theories and methodologies

Beyond Contempt: Ways to Read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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I WROTE MY DISSERTATION IN THE LATE 1990s. IT COMPARED HARRIET BEECHER STOWE AND OTHER ANTEBELLUM SENTIMENTAL women writers with professional male orators and rhetoricians. I argued that these women authors hadn't been writing in a rhetorical room of their own. Instead, they were solving problems that the professionals could not. While writing the dissertation, I asked a friend who was in my program to read my chapter on the most popular book in the nineteenth-century United States, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Uncle Tom's Cabin involves a lot of weeping. The novel culminates in a tear-soaked scene as the angelic little white girl, Eva, nears her expiration date:

> "O, Eva, tell us what you see! What is it?" said her father.
>
> A bright, a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly,—"O! love,—joy,—peace!" gave one sigh, and passed from death unto life!
>
> "Farewell, beloved child! the bright, eternal doors have closed after thee; we shall see thy sweet face no more." (257)

Although I saw scenes like this one as central to the power sentimental novels had on antebellum readers, I made it clear that such scenes did not cloud my own critical faculties. After reading the chapter, my friend asked me why I felt so much contempt for the novel. Until then, it had not occurred to me that my contempt had seeped into my writing.

Upon receiving this feedback, I had two reactions: I worried that it wasn't acceptable to let my emotional reaction to this sentimental novel show, and—a split second later—I realized I was proud that I had been observed showing contempt. I was proud because it confirmed an idea of myself that gave me great pleasure—the idea that I was the most unsentimental person in the world. I was the person who had once convinced my mother not to put our adored, recently deceased cat in the trash, not because it was an unfeeling thing to do

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but because it would create a biohazard. I was proud, too, for having been caught out in feeling contempt for what I thought was, after all, a badly written, overwrought novel. (When people asked me at the time what my dissertation was about, I would say, "Shitty women writers.") I tried to erase that contemptuous tone from my dissertation before I turned it in, but when I look it over now, I can see this tone creeping in around the edges.

Despite my pride in my contempt, I had an intellectual reason for trying to erase it. Elsewhere in the chapter, I observed that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tends to produce polarized responses from modern critics, even feminist ones. Some critics, like Jane Tompkins, Elaine Showalter, and Susan K. Harris, find *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other sentimental novels to be subversive. Their attitude inverts the nineteenth-century devaluation of the private feminine sphere. Harris and Showalter refer, respectively, to a "coverplot" (20)—the ostensible plot—and a "mask" (x) to argue that the seemingly conservative surface of antebellum sentimental novels, their dedication to womanly virtue and obedience, conceal deeper meanings. Thus, for example, Showalter emphasizes the "suppressed radical elements in" the lesser-known works of Louisa May Alcott and suggests that they point to "similar divisions masked by domestic conventions in the writing of other nineteenth-century American women" (x). Scratch the surface and find subversion.

Opposed to these celebratory critics, Ann Douglas, Shirley Samuels, and Lauren Berlant claim that nineteenth-century sentimental novels are regressive, a disingenuous protest against the status quo. For example, Berlant discusses *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "render[ing] scenes and stories of structural injustice in the terms of a putatively preideological nexus of overwhelming feeling" (636). According to Berlant, the novel uses a bait-and-switch technique, evoking tears to distract from its complicity in the perpetuation of systemic racial and class injustice. I felt proud that I had identified this polarization. I didn't want to be either a celebrator or a condemner. I believed my emotional response wasn't just inappropriate but also intellectually limiting. At the time, I tried to model my criticism on that of Lora Romero and Marianne Noble, two critics who could assess the book in a subtler way, recognizing some of its aspects as conservative, others as progressive. I liked their ability to step back from the novel and observe its complexity.

I didn't think to wonder about the cause of these polarized responses, nor did I think (as so many others in the discipline were not thinking) about reader response in general. No, this critical debate, in my view, in most everyone's view, was about content: whether *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a politically progressive or politically conservative book. I liked to think that I could enter the debate in a neutral, nuanced way—hence my attempts (however unsuccessful) to erase my contemptuous tone.

I might have forgotten about this copyediting incident if not for two problems. First, I couldn't stop writing about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Acknowledging the novel's complexity has never been enough for me. The second problem was Joanne Dobson. Her criticism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which differed from most other scholars' criticism, bothered me. Like other critics who sought to rescue the reputation of Stowe, she argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is as rich and distinctive as texts by traditional canonical authors. However, it was not the content of her criticism that I found so fascinating and appalling but the tone. She writes, "Eva's generosity is constructed within a cultural and historical context where all too often children *did* die, were snatched incomprehensibly from the arms of helpless families—as Harriet Beecher Stowe knew only too painfully" (273). It is as if Stowe is infecting Dobson with her own style, even down to the dashes. Like Stowe, Dobson tries to evoke an emotional response in her readers.[1] Dobson,

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unlike almost all other critics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, does not try to make a case for the novel's hidden depths; instead, she records her strong and sympathetic emotional reaction to the text. At this moment in her article at least, it's not just that Dobson isn't criticizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; it's that she has ceased to sound like a critic.

I realized then that I had missed the more interesting polarization that divides modern critics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It's not between the celebrators and the condemners; it's between them and the rare critic like Dobson, whose approach is rooted in unsuspicious immersion. The celebrators and the condemners share a technique of reading that is so familiar to us that it didn't even register with me as a particular technique: rejecting what we perceive as the surface meaning for a deeper meaning. The technique is akin to what Paul Ricoeur calls the "school of suspicion" (28), what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading" (123), and what Rita Felski calls "critique" (1).[2] Masks, coverplots, and readings that start with the word *putatively* share in this technique. Harris rejects the coverplot for the real plot of the sentimental novels she considers, Showalter removes the mask from Alcott, and Berlant reveals that these works' evocation of overwhelming feeling is not so overwhelming for the discerning literary critic. By contrast, Dobson allows herself to feel alongside Stowe, and, in responding this way, she does not sound much like a critic.

Uncle Tom's Cabin does something to many of its readers, and what that something is depends on how a reader reads. What happens when a suspicious reader reads the novel? It might be easier to distinguish if we take a brief detour to investigate what happens when such a person reads Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, with its intentional evocation of multiple interpretations. (Hawthorne, not so coincidentally, is the person whose disparaging and oft-quoted characterization of the sentimental authors as "scribbling women" [qtd. in Mott 122] is the nineteenth-century version of my "shitty women writers.") *The Scarlet Letter* blooms under the practice of suspicious reading. For example, a passage from chapter 12, "The Minister's Vigil," offers competing descriptions of a meteor and the shape it makes against the clouds. First, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale sees it as tracing a giant *A*, a message that he takes as the mark of his guilt. Yet the narrator then seems to undermine Dimmesdale's conclusion: "[I]t could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate" (107). According to the narrator, the *A* is a clear case of psychological projection. We may agree—until the end of the chapter when the narrator subverts this interpretation through a question one of Dimmesdale's ministerial colleagues puts to Dimmesdale: "But did your reverence hear of the portent that was seen last night? A great red letter in the sky,—the letter A,—which we interpret to stand for Angel" (109). The suggestion that there actually was an *A* in the sky calls the narrator's initial skepticism into question because the reader seems meant to believe the colleague's observation.

By affirming the reality of Dimmesdale's impression, Hawthorne ultimately suggests that sometimes the symbols people project onto the world are really there. Or does he? After all, the villagers see the *A* but read it differently from the way Dimmesdale does, suggesting people see what they want to. Perhaps we are still meant to accept the narrator's initial, seemingly authoritative statement that people tend to project more often than nature tends to reveal: the villagers are performing their own projection, if not about the *A*'s existence, then about what it signifies. Yet if we are to believe, as the narrator seems to

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suggest, that Dimmesdale is mistaken even about seeing an *A* in the first place, are we to believe that the villagers are as well? Hawthorne craftily leaves room for the possibility that the villagers and Dimmesdale are wont to project, but then what are we to make of the coincidence of their both seeing an *A*? Is the *A* real? If so, odd as it is, this depersonalized, heterodiegetic narrator must not be completely trustworthy, having led us, initially, to disbelieve what Dimmesdale thought he saw. If the narrator is untrustworthy, what can we know with certainty? Is this uncertainty a comment on interpretation itself? Is Hawthorne suggesting that we should distrust how people—even seemingly omniscient narrators—describe the world around them? He leaves all these interpretations open. This passage rejects one obvious meaning after another, leading us into more and more complex interpretations. To read Hawthorne in a suspicious way is to affirm his artistry and the fruitfulness of our critical enterprise.

But subjecting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a suspicious reading makes the novel look like a sham since the power of sentimental rhetoric lies in its ability to make readers forget its artfulness. This rhetoric tries to guard against unethical eloquence, the possibility that an orator well trained in the art of persuasion will try to dupe the audience. Like Tom himself, the novel wants to be seen as artless and natural (a word that unfailingly sets off the paranoid reader's bullshit detector). It sets up a hierarchy of trustworthiness tied to the biological: the less an act of expression is in a character's conscious control, the more that act of expression can be trusted. Words, then voice, then tears—this is the ascending hierarchy of certainty that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* establishes.[3]

The only character in the novel who unsettles this certainty is soon dispatched. Why does Stowe kill off Augustine St. Clare, Tom's good-hearted and ironic owner? Is it because he waffles on the issue of slavery? No, it is because of the way he reads. Here is St. Clare's response to his cousin Miss Ophelia's question about whether he thinks the Bible justifies slavery:

> Well, . . . suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and forever, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market, don't you think we should soon have another version of the Scripture doctrine? What a flood of light would pour into the church, all at once, and how immediately it would be discovered that everything in the Bible and reason went the other way! (Stowe 160)

St. Clare reads the way that modern literary critics do. He believes that any given text is open to multiple interpretations, the enabling condition for a suspicious reading. The paranoid critic sees at least two readings: the reading the text wants the reader to fall for and the more illuminating against-the-grain reading the suspicious reader will supply. Yet for Stowe this is clearly not the way to read the Bible—or her novel.

Stowe's antipathy toward polysemy is a problem since the hermeneutics of suspicion are, according to Sedgwick, "perhaps by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself" (124). Dobson and Tompkins are among the rare critics who do not read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suspiciously. The novel puts the twenty-first-century critic in a bind: read it the way professional literary critics have been trained to read and make yourself unable to understand why it exerted the power it did, or read it as it wants to be read and lose your credibility as a critic.

Reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the way it wants to be read was the last thing I wanted to do as a graduate student. I was too invested in showing that I could read the way I was supposed to, as a professional literary critic. My contempt, then, was a sign that I belonged to the community I wanted to join.

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Despite my earlier idea that allowing emotion to inflect my response would lead to a limited reading, I now think that it was my membership in Club Critique that was causing me to see *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in limited ways.

I feel much less contempt toward the novel now. Maybe I'm just getting old and soft. A few years ago, I watched a rerun of a PBS special, "Extraordinary Cats," about a mother cat who risked her life to save her many kittens from a burning building (Simon). This was a ten-hankie story for me, much to my kids' amusement. How the mighty have fallen. But this change in me confirms *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s persuasive techniques. Glenn Hendler has described how sentimentality "works through a logic of equivalence based on affect; any being capable of suffering, regardless of race, age, or any other personal characteristic, can evoke sympathy, especially from a female character (or reader) who has suffered herself" (688). Embarrassing as it is to admit, I think I was identifying with this mother cat, hoping that I would also brave an inferno to rescue my offspring. Similarly, when I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the scenes where slave women and children are separated affect me deeply. Despite my awareness of the problems associated with this kind of affectively achieved equivalence—as if the fact a slave woman and I both have children makes me somehow equipped to understand what it was like to be her—I can't help that sympathetic reflex.[4]

But where does that leave me as a critic? Now when I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I can feel the power it exerted over its nineteenth-century audience. I'm not quite in the league of Georgiana May, a former student of Stowe's, who wrote, "I sat up last night long after one o'clock, reading and finishing 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' I *could not* leave it any more than I could have left a dying child" (qtd. in Noble 141), but I'm no longer as distant from such a response as I was.

May's reaction raised a crucial question for me: What allowed so many readers—not just mothers or other women—to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the way May did? Much evidence suggests that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a literacy manual; as the critic Sarah Robbins has argued, the novel contains endless scenes of reading and takes pains to teach its readers how to read properly. But it is a strange kind of literacy manual: it actually works as an antiliteracy manual, enshrining a method that counters the conventional concept of literacy that was developing in the antebellum United States. It teaches its readers to read in ways that hark back to older, intensive reading practices and mounts a case against the new, extensive reading practices that had become dominant in this period.[5] But there's another twist: seen from the perspective of modern professional literary critical ways of reading, the novel is not an antiliteracy manual but an illiteracy manual. It trains its readers to think of it as real, to think of its characters as actual people.[6] However, this way of reading, becoming so immersed in the work that one can gain no critical distance from it, is exactly the way we train our undergraduates not to read.

As a graduate student, I did not think that my reading practices could be historicized or that they would affect the character of what I read, an idea that is still hard for me to grasp. My newly found suspicious style of reading created a sentimental novel that I could see only as a manipulative sham. Yet I hope that opening myself to other ways of reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has allowed me to view the novel more clearly or at least more as its nineteenth-century readers did. But I still don't spend much time in my criticism, this essay excepted, detailing my emotional reaction to the novel.

Uncle Tom's Cabin went from a way of certifying my membership in a sophisticated community—what a manipulative sham of a text!—to a way of thinking about the costs of that belonging. Do I just dismiss as fools the novel's nineteenth-century audience members, many of my students, and the more

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recent version of me, all of whom are moved by it? It's not that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* taught me how to read; instead, it taught me how to better understand what kind of reader I am. It also allowed me to see how modern literary critics tend to read.

In moving away from my definitive graduate school diagnosis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I have found that the book has grown not more but less familiar to me. Hortense Spillers has said that one of the racist aspects of the book is how it thinks it can confidently expose "the central nervous system of the African" (543). I don't disagree, but the novel has had the odd effect of allowing me, a modern critical reader, to grow less familiar to myself. Because I recall not only that I expressed contempt for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a graduate student but also that my usual bookmark was a tissue. An apprentice literary critic, I so completely denied an aspect of myself that for a long time I forgot its existence. The novel has allowed me to recognize the traces of older reading practices that remain in me. Perhaps all of us contain traces of different ways of reading, ways that are ready to be brought to consciousness or disavowed depending on who at that moment we are trying to be.

I do not want to end on the consoling note that paranoid reading can coexist in an individual with other, less critical ways of reading, that all our ways of reading add up to a reading self who is replete. But just as context frees us to be different kinds of readers, it also constrains us to be different kinds of readers. It's hard for me to imagine a context where my proclivities as a paranoid reader can coexist with my uncritical reading self. I've frequently stopped myself from crying over a Hollywood movie by thinking about its bad gender politics, and I've never figured out how to write a conventional academic article that explicitly mentions my uncritical responses to a literary text. A theme runs throughout this *PMLA* feature: reading over time as sedimentation, of one layer forming atop another. These layers make up a complex whole, but they hardly ever mix. Having an awareness of my different reading selves hasn't allowed me to push the bounds of literary criticism, but it has allowed me to approach *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with much more sympathy for its capabilities and for its limits. The same goes for its many different readers, including me.

Notes

1. Tompkins also prizes reader response. She ends her famous essay on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by subtly acknowledging her similarity to Stowe's nineteenth-century, emotionally engaged readers.

2. Felski articulates what the polarized critics of sentimentality have in common: all are married to the idea of critique, but one group, applying critique to the text, "slices into a literary work to expose its omissions and occlusions, its denials and disavowals," while the other sees the text as itself performing critique (16).

3. We can see this dictum at work in a description of Miss Ophelia's long-withheld embrace of Topsy: "Miss Ophelia's voice was more than her words, and more than that were the honest tears that fell from her face" (Stowe 259). I make this point in *Sentimental Readers*.

4. Jacobs's slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, also seems to encourage this kind of identification, but Warhol has persuasively shown how Jacobs, unlike Stowe, comprehends the limitations on any middle-class white woman's understanding of the slave mother's situation.

5. This heuristic was developed by Engelsing to describe a shift in reading practices that began in the eighteenth century and extended, in the United States, into the nineteenth, powered in part by an explosion of printed material. Before this shift, readers practiced intensive reading: they possessed few books, but they read reverently over and over those they had (Hall 54). After the shift, readers practiced extensive reading: they read many more texts and thought of them as disposable.

6. For an elaboration of this argument, see Halpern, "Word."

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