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Debra J. Rosenthal

Staging *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Tehran

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in late August 2005, it became one of the five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States and resulted in the country's costliest natural disaster in terms of property damage, not to mention human lives. While political response to the hurricane stalled and largely failed the people hit hardest, aesthetic response to the disaster has been continuous, impassioned, and highly critical of the U.S. government's multiple failures and of preexisting structural inequities in American society. The decade following Katrina produced many American literary works informed by the devastation: Douglas Brinkley's *The Great Deluge* (2009), Dave Egger's *Zeitoun* (2009), Dan Baum's *Nine Lives* (2009), Josh Neufeld's *AD: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2009), Mat Johnson and Simon Gane's *Dark Rain* (2010), and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011). Photographer Jane Fulton Alt documented the storm flood's destruction in her book *Look and Leave* (2009). Filmmakers also interpreted the brutality of the hurricane and its human costs, in films such as Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and *If God Is Willing and the Creek Don't Rise* (2010), Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's *Trouble the Water* (2008), PBS's *Fats Domino: Walkin' Back to New Orleans* (2008), and Werner Herzog's *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009). Innumerable visual, musical, and conceptual artists also have used their talents to retell and respond to Katrina and its aftermath.¹

The wake of the hurricane's floodwaters reaches beyond the coasts of the United States: artists abroad also claim interpretive rights to the tragedy. When renowned Iranian playwright, director, and puppeteer Behrooz

Gharibpour watched televised images of Katrina's devastation of New Orleans from his home in Tehran, he felt called to make a theatrical and activist response to what he rightly saw as the disproportionate misfortunes that fell on black Americans. As an artist from a culture far different from the one in which Katrina occurred, Gharibpour connected the catastrophic natural disaster to a classic American novel that thematizes slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He adapted Munir Jazani's 1956 Farsi translation of the novel into a script and then staged the play at the Bahman Cultural Arts Center in Tehran in 2008. Since Gharibpour's theatrical production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was motivated by Hurricane Katrina, it addresses issues of social inequity made visible as the winds hit and the waters rose.² The present essay is based on a DVD recording of one of these performances.³

Given the historical political antagonism between Iran and the United States, one might wonder what Iranian officials think of fiction produced by the West, as well as whether the literary output of liberal democracies would be welcome in an Islamic state that still has a very active and prominent censor. Most important for the concerns of this essay is that Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the second and current Supreme Leader of Iran and a Shia cleric, advocates reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He recommended the novel to high-level state managers in 2002 because it details the reality of U.S. history: "Isn't this the government that massacred the original native inhabitants of the land of America? That wiped out the American Indians? Wasn't it this system and its agents who seized millions of Africans from their houses and carried them off into slavery and kidnapped their young sons and daughters to become slaves and inflicted on them for long years the most severe tragedies? Today, one of the most tragic works of art is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. . . . This book still lives after almost 200 years."⁴ Khamenei, an official spokesman of Iranian governmental approval, highly recommends both Stowe's novel and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* for their ability to support negative interpretations of American and French history. Many U.S. news sites quote Khamenei as saying, "In my opinion, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is the best novel that has ever been written in history. I have not read all the novels written throughout history, no doubt, but I have read many. [. . .] *Les Misérables* is a miracle in the world of novel writing. I have said over and over again, go read *Les Misérables* at once. This *Les Misérables* is a book of sociology, a book of history, a book of criticism, a divine book, a book of love and feeling." Since Khamenei believes that novels allow him to understand what life in the West is really like, he recommends that Iranians

turn toward the United States and "read the novels of some authors with leftist tendencies, such as Howard Fast," and that they read "the famous book *The Grapes of Wrath*, written by John Steinbeck, [. . .] and see what it says about the situation of the left and how the capitalists of the so-called center of democracy treated them."⁵ In other words, Khamenei believes that Fast and Steinbeck usefully expose the ill treatment of civilians at the hands of American capitalists.

My discussion of this recent Tehran performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will argue that although Iranian government officials emphasize an anti-American interpretation of the novel, playwright and director Behrooz Gharibpour manages to avoid supporting the regime's anti-Americanism, by stressing Stowe's universal themes of suffering and injustice. The Iranian production could be said to perpetuate anti-American propaganda, but it does so only by dramatizing Stowe's own criticism of certain aspects of American culture, such as flesh mongering, the separation of families, religious hypocrisy, and alcoholic depravity. The play demonstrates the "fundamental importance of translation studies as a shaping force in literary history,"⁶ since it does not limit itself to anti-Americanism; rather, the heart of the show agitates against all forms of discrimination and disenfranchisement.

As an example of a Middle Eastern translation of canonical American literature, Gharibpour's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performs many levels of interpretation: the translation from English into Farsi, the translation of a novel into a play,⁷ and the translation of an antebellum American context into a contemporary Iranian milieu.⁸ Intergeneric transpositions can be very vexing to evaluate; they are susceptible to charges of unfaithfulness or disloyalty to the original text and generic form. A comparison of this nineteenth-century novel by an American Christian woman and this twenty-first-century play by an Iranian Muslim man reveals much about cultural and literary adaptations. This essay is concerned with textual transmission and, in the words of Bassnett and Damrosch, the ways "texts move across cultures" and "the transformations those texts undergo in the process of movement."⁹ Artists have always had to maintain a tricky equilibrium when elucidating or commenting on personal hardship. How can art contribute to understanding, dialogue, and social transformation without aestheticizing suffering? How can art represent tragedy without co-opting someone else's heartbreak or reaping benefits from another's pain? Such a balance can be especially complicated to pull off when addressing problems in a different country.¹⁰

The official Iranian state censor that proscribes theatrical events also enforces a strict educational map for its young citizens. According to a report of the Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), *Iranian Textbooks: Content and Context*, "The textbooks of the Islamic Republic of Iran have changed since 1979. There is a movement to make the textbooks compatible with the post-Revolution political system, which is controlled by Islamic clerics. Through textbooks, Iran hopes to transform school children into devout Muslim citizens with little regard for the world beyond Iran. The children of Iran are not learning as much as they could be about international standards of human rights as envisioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations conventions on civil, political, social and economic rights."¹¹ The Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP), a nonprofit organization that examines textbooks and school curricula particularly in the Middle East, also surveyed numerous Iranian textbooks and concluded that "a massive effort is made to portray the West, with America at its head, as the incarnation of evil, and thus make it the object of the school students' hatred as a prerequisite for their spiritual mobilization for the global war with it." Schoolbooks also accuse "the Great Satan" (as the United States is called) of mistreating African Americans "while falsely using the issue of human rights against other governments—Iran, for example."¹² This constant demonization of the West is often referred to as "Westoxication."¹³ Evidently, even in university classes today, "spies, some self-appointed and others professional, sit in on lectures and in classrooms, making sure that nothing is said that violates the official line."¹⁴

According to Iranian scholars Shamschiri and Zekavat, the Iranian world literature syllabus "is slim," and "its inclusion follows a systematic procedure in line with State ideological and doctrinal principles." A short extract of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is included in Persian textbooks so that young students will have an exposure to the novel as an example of world literature. Shamschiri and Zekavat's study of literature anthologies used in Iranian high schools points out that most literary extracts are not accompanied by explanatory contextual information, because the "default pre-supposition" of the Iranian education ministry is that "a text could be understood apart from the (broad) context in which it was produced."¹⁵ As a very rare exception, however, one textbook anthology's extract of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

includes background information. According to Shamshiri and Zekavat, "The short note introducing this book insists on the dark side of antebellum American history. Although this knowledge is necessary to understand *Uncle Tom*, background information is needed elsewhere where it is never offered. And this might lead one to think that this is a deliberate attempt to sketch a dark picture of the Iranian regime's alleged enemy." The researchers of the study reveal that the decision to have the textbooks for high schools include explanatory cultural information about Stowe's novel is due to "ideological doctrines rather than informative illustration."¹⁶ In Iran, they conclude, "globalization and cultural negotiation are (deliberately) mistaken for cultural war (and manipulated for political ends)."¹⁷

Since the only productions about American culture that Iranian censors allow on stage are works that fault U.S. culture and politics, it is safe to say that there can be no theatrical productions in Iran that "serve as promotion or advertisement for American culture." For example, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* passes the Iranian censors because it criticizes capitalism. Gharibpour states, "From the point of view of our cultural officials, these works serve to show how the U.S. is no paradise, and that it suffers from poverty, conflict, and opposition. So they [the Iranian censorship ministers] approve of such works going on stage to show that Americans themselves are critical of their country and by doing so, advance their own [Iranian officials'] political agenda."¹⁸

Khamenei's interpretation of the ideological basis behind *Uncle Tom's Cabin* might differ profoundly from that of a Western reader, and it is fascinating that Stowe's work does indeed still "live" (as Khamenei says) in surprising ways almost two centuries later. If Iranians themselves wanted to follow their Supreme Leader's recommendation, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is available in a translation from the 1950s by Mohammad Ali Khalili, Monir Mehran, and Mohsen Soleimani. According to scholar Behnman Mirzabazadeh Fomeshi, an abridged version of the novel was created by Mostafa Jamshidi, and a 1909 film version starring Julia Swayne Gordon and Ralph Ince was dubbed into Farsi. According to Gharibpour, the 1956 translation was made by Munir Jazani, who did not have much experience translating but felt so moved by the novel that she undertook the task.¹⁹ Scholars living and writing in Iran publish on the novel, as evidenced by the work of Ghasemi and Fomeshi. Thus, according to Fomeshi, Stowe's novel "is a popular work in Iran, thanks to the Islamic anti-American policy makers."²⁰

BEHROOZ GHARIBPOUR

Born in 1950, Behrooz Gharibpour is a playwright and the managing director of the Iranian Artists Forum. Gharibpour was living and studying in Italy when the Iranian Revolution of 1979 overthrew the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, and installed in his place the Ayatollah Khomeini. According to the biography on his website, Gharibpour felt compelled to return home from Europe in the aftermath of the revolution.²¹ Around the same time, writer and professor Azar Nafisi, well known for her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, similarly returned from the United States to Tehran. However, she was soon fired from her teaching position at the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil (she eventually left Tehran in 1997). A prolific writer, producer, and advocate for the theater, Gharibpour is the founder of the Children's Theater in Tehran, the Bahman Cultural Center, the Iranian Artists Forum, and the Marionette Opera House. He has staged, among other productions, the *Rostam and Sohrab Puppet Opera*, *2342 Bad Days*, and the *Qajar-Style Puppet Show*. Many of his plays have appeared at international theater festivals.²² Although Iranian-themed productions remain Gharibpour's specialty, he also adapted *Macbeth* as a puppet show and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* for the Iranian stage.²³ Tehran has a vital theater scene, with over forty active performance halls, including the largest theater in the Middle East.²⁴

According to Gharibpour, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the oldest American novels to have been translated into Farsi. Iranians of his generation studied the American Civil War and Abraham Lincoln as well. Gharibpour humorously points out that neighboring Afghans would watch American films dubbed into Farsi, which "led many Afghans to believe that Americans actually spoke Farsi. So there was a market for dubbed American films in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini, the author of *The Kite Runner*, mentions that he used to think John Wayne spoke Farsi." Gharibpour speculates that through the popularity of dubbed Farsi films, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has made its way even further east. Gharibpour muses that "Eastern civilizations, whether because of our legends and mythology or folklore, have always been battling oppression and people have been drawn to such stories. Afghans and Tajiks are no exception to this rule, so *Uncle Tom's Cabin* must certainly be available in these countries too."²⁵ In other words, because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* addresses the plight of

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the downtrodden and oppressed, especially at the hands of capitalists, the novel has found a vast appreciative audience way beyond the bounds of the United States.²⁶

Gharibpour first encountered the novel in his late teens and then saw a translated German movie version. He felt that the character of Tom was not very attractive to Iranians, because Tom "concedes to every trouble and hardship." According to Gharibpour, "Iranians are very much influenced by mythological and hero-stories and so such a story and character like Uncle Tom is bound to fail in Iran." A friend in the United States sent Gharibpour a script of a dramatic version. Gharibpour attempted a literal translation but realized that it did not have enough of a dramatic impact for a theatrical hit. He understood that the novel had an enormous impact on the American Civil War, but since Iranians had limited experience with blacks or with slavery, the story might not seem relevant to them.

Stowe's novel continued to haunt Gharibpour, and he eventually devoted his artistry to bringing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a large stage venue. Because of the age difference in his actors, there were varying levels of familiarity with Stowe's work: "The professional actors [. . .] by virtue of their age were expected to have seen the film and have read the book, and then there were also younger students of cinema and theater who were cast who might have been less familiar with it. More or less all of them knew of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but of course in all my works, I try to assign a reading list comprised of the novel, my script, as well as my notes, opinions, and research on the piece, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was no exception." According to University of Tehran professor and award-winning playwright Naghmeh Samini, the story line is better known among the older generation, especially among those with left-leaning politics before the Iranian Revolution; the novel does not resonate among young people, since the Iranian government favors it as anti-American propaganda.²⁷

A longtime advocate of theater for both its aesthetic and political expression, Gharibpour is committed to expanding the stage beyond intellectual circles in order to include the general public. His belief that intellectuals might be apathetic toward his productions of *Les Misérables* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* parallels some current aesthetics in the United States that cast Stowe as sentimental and middlebrow. A play based on Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* was considered more intellectual and thus was favored more by the upper classes. Yet *Les Misérables* was very well received and ran for more than seven months. Some resisted a staging of Hugo's novel, ac-

ording to Gharibpour, because he crafted it not long after Iran's eight-year-long war with Iraq. Many worried that war exhaustion would drive away audiences. This fear of desensitization led the playwright and director "to put all my energy into the war scenes to make them as real as possible, and so the scenes with the street battles were able to leave an amazing mark on the audience. I was very happy when I would see a member of the audience weeping. It was similar with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: the general public, who are usually less judgmental and less likely to filter their sentiments, would often react with tears to the scenes where the slaves were flogged, or when they saw Uncle Tom or his family in misery."²⁸ Gharibpour believes that moving the audience to visible emotion is a forceful way to guide and measure their investment in the play's story and message.

IRANIAN "CO-OWNERSHIP" OF *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

Behrooz Gharibpour's Tehran staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* certainly loosens up Stowe's novel and renews its life in a new context. Caryl Emerson discusses Bakhtin's distinction between "canonization" and "re-accentuation": the first merits circumspection because it "hardens literary images in place and prevents free growth," and "we should welcome" the second because it "loosens up literary images and guarantees them a long life by embedding them in new contexts."²⁹ Bakhtin refers to such generic boundary crossings as transpositions or intergeneric shifts. According to Emerson, Bakhtin theorizes that one existing method of translation aims to "eliminate all traces of cultural space or time elapsed between the original and his [the translator's] version of it." However, Bakhtin finds more value in a less ossified form of translation, one that is more of a "free imitation" and that "we value precisely because we are asked to be conscious of co-ownership."³⁰

I find the term *co-ownership* useful here because Gharibpour has become a co-author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by repurposing and adapting the story line to a Persian context. The adaptation of the novel is a fascinating entity of its own that differs from the original; Stowe and Gharibpour have become co-authors of a new text that resonates both with antebellum American themes and twenty-first-century Iranians. Emerson continues her argument about co-ownership or co-authorship by claiming that "transposing a theme might in fact be the most vigorous and autonomous commentary possible on another's work of art. It is the one category of 'translation' which does not hide co-authorship, but rather emphasizes it. . . . Both sides of the

boundary must be kept simultaneously in view: two languages, two media, two genres, and two voices.³¹ Thus, reading Gharibpour through Emerson, the Persian stage version and Stowe's original novel converse across centuries, national boundaries, languages, and genres to co-author a new aesthetic experience. If we are familiar with Stowe's novel, we can keep both sides of the boundaries in view when watching Gharibpour's play.

Some argue that an original version may hold a privileged status in the view of the reader or audience. If we know the adapted work, there will be constant oscillation between it and the new adaptation we are experiencing. Yet some read or view the original only after seeing the adaptation, which challenges notions of the authority of priority; such readers or viewers therefore would not experience the adaptation as an adaptation but would instead feel the oscillation in reverse.³² For U.S. readers who know Stowe's novel, viewing Gharibpour's staged version is a fascinating palimpsest where we identify elements of the original novel but constantly are dazzled as we view the adaptation as an autonomous work. For Western viewers, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes denaturalized (an American story in Iran) and then renaturalized (an Iranian story about an American story). While there are innumerable points of entry in a discussion of Gharibpour's theatrical adaptation of Stowe's novel, I want to draw attention to six: his stage setting, the representation of drinking alcohol, women's dress, a church scene, the famous scene between Tom and Eva, and the ending.

THE STAGING OF GHARIBPOUR'S *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

Gharibpour's gorgeous stage setting is designed to evoke the antebellum American South. The theater stage does not have a curtain but is encircled by railroad tracks and bales of cotton, to keep slavery's commercial and capitalistic underpinnings in the audience's mind. At various times throughout the performance, actors appear silently picking cotton in the background. For Tehran audience members unfamiliar with the United States and its various regions, the cotton bales, railroad tracks, Southern costumes, and some architectural details work together to create a sense of the antebellum South.

Gharibpour scripted several scenes of heavy drinking and drunken revelry in his play, knowing that his audience would be comprised of non-drinking Muslims. Official Iranian state censors approved of these scripted scenes of depraved drinking, because such moments demonstrate the ills

of alcohol and reinforce Islam's disapproval of drink. According to Gharibpour, "The censorship authorities actually have no problem with drinking being associated with a person turning into an evil and bloodthirsty individual! They do, however, find it problematic if the person drinks and becomes kind and positively affected; then they would probably censor it. Having said this, I think the novel, too, implies such a negative association [between alcohol and morality]."³³ In one tavern scene in the play, a young slave girl entertains the white slave owners with what can be termed a racialized "pickaninny" dance. One slave dealer wears a red wig to mark him as distinctly white. The girl receives fruit as a reward for amusing the men, and the slave traders seal their market transaction with a drink. To convince Legree to treat Tom well, Cassie serves Legree many drinks and acts sexually interested in him. Stage directions in Gharibpour's play read, "Cassie is wearing clean clothes and a lot of makeup and is moving flirtatiously in front of Legree, who is drunk with the drinks that Cassie serves him."³⁴ In another tavern scene, bottles of alcohol are prominently displayed, and barrels line the front of a bar. Festive dancing occurs, as if drink inspires goodwill, but the scene quickly changes to that of a slave auction. The effect is that the jollity of drinking closely elides into the horrors of flesh mongering, and Iranian state censors approved of such a depraved scene of American history. American temperance drama of the 1840s similarly used staged scenes of inebriation to advocate for sobriety and a temperate lifestyle.³⁵

Gharibpour faced an interesting challenge: in some scenes, the female actors need to represent sexually "available" slave women, yet law and custom dictate that actresses must conform to modest Muslim dress codes. To finesse this problem of modest dress when needing to suggest immodesty, Gharibpour crafted the play so that most scenes with women take place outdoors. When indoors, Muslim women tend to relax their dress code, and female characters in scenes staged in private interior settings would be allowed to dress less modestly. Outdoor scenes provide an excuse for the actors to dress modestly in accordance with state and religious law and thereby avoid offending the audience. Although Talajooy argues that women rarely "appear on stage to resist on-stage and off-stage control" in post-revolutionary Iranian theater,³⁶ Gharibpour claims that women have the right to speak out as powerful orators. Thus they speak their minds in his play.

Although no part of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* occurs inside a religious institution, Gharibpour felt that staging a scene inside one would lend

authority to his vision. In one scene in particular, a large cross faces the audience, and the actors sit in pews with their backs to the theatergoers, as if the actors have commandeered the front rows. The effect is that both audience and actors all find themselves, as Muslims, attending worship together in front of a large cross. Gharibpour argues, "I think I'm simply dramatizing a theme that Stowe is alluding to in her book. I simply try to make these points more explicit and to give them a more dramatic flair. She clearly raises this issue of multiple interpretations that can be made from the Bible or any sacred text, but I thought that it would be much more dramatic if this were presented in the context of an actual church, with priests debating the issue. I added the church scene so that I could contrast the differences between various interpretations of the Bible and make them even more visible."³⁷

Gharibpour's translation of Stowe's Protestant Christianity to his Muslim audience makes heavy use of Catholic symbols to signify Christianity in general. For example, George crosses himself before fleeing, even though Stowe does not suggest that George is Catholic. In his recasting of Stowe's scenes in a slave market and a hotel and her scene where Eliza is being sold, Gharibpour tries to convey how people interpret religion and sacred texts for self-serving purposes. In his scripted scene, a priest "strongly and fanatically argues that the Bible endorses slavery, whereas in fact he is only voicing the opinion of a particular class and sector in society. I similarly see a parallel between him and people in our own society who view Islam in one way which contrasts with how I view it." According to Gharibpour, some critics complained that his play was tantamount to advertising for Christianity. He maintains that such critics only hold a fanatical view; they are incapable of seeing nuance. As an example, Gharibpour points to the scene where he has Uncle Tom carry his own cross (fig. 22): "In a Muslim country like ours, the purpose of such a scene is to convey a metaphorical and dramatic meaning rather than a religious one. I was trying to say that this is a 'heavy burden' that Uncle Tom has to carry. It is 'suffering without end' that Uncle Tom or the deprived and the poor or any other group whose rights have been violated has to carry."³⁸ Gharibpour's plays clearly passed through the filters of the censorship ministry, so any pro-Christian meaning likely evaded government officials.

Theatergoers can also see a profound influence of Iranian folk artistry in Gharibpour's adaptation. In one scene, Gharibpour makes use of traditional shadow puppets: the famous scene between Tom and Eva dazzles

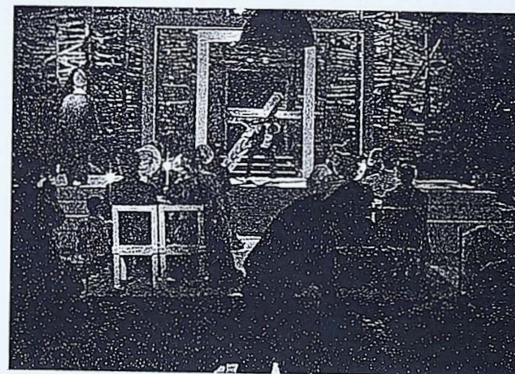


Fig. 22. Tom carrying the cross in Behrooz Gharibpour's play *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Bahman Cultural Arts Center, 2008. (Reproduced with permission of Behrooz Gharibpour.)

as the characters morph into shadow puppets on stage while they discuss good and evil, a theme long established in folk entertainment. This interpretation of the scene between Tom and Eva clearly draws on Iranian traditional marionette theater—so important to Persian culture—and thus elevates the scene to an almost legendary, transcendent level.³⁹ Puppets have inherited as important to Iranian tradition for centuries. For example, the eleventh-century poet Omar Khayam and the twelfth-century poet Nezami Ganjavi both make use of images of puppets to explore themes of fate and divinity.⁴⁰ In an essay, Massoudi outlines several historical periods and puppeteer practitioners. He concludes, "This brief literature survey has shown that puppetry has been part of Persian culture for a millennium and that puppetry . . . was performed from the Safavid period, through the Qajar era, and up to the Iranian present. The earliest references tell us little of the actual content but do show the philosophical importance of puppetry in Iran."⁴¹ Gharibpour included a puppet scene in his staging of a play about disenfranchisement for several reasons: "I hold the deep conviction that the discovery of puppetry has had as much of a transformative effect as the discovery of the wheel, and has been at least as effective in helping to reduce the distances and the communicational rifts between us. This is perhaps because even a deeply philosophical puppet play has the ability to awaken an element of childhood in the audiences' consciousness, with which they are emancipated from the illusions of age and time, and discover a fantastical world where objects made of wood and other inanimate materials come to life."⁴²

Understanding the shadow puppet scene in Gharibpour's production is

Fig. 23. The devil threatens Eva in Gharibpour's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Bahman Cultural Arts Center, 2008. (Reproduced with permission of Behrooz Gharibpour.)



challenging for a Western viewer who does not speak Farsi. Stage directions read,

In a corner of the backyard in Master St. Clare's house. Washed sheets are hanging on a clothesline and have made that place appropriate for performing a shadow play. Evangeline, with cardboard wings, is behind this curtain and her angelic shadow is seen. The other actor of this play is Uncle Tom. Black children of different ages and the rest of the slaves observe the play.

While this play-within-a-play is captivatingly beautiful and lyrical, the scene makes use of devil and angel images that cannot be understood without a familiarity with Iranian folk culture. It appears that Tom turns into a satanic figure (see fig. 23)—it can be uncomfortable for a North American viewer to see the black-as-devil metaphor concretized. The Tom-as-devil shadow figure even says, “I am the Devil and I made it so that the Whites enjoy the suffering and death of their kind, the tormenting of Blacks . . . cruelty . . . cruelty . . . I tell them to have cruelty as much as they can.”⁴³ But Gharibpour intended for the devil image to represent the monster of slavery; an Iranian audience would understand that Tom himself is not demonized but that he mutates into a messenger of the evil of enslavement.

The transformative powers of the shadow puppet tradition that morphs Eva and Tom into symbolic figures also transforms St. Clare: he is so moved by seeing Eva as a vision of an angel that he decides to liberate his slaves. After she becomes Eva again, St. Clare takes Eva's hand, returns with her

behind the curtain, and says, “Oh, little angel, Master St. Clare can also be an angel, and can be a devilish slave. Anyone can be one of these two things. God has created us to be either like himself, kind and fair and loving, or like the Devil, cruel and bloodthirsty and ruthless. I have learned from my little angel. . . . Next week I will give all the slaves their freedom papers.”⁴⁴ The spiritual conversion of St. Clare thus seems perfectly dramatized by tapping into the rich Persian tradition of shadow puppetry's ability to reveal human truths and longings.

One challenge in an intercultural adaptation is the cultural assumptions or baggage that might get inferred in the process of translation. A traditional story frequently dramatized in Iranian puppet shows is *Shah Salim*, the main character of which is Mobarak, Shah Salim's black slave. According to Massoudi, “there are two theories about historical roots of Mobarak: one lineage traces him to African origin, and the second sees him as a royal jester. . . . Because of Mobarak's black skin, some argue he comes from the era of the slave trade when some rich families purchased Africans. . . . Mobarak, like these black slaves, uses incorrect words and marred grammar.”⁴⁵ I wondered whether Iranian audiences of Gharibpour's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would recall the black slave Mobarak when they saw the devilish Tom in the shadow puppet scene. Since I do not have any familiarity with indigenous puppet theater, I must rely on other experts. Behnam Fomeshi corrected my linking of Tom in Gharibpour's puppet scene to Mobarak: “In Iranian society, a few theatergoers may know that Mobarak is a black African servant. For Iranian audiences he is not repressed, a slave, or an African. As far as I understand this issue, while watching a theatrical production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Iranian theatergoers would not think of Mobarak. A repressed African slave (Uncle Tom) never reminds Iranians of a bold servant who criticizes the rotten traditions of the Iranian society and pokes fun at those in power (such as Mobarak does).”⁴⁶ Gharibpour's shadow puppet scene featuring Tom and Eva thus draws from antiquity and resonates deeply with an Iranian audience, but it does not connect Tom to a famous black African servant from the traditional Iranian repertoire of marionette stories.⁴⁷

THE PLAY'S FIERY END

At the end of Gharibpour's play, Tom carries a large wooden cross, which a Western viewer would see as clearly linking Tom to a Christ figure and

Fig. 24. Mrs. Shelby collapses at the cross in Gharibpour's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Bahman Cultural Arts Center, 2008. (Reproduced with permission of Behrooz Gharibpour.)

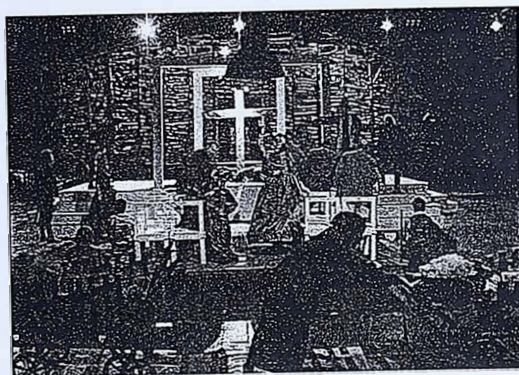


Fig. 25. Tom preaching in Gharibpour's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Bahman Cultural Arts Center, 2008. (Reproduced with permission of Behrooz Gharibpour.)



suggesting that Tom dies while suffering for the sins of society (see figs. 24 and 25). By titling chapter 40 "The Martyr," Stowe intended her readers to consider Tom in a salvific light. I am interested in this idea of martyrdom and what the image of a cross-bearing Tom might mean to a Shia Muslim. As explained above, Gharibpour means to metaphorically signal Tom's unbearable suffering. Shia Islam teaches that martyrdom is for believers who die for their religion. Tom is probably not a martyr in a Shia sense, but his martyr-like suffering due to discrimination would affect the humanity of a Tehran theatergoer. Such a misunderstanding of martyrdom might have occurred when Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt was invited to give a talk in Tehran; he perceived Iran to be a culture that celebrates and glorifies martyrdom. During his visit, he saw photographs of martyrs "along the

avenues, in traffic circles, on the sides of buildings, on the walls around the buildings, on overpasses and pedestrian bridges, everywhere. On the light poles, the martyrs' images were generally in twos, and the pairings, which may have been accidental, were sometimes striking: a teenager next to a hardened veteran, a raw recruit next to a beribboned high-ranking officer, a bearded fighter next to a sweet-faced young woman."⁴⁸

Greenblatt's perception of omnipresent messages of martyrdom is perhaps validated by the conclusions of a nongovernmental organization's study of Iranian textbooks: "The Social Teachings textbook for the fifth grade of primary school indicates that, 'Martyrdom is the highest degree of sacrifice. . . . The Persian Language and Literature textbook for the fifth grade of primary school also praises martyrdom and urges children to welcome it.'⁴⁹ The Persian textbook for language and literature for the first year of high school explains, "The literature of resistance is the literature that calls for resistance, shows the oppressors, marks the popular heroes and martyrs."⁵⁰ Thus it could be easy for a Westerner who views Gharibpour's transposition to think that there could be an overlap between Christian and Shia views of Tom's sacrificial death. Gharibpour points out that since Muslims do not support jihad, martyrdom, the Taliban, or Daesh, only a fanatical branch might support this interpretation. Shiraz scholar Fomeshi writes,

I, myself, may consider Tom's death martyrdom because he died for his beliefs. But, an Iranian audience, in general, doesn't think so. For those Muslims you are talking about martyrdom belongs to just some narrow religious contexts. For instance Iranians consider those killed in Karbala, or Iran-Iraq war, to be martyrs. In the latter case those killed are closely associated (by the government) to the Karbala story in order to be considered martyrs. And in all those cases religion plays an important role (by religion I mean Shia Islam). Therefore, to them Uncle Tom is not a martyr because he has nothing to do with Shia beliefs.⁵¹

Interestingly, Gharibpour has the slave Cassie kill Simon Legree by shooting him with a gun. Cassie's verbal anger in Stowe's original novel translates to lethal violent action in this play, a move that American playwright Robert Alexander similarly makes in his play *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵² Gharibpour chose to make the play's ending mesmeric, fiery, trancelike, hypnotic, and insurrectionary. The play ends with an impressive staging that simulates an inferno wreaking revenge

on the depraved slave-owning system. The ending seems to suggest an uprising, an insurrection, or violence, as slaves run around the stage setting numerous cotton bales on fire. The flames and the rhythmic swaying of a flag bearing the word "Freedom" effuse anger and violence.⁵³

Of course, Stowe's final chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* avoids such a scene of violence, though she ends her novel with a forceful fire-and-brimstone sermon. The last page of her novel reads, "But who may abide the day of his appearing? 'for that day shall burn as an oven.' [. . .] Not by combining together, to protect injustice and cruelty, and making a common capital of sin, is this Union to be saved,—but by repentance, justice and mercy; for, not surer is the eternal law by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than that stronger law, by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!" (456). Gharibpour's incendiary ending thus concretizes Stowe's intense passionate hatred of slavery and discrimination and brings home for Iranians the heated passion of Stowe's wrathful message. Gharibpour avers, "Stowe actually threw a small fire in the cotton storage that was America. . . . It is true that Stowe's language may have been mild and gentle but I think it's fair to say it started a war. Or at least she did have this deep conviction that such a world is not a humane world and that it must be burnt down."⁵⁴ The actors on Gharibpour's stage literally throw fire onto the onstage cotton bales, and the set is aflame with righteous anger and a call for justice.

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, TRANSLATION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Caryl Emerson asks, "On what grounds does a work enter a 'tradition,' and why are certain themes so resonant and so often reworked?"⁵⁵ Gharibpour might answer that his dramatic staging of Stowe's novel, inspired by a U.S. natural disaster, resonates with Iranian social issues of discrimination. His play demonstrates that oppressive patterns with long historical antecedents can be successfully translated from one culture to another. His *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be seen as an interpretation that does not address the specific plight of African Americans or even of slavery in general, because Iran has a very small African population in the south of the country and a limited history of slavery among the aristocracy.⁵⁶ According to Gharibpour, while some racism against darker Iranians persists, "'skin color' and 'slavery' do not have the same cultural or historical significance for an Iranian as they

do for an American."⁵⁷ His actors' skin tones vary, reflecting the typical range of Iranian complexions; social status is conveyed in the production by costume, not casting or makeup, with the exception of the actor who darkens his face to play Uncle Tom.

According to Iranian scholar Behnam Fomeshi, "Of course there is/has been violation of human rights in Iran. But, slavery is not one of those. 'Slavery' as practiced in Iran was too different from that of [the] U.S. There used to be masters and servants in Iran, and servants were definitely considered 'human.'"⁵⁸ In the early 1800s, both black and white slaves were traded in Iran, and anti-slavery legislation was ratified in 1929. Rather than issues of slavery, Gharibpour's play investigates larger concerns of disenfranchisement. Gharibpour asserts that he "zoomed in on the material within the novel that was relevant to the Iranian audience and sparked interest as well as questions in their minds."⁵⁹ For example, his introductory materials to the script open with an invocation for freedom: "Rise and unshackle the chains! What dreams man develops in his head!" The introduction reflects his interest in the worldwide problem of slavery and oppression, by discussing the Roman slave Spartacus; Lincoln's efforts at emancipation; the 1951 novel *Spartacus* by Howard Fast; Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novella addressing human trafficking, *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother*; and Frank Darabont's film featuring a black Christ figure, *The Green Mile*.⁶⁰

In Gharibpour's view, "One of the fundamental teachings of Islam is to ban racial discrimination and to view all people in the same light. This is perhaps because Islam has its roots in Arabic and more-or-less dark-skinned regions." To this end, Gharibpour shares a common concern with Stowe: to highlight the plight of the dispossessed and to "direct the emotions and thoughts of my audience." Gharibpour maintains, "If Stowe had been in Iran she would have become aware of a different kind of discrimination and would have likely written a different novel altogether. As an Iranian I was concerned more with this notion of discrimination rather than the issues of color and race per se."⁶¹

"In all of my works," Gharibpour explains, "I have been sensitive to oppression and the struggle against it, to violation of others' rights, to greed for power, or to any other means of violating the human conscience. So what is obvious in my works is that I stand side by side with Mrs. Stowe and express my stance against violations of others' rights in whatever form. I've tried to use these emotional elements to force my audience to think

and to take a humanistic stance towards whatever race or color. I think—and I say this with confidence and modesty—that the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I have written is characterized by a tangible respect for human rights, as well as a more palpable emotional impact on the audience.⁶² Gharibpour's Iranian staged version is proof of the continued life of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to Caryl Emerson, "derived texts should be taken seriously, not as threats or distortions of an original but as proof of the continued life of literary images."⁶³ Thus the ability of Iranians to make such profound meaning through this adaptation, despite the obvious ease with which the play could be used as a simple vehicle for anti-Americanism, demonstrates how powerfully Stowe's political novel was grounded in enduring observations of humanity's capacity for resilience and creative transformation in moments of extreme personal suffering. Gharibpour's twenty-first-century staged version of Stowe's nineteenth-century novel extends and amplifies Stowe's vision of justice across centuries, genres, continents, and languages.

Notes

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1. Hurricane Katrina brought attention to entrenched racism in the region, government corruption, and the failure of leaders to attend to the neediest. See Spike Lee's 2006 documentary film *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (Brooklyn, NY: 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks). For details on musical responses to Katrina, see Phil Dyess-Nugent, Marcus Gilmer, Will Harris, Jason Heller, Keith Phipps, and Scott Tobias, "After the Deluge: 29 Remarkable Works Inspired by Hurricane Katrina," *AV Club*, 22 August 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/article/after-the-deluge-29-remarkable-works-inspired-by-h-60684> (accessed 7 January 2017). For scholarly articles on the "cultural visualization" of Katrina, see "The Cultural Visualization of Hurricane Katrina," ed. Nicola Mann and Victoria Pass, special issue, *Invisible Culture* 16 (Spring 2011), https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_16/contents.html (accessed 7 January 2017).

2. In a not-quite-similar case, the Hollywood movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, directed by David Fincher (Hollywood: Paramount, 2008), transposes the Baltimore setting of F. Scott Fitzgerald's story to New Orleans, so that Katrina becomes a frame. While the Fitzgerald original obviously never had any hurricane connection, the movie's incorporation of the storm places it in the genre of artistic responses to Katrina.

3. My analysis is based on a DVD recording, shared by Behrooz Gharibpour, of a live performance of the 2008 staging of his script of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

4. Akbar Ganji, "Who Is Ali Khamenei? The Worldview of Iran's Supreme Leader," *Foreign Affairs*, October 2013, 24–48.

5. Margaret Eby, "Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Loves Victor Hugo," *New York Daily News*, 23 August 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/blogs/pageviews/ayatollah-ali-khamenei-loves-victor-hugo-blog-entry-1.1640940> (accessed 7 January 2017).

6. Susan Bassnett and David Damrosch, "Introduction: Translation Studies Meets World Literature," *Journal of World Literature* 1 (2016): 295–98.

7. Of course, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has appeared in dramatic form in English since 1852.

8. Although I do not know the extent to which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a topic of scholarly interest in Iran, at least two scholars from Shiraz University in Iran have published on the novel. See Parvin Ghasemi and Behnam Mirzababazadeh Formeshi, "Defusing the Controversy over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: A New Historical Approach," *CLA Journal* 55.4 (June 2012): 335–51.

9. Bassnett and Damrosch, 295.

10. On a personal note, my family and I were living in Oxford, England, when Hurricane Katrina hit; thus we watched images of the devastation through the eyes of the English. We felt so helpless and found it difficult, if not impossible, to answer their questions about social injustice in the United States.

11. SAIC, *Iranian Textbooks: Content and Context* (Maclean, VA: SAIC, 2007), 2, <http://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/irantext.pdf> (accessed 7 January 2017).

12. CMIP, *The Attitude to "the Other" and to Peace in Iranian School Books and Teachers' Guides* (CMIP, 2006), 305, <http://www.impact-se.org/docs/reports/Iran/Iran2006.pdf> (accessed 25 May 2015).

13. CMIP, 306.

14. Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare in Tehran," *New York Review of Books*, 2 April 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/04/02/shakespeare-in-tehran/> (accessed 7 January 2017).

15. Babak Shamshiri and Massih Zekavat, "World Literature in Iranian Persian Literature Textbooks," *Asian Journal of Education and e-Learning* 2.1 (February 2014): 24.

16. *Ibid.*, 26.

17. *Ibid.*, 27.

18. Behrooz Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Behnam Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi, personal e-mail, 17 March 2015.

21. Behrooz Gharibpour, "Biography," <http://behrouzgharibpour.com/contacts.aspx>. This information was confirmed by Behrooz Gharibpour via personal e-mail on 30 December 2016.

22. Some of this information is derived from the International Campaign for Human Rights newsletter of 25 July 2011 ("Raising Voices," pt. 2, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/07/raising-voices-part2-3/> [accessed 7 January 2017]), which greatly contradicts biographical information found on Gharibpour's personal website.

23. Gharibpour's publications are not translated into English. When Iranian scholars cite Gharibpour's scholarship, they cite, *Entering the World of Marionettes and Puppet*

Plays (Tehran: Intellectual Promotion Centre for Children and Adolescents Publications, 1981) and *Ostad Kheimeh Shab Bazi Miamoozad* [Master teaches *Kheimeh Shab Bazi*] (Tehran: Intellectual Promotion Centre for Children and Adolescents Publications, 1990).

24. Maryam Ala Amjadi, "The Modernity of a Live Tradition: Theater in Iran," *Tehran Times* 11388, 7 March 2012.

25. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

26. Gharibpour is not the only Iranian playwright interested in dramatizing U.S. tragedy: Mohammad Rahmanian (b. 1962) wrote the play *Cho's Manifest* (2009) about the Virginia Tech massacre. Several other plays by Rahmanian address non-Iranian subjects. He set his *A Play for You* (1994) during a coup in Bolivia. His play *Rooster* (2000) addresses the plight of an Afghan family during the Taliban reign. He takes up the topic of censorship under Josef Stalin's Russia in *The Swan Song of Chekhov* (2004), and he explores the world of English football in his 2005 play *Fans*.

27. Naghmeh Samini, personal e-mail, 21 August 2015.

28. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013. Some also resisted Gharibpour's staging of *Les Misérables* because the Tehran municipality invited him to turn a large unused slaughterhouse into the first and largest cultural center in Iran in the process. Since the space was located in the south of the city, where the more religiously conservative live, Gharibpour was criticized for attempting to introduce Western values to the devout.

29. Caryl Emerson, "Bakhtin and Intergeneric Shift: The Case of Boris Godunov," *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* 9.1 (1984): 145.

30. *Ibid.*, 146.

31. *Ibid.*, 147.

32. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xv.

33. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

34. Behrooz Gharibpour, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," trans. Roshi Ahmadian (unpublished script), 36; manuscript in the author's possession.

35. Amy Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 46–85; John Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

36. Saeed Talajooy, "Indigenous Performing Traditions in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Theater," *Iranian Studies* 44.4 (July 2011): 512.

37. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Jane Tompkins discusses how this scene between Eva and Tom in Stowe's novel reaches a transcendent level: "The scene I have been describing is a node within a network of allusion in which every character and event in the novel has a place. The narrative's rhetorical strength derives in part from the impression it gives of taking every kind of detail in the world into account, from the preparation of breakfast to the orders of the angels, and investing those details with a purpose and a meaning which are both immediately apprehensible and finally significant. The novel reaches out into the reader's world and colonizes it for its own eschatology: that is, it not only incorporates the homely particulars of 'Life among the Lowly' into its universal scheme, but it gives

them a power and a centrality in that scheme, thereby turning the socio-political order upside down" ("Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 139).

40. See Shiva Massoudi, "Kheimeh Shab Bazi: Iranian Traditional Marionette Theater," *Asian Theater Journal* 26.2 (Fall 2009) 262; Willem Floor, *History of the Theater in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2005), 63.

41. Massoudi, 264.

42. Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA), "International Message from Behrooz Gharibpour for the World Puppetry Day 2015," <https://unimadeutschland.wordpress.com/2015/09/11/international-message-from-behrooz-gharibpour-for-the-world-puppetry-day-2015/> (accessed 7 January 2017).

43. Behrooz Gharibpour, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, trans. Roshi Ahmadian, 21.

44. *Ibid.*, 22.

45. Massoudi, 271.

46. Behnam Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi, personal e-mail, 20 March 2015.

47. For information on Iranian blackface (which, again, would not inform Gharibpour's staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but is fascinating in its own right), see Talajooy, 505–9.

48. Greenblatt, 18.

49. SAIC, 6.

50. SAIC, 8–9.

51. Behnam Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi, personal e-mail, 22 March 2015.

52. For an analysis of the performativity of Cassy's verbal violence, see my essay "I've Only to Say the Word": *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Performative Speech," *Legacy* 27.2 (2010): 237–56, reprinted as a chapter in my book *Performatively Speaking: Speech and Action in Antebellum American Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

53. According to Gharibpour, most Tehran theatergoers would know enough English to read the word "Freedom" on the flag (personal e-mail, 4 October 2013).

54. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

55. Emerson, 159.

56. For information on Africans, slavery, and Iran, see Beeta Baghoolizadeh, "The Afro-Iranian Community: Beyond Haji Firuz Blackface, the Slave Trade, and Bandari Music," *Ajam Media Collective*, 20 June 2012, <http://ajammc.com/2012/06/20/the-afro-iranian-community-beyond-haji-firuz-blackface-slavery-bandari-music/>; Behnaz A. Mirzai, *Emancipation and Its Legacy in Iran: An Overview*, Cultural Interactions Created by the Slave Trade in the Arab-Muslim World (Paris: UNESCO, 2008) <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/dialogue/pdf/Emancipation%20Iran.pdf>; Niambi Cacchioli, *Fugitive Slaves, Asylum, and Manumission in Iran, 1851–1913*, Cultural Interactions Created by the Slave Trade in the Arab-Muslim World (Paris: UNESCO, 2008), <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/dialogue/pdf/Disputed%20Freedom.pdf> (all sites accessed 7 January 2017).

57. According to Baghoolizadeh in "The Afro-Iranian Community," "The neglect of Afro-Iranians by most Iranians stems from a number of factors, most of which stem from the Aryan myth. The Aryan myth effectively whitewashed Iran's history, leading many to believe that true Iranians are only light-skinned and that Iran never engaged in

slavery. Beyond this, the lack of Afro-Iranian presence in media further reinforces any preconceived notions that exist about Africans in Iran: that they simply do not exist. . . . Regardless of the reasons for the neglect, it is important to acknowledge the presence and history of the Afro-Iranian communities, not only for their sake, but with the intention of better confronting racist narratives, like the Aryan myth, that exclude so much of Iran's population."

58. Fomeshi, personal e-mail, 20 March 2015.

59. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

60. Behrooz Gharibpour, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, trans. Roshi Ahmadian, 3-5.

61. Gharibpour, personal e-mail, 4 October 2013.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Emerson, 160.