actual faith of many African Americans differed from the one Stowe promoted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Denmark Vesey, for instance, was a key leader and teacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, the same denomination that David Walker attended. The church served as a center of African American life in the city. One of the ways members of the church combated slavery was by teaching local blacks how to read and write. Vesey used his position as a church leader to organize local blacks for a potential slave revolt in the city. Another African-American who practiced a faith that radically differed from Tom's was Nat Turner. Turner was referred to as the "Prophet" by many of his fellow slaves because of his fervor in preaching the word of God to them. Turner viewed himself as an arbiter of God's will because he was convinced that God wanted him to strike out against his masters and start a rebellion among the local slave population. He believed that he was furthering God's kingdom by launching a slave rebellion because he would be participating in fight against God's enemies, the slave masters. Both Vesey and Turner were embodiments of Walker's philosophy on African-American religion and self-dependence, a philosophy that ran directly counter to

what Stowe proposed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Their faith did not lead them to contentment in slavery. Rather, it led them to rebellion.

Lastly, African-Americans viewed the American part of their identity to be just as valuable as the African part of their identity. They considered themselves to be as American as white Americans. Whites, however, believed that outside of slavery African-Americans should have no permanent place in the nation. Slavery would be the only way that African-Americans could stay in the nation. This viewpoint was heavily influenced by beliefs in the natural inferiority of African-Americans. There was no hope in attempting to improve the conditions of African-Americans because they “always must be a depressed and abject race.”<sup>37</sup> African-Americans were destined to be “forever debased...for ever useless...for ever a nuisance” in the United States.<sup>38</sup> They could not “materially benefit” from any help because they were “degraded beneath the influence” of any efforts to help them.<sup>39</sup> The prejudices the races had towards one another would be too great to overcome, and since African-Americans were the inferior race they would be exterminated. If African-Americans did not deserve a place in the future of the country, what was to be done with the ones that had gained their freedom? This question perplexed many white Americans during the antebellum era. An attempt to answer the question resulted in the birth of the colonization movement, a movement that advocated the removal of African-Americans from the United States to Africa. Many whites believed

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37 American Colonization Society, *Repository*, v. 4, 1825, 117-119.

38 American Colonization Society, *Repository*, v. 5, 1825, 276.

39 American Colonization Society, *Repository*, v. 4, 1825, 117-119.

that African-Americans would be able to achieve a better life in the less hostile climates of Africa, and that they could also advance the spread of Christianity and civilization throughout the continent.

African-Americans, however, believed that they had shown themselves more than worthy of being considered fully American. Not only did they see themselves as equals, but African-Americans also argued that many African-Americans had fought and died for the United States. The first American to die in the Boston Massacre, and therefore the first death in the American Revolution, was Crispus Attucks, an African American. African-Americans pointed to their sacrifices under Andrew Jackson's command in the Battle of New Orleans when they pleaded with him to outlaw slavery in new territories. African Americans saw the United States as their nation since it was the land of their birth; they argued that since they had been born in the United States, and since many of their forefathers had fought and sacrificed for the nation, that they should be treated at least "as well as foreigners."<sup>40</sup> Douglass stated that African-Americans "had grown up with this Republic" and he believed that he had "seen nothing in [the] character" of African-Americans "which compelled the belief that [they] must leave the United States."<sup>41</sup> Douglass believed that free blacks "generally mean[t to live] in America, and not in Africa."<sup>42</sup>

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40 Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists: Benjamin Quarles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 7.

41 Frederick Douglass, "Letter to Mrs. Stowe," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*. December 2, 1853.

42 Frederick Douglass, "Colonization", *The North Star*, January 26, 1849.



Stowe, perhaps unwittingly, entered the debate about the American identity of African-Americans on the side of pro-slavery forces when she argued for colonization via George Harris. Harris, at the end of the novel, declared that he would go to “[his] country—[his] chosen,[his] glorious Africa.” He did not want to claim the rights he was owed in the United States; instead, he wanted a country of his own.<sup>43</sup> This particular statement by Harris implied that even though African-Americans were capable and deserving of equal rights in America, it was not actually their country, and even if they decided to live in the United States they would never truly be happy there. Even though Stowe, through Harris, realized that colonization “may have been used...as a means of retarding emancipation” still believed it would ultimately be beneficial for African-Americans in the long run.<sup>44</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Stowe’s support of colonization drew the ire of many contemporary African Americans, who referred to Stowe’s support of the plan as a “burr under the bare feet...a thorn in [the] side...a beam in the eye” of African Americans.<sup>45</sup> The *Provincial Freeman*, a prominent black Canadian newspaper, described Stowe’s decision to send George Harris to Africa as a “piece of needless and hurtful encouragement of the vile spirit of Yankee colonizationism” and that the writers of the *Freeman* “never could reconcile [Stowe’s colonization argument] with an anti-slavery tale, nor see its place in an anti-slavery book.” One of the writers of

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43 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 395.

44 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 394.

45 *Provincial Freeman*, 22 July 1854.

the *Freeman* stated “death and banishment is [the] doom” of African Americans according to “the slaveocrats, the colonizationists, and...Mrs. Stowe!”<sup>46</sup>

Stowe came into conflict with the African American community over key aspects of their self-identification. Whether it was skin color and racial identity, the future of African Americans in the United States, the necessity of self-dependence for African Americans, or the faith of African Americans, Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* repeatedly differed from the direction the African American community had taken in its intellectual development and in practice. Stowe and Tom were in disagreement with the most critical foundations of the African-American community. These disagreements led to further conflict in other aspects of the African-American community.

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46 Ibid.

## Chapter Two: Means of Abolition

Two major components of African-American identity in particular, religion and self-reliance were cornerstones for African-American beliefs on and arguments for different means of abolition and uplift. If African-Americans were unable to go beyond mere achievement of freedom, abolition would be in vain. These aspects of African-American identity directly influenced the development of different means of abolition and uplift, such as self-improvement, political involvement, violent resistance, and emigration, and the debates over the different means of abolition became an important part of the African-American intellectual continuity. Because Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had conflicted with African-American self-identity, it was only natural that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* conflicted with African-American beliefs on the nature of abolition and uplift that were outgrowths of African-American self-identity.

Stowe implicitly argued throughout her novel that African-Americans were incapable of self-uplift, that they had no place in the future of the United States, and that they could not exercise their agency in the form of politics or violent resistance. While Tom was used to show white Americans the horrors of slavery, he was also intended as a model for African-Americans to conform to. He was a model for "proper" African-American behavior that would lead to support from white Americans. Tom was a secondary member in a cause run by white Americans, not a leading member in an African-American cause. He was essentially without agency.

Tom did not seek to improve himself by fighting back against slavery. Instead, Tom turned to his faith to sustain him, and he looked for improvement in the life to come rather than improvement in this life. Stowe's conflict with African-American traditions and intellectual patterns can be seen most clearly in their disagreements over means of abolition. The African-American community had a tradition of exercising their agency through violent resistance to slavery and political involvement. However, the only slaves to fight against slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were the mulatto slaves, and they only fought when they were aided by whites. Throughout the novel there were numerous instances of whites giving aid to African-Americans. However, there was no instance of African-Americans using their own agency to help other African-Americans.

Violence was perhaps the most pure method of self-reliance but it was completely anathema to the majority of white abolitionists. They believed that it was a morally bankrupt option that would only result in further hardships and suffering. William Lloyd Garrison and the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society declared that their principles "forbid the doing of evil that good may come" and they "entreat[ed] the oppressed to reject the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage."<sup>47</sup> Their resistance to slavery would be "the opposition of moral purity to moral corruption."<sup>48</sup> Garrison declared that he denied the "right of any people to fight for liberty."<sup>49</sup> Abolitionists who believed in the power of moral

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<sup>47</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, "Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society," (speech, Dec. 6, 1833).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, "Letter to LaroySunderlad," *The Liberator*, September 8, 1831.

suasion sought to convince Americans of the sinfulness of slavery by “the power of love...the spirit of repentance,” and they went at it with a religious fervor.<sup>50</sup> Stowe’s explicit purpose in writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was to “awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race” amongst white Americans.<sup>51</sup> The literary style used by Stowe, sentimentalism, worked perfectly for a novel that sought to “awaken the strongest compassion for the oppressed and the utmost abhorrence of the system which grinds them to the dust.”<sup>52</sup> Stowe specifically desired to showcase Uncle Tom’s piety and Christ-like suffering in order to garner support from white Americans. Tom “was willing to be ‘led as a lamb to the slaughter,’ returning blessing for cursing, and anxious only for the salvation of his enemies,” rather than striking out against them.<sup>53</sup> Tom’s trials, the flight of the Harris family to safety, the life and death of Eva St. Clare, and the fate of the mulatto slaves were intended to elicit a wide range of emotions from Stowe’s audience and turn popular opinion against the peculiar institution.

In short, Tom was created as an example for African-Americans to model. Rather than striking out violently against slavery, slaves were to be patient and bear their afflictions passively, finding solace in religion. Free African-Americans were to instruct their enslaved brethren to patiently wait for popular sentiment to turn against slavery. African-Americans could not take their fate into their own hands, but instead had to wait on white Americans for deliverance and change.

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50 Garrison, “Declaration of Sentiments.”

51 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, xiii.

52 William Lloyd Garrison, “Review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *The Liberator*, March 26, 1852.

53 Ibid.

Although violence ran completely counter to moral suasion and was repulsive to the piety of many abolitionists, there was a tradition of violent resistance and a tradition of celebrating that resistance within the African-American community. Violent resistance was the ultimate means of self-reliance. A slave could strike out against their master without waiting for white Americans to change. If African-Americans could not count upon white Americans to change on their own, then what recourse did they have? And if African-Americans were also denied the right to vote, was violence not their only remaining option? They were an oppressed and, seemingly, permanent minority in a country where the majority was indifferent or even outright hostile towards them. Numerous African-Americans grappled with these questions throughout the nineteenth century. Ultimately, quite a few leading African-Americans came around to supporting violence and slave rebellions, if not outright calling for the revolutionary and violent overthrow of slavery. Praises of the Haitian Revolution did not just revolve around rhetoric of rights and liberties, but also the defeat of a French army by mere slave rebels. The Haitian Revolution was the greatest example of slave agency. The Haitian Revolution, and the American Revolution, served as examples and inspiration for rebellious slaves in the United States.

During the Haitian Revolution, many whites fled the island to the United States, particularly Virginia, bringing with them thousands of slaves. These Haitian slaves had been “dangerously infected” by the “malady” of rebellion, a malady that

would be spread to Virginia's slaves.<sup>54</sup> Slave owners were fearful that their slaves were "rife for insurrection" because the slaves had become "extremely insolent and troublesome" after "associat[ing] with French negroes from [Haiti]."<sup>55</sup> After the introduction of Haitian slaves to Virginia, African-American slaves carried out numerous failed rebellions. These attempts at rebellion culminated with the rebellion of Gabriel Prosser. When they were captured and put on trial, Gabriel and his comrades talked strongly about "their [natural] rights" that they had wanted to fight for so desperately.<sup>56</sup> One slave compared himself to George Washington, had Washington ever been forced to answer for his actions against the British, stating that he had wanted to fight "to obtain the liberty of [his] countrymen."<sup>57</sup> Gabriel had planned to fly a flag embroidered with the slogan "death or Liberty" in imitation of Patrick Henry.<sup>58</sup>

The connection between Gabriel's slave revolts and the American Revolution was not lost on Martin Delany. In Delany's novel *Blake*, Henry Blake meets with a slave who claimed to have fought alongside Gabriel on the American side in the American Revolution. Many of the slaves Blake meets with "held...in sacred reverence" the names of slave rebels such as "Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and General Gabriel," and considered these three to be some of "the greatest men who

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54 John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold, *Anti-Slavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 43.

55 Ibid.

56 McKivigan and Harrold, *Anti-Slavery Violence*, 56.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

ever lived.”<sup>59</sup> By highlighting these connections, Martin Delany was clearly arguing that African-American slave rebels had the same right to rebel as white Americans. Frederick Douglass also argued in favor of this right to rebel, drawing connections between Madison Washington and George Washington in his fictionalized account of Madison Washington, *The Heroic Slave*. Douglass’s depiction of Madison Washington was that of a “man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry” and Madison Washington had “fought for [liberty]” just as fiercely as George Washington.<sup>60</sup> Both of these novels also condoned, and even celebrated, the right of the slave to violently rebel for their freedom.

African-Americans did not just experiment with violent rhetoric and violence through characters in novels. In their speeches and pamphlets they often openly embraced it. David Walker’s violent rhetoric throughout his *Appeal* is obviously notable, and connected to his religious tonalities and themes. Walker believed that slavery was an affront to God, and he called upon whites to “listen to the voice of the Holy Ghost” because the “will of [Walker’s] God must be done.” If the whites continued in their ways they would “drag down the vengeance of God upon” themselves.<sup>61</sup> The slaveholders’ “cup [of wrath] must be filled” by “God [who] is just” because the Lord’s “suffering people” had “pierce[d] the very throne of Heaven” with their “moans and groans...for deliverance from oppression and wretchedness.”<sup>62</sup>

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59 Martin Robinson Delany, *Blake: or the Huts of America*, ed. Floyd J Miller (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 113.

60 Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave: A Thrilling Narrative of the Adventures of Madison Washington, in Pursuit of Liberty* (Cleveland: John P. Jewett & Company, 1853), 176.

61 Walker, *Appeal*, 49.

62 Walker, *Appeal*, 50-51.



Would not the “Lord condescend to hear [the] cries and see [the] tears” of the oppressed and “put [the oppressors] to death?”<sup>63</sup> That just death sentence “may not [be] effect[ed] by the oppressed” but surely God would “bring other destructions upon [the oppressors].”<sup>64</sup>

Stowe and Walker both drew on religious themes to argue for their visions of moral suasion yet reached different conclusions. Walker believed that African-Americans were analogous to the Israelites during the enslavement in Egypt. God heard the cries of His people and brought destruction upon the Egyptians when they refused to repent. Walker was convinced that white Americans were opening up themselves to the wrath of God not just because they were oppressing His people, but also because white Americans claimed to be Christian while doing so. Walker warned white Americans that African-Americans “must and shall be free and enlightened” just as whites were, and that African-Americans “under God, [would] obtain [their] liberty by the crushing arm of power.”<sup>65</sup> Stowe, however, used Tom to draw a comparison between Christ and African-Americans. Stowe believed that African-Americans needed to focus on the Lord and endure their present sufferings, unlike Walker, who believed that faith could lead to physical freedom for African-Americans. Stowe believed that if African-Americans focused on their spiritual improvement then they would be able to endure until white Americans came to their aid. Walker believed that African-Americans should be able to exercise their agency

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63 Walker, *Appeal*, 6.

64 Walker, *Appeal*, 5.

65 Walker, *Appeal*, 72.

however they pleased, even if it meant violent resistance. While Walker did not explicitly call for a slave rebellion or race war, he did state that whites, if they did not change, would face the fearful judgment of the Lord. Walker also implied that because African-Americans had been given their rights and equality from God Himself, that they would have Him on their side if they chose to rebel, and that a rebellion or race war would possibly be God's wrath on America.

Even though David Walker did not explicitly command slaves to rebel against their masters, Henry Highland Garnet did just that at the 1843 meeting of the National Negro Convention with his "Call to Rebellion" speech. Like Walker, Garnet placed his arguments in a deeply religious context. Because they had been made in the image of God, "all men cherish[ed] the love of liberty. Garnet believed that it was "sinful in the extreme" to make "voluntary submission" to slavery because slavery "hurl[ed] defiance in the face of Jehovah." Garnet's belief that voluntary submission was sinful flew in the face of Stowe's arguments on moral suasion. She believed that voluntary submission was the only morally acceptable option for slaves. Garnet told his intended audience, the slaves, that the time had come for them to act, to remember the injustices committed against them, and for them to tell their masters that they would work no more. He called upon the slaves to "strike for [their] lives and liberties" because "heaven...call[ed] on [them] to arise from the dust." It "was their solemn and imperative duty to use every means" possible to achieve their freedom. If every slave rebelled, then the "days of slavery [would be] numbered." He told them to look at the examples of Denmark Vesey, "patriotic" Nat Turner,

“immortal” Joseph Cinque, and “that bright star of freedom,” Madison Washington, as heroes in their attempts at rebellion. Garnet reminded the slaves that “no oppressed people [had] ever secured their liberty without resistance.”<sup>66</sup> Garnet’s speech was celebrated by many of the African-American abolitionists in attendance, and Garnet planned to distribute copies of his speech alongside copies of Walker’s *Appeal*.

Frederick Douglass originally opposed Garnet’s call for violence and rebellion at the 1843 convention, but he too eventually came around to being open to the possibility of violence as a means of abolition. Douglass’s turn to violent resistance was part of a decade-long break with white abolitionists. Douglass was an anti-Tom, a symbol of Walker’s moral suasion, not Stowe’s. Douglass had originally been an object acted upon by white abolitionists. He was trotted out at abolitionist conventions to serve as an example of what African-Americans could achieve if they were helped by whites.

His turn to violent resistance was merely the culmination of a process that began when he ran away from his master. Douglass broke with white abolitionists, specifically William Lloyd Garrison, by founding his own newspaper, advocating for political involvement, and turning to violent resistance. Besides celebrating the exploits of Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass also publicly discussed his conversion to violent resistance. He declared to a group of abolitionists that he would “welcome the intelligence...that the slaves had risen in the South” and that they “were engaged in spreading death and destruction” against their masters.

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<sup>66</sup> Henry Highland Garnet, “Call to Rebellion,” (speech, August, 1843).

Douglass argued that the slave masters were already “waging a war of aggression against the oppressed.” He asked white abolitionists if they would cheer “with equal pleasure, the tidings from the South, that the slaves had risen, and achieved” the equivalent of what Republicans had achieved in France, since the abolitions had celebrated, with fervor, the latter news.<sup>67</sup> To Douglass, there was no difference between rebellious slaves, rebellious Frenchmen, or rebellious American revolutionaries.

Walker, Garnet, and Douglass were certainly a bit on the radical edge with their calls to violence, but there was an even more radical view of violence taken by some African-American abolitionists, a view that flew in the face of their American self-identification. Many African-American abolitionists had a special place in their hearts for the British, as they were seen as close friends and allies in the fight against slavery. David Walker declared the British to be “the best friends the colored people have upon earth” because they had “done one hundred times more for the melioration” of the conditions of slavery.<sup>68</sup> Charles Redmond, however, went a step further than just being allied with the British in the fight against slavery. In the 1840s, when tensions between the United States and Britain over the Canadian border were increasing, Redmond informed the Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society that he would welcome a war between the two nations because such a conflict would most likely bring about the end of slavery. Even after he was criticized, Redmond doubled down on this seemingly un-American sentiment by telling another Anti-Slavery

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<sup>67</sup> F.W. Leeds, “Great Meeting in Faneuil Hall,” *The Liberator*, June 8, 1849.

<sup>68</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 43.

Society in the United Kingdom that he would welcome an American defeat in the war, particularly if it meant dissolution of the Union. He believed that this disunion would lead to a widespread slave rebellion against weakened masters.<sup>69</sup> When British-American relations became tense after the *Creole* incident, when the British refused to return or prosecute Madison Washington and his fellow rebels, an African-American newspaper told its readers that it would be best if their community remained neutral if a conflict happened between the two nations. African-American sacrifices for the United States had only resulted in more tyranny and repression. The writers of the newspaper believe neutrality should be the position of all African-Americans until they received equality and liberty on a national scale.<sup>70</sup>

Violent resistance was a key component of the African-American community that only increased in importance over the course of the nineteenth century. While enslaved African-Americans had always looked for chances to lash out against their masters, free blacks had grown increasingly frustrated and worried by developments across the nation. Whether it was the expansion of slavery into new territories, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, or the Dred Scott case, slavery appeared to be expanding nationally. Many white abolitionists, however, continued to oppose violent resistance. Indeed, Stowe was using Tom to promote a feminine piety that ran counter to the more fiery piety of Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delany, and David Walker. Tom's

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<sup>69</sup>Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 225.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

submissiveness was in opposition to the decades of violent tradition and celebration of violence within the African-American community. Yet, that also cut across the African-American belief in the necessity of self-reliance as part of their identity led to the development of self-help as a means of abolition and uplift. Violent resistance, then, was only one strand.

The spirit of self-help and self-reliance also led to the creation of numerous African-American organizations. The organizations Walker was heavily involved in, such as the Massachusetts General Colored Association, the AME Church of Charleston, and the Prince Hall Masons, were deeply concerned with the issue of African-American uplift. African-Americans in these organizations sought to promote African-American unity and improvement through community involvement and outreach. In Boston, Walker witnessed daily how African-Americans were restricted to the lowliest of positions and kept from climbing up the social ladder. However, Walker believed that “oppression ought not to hinder [them] from acquiring all [they] could” and he had grown frustrated with the lowly jobs that many African-Americans had grown content in working.<sup>71</sup> Walker was not speaking out against African-Americans working these lowly positions in general, since these were generally the only jobs they could find, but rather the African-Americans who “never want[ed] to love any better or happier than when” they had the lowliest of jobs.”<sup>72</sup> Instead of settling for jobs such as boot blacks and barbers, African-

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<sup>71</sup>Walker, *Appeal*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 30.

Americans should “look forward...to higher attainments.”<sup>73</sup> If African-Americans did not reach for more and instead focused “their greatest glory...in such mean and low objects” then those who were “actuated by avarice” would have no reason to think that African-Americans had not been created to be “an inheritance for them forever.” If African-Americans wanted to be treated equally then they needed to show that they were deserving of that equality.

When Walker countered Jefferson’s arguments of African-American inferiority, he stated that he wished “to see the charges of Mr. Jefferson refuted by the blacks themselves.”<sup>74</sup> African-Americans had a “great work” ahead of them; to “prove to Americans and the world, that [they were] men, and not brutes.”<sup>75</sup> An African-American suffrage committee declared that white Americans were “strangers to...ignorant of...and oblivious to [the] history and progress” of the African-American community.<sup>76</sup> It was up to African-Americans to increase their own standing; if they continued to rely on the benevolence of white Americans then their successes could be discredited by their opponents. Leading African-Americans argued that the self-uplift and self-improvement of their community would weaken slavery by showing white Americans what they were capable of. By showing that they could pull themselves up to the level of whites while simultaneously not having access to the same rights and advantages as whites, such as schooling and employment, African-Americans would be able to show white Americans that the

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73 Ibid.

74 Walker, *Appeal*, 17.

75 Walker, *Appeal*, 32.

76 Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 173.

African-American community was more than deserving of full equality in the nation. While self-uplift was a form of moral suasion, it differed drastically from Stowe's form of moral suasion. Walker's form of moral suasion allowed African-Americans to exercise their agency and improve their lives in the present. Stowe's moral suasion denied African-Americans the right to their own agency and cast them as passengers in their salvation.

A key part of David Walker's argument for African-American self-reliance and self-uplift was based on the necessity of unity among African-Americans. He believed that African-Americans needed to work together to achieve their uplift. Disunity among African-Americans had allowed the "natural enemy" of blacks to "keep their feet on [African-American] throats."<sup>77</sup> Walker was worried that too many of the African-American organizations at the time were focused solely on local issues, rather than issues that affected all African-Americans nationally. Walker believed that African-Americans across the nation, enslaved and free, needed to unite and work together for their common good. He argued that the provincial tendency must be pushed aside and he reasoned that if African-Americans were not united under a common group or banner then they would be kept from "rising to the scale of reasonable and thinking beings" by those who "delight[ed] in [their] degradation."<sup>78</sup> If all "colored people under Heaven" wanted to achieve "full glory and happiness", then they needed to ensure "the entire emancipation of [their]

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<sup>77</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 32.



enslaved brethren all over the world.”<sup>79</sup> Free blacks needed to be concerned with the improvement of slaves as well as their own improvement. Walker placed the necessity of working to emancipate enslaved African-Americans in deeply religious terms—he referred to it as “the work of the Lord.” He also believed that it was “the will of the Lord that [their] greatest happiness [would] consist in working for the salvation of the whole body.”<sup>80</sup> To achieve this “salvation,” free blacks needed to focus on the “dissemination of education and religion among their more ignorant and enslaved brethren.”<sup>81</sup>

Because of the importance of these organizations in the African-American community and because of his own personal experiences, Walker felt it necessary to address concerns of unity in his *Appeal*. For instance, Walker would have been well aware that Vesey’s planned slave rebellion was foiled by two slaves who reported the insurrectionary meetings to the white authorities. A similar betrayal by African-Americans three decades earlier foiled Gabriel’s rebellion in Virginia. Secondly, African-Americans needed their own organizations because they were often excluded from membership in other organizations, even anti-slavery ones. For instance, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery only admitted one black member in over seventy-five years.<sup>82</sup> Besides the Massachusetts General Colored Association, there were numerous statewide African-American meeting and conventions throughout the North, various regional abolitionist

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79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 James McCune Smith, “Unity in Action,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, May 12, 1854.

82 Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 12.

organizations affiliated with the national Anti-Slavery Society, and numerous juvenile anti-slavery organizations. African-Americans operated and funded their own newspapers and magazines.<sup>83</sup> African-American organizations had already been working for years to address issues related to African-American uplift by the time Walker published his *Appeal*. Other organizations, such as churches, abolition societies, temperance societies, and fraternal organizations, sought to promote uplift through the promotion of morality and civic virtue. These organizations also sought to harness the political power of the African-American community.

African-Americans had been quick to realize the power that they could wield with united political action. Even though many African-Americans were denied the right to vote, they could still make their voices be heard. When their political power was threatened, African-Americans used their organizations to drum up support among the community and to pressure politicians to include African-Americans in the franchise. Hundreds of Africans Americans marched through the streets of New York in 1810 with a banner reading “Am I Not a Man and a Brother” in an attempt to encourage support for the abolition of slaves in the state. In 1813, an African-American wrote “a series of brilliant letters” to oppose a possible new Pennsylvania law that would have required all African-Americans to register themselves with the state government.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 12-14.

<sup>84</sup> James McCune Smith, “Free Colored People vs American Anti-Slavery Society,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Jan. 26, 1855.

African-Americans were particularly keen on using petitions, “the only constitutional guarantee...inviolable from the ruffianism of American slavery,” as a way to achieve their political goals.<sup>85</sup> The Massachusetts General Colored Association voted in 1832 to petition Congress in favor of abolition in the District of Columbia. Soon after, twelve hundred African-Americans signed a petition beseeching Andrew Jackson to remember the sacrifices of African-Americans in the battle of New Orleans and free the slaves in the Arkansas and Florida territories.<sup>86</sup> A petition protesting the arrest of a runaway slave under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 in particular gained more than 50,000 African-American signatures.<sup>87</sup> After Americans were denied the right to vote in New York and Pennsylvania, they held statewide conventions and gathered thousands of signatures on multiple petitions to the state governments. African-Americans also held statewide conventions throughout the Midwest to protest the exclusion of African-Americans from the franchise. Even though African-Americans were often denied the right to vote they still were capable of political involvement.

However, the desire of African-Americans to achieve the franchise and to vote brought them into conflict with influential white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Stowe. Garrisonian abolitionists abhorred political involvement. They believed that the very structures of the nation, including the Constitution, had been corrupted by the sin of slavery and were irredeemable. Stowe included a section in

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<sup>85</sup>Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 191.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* that portrayed the U.S. Senate as a pro-slavery instrument that sought to reinforce the peculiar institution. To Garrisonians, the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, a "covenant with death, and an agreement with hell."<sup>88</sup> The document existed for the "protection of a system of the most atrocious villainy ever exhibited on the earth."<sup>89</sup> Garrison argued in his newspaper that the Constitution would be "held in everlasting infamy by the friends of justice and humanity."<sup>90</sup> He went as far as to burn a copy of the Constitution during one of his Fourth of July orations. To enter into politics, according to Garrisonians, would be to enter a pact with slaveholders and the devil himself. Even a political party that advocated for abolition, such as the Liberty Party, was "inherently...ridiculous" and had "leapt forth" from the mind of the devil.<sup>91</sup> Garrison viewed the Liberty Party as anathema, urging his readers to vote against the Liberty party, its "self-seeking agenda," and the dangerous temptation it represented.<sup>92</sup> Garrison's abhorrence of politics flew in the face of the effort of hundreds of thousands of African-Americans who had labored for decades to acquire political power. African-Americans, and some of their white abolitionist allies, believed that politics could be reformed and transformed by the involvement of abolitionists.

Frederick Douglass directly opposed the Garrisonians on the issue of political involvement and declared the Constitution to be an anti-slavery document. To

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88 William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*, Jan. 3, 1845.

89 William Lloyd Garrison, "On the Constitution and the Union," *The Liberator*, Dec. 19, 1832.

90 Ibid.

91 Garrison, *The Liberator*, Jan. 5, 1843.

92 Ibid.

suggest otherwise would be to “slander” the legacy of the nation’s founders. According to Douglass, the Constitution did not contain any “warrant, license, nor sanction” of slavery in its pages. Instead, it was a “glorious liberty document” that did not once mention “slavery, slaveholding, nor slave.”<sup>93</sup> Douglass believed that the best way to abolish slavery was to elect politicians who would use their political power to abolish slavery. A leading African-American newspaper declared that political power was “a mighty anti-slavery engine” and that “all true abolitionists should go to the polls and vote.”<sup>94</sup> Another newspaper called upon African-Americans to vote and “set an example for the whites who are...politically half crazy.”<sup>95</sup> African-American involvement in politics also fit into their identification as fully American and their belief that they were deserving of equal rights. Did the American colonists not petition the king and Parliament for representation and a political voice? If so, then what was wrong with African-Americans doing the same? Who were the Garrisonians to tell African-Americans what to do and what not to do with their rights? Contrary to Garrison’s wishes, many African-Americans enthusiastically supported the Liberty Party when it was first formed in order to “hasten the consummation of [their] disenthralment from partial and actual bondage.”<sup>96</sup> Garrison’s insistence on the evil of politics contrasted with the belief of many African-Americans that politics could be used for good, especially since they had fought so dearly for the right to vote. Political involvement was a way for African-

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93 Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” (speech, July 5, 1853).

94 *Colored American*, August 17, 1839.

95 Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 182.

96 Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 184.

Americans to exercise their agency. Political involvement was also a primary cause for the divide between Garrisonians and African-American abolitionists. The Garrisonians were denying the ability of African-Americans to alter their own destiny in the United States without the help of whites. In modern terms, at least from this perspective, the Garrisonians might have been abolitionists, but they were also paternalists; they denied African-Americans their agency.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's most blatant dismissal of African agency was her dismissal of Haiti. Haiti had been the sight of one of the world's few successful slave revolts, and it stood as the only democratic nation for Africans. It was also a beacon from African-Americans. It represented the ultimate example of self-uptift. African slaves in Haiti had overthrown their masters, fought off European invaders, and had established a functional and independent republic. Stowe, through George Harris, completely dismissed Haiti as a worthless endeavor because it was founded by "an effeminate race" and would take "centuries [to] ris[e] to anything."<sup>97</sup> She believed that the Haitians would be incapable of self-improvement and that their violent rebellion had been in vain. The Haitian Revolution had merely hardened the hearts of white Americans because they had grown fearful over the possibility of revolution spreading to African-American slaves.

Haiti, however, was universally beloved and celebrated in the African-American community. As a member of the Prince Hall Masons, David Walker helped to organize parades celebrating the Haitian Revolution, "the glory of the blacks and

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<sup>97</sup>Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 393.

terror of tyrants.”<sup>98</sup> Walker also believed that the Haitians were “bound to protect and comfort” African-Americans.<sup>99</sup> African-American intellectuals such as James McCune Smith publically praised Haiti as a “bright and happy state” under the direction of “the genius of Toussaint” and considered its revolution to be “an epoch worthy of the...study of every American citizen.”<sup>100</sup> At a public celebration commemorating the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, African-Americans praised the brilliant exploits of the Haitians who had fought to “proclaim the imprescribable rights of man.”<sup>101</sup> African-Americans from Philadelphia to St. Louis celebrated the Haitian Revolution alongside the American Revolution during Fourth of July ceremonies. The differing opinions over Haiti between black abolitionists and some white abolitionist also highlighted key differences over another possible method of abolition: violence.

Besides moral suasion, Stowe used *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to promote another means of abolition, one that was despised by the African-American community: colonization. Colonization as a means of abolition denied the American identity of African-Americans, their agency, and their equality. By the time *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written colonization had been utterly rejected by African-Americans, as well as many white abolitionists. However, colonization had been popular in the opening years of the nineteenth century among abolitionists and slaveholders. Supporters of

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<sup>98</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 23.

<sup>99</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 58.

<sup>100</sup> James McCune Smith, “Lecture on the Haytien Revolutions,” (speech, Feb. 26, 1841).

<sup>101</sup> Mitch Kachun, “Antebellum African-Americans, Public Commemoration, and the Haitian Revolution,” in *African-Americans and the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon (New York: Routledge, 2010), 95.

colonization believed that African-Americans would never be able to achieve equality in the United States because of the inferiority of African-Americans and the prejudices that white Americans held against them. Colonization supporters sincerely believed that African-Americans were incapable of improving their position in the United States. Their freedom would only result in their degradation and extinction. In fact, it would have been just “humane to throw [Africans] from the decks in the middle passage, as to set them free” in the United States.<sup>102</sup>

George Harris’s monologue on colonization was one of the most important sections of the novel. Not only was it intended to elicit emotional support for African-Americans, but it also served as a platform for Stowe’s beliefs on abolition and colonization. Harris described Africa as his “chosen” and “glorious” country.<sup>103</sup> Because of the injustices committed by Americans, Harris had “no wish to pass for an American or to identify” with them. Instead, the “desire and yearning” of his heart was for an African nationality. Tellingly, Harris referred to white Americans simply as “Americans.” By only referring to black Americans as “Africans” and white Americans as “Americans,” Harris was denying the American identity of African-Americans. They were a people that could not call the United States their home and did not have a future in the nation. Instead, it would be far better for African-Americans to return to Africa, even if they had never been to Africa or saw themselves as Africans. Stowe’s colonization beliefs, particularly her denial of the American identity of African-Americans, drew the ire of many African-Americans.

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<sup>102</sup> American Colonization Society, *Repository*, v. 4, 1825, 226.

<sup>103</sup> Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 395.



Frederick Douglass stated that African-Americans had “grown up with [the] Republic” and that he had seen nothing to “compel the belief that [they] must leave the United States.”<sup>104</sup> African-Americans believed they had earned the right to be considered Americans because of their sacrifices for the country. When African-Americans had petitioned Andrew Jackson to end slavery in a few territories, they reminded him of the service African-American soldiers had provided in the battle of New Orleans. In *Blake*, Martin Delany made a point to mention that some of the older slaves had fought on the American side of the American Revolution. The *Provincial Freeman*, a leading African-American newspaper, declared Stowe’s defense of colonization to be “a burr under the feet...a thorn in [side]...a beam in the eye” of abolition.<sup>105</sup> African-Americans were also concerned that colonization would actually strengthen slavery. Once they were removed to Africa, free blacks would essentially be out of sight and out of mind for many white Americans. Free blacks would no longer be present to agitate against slavery and to provide an example of what African-Americans were capable of. Many free blacks also had friends and family who were still enslaved. Instead of “returning” to Africa, African-Americans planned to live in the United States as long as their “brethren [were] in bondage on [its] shores.”<sup>106</sup> African-Americans had no interest in being forced by white Americans to leave their enslaved kin and the only homes they had known to move to a foreign, alien land.

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104 Frederick Douglass, “Letter to Mrs. Stowe,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, December 2, 1853.

105 *Provincial Freeman*, July 22, 1854.

106 Frederick Douglass, “Colonization,” *The North Star*, January 26, 1849.

Because Harriet Beecher Stowe had come into conflict with core concepts of African-American identity that formed the basis of African-American thought and practice on the means of abolition, she, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, inevitably came into conflict with African-American beliefs on different means of abolition. Stowe opposed the political involvement and violent resistance of the African-American community, two means of abolition that had been popular and were celebrated for decades, through her association and her words. Stowe was essentially opposed to the African-American belief that they could better their community through their own efforts, that they could control their own destiny. By supporting moral suasion and colonization, Stowe declared that African-Americans were not capable of their own uplift and that they needed to wait on the help of benevolent whites. Uncle Tom, as the vessel for Stowe's beliefs, was opposed to decades of thought and practice within the African-American community, putting his potential legacy in the eyes of the African-American community in serious jeopardy.

### Chapter 3: African-American Responses to Stowe

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* drew numerous vicious responses from Southern writers who saw the novel as a direct challenge to slavery and their way of life. They viewed Stowe as a meddling and interloping abolitionist seeking to spread rebellion and discord among African-American slaves. While the nature of the Southern response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was unsurprising and expected, some of the African-American responses to the novel were unusually and uncharacteristically negative and combative. Even though the majority of the African-American responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were, unsurprisingly, glowing and positive endorsements, there were still quite a few negative responses, some of which came from prominent African-American leaders. These negative responses were built upon the intellectual continuities, patterns, and traditions concerning African-American identity and means of abolition. Stowe's vision in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was in contention with ideas that were foundation to the African-American community. As a result, some African-Americans, obscure and prominent, countered Stowe's vision with ones of their own, even if some of them also simultaneously and publically praised the novel. These contradictory responses highlighted the unique position African-Americans found themselves in; they realized the potential good the novel could do but they also realized the danger Uncle Tom could bring to their community.

Of the numerous studies and analyses of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its cultural impact, very few studies or analyses have been concerned with the African-American responses. The attention paid to African-American responses has mainly

placed the responses within the wider abolitionist continuum. Instead, the African-American responses need to be looked at in their own unique circumstances. The nature of these responses was often contradictory as African-Americans grappled with the role and significance of Uncle Tom and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within the African-American community. At times African-Americans raved about the novel and held Stowe in high esteem; in other instances they were harshly critical of her work. African-Americans such as Douglass realized that Tom was somewhat of a necessary evil for their community; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the character of Uncle Tom were useful for gaining the support of whites. However, Tom was not the model that African-Americans wanted members of their own community to emulate, African-Americans such as Douglass and Martin Delany had key differences with Stowe about the very identity of African-Americans and different means of abolition. While these African-American responses did not achieve the same success as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they are still important for a wider understanding of Uncle Tom's conflicts with the African-American community and its intellectual history.

Newspapers were often the most important means of communication and dissemination of knowledge in the African-American community. The majority of black responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were published in African-American newspapers and journals. The majority of the responses to Stowe were glowing endorsements of the novel and support for Stowe in the face of criticism that she received. She occupied a dear position in the hearts of many African-Americans, and they were more than willing to declare their affections for her and her novel. One

poet publically wrote that she thanked Stowe “for [her] pleading/ For the helpless of our race;/ Long as our hearts are beating/ In them thou hast a place.”<sup>107</sup> Another black writer remarked that Stowe “gave an ear” to the “wrongs” of the slaves and “a tongue” to their “hurts.”<sup>108</sup> Stowe’s “name [would] be chronicled amongst the [greatest]...benefactors of the human race, and recurred to with feelings of the highest imitation and esteem.”<sup>109</sup> Few Americans would have given notice to the plight of those “clothed in Africa’s hated hue” if not for Stowe. African-Americans readily came to Stowe’s defense when she was accused of mishandling her financial windfall.

When one non-abolitionist newspaper accused Stowe of “accept[ing] without scruple a purse filled with penny contributions of English women,” even though her novel had already “brought her a fortune.”<sup>110</sup> Frederick Douglass’s rebuttal was immediate. By accepting donations, Stowe was “appropriat[ing funds] to the establishment of some institution, which shall be of *effectual* and *permanent* benefit to the colored people of the United States.” Stowe was in fact paying for two African-American women to go to Oberlin College.<sup>111</sup> In fact, the “end to which the thoughts and plans of Mrs. Stowe are nobly directed,” was the establishment of an institution” at which the “oppressed and proscribed [African-American] youth” could receive an

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107Francis Watkins, "To Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, January 27, 1854.

108Joseph C. Holly, "To Mrs. Harriet B. Stowe," *Freedom's Offering*, 1853.

109Frederick Douglass, "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, April 29, 1853.

110 Frederick Douglass, "Mrs. Stowe in England," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, May 6, 1853.

111 Ibid.

education.<sup>112</sup> Stowe had always “desired to turn whatever influence [*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] might give her, to the elevation of the African race.”<sup>113</sup> Stowe was not accepting the money for her own personal gain, or for the gain of any of the abolitionist groups, but rather for the betterment of free blacks.

African-Americans were quick to realize the potential good that Stowe’s work could bring to their community, especially after the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This law allowed slave catchers to operate with impunity throughout the nation. Leading African-Americans realized their community needed the support of white Americans to resist the new federal law and its agents. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would be able to turn the tide of public support in favor of African-Americans. Frederick Douglass remarked that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would “enlist the kindly sympathies, of numbers, in behalf of the oppressed African race, and will raise up a host of enemies against the fearful system of slavery.”<sup>114</sup> Douglass also doubted “if abler arguments ha[d] ever been presented, in favor of the ‘*Higher Law*’ theory, than may be found here [in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.]”<sup>115</sup> *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had “come down upon the dark abodes of human bondage like the morning sunlight,” had ensured that “sympathy [was] diminishing for the oppressor, and increasing for its victims,” and it had “rekindled the slumbering embers of anti-slavery zeal into active flame.”<sup>116</sup> The novel was just the sort of aid that African-Americans needed

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112 Ibid.

113 Frederick Douglass, “The Testimonial to Mrs. Stowe,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, June 19, 1853.

114 Frederick Douglass, “Literary Notices,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, April 1, 1852.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

from white abolitionists; it was able to persuade average Americans that slavery was in fact a grave evil and that African-Americans were actually suffering while enslaved. It was argued that “amongst the means recently adapted [by abolitionists] to expose the dreadful iniquities of slavery, none ha[d] been more efficacious than” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>117</sup> Uncle Tom’s “earnest and tearful appeal to all of the best, and purest, and noblest feelings of human nature [would] never be forgotten” by Americans, white or black.<sup>118</sup>

Douglass believed there had “not been an exposure of slavery so terrible as the *Key*[to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*].”<sup>119</sup> The *Key* was an addition to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that Stowe published after the novel’s success. Douglass referred to it as “a key to unlock the prison-house for the deliverance of millions who are now pining in chains.”<sup>120</sup> The *Key* addressed criticisms of the novel’s plausibility by showing that slavery was just as cruel as Stowe had described. She gathered numerous runaway slave notices and bounties that described slaves with preexisting scars and injuries to show that masters were cruel. When a prominent Northern literary review, *Graham’s Magazine*, referred to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a “mistake” and a “failure”, African-Americans quickly came to the defense of the novel; Douglass referred to the review

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117 Ibid.

118 Frederick Douglass, “Letter from James Taylor,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, September 30, 1853.

119 Frederick Douglass, “Literary Notices,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, April 29, 1853.

120 Ibid.

as “the most unjust, the most ungenerous, and the least refined review of the world-renowned book [he had] ever read.”<sup>121</sup>

While Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had a great deal of support among African-Americans, it also had its fair share of black critics. Martin Delany, for instance, was particularly critical of Stowe and his complaints were published by Frederick Douglass. Delany was bothered that Douglass had gone to Stowe for advice rather than the “intelligent and experienced among [African-Americans]” because Stowe “knew nothing about [them]” and “neither [did] any other white person.”<sup>122</sup> He argued that instead of consulting with whites, Douglass should have met with “the leaders among [their people],” especially when it was about matters that “concern[ed] [their] elevation.”<sup>123</sup> Delany would not exchange “the counsel of one dozen intelligent colored freeman of the right stamp, for that of all the white and unsuitable colored persons in the land.” Only African Americans had the best interest of African Americans in mind, according to Delany; whites were solely interested in personal gain. Delany argued that “no enterprise, institution, or anything else, should be commenced for African-Americans...without first consulting [them].” He also criticized Stowe for only planning to hire white instructors in her planned “industrial institution” for African-Americans. This insistence on white instructors helped to further “the impression that colored

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121 Frederick Douglass, "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, January 21, 1853.

122 Frederick Douglass, "Letter From M.R. Delany," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, April 1, 1853.

123 Ibid.



persons are incapable of teaching, and only suited to subordinate positions.”<sup>124</sup>

Delany was also critical of how Stowe “sneer[ed] at Hayti...the only truly free and independent civilized black nation” even though she was a supporter of colonization in Africa.<sup>125</sup>

Delany, like other critics, was skeptical of how Stowe handled the money she gained due to the novel’s success. He argued that, with the exception of support for Douglass and a few black students, “nothing that ha[d] as yet been gotten up by our friends [Stowe and other white abolitionists], for the assistance of the colored people of the United States, ha[d] ever been of any pecuniary benefit to them.”<sup>126</sup>

Delany did not limit his criticisms of Stowe to letters published in Douglass’ newspaper. He also wrote a novel, *Blake*, that was a complete rebuttal of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Delany’s protagonist, Henry Blake, was the anti-Tom: a fiery and rebellious who sought to start a massive slave uprising. Tom had tried to dissuade slaves, from committing violence against their masters. Henry, on the other hand, travelled throughout the South in order to spread the seeds of violent rebellion. He was “for war--war upon the whites.”<sup>127</sup> The South “stood like a city at the base of a burning mountain, threatened with destruction by an over of the first outburst of lava from above” because of Henry’s efforts.<sup>128</sup> Henry met with slaves that had

rebelled with Nat Turner, many of whom “held...in sacred reverence” the names of

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124 Frederick Douglass, “Mrs. Stowe’s Position,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, May 6, 1853.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Delany, *Blake*, 290.

128 Delany, *Blake*, 109.

slave rebels such as “Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey, and General Gabriel.” These three were thought to be “the greatest men who ever lived” by the older slaves.<sup>129</sup> In fact, one of the slaves claimed to have fought alongside Gabriel with the colonial forces in the American Revolution. By tying rebellious slaves in with the American Revolution and drawing upon the American identity of African-Americans, Delany argued that there was little difference between rebellious slaves and the American revolutionaries. He drew upon the numerous examples of violent resistance and celebration resistance within the African-American community.

Stowe told the tale of tragic mulatto characters such as Cassy, and George and Eliza Harris while Delany painted mulattoes as potentially harmful to African-Americans and the fight for freedom. Delany used Blake’s trip to South Carolina as an opportunity to criticize the mulatto organization known as the “Brown Society,” “the bane and dread of the blacks in the state.”<sup>130</sup> The members of the society “would prefer to see the blacks in bondage” rather than freed.<sup>131</sup> According to Delany, the organization was “created by the influence of the whites” with the express “purpose of preventing pure-blooded Negroes from entering the social circle” in South Carolina.<sup>132</sup> Mulattoes and black overseers helped keep watch over the slaves, preventing them from meeting with Henry in their cabins. When Henry entered Charleston he had to flee from a mulatto slave owner that tried to

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129 Delany, *Blake*, 113.

130 Delany, *Blake*, 111.

131 Ibid.

132 Delany, *Blake*, 109.

apprehend him. The mulattoes of Richmond held “against the blacks and pure-blooded Negroes the strongest prejudice and hate.”<sup>133</sup>

Delany also rejected the feminine piety of Stowe and Tom in favor of his more aggressive version of Christianity. Delany, like David Walker before him, believed that African-Americans had a God-given right to equality. If that equality was not given to them by whites then it would be morally acceptable for them to take it by force. Henry told potentially rebellious slaves to “stand still and see the salvation” that was coming.<sup>134</sup> Their salvation would be a mass slave insurrection, not the life after death that Tom focused on while he endured his bondage. When Henry met with his rebellious cohorts in Cuba to discuss a potential slave rebellion on the island those gathered prayed to “the Lord...a man of war” before “in the name of God declar[ing] against [their] oppressors.” After declaring war against the whites of Cuba, the group sang Christian hymns.<sup>135</sup> Later on, one of Henry’s companions used the verse “whosoever sheds man’s blood shall his blood be shed” as justification for revenge against whites.<sup>136</sup> Delany’s combination of Christianity and violence was also present in the words and deeds of David Walker, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey. Tom’s faith in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was nearly identical to the faith of Mrs. Shelby and Eva St. Clare. Tom’s faith influenced him to sacrifice himself in a Christ-like manner. Henry’s, on the other hand, was nearly the polar opposite. Henry’s faith

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133 Delany, *Blake*, 116.

134 Ibid.

135 Delany, *Blake*, 292.

136 Delany, *Blake*, 312.

was used as a justification for violence and resistance. If Tom was Christ then Blake was King David.

Another prominent African-American that offered a critique of Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was, surprisingly, Frederick Douglass. While Douglass had publically rebutted Delany's criticisms of Stowe and sung the praises of her novel far and wide, he later developed his own criticisms, publishing them in his novella, *The Heroic Slave*. Douglass' seemingly contradictory and hypocritical reactions to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* highlighted the internal conflicts and debates present in the African-American community. The novella was loosely based on the life of Madison Washington, a slave who was hailed as a hero for leading a rebellion aboard the *Creole*. Douglass' critique of Stowe was more nuanced than Delany's overthrow, primarily because Douglass still sought the support of Stowe's audience. While Henry had been adversarial to whites in *Blake*, Douglass's protagonist, Madison Washington, had a beneficial friendship with the abolitionists he encountered. But, like Delany, Douglass sought to tie Washington to the American Revolution and the African-American tradition of violent resistance. Madison Washington was similar to Henry Blake, in that both of them were anti-Toms. Douglass described Washington as a "man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry... and who fought for it with a valor as high...as strong as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence."<sup>137</sup> Madison Washington's association with Patrick Henry and revolutionary generals was an argument for the

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<sup>137</sup>Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 176.

slaves right to rebel, and it connected them to American ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom.

Washington declared early on in the novella that he would “have [liberty] or die in the attempt to gain it.”<sup>138</sup> He was determined to run for freedom so that he could “devise the means to rescue [his wife]” before she was sold away from the plantation.<sup>139</sup> Washington’s decision to run away and then return is easily contrasted with Tom’s decision to do neither. If Washington had stayed behind with her in bondage he would not have been able to rescue her or their children. He despised the “cowardly acquiescence in...degradation” that he saw in the other slaves because where there was “seeming contentment with slavery, there [was] certain treachery to freedom.”<sup>140</sup> Washington believed that it was dangerous for slaves to find contentment in their condition; they needed to always strive for freedom and a better life in the here and now. Washington’s sentiments echoed Walker’s earlier exhortations about the necessity of self-improvement within the African-American community.

Douglass, like Delany, also used his novella to critique American Christianity. Douglass saw it as a tool for masters to further oppress their slaves; Washington was described by an observer as a “child of God...[who] shun[ned] church, the altar, and the great congregation of Christian worshippers.”<sup>141</sup> Washington encountered a devout slave when the former was running away from slavery. Washington heard the

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138 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 179.

139 Ibid.

140 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 191.

141 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 182.

elder slaves prayers for deliverance from bondage. Washington, however, could not “repeat [this] prayer” because he had paid “little attention to religion, and had but little faith in it.”<sup>142</sup> Washington normally had little use for religion in his life even though he had been deep in prayer in the opening act of the novella. Thoughts of liberty and freedom had sustained him throughout his struggles and travels had been. Douglass appeared to be critical of the elderly slave’s faith. The elderly slave was representative of the African-Americans who refused to improve their lives. The elderly slave almost turned Washington in to slave catchers because the “truthfulness of the old man’s character compelled him to disclose the facts.”<sup>143</sup> Even though the old slave had been honest and faithful with the whites he was harshly whipped when he was unable to locate the hiding Washington.

The climax of the novella was the slave rebellion aboard the *Creole*. After taking over the ship, Washington declared to the surviving white sailors that the slaves had “struck for [their] freedom, and if a true man’s heart be in [the whites], [they would] honor [the slaves] for the deed” because the slaves had “done that which [the whites] applauded [their] fathers for doing,” and “if [the slaves] are murderers” then so were the revolutionary “fathers” of the whites.<sup>144</sup> This statement, as well as earlier statements on liberty, sought to tie African-Americans into the revolutionary tradition of white Americans. If whites could rebel against tyranny then why could African-Americans not do the same? Douglass, through Washington,

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142 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 199.

143 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 200.

144 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 236.

upheld violence as a virtue if it was carried out against injustice and tyranny. Blacks should have been able to fight against slavery without negative repercussions. Violent resistance was not something to be shamed or merely tolerated; rather, it was to be celebrated just as the American Revolution was celebrated throughout the nation. One of the surviving white slavers later recounted that he forgot Washington's "blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech."<sup>145</sup> He also felt that he had been in "the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise."<sup>146</sup> Washington told the white slavers that if they took the *Creole* to a "slave-cursed shore" instead of Nassau he would put a match to the magazine, and blow her, and be blown with her, into a thousand fragments."<sup>147</sup> When the slaves were freed in Nassau, they, along with gathered spectators, celebrated the "triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, Madison Washington."<sup>148</sup>

Douglass had another public critique of Uncle Tom and Stowe in a speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society at the end of the Civil War. Douglass spoke to the Society about the gains African-Americans had made during the war, particularly in terms of their perception among whites. Before African-Americans had enlisted in the Union Army during the war, whites believed that African-Americans "possessed only the most sheepish attributes of humanity; [were] perfect lambs, or 'Uncle Toms;' disposed to take off his coat whenever required, fold his hands, and be

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145 Ibid.

146 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 238.

147 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 237.

148 Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 239.

whipped by anybody who wanted to whip him.”<sup>149</sup> This part of Douglass’ speech was his most precise and focused critique of Uncle Tom. Douglass rejected Tom’s passivity and argued that Tom had helped to reinforce the notion that African-Americans were spineless and that they would not fight for their freedom. Douglass wanted to dispel the notion that African-Americans were helpless and infantile. He argued that African-Americans had shown they were more than willing and able to fight; by fighting they would be able to end the war and free their fellow African-Americans who were still stuck in bondage. Douglass stripped Tom’s sacrifices of all their religious meanings and effectively argued that Tom had needlessly allowed himself to be beaten and killed. In Douglass’ view, African-Americans needed to stand and fight rather than stand and acquiesce like Tom. African-Americans would respect a show of force more than acquiescence.

While they were the most prominent critics, Delany and Douglass were not the only African-Americans to offer their own revisions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Harriet Wilson did not write her semi-autobiographical novel, *Our Nig*, as a direct response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but the novel did address and confront many of Stowe’s ideas about femininity and domesticity, particularly how those related to piety. *Our Nig* should be read as part of the African-American intellectual continuity that led to Tom’s rejection. Wilson confronted Stowe’s vision as well as the North’s prevalent racism and discrimination through her protagonist Frado.

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149 Douglass “What the Black Man Wants,” (speech, Boston, April 1865.)



Frado's mother, Maggie Smith, was a white woman. She was neglected and cast aside by her community because she had an illegitimate mulatto child. The few side jobs she was able to work were hardly enough to support her. The only person that offered her any aid whatsoever was an African-American, Jim. Without his help, Smith would have frozen or starved to death. The two would go on to become married, despite the "impropriety of such [a] union" and the "dozens of sermons [preached] on the evils of amalgamation."<sup>150</sup> Even though Jim pitied and loved her deeply, Smith "cared for [Jim] only as a means to subserve her own comfort."<sup>151</sup> After Jim's early death, Maggie was "expelled from companionship with white people;... her union with a black was the climax of repulsion."<sup>152</sup> Even if Northern whites were opposed to slavery, they were also opposed to full equality for African-Americans. Their arguments against integration were reminiscent of Jefferson's arguments.

Maggie eventually decided to abandon her children, "the black devils," with a white family, the Bellmonts, even though Mrs. Belmont was "a right she-devil."<sup>153</sup> In order to convince Frado to stay at the Bellmonts and to convince the "self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary, and severe" Mrs. Belmont to allow her daughter to stay at the house, Maggie told the pair that she would return when she had no such plans.<sup>154</sup> Mrs. Belmont was not inclined towards kindness, especially towards a

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150 Harriet E. Wilson and Henry Louis Gates, *Our Nig: Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-story White House, North: Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 14.

151 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 16.

152 Ibid.

153 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 17-18.

154 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 26.

mulatto child that had been abandoned on her doorstep. She constantly tormented Frado throughout the latter's years of service in the Belmont household. One of her daughters, Mary, who "more nearly resembled her [mother] in disposition and manners than the other" children, was Frado's other chief tormenter through her childhood in the Belmont house.<sup>155</sup> Mary was a counterpoint to Stowe's Eva St. Clare. Mary sought to make Frado's life a living hell, while Eva counted Tom as one of her dearest friends.

Both Mrs. Belmont and Mary Belmont were examples of the racism that African-Americans experienced in the North; this Northern racism was a particularly appealing target for pro-slavery advocates that sought to label Northerners, especially abolitionists as hypocritical. When the Bellmonts were deciding what to do with Frado when she first showed up, Mary remarked on multiple occasions that she "didn't want a nigger 'round" her.<sup>156</sup> Mary included Frado with fully black African-Americans even though she was a mulatto. Frado learned not to weep loudly around or near Mrs. Belmont because the latter had kept "a rawhide, always at hand" to administer punishment when Frado cried loudly. Mrs. Belmont believed that Frado's weeping was a "symptom of discontent and complaining that which [needed to] be 'nipped in the bud'"<sup>157</sup> Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mrs. Belmont "was in doubt about the utility of attempting to educate people of color" because she believed that they "were incapable of elevation."<sup>158</sup> Mrs. Belmont believed that

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155 Ibid.

156 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 27.

157 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 31.

158 Ibid.

African-Americans were incapable of their improvement and uplift. Her daughter shared similar sentiments and refused to attend the same school as Frado once Mr. Bellmont decided to pay for the latter's education. When the school children first made fun of Frado for being black, Mary "relished" the insults and "saw a fair prospect of lowering [Frado to] where...she belonged."<sup>159</sup> Mary would leave all the house chores to Frado even though the former "affected great responsibility." When Mary believed that Frado had been a "saucy, impudent nigger" she threw a knife at her and threatened to kill Frado if she told anyone of the incident.<sup>160</sup>

Neither Mrs. Bellmont nor Mary were images of the domesticity that Stowe and her characters represented. On multiple occasions Mrs. Bellmont threatened to "take the skin from [Frado's] body" when the young girl had displeased her. She remarked to one of her sons, who asked if Frado was the "pretty little" girl his brother had written him about, that she would "not leave much of [Frado's] beauty to be seen if she came in sight."<sup>161</sup> When Mr. Bellmont declared that his wife would not "strike, or scald, or skin" Frado, Mrs. Bellmont broke into tears because she did not think that her "own husband would treat her so."<sup>162</sup> At one point Frado ran away from the Bellmont house because of the cruelty being inflicted upon her; while the family was out searching for Frado she remarked that it "was a shame a little nigger should make so much trouble" and wanted them to "take that nigger out of [her]

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159 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 32.

160 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 64-66.

161 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 47-48.

162 Ibid.

sight” upon their return.<sup>163</sup> Mrs. Belmont received “manifest enjoyment” from her “favorite exercise” which was to “enter the apartment noisily, vociferate orders, give a few sudden blows to quicken [Frado’s] pace, then return to the sitting room with such a satisfied expression, congratulating herself upon her thorough house-keeping qualities.”<sup>164</sup> When one of the Belmont sons, James, came back to his parents’ house to recover from his illness “Mrs. Belmont found [Frado] weeping on [James’] account, shut her up, and whipped her with the raw-hide, adding an injunction never to be seen sniveling again because she had...work to do.”<sup>165</sup>

Mrs. Belmont most clearly diverged from Stowe on domesticity and femininity with regards to piety. While many of Stowe’s female characters had been concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of African-Americans, Mrs. Belmont did not share similar sentiments. She didn’t allow Frado to attend church with her because she believed that “religion was not meant for niggers.”<sup>166</sup> Mrs. Belmont “did not feel responsible for [Frado’s] spiritual culture,” “did not trouble herself about the future destiny of her servant,” and in fact “hardly believed that she had a soul.” Mrs. Belmont was explicitly denying the religious identity of African-Americans as the long suffering children of the Lord. When Mrs. Belmont saw that her servant was reading the Bible in her spare time, she believed that it “was time to interfere” and ordered Frado to not stop to read while she still had work to do.<sup>167</sup> Mrs. Belmont

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163 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 51.

164 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 67.

165 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 78.

166 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 69.

167 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 87-88.

wondered “who ever thought of having a nigger go [to church], except to drive others there.”<sup>168</sup> She later told Frado it would “do no good for her to attempt prayer; prayer was for whites, not for blacks.”<sup>169</sup> After her son passed away from his illness, she told Frado to not dwell on his passing because “she could not go where James was; she need not try. If she should get to heaven at all, she would never be as high up as he.”<sup>170</sup> Finally, after tiring with Frado’s attempts to find religion and go to meetings with Abby, Mrs. Belmont informed her that if she “did not stop trying to be religious, she would whip her to death.”<sup>171</sup>

Mrs. Belmont and her daughter Mary clearly did not fit the mold that Stowe personally adhered to and had used to create some of her most influential female characters. Mrs. Belmont was the anti-Mrs. Shelby and Mary was the anti-Eva St. Clare. Even though Emily Shelby was married to a slave owner, she personally hated the institution and she cared for the spiritual welfare of her slaves. Mrs. Shelby was a woman who possessed “high moral and religious sensibility and principle.” Her husband afforded her “unlimited scope” for all of her “benevolent efforts for the comfort, instruction, and improvement” of the slaves on the plantation.<sup>172</sup> She was able to use her position as wife and mistress of the plantation to subtly influence many of the events on the plantation. Mrs. Shelby was the one who instructed the slaves to hamper any attempts by the slave trader Haley to recapture Eliza. She

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168 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 90.

169 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 95.

170 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 101.

171 Wilson, *Our Nig*, 105.

172Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 9.

exerted a guiding and caring influence without being seen or heard. Mrs. Belmont was nearly the polar opposite; she had a dominating personality that she visibly used to exact vengeance and control on the members of her household, including her husband. She had no interest in the religious affairs of African-Americans and cared little for Frado's external and internal torments.

Even though Harriet Wilson did not set out to challenge Stowe, her autobiographical novel stands as a testament to an alternate African-American experience than the one Stowe presented. Wilson effectively argued against moral suasion as the sole means of abolition when she pointed to the anti-black sentiments that existed in the North. She showed that there were still many barriers to the path white abolitionists wanted to take. Despite Wilson's intentions, and the relative obscurity of her novel, it is another valuable insight into the African-American responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Despite all the good Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the African-American community, some African-Americans still had valid criticisms of Stowe and the novel. The negative and combative responses by African-Americans towards Stowe were merely the tip of the iceberg. These responses were built upon the intellectual history and traditions of the African-American community. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By studying these responses, as well as the intellectual continuity that created them, one is able to gain a better understanding of the history of the African-American community, particularly the freedom struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Civil Rights movement, black power, and black nationalism.



## Conclusion

This thesis began as an attempt to understand the development of the term “uncle Tom” from an abolitionist Christ-figure into a self-policing term in the African-American community. The idea for the project came from a talk given by Mrs. Juanita Abernathy where she discussed how her husband, David Abernathy, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were called “uncle Toms” by their African-American enemies. “Uncle Tom” was a weapon during one of the most heated debates in the history of the African-American community, the debate over how the fight for equality should be approached. The enemies of Abernathy, King, and members of the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement considered them to be traitors to their own community because they were, in the eyes of the detractors, too conciliatory to whites. However, the use of “uncle Tom” as a pejorative did not begin in the 1960s during the Civil Rights debates. African-American leaders such as Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, and W.E.B. DuBois labeled their opponents as “uncle Toms” in an effort to discredit them during the earliest years of the twentieth century. These leaders, like their successors in the 1960s, used “uncle Tom” as a weapon in debates over the nature of the fight for equality and liberty. The Oxford English Dictionary attributes the use of “uncle Tom” as a pejorative to the 1920s. Despite the placement of “uncle Tom” in the twentieth century this thesis deals with the antebellum era because of a reference Frederick Douglass made concerning “uncle Tom.” Surprisingly, the earliest use of “uncle Tom” as a pejorative came from Frederick Douglass. Why is that Frederick Douglass, one of the most important members of the



abolitionist and African-American communities, saw Uncle Tom as an enemy instead of an ally?

The search for this answer shifted the focus of the project to the antebellum history of the African American community. Frederick Douglas was just one of the African Americans who responded negatively to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The negative African-American responses to Harriet Beecher Stowe and her novel were grounded in the intellectual history, debates, and traditions of the African-American community. These negative responses were part of a wider intellectual continuum in the African-American community and were a gradual development rather than a sudden change in opinion. Harriet Beecher Stowe and her vision did not just come into conflict with individual African Americans but also the entirety of African-American history in the United States. African Americans turned against Uncle Tom because Uncle Tom ran counter to decades of thought and tradition within the African-American community. African Americans believed in the necessity of self-uptift, viewed themselves as fully American and deserving of liberty, involved themselves in politics, and celebrated their acts of violence against slavery. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, argued the opposite with nearly all of these arguments. Tom relied on the help of whites, was inferior to whites, and refused to fight back against slavery on multiple occasions.

In fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its arguments, particularly about the differences between whites and blacks, bore similarities to the arguments of pro-slavery advocates. David Walker and his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*

are particularly important to understanding the conflict between the African-American community and Stowe. Walker sought to combat the arguments of white Americans like Thomas Jefferson who believed that African Americans were naturally inferior to white Americans. Because of the surprising similarities between Jefferson and Stowe, Walker's *Appeal* was well positioned to argue with Stowe across the years. The differences between the African-American community and its intellectual history, and Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, can be summed up in the conflict between Walker and Stowe. At the most basic level, Walker believed that African Americans were capable of improving their lot in life to full equality while Stowe believed they needed the guiding hand of white Americans to become secondary citizens. The theme of agency was the foundation on which all of the other differences were built.

Walker's arguments about the nature of African Americans also serve to highlight connections between African Americans in the antebellum era and the twentieth century. Black abolitionists of the nineteenth century and black nationalists of the twentieth century actually had quite a bit in common. Both groups believed first and foremost that it was imperative for African Americans to exercise their agency if they wanted to achieve greater levels of freedom and equality. Both believed that African Americans could only count upon themselves for help because white Americans did not have the best interests of the African American community in mind. The connections between the two groups show that the black nationalist and black power movements of the 1960s were not radical

departures from the development of the African American community or outlier alternatives to the more peaceful Civil Rights movement. Instead, they were in harmony with the history and traditions of the African American community. Douglass, Delany, and Garnett would more than likely have found common ground with DuBois, Garvey, and Malcolm X.

This thesis sought to simultaneously address a gap in the history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a gap in the history of the African-American community. Much of the historical literature surrounding the novel has primarily focused on its cultural impact, its literary style, or its influence on contemporary events. The vast majority of the negative responses that have been studied are responses from pro-slavery white Southerners. The ways in which the novel has been studied have, for the most part, been in a white context. The African-American community is usually ignored in these studies, or relegated to a few brief mentions. When the African-American community has been studied in regards to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* it has been viewed simply as a part of the wider abolitionist community. Their responses are also seen as universally positive, in line with the white abolitionist responses. In short, when it has come to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the African-American community has only been given a cursory and shallow glance, devoid of its complexities and contradictions. This is par for the course however. African Americans are often viewed as secondary participants in the fight to end slavery. African-American organizations are often overlooked, and African-American abolitionists are seen as outliers within the wider abolitionist community. This research project, however, shows that African

Americans desired to be primary participants in abolition and that they often were primary participants.

This thesis is also an attempt to more fully understand the depth of the African-American responses to the novel by looking at the intellectual forces that influenced the responses. Steven Hahn, in his essay "Slavery at Large," discussed the lack of studies on the connections between the slave communities and free black communities. Too often the relationships between these communities have been ignored, particularly with regards to slave communities. This project addresses the connections by showing how free blacks, such as Walker and Henry Highland Garnett, sought to influence the actions of their enslaved brethren, and how enslaved blacks, particularly rebellious slaves, impacted the discourse of free blacks. The two groups were often in constant, if indirect, contact with one another. These connections had a tremendous impact on how African Americans responded to Uncle Tom, and, when studied, provide a deeper understand of the black community and the fight to end slavery. A study of the connections between the free and enslaved African-American communities is particularly beneficial for understanding the political involvement of antebellum African Americans. Even though slaves had no political rights they were still able to exert political influence through their actions, which impacted both the white and free black communities. Free blacks were also able to overcome legal barriers to involve themselves politically. The relationships between the two communities and their actions show that African

Americans were able to involve themselves politically by doing more than merely voting.

Looking ahead to the future of this thesis and where it can go provides a number of possibilities. The political agency of the antebellum African American communities, particularly the slave communities, can be further studied. African Americans in the antebellum era were able to wield a considerable amount of political power even when their rights were curtailed or outright denied. It can be argued that the political actions of African Americans were just as vital to the end of slavery as the political actions of white Americans, even if blacks and whites had different ways of using their political power. One is able to gain a greater understanding of how African Americans conceived of political engagement and involvement by studying their actions at a time when their political rights were limited. Another possibility would be to further explore the connections between the different African-American movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A great deal of continuity existed between the movements of the 1800s, the 1920s, and the 1960s and '50s. It is tempting to view them all as separate and unrelated events that responded to contemporary contexts. However, they are all united by shared intellectual histories and debates. The actions and words of African Americans in the early nineteenth century would impact the actions and words of African Americans in the twentieth century. The ways in which African Americans like David Walker combated inequality and notions of inferiority would influence the ways in which Garvey, Malcom X, and King sought to combat inequality. By

studying the connections and continuities, one is able to see a gradual development of the African American community that lasted over a century, as African Americans fought inequality and sought to find their place in American society.

Most interestingly, perhaps, is the way this project could move into a study of African-American spirituality and religion. The rejection of Uncle Tom by African Americans raises an interesting question: what is a Christ-figure according to the African-American community? Tom was the stereotypical Christ-figure. He allowed himself to be sacrificed for the greater good of his fellow slaves and always sought to evangelize those around him. Tom's rejection shows that African Americans conceived of a Christ-figure in a different light than white abolitionists. While Tom's passive and nonviolent nature as certainly drawn from Christ, it might be wise to look at other representations of Christ in the New Testament. Christ was not just the lamb of God, led to the slaughter, but Christ was also seen as the lion of Judah in the book of Revelations. There are references to the second coming of Christ throughout the New Testament, a return that would separate the goats from the sheep, the chaff from the grain, and that there would be weeping, and mourning, and gnashing of teeth. Christ's apocalyptic message would not have been lost on a culture steeped in religious references. So perhaps African Americans did have their own specific character in mind for a Christ-figure. Their Christ-figure, however, was not the innocent lamb, but the triumphantly returning king clothed in glory. A reimagining of the Christ-figure and how it related to the African-American community would allow for a fuller understanding of African-American religion and spirituality.

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