

SURROGATION AND THE [RE]CREATION OF RACIAL VOCALIZATION:

MARY E. WEBB PERFORMS *THE CHRISTIAN SLAVE*

by

ELLEN JOY LETOSTAK

(Under the Direction of Frances Teague)

ABSTRACT

In her 1852 sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe examines the culture of slavery from a distinctly white, abolitionist point of view and urges her readers to perform their Christian duty and dismantle the evil institution. Stowe's didactic work galvanized public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic and further stirred the increasingly volatile slavery debate. Stowe's popular novel was appropriated by commercial interests, causing her great anguish. In 1855 Stowe befriended an African American couple from Philadelphia named Frank and Mary Webb, and rewrote her famous novel as a one-woman performance piece for Mary Webb, entitling it *The Christian Slave*. Using archival materials, this thesis examines the performance history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its surrogations, and uses the critical theories of Joseph Roach and Mikhail Bakhtin to suggest that Mary Webb's [re]creation of Stowe's narrative vision results in a new, liminal assertion of black voice.

INDEX WORDS: The Black Siddons, The Christian Slave, Frank J. Webb, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary E. Webb, performance, surrogation, Uncle Tom's Cabin

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DEDICATION

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(1919-2001)

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(1918-2003),

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October 23, 1954-2004

Happy Anniversary!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis questions the complications of authorship, performance, and narrative voice using Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 sentimental antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and explores the manner in which that authorship is interrogated when a textual work is performed. A significant aspect of Stowe's book is its didacticism; the novel features an omniscient white narrator who relates the tale of black oppression and Christian forbearance and offers instructive remedies for slavery's evil. Stowe argues a tripartite theory: slavery is cruel and evil, true Christianity condemns its practice, and its eradication depends on familial and domestic intercession. I suggest that Stowe's Christian message was misread and disregarded in both the critical assessment and commercial appropriation of her popular tale. Harriet Beecher Stowe first reasserted her message by creating a new text, *A key to Uncle Tom's Cabin; presenting the original facts and documents upon which the story is founded, together with corroborative statements verifying the truth of the work* in 1853. This new text can be seen as a surrogation of the original novel, to use critic Joseph Roach's phrase, in that it sought to perform in the same fashion as the novel, to do the same sort of cultural work. Stowe's final attempt to deliver her message came with her 1855 dramatization of the Uncle Tom story, entitled

The Christian Slave, a Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin

Dramatized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary

E. Webb. Mary E. Webb was a free Northern black who, under Stowe's patronage, performed this new, noncanonical surrogation both in America and abroad, replacing Stowe's white narration with a reassertion of the originary black voice.

Chapter Two traces Harriet Beecher Stowe's creation of her seminal antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, its critical and popular acceptance, the narrative's commercial appropriation as dramatization, and its reception, which implicitly altered the novel from Christian didacticism to popular entertainment.

In Chapter Three I examine the brief life (1828-1859) and performance career (1855-1859) of Mary E. Webb, who enacted both black and white characters in public readings of Stowe's *The Christian Slave* in America and abroad. The career of this African American woman, who became internationally known and written about during her brief life, is one that deserves further research and critical scrutiny.

Chapter Four will briefly examine the critical complications of authorship and performance using the theories of two modern critics. I will suggest a connection between Mary Webb's assumption of the white authorized, yet black textual voice and Joseph Roach's theories of orature and surrogative performance, and Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about double-voiced discourse and the creation of cultural memory. I will suggest that Mary Webb's oral

performance of race and class transcends the inherent limitations between writing and speech and creates a new, liminal iteration.

CHAPTER TWO

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 provoked a political and spiritual furor that propelled the already-abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe to further assertion of protest. Section seven of the law stated:

That any person who shall knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent such claimant [slave owner], his agent or attorney, or any person or persons lawfully assisting him, her, or them, from arresting such a fugitive from service or labor . . .or shall rescue, or attempt to rescue, such fugitive from service or labor. . shall, for either of said offenses, be subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months . . .(Avalon Project)

This law, which privileged the materialistic commodification of human flesh over human rights and dignity, essentially created open season on people of color. Following its passage, blacks lived in jeopardy on either side of the Mason Dixon Line, and the whites that aided them faced loss of their own liberty. A 15 June 1855 article in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* notes:

The Free Soil of the North, consecrated to Freedom by the blood of our fathers, has already been polluted by the footsteps of

incarnated devils, in hot pursuit of men, women, and children, who were flying from the hell of slavery. (“Practical Abolitionism”)

Public outrage grew in the North, as blacks were bodily removed from their homes and places of employment, shackled, taken to a U.S. Clerk’s office, and summarily informed that they had been “reclaimed” by a slave owner. Kirkham notes in *The Building of Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that Northern free blacks were “taken into slavery on the word of any man who claimed to be or to represent his master” (62). With chilling effect, this law legitimized the enactment of property-owning mercantilism as national behavior: all American citizens were now required, by edict, either to become complicit in the horror of human bondage or conscientiously resolve to challenge it. In his 1889 biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe, her son Charles writes: “her soul was all on fire with indignation at this new indignity and wrong about to be inflicted by the slave-power on the innocent and defenseless” (C. Stowe 144). In a letter to her sister Catharine Beecher, Harriet wrote:

Your last letter was a real good one, it did my heart good to find somebody in as indignant a state as I am about this miserable wicked fugitive slave business--Why, I have felt almost choked sometimes with pent up wrath that does no good (Hedrick 204).

The terror with which Northern blacks confronted this new law can be surmised; Frank Webb, in the “Biographical Sketch” he wrote about his wife Mary, claimed that his mother-in-law died “a victim of anxiety produced by the passing of the infamous Fugitive Slave Law” (ii).

While clearly affronted by the further politicization of the trade in human flesh, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Christian sensibilities were deeply offended as well. As Elizabeth Ammons notes in her Preface to the *Norton Edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Indeed, it was her passion and sense of mission as a Christian, she maintained, that compelled her to write the novel" (vii). This sense of outrage coupled with Christian duty emboldened her to contact Gamaliel Bailey, editor of *The National Era*, an abolitionist newspaper that had previously published her sketches. In her letter, she described her new work "which [would] give the lights and shadows of the 'patriarchal institution'" and that she expected might "extend through three or four numbers" (Kirkham 66-67). In an unsigned notice, Bailey announced its imminent publication to his readers this way on 8 May 1851:

Week after next we propose to commence in the *Era*, the publication of a new story by Mrs. H. B. Stowe, the title of which will be, "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, OR THE MAN THAT WAS A THING." It will probably be of the length of the Tale by Mrs. Southworth, entitled Retribution. Mrs. Stowe is one of the most gifted and popular of American writers. We announce her story in advance, that none of our subscribers, may lose the beginning of it, and that those who desire to read the production as it may appear in successive numbers of the *Era*, may send us their names in season.

Several assertions made by the publisher did not come to fruition; for one, the title was changed to *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, with a later London edition being entitled *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or the History of a Christian Slave*. Furthermore, there is the matter of the publication time limit: according to her son Charles's account, the serial "was announced to run for about three months" but "once begun it could no more be controlled than the waters of the swollen Mississippi, bursting through a crevasse in its levees" (156). Little did Stowe surmise that the currency and honesty of her sentimental story of a beleaguered Christian slave and the formidable, transcendent power of his faith would capture the public's attention with such alacrity: the serialization ran from June 5, 1851, to March 20, 1852.

Born of powerful religious sentiment, Stowe's narrative illustrates her tripartite thesis: slavery is cruel and evil, it destroys domesticity, and true Christianity condemns its practice. Stowe indicts both factions in the slavery controversy for their inability or unwillingness to embrace "true" Christianity and liberate their fettered brethren. Perhaps chillingly for Stowe's detractors, her argument does not merely inform: it arouses and hopefully agitates her reader to resolve this societal dilemma from within the orbit of maternal and familial authority.

Reaction to the serial publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was enthusiastic among the general public. Stowe, desperate to finish the arduous undertaking of producing weekly installments, offered to finish the saga with a few brief

paragraphs concluding the various story lines. The public reaction to this suggestion was both censorious and swift:

Please signify to Mrs. Stowe that it will be quite agreeable to the wishes of very many of the readers of the *Era* for her *not to hurry through* "Uncle Tom." We don't get sleepy reading it. Having resided many years among slaves and being familiar with their habits, thoughts, feelings, and language, I have not been able to detect a single mistake in her story and in any of these respects-- 'tis perfect in its way--will do great good.

Yours,

J.D.L.

(Wilson 273)

This writer's feeling of familiarity with the story and its characters is typical of the response. In a letter to old friends Levi and Millicent Lamson dated 25 July 1853, Samuel V. Tripp illustrates this reaction when he asks:

What do you think of Uncle Tom's Cabin or haven't you read it. I am just finishing it and I think that to one who can appreciate the value of its truths and representations that it is a valuable work and deserves patronage. I have taken cognizance of the disposition and character of Southerners generally as I have had an opportunity from time to time.

Tripp, having emigrated from Ohio to the Willamette Valley in Oregon, typifies the universal recognition with which readers greeted the book and its

characters. Readers identified with the pathos of mothers torn from their children, and enjoyed the emotional and melodramatic adventure story woven by Stowe week after week. Stowe's greatest success may lie in the verisimilitude of her characterization and her description of the torments of slavery. The emotional response of her readers to the narrative's episodes is due largely to her ability to render the poignant vignettes in a convincing manner. The large number of characters (over one hundred) enabled her to explore all stratas of humanity, and to probe each one's true sensibility toward both slavery and Christian duty. This realistic mirroring of national attitudes served both to educate and inspire her readers toward "see[ing] to it that *they feel right*" (UTC 385) and leading them to Christian social action opposing slavery.

The popularity of the newspaper serial caught the attention of J.P. Jewett, a Boston publisher of religious tracts who arranged for its publication as a novel in a two-volume set in March of 1852. Jewett reported that on the first anniversary of the book's publication over 305,000 copies had been sold "with demand as heavy as ever" (Kirkham 192). It became a controversial yet beloved bestseller, "sold more copies than any book in the world except the Bible" and turned Stowe "into the most celebrated author in the world" (Ammons viii). To Stowe, expecting to earn enough money for a new dress, the book's financial success enabled her to help support her family for years to come.

Critical response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was often negative, however, ranging from scathing to merely alarmed. Harriet Beecher Stowe had managed

to create her desired emotional effect, although the passions that arose were not necessarily those she had intended. In an unsigned article in the *New York Observer* dated 21 October 1852, its author states “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a fiction in every sense of the word” and describes Stowe’s narrative as “. . .devised so as to present slavery in three dark aspects--first, the *cruel treatment* of the slaves, second, *the separation of families*, and third, their *want of religious instruction*.” This Northern publication went on to refute each of these three points, citing the General Court of Virginia, the “statue” book of Louisiana and church attendance records to rebut Stowe’s alleged accusations. This article also uses religious phrasing to attack her personally, asserting “She manifestly has borne false witness against her neighbor.”

Publisher and antislavery activist William Lloyd Garrison, in a 26 March 1852 review in *The Liberator*, questions Stowe’s racialized view of Christian submission, stating:

Is there one law of submission and non-resistance for the black man, and another law of rebellion and conflict for the white man? When it is the whites who are trodden in the dust, does Christ justify them in taking up arms to vindicate their rights? And when it is the blacks who are thus treated, does Christ require them to be patient, harmless, long-suffering, and forgiving? And are there two Christs? The work, towards its conclusion, contains some objectionable sentiments respecting African colonization, which we regret to see.

It is not surprising that abolitionist Garrison took issue with aspects of Stowe's tale. Known as an "immediatist" for his insistence on immediate emancipation, the publisher rejected the notion that blacks should patiently await either manumission or salvation: he argued for a radical and instantaneous disruption to the racist status quo.

Even *The Boston Morning Post*, while lavishly praising the novel's literary qualities in an 1852 review, had concerns regarding the narrative's veracity:

But we would here remark that some portions are very highly colored. In a word, the effect of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," as a whole, is grossly to exaggerate the actual evils of negro slavery in this country. As a didactic work, therefore, it should be swallowed with a considerable dose of allowance.

This perspective of disbelief is precisely what Stowe was trying to combat through her creation of *The Key*, with didactic rhetoric as her instrument.

At this point, it is intriguing to note that resistance to Stowe's message often centers on its "truth." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a novel, however, a literary form not necessarily based on determinable fact. The insistence of the book's critics on this point may lead back to Harriet Beecher Stowe herself, who by her own admission produced the work with didactic intent.

Given the tenor of the Northern response, the Southern reaction can easily be surmised. *DeBow's Review*, which by the start of the Civil War was the most widely circulated southern periodical, was particularly virulent in its attacks against Stowe and what it considered the infamous lies propagated by

her novel. Describing her work as “insulting to the South” and as “one of the most incendiary papers ever issuing from the American press,” the ‘gentleman from Georgia’ who authored the piece rebukes Stowe for her injustice to the South. He argues that the North is just as economically dependent upon slavery as the South, and that Stowe herself is in fact financially enriched through continuation of the practice. This stinging criticism of Stowe and her narrative must have seemed inconceivable to the author who had wanted to change people’s hearts and minds to “do what feels right,” particularly one who believed that “God wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, using her as His agent” (Reynolds 128). The denunciation of her characters and their servile degradation as implausible and untrue particularly stung the woman who announced in her book that the “. . . incidents that compose the narrative are, to a very great extent, authentic, occurring, many of them, either under her own observation, or that of her personal friends” (*UTC* 381). In a letter to Lord Chief Justice Denman in January 1853, she writes:

I am utterly incredulous of all that is said; it passes by me like a dream. I can only see that when a Higher Being has purposes to be accomplished, he can make even a “grain of mustard seed” the means (Wilson 336).

Her bewilderment gave way to a determination to demonstrate that the facts of the story were based on truth, and to that end, in 1853 she published *A key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin; presenting the original facts and documents upon which the story is founded, together with corroborative statements verifying the truth of the*

work. This volume is a collection of slave narratives, advertisements, newspaper clippings, court records and other ephemera categorized by the topics and characters originating in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe catalogued mountains of material in order to prove the truth of her narrative, and her massive effort in documenting evidence is highly successful. The reader is confronted with incident after incident of the true-to-life evil of the slave trade. Particularly effective are Stowe's chapters refuting the belief that slavery is Biblically ordained; she also castigates ministers, whom she considers complicit in slavery by their silence. Stowe confesses in a letter to the Duchess of Sutherland that she personally considered the collection an indictment against her nation, written with a heavy heart (C. Stowe 188). Apparently, Stowe believed her efforts in compiling *The Key* would silence her critics regarding the veracity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and enable the public to move beyond the controversy and into acceptance of the book's message. In a letter she wrote:

I am now very much driven. I am preparing a Key to unlock 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' It will contain all the original facts, anecdotes, and documents on which the story is founded . . . My Key will be stronger than the Cabin (C. Stowe 189).

In truth, while Stowe had personal contacts with fugitive slaves and was very familiar with their narratives, the materials in *The Key* were gathered *after* the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. There remains some debate regarding the book's eventual financial success; Kirkham reports "When she attempted to

prove the truth. . .by producing a factual *Key* . . .the book sold only on the reputation of its author. . and [was] bought by people who expected another *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (192). While her publisher reported sales of 90,000 in the first month, *The Key* never gained the popularity of her first book. Harriet Beecher Stowe, writing to the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Glasgow, resolutely considered *The Key* a success:

The "Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin" has sold extensively at the South, following in the wake of "Uncle Tom." Not one fact or statement in it has been disproved as yet. I have yet to learn of even an *attempt* to disprove. (C. Stowe 253)

This reception must have proven satisfying to Stowe, whose health suffered due to the rigors of completing the manuscript.

The critical response to *The Key* in the North was more positive than that for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although even the abolitionist press voiced some reservations. In a review published in 1853, *The National Era* announced itself as being:

. . . among those who were inclined to doubt the expediency of such a work. . . [as it] might arouse the bitter antagonism of the South, and close its heart to the more winning appeals of Mrs. Stowe through her fictitious narrative, we could have wished that she had let her assailants contradict and silence themselves. . .

In a vitriolic counterpoint to the *National Era*, *The Southern Literary Messenger* responded in a vehement personal attack upon Stowe's femininity in a review

of her “present encyclopedia of slander.” Written by G.F.H in June 1853, the review attacks Stowe’s lack of decency in investigating the moral and sexual imbroglio that results from white men owning black women as property. Slavery, sexual bondage, and miscegenation were not considered proper topics for a woman writer, and the review goes on to state:

It may accord with the gross fancies and coarse nature of a Cincinnati school-mistress to revel over the imagination or the reality of corruptions, with which she is much more conversant than the majority of Southern gentlemen . . . If Mrs. Stowe will chronicle or imagine the incidents of debauchery, let us hope that women--and especially Southern women, will not be found pouring [sic] over her pages. (322)

While the review spent much of its time vilifying Stowe’s respectability, it did pause to address the actual *content* of *The Key*, describing it as “a distortion of the facts and mutilation of the records . . . reduplicating the falsehood of the representation” (322).

Interestingly, both Northern and Southern reviews seek to silence Harriet Beecher Stowe’s response to the fevered criticism of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. *The National Era* concludes that her new book will incite Southern anger and antagonism, and would have preferred Stowe to restrain her response. The Southern rejoinder asserts that a decent, God-fearing, respectable woman would not consider slavery a suitable topic for discussion, let alone publication. Having her work critically attacked on political, sexual, religious, and accuracy

grounds encouraged the writer to respond: in choosing to be vocal, Stowe reasserts both didactic message and claim of authorship. *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* unprecedented success was evidently not a result of the critical response; however, it was the general public who embraced her melodramatic tale of slavery's evil.

Culturally, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a phenomenon beyond the control of its author. A cottage industry emerged, cashing in on the popularity of Stowe's publishing success, usurping her characters without authorial permission. A card game published by W. & S. B. Ives of Salem, Massachusetts, in 1852 is reminiscent of the children's game Go Fish. It directs children to accumulate cards from the other players: the player who collects all the cards, including Simeon's hat, George's Bible, Chloe's biscuit, and Eva's flowers wins the game. Interestingly, the player holding the Uncle Tom card was in control of the game; thankfully, there was no Simon Legree card.

Even more intriguing is UNCLE TOM AND LITTLE EVA, a card game, presumably for children, in which the play "consists [of] the continual separation and reunion of families." The directions are explained on a card called "Justice." The website *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture: a Multi-Media Archive* relates that the directions are "not easy to follow, but it's clear that Legree, Tom, and Eva cards had special value." Fascinating also are the "families" the players are attempting to reunite: while the Shelby, St. Clare, Harris, and Uncle Tom families are easily envisioned, the Legree 'family'

consists of Legree, Haley, Cassy, and Loker. (Railton site) While we do not know precisely how Harriet Beecher Stowe reacted to this consumerism, surely her Presbyterian sensibilities did not appreciate the degradation of her narrative into a card game. The unabashedly commercial appropriation of Stowe's work did not rest with playing cards; there existed Uncle Tom's Cabin decorative plates, utensils, puzzles, fireplace screens, Staffordshire china, handkerchiefs, as well as Topsy tobacco. The marketing onslaught appears pervasive and interminable; all was affected without the permission of the author.

The crass commercialism did not end with advertisements and merchandise. Dramatic appropriations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were staged even while the story was still in serial format. Annie Fields, in her *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, recounts Charles Dudley Warner reporting:

The story was dramatized in the United States in August 1852, without the consent or knowledge of the author, and was played most successfully in the leading cities, and subsequently was acted in every capital in Europe. Mrs. Stowe had neglected to secure the dramatic rights, and she derived no benefit . . . (178)

Thomas F. Gossett relates that Stowe was approached by Asa Hutchinson about consenting to a dramatization and refused, stating:

If the barrier which now keeps young people of Christian families from theatrical entertainments, is once broken down by the introduction of respectable and moral plays, they will then be open

to all the temptations of those who [sic] are not such, as there will be, as the world now is, five bad plays to one good. (261)

And there were *many* 'bad plays' created from the Uncle Tom story. Gossett recounts: "Perhaps as many as fifty people would eventually see *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the play, for every one person who would read the novel" (260). If true, these numbers were staggering: there were 305,000 copies sold in America and a million and a half in Great Britain in its first year of publication. (Kirkham)

In a quest to cash-in on the astonishing popularity of the novel, countless plays were produced, all without authorial consent. These productions softened the Christian antislavery message to near non-existence, and featured melodramatic or entertaining moments from the novel and none of Harriet Beecher Stowe's substantive message. Familial domesticity was often absent, with the Shelby, Halliday, and St. Clare families often excluded or minimized (although Little Eva and Topsy were nearly always portrayed). The significance of the cruel evil of slavery became minimized or lost in the haste to produce popular, spectacular entertainment. The play's producers appropriated the characters and turned them into humorous caricatures, playing upon the audience's familiarity with the novel. These "Tom-Shows" began as little more than minstrel-like additions to burlesques, but became plays with actual story lines (although never following the novel with any precision). Songs were written for the productions, and the plays were often advertised by the number of tunes they contained. The popular dramatizations were unavoidable and omnipresent, with dozens of acting troupes playing

thousands of performances in both America and abroad. These incarnations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* persisted in the United States for eighty years, only diminishing in the 1930s with the increasing popularity of films. During one New York City theatrical season a popular version of the play “ran for an unprecedented 325 consecutive performances” (Tanner 22). The scene featuring Eliza's frantic escape across the ice floes was an audience favorite, with the addition of real bloodhounds giving chase onstage imparting a realistic touch to the spectacle, as this *Washington Post* notice suggests:

New York, May 28. —During the production of the play of “Uncle Tom's Cabin” at Haverly's Brooklyn theater this evening, two of the large Siberian blood-hounds attacked each other fiercely while on the stage. They rolled over the footlights into the orchestra, creating great excitement among the audience. The brutes were finally separated and the play proceeded.

Publicity for these shows emphasized the abundance of musical interludes or the number of live animals that would appear onstage, an understandable enticement in the era of P. T. Barnum. Black characters were embodied by white performers with burnt cork makeup and woolly hair: stereotypically shuffling, dancing, and grinning. The singing, dancing, ‘Happy Uncle Tom’ became a performative fixture; this portrayal is the genesis of the Uncle Tom stereotype as it exists today. Intriguingly, the Southern response to these racist performances was not necessarily a positive one, as this 1895 *Washington Post* notice attests:

Athens, Ga., Feb. 11.—“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was billed for Athens to-night, but failed to appear. Athens has been considerably stirred up ever since the play was billed. The papers denounced it as an insult to our people, and bills were distributed reading, “The vile slander on the manhood and honor of our fathers will show to-night. Let all true Southerners stay away.” There would have only been a small house and an egg reception would have resulted. (“Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ Didn’t Appear” 2)

Apparently this boycott proved successful; the troupe bypassed Athens but continued to attempt to perform in Georgia, as this wry, 13 February 1895 comment suggests:

Instead of carrying its own bloodhounds, two Topsy’s, two Uncle Toms, and a large assortment of Lawyer Marks, that Uncle Tom’s Cabin Company that has ventured into Georgia had better invest its surplus cash in armor plate. (“Comment on UTC in Georgia” 4)

While this theatrical venture may have proven futile, there are records of numerous successful forays into the South, confirming perhaps the dilution of Stowe’s emphatic antislavery message when rendered performatively.

Stowe refused to approve theatrical representations based on religious grounds, and the commercial theft and manipulative distortion of her work into theatrical performance caused her great anguish. Plays were considered immoral in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Congregationalist faith; her refusal to allow Hutchinson to borrow her narrative is easily understood. It is intriguing that

she clearly recognizes the enticing, forbidden allure of “theatrical entertainments” and initially resists the notion: Stowe does not want her Christian, moral tale to be a conduit that leads others into temptation. Stowe’s Christianity was both the cornerstone of her life and the focus of her seminal abolitionist work, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She was raised in a family of ministers: her father, seven brothers, and husband were all clerics. Her anti-slavery message uses Christianity as its major catalyst: *true* Christians, she asserts, cannot possibly condone slavery. In the “Concluding Remarks” of the novel, Stowe implores, even demands, that true Christians rise up and dismantle the evil institution that degrades them as well as the shackled slave. She rails against the economic, political, and institutional Christian stance and demands that her readers, both Northern and Southern, act Christ-like and release their fellow Children of God from bondage.

It is unknown why she decided in 1855 to dramatize *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* herself; *The Christian Slave* remains, however, her last word in defense of her original project. Perhaps a defining moment came for her when she attended a Conway production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* when it played in Hartford. Gossett reports:

In this version, Uncle Tom does not die but is rescued by George Shelby from the clutches of Simon Legree and returns happily as a slave to the old plantation in Kentucky. Eva recovers from her illness (274).

Harriet Beecher Stowe is reported to have left the theater in disgust, revolted also by the strong language conferred on one of her characters. An 1853 *New York Tribune* review of a Conway production describes Uncle Tom's saga this way:

At the end of the play, Uncle Tom is allowed to run with flying colors, after having had a pretty good time, so far as is seen or represented, throughout his entire pilgrimage. . . The effort of the dramatist had evidently been to destroy the point and moral of the story of Uncle Tom, and to make a play to which no apologist for Slavery could object. (3)

For Stowe, much more was at stake than the inaccurate representation of her story. The promulgation of her Christian ideology and the societal change she believed would follow its faithful application was critically important to her. In the novel, the death of Christ-like Uncle Tom enacts the necessarily-sacrificial culmination of the emancipative story of salvation, "demonstrating that human history is a continual enactment of the sacred drama of redemption" (Tompkins 134). Tom's self-sacrifice is both physically and spiritually transformative, and his jubilant final victory at death is the ultimate liberation for a true Christian. Uncle Tom's rescue by George Shelby in the Conway version undermines Stowe's admitted Christian didacticism as well as her intention of inspiring her readers toward "see[ing] to it that *they feel right*" (UTC 385).

Stowe's religious beliefs regarding such secular activities as dancing, nude sculpture, painting, and plays were undergoing a change at this time,

however, particularly following her successful European tour in 1853. Gossett reports “Stowe had come a considerable distance in freeing herself from the narrow conventions of her religion” (261).

The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin Dramatized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb was published in 1855. The play was a total departure from the popular Tom Shows, and exists as Stowe’s final rebuttal to the unending criticism she had received since the original publication of the novel. Intriguingly, *The Christian Slave* was written “expressly for the reading” of a specific individual, the African American Mary E. Webb. Billed as “The Black Siddons,” Webb performed Stowe’s work both in America and abroad to a mixed reception. Investigation into this work raises more questions than it answers, as little has been written on it. An examination of the changes Stowe engineered, particularly “the emphatic revisions of the text” (Clark 339) is fascinating.

CHAPTER THREE

Although details remain difficult to ascertain, the history of Harriet Beecher Stowe's relationship with the Webbs is a compelling one, with little verifiable information available archivally on the brief life and career of Mary E. Webb. Virtually all that is known about her emerges from the succinct, arguably self-promoting "Biographical Sketch" ("BS") penned by her husband, Frank Johnson Webb, for Stowe's 1856 edition of *The Christian Slave*. "Little Mary," as she was called, was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1828: the child of an escaped fugitive slave and a "Spanish gentleman of wealth" (A). A tantalizing clue to her paternal roots exists in the collected journals of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, compiled by his son Samuel in 1886. In an entry dated 6 December 1855, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow describes his attendance at a performance of *The Christian Slave* in Boston:

In the evening, went to town to hear Mrs.-----, daughter, it is said, of Espartero and a negro mother, read Mrs. Stowe's dramatization of her own Uncle Tom. (269)

Baldomero Espartero, (1793-1879), was a politically noteworthy Spanish general and statesman whose opposition to queen regent Maria Christina forced her exile from Spain in 1840. Rewarded with the title duque de la Victoria [duke of Victory], Espartero himself became regent of Spain and ruled

as “virtual dictator” until his 1843 overthrow, prompted by his “ruthless suppression of opposition” (“Espartero”). Research is still necessary to determine whether or not Espartero, who was a known traveler to North and South America, Cuba, and Europe, can be placed near the Virginia plantation where Mary Webb’s mother was a slave. This intriguing assertion by Longfellow regarding Mary Webb’s father remains speculative, but may explain her middle initial of “E.,” which she consistently used throughout her career. Further evidence may rest in Frank Webb’s description of her as:

. . .a child of remarkable beauty; and her finely-cut features and fair complexion contrasted so broadly with the jet-black colour and African contour of her mother’s face as to excite great astonishment when their close relationship was discovered.

(“BS” A)

Mary Webb’s possibly African-Hispanic roots may explain a later description of her in the *Provincial Freeman* on 12 May 1855:

Her appearance is extremely graceful and prepossessing, and being of a color that will vary but little from that of a native Mexican girl, the disagreeable prejudice of mere complexion can, of course, proceed but a very little way before being checked by the fact that the Anglo-Saxon predominates and has, true to its aggressive character, obliterated [sic] the African feature and hue

to such a degree that we see before us little more than a deep
brunette, so that the name black Siddons is a misnomer. . .

(“The Black Siddons”)

This view is seconded by a review published in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* one month later, on 15 June 1855, which suggests:

It is at last a misnomer in one respect, if no other, to apply the
term “Black Siddons” to this lady. She is by no means black, being
chiefly of white blood. She has a brunette tinge, with a somewhat
Spanish cast of features, and is of delicate, lady-like appearance.

(“Mrs. Webb”)

The close wording of the two pieces suggests that the authors may have seen each other’s work; the Railton site states that while the *Provincial Freeman* piece was reprinted from the *Woman’s Advocate*, the latter was reprinted from the *Portland Transcript*. In any event, Mary Webb’s mixed parentage was clearly noticeable, and it is fascinating to speculate about how her light color may have affected both her childhood and later audience reception.

Frank Webb’s biography relates that Webb’s father supported her up until “Mrs. Webb’s sixth or seventh year. . .she had no wish remaining ungratified that wealth could supply” (A). In a further nod to an Espartero connection, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in an introduction dated 24 May 1856 that “She was born in New Bedford and was subsequently sent to Cuba, where she passed [the] earlier part of her life in a Convent” (Baines letter). In the previously mentioned notice from *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, the anonymous

author tantalizingly writes “We see it stated the [sic] Mrs. Webb was educated in a convent” (“Mrs. Webb”). Frank Webb makes no mention of a Cuban convent connection, but notes “she made very rapid progress” at school, exhibiting at a young age “a fondness of poetry,” “a taste for dramatic literature,” and “a genius for dramatic reading” (“BS” ii).

Mary and Frank Webb were seventeen when they married in Philadelphia in 1845. Shortly thereafter, Mary’s mother died, “a victim of anxiety produced by the passing of the infamous Fugitive Slave Law” (“BS” ii). When her husband’s business failed, Mary Webb took elocution lessons from A.A. Aphorp, a Philadelphia professor of voice, in an effort to develop her recognized expressive powers and to enable her to help her husband financially. She made her public debut 19 April 1855 at the Assembly Rooms in Philadelphia, and was “repeatedly applauded throughout her performance” (“BS” iii). Eric Gardner reports that “Webb attracted a racially diverse audience of several hundred, including Lucretia Mott.” (*American National Biography Online*)

Frank Webb relates:

Her reading was pronounced a complete success; the press was unanimous in its encomiums upon her wonderful voice and the marked dramatic ability she had displayed in her renderings of various pieces selected. (“BS” iii)

Not quite: the critics were not always as enthusiastic as her husband suggests; an early review comments on:

. . . an evening with Mrs. Webb alias “The Black Siddons,” as she ill-advisedly styles herself, for she is as far from being black as she is distant from Mrs. Siddons. . . (“An Evening”)

This Boston notice continues denigrating her elocutionary talent, suggesting she is a “fair reader” who “can’t speak Juliet’s love”; interestingly, criticism of her Shakespearean renditions would follow her throughout her brief performative career. The writer reports that Webb read the “Balcony Scene,” and suggests:

. . .and were she forty times a woman, and blacker than Egyptian darkness, it must be confessed that there was nothing Siddons-like in the effects produced[,] no hearts “turning liquid,” and bosoms heaving in responsive sympathy. Indeed, Fanny Kemble could read it better! (“An Evening”)

This Northern writer appears personally dismayed both by Webb’s lack of blackness and her perceived talent; his odious comparison of her with renowned (white) artistes Siddons and Kemble suggests a racial bias. The writer apologizes for possibly criticizing her “too closely,” yet explains “one can’t help growling a little when his corns are remorselessly trodden upon. . . in fair and fond loving Juliet’s balcony” (“An Evening”). His privileging of canonical Shakespeare over a black, female rendering suggests a misogynistic inclination as well.

In a piece published 12 May 1855, the *Provincial Freeman* offers one of the few extant descriptions of Mary Webb’s early readings in Philadelphia.

Webb's program began with Monk Lewis's *The Maniac* and she remained seated for the first half of the evening, a position described as "unfortunate," because "it is a piece which requires action." This was followed by Act 3 Scene 1 from *School for Scandal*, at which "Mrs. Webb excels," an "admirably read" scene from Fazio, and "Irish Eccentricities," which were "no more than fairly done." For the second half Webb stood and read scenes from *School for Scandal* and *Twelfth Night*, both "admirably done," a scene from Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, which "did not strike as so well done," a well-received "French piece," and "Negro Eccentricities," apparently rendered "near perfection." Although clearly a mixed review, the paper concludes by pronouncing Webb's performance as "one of the most remarkable debuts of the Quaker City." ("The Black Siddons") This review is a highly representative example of Webb's reception; other venues variously describe her performance as "really remarkable" to

In the art of elocutionists she is not thorough versed, but a little training, with her natural abilities, would place her professionally above any of her rivals. . . (*Frederick Douglass' Paper*)

She also performed "Hiawatha," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "new poem," dressed in Native American costume, and its author "had been pleased to express great gratification of her rendering" (H. Stowe Baines letter). As Webb traveled the northeast performing, her reviews became more overtly positive.

Harriet Beecher Stowe met the Webbs in the summer of 1855, and Gardner reports she "took the role of patron and apparently provided both

lodging and a voice teacher for Webb.” (*American National Biography Online*) Later that year Stowe published her new incarnation of the Uncle Tom story, *The Christian Slave, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb*. That Stowe revised her most cherished work expressly for the reading of a black woman belies some critics who suggest it was simply a case of white paternalism. By choosing Mary Webb to introduce her new version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe silenced the omniscient white narrator of the novel and gave agency to black voice. Or looking at it another way, perhaps Stowe regained control of her Christian message through the ventriloquy of Mary Webb. Stowe whittled down her massive tome containing over one hundred characters to a sixty-seven page dramatic reading incorporating twenty-seven. Mary Webb portrayed the play’s characters in a one-woman show: all the characters, black or white, male or female, were enacted by a black woman. Stowe’s muting of her narrative self in this regard is a surrogation that brings ‘voice’ to her novel’s haunting, but flawed black portrayals.

The play is divided into three acts totaling thirty-seven scenes; they take place in Uncle Tom’s home, the St. Clare home, and the Legree home. These domiciles illuminate Uncle Tom’s path in his journey of Christian forbearance and passivity that eventually leads towards his death. The farther Uncle Tom travels from his happy, Christian home, the more domestic disorder he progressively encounters. In every situation, Tom, whom Harold Bloom describes as “the only authentic Christian in Stowe’s vision of her nation” (*Notes 5*) converts hearts and minds through the power of his Christian

example. Tom, whom Stowe reasserts as the main character by renaming her work *The Christian Slave*, refocuses the viewer's attention on Stowe's message: for a true Christian, submission to the power of God will overcome the evils of slavery.

The characters of St. Clare and Ophelia are important and remain in this work because their discussions involving Christianity and slavery speak directly to Stowe's belief in the complicity of the North and institutional church in the continuation of human bondage. I suggest that Mr. and Mrs. Shelby remain, albeit briefly, because their argument about the sale of Uncle Tom demonstrates that even a 'good master' is capable of destroying families due to economic need. By streamlining the narrative and eliminating the Byrd, Halladay, Loker and Harris subplots Stowe is able to focus on the centrality of the martyred Uncle Tom and his conversion of those he comes in contact with.

The handsome, swash-buckling George Harris totally disappears in Stowe's work, and Eliza is heard from only as the harbinger of bad news to Uncle Tom, informing him of his imminent sale. The elimination of the Harris subplot enables Stowe to avoid the Liberia/colonization issue that had so angered her abolitionist critics, notably Garrison and Frederick Douglass. I would argue that Stowe replaced the strident, determined voice of George Harris with the fierce anger and hatred of Cassy, who is the prominent voice in her rewrite of the Legree home. Cassy's third act soliloquy is four pages long, the longest in the entire script. Eric Gardner suggests "Cassy arguably becomes the play's representative mother" whose "domestic dreams have been

all but destroyed by slavery” (“Stowe Takes the Stage” 82). Cassy has had a child sold away, and becomes an infanticide as an act of rebellion--officially childless, she maternally ministers to both Tom and Emmeline. It is Cassy, in fact, who embodies the revolutionary George Harris; she cleverly devises a plot to escape and to protect her new ‘daughter,’ Emmeline. The amplified significance of Cassy may also suggest a performance of the author herself: a cathartic transference of Stowe’s own anger and frustration.

It is clear that Stowe took a personal interest in the success of Mary Webb, perhaps even to the point of excessive protectiveness. John Greenleaf Whittier, poet and antislavery advocate, penned a new poem entitled “The Panorama,” which the lecture committee of the Tremont Temple wished Mary Webb to recite publicly as part of a lecture series. Apparently Harriet Beecher Stowe objected to this plan, and Mary Webb performed *The Christian Slave* there instead, on 23 November 1855. In a letter to lecture chairman Samuel Gridley Howe dated 24 November 1855, Whittier states:

I enclose a line just recd. from Mrs. Stowe. I am not sure as I understand her, but I am unwilling to do or consent to anything which wd interfere with her own plans or interest, or which might be an injury to Mrs. Webb. I do not wish to give thee any further trouble about the affair, but I am really at a loss what course to take. I am half inclined to let the poem die after this reading.

(*Letters* 280-281)

The poem was eventually read by Thomas Starr King, who wrote to Whittier regarding its reception:

I have heard the heartiest encomiums of it, even from men not specially interested in the anti-slavery cause, who were swept by it. Inadequate as the reading was, I am suspicious that the soul of the piece possessed my voice, and lifted it above its natural poverty. . . Would that Mrs. Webb might give it wings! Though I think it needs a man's throat and passion. (*Letters* 281 1n)

The details of this debate remain lost in history, but not surprisingly Stowe held a large measure of control over Webb's schedule, deciding what and where she would perform. Mary Webb's opinion regarding this incident remains unknown, but interestingly Whittier penned another poem at this time entitled "The Christian Slave," the title character of which is decidedly female.

The new Uncle Tom dramatization *The Christian Slave* was first performed in Boston at the Tremont Temple to generally positive public comment. A review of this performance in *The Liberator* describes "the manner of its execution . . . as a work of art" which was

. . . abundantly evidenced by the frequent applause, and by the close attention which was paid by the vast auditory (many of whom were standing) throughout the reading. . .

Evidence exists that Webb traveled on the antislavery lyceum with the piece, drawing large crowds and obtaining good notices, although I can find little support to substantiate Stowe's claim that "her [Mary Webb's] success . . . is

attested by hundreds of notices written by some of the most competent critics in this country” (Hatherton letter). In fact, several less-than-enthusiastic reports exist. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in a journal entry dated 6 December 1855, describes his attendance at a performance of *The Christian Slave* in Boston:

In the evening, went to town to hear Mrs.---, daughter, it is said, of Espartero and a negro mother, read Mrs. Stowe’s dramatization of her own Uncle Tom. A striking scene, this Cleopatra with a white wreath in her dark hair, and a sweet, musical voice, reading to a great, unimpassioned, immovable Boston audience. (269)

This irritatingly meager mention suggests that the jaded, urban Boston audience was unenthusiastic, and Longfellow’s depiction of Webb as an exotic Cleopatra implies that Mary Webb’s alterity was alienating to her listeners. Another performance criticism arises from an unexpected source. Charlotte Forten, a relative of Frank Webb by marriage, describes another Mary Webb presentation in a journal entry dated 19 November 1855:

This evening attended Mrs. Webb’s readings; they were principally from Shakespeare. I was not much pleased. I wish colored persons would not attempt to do anything of the kind unless they can compare favorably with others. (Billington 76)

A freeborn, highly educated black woman raised in a prominent abolitionist family, Forten's view of Webb's talent may be biased by her choice of reading selection, as much as by her class. Mary Webb's decision to enact the foremost writer of the white, patriarchal canon may have struck Forten as unfortunate. A further look at this performance affirms that Webb's "versatility found full scope in the Irish sketches" and that while she performed scenes of "slave life" she was "equally at home in delivering French and German eccentricities" (Billington 244n). These selections may not have represented the celebration of black talent that Forten was seeking, although Webb's performances may, in fact, have been lacking. Later in her life, Forten became a well-known educator and writer who was present at Lincoln's reading of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. (Billington)

A *Christian Slave* performance ran one and one half hours, with Mrs. Webb standing at a podium in front of the audience. She neither wore a costume nor enacted the scenes; she communicated the story's pathos through the tenor of her voice, which was described as "remarkably sweet and flexible." *The London Times* reports:

Placed behind a reading desk, Mrs. Webb read in a clear voice, and with great signs of intelligence, the interesting scenes which had been prepared for her, and which comprised the most celebrated dialogues and incidents in the celebrated novel. Without exactly acting the different parts, she discriminated them with a great deal of nicety. ("Mrs. M. E. Webb's Readings")

Webb “displayed considerable feeling in the rendering of particular passages,” reported *The Illustrated London News*. Mary Webb portrayed all of the play’s characters in a one-woman show, and Stowe’s silencing of the white narrator gave agency to black voice. The newspaper goes on to cite Mrs. Webb’s successful portrayal of the humble dignity of Uncle Tom:

The hoarse Negro voice, the solemn tones—those of a man living in a world which seems to be in perpetual contradiction to the laws of God in whom he firmly believes— were very striking. The piety, the resignation, the humility, and, at the same time, the confidence of Tom’s character were brought out fully.

(“Dramatic Reading”)

This reaction would have pleased Stowe; it demonstrates that her effort to reassign Tom to his appropriate place as central figure of Christian resignation was successful. In Stowe’s play, the talent of Mary Webb was critical in creating a believable reinterpretation of her novel. Her intent to bring ‘voice’ to her black characters is achieved; there are nine white characters and eighteen black in her play. Of the black characters, ten are women, thereby giving a prominence to the black female voice that was missing in the novel. The role of Cassy is a case in point: while a small, but pivotal character in the novel, in the dramatization Stowe bestows upon Cassy a four-page soliloquy, the largest in the play. *The Illustrated London News* reports that “The manner in which Cassy’s story was told was especially pathetic . . . although, from its length it threatened to be tedious.” (“Dramatic Reading”) In Stowe’s play, all the

characters, black or white, male or female were enacted by a black woman, whose rendering, Clark reports, was:

. . .nearly as natural as it is possible for an imitator to give them. The selections. . .were in the best of taste. . .and read in tones varying from strong and rough to soft and gentle, from the rushing and boisterous wind to the sighing and musical breeze. . .deeply affecting. (346)

Through the continued helpful patronage of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Webb proceeded to tour England, where her efforts proved even more popular than they had been in America. Her industry enabled her husband to finish his book, *The Garies and Their Friends*, the second novel published by an African American author. It was the first novel to discuss ‘passing,’ and it investigated the social agency and political power of free blacks in Philadelphia. Lord Brougham wrote a “Foreword,” and Harriet Beecher Stowe, continuing her sponsorship, wrote a brief “Preface” to Webb’s book, recommending it to “the attention and interest of the friends of progress and humanity in England” (xx). A review in *The Athenæum*, however, disparages these public figures for their support of the book, stating:

Clearly enough, these literary sponsors have no faith in their own office, and little enough in the capacity of their protégés to run alone. We agree with them in thinking that to put good names as a guarantee to second-rate books is not a pleasant position for the

owners of said names, although it may give an emphasis to the advertisements.

This color-conscious review suggests an explanation for the novel's depiction of Northern free blacks as intelligent, middle class entrepreneurs:

Most of them have an admixture of European blood in them; so that the mixture of race gives to the original slave stock capacities for civilization and moral qualities of self-control which render them capable of achieving freedom and undertaking all its responsibilities, which in their original state they were not,---

It is unknown how the Webbs reacted to this response, but they were not strangers to racial discrimination, as several published accounts attest. In 1855, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reports:

. . .Mrs. Webb, the 'Black Siddons,' who had gone to the Marlboro on account of the reputation of that house for 'order and quietude' was informed that she could not be admitted to the public table for her meals, but that she could be furnished with them at her private room at an extra expense! Even the usual courtesy, upon which the Marlboro has prided itself so much of inviting its guest to the morning religious exercise, was omitted toad [sic] her! And this, because this gifted lady, as she truly is in every sense of the word, has a dark skin! ("Practical Abolitionism")

Later that same year Frank Webb was denied passage aboard a ship to Rio de Janeiro, its captain stating: "I allow no man whose complexion is darker than

my own to take passage with me.” (“Disgraceful Conduct”) These accounts suggest that the pair suffered racial indignities as a standard consequence of existence, so perhaps the *Garies* review came as no surprise to them.

The Garies and Their Friends was published in London in 1857, with no discernable American response. Although Frank Webb’s book has been largely ignored by modern critics, recent scholarship suggests that a reexamination of its importance is underway.

Mary Webb’s performances proved to be more popular in England than America; presumably her status was considered more of a novelty there. While most notices describe her performance of *The Christian Slave*, the *National Era* reports on 18 June 1857 that

Mrs. Webb, the ‘colored lady from Philadelphia,’ with her husband, appears in a new entertainment, entitled ‘The Linford Studio,’ at Camden House, Kensington, tomorrow evening, under the patronage of the Duchess of Sutherland. . .

(“Amusements in London”)

Intriguingly, the same article reports “Mrs. Stowe lately returned to Paris, from Rome, and was to sail for the United States by the steamer of the 9th of June.” Were both Stowe and the Webbs in England at the same time? Was Webb’s “new entertainment,” which included her husband, cause for a rift with the overprotective Stowe? This is speculative, of course, but Joan Hedrick reports that

When her role was clearly that of patroness of the arts and of “the race,” Stowe functioned comfortably—though the difficulties of guiding the Webbs through the intricacies of English society led Stowe to admit “how shallow my benevolence was--& how soon one grows weary of doing what one writes about.” (249-250)

Mary Webb’s increasingly bad health forced her to cease most of her public readings; the last known performance of the play was in Philadelphia in 1857. With the assistance of English royalty, Frank Webb secured a postal position in Jamaica and the Webbs moved there in 1858, where Mary resumed some public readings. Mary E. Webb died there of consumption on June 17, 1859, at the age of thirty-one. (Gardner)

In the preface to Frank J. Webb’s novel, Stowe asks “—Are the race as present held as slaves capable of freedom, self-government, and progress”? (v). The performative talent of Mary E. Webb gave visual response to that query, and white audiences watched with rapt attention as Webb recreated the powerful Uncle Tom story, undiluted by white aesthetic or narration.

CHAPTER FOUR

How is one to understand the interplay of voices and narratives in *The Christian Slave*? There is Harriet Beecher Stowe's original novel, her reconsideration of that novel as history in *The Key*, other people's reconceptions of the text as entertainment in the various play versions, and her own attempt to reappropriate her narrative in *The Christian Slave*. Yet that last effort is complicated by the way her voice as a white woman is ventriloquized by a black woman, Mary Webb. Clearly all of these versions are attempts to claim the cultural power of that narrative, yet the relationship among them is complex. To put it another way, what do we mean when we say *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Do we refer to the novel, the history, the popular plays, or the enactment of slavery's pain and suffering by an African American? Two critics offer theoretical approaches that I think are interesting in exploring the complexity of *The Christian Slave*'s dual narration: Joseph Roach and Mikhail Bakhtin.

In his book *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Joseph Roach examines the concept of performance as a surrogation, an act of memory that recalls, reconstitutes and recreates the past. He suggests that this historical reconstruction arises as a result of loss, or "public enactments of forgetting" (3), and argues that this refashioning potentially externalizes greater rhetorical

power than its nascent composition. The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* surrogations are not mimetic in nature; rather, they exist as unique embodiments of the originating gesture, the novel itself. Stowe's dramatization, *The Christian Slave*, corroborates Roach's construction of the empowering authority of memory through the text's extensive history of reinvention.

Roach suggests that veneration may be enacted in the re-embodiment of the missing when he states: "These performances then constitute rites of memory in honor of the artificially superannuated" (1). This loss is transformative; in this case the reconstruction of narrative voice through the physicality of Webb privileges black women, and unlike the originary text, memorializes African American agency. Interestingly, Stowe "superannuates" her own white narration, bestowing a new, significant authorship on her performer.

Roach borrows the term "orature" from Kenyan novelist and director Ngugi wa Thiong'o, broadly defining it as wide variety of oral forms, including gossip, song, and storytelling (11), suggesting that orature

. . . goes beyond a schematized opposition of literacy and orality as transcendent categories; rather, it acknowledges that these modes of communication have produced one another interactively over time and that their historic operations may be usefully examined under the rubric of performance. (11-12)

Mary Webb's orature in *The Christian Slave* is just such a performance; it is a black transmission of cultural memory that transcends the textual, authorized, white moment and operates freshly as a binary gesture.

Philosopher and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin offers his own terminology to convey how authorship is transcribed. Stowe's discourse in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be said to be "objectified," (Morson and Emerson 151) to use Bakhtin's expression, in that it seeks to create a representation of characterization that is not her own. In silencing the white narrator in *The Christian Slave*, Stowe authorizes the emergence of Mary Webb and creates dual authorship, or "double-voiced discourse" (Morson and Emerson 324), in which Stowe demands that black speech be heard and esteemed. Stowe's didactic voice is, as Roach suggests, strengthened by the new surrogation and the Bakhtinian transformation from single to double voice offers a narrative parity that is amplifying as well.

Morson and Emerson relate:

Later in his career, Bakhtin would insist that without memory and a rich sense of the past, freedom and meaningful change are illusory . . . Bakhtin develop[s] complex models of "genre memory" and culture memory to explain the intimate link between a sense of the past and an unfinalizable future. Memory establishes identity, enables responsibility, and creates meaningful potential. (224)

It is the potentiality of memory that is of interest here. As Roach suggests, the cultural performance enacted through the transformation of text is

possibly regenerative, and as Bakhtin charges, the recalled memory establishes identity. Who is Mary Webb at this instance, and whose identity is enabled? I would suggest that the inherently hegemonic dynamic of cultural memory is disrupted by both potential and actual upheavals to the race/gender status quo. As Roach suggests, this new iteration is intrinsically surrogative, as memory is only possible through the allowance of loss. The emergence of Mary Webb as narrative voice is a link to the past and an affirmation of Bakhtin's assertion of the potentiality of cultural memory.

Stowe's anger and frustration at her work's reception is re-embodied by her surrogate and her narrative empowered by its transformation. The reappropriation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe enables the author to redress a wrong: the denial of black female voice, a "violent form of oppression" (Anderson). In the case of *The Christian Slave*, the interests of both Webb and Stowe coincide, in essence creating a performance space in which cultural memory and Bakhtin's "double-voiced discourse" conflate into a new, liminal embodiment.

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