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A Source for Stowe's Ideas on Race in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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Harriet Beecher Stowe's treatment of race in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and the colonization scheme with which she ends the novel have long been its most controversial features. Colonization was a term then in use for returning African Americans to Africa as a solution to the race/slavery problem. Stowe concludes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by sending most of the surviving black characters—George, Eliza, their children, George's sister Emily, and Eliza's mother, Cassy—to Africa where George dreams of founding a Christian republic. In a lengthy letter George explains his colonizationist ambitions: "On the shores of Africa I see a republic" (609). "I want a country, a nation, of my own. I think that the African race has peculiarities, yet to be unfolded in the light of civilization and Christianity, which, if not the same with those of the Anglo-Saxon, may prove to be, morally, of even a higher type" (610).

As a Christian, I look for another era to arise. On its borders I trust we stand; and the throes that now convulse the nations are, to my hope, but the birth-pangs of an hour of universal peace and brotherhood.

I trust that the development of Africa is to be essentially a Christian one. If not a dominant and commanding race, [Africans] are, at least, an affectionate, magnanimous, and forgiving one. Having been called in the furnace of injustice and oppression, they have need to bind closer to their hearts that sublime doctrine of love and forgiveness, through which they alone are to conquer, which it is to be their mission to spread over the continent of Africa. (611)

Stowe soon came to regret her decision to end the novel on a colonizationist note. Early criticism of the novel from both black and white abolitionists focused on the colonization scheme (see Donovan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 18). The 1853 American and Foreign Anti-Slavery convention meeting in New York condemned the novel's colonization ending. Stowe, however, sent a note to the convention, in which she stated that she was not (or no longer) a colonizationist. And a delegate reported that she had told him that if she were to do it again, "she would not send George Harris to Liberia" (Gossett 173, 294).

Stowe might readily have changed the ending of the novel, but her conception of Africans and African Americans as harbingers of a utopian future pervades *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and could not have been so easily erased. Early in the work, for example, Stowe projects a utopian future for Africa in the following exotic terms.

Life will awake there with a gorgeousness and splendor of which our cold western tribes faintly have conceived. In that far-off mystic land of gold, and gems, and spices, and waving palms, and wondrous flowers, and miraculous fertility, will awaken new forms of art, new styles of splendor; and the negro race, no longer despised and trodden down, will, perhaps, show forth some of the latest and most magnificent revelations of human life. (275)

Stowe believed, in short, that Africans, because they are “natural” Christians, are the chosen race. They will lead humanity into a utopian future by turning Africa into a heavenly abode.

Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness. In all these they will exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly *Christian life*, and, perhaps, as God chasteneth whom he loveth, he hath chosen poor Africa in the furnace of affliction, to make her the highest and noblest in that kingdom which he will set up, when every other kingdom has been tried, and failed; for the first shall be last, and the last first. (275)

While there is much that is objectionable in this passage, I am not going to develop a critique here, since that has been done extensively elsewhere.¹ The passage exemplifies what George Frederickson has called the “romantic racialism” of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Unlike modern racism, which Frederickson defines as “a belief in *de facto* Negro inferiority and opposition to black aspiration to equality” (Frederickson 13 n. 22), romantic racialism often posited the members of racial or ethnic groups as superior by virtue of ascribed cultural attributes. It derives from the ideas of cultural nationalism developed by nineteenth-century German scholar Gottfried von Herder, who held that cultural groups were characterized by their *Volksgeist*, or spiritual identity.

Thus, as the passages cited above indicate, Stowe was not a racist in the modern sense of the term (of considering one race as inferior), but she did believe Africans to have certain cultural, behavioral, and attitudinal traits (a certain *Volksgeist*) that made them more inclined to be good Christians than other races and ethnic groups. She saw African Americans as morally superior, and as therefore proleptic of a utopian future, established first as a Christian republic in Africa.

The source of Stowe's vision of a utopian Christian Africa appears to have been Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1771). Swedenborg's influence on nineteenth-century ideas was extraordinary. It is well known that he provided major Romantic and Transcendentalist concepts. Not so well known is the enormous impact he had on nineteenth-century American women writers. From Lydia Maria Child and Margaret Fuller to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Sarah Orne Jewett, women writers picked up on aspects of Swedenborg's doctrine (Donovan, “Jewett and Swedenborg” 748 n. 2).

I theorize that the main attraction of Swedenborgianism for these women was that it provided a feminized theological alternative to Calvinism. Unlike the stern pessimism of the latter, Swedenborgianism was a cheerful, optimistic creed that emphasized the importance of love, friendship, and good works as means to salvation, and which imagined a friendly familiar afterlife where people are retrained rather than eternally damned (Donovan, "Jewett and Swedenborg" 732; McDannell and Lang 181–83, 200). For example, what for women had been one of the most tormenting aspects of Calvinism—infant damnation—was replaced by a notion of heaven as a kind of day-care center. "When infant deaths bring children to heaven, they are given over to women who want to care for them, not to their natural mothers. It is a woman's psycho-spiritual state which enables her to rear children properly" (McDannell and Lang 221).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman presented a similar idea in her utopian novel *Herland* (1915), which may have derived from this Swedenborgian source. Her mother, Mary Beecher Perkins, was for a while involved with Swedenborgianism, and she and her daughter lived in a Swedenborgian collective where Swedenborg's ideas were discussed (Lane 51–52). While she later rejected Swedenborgianism, Gilman in any event was wholly familiar with its tenets and seems to have incorporated some of them in her own utopian theorizing. An even more pronounced absorption of Swedenborgian ideas about the afterlife may be seen in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's utopian novels *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1886) (see Donovan, *New England* 94–95).

Harriet Beecher Stowe, immersed from birth in orthodox Christianity (both her father and her husband were theologians) would probably have resisted the more heterodox aspects of Swedenborg's theology. However, she clearly picked up his views about Africans, in particular his idea of them as feminine, as opposed to the masculine "Anglo-Saxons." As Frederickson has shown, the direct source of many of Stowe's racial theories was Alexander Kinmont, a Swedenborgian minister who lectured in Cincinnati in 1837 and 1838 (Stowe lived in Cincinnati from 1832 to 1850). His lecture series was entitled *Twelve Lectures on the Natural History of Man, and the Rise and Progress of Philosophy*. It is Lecture 7, "Origin and Perpetuation of Natural Races of Mankind," and part of Lecture 8, "Unity and Variety of the Human Race," that concern us here.

Kinmont believed in a kind of cultural evolution wherein the different races succeed one another in dominating the cultural and moral climate. "Caucasians" are currently dominant; other races will lead in future epochs (170, 188). When African ascendancy occurs, civilization will be milder and gentler, more truly Christian, reflecting Africans' allegedly natural predispositions. "[A] voluntary choice would never have led the Negro into exile; the peninsula of Africa is his home, and the appropriate and destined seat of his future glory and civilization . . . [where] humanity,

in its most advanced and millennial (*sic*) stage, will reflect, under a sweet and mellow light, the softer attributes of the divine beneficence" (191).

Kinmont believed that "there is more of the *child*, of unsophisticated nature, in the Negro race than in the European" (190) but urged that this should not be seen as a sign of inferiority. Rather, as a Swedenborgian, he believed that moral progress requires not intellectual sophistication but a liberation of authentic, spontaneous emotion and unmediated intuition, becoming less educated and more like a child. "In Swedenborg's concept of spiritual progress, the soul does not become more sophisticated, as it progresses, but more childlike" (McDannell and Lang 202). Thus Africans' ascribed childlike character means they are higher on a scale of moral progress than Caucasians. Africans, Kinmont further maintains, are the "very type itself of affection and of gentleness" (199).

He argues moreover that the Caucasian race is so constituted that it has failed to nourish the "sweetness and gentle beauty of the Christian religion" (219); rather, "a race more feminine and tender-minded than the Caucasian" is required for true Christianity to flourish" (218). Caucasians are characterized by their "manly sense of justice" and "rational love of truth," but "all the sweeter graces of the Christian religion appear almost too tropical, and tender plants, to grow in the soil of the Caucasian mind" (218). Thus African traits are seen as superior; Africans' "natural ground of a sweetness and serenity of moral perception [is] more valuable than a vigorous capacity for scientific research or political legislation," which Caucasians manifest (221). In the African ascendancy, then, "the reign of goodness shall at last supersede the supremacy of truth, and the feminine prevail over masculine virtue" (200).

We do not know whether Stowe actually heard or read the Kinmont lectures, but their publication in Cincinnati in 1839 was a major local event; and given her voracious intellectual curiosity, it seems beyond question that she gave the Kinmont theories serious attention. The evidence is, in any event, apparent in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where she appears to have taken over his racial theories with little modification. I have cited above her prophesy of a future Christian-African civilization. She also adopted the notion that Africans have a naturally childlike character, considering this, as did Kinmont, a virtue that allows unmediated emotional truth and virtue full expression.² Uncle Tom, for example, is conceived as a character who has a kind of direct intuitive understanding of good and evil and of the divine (see 209, 229). Tom's sermons, delivered in the slave quarters on the Shelby plantation, are marked by their "hearty, sincere style": "Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the childlike earnestness of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously" (79). Tom thus has a direct, unmediated religion; he is a "natural" Christian.³

In his religious discussions with one of his owners, Augustine St. Clare, who is agnostic, Tom again expresses an intuitive faith. "How do you know there's any Christ, Tom!" St. Clare asks. "You never saw the Lord." Tom responds, "Felt Him in my soul, Mas'r" (436). When Tom analyzes a biblical passage, St. Clare remarks in surprise, "this is all *real* to you!" (437). And he asks Tom whether his own sophisticated skepticism does not shake Tom's faith. No, Tom replies, because the Lord "hides from the wise and prudent, and reveals unto babes" (437).

Stowe also subscribed to Kinmont's notion that the Caucasians or "Anglo-Saxons" are more masculine, analytical, and "a more coldly and strictly logical race" (Stowe, *The Key* 155). In seeing Africans as repositories of feminine sensitivities, Stowe's romantic racialism combined with her utopian feminism, in which she, like many nineteenth-century cultural feminists, hoped the ascendancy of women would mean, as Margaret Fuller put it, a "reign of plant-like gentleness" (113).⁴

Swedenborg's own views about Africans consisted mainly in some sketchy remarks made in his *Spiritual Diaries* (1747–65) and his *Last Judgment Posthumous* (1762). Although a decidedly minor and obscure tributary of his overall work, these texts nevertheless became an important source of early colonizationist theory.

In the *Spiritual Diaries* (no. 5946) Swedenborg claims that in the interior of Africa there are those "who communicate with the angels of heaven; that the communication is not by speech from angels but through interior perception" (qtd. in Odhner 259).⁵ In another entry (no. 5518) he claims, "the Africans are they who on our earth are of the genius in which are the angels of the celestial kingdom" (qtd. in Odhner 255); and "they . . . possess a book which is the Word to them, but it is not like ours. It is written in like manner by correspondences. It was written through enlightened men: these are in Africa" (no. 5909, qtd. in Odhner 255).

Swedenborgians, like most Gnostic mystics, were very interested in discovering an unmediated language, a presymbolic communication, where "words" and "things" coalesce. The American Swedenborgian Sampson Reed, for example, hypothesized a prelapsarian world in which "there is a language, not of words but of things": "Adam and Eve knew no language but their garden. They had nothing to communicate by words; for they had not the power of concealment" (Cameron 266; see also Donovan, "Jewett and Swedenborg" 742).

Thus Swedenborg's theorizing about Africans must be seen in the context of this search for unmediated "language." The Africans' mystical book also appears to be written in a symbolic code of "correspondences" rather than in linguistic script. Correspondences in Swedenborgian theory are moral and spiritual allegorical representations whereby earthly figures signify a corresponding heavenly or spiritual feature ("as above, so below"). While the character and contents of this knowledge remain vague,

the idea of direct nonrational, nonverbal access to truth is clear enough, and it is this idea that Kinmont and apparently also Stowe picked up on.

In the *Last Judgment Posthumous* Swedenborg claims that “the best and wisest are in the interior of Africa. . . . The Africans are more receptive of the Heavenly Doctrines than most others on this earth, because they readily accept the Doctrine. . . . They are in the faculty of receiving truths of faith and especially its goods, because they are of a celestial genius” (qtd. in Odhner 256). Swedenborg believed that Africans are the closest to heaven among human races, largely because of their intuitive, preverbal perceptual abilities, which allow direct apprehension of spiritual realities. African life for Swedenborg “most clearly resembles life in the celestial kingdom. When Africans die they form communities and live much the same way they did on earth. Africans ‘think interiorly’ and actively follow their religion and its laws out of love,” as opposed to Europeans who follow doctrine not out of love but out of deference to its authority (McDannell and Lang 201). Swedenborg divided heaven itself into three spheres: the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial. Africans corresponded to the highest sphere, the celestial, while Europeans only correlated to the middle sphere, the spiritual.⁶

Thus Uncle Tom in Stowe’s novel exemplifies the “celestial genius” that Swedenborg saw as characteristic of Africans; he thinks “interiorly” and intuitively truth preverbally, and his understanding of scripture is rooted in love—“Felt Him in my soul, Mas’r” (Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 436).

Swedenborg was strongly opposed to the enslavement of Africans, and Swedenborgian adherents established what was apparently the first abolition society in the world in Sweden in 1779. Its founders—Carl Bernhard Wadström and Augustus Nordenskjöld—also developed the first colonization plan, having as its purpose to abolish slavery and “to create the New Jerusalem in Africa” (Paley 83). Nordenskjöld went to Sierra Leone in 1792 to participate in the British founding of a colony of free blacks and whites. In following the Swedenborgian idea that Africans in the interior “maintained a direct intuition of God,” Nordenskjöld (according to Wadström) “signified an ardent desire to penetrate immediately into the country, where he always hoped to find an innocent, hospitable people, among whom he could pursue his researches” (Paley 83). Wadström published three influential antislavery and procolonization works: *An Essay on Colonization* (1794–95), *Observations on the Slave Trade and a Description of Some Parts of the Coast of Guinea* (1789), and (with Nordenskjöld) *A Plan for a Free Community on the West Coast of Guinea* (1789).

The Sierra Leone colony, peopled in part by American ex-slaves freed by the British during the American Revolution, became a prototype for American colonization theorizing, which intensified after the Revolutionary War. In 1816 the American Society for Colonizing the Free People

of Color in the United States (generally referred to as the Colonization Society) was formed.

While some early American proponents appear to have endorsed the Swedenborgian idea of Africans as a spiritually gifted elect establishing a paradisiacal society in Africa (see Staudenraus 18, 20, 38), the idea does not seem to have taken hold in the American colonization movement, which became progressively conservative and racist in its views.

Indeed, the black abolition movement appears to have arisen in the early nineteenth century largely as a reaction against the growing popularity of the white-led colonization movement. In his work *Black Protest* Robert C. Dick notes that

colonization was a most pressing issue demanding a response from black men early in their crusade for freedom. . . . The launching of the *Freedom's Journal*, the issuance of David Walker's *Appeal*, and the calling of the first National Negro Convention all came about at least partly in response to colonization, particularly to the plan of the white-sponsored American Colonization Society to export free blacks to the West Coast of Africa. (9)

Between 1817 and 1830 numerous conventions of free blacks condemned colonization. Their statements were published in 1832 as Part 2 of William Lloyd Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1–76). Garrison, a leading white abolitionist, also vehemently opposed colonization, seeing it as a ploy to subvert abolition and to weaken the black protest movement (by removing free blacks from proximity to slaves and thereby rendering them incapable of inciting slave rebellion) (21). Moreover, as Garrison notes, colonization rhetoric became increasingly racist, characterizing African Americans as debased and degenerate in order to legitimize the idea of deportation to whites (124–28). Thus by mid-century the American Colonization Society was far removed from the Swedenborgian vision of a utopian Africa peopled by diaspora Africans.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's attraction to the Swedenborgian theory is therefore anomalous in the American historical context—of both the colonization and the abolition movements. One of the main supporters of colonization in the United States was, however, Harriet's father, Lyman Beecher. At the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, where Beecher served as president for several years, twenty-one of the twenty-five trustees were colonizationists, but the student body tended toward the abolitionist position. Lengthy debates on the issue were held in the 1830s. By 1852 all of the Beecher children—except Harriet and Catharine—had abandoned colonizationism and became abolitionists (Kirkham 23–27). And, as noted, Stowe repudiated colonizationism in 1853.

So Stowe's adherence to the colonization plot in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could not have been an offhand decision; colonization must have been an issue she had devoted considerable attention to. That she was swayed

largely by the Swedenborgian view of Africans and Africa as millennial and proleptic reveals something about her own visionary yearnings, reflecting what Ernst Bloch has called "anticipatory illumination." All great art, he maintains, expresses a dialectical critique of social evil and offers prophetic glimpses of alternative possibilities (Zipes xxvi–xxvii). Stowe's vision of Africa in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* projects this utopian hope.⁷

While Stowe does not detail the specifics of the imagined African utopia, in general her utopian imagination projected a world dominated by cultural-feminist values. Like many other utopian women writers, Stowe dreamed of a society that was "home-like" and governed by a female value system. It was a society, as Carol Pearson has noted, that had "done away with the division between the inhumane marketplace and the humane hearth," and that was patterned "on the principles which have ideally governed the home" (qtd. in Kolmerten 74).⁸

In the tradition of American women's utopian writing only two subsequent writers seem to have picked up on the colonization scheme and projected Africa as a utopian locale, but their elaborations are of some significance. Both probably wrote their works in response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

First was Sarah Josepha Hale, more or less Stowe's contemporary and celebrated as the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a women's journal. Hale developed a colonization scheme in two novels. In 1852, the same year as the book publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Hale revised her novel *Northwood* for its fifth edition, retitling it *North and South: Showing the True Character of Both* and adding a colonization plot. According to Barbara A. White, in that work Hale proposed first teaching slaves Christianity and then sending them to Africa to "plant Free States and organize Christian civilization" (White 214). It seems likely Hale borrowed this idea from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (which had appeared in serial form the preceding year).

In 1853 Hale elaborated these ideas in the novel *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments*, which concludes with the establishment of a utopia in Africa by the "Liberian Colonization Society." Carol Farley Kessler in her study of American women's utopias notes that Hale's work is the only full-scale nineteenth-century utopian novel that dealt with the subject (Kessler 10, 237).

Even more significant, however, is the fact that the first utopian novel by an African American woman—*Five Generations Hence* (1916) by Lillian B. Jones—followed a colonization plot. In this novel the protagonist is a black woman whose "life work" is promoting colonization: "convincing Negroes that they should emigrate to Africa, where five generations hence, they can live a utopian existence" (Kolmerten 120). By the end of the novel many of the main characters have emigrated to Africa, where they found not a paradise but nevertheless a place where through

hard work they could achieve a measure of success (*ibid.*). One might hypothesize that Jones proposed this more realistic view of Africa in response to Stowe's exotic Swedenborgian a fantasy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If so, Jones's work fits into a tradition of African American critiques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (see Donovan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 19).

Thus Swedenborg's utopian ideas about Africa and Africans became an important source for Harriet Beecher Stowe's similar utopian projections in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While her decision to end the novel on the colonizationist theme may have been hastily and poorly conceived (as noted, she soon regretted it), Swedenborgian ideas on race infuse the novel and help to explain Stowe's conception of African American characters, especially that of her protagonist, the slave Tom.

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Notes

1. For a further discussion see Donovan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 19–20, 55–56, 92, 94–95. I do wish to note here that the phrase that seems to be the most patently racist—"their aptitude to repose on a superior mind"—likely refers to God rather than to whites, and therefore is simply a further indication of Stowe's notion that Africans have a "natural" tendency toward religious devotion. Today, of course, we find such egregious generalizations both erroneous and offensive.
2. In her new biography Joan Hedrick suggests that Stowe's emphasis on "child-like dependence" in African Americans stems from the fact that her main experience with African Americans was with domestic servants (209). Hedrick also considers that Stowe hadn't really thought through the implications of her "colonizationist valedictory" (235).
3. Stowe is not entirely consistent in her characterization of African Americans. Topsy, for example, probably the most "natural" character in the novel, having had no education or socialization when she is discovered by St. Clare, is hardly a natural Christian. Indeed, she tends to exemplify the idea that goodness is environmentally produced, rather than innate, for she becomes a devout Christian only after years of education. Kinmont did believe, however, that the moral and political environment has a significant influence on the development of cultural traits (175), but he does not explain how the African cultural environment created natural Christians.
Another ideological source for Tom's (and Eva's) natural religiosity is Edwardsean Calvinism. See Donovan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 57, 78.
4. Fuller was heavily influenced by Swedenborg. See Urbanski 159–60 and Donovan, *Feminist Theory* 35–36.

5. J. Durban Odhner, a contemporary Swedenborgian, believes the modern Ituri Pygmies of Zaire are the tribe Swedenborg described. Odhner visited them in Africa and found them to be "sweet child-like" with a "simple, exquisitely perceptive lovingness" (265). They exhibit no cruelty, have no sense of possession, and have amazing psychic powers (268).
6. There is apparently an ancient tradition in European thought of locating the biblical paradise or Garden of Eden in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, and of postulating the existence of a body of natural Christians in Africa. Thus when Portuguese explorers began voyaging along the African west coast in the fifteenth century, "one of their principal aims was to find a channel of communication with that mysterious Christian kingdom," according to Henri Baudet (18; see also 15–17). The *bon nègre* was thus an early version of the "noble savage," which superseded it in the European mind in the sixteenth century (Baudet 26). So Swedenborg may have been tapping into this tradition.
7. On a moral level one might well criticize Stowe for using a group she did not belong to as a vehicle for her own millenarian hopes.
8. On the cultural-feminist values in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* see Ammons, Berkson, and Tompkins; on Stowe's "female Arcadia" in her local-color novels see Donovan, *New England* 50–67; and on nineteenth-century cultural feminism in general see Donovan, *Feminist Theory* 31–63.

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