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# Uncle Tom's Cabin In Krakow: Cross-Cultural Apprehensions

Nancy Schultz, *Salem State University*



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## **UNCLE TOM'S CABIN IN KRAKOW: CROSS-CULTURAL APPREHENSIONS**

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*Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin has been mired in controversy since 1852; it continues to challenge readers today. During spring 2018, I had the opportunity to teach the novel twice, once at Salem State University in Massachusetts, and then as a visiting professor at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland.*

In Salem, many of my students had not read it, and most found it to be a much better book than expected. As a class, we acknowledged Stowe's unenlightened depiction of African-American slaves was problematic, but most of us agreed the book's powerful contribution to ending slavery in many ways compensated for its flaws. Many of us expressed admiration for Stowe's comic writing and the astute employment of the sentimental that powers her book.

But not all of us.

One student told me after class that it was painful for her to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She was distressed by its insensitive portrayals of black people. I taught the book a dozen times to diverse groups of students, and alongside James Baldwin's angry 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." I was, of course, sympathetic, and concurred that Stowe scholars regret that her mid-nineteenth-century perspectives on race are benighted by today's more sophisticated constructions of racial identity. I contended that, as a key work of American literature, the book's passionate argument for abolition elevates it as an ethical text in spite of, or even as it surpasses, its own time-bound perspectives.

Then I went to Krakow.

I was invited to teach at the School of English Studies at Jagiellonian University, where I offered an intensive course called "Harriet Beecher Stowe: Literary Responses to Racism and Slavery." Teaching the text in Poland, I thought,

required providing more information on slavery in the United States, so I prepared an overview. Most of my Salem students had grown up in the Northeast, and, for them, slavery was antiquated Southern history the Civil War abolished. While I may be more aware of slavery's lingering evil than some of my students might be, truthfully, my own view was not all that different. Teaching the book in Poland changed my perspective in ways I hadn't anticipated and made me rethink what it means to know a book well.

My first weekend in Krakow, I signed up for a tour of Auschwitz I and Birkenau (Auschwitz II) near the town of Oświęcim, Poland. As the guide took us through the compounds, I observed firsthand the jarring contrast between the Nazis' highly organized processes and their evil purpose, such as the cramped train cars that brought the victims to the camp and the tiny rations that starved many to death. One of the most haunting parts of Auschwitz was the hallway hung with victims' photographs. The Nazis documented many of their prisoners, and the walls were lined with rows of photographs — women on the left, men on the right. The pictures had birth dates, admission dates, and death dates. I was riveted by the traumatized eyes of the victims as they stared into the camera: a gaze of fear, loathing, and despair.

Portraits of former slaves taken by the Works Progress Administration from the Library of Congress juxtaposed with photos of Holocaust victims from Shutterstock.





UNCLE TOM IN POLAND

General view of slave quarters No. 2, Westend, Trevilians, Virginia. Photo from the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS VA, 55-TREV.V, 14D--1.

Teaching *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the following week, I presented the well-known diagrams of the interior of slave ships. These ships were designed to maximize the number of slaves who could be transported and were, like Auschwitz, models of soulless efficiency. The more I detailed the ship's conditions, the more I understood parallels with the history so familiar to my Polish students: the camps. These parallels have been explored by writers such as William Styron and Richard L. Rubenstein, but the experience of teaching U.S. slavery in Krakow made them resonate more deeply. When I projected a daguerreotype of a young bondswoman, Delia, taken by Joseph Zealy in 1850 for Louis Agassiz's racially biased study, the traumatized look in her eyes forcefully recalled the victims' photographs I had seen at Auschwitz.

The words over Auschwitz's ornate gate at the entrance to the camp contain the famously cruel Nazi lie: "Work will make you free." Many of the stories in Stowe's novel echo this lie. There are the stories of Chloe, Tom's wife, who is allowed to hire herself out as a baker to try to buy back her husband's freedom. George Harris, Tom's more radical alter ego, plans his escape to Canada, where he vows to use all his earnings to buy the freedom of his wife and son. There are stories of loyal slaves in the book whose masters promised freedom after years of work, only to have it turn into a lie, as happens with Tom twice: the first with a change in Mr. Shelby's financial circumstances, and then, following the sudden death of Augustine St. Clare.

Teaching *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Krakow made me confront the history of American slavery in a deeper way, exposing how my own New England-based myths helped veil its meaning. My mainly French-Canadian ancestors arrived in Massachusetts at the turn of the twentieth century, and there underwent their own immigrant hazing. It had been too easy to distance myself from disturbing

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Railway entrance to Auschwitz Birkenau. Photo from Shutterstock.

nineteenth-century Southern history. In Krakow, these distinctions were largely erased. My students were mainly Polish, and in their eyes, I was mainly an American. They didn't see the regional distinctions that allowed me to take a pass on owning this embarrassing national history. Once I was outside my own borders, this history became more fully national, and more fully my own.

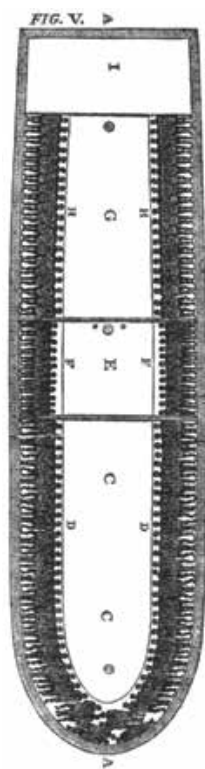
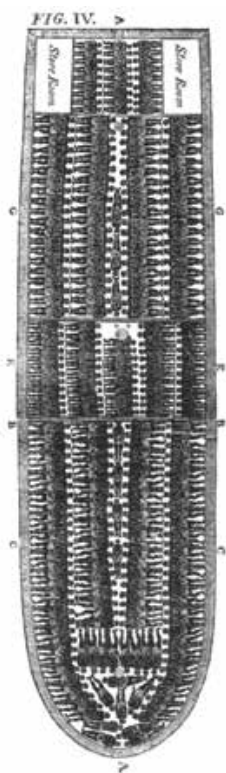
Today, Poland is in the throes of grappling with painful parts of its own history, such as its fate under communist rule until 1989 and the aftermath. There was also the recent Institute of National Remembrance Law, which threatens fines or up to three years of imprisonment for anyone who "... publicly and untruthfully assigns responsibility or co-responsibility to the Polish nation or the Polish state for Nazi crimes." Five million Poles, three million of them Jews, perished during brutal occupations by the Nazi and

Soviet regimes during World War II, so the inaccurate phrase "Polish concentration camps," as my students confirmed, is deeply hurtful to Poles. My class made thoughtful and astute comparisons between the removal of communist monuments and the curation of World War II exhibitions in Poland, and similar dialogues in the United States over Confederate memorials.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is also a better-known text in Poland than I realized. It was translated into Polish in 1853, just a year after its publication in the United States, and was assigned in schools during the communist era (1947-1989) to critique racism in the United States. The connections between the slavery practiced in the United States and the perverse logic of the death camps were clear to my Polish students, and gave rise to fascinating discussions about these shared histories.

Seeing Stowe's book through Polish eyes uncovered more of its disturbing elements. Its sentimental appeals were crafted for white middle-class audiences who were asked to connect the separation of black families to their own experiences with high infant mortality in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, much of the book's high-octane emotional intensity was fueled by the loss of Stowe's own baby son, Charley, during an 1849 cholera epidemic in Cincinnati. Afterward, Stowe wrote, "There were circumstances about his death of such peculiar bitterness, of what might seem almost cruel suffering, that I feel I should never be consoled for it, unless it should appear that this crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others." Stowe's grief over the death of her child was weaponized against the "peculiar institution" of slavery, as Stowe took aim at the separation of families that slavery produced.

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This serious message is lightened by Stowe’s use of humor. In Krakow, the novel’s comic scenes did not hold up well in the glare of the power relations that underlie ethnic jokes. When I was growing up in a Massachusetts community that had a French church, an Italian church, and a Polish church, I heard many ethnic jokes about each group. My Polish students admitted to me that there are plenty of jokes Europeans tell about clueless “ugly” Americans (and I heard a few). Stowe’s conspiratorial elbowing of her white middle-class readers and chuckling at the expense of uneducated black slaves appeared in Krakow in an unflattering new light. Teaching the book in Poland made me see more clearly the ways the book had so discomfited my American student.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was translated into dozens of languages and is said to have inspired a yearning and a quest for freedom in countries where the oppressed hungered to throw off their own yokes. In the nineteenth-century United States, much of what Stowe accomplished in the novel was both radical and beneficial, and I still believe the book should be read and taught. Viewing it through the lens of our own time and culture, as well as through the history of twentieth-century atrocities, adds a valuable dimension. Our narrow constructions of community dissolve when we are transported outside of

our own borders. We gain fresh insights into things we think we already know well and learn to see them anew.

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*Additional Readings*

*Davis, Tracy C. and Stefka Mihaylova, eds. Uncle Tom’s Cabins: The Transnational History of America’s Most Mutable Book. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018 (See especially Katarzyna Jakubiak’s “The Divided Poland: Religion, Race, and the Cold War Politics in the Rozmaitości Theater’s Production of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Krakow in 1961).*

*Drescher, Seymour. Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.*

*Rubenstein, Richard L. The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.*

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**NANCY LUSIGNAN SCHULTZ** (Salem State University) is a professor of English at Salem State who studies the intersection of literature, history, and religion. She is a graduate of the College of the Holy Cross and Boston College, and is the author of *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834 and Transatlantic Conversations: Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Encounters with Italy and the Atlantic World.*

A diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*, loaded to capacity with 454 people bound for the Atlantic slave trade. Photo from the Library of Congress.