

Why There's No Uncle Tom in Cincinnati's Freedom Center: The Uses of Slavery in Marketing

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This paper proposes marketing analogies, rooted in history and geography, between Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Freedom Center, initially called the National Underground Railroad Museum, inaugurated this year on Cincinnati's riverfront. Both the uses of slave stereotypes in nineteenth and twentieth-century marketing and the new "museum of conscience," reassure consumers by creating narratives essentially consonant with the intended audiences' worldview.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written in Cincinnati and with a passionate anti-slavery agenda, quickly and ironically became the source for some of the most enduring of the denigrating stereotypes of nineteenth and twentieth-century popular culture. Fervent in her educational mission to report the brutalities of slavery, Stowe strove for historical accuracy in her novel. She read widely in slave narratives and abolitionist tracts, basing Uncle Tom on the narrative of a runaway slave, Joshua Henson; she interviewed whites with experience of slavery; and especially she used what she learned from the lives of Frankie and Eliza, two freed slaves who worked as domestic servants for her in Cincinnati (Beecher letter, quoted Douglass 1855). Stowe depicted in her novel what she discovered in her research. (Turner 1994, 13) Children in slavery are poorly-clothed, ill-kempt and uneducated; Topsy is intended as a tragic as well as a comic figure, an indictment of the deprivations of a childhood in slavery. (Bowlby 1993, 201) African-American slave women were pivotal figures in the domestic life of wealthy slave owners as is Aunt Chloe for the Shelby's. Slavery is an economic system founded on the necessary cruelty of the masters to force work from the enslaved; Simon Legree represents the brutal truth of slave ownership. Families were torn apart and slaves did flee from imminent sale; Eliza and her son Harry cross the half-frozen Ohio River in their flight to join her husband George in Canada. Religion was always a vital part of slave life; Tom's piety is not an anomaly. These are historical facts.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was the first million-dollar novel in history. Adding a propagandistic fervor to the sentimental and the gothic favored by popular fiction in the mid-nineteenth century, it sold 300,000 copies in its first year of publication and three million before the civil war. (Ohmann 1996, 21) Moreover, given the absence of the legal protections of copyright, pirated editions of the novel turned it into an international best seller, and ceramic images of the novels' characters and other "Tomitudes" flooded the market, as Stephen Railton has fully documented at the University of Virginia website he edits, "Uncle Tom's Cabin in American Popular Culture."

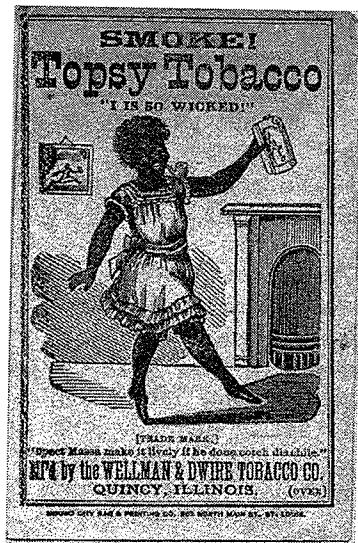
Stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were immensely popular, in part because the story was so well known and could be abbreviated for stage, but also because the stage versions simplified the characters into stereotypes. The minstrel and vaudeville shows of the late nineteenth century already used black-face stock characters and so easily transformed Tom, Topsy, and Chloe into the caricatures beloved by mass audiences. The narrative was changed from an indictment of slavery to a comfortable melodrama with the saintly Tom, the comic pickaninny, Topsy, the angelic Little Eva, the evil Simon Legree, and the Mammy, Aunt Chloe.

In 1903 Edwin S. Porter, under the auspices of Thomas Edison, directed the first movie version, though it was not until 1927 and the fourth film version of the novel that an African-American, Sam Lucas, played Tom. (Bogle 1989, 3) The movies continued the tradition of simplified melodrama with stock characters. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its characters were a Hollywood standby (Mickey Mouse AND Mighty Mouse, Shirley Temple, Frank Morgan, Judy Garland, Betty Grable and June Haver—among many other lesser lights—played either scenes or characters from the novel. MGM considered filming the novel again in 1946, but the N.A.A.C.P. protested and M.G.M. bowed to changing times (UTC in Hollywood). *The King and I* (filmed in 1956, based on a 1951 play developed from the 1944 novel by Margaret Landon), was not the last time Hollywood made direct use of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The 1969 *Slaves* is an "undercover remake of

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Uncle Tom's Cabin," part of the "blaxploitation" films of the 1960s and 70s. (Bogle 1989, 225)

The use of those early stereotypes, especially the Pickaninny, the Mammy, the Tom, were widespread in late-nineteenth-century marketing. By the turn of the twentieth century, the images taken from slavery were domesticated into familiar and comfortable brand symbols. Images of "comic" black children appear repeatedly in advertisements and sales promotions for an array of products, including Pear's soap, Knox's gelatin, Gold Dust washing powder, New Orleans Coffee, Two Coons Axle Grease, and Topsy Tobacco (illustrated below). The good, well-dressed and well-groomed Tom sold Cream of Wheat (illustrated below), Uncle Ben's Rice, and appears frequently as a background figure in advertisements. The most pervasive—and enduring of these of the stereotypes as brand symbol—is the Mammy, a figure still at work selling pancakes and laxatives at the turn of the twenty-first century. Aunt Jemima is a brand symbol that has stood the test of time since 1893, though her origins lie further back in a popular minstrel tune (Turner 1994, 49). Even as the sales of the novel declined rapidly after the Civil War (and according to Edmund Wilson, quoted in Stuteville, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was out of print for much of the twentieth century until the Modern Library Edition in 1948), the marketing of its characters and episodes continued unabated until the 1950s. A favorite was a "Plantation" themed children's party that included a relay race called "Liza Crossing the Ice" (Hamsher 1949).



Richard Ohmann argues in his discussion of the pervasive role of marketing in the formation of American culture that these late nineteenth-century images of African Americans in advertising needed no explanation. At a time when most advertisements had to explain what they were doing because the audience had not yet learned the meaning of images, these visual images needed no verbal explanation. Their meaning was provided by a shared cultural understanding in the mass white market about the stories: "... and turn-of-the-century advertising, like advertising today, often reassured its audience that old values and social relations were still somehow present and dependable, among the new. Images of servant and pickaninny, marginal to the new market system but still happily attendant upon its masters, helped enact this nostalgic gesture" (Ohmann 1996, 264).

"Reassuring an audience" that U.S. history may be read in its most positive interpretation, seems to be at the heart of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. This massive civic project on the northern banks of the Ohio River exemplifies how history, as a "culture product," may be marketed by creating narratives essentially consonant with the intended audiences' worldview. (There is nothing new to this historiography—aficionados are still trying to rehabilitate Richard II from the villain created for a Tudor monarch by Shakespeare). Originally proposed in 1993 as the *Underground Railroad History Museum* intended to commemorate the network of hiding places and "conductors" --both black and white--which helped slaves fleeing the south escape north, often as far north as Canada. Cincinnati, and other smaller towns on the northern bank of the Ohio River, especially Ripley, were more than just stations on the Underground Railroad. They represented the mythic crossing of the river to freedom.

The Freedom Center, as it is now called, always had civic purpose. Proposed by the local chapter of the National

Conference for Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews) "as a way of marking its 50th anniversary and its mission of fostering cooperation across racial, religious and ethnic lines" (Klein 2002). The *New York Times* quotes Robert C. Harrod, who deserves great credit for the original concept, "the Center will use history to improve race relations" (Webb 2004). Its planners, according to Klein, also promised an "unflinching" view of slavery (2002).

On August 23, 2004 the Freedom Center was inaugurated. It's a massive 3-pavillion building on Cincinnati's riverfront, hedged in between the taxpayer funded baseball and football stadiums, built at a cost of \$110 million, 40% of which was funded by federal, state and local tax dollars. The \$16 million dollar federal appropriation has been criticized for diverting funds from the 400 other historical slave sites documented by the National Park Service. (Klein 2002). Most of the balance of the \$110 million was provided by private funding, including significant donations from local corporate giants Procter and Gamble (\$6 million), Kroger and Toyota (\$1 million). First Lady, Laura Bush, was the keynote speaker. Oprah Winfrey hosted the opening Gala Banquet.

No longer a museum, it is now a Freedom Center whose mission, according to its Executive Director, Spencer R. Crew, "is to help people talk about interracial cooperation" (Amos 2005). The Freedom Center has only about 200 artifacts in its collection, and that includes commissioned art works (Weber 2004). The one notable historical artifact is a pen for holding slaves, purchased and cleansed "Elgin style" from a Kentucky farmer. (Burke). The rest of the Freedom Center is interactive, educational and atmospheric. There are several short films, including "Midnight Decision," about a fictional slave boy's escape and "Brothers of the Borderland," by noted African-American film maker, Julie Dash about a fictional slave woman's escape to Ripley with her child. Narrated by Oprah Winfrey, it is shown in a theater lighted as if in a star-lit night. There is a "Hall of Freedom Heroes," which includes portraits of heroes of international figures (Mandela, Gandhi, Pablo Casals), national luminaries such as Mohammad Ali, and local heroes including Theodore Berry, Cincinnati's first Black mayor, and Carl Lindner, majority owner of the Cincinnati Reds. There is a room, "Reflect, Respond, Resolve" for reflection and discussion about race relations, which according to a recent survey is the least popular attraction at 3% "most enjoyed" at the Center (Amos 2005).

The project has evolved from a documentation of the most difficult and divisive realities of U.S. history into a tourist destination spot, dedicated to a different use of history. Slavery is a muted topic, "almost subliminal" to use the language of Nathaniel R. Jones, co-chairman of the Freedom Center. Ernest Briton, then the Center's director of external affairs, in a March 2003 interview describe its intended purpose. "We are using history to connect to modern day issues. The Center will be highly interactive

and invite the participation of visitors in dialogue to connect with lessons of the past—the interracial cooperation, perseverance and desire for freedom [which marked the Underground Railroad]." One trustee, Consuelo W. Harris is quoted "we wanted to make sure we were not being accusatory of whites" (Weber 2004).

This evolution—or clarification—of purpose occurred in a local context of explosive race and police relations. In April 2000, an unarmed 19-year old African-American man, Timothy Thomas, was shot dead fleeing a police officer. It was the 15th such death in three years. Cincinnati's ravaged inner city erupted in protest; police in riot gear confronted the crowds. The media images were indelible.

So, the Freedom Center as inaugurated reflects converging needs. The need to market a different image for Cincinnati has been a constant theme since 1993: "Cincinnati could yet become a beacon for improved race relations... [with] the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center." (Webb 2004) Indeed, history itself can be commandeered to this purpose. To attract a mass audience, necessary both for its funding and its perceived role as a destination economic anchor on the Riverfront, the version of history themed in the Center must be consonant with an ameliorative narrative. Rita Organ, the museum's director of exhibits, said of the Center, "We're not an African American museum. We're an American museum, trying to tell American stories." (Klein 2002)

The paradoxes inherent in the Freedom Center may account for its disappointing first year of operations, described in a surprisingly frank and full profile by Denise Smith Amos in an article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 24, 2005. Although the Freedom Center is praised by Angela Berrigan, Vice President of the Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau for "being known as one of our great spaces," revenue is, by inference, disappointing. There are no official accounts of the revenue generated by ticket sales, membership dues, bookstore and café sales, and the renting of space for private and corporate events, but it would seem that the Freedom Center has money troubles. Despite, the very high level of initial funding, the Freedom Center still owes about \$5 million of its \$110 million development and construction. It will need to raise about \$7 million annually for operating expenses, plus additional monies to create an endowment (Amos 2005).

The 130,000 visitors to that date represent 50% of its annual attendance goal. That goal, however, is very modest for an inaugural year for a national museum. According to Dennis Barrie, who as Director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center caused local controversy with an exhibit of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, and who has also served as Director of two other major national museums, the *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame* and the *Spy Museum*, such institutions usually enjoy their highest attendance in the first two years, and then settle into annual maturity sales of about 50% of the first year (Amos 2005).

Attendance by those who live locally has been especially disappointing. According to an *Enquirer/WCPO* survey conducted in February 2005, fewer than 10% of adults in the greater metropolitan area have visited the museum. "It looks like we have a very good product, but a lot of people still have to try it," according to Paul Bernish, spokesperson for the Freedom Center. Executive Director Spencer Crew acknowledges that perceptions that this is a "slavery" museum remain a problem. On the other hand, some visitors to the Center have wanted to see more "about the struggles of enslaved blacks and the whites who helped them" (Amos 2005).

It has also emerged in the Amos article that some of the historians actually working on the project over the last ten years have become uneasy with the change in the Freedom Center's purpose and emphasis: "...its historians and researchers came and went. Some said privately they weren't happy that proposals for more artifacts and authentic items were ignored. Others didn't agree with the Center broadening its focus beyond African Americans' escapes into worldwide freedom efforts." (2005)

Obviously, there is another context for this discussion: the debate among historians and museologists about the "Disneyfication" of history, the concern that the emphasis on "telling a good story," in a setting funded by corporate sponsors, may be in conflict with the obligation to also tell the cruel realities of human history. One of the ironies of this story is the comparative success of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., which is truly unflinching in its portrayal of history by exhibiting the true artifacts and the actual biographies of the victims of genocide. Its success is phenomenal: 10 million visitors in its first five years.

The comparison with the Holocaust Museum is fair, and we are not the first to make it. *Beloved* is Toni Morrison's fictionalized account of Margaret Garner, who as a slave fleeing with her family, is captured on the Ohio side of the river and murders her child rather than see her return to servitude. Toni Morrison implicitly establishes the comparison with her frontispiece to *Beloved*, which simply reads: *Sixty Million and More*. The sixty million refers to those enslaved in Africa who never made it out to the ships, and those who died in the slave ships. Clearly, though, this is a metaphorical number, resonant in its implications of more recent history. Margaret Garner does figure in a single pull-up plaque in the Freedom Center, but the most popular exhibits, the short films, figure fictional slaves in journeys to freedom, as if the true historical protagonists, the real Uncle Toms, cannot tell a good enough story.

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