

The Heterosexual Economy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: The Threatening Presence of the Taboo in the Domestic Novel

Léa Pitschmann
Heidelberg, Germany

Abstract: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depicts a violent society shaped by and built around slavery but also offers a possibility of liberation from the sins it causes. This paper focuses on the novel's construction of alternatives to its main story as it positions the taboos surrounding gender and race against its Christian narrative. It is thus imperative to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* considering Monique Wittig's work since it uncovers what is hinted at but never enacted. It is the unsaid that unveils the most dangerous aspects of a society in crisis, a society that at times even toys with the realization of the taboo. Categories of being, as conceptualized by Wittig, reveal their core when threatened by the anxieties present in the novel's characters and overall economy. The overarching equilibrium in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is constantly challenged by the loss and following reestablishment of balance through the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of its characters. This article demonstrates how the domestic novel might be less conventional than it appears and how it sheds light onto the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in the violent spaces created by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

U*ncle Tom's Cabin* is a monument of American culture which has been impactful both in its immediate reception and its lasting influence on collective memory. Considering its canonical status, one might wonder why yet another piece must be written about it. If it is true, however, that everything this novel contains has been studied, then why not look at what has been excluded from it?

Uncle Tom's Cabin, much like the scholarship surrounding it, is difficult to summarize. It starts out on the Shelby farm as an idyllic portrait of the American South where slaves and masters live in harmony. Then, the Shelby family has to sell slaves in order to pay their debts. The narrative thus unfolds as it follows the parallel

paths triggered by this event, those of Uncle Tom and Eliza. Uncle Tom, a middle-aged slave, accepts his fate and is sold by the slave trader Haley to the Saint Clares, a rich New Orleans family. There, he befriends his mistress, the young Evangeline, until she dies of a mysterious illness. The patriarch Augustine Saint Clare dies not long after and Tom is sold again to Simon Legree, his last master. Legree represents the evil South as a cruel plantation owner. He frequently beats his slaves, including Tom, who eventually dies as he refuses to surrender his Christian beliefs to his earthly master. Simultaneously, the novel follows Eliza, who refuses to accept the fate imposed on her by the slave economy. She runs away from the Shelby farm in the hopes of finding her husband, George Harris, another runaway slave who fled before she did. The novel follows these two main narrative paths as it introduces more and more characters, each of them embodying a political standpoint in the philosophical debate about slavery. Thus, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* poses the following question: Can an individual lead a just life under slavery?

Uncle Tom's Cabin has elicited an abundance of scholarly work since its first publication in 1852. From an abolitionist narrative to a Christian pamphlet, from a feminist manifesto to a sentimental novel, interpretations have flourished to a point where they become inseparable from the text itself. Amanda Claybaugh explains in her introduction to the 2003 edition of the novel that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been discredited for its racism, especially with regard to traditions of minstrelsy (Claybaugh xxxiv). Even further, James Baldwin condemns the novel for its racist commodification of black suffering for a white audience bearing “the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel [...] and it is always, therefore, [...] the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty” (28). The main impetus of the scholarship is to either condemn or rehabilitate *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Claybaugh xxxvi-xxxvii) and, subsequently, Harriet Beecher Stowe herself. This article does no such thing, since its object of study is located in the unknown.

Eric J. Sundquist insists on the fact that “[t]he triangular entanglements among the role of women, the place of blacks in American history and society, and the radical powers of Christianity cannot be pulled apart or reduced to easy schematic interpretations” (7). As such, an analysis of the heterosexual economy, especially in slavery, presupposes a space where naturalizing¹ discourses will be suspended. This does not mean that they will cease to exist, but that they will be understood in their

¹ Naturalization, in this context, refers to the cognitive transformation of gender from a social category to a scientific category.

most material sense, in their dependency on the relationship between an oppressor and an oppressed. Colette Guillaumin points out that “[w]e experience the greatest difficulty in trying to unite ourselves into a single self. How not to be crushed by the multiple uses made of us? These uses do not succeed in connecting with each other organically inside us, and for good reason” (245).

It is necessary to unravel these “multiple uses made of us” (Guillaumin 245) displayed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel depends on these uses, and the plot unfolds the presence of the hidden taboo. The taboo serves as a backdrop for the story because “[t]he function of [the] taboo is to keep certain knowledge unconscious” (West 5). This needs to be taken into account when analyzing the heterosexual economy within the slave economy, and how it articulates its anxieties not only through the problems depicted in the domestic novel,² but also through the anxieties present in race relations that slavery inevitably evokes. Characters have to navigate arenas of violence that constantly disrupt the heterosexual economy through their personal failures that subsequently affect their relationships in love's capitalist regime. This generates the presence of the taboo, or the intimate fear of succumbing to unspeakable desires, and thus the potential to destroy society. However, eventually, and after great moments of dread, an equilibrium is achieved in the novel through the deterritorialization of the characters that ultimately leads to their reterritorialization within the framework provided by the heterosexual economy.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conceptualized by French writer and philosopher Monique Wittig, the heterosexual economy refers to rules and habits in a network of power “relationships” between the “categories” of gender (Wittig, “The Category of Sex” 66, 64). The power of the heterosexual economy is the subordination of people by confining them to the “category” of woman. It molds the individual into, in Wittigian terms, ‘the woman,’ an essentialist vision of how she has to behave and to feel, thus forming her identity as man's other, his needed subordinate (Wittig, “One is Not Born a

² According to the Lori Merish, the domestic novel can be defined as a “largely Anglo-American” subgenre, related to women authors and depicting the private lives of its characters.

Woman”). Thus, according to Wittig’s materialist feminism,³ a woman is a woman only because she has been violently produced as such by the patriarchy. Accordingly, “women” is a class of “servitude,” made of the not-men and defined by a set of “obligation[s]” (Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman” 108). Through a naturalizing process, gender is comprehended as an individual’s inherent quality, disguising its social construction. This dynamic becomes even more deceptive as gender is indissolubly tied to the binary process of reasoning. This process, in its very conception, generates an implicit dependence in each category: the female to the male, the left to the right, the darkness to the light, the bad to the good (Wittig, *La pensée straight* 80). Because gender and sexuality work in this binary system, everything that escapes the feminine/masculine dichotomy becomes pathological (Macé 500).

Hesitating between acknowledging the taboo and atomizing it is a striking feature of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, discernible once the initial layer of meaning disappears to give place to a polyphonic⁴ novel. Wittig’s analysis and the behavior of the novel’s protagonists imply that heterosexuality is compulsory, coerced, and even oppressive as a discourse imposed onto individuals (Wittig, “The Straight Mind” 105). The taboo is an undefinable object within the novel, constantly looming over the main narrative. As such, it is not so much located in the realization of an act but lies rather in the threat of the act being realized. The taboo can only be defined as the palpable relationship of the subject to its object, of the reader to the destruction of society. As a tentative definition for this essay, one might look at Claude Lévi-Strauss, who demonstrates in *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* the prohibition of incest as the fundamental principle of society, the first taboo. A. Métais points out that “its solidity, its quasi-universality derive from the fact that it constitutes the fundamental procedure through which the passage from the

3 Emerging in the 1960s in France with the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes), materialist feminism refers to a Marxist praxis of feminism, i.e. an analysis of women’s condition as a class subordinated by the patriarchy, with its means of productions seized and its labor commodified. Christine Delphy coined the term itself in 1975 in the French version of “A Materialist Feminism Is Possible.”

4 This essay understands “polyphonic” in its most basic meaning: as the interaction of several voices within a narrative structure. See the entry “Orchestration” (430) in the glossary to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*: “Within a novel perceived as a [polyphonic] musical score, a single ‘horizontal’ message [melody] can be harmonized vertically in a number of ways, and each of these scores with its fixed pitches can be further altered by giving the notes to different instruments. The possibilities of orchestration make any segment of text almost infinitely variable” (431).

biological to the social, from the state of Nature to Culture [sic], is synthetically executed” (113, my translation). Indeed, according to its etymology, incest is impure⁵ and this permits the definition of the taboo to shift. Impurity resides in the promise of demise, the destruction of social structures, rather than in the act of sexual contact between members of the same group. A letter to the radical feminist publication *off our backs* offers an even more striking elucidation of the taboo: “*Incest is not taboo*. It is common behavior commonly accepted in our society, even by the courts. *Believing it is taboo*” (A hysterical mother 23). Following this consideration, the taboo becomes especially tangible in the heterosexual economy. If its literary definition is built upon the concept of incest, then it becomes evident in the Wittigian context.

When Wittig conceptualizes heterosexuality as alienating, she means it in a materialist way. Bodies are displaced within it, hollowed out, and refilled with oppressive structuralizing discourses. Lesbians themselves are not the taboo at play, it is rather life after the advent of lesbianism that puts the heterosexual economy in crisis, both in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in the society beyond its pages. Lesbians represent the possibility of life outside of the oppressive category of gender where freedom is violently reconquered. Thus, they fit into what Adrienne Rich calls the “*lesbian continuum*”:

[It includes] [...] not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. (648-49)

Indeed, this essay will consider the following Wittigian proposition, one that is made explicit by Rich's continuum: Lesbians escape the grasp of men, thus, “[l]esbians are not women” (Wittig, “The Straight Mind” 110).

The taboo serves as a constant reminder of what could happen if one decides to be deviant. It also serves as a rallying point, an Other against which a community solidifies itself—regardless of how vague its definition might be. Even though the taboo is ugly and threatening, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* constantly toys with it. The novel displays a society where racial violence is so exacerbated and mundane that the

5 “Middle English, from Latin *incestus* sexual impurity, from *incestus* impure, from *in-* not + *castus* pure” (“Incest”).

taboo becomes paradoxically distant from its physicality. Torture in itself is not what the reader should be moved by. The causes for worry should rather be what it entails—a flawed system, a possible black insurrection, interracial contact. Striptease, as explained by Roland Barthes, may be a good explanation for this unshakable fascination with the forbidden, as a “spectacle based on fear, or rather on the pretence of fear” showing evil that is “advertised the better to impede and exorcize it” (84). The taboo is erotic, in Barthes’ sense, because it is avoided, moving fast but never quite reaching its climax. Indeed, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* avoids the climax—the realization—of the taboo. Thus, evil is advertised but always defused, physically displaced.

At this point, the following concepts also need introduction: deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Wittig posits that words have a physical shape, she explains that “there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real” (Wittig, “The Mark of Gender” 4). This leads to a physical consideration of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, deterritorialization must be taken by its literal meaning for a Wittigian reading. It means an extraction from territory, from a delimited space, but it does not condemn its subject to an absolute end. Deterritorialization can be a moment of passage from one subject construction to the other, a reformation of the self, as in “no, I am not of your kind, I am the outsider and the deterritorialized” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 105). It is a “searing thrust that rips the subject away from its manners and habits, which enables it to shield itself from the forms of alienating subjectifications surrounding it” (Robitaille 43, my translation). Deterritorialization is a movement and so is reterritorialization. One can recover the lost territory, be replaced as a subject into a new space, when the movement is obstructed (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 634).

Reterritorialization supposes a reentering of the territory, a “recoding” or a “reinvention” (Robitaille 44, my translation). When analyzing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, such movements in space become crucial because they mimic the motions of the taboo: a fluctuation of the subject via its journey into another context, and to its return as a changed matter. The heterosexual economy within the slave economy does exactly that, as it displays a possibility until this heterosexual economy atomizes the taboo and replaces the subjects into a safe, and therefore solidified, context.

GENDER EQUILIBRIUM: THE HETEROSEXUAL ECONOMY AND ITS BALANCE

Married Life in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Spatial movement is crucial to the novel's plot. Not only are the runaway slaves constantly moving or being moved from one place to another, these places are structured by them as they relocate. This does not only include topographies, since each space through which Eliza and Tom pass constitutes its own governmental entity. In the domestic novel, it is the regime of marriage that is the most authoritative one while also encompassing the most severe insecurity and conflict.

The men in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are ridiculed because of insufficient intellectuality or lack of organizational skills, but they regain humanity by the virtue of their wives. This heterosexual model follows the idea that, since gender is considered natural (Wittig, "The Straight Mind" 107), men and women naturally have complementing characteristics and qualities. In this economy, men are the brains—the political—and women are the heart—the domestic—, but as soon as the equilibrium is disrupted, the brains become useless and the heart is rendered incapable of love. In this normative society, the individual deviant becomes threatening because they put society as a whole in danger. In materialistic terms, to name the Other is to recognize the norm, but to endanger the Other in the way the society of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does is to justify and reinforce the norm.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, as a domestic novel, has difficult goals, all of them matching the idea that harmony is achieved through balance. The novel appeals to emotions, especially the ones assigned to its female readership, revealing its sentimental function. It does so in the hopes of abolishing slavery through winning the hearts of wives so that husbands, those in actual material power, follow suit. This clear divide is present within the dynamics of the novel.

The domestic sphere can function only if the wife and husband balance each other out perfectly. As the first couple appearing in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Shelbys hint at the possible fall of the equilibrium of the entire novel. Mr. Shelby expects his wife's qualities to compensate his flaws: "[H]e really seemed somehow or other to fancy that his wife had piety and benevolence enough for two—to indulge a shadowy expectation of getting into heaven through her superabundance of qualities to which he made no particular pretension" (Stowe 53). As the head of the

household, Mrs. Shelby cannot oppose his decision to sell their slaves because of his debts; she neither has the material means nor the moral right to do so. One may wonder if, had the two spheres, man and woman, business and domesticity, not been separated so starkly, happiness could have remained. The novel hints at a flaw within this domestic ideal of marriage itself, since this particular imbalance starts off the entire narrative scheme, or as Jean Fagan Yellin observes: “[...] Mrs. Shelby fails to influence her husband—thus setting into motion the events of the novel [...]” (91).

At the same time, one can say that Mrs. and Mr. Shelby do not function well enough as a domestic couple because they do not balance each other out. This does not question domesticity in a structural sense, but in an interpersonal one which entails the characters’ lack of agency. From a broader narrative perspective, Mrs. Shelby’s incredulity displays the polyphony of the novel, because she believes in the equilibrium of her own marital regime. Thus, the possibility that Harry might be sold disappears entirely: “In fact, she dismissed the matter from her mind, without a second thought; and being occupied in preparations for an evening visit, it passed out of her thoughts entirely” (Stowe 53).

The taboo is acknowledged without being referenced. For a moment it even disappears, as if put on hold. As she gives her full trust to her husband, Mrs. Shelby has to navigate her marriage, especially because she ultimately realizes that she does not live in perfect symbiosis with him. It is a display of symbolic violence, executed by the dominant class: “Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations” (Bourdieu and Passeron 4). Marriage itself is an arena of symbolic violence, a constant confrontation between male and female, precisely because the female social class is one that has been defined, in the Wittigian sense, for the dominant male class to create and assert itself. Subsequently, man cannot exist without woman, but at the same time they must exist peacefully together.

Unlike the Shelbys, the Quakers are displayed as a loving and fully functioning couple, a perfect example of how the heterosexual economy should work. Yet, they are removed from normalcy because they belong to a religious minority. Quaker women are so completely women that their beauty shifts away from the sexual, and thus away from the most carnal aspects of heterosexuality, to their morality. As

such, Rachel Halliday is described as having “a large pair of clear, honest, loving brown eyes; you only needed to look straight into them, to feel that you saw to the bottom of a heart as good and true as ever throbbd in woman’s bosom” (Stowe 215). What follows is a spatial analysis that shifts from an introduction of the landscape — “[a] quiet scene now rises before us” (Stowe 214)—to its women, whose beauty is located in their perfect motherhood (Ammons 166). The Quaker settlement serves as a temporal safe haven for Eliza, an isolated example of a possible paradise. The Quakers themselves are presented as an enclave to the violence Eliza had to suffer and a successful instance of a heterosexual domestic partnership, both in their morals and in their actions to conceal a fugitive slave and in their refusal to participate in the system of slavery.

Opposed to them are the St. Clares in New Orleans, the most obviously dysfunctional pair. Augustine and Marie St. Clare’s gender characteristics are inverted, as Augustine is a feminine man, which cannot be concealed despite his deliberate and masculine choice not to enact the noble values he posits (Ammons 175). He is portrayed as beautiful like a woman and loving like a mother, “more akin to the softness of woman than the ordinary hardness of his own sex” but with “time [...] [overgrowing] this softness with the rough bark of manhood, and but few knew how living and fresh it still lay at the core” (Stowe 239). Marie stands in opposition to him, as she is more concerned with herself than with her child and is therefore considered lacking feminine sensitivity and not interested in the true meaning of religion (Stowe 415). The St. Clares are displayed as flawed because they do not function as a pair but as a mirrored and decadent version of what a pure domestic marriage should look like, especially because it was not the marriage Augustine wished for in the first place. The novel displays a disturbing image of marriage, furthered by how its wickedness is folded against what it could and should be. The capitalism of love, for the St. Clares, does not generate a surplus since the two partners cannot get what they want and need from each other. They fail not only because they are not a match but also because their marriage exacerbates the peculiarities of their respective gender, even hinting toward a homosexual depravity materialized in inversion (Macé 500). In this regard, Augustine becomes the woman and Marie the man.

As problematic as the system may be, there still is some solace in how the women operate within it. White women especially work within the confinements of their own condition and end up being self-reliant as they transcend this condition,

going beyond the particularity of their location in time and space and their location in the novel itself. These women are written as being wholly women in executing their role as the heart of the domestic sphere. This makes women stand individually by abolishing the social barriers that were artificially put between them and the men: They become free in their own right. Hence, they are not only women, they are women perfectly, which still does not compensate for the fact that the equilibrium is disturbed. Womanhood in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seems to be a bargain which is paradoxical since it exists based on the essentialist notion of 'woman.' Even if women are located in a higher truth, their construction still depends on their counterparts. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* calls for a radicalization of such feminine difference, one that might go beyond simple female isolation from the public sphere, beyond the heterosexual economy as a constant struggle between the wife and her husband (Brown 511).

This discrepancy is justified through the lens of the heterosexual economy: Women only exist in economic relation to men and their self-reliance in white marriages is achieved because they fully are 'the woman.' Thus, the heterosexual economy relies on the fact that women do not escape their condition of heterosexualized beings (Wittig, "The Straight Mind" 109). This heterosexuality is articulated as the key to self-reliance tending to a form of self-reliant feminism. Women find their own voice and gender becomes a tool of material empowerment in domesticity. Even though white women are presented to lack material means to stop slavery, it is their moral influence as women that might steer their husbands away from this unjust system (Yellin 91). As dysfunctional as some of the marriages are, and as much as they raise the question of the taboo, they are still less suspicious than the women operating on their own. Indeed, the women who do not have husbands function in frontal opposition to marriage. They are those who cannot be defined.

Re-Womanization through Motherhood

Uncle Tom's Cabin displays its own power in its capacity of shedding light onto the unsaid. What does not happen and what should happen has as much relevance as what does happen. Independent women are a threat as they are missing a half. They are floating entities that disrupt social harmony, not only because of their personal effect on others but also because of their role in the novel's economy. Similar to

raising the question of a feminine St. Clare, the taboo articulates the ambiguous identity of the spinster Miss Ophelia.

The presence of a spinster is suspicious in a domestic novel, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, especially because of her character's inherent flaws. Miss Ophelia lacks compassion and patience when it comes to raising the slave girl Topsy, leading to the assumption that, in the beginning at least, she is incapable of love. She is also disgusted by physical contact, especially with black people. Her repugnance and her distrust toward platonic interracial touch is constantly challenged, especially by Eva (Stowe 272-73). When Ophelia tries to reform the domestic sphere by inspecting the kitchens, she is met with resistance from the cook, Dinah, a slave who has not been taught white methodology and still trusts her own "indigenous African" instincts (Stowe 312). Miss Ophelia compiles northern capitalist characteristics in her sternness (Conforti 168), her inability to sit still, and her need to organize everything for utmost efficiency, as she wants to transform the kitchen into a perfect for-profit machine. She wants to turn away from "such shiftless management, such waste, such confusion" (Stowe 316). Because of this, even Dinah considers Miss Ophelia removed from womanhood: "If dat ar de way dem northern ladies do, dey an't ladies, nohow" (Stowe 315).

The dynamic of the novel also positions Miss Ophelia against her polar opposite, embodied by Topsy. It seems impossible for Miss Ophelia, who is constructed around her own emptiness, to recognize an abused slave girl as a human being. Miss Ophelia's first instinct is to physically punish her, and Topsy receives this naturally, as if codes had been reversed and violence had become accepted in their twisted mother-daughter relationship. Thus, Topsy and Miss Ophelia play mother and daughter without quite reaching the essence of their roles, at least before their respective reterritorialization. Here, the taboo finds its very significance in this fugacious dynamic, displaying but never naming an erotic "un-categorization," in a complete destruction of hierarchies and nature, in a space without any rules (Chetcuti and Amaral 95, my translation).

Motherhood is indeed a problematic aspect in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, mostly because it causes action but also because it shapes characters. The unspoken in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also manifests in the importance of characters that are not there. Mothers, because of their absence, generate imbalance. Augustine St. Clare is traumatized by his mother's early death, so much that he even tries to regenerate her with the birth of his daughter: "St. Clare's mother had been a woman of

uncommon elevation and purity of character, and he gave to his child his mother's name, fondly fancying that she would prove a reproduction of her image" (Stowe 243). Despite this longing for moral purity, St. Clare chooses to remain indolent to slavery, outside of action, in a display of "terrifying [...] masculine privilege and power" (Ammons 175). This privilege is also displayed in his indifference toward his brother's actions, who "was generous to his friends and equals, but proud, dominant, overbearing, to inferiors, and utterly unmerciful to whatever set itself up against him. Truthful we both were; he from pride and courage, I from a sort of abstract ideality" (Stowe 334).

Conversely, Legree, arguably the most despicable character in the novel, is amoral because he was not tempered by his devoutly Christian mother even though she eventually becomes his demise, as he is too scared of her ghost to enter the attic. Indeed, "born of a hard-tempered sire, on whom that gentle woman had wasted a world of unvalued love, Legree had followed in the steps of his father" (Stowe 528). The blame does not necessarily lie on the mother herself, but more on the disruption of the equilibrium. The novel senses a discrepancy in the system: it can work perfectly only if the functions of society are completely balanced. Therefore, families should aspire to form a Christian society in which the flaws of one segment can be annulled by the qualities of another, just as it is displayed in the utopian space of the Quaker society. This is why toxic motherhood and female independence must be rendered harmless by other reformative forces.

The only salvation for Miss Ophelia and Topsy, and thus their acceptance of the roles assigned to them, comes through the Christian figure of Eva. Topsy, for the first time in her life, receives unconditional love, and this Christian contact makes her and Miss Ophelia capable of actually working together in the reformative power of the heterosexual economy (Kent 19-20). Indeed, with Eva's Christian reformation of Miss Ophelia and Topsy, both can function within this economy, and thus become the characters of the mother elevating the slave to a girl possessing full humanity, "as if Eva's intervention moves Topsy from caricature to character" (O'Loughlin 581).

Hence, the taboo is defused. Miss Ophelia lives a reterritorialization of her identity without deterritorialization, she is not dispossessed and restructured on the margins of society. A brief moment of deterritorialization can be perceived in her discomfort in the heterosexual economy, but she never leaves its space in order to be

restructured. On the contrary, she finds her identity in normative reformation itself. In Wittig's sense, she becomes a woman again.

The even bigger taboo in the slave economy is Cassy's infanticide, since it does not directly unfold but is only referred to (Stowe 521). It is a sacrificial murder, as Cassy not only kills her son to save him from slavery but also abandons her position as a mother. By realizing the ultimate taboo act a mother can commit, she turns it inside out, empties it of its cruelty, or in Natacha Chetcuti and Maria-Teresa Amaral's terms "un-categoriz[es]" it (95, my translation). Since she is put into a situation that defies humanity itself, Cassy rejects societal norms as she retrospectively fights the rape she was subjected to. The taboo functions only in its avoidance, which means that it is hinted at but never unfolds, and suggests appropriation as a solution to the risk of transgression (Lott 39). Even though Cassy's condition is not her fault, she still has to be redeemed and the only way the domestic novel can do so is to make her a mother again. The sentimental novel reunites her and her family at the end of the narrative, but if read through a Wittigian lens, it is evident that the reunion is the only way to make Cassy a woman again, not a murderess.

More tentatively, perhaps, does the novel deal with the fact that it is whites that create a murderess. Indeed, they generate the disruption of the heterosexual model among black families, as they are the ones tearing mothers and children apart (Ammons 167). Moreover, the novel displays the constant tension between violence and desire in contrasting white femininity with black femininity. This aesthetic of contrast follows the principle of desire as a visual transgression instead of a factual one. Accordingly, Mrs. Bird and Eliza are both mothers and their actions are driven by the (potential) loss of their children. When Mrs. Bird ushers Eliza into the carriage, they stand as two contrasted silhouettes: Eliza has her child in her arms, which accentuates the fact that Mrs. Bird's arms are empty because she lost her own child (Stowe 155). Their condition appeals to the reader's feelings, and this underlines the fact that despite their different social position, they suffer the same things as mothers and thus women, especially because motherhood is what confirms womanhood in the heterosexual economy.

The taboo is revealed in the absence of its name. Whenever characters seem to reach happiness through balance, gender emerges as a natural struggle, a never-ending exchange of violence between the categories, an ineluctable pain

(Guillaumin 158). *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, eludes this uncomfortable outcome in its spatial relocation of characters via the fluctuation of power itself.

DOMINATION AND THE FEAR OF BEING DOMINATED: INTERRACIAL CONTACT IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

Black Male Rebellion

Uncle Tom's Cabin provides a moral analysis of slavery but avoids addressing the systemic responsibility of whites. The ambiguity here lies in the portrayal focusing on hypocritical whites in the North and some bad masters in the South, and in the novel's acknowledgment that owning a slave is, in principle, morally wrong. However, this argument finds its basis in the novel's intertwining stories, and especially in its capacity of questioning race itself. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* then relocates race into other realms of meaning, as the symbolic suffering of Tom corresponds to a white conception of black masculinity. The novel makes sense of the fact that black people cannot be as assertive as whites, otherwise they will be perceived as threatening political and cultural subjects. Indeed, the St. Clare brothers discuss this threat when they imagine a black rebellion in America similar to the one in Haiti (Stowe 392). At the same time, the fear of such a threat lies in the revocation of the "passivity" black men have been reduced to (Wolff 603-04).

The novel explicitly condemns active black characters such as George Harris, a man so intelligent and talented that he becomes threatening: "[...] George, who, in high spirits, talked so fluently, held himself so erect, looked so handsome and manly, that his master began to feel an uneasy consciousness of inferiority" (Stowe 55). He is even more threatening as these qualities could fuel his hatred toward whites. Indeed, he frightens his wife as he loses patience over slavery, displaying a resolutely masculine form of political ideology that calls for revolution: "Patient! [...] haven't I been patient? Did I say a word when he came and took me away, for no earthly reason, from the place where everybody was kind to me?" (Stowe 60).

In diametric opposition to George, Tom eludes this disapproval, as he is portrayed as the perfect liberator who loves even his enemy, someone who would never actively promote hatred against the dominant class. He never calls for

violence against his masters, not even toward Legree, and he never thinks of defending himself against the slaves that beat him: “[H]e knew the deadly character of the man he had to deal with, and his despotic power. But he felt strong in God to meet death, rather than betray the helpless” (Stowe 581). Nonviolence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes a militant tactic and the inversion of power annuls the systemic argument because, even though it might seem contradictory, it transforms individuality into universalism. Therefore, it “un-categoriz[es]” violence (Chetcuti and Amaral 95, my translation). Furthermore, the heterosexual economy articulates this taboo of black rebellion and the fear of blackness itself in deterritorializing it into a new society. In their conversation the St. Clare brothers open up another possible novel within the novel, where race is exposed as a class of oppression, but they abandon this idea almost instantly.

Miscegenation and Desire

Race is a source of uncertainty in the novel. Fear and fascination of miscegenation generate a taboo since whites may no longer be able to distinguish black people from themselves. George, for example, is able to pass as a Spaniard and fool his audience (Stowe 180). Thus, white fear of blackness crystallizes in their obsession to hold onto institutional power that counterbalances the attraction toward black people, and black people seem to long for integration but are almost immediately subjected to whites’ repulsion (Armand et al. 147). Both races engage in a constant back and forth between being dominated and the possibility of replacing the class of masters, which is why “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant 55). The black masculinity suggested in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* confirms the anxiety that black people and white people cannot live together—or at least that contact is inherently painful.

This anxiety is exacerbated in the slave economy since black sexual appeal is a source of concern, especially for white men. Beauty must be comprehended through the lens of rape, as ‘mulatto’ women who elicit desires are products of rape somewhere along their ancestral line:

All depictions of interracial lust develop out of the relations of inequality that have prevailed between the races. They grow out of a history that has covertly permitted the white man’s sexual access to

black women and violently forbidden the black man's access to the white woman. The racist and sexist assumptions that underlie such unequal access to sex have generated forms of pornographic sexual fantasy with an important purchase on the American sexual imagination. (Williams 96)

The taboo is even more present and threatening in the contradiction it displays in the domestic novel. How can benevolent whites love their slaves when they love them more if they can see their own whiteness in these slaves? The St. Clare brothers mention this understanding of racial supremacy in their conversation on a possible black rebellion by displaying a heterosexual model of miscegenation. If slaves rebel, it will be because of the masculine characteristics present in their white side—the father's side—that will carry “their mother's race” with them (Stowe 392). Sexual desire toward light-skinned black women can also be interpreted through St. Clare's projection of himself onto the Other and thus otherized but still familiar. In the case of Deleuze and Guattari, it means that there is a constant shift in the machines of production of desires (Deleuze and Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe* 8). In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, desire constantly shifts spaces of violence and places the relationships of oppressor and oppressed under the constraint of back-and-forth motions between domination and the fear of being dominated.

This notably materializes in the instant fascination Haley has for Harry the first time he sees him because it is transferred from the sexual to the capitalistic. Haley sees monetary value in Harry since he is a talented boy with light skin, his beauty residing in a tradition of ‘breeding out blackness’ while keeping the mark of subordination visible. Similarly, when he offers to buy Eliza, it demonstrates that he considers her disposable, worth “watches, feathers, and trinkets” to him, a sexual object he unabashedly subjects to his violent gaze (Stowe 45). Emmeline is described in the same way during the slave auction scene in which she is publicly displayed and scrutinized, guaranteed to generate a lot of money because of the fairness of her skin (Stowe 478-79). Here, the racial tone of desire emerges because of the discrepancy between white and black female sexuality, which comes forward in Legree's fear of Cassy's “influence” over him, another instance of dominating the one that threatens to dominate her master in return (Stowe 526). The sexualization of black bodies serves a material purpose, the sexual violence allegedly inherent to black men justifies their lynching, the supposed sexual impurity of black women their systemic rape (Craig 12). Because black women's sexuality is constantly exacerbated, the whiter the woman is, the more beautiful she becomes. Thus,

'mulatto' women are conceptualized as a mysterious in-between the races, one that still carries the mark of blackness, a result of a violent interracial contact that elicits sexual desire.

'Return to the Homeland' as Emancipatory Agenda

Race crystallizes identity de- and reterritorializations as characters move from one state of being to the other. In the novel's economy, some of the black characters regain their agency in a nationalist reterritorialization. Interracial cohabitation seems to be a theoretical impasse for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This is especially proven by the fact that Eliza and her family end up emigrating to Africa to form a new society, because black people and white people cannot live together without transgressing the taboo, even though whites have to pay actual and symbolic reparations (Stowe 62). At this point, the novel defuses the taboo by suggesting not only that interracial contact is painful and that a gender imbalance is dangerous, but also by explicitly showing that slavery itself creates these vices. By removing black people from a space of violence and restraint, a natural heterosexual economy can grow in a more stable environment. Migration to Africa is only suggested in the constant painful contact throughout the narrative, and confirmed in a denouement that resolves the dilemma of black people as "natural' Christians" and the American state in a spatial utopia that will lead the rest of humanity (Donovan 25).

Consequently, black people in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are forced into a literal deterritorialization in their displacement from Africa to the United States and then reterritorialize when they decide to go back to Africa. George Harris exclaims in his letter: "[O]n the shores of Africa I see a republic [...] I want a country, a nation, of my own" (Stowe 609-10). It is this newfound freedom that humanizes black characters in the purest form in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This tactic constitutes an autonomous subject formation since the Harris family and Topsy become citizens of their own land.

CONCLUSION

The presence of the taboo in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers an ambiguous reading of the novel, as characters are put in motion by tacit forces that encompass their sexuality,

gender, and race, which all place them on the narrative map. Desire and taboo shed light on the ephemerality of these essentialized concepts and raise the question of racial interaction. However, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not call for the abolition of those categories. On the contrary, it deconstructs these concepts from a Christian approach and even flirts with transgression. In the end, however, it reterritorializes the characters into safer spaces, where they can regain the agency that the slave economy robbed them of. Thus, the novel goes through periods of uncertainty when it goes through the process of othering and even endangers the heterosexual economy by an almost-subversion thereof. This constant push-and-pull motion not only creates a literary taboo, it also moves the sexual taboo to the center of the aesthetics of the novel and ties it to questions of race and gender. Black people become truly free when they go back to Africa and form their own heterosexual society there, whereas the white women become truly free in the realization of their femininity in the heterosexual economy already present in the United States.

The taboo is defused in the redemption of characters that were put at the margin of this normative society, even if it is unsure whether the slave economy perverts the heterosexual domestic economy or the other way around. The tensions caused by this ambiguity are vividly manifested throughout the different narratives in the novel, creating symbolic and material arenas of violence which the characters, especially the women, have to navigate. Through tensions and anxieties, the novel gives Wittigian categories a new force, one that is not rooted in violence but in Christian compassion that allows the characters to fulfill their nature and become self-reliant. To fully articulate this idea, the novel has to go through the painful process of toying with sexual and racial anxieties, sometimes even subconsciously. Thus, it finds a new and more peaceful social reality as it enters a dangerous relationship with the taboo but also strips it of its reality by foiling it against happier outcomes or alternative narratives within the polyphonic novel.

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