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ENGL 438: Performing American Literature

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06 March 2017

### Project Proposal: Tender Hands

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe uses motherhood as a vehicle to prompt empathy in her white, Northern audience, often asking them to project their feelings onto their black counterparts to generate compassion; motherhood is universal. For Stowe, its ideals are inextricably linked to Christianity, which is why her female characters are so often opponents of slavery. Matriarchs rule over the domestic sphere and, free from the doctrine of monetary success, are able to live their lives honestly according to Christian values. Stowe's men are not afforded the same freedom because the public sphere they operate in values money more than faith-based action. Men have the power, so slavery exists.

This patriarchal norm is contrasted with the more matrifocal Quaker community. They believe all men are equal in the eyes of God and are willing to defend their faith with non-violent action. The settlement is peaceful and moral because feminine nurturing is given more power than masculine authority. Rachel Halliday even calls Eliza Harris "my daughter" (216).

Stowe believes that if maternal and feminine qualities were to rule man instead of masculine authority, slavery would be revealed as immoral. The most evil men in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are the men who have rejected femininity within themselves, and thus, Christianity.

I would like to explore Stowe's theory of femininity as moral and righteous by applying it to her characterization of men. I'm particularly interested in Simon Legree, Augustine St. Clare,

and Uncle Tom as they represent a sort of gradient; Uncle Tom is feminine, Legree is masculine, and St. Clare vacillates between properties of the two. For my final project, I'd like to create portraits of the hands of these three characters and display them, accompanied by music, in a space on campus.

### **Character Choice:**

Uncle Tom is the one of few male characters that exhibit the feminine quality of living a life guided by the Christian God. He physically a masculine figure, described as “large, broadchested, powerfully-made” (68). He is Mr. Shelby’s most capable farmhand. His hands are large and strong and efficient. Uncle Tom could be a threatening figure, but instead he is gentle, submissive, pious, and self-sacrificing — all characteristics shared by the mothers in the novel.

All of these qualities are apparent in his reaction to the news that he has been sold. He is surprised and scared but refuses to flee the farm with Eliza because he would rather be sold than put Mr. Shelby in a position to break apart other families on the farm. He is even capable of forgiving his owner, and implores his wife to do the same.

Uncle Tom also reacts most viscerally to leaving his children behind. “Here he turned to the rough trundle bed full of little woolly heads, and broke fairly down. He leaned over the back of the chair, and covered his face with his large hands. Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor...” (90). Like mothers in the novel, he most treasures home and family.

Most men in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* choose not to or are incapable of being feminine. Haley, Marks, Lokery, and Skeggs are all examples of characters guided only by masculine qualities. I chose Simon Legree from this group because he is so masculine that he is viscerally repulsed by

femininity. Eva's lock of hair and memories of his mother make him more than uncomfortable — they challenge his worldview. Legree needs Uncle Tom to whip other slaves because it would confirm that every man is ruled by self-interest. Legree's farm is powered solely by masculine rage. There is no matriarchal figure, no keeper of the faith on his plantation until Uncle Tom arrives.

Augustine St. Clare has both masculine and feminine qualities and is the most tortured white man in the novel because he is unable to reconcile his Christian instinct with the commercial results of slavery. St. Clare recognizes that slavery is immoral, but he is unwilling or unable to act on this knowledge. He means to free his slaves, but he doesn't. His last word is "mother".

### **Body Choice:**

Stowe describes the hands of characters often. On the first page of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she describes the hands of slave trader Haley as "large and course... bedecked with rings" (1). Hands also represent what a person is capable of. Uncle Tom fetched such a high price because of his skill as a farmhand. George Harris can "write a better hand" (61) than his master. Masters' hands wield whips and pens. For women, hands are tools of faith and motherhood. Mrs. Shelby "raised her hands in mute appeal to Heaven" (86). Mothers lead children by the hand.

Uncle Tom's hands are big and strong, but he doesn't raise them in violence. His hands are important because they demonstrate his femininity and the coexisting of the two traits. Legree's hands are dangerous, while St. Clare's hands are impotent.

**Music Choice:**

The song “I Never Had a Mammy”, written and performed by the white Duncan Sisters, is a duet between Topsy and Eva. The chorus, sung by Topsy, goes:

I never had a mammy a mammy to rock me to sleep

I've always been so lonely when dark shadows creep

I've never had no one to tuck me in my bed.

And no one cared a darn just where I laid my head

I never had a mammy a mammy to rock me to sleep.

Eva then responds by telling Topsy that once she goes to Heaven, God will make her white and give her a mammy to “keep us safe and keep as sound, away from all alarms.”

The song's melody is upbeat, so I'm not sure if I've settled on it just yet. But I think its message is relevant to my project — Topsy is lamenting the absence of a mother, and the hands of Legree and St. Clare have the power to take a mother away or give one to her. Matriarchs carry the values of Christianity within them — Topsy is not singing for a masculine figure, but all the hands are male. The paintings are meant to reflect the agency that masculinity has afforded, and I hope a crooning reminder of the result of that power that would compliment the paintings.

I want to work with the Digital Humanities Center to remove and record some parts of the song. I also would like the to song to play over itself after the chorus; I want the message to become distorted as viewers make their way between Legree to Tom.

**Challenges:**

I am a moderately skilled technical artist, but I haven't worked with acrylic paint in years. I'll need a fair amount before undertaking such a large project.

I'll also need help from the Digital Humanities Center to make the recordings possible.

I am also unsure if just one project would attract an audience significant enough to justify renting out a space and asking people to donate their time to teach me how to edit music. I will hopefully be able to collaborate with a classmate's project to create a small showcase.

**Other projects considered:**

I was also considering making a color palette of the black characters in the book. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was revolutionary, but its author was still racist. The skin tones of the characters she creates matters more than just black or white; the colorism that dominates her work is especially apparent in her characterizations of George Harris. He speaks more eloquently than other slaves do. He is smarter. He works harder. As Stowe compliments George, she hovers over his skin tone as if its lightness were also a merit.

This project would entail a producing a book of color swatches of every character's skin. I was attracted to it at first because it dehumanizes the characters as the slave trade did of real people; it reduces Stowe's characters - characters that are very vividly portrayed in her novel - to swatches that are seen in home improvement stores. This project would also passively comment on the colorism present today.

I ultimately chose against this project, despite encouragement from Professor Dimock, because I wasn't excited about where it could go. Colorism is understood to be a problem within all communities of color from African American to Asian to Native American; it has always been

more attractive to be lighter skinned. The color palette would have reaffirmed this accepted truth. I couldn't see a way to proceed or to comment on themes or strategies in Stowe's work passed that.

### **Goals for the project:**

“Uncle Tom” in contemporary culture is an insult because it invokes an image of a submissive black man trying to please his white masters. Submissiveness is still considered a feminine trait. I believe that some of the derision that is embedded in the term today comes from the idea of a black man being feminine. I hope that this project will showcase Uncle Tom's character from a different perspective, emphasizing that femininity in a tender way. I hope this project will show that he is gentle, but he's not weak; his strength lies in his belief in God and his own values.

I want this project to personalize images of black men by presenting Uncle Tom with two white men. I want to retell the story of Uncle Tom to modern audiences by accentuating his feminine presence through a complimentary light to ask why a black man can be shamed for gentleness, generosity, vulnerability, and love.

### WORKS CITED:

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom's Cabin. N.p.: Saylor Academy, 1852. Web. 01 Mar. 2017.

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