

White Knights and Black Voices: Considering Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs

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Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the abolitionist text *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. The book quickly became a bestseller, and she received international distinction from her authorship. The most famous example of her renown is the well-known quote by Abraham Lincoln where he tells Harriet Beecher Stowe that she is the "little lady" who started the civil war. (Vollaro 18) The American Civil War was founded on issues like slavery, the economics of abolition, and states rights; an analogy for Stowe's is a match above a powder keg that was U.S. politics.

Her book was created using many different stories, as illustrated by Stowe's publication, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which cited enslaved people's narratives. As an upper-middle-class white person, Stowe was in an ideal position to know what other middle-class white people were looking for in an abolitionist text. Although Stowe's intentions seem pure, she is further removing the agency of the African-American community. By writing her book based off of other accounts, there is an insinuation that none of the writing well enough to appeal to the white audience.

There is a contrast between Harriet Beecher Stowe's writing and Harriet Jacobs' account of her own life called *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs was born into slavery and lived as property for much of her life before escaping to the North and then being bought and set free. When she was 48 years old, she published the story of her life, beginning when she was a child, before the death of her parents. The first publications of the book included a nom de plume of Linda Brent. The autobiography was published in 1861 just as the Civil War was breaking out. Loss of records was common in wartime, and this included Jacobs' record of authorship. This led to theories about the true identity of the author, theories included Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child. (Jacobs xiii) More contemporary scholars were able to trace the events mentioned in the book back to Jacobs and put an end to the debate. Publishing of the book is now under the name Jacobs. The persona in the book is still Linda to keep the integrity of the writing.

The theories of white authorship indicate that a false autobiography of enslaved people by white writers was commonplace. It was routine enough that when the author was unknown, the assumption was that a white person wrote it. Consider, the famous propaganda piece with a slave kneeling in chains with the words "Am I not a (wo)man and a brother(sister)?" Josiah Wedgwood, who was a white Englishman, created this piece of propaganda for the abolitionist cause. The piece, however, speaks as if from an enslaved person, as depicted. The Wedgwood example is an anecdotal example of a more significant trend of the privileged posing as those of a different demographic often to create sympathetic works. One of the reasons doubt was cast on Brent's identity as a formerly enslaved person could be under the assumption that if a black person wrote a book, they would want to take credit, and own their narrative. However, Jacobs chose anonymity.

Writing was a difficult venture, mainly because she wrote the whole thing herself. Her close personal friend suggested that she acquire the help of someone who had written

a slave narrative already; Stowe was just such a figure, but she told Jacobs that she had no interest in being someone else's scribe. (Jacobs xii) Jacobs wrote her story as a call to action to those who opposed the slave trade. This similarity is one of the reasons why Jacobs is well contrasted to Stowe, who also wrote a call to action novel. As well, Jacobs published her account following *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which means that *Incidents* did not inform *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Knowing something is morally wrong and deciding to take a stand against the subject are very different, and this can be difficult to take the step. Both writers are trying to encourage people to become active. To prognosticate what would have happened if Harriet Beecher Stowe had not published her book is pointless; there can never be a definitive answer to that question. However, comparing Stowe and Jacobs' writing allows for an exhibition of the privilege that Stowe possessed and illustrated the issues with a privileged person speaking for those divergent from him or herself.¹

Labels have been attached to Stowe's work and character, including that it was "no work of avant-garde subversion, but rather, a successful bid for national (and even international) prominence." (Berman 321) This critique highlights the first issue with Stowe's writing; the intention of the writing differs drastically with Jacobs. For Stowe, the intention of writing the book is to move and to be known as the one who caused the movement. Stowe says that while in church she was struck with the vision of the book and began by writing the death of Uncle Tom and wrote backward from there. (Stowe, iii) From this admission, the reader can tell that the conclusions of the book are foregone. When writing Stowe was not moved by the sources or by the characters that she created into creating a tragic death. Instead, she created a tragic death and then characters that were fitting of such an end.

Additionally, the serialization *Uncle Tom's Cabin* meant that publication happened in short parts in a magazine. (Yothers 7) One of the more famous examples of this is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose publication happened through "The Strand." Audience to the book would start reading the parts without knowing how it finished. This strategy of publication would increase exposure to the writing, and also the author. There is a mystery created from the entire audience being held in suspense. Supporters of Stowe might be inclined to argue that Stowe wanted to increase exposure to her work because she saw merit in the message that she was spreading and it was lateral forces that caused her fame. However, this theory is problematic. First, she was very present after publishing; as aforementioned she was having interviews with the American President and is given much of the credit for starting the American Civil War. She became a lecturer and continued to write books following her success. Her real name was used on the cover from the first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* onward. She wanted people to know who the author of the work was and that she was speaking for those with whom she was not a part. Finally, she also refused to be a scribe for any other work. She did not want to help Jacobs write her narrative. If her intentions were based fully on helping the enslaved people get their accounts published, then sharing authorship would be a non-issue. Instead, Stowe offered to mention Jacobs in her new book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *The Key* is a book that holds the stories of others but has Stowe's names linked

¹ Notably, the author of this paper is of a privileged background and therefore would also not be at liberty to write a slave narrative. However, critiquing Stowe's approach to writing the narrative is serving a differing purpose than Stowe had in mind when writing her book.

thoroughly with the work. The amount of secondary accounts is so numerous that they drown each other out, which leaves only Stowe at the forefront. The religious themes running throughout the book proves that she is not against pushing secondary messages along with the call to action. As a Christian, she puts Christian values at the forefront of much of the book. Piety, sacrifice, and the greater good are portrayed as admirable qualities, as the bible teaches. She is pushing religious values in a book steeped in racism and the horrors of slavery and the south. Stowe's intentions are not as simple as abolition; it is, therefore, not inconceivable that she was self-promoting in the publishing of her book. If this was part of her purpose while writing the book she was very successful. She "became a nationally and internationally known figure, and was able to build a career as an author and a lecturer on the basis of her first novel's popularity." (Yothers 8) In 1963, for example, a critic dismissed Stowe's work, saying that "Mrs. Stowe was not fighting for the Negro, however, but for her ego." (Adams 66) She was tired of having critics claim that she exaggerated many of the horrors of the slave environment. She wanted to make sure her writing was respected instead of making sure the suffering of others was appreciated.

Stowe's reputation is juxtaposed with that of Jacobs. Jacobs chose to publish under a pseudonym to obtain anonymity. This attempt worked too well, as her authorship was almost lost entirely. She was not interested in fame that would have resulted from her story. She was hesitant to publish the account of her life at all but was convinced by a close personal friend when she was in her late 40s. (Jacobs xi, xii) These two factors combine to create the impression that the publishing of *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* prompt came by externally rather than internally. Jacobs' friend, who convinced her to write and publish her story, believed that the account would be helpful to abolition and fugitive, former slaves. (Jacobs, xi)

Stowe's inspirations seem largely internal; even the inspiration—a vision of the death of Uncle Tom during a church service—is created internally. With religion, Jacobs has a complex relationship. Her writing is less zealous than Stowe when religion incorporates itself into her story. Where Stowe tries to show the virtuous nature of a religious life Jacobs shows the contradictory nature of the Southern church as it relates to slavery. Jacobs' writing was not intended to convert anyone to Christianity, as Stowe's attempts to. While Stowe achieves her goal of social and economic success, Jacobs can achieve her goal of being anonymous over the course of her lifetime, although, Jacobs did speak at some events as the author of the book. Stowe capitalizes on the conventions of sentimentalism and uses it heavily throughout the book as a method of gaining popularity amongst middle-class readers. Jacobs also capitalizes on the literary conventions of sentimentalism but subverts the themes to create a more realistic portrayal of life.

A defender of Stowe may be inclined to argue that as she was writing for a middle-class audience as part of the middle class, she is in the perfect position to sway their opinions and know what it is that they are looking for in an abolitionist text. Stowe could create an ideal version because of her inside knowledge as to what the ideal text is for her demographic. The former slaves would not have such personal knowledge. It is possible that they had spent time around middle or upper-class people as the live-in servants. However, the slave owners that they were surrounded by would be curating their personalities as most people do around servants. If they chose not to curate their personalities, there is still the issue of seeing versus understanding. Being present around

middle-class people is not the same as understanding every facet or characteristic held among the group as a whole. Stowe was born and raised in the culture; she was a part of it herself and received help from other people who were also born into the culture of whiteness. By possessing all these voices, she could figure out trends in taste and cater to these trends.

There are two critical issues with this argument. First, there are better ways for Stowe to share her middle-class expertise. Her writing is very Stowe-centric, and she seems unwilling to share the spotlight with the figures that are more qualified to talk about the horrors of slavery. Creating an account with Jacobs has the potential to be the epitome of respectful expertise. She would be able to give opinions about what the demographic would like to hear more about and what should be glossed over. She would also be able to have editors and close friends, who would also be part of the target audience, give feedback and critiques. Creating a partnership between the middle-class writer and the formerly enslaved person allows both parties to exhibit their expertise. It is unjustifiable that being knowledgeable about the target demographic should be viewed as more valuable than having lived-experience of the slave trade or the ownership of slaves. Stowe chooses not to have a partner in her writing and instead takes the stories of others, people who had already been silenced, and declares that she is more able to speak than they are. She writes her novel with no lived experience of enslavement and leaves the underprivileged in the same position she found them. It is not until people start questioning the validity of her work that she begins to show her audience where her work is sourced. Stowe could not have known that her work would be brought under as much scrutiny as it was. There is no evidence that she intended to publish *The Key* when she began writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and therefore, she would bring exposure to the voices she used, but did not exhibit.

Second, Jacobs written work has the emotion and earnestness of a real story. This concept is attractive in itself. The held belief while reading a true story allows for missteps as it relates to intended reader preferences. The very existence of slight missteps adds to the feeling of candor in the narrative. Additionally, Jacobs had an editor who would be able to help her create a story that appealed to those that she was attempting to attract. She appears to have several close friends, of middle-class, white backgrounds, who would be willing to help her with any questions she may have had. (Jacobs xii) It is possible and likely that she did not have the same amount of demographic knowledge as Stowe, but she still knew who she was writing to and the reasons for this. In the introduction to her book the editor writes:

Incidents addressed an implied audience of northern white women with lives bound by the codes of the cult of true womanhood. This is not to suggest that African Americans, especially women, did not buy and read books like Jacobs for their own instruction, only that in her text, Jacobs appealed directly to a group of other women from whom she hoped for a compassionate hearing and frank understanding of the far-reaching effects of slavery, especially of who it linked together the sexual defilement of slave women and the violation of the natural laws of mother/child relationships. She had no illusions that this was anything other than a difficult group for a fugitive slave like her to convince, for as a woman who had never been married and who chose motherhood voluntarily, her life

was outside of the frame that automatically claimed sympathetic responses from them. (Jacobs x, xi)

From this excerpt, it is clear that first, Jacobs knew who she was targeting, and also what they were looking for in a book. However, unlike Stowe, Jacobs had lived the life she was writing about, and she recognized that she was unable to change the significant events in her life. She writes her story in a way that does not attempt to justify her actions but does show the events leading up to them. The fact that Linda Brent is such a subversive character makes her all the more interesting when reading the story critically. The quote also heavily implies that not only was she writing to the group of white, Northern women she was also trying to convince them to join her position. First, that the enslaved people were people too. Second, that they had sense and sensibilities just as the audience did. Third, enslaved people had to deviate from these codes to survive. Finally, convince the audience that by being active in the abolitionist community the target audience can make a difference. The argument that Stowe had a better understanding of writing or of the middle-class white community is a moot point as she did not use this expertise in a progressive way, and Jacobs was able to obtain much of the same knowledge and expertise with the help of her connections.

Part of the issue with comparing the two works is that one is autobiographical and the other is a hybrid of various sources. Illustration of this is in *The Key*, where Stowe cites much of her information. Not only does this complicate any comparison, it also demonstrates the extent of Stowe's privilege. Jacobs writes about her life in part because that is where there is an audience for black writers. Jacobs was privileged enough to write, which is something that people like Tubman were unable to achieve. However, this did not mean that she could publish whatever story she chose. Stowe was a middle class, white writer and although she decided to write about slavery, this is not the topic she was limited to for her authorship. The topic is what elevated the writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the literary canon rather than Stowe's proficiency at authorship. The literary issues with the novel have been noted by many critics of the time of publication and by more contemporary readers. Jacobs story was all that was allowed to her because it was non-fiction, even then was ambitious because she wrote it herself instead of channeling her events through a ghostwriter or other famous abolitionist author. The sources that Stowe uses to back up her writing are a list of the people she has overpowered. Some followers say that she was giving these people a voice, but they were already using the voice that they had, and that is how Stowe found their stories to start her text. Josiah Henson, who was said to be one of the models of Uncle Tom, had written an autobiography for himself that Stowe had found and used. She adulterated accounts that she had never been a part of or experienced similar incidents. The irony of her work is, in her attempt to show the terrible inequalities of American society, the very existence of the book is proof of her privilege. The noted hypocrisy in *Book of Negroes*, written by Lawrence Hill, is the abolitionists boycotting sugar while still smoking tobacco. (Hill, 142) There are parallels between this form of hypocrisy and Stowe's brand of irony.

After Jacobs' escapes from slavery, she begins to reside in New York, but there are still fears that her former owner will come after her or her children. To alleviate her fears, a friend purchased Jacobs' freedom in 1852. (Jacobs xii) When Jacobs reflects on this act later in her life, she is conflicted. On the one hand, her friend ensured she would

never have to worry about slave hunters trying to find her and return her to the conditions in which she had once lived. On the other hand, the cost of her freedom distempered her sense of self. She is recorded saying,

The freedom I had before the money was paid was dearer to me. God gave me *that* freedom; but put God's image in the scales with the paltry sum of three hundred dollars... I served for my liberty...but I was robbed of my victory; I was obliged to resign my crown, to rid myself of a tyrant. (Yellin, 117)

By paying the money, which amounts to a ransom, Jacobs' friend was putting a price on her freedom when it is priceless to Jacobs. It is clear that her friend had good intentions and wanted Jacobs to live a life free of worry for herself and her children. Her friend did not understand that the worry was worth the benefit, and paying the fee is something that Jacobs should have done herself if she were to want it done. This thought process reflects the Stowe mindset as well. Stowe felt as though she was helping those who were living in an inequitable society. Instead of helping, Stowe took away the agency of the African American writers. If a work like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was necessary to shed light on the horrors of slavery, then the formerly enslaved should be the ones to write such a work. It is difficult to critique a work linked with a legacy with the end of treating people as unpaid labour and subhuman, but when Stowe was writing she did not foresee such an outcome. Additionally, by critiquing the strategy of Stowe and examining how it came about it is less likely to happen in the future. Good may have come from Stowe's writing, just as good came from Jacobs' friend buying her freedom, but that does not mean the act itself is good.

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