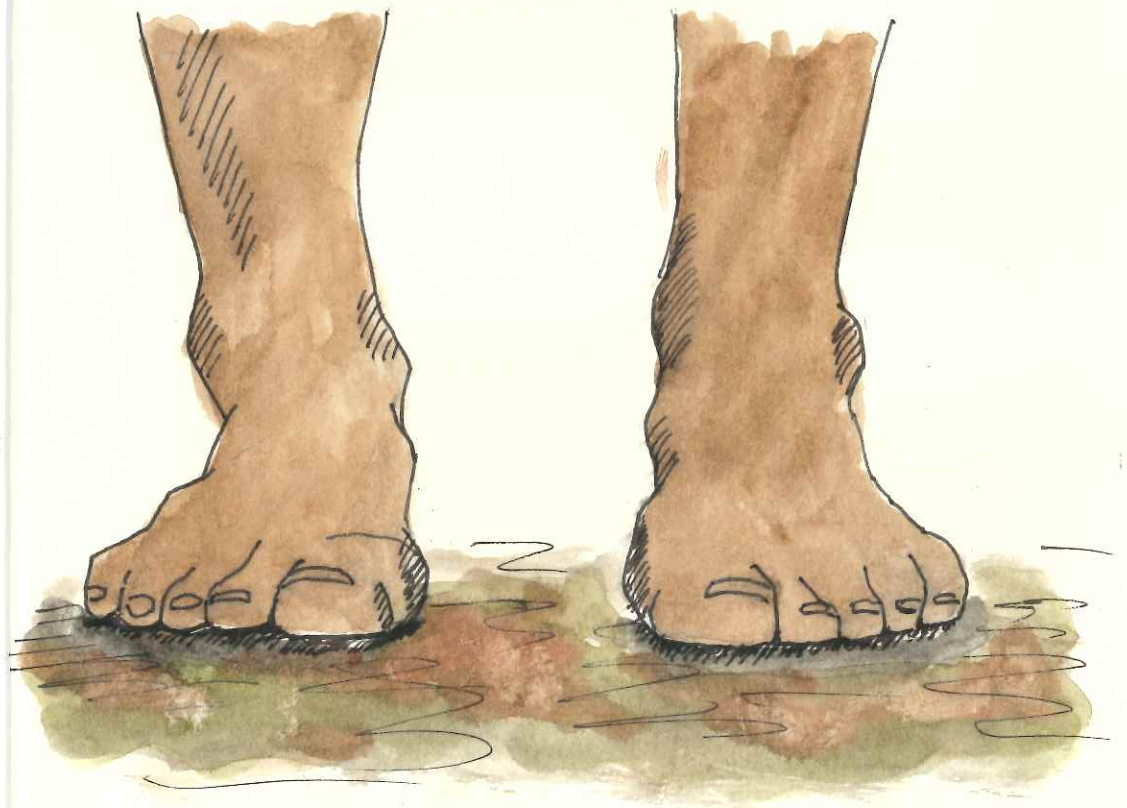


SONS OF

UNCLE TOM



PREFACE

In formulating a response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and the African-American literature that followed in its wake, we chose to create a poetic dialogue employing stylistic and ideological elements expressed by several authors in the works we read for this course in order to confront the question "What should a black man be?" The authors chosen - Stowe, Douglass, Johnson, Wright, Himes, and Baraka, - each provide different models of and/or cautionary tales about the male black experience in America through various time periods, and we have sought to create a collage of those experiences through this dialogue.

We chose poetry as our format because it is a concise form that still allows for intense impact, and it allowed us to emulate each of the authors' voices in a contained amount of space. For Stowe, we chose rhyming couplets to connote her romantic/sentimentalist style. Douglass' poems come in the form of modified Petrarchan sonnets, and Johnson's are brief doubles, as these complicated, sophisticated forms reinforce the premium these two men place on classical education in their texts. Wright and Baraka, both poets in their own right, are represented in free verse, with direct allusions to their own poems woven throughout. Himes' sections are also in free verse, but each has at least one line with internal rhyme to give it a certain punch, as Himes' The Third Generation seems to have a violent incident around every corner that stops the reader short.

We wanted to put all of these authors in dialogue with each other not only to represent answers to our question across the chronological and stylistic canon but also to, more specifically, give Stowe a second chance to express her voice, bringing the course full-circle. Not only can the other authors respond to her, as they did in their original texts, but she can also respond to them, literalizing our overall goal in this course: to see the interaction between various authors in representing black life in literature.

We opted to create a small book as our overall format because, in addition to being an opportunity for creative expression, it allows the dialogue to unfold as one united text and to contain visual markers to enhance the reader's experience of the poems. Whether we answer this question adequately given our interpretations of these authors' ideas and messages is up to the reader to determine.



STOWE: There once was a man who knew nothing but good
Who had a wee cabin in the Kentucky wood
Simple and humble and pious and kind,
A more loyal slave you never could find.

DOUGLASS: You're yet to mention he's most like the child
Not like my men, who are strong and courageous
To see them as young girls would be outrageous
They are not weak, nor vuln'erable, nor mild.
Your Tom knows not to read, nor how to write
My men read hist'ry, poems, and great prose
Their names you'll find among the great heroes
Known for their minds and for their lasting might.
My men resist, with weapons and with wit
They guide each other to emancipation
It may bring pain and sacrifice and grit
To bring white masters to final damnation
Yet in no case will my brave men submit -
Their bravery will be their reputation.

STOWE: Uncle Tom is one hero, one of many I wrote
Of the hero George Harris you ought to take note
He is noble, well-spoken, on himself he relies,
And to prove it, he says, "I'll be free, or I'll die!"





Johnson: The greatest black men are the brightest of bright
like the ones of whom Douglass sang praise
The best are the ones fit to speak to great crowds
The black race they shall represent.

Take Shiny, for instance, a natural orator
Who left a whole crowd in sheer awe
And inspired Ex-Colored Man to stand for his race,
To be one of the top ten percent.

While Ex-colored Man failed in his mission
(He chose whiteness - his ultimate flaw),
Shiny never did cease to amaze
With his drive and his cool temperament.

An intellectual, true black bourgeois
The black race Shiny's sure to upraise.

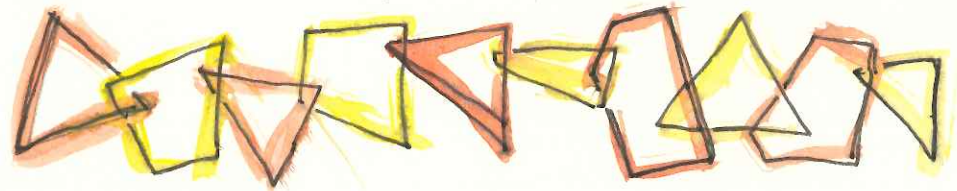
STOWE Yes, perhaps Shiny's noble, and fit to uplift,
His voice and intelligence his God-given gift,
But to serve just his people, and not the Lord too
Is to do only half of what a black man should do.



DOUGLASS: A black man should be pious, as you say
But in a different church he seeks his prayer
He finds God in the woods, in open air
It's there he's free to worship and to pray.
The white man's church provides no consolation
For pain that comes from chains and whips
and scars
The black man turns instead up to the stars
Should nature be his haven in this nation.
Yet piety comes not at the expense
Of independence and deep self-reliance
The black man must not lose his one defense:
Himself. He must not fall into compliance.
To sacrifice for wife and child, hence,
Would be a counterproductive alliance.

STOWE: Family ties are the ties that bind;
A stronger devotion you rarely will find.
Recall Master George, who knelt at Tom's bed,
And remained by his side, till at last, he lay dead.

Wright: Family ties are ties of blood and bone -
The ones who own your heart and not
your labor, not your soul -
Thrusting themselves between you and
the world.
A strong man shoots first and thinks
later to protect the ones he loves.



HIMES:



And a weak one lets his wife direct his life,
His mother smother him and break his spirit,
Trampling the first dreams of his youth
Beneath the crushing wheel of ruthless
expectation.

STOWE:

Oh, but a mother's tender love heals all!
She stems the tide of tears, lets not one fall
When her dear child suffers the world's woes.
From her sage truth his strength and
knowledge grows.

Baraka: Mothers, lovers: liars - liars lie through
lipsticked teeth -

It helps them control the world.

It must be the devil, it must be the devil,
whispering in those deafening tones
That threaten to drown out your voice with
her slithering words.

A black man issues forth black power -
calls his fellow men to fight,
To avenge their yester-pain with fists held high
And cast out Eve who, with her bloody smile,
would do her level best
To bring him to his knees.

Wright: These "fellow men" will watch a lynch mob cart
you to your pyre,

Leave you in a scattering of bones along the ground
Like so many frail leaves crushed in October's
slow decay.

The only man a black man can rely on is himself,
And even then, his hope for life is frail as those
crushed leaves.

A bullet through white skin sets dogs to barking
and torches aflame;

A bullet through black skin sets tears to
running, but black feet stand still.

HIMES:

A fatal numbness - that's what black skin is,
Numb the pain and gain
A blindness sure to ease what worries gnaw
at you,
Whiskey filling in the holes
Chewed in your soul by your own gnashing teeth.

Bite the rag and let the morphine take,
And drive so fast your windshield blurs
And color fades to gray.

STOWE:

Perhaps there is nothing a black man must be
You all deem him doomed by a harsh history
Whose long fingers reach into the present and choke
Any progress, success; it's all ashes and smoke.

When I first began writing, things seemed bleak
indeed -

Men and women, in chains, each forced daily to bleed
So the country could thrive on the work of their
hands,

The sweat of their brow at their owner's commands.

Perhaps in my home far away from plantations,
I failed to take stock of the whole situation.
I knew all my facts, but perhaps could not see
How narrow my renderings of black men
could be.

But I picked up my pen to do what I thought
right,

As did these great men with their literary might.
Perhaps the choice picture of an ideal black man
Is a man with a voice and a pen in his hand:
Writing his story, his truth, his life of everyday,
For not all black men live, breathe, think
the same way.

BY NATALIE EDWARDS + IVY ELGARTEN