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“It is to a Great Extent, a *New Book*’: Josiah Henson, John Lobb and the challenges of white editorship of Black texts”

Abstract

Formerly enslaved African American Josiah Henson is well-known for his association with the character of Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Published in 1852, the literary phenomenon sold millions of copies throughout the nineteenth century, and also made a hero of Henson, who marketed his connection with the novel to great acclaim. However, Henson’s visit to Britain in 1876–1877, his revised edition of his narrative, and the accompanying book *The Young People’s Illustrated Edition of Uncle Tom’s Story of His Life* (1877) has received scant attention from scholars. This article will be the first to discuss *The Young People’s Edition* in detail, and how John Lobb, Henson’s benefactor, marketed Henson and his literary work, which demonstrated not only the struggles Black authors faced in a white supremacist environment, but also how activists like Henson managed to retain some sense of authorship over their work.

Key Words

Slavery; abolition; Josiah Henson; John Lobb; children’s literature; antislavery; slave narrative; Harriet Beecher Stowe; Uncle Tom; Black Atlantic.

“It is to a Great Extent, a *New Book*’: Josiah Henson, John Lobb and the challenges of white editorship of Black texts”

In 1877, the British journal editor John Lobb published *The Young People’s Illustrated Edition of Uncle Tom’s Story of His Life*, an abridged version of Josiah Henson’s revised slave narrative. Born enslaved in Maryland, Henson published the first edition of his narrative in 1849, which was used by Harriet Beecher Stowe to inform her infamous 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and in particular the character of “Tom.” Lobb wrote in the author’s preface to *The Young People’s Edition* that Henson’s recent visit to the British Isles, and his association with Tom, had led to much interest from “all sections of the community, from Her Majesty the Queen to the humblest of her subjects.” In response to the fanfare,

[...] many persons have expressed a wish to have the main facts of [Henson’s] strange eventful life presented in a form which would be more suitable to the young, and at the same time more directly calculated to impress its lessons of religion and morality on the young mind [...] It will be seen that the book is not merely an abridgment, or a condensation of the larger work, but is, to a great extent, *a new book*.¹

By identifying the volume as “*a new book*,” Lobb laid claim to the text of Henson’s revised slave narrative, and his testimony itself. He altered and manipulated the relationship between a white amanuensis and a Black author, and shaped the book for religious ends, rather than for the antislavery cause. Henson’s life afforded Lobb the perfect opportunity to teach juvenile audiences Christian forbearance and piety, which tapped into certain transatlantic white stereotypes of African American men as dutiful, cheerful and patient, characteristics uncoincidentally associated with Stowe’s “Uncle Tom.” In Lobb’s mind, and to his audience,

Henson and Uncle Tom merged into the same person, a blurring of fiction and reality that rested upon a white supremacist schema. Henson's lifework was a springboard from which Lobb could launch his own moral agenda, in which he omitted important chapters in Henson's life and added his own extensive annotations.

While the extent of Lobb's textual reframing is unusual, the move from antislavery to temperance narratives was not without precedent. In her novel *Clarence and Corinne* (published in 1890), Amelia E. Johnson directed audience attention towards a Sunday School readership and centred on alcoholism as a contemporary evil.² However, aside from Marcus Wood,³ scholars have largely ignored the significance of Lobb and Henson's *Young People's Illustrated Edition*, and this article will be the first to study the book in depth. I argue that he selectively chose incidents in which to add his own religious commentary, and removed graphic details of slavery so as not to offend his young audience. Events in Henson's life were repackaged, reframed and resold to a new audience eager to learn about the "real" Uncle Tom. Lobb's heavy editing hand cast aside events that had a lasting impact on Henson's physical and mental wellbeing, which illustrated the vast gap between white amanuensis and Black author, and the problematic nature of the former to hold sway over editorial decisions on Black texts. Robert Stepto has written about the "the former slave's ultimate lack of control" over their narratives, as a direct result of "audience and [abolitionist] authentication."⁴ As Stepto refers to, unlike a traditional amanuensis in the antebellum period who edited the testimony of formerly enslaved individuals and framed it to suit the antislavery cause and the transatlantic literary marketplace, Lobb reshaped the narrative in a postbellum environment to religiously instruct and guide the young.⁵ The "new book" would ultimately serve its primary focus of moral instruction: this was the *only* purpose such a work could perform, because slavery had ended and apparently, so had Henson's suffering.

Despite this, I argue that Henson's short introduction to the volume allowed him to maintain some form of authorship over the work, acting in a similar fashion to a frontispiece at the start of a slave narrative. He reminded his young audience (and by extension Lobb) of their white privilege and how the legacy of slavery lived on through pervasive racist discrimination, even in British territories such as Canada. Furthermore, Henson's testimony highlights his heroic masculinity, bravery and survival against all the odds, which continued to be central points within the book regardless of Lobb's attempts to frame them.

It is worth stating here that much debate exists surrounding Henson's association with Tom, and whether Stowe actually based the character on his life-story or not. While it is important to recognize how Stowe wanted to provide a sense of realism for her novel, and Henson's ability to manipulate the association, the central focus of my argument is not concerned with the veracity of the connection: rather, that Henson and Lobb exploited it for their own gain. For the purpose of this article, I do not make a judgment on whether the relationship is grounded in reality or not. Instead, I am interrogating the ways in which Henson and Lobb exploited the connection after the Civil War in specifically a British context.⁶

“Interspersed with goodly advice:” Transatlantic antislavery children's literature

Children's literature as a genre can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, as most books, texts or tracts read by children before this date were also used and read by adults. In 1744, John Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocketbook*, designed exclusively for children, and other publishers soon recognized the commercial promise of literature directly targeted to juveniles, and marketed folk tales, romance stories, and moral and religious instruction to parents, guardians, families and to children themselves.⁷ Throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century, gender-specific children's books were produced in order to promote

moral values that adults wanted to see in girls and boys; domestic work within the private sphere of the home was usually the focus of the former, whereas books for the latter highlighted anything from the public and political realm to the British Empire.⁸ As Peter Hunt succinctly argues, children's books are constantly influenced by outside forces, and "cannot help but reflect an ideology" that goes beyond "simply" telling a story.⁹

The nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of printed material, most of which took advantage of new technology in order to print illustrations: aside from the cheap broadside, which catered mainly towards a working-class readership, illustrative annuals and gift books became popular to give to adults and children as a Christmas present, reward or a keepsake.¹⁰ Antislavery juvenile literature in particular increased from the early 1800s, following the rising abolitionist movement. Quaker publishers such as Harvey and Darton published at least eight books dedicated to the subject between 1823 and 1826, including Amelia Opie's *Black Man's Lament*. Juvenile works during this period were, according to John Oldfield, "unashamedly moralistic and concerned, above all, with inculcating a compassionate humanitarianism," and focused on charity, kindness and religious morality.¹¹ On both sides of the Atlantic, female abolitionists often took up this task of writing children's literature, as it was a vehicle to display their political activism and unwillingness to be confined to the domestic sphere.¹² Authors such as Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, Anne Wales Abbot, Ann Preston, and Anna Richardson all published children's books, poems and short stories focusing on slavery's brutality and enslaved children.¹³ Furthermore, Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, editor of *The Child's Friend* in the U.S. between 1843–1850, also published numerous poems and writings that specifically drew comparisons between a Black child enslaved on a plantation, miserable and alone, compared to a white child who possessed numerous comforts.¹⁴ As Paula Connolly notes, within these stories, "the centrality of white power" was displayed "where a white narrator, functioning as

a fictional amanuensis, replace[d] black voices by recounting stories of slavery.” Thus, most children’s works were written by white people, consumed by white children, with white characters as the central focus.¹⁵

However, it was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that proved a major catalyst for popular antislavery children’s literature. Partly basing her work on slave narratives, which included Josiah Henson’s, Stowe and her publishers marketed the book extensively both in the US and in the UK. British audiences quickly became obsessed with the novel and in October 1852 alone, there were ten different editions published in two weeks, jumping to over forty editions by the close of 1853.¹⁶ Stowe addressed children within the novel’s serial form, writing: “dear children, you will soon be men and women, and I hope you will learn from this story always to remember to pity the poor and oppressed... Then, when you grow up, I hope the foolish and unchristian prejudice against people merely on account of their complexion will be done away with.”¹⁷ As Augusta Rohrbach makes clear, slave narratives or ‘slave’ stories were transformed into a publishing industry in which books and lectures by African Americans were devoured by a white public, leading to multiple editions. Henson himself exploited the profitable market for books related to Stowe’s novel, and titled his extended autobiography *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (1858), which was a direct challenge to the novel’s inconsistencies and racial stereotypes. As the title of his autobiography suggests, Henson wanted to own his story and teach others the truth about slavery.¹⁸

After the Civil War, transatlantic abolition was subsumed into prevalent narratives of plantation culture or dramatic productions of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The popularity of such productions in Britain sparked numerous commentary about the nature of abolition in America and illustrated how it was repurposed to suit romanticized ideals. Novels, children’s literature and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*-themed dramas and its various spin-offs were performed

across the British Isles. Lobb intervened within *and* exploited this marketplace for plantation or slavery stories, and used Henson's lecturing tour as an additional draw. He revised the narrative and published the *Young People's Edition* specifically because of Henson's presence: American slavery did not seem so far away when a part of its legacy still lived and had come to the British Isles. Unlike the authors of minstrel shows, novels or songs focusing on American slavery, Lobb had access to an authentic voice from slavery that he could amend to his own advantage.¹⁹

Rohrbach's concept of marketability 'for the real' is clearly demonstrated through this romanticized story of abolition, and Henson himself.²⁰ In 1876–1877, Henson travelled to the British Isles to pay off debt on his mortgage (accumulated through his work as a community activist in Canada) and he travelled around the country to raise the money. In doing so, he lectured to regional communities, church congregations, school groups, and even the navy. Hundreds of thousands of people attended his lectures and read his books to ascertain the 'real' from the fictionalized novel, or perhaps to see the fictionalized hero on display.²¹ Lobb proved to be an indefatigable ally and used his extensive religious connections to organize meetings; he merged the fictional character with the real figure and advertised that 'Tom' was indeed alive and well. Lobb even orchestrated a visit to Windsor Castle to meet Queen Victoria, who was intrigued by the Stowe connection.²² As Marcus Wood states, Henson exploited this "intense public desire to see Tom rise in flesh and blood from the page, to have the 'state of vision' become corporeal." As he succinctly argues, the "memory of slavery [became] represented within the factualised fictions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."²³

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in this climate, Henson's revised edition of his narrative was a phenomenal success: 3,000 copies were sold in the first two days.²⁴ In just four weeks, over 20,000 copies were sold, which doubled by the end of the second month.²⁵ The volume was translated into Welsh, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, French, German and

Norwegian. Together with the *Young People's Illustrated Edition*, over 250,000 copies of Henson's works were sold in less than three years.²⁶ To put this into perspective, Douglass' slave narrative sold 13,000 copies in Britain between 1845 and 1847, and William Wells Brown sold over 12,000 copies in the early 1850s.²⁷

The Young People's Edition attracted numerous positive reviews. One stated the book was "interspersed with goodly advice, and sage wisdom, as to make a beneficial impression upon the mind."²⁸ Another noted the book was "full of adventure and incident, bravery and courage" and was "just the sort of book that will enlist the sympathy and attract the imagination of young people."²⁹ Speaking directly to parents, teachers, principals of Sunday schools, "and all desiring to give prizes or presents," Lobb wrote that the book was "unusually attractive to young people, for whom this edition has been special prepared and illustrated."³⁰ However, he also reassured his adult readers that "everything unsuitable to the youthful mind ha[d] been carefully eliminated" and "interesting and amusing incidents" from Henson's life had thus made "the book valuable for family reading."³¹ Lobb's explicit acknowledgement of his editorial practice was designed to placate parents and warn them that no brutal language remained in the text. As he did so, he not only acted like an antebellum amanuensis but also reshaped his audience's understanding of slavery and manipulated Henson's traumatic memories for his own ends. For example, when Henson described in his narrative a bloody, bruised and traumatized group of enslaved women, men and children, whose "cheeks were literally caved in with starvation and disease" and who "looked forward to death as their only deliverance," Lobb wrote "we will not shock our readers with details of the wretchedness of those poor creatures." Removing violent, insignificant or dangerous passages did not suit Lobb's politicised and religious agenda: this scene, branded on Henson's memory as trauma, was carelessly cast aside because it did not serve his particular purpose. Lobb's white editorial hand attempted to silence Henson's testimony and suffering,

and in doing so, he left little room for Henson to possess agency or challenge the white racist schema.³²

“The burning sting of remorse:” *The Young People’s Illustrated Edition*

In marketing *The Young People’s Edition* as a ‘new book,’ then, Lobb manipulated Henson’s testimony to suit a moral purpose and dramatically altered the relationship between Black subject and white editor. Lobb claimed the text as his own, and often took Henson’s words and experiences out of context to illustrate a particular lesson. Such experiences were deeply traumatic for Henson and revealed the white privilege of Lobb, who also framed the book in racialist terms that would have had a familiar place within the antebellum abolitionist movement. For example, in his preface for the book, he reiterated that Henson’s entire life-story provided numerous examples for children to learn from, not to mention the fact that as a person, he exhibited a “warmth of heart...cheerfulness and elasticity of temperament, with wonderful powers of mental and bodily endurance.” Lobb, like Stowe and other white abolitionists, described African Americans in the language of romantic racialism and paternalism, which ironically, had more in common with pro-slavery advocates than with Black abolitionist language.³³

The preface of the *Young People’s Edition* sets the tone for the entire work, which was littered with sections of abridged text from Henson’s narrative, focusing on his birth, conversion, and escape to Canada in anecdotal form. Each story was deliberately chosen by Lobb to teach young children about religion and moral choice, and such reflections become noticeably more detailed when Henson spoke of religion, temperance or immorality. During one scene from the revised edition, Henson’s slaveowner McPherson became intoxicated and drowned, and his family were suddenly seized with “the frantic terror at the idea of being sent ‘down south;’ the almost certainty that one member of a family will be torn from another; the

anxious scanning of purchaser's faces; the agony of parting, often for ever, with husband, wife, child – these must be seen and felt to be fully understood.” Lobb, as a white reformer who had no experience of slavery, completely dismissed this abject fear; Henson would have been well aware this, considering within his own text he rejected the notion that any white person could fully grasp what that fear meant. Instead, Lobb edited this scene for the *Young People's Edition* and taught his young audience the lesson of temperance. Powerful and religious men “have been cast down and destroyed by drink” and “the road of life is strewn all over by the wrecks of miserable ruined drunkards – ruined in mind, body and estate.” He warned his young audience to “*never begin to smoke or drink, and you can never be placed in peril.*”³⁴ Since slavery had ended in 1865, there was little point for Lobb to address the main issue of being sold south: the cause of the slave auction and all subsequent problems Henson faced at the time were utterly due to the alcoholism of McPherson, and his descent first into sin, and then unsurprisingly, to death by his own hand. The transformation from an anti-slavery to temperance narrative appears complete in this example; unlike slavery, the evils of alcoholism persisted and would continue to become rife in society lest his young audience learned from McPherson's example and led a life free from sin, avarice and indulgence.

Lobb offered similar instruction when Henson described how at one stage in his life, his “faith in God utterly gave way,” and he was prepared to murder four of his ‘companions.’ Lobb quoted extensively from the revised narrative, adding his own customary commentary. While the details of such a trial of faith are “hardly suitable to young people” (and thus he omitted them), he hoped that “our youthful readers will [n]ever know anything of such an ‘hour of darkness:’”³⁵

But the stroke that would have deprived another of life and left the burning sting of remorse in the soul for ever, was averted, in a way

which we do not hesitate to affirm was a merciful interposition of God
[...] Let it be a warning, however; for had he not cast away his
confidence in God, and surrendered himself to the gloomy power of
unbelief, the tempter never would have ventured such a horrid
suggestion, so unlike all the man's antecedents, and so opposed to his
life and character [...] we live in times when many persons, unhappily
for themselves and others, seem to have lost faith in the Bible
doctrines of the Fatherhood of God and His loving Providential care
over His people. But is not this which we have just narrated a striking
illustration of both? Did not the Heavenly Father arrest, by
conscience, the arm of His maddened servant when about to commit a
terrible crime?³⁶

Shifting the antislavery focus of Henson's testimony to a moral narrative, Lobb used this turning point in Henson's life to illustrate the power of faith. Even those who had temporarily lost their belief in God, just like Henson in this scene, should be reminded of His power. Henson's internal turmoil was his error in judgement alone, and so Lobb instructed young children that they only had themselves to blame if they renounced God. It was only due to Providence that Henson did not murder his companions, and at the exact moment where Henson turned 'mad' with sin, anger and passion, the Lord intervened to protect him. Lobb bemoaned the lack of faith many people experienced within his own time, and criticized those who rejected God or who were too idle to offer themselves to Him. How could this be, Lobb asked, when this incident clearly proved God's truth and presence? Henson's decision not to commit murder was the most symbolic illustration of His divine intervention and His refusal to abandon faithful subjects, and their juvenile audience must follow the same example.

These traits of piety, honour and religious education were present in many children's books throughout the nineteenth century. What set this book apart, however, was Lobb's manipulation of a Black-authored text in order to compare descriptions of American slavery to the slavery of sin, and his rigid conversion of Henson's antislavery narrative into a religious and moral tale. In one paragraph, Lobb wrote:

His holy name, the Gospel comes with the blessed sound of *liberty*. His opens the door of the captive; it strikes off his fetters; it shows the way of escape; it leads to the promised land; it takes away the spirit of bondage; it imparts a filial spirit; it reveals the home beyond the grave, and points to the skies. It transforms the slaves of sin and Satan into sons and daughters of God, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.³⁷

Lobb equated the brutal system of American slavery with being enslaved to sin. Those who sinned or committed crimes were enslaved by the devil and deliberately made a choice to bend their knee to a tyrant. If one denounced sin and chose the light, one's soul was free: no chains restricted religious destiny or their ascent into Heaven. Slavery to the devil – much like the institution of American slavery – shut out the light, the Gospel, all 'filial' and communal relationships, and represented physical and spiritual death. The only true path for the slave was God, and He will deliver freedom to those enslaved by men or by the devil. In the next passage, Lobb urged his young readers to pray and follow "the way of the Lord" since "bondage and death" were one way, and God another. In language akin to a call for arms, he described how "a glorious manhood, to be strengthened and chastened, purified and made beautiful" awaits those willing (particularly boys in this example) to accept the Lord's grace.³⁸ Lobb urged his young readers to look to the Lord "for what is behind you but bondage and death...and what is before you but a glorious manhood, to be strengthened and

chastened, purified and made beautiful, by trial?”¹ Here, American slavery was normalized and characterised as a metaphor for sin. The violent systematic oppression of people of colour was completely reduced to a single place of suffering, a place that Lobb and other white men could not imagine because they had never been enslaved. In his interpretation, the soul-crushing slavery Henson had experienced was comparable to a life full of sin and was necessary for his transformation into a Christian man. His young audiences should expect a fiery trial, but would be rewarded if they followed the righteous pathway to God as Henson had done.

“The iron through his own soul:” Henson’s contested authorship

Throughout his British tour, Henson had willingly marketed himself as ‘Uncle Tom,’ and had allowed Lobb the copyright for his revised narrative edition. However, there were times when the racist moniker clearly became too much. During a meeting in Scotland, Henson challenged the romantic language used to describe slavery and rejected the idea anyone could discuss slavery lightly, and stated that “no one can feel it but the man who has had the iron through his own soul.”³⁹ Henson wanted to remind white audiences – and quite possibly by extension white authors – that no one could imagine how brutal slavery was unless one had lived through it.

Building on this meeting, and perhaps his frustration with the racial epithet, Henson actively rejected it a month later in Dumfries: “allow me to say that my name is not Tom, and never was Tom, and that I do not want to have any other name inserted in the newspapers for me than my own.”⁴⁰ Significantly, he began his speech with this declaration and wanted to clarify his true identity and position in front of a white audience. Despite the heavy marketing campaign to connect him with the character, it was quite possible either that he had become

¹ Young People’s Illustrated Edition, 96-102.

tired with the association to Stowe's novel, or rejected it because of minstrelsy stereotypes.⁴¹ Similarly, within his own revised slave narrative, Henson performed similar challenges to the white racial schema. When he declared that Stowe had "made her hero [Tom] die," Henson was at pains to point out that he still lived because of a "giant's constitution" bestowed upon him by God. While Henson celebrated the character and the novel's supposed hand in causing the Civil War, he clearly identified a major difference between himself and Tom. His strength and sheer determination were the only reasons he had survived, if not, he would "have died over and over again long before I reached Canada." His self-pride at his "remarkable" ability to "have rallied after so many exposures to all kinds of hardships" was a testament to his bravery and identity as a man.⁴²

Maintaining some form of control over *The Young People's Edition* was far more difficult, but Henson's introduction to the book illustrated his authorship within the text. Acting almost like a frontispiece in textual form, Henson laid claim to his testimony and life-story despite Lobb's editing. Henson wrote a special appeal to his young audience and played on the religious themes espoused by Lobb, in particular that of the spiritual Christian figure. He urged the children to read their bibles, pray for themselves and their families, and to "fit you and them for His heavenly glory."⁴³ Many of the children's parents and the children themselves no doubt had "read the book [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] and wept and burned with indignation." They – and by extension white adults – "could not understand how men bearing the Christian name could be so cruel to their fellow-creatures," as their white skin protected them from such violence and discrimination. Echoing the testimony within his own revised narrative – that he had survived against the odds – Henson was at pains to remind his young audience that while Stowe had killed "her Uncle Tom," the real inspiration behind her fictionalized character was "wonderfully preserved alive." The heroic tales described in the forthcoming book were Henson's victories against slavery, as only a formerly enslaved

African American could understand “what a bitter thing it is to be born in slavery.” As a survivor, whose physical and mental scars were burned into his body and soul, Henson never missed an opportunity to remind any audience that those who had not experienced slavery would never be able to picture, experience, or attempt to understand what it was like. When Henson related how one only knew about slavery if the ‘iron’ had pierced their hearts, he subversively challenged Lobb too, when he had so closely identified the brutalizing system of slavery with slavery as sin.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Henson deliberately targeted transatlantic white privilege regarding the nation’s role in abolition. For example, when Lobb copied an extract from Henson’s slave narrative and described his first moment of freedom in Canada, he accompanied the description with an image of Henson kissing the earth. As Martha J. Cutter asks in her seminal work, *The Illustrated Slave*, how “might words on a page be combined with text to move readers toward certain prosocial ends of actions more effectively than pictures or words alone?”⁴⁵ The relationship between image and text, as well as the spaces between them, offers the reader new interpretations, politicized commentary, or perhaps, as in this example, xenophobic narratives presented through a moral lens. Lobb’s decision to include this image, together with the caption and surrounding text, is strikingly illustrative of his innate belief in British patriotism which advertised the nation’s moral superiority in relation to abolition.⁴⁶

Fig.1 Henson kissing the soil of Canada, from the *Young People’s Illustrated Edition*.⁴⁷

Clearly, this image was designed to evoke joy at an African American reaching the safe haven of British soil. The simple act of depicting a British flag provided a visual and visceral illustration of the power of British liberty abroad, and the flag’s deliberate placement implied that Henson’s family owed their freedom to Britain, as well as to God. Lobb reproduced this

image to sustain a patriotic narrative, but also unsurprisingly compared it to some form of religious instruction: the joy that Henson experienced mirrored the “joy and gratitude of the soul when first it realizes freedom and life in Christ.” When someone abandoned sin and turned to God, the spiritual release one felt was surely the same feeling one encountered after arriving on free land. Liberty from slavery and liberty from sin were subsumed and collectively interpreted as one and the same.⁴⁸

To combat this narrative of superiority, in his introduction Henson addressed white children in particular and stated they could not grasp what it felt “to be torn from all your relatives, and to be sold away from even your father and mother into the hands of cruel masters who would use you worse than a dog.” White children were fortunate and should be thankful for their privileged position, and they should use it to help others. Henson made a barbed comment here in regard to his own grandchildren in Canada, who were “scorned and despised, and otherwise treated unkindly, simply because God has made them *black*.” White children – and their parents – would be surprised to hear this, Henson said, and thus subtly criticized the nation’s obsession with liberty and supposed tolerance of Black people. His own grandchildren suffered from racial discrimination in a land that supposedly protected Black rights. His specific reference to this scene was a not-so-veiled attempt to challenge Britain’s vaunted protestations of liberty, a hypocrisy based on a white supremacist schema which did not allow for testimonies to the contrary. Lobb had attempted to craft his own narrative of British moral superiority into the text, and while limited to some extent by his position, Henson remained unafraid to challenge white British audiences about their conceptions of slavery, Black heroic masculinity, or how the legacies of a violent transatlantic institution still remained on British soil.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life*, Henson described the scene where he was maimed for life, a transformative event which affected not only his physical body (in that he was unable to lift his arms above his head) but also his mental wellbeing, in particular his fearless self-defence of mind, body and soul against slavery:

The overseer called upon the negroes to seize me [...] and as they bought themselves within my reach I knocked them down successively [...] Meanwhile Bryce Litton beat my head with a stick, not heavy enough to knock me down, but it drew blood freely. He shouted all the while, "Won't you give up! won't you give up!" adding oath after oath. Exasperated at my defence, he suddenly seized a heavy fence-rail and rushed at me with rage.⁵⁰

Furious that Henson had showed defiance instead of the expected racialized deference, Litton's furious cries of "won't you give up" highlighted Henson's extraordinary desire to challenge slavery and its defenders. Lobb, on the other hand, paraphrased this brutal scene in the *Young People's Edition*, omitted the bloody details and confined this important event in Henson's life to a small paragraph, an irrelevant tale, illustrative only of the cruelty of slavery and not Henson's heroic masculinity. In Lobb's eyes, this was a relatively minor event that could offer little instruction for youth, which highlighted the enormous gap between author and editor, formerly enslaved individual and white abolitionist. This act of bloody violence which scarred Henson for life had no significance for Lobb beyond his own self-interest, which illustrated the dangerous capacity for white authors, who were far removed from the physical and mental scars of slavery, to make important editorial decisions on Black literary work. Lobb's attempts to exclude events or revise and reframe important passages of

Henson's life into a 'new book' illustrated an editorial power beyond what we would traditionally associate with an amanuensis. Forever altering the relationship between a white editor and his Black subject, he added his own extensive and exclusive commentary to transform the antislavery work into one specifically focused on religious, moral and temperance narratives. With this specific audience in mind, Lobb cut sections he did not think appropriate for children, and constantly referred to British figures, places or events in an attempt to tether the book to *his* reality, rather than Henson's.

However, Lobb did not quite succeed in speaking for Henson, and did not render him the object rather than subject of his own work. By including Henson's introduction at the start of the book, much like a frontispiece at the beginning of a slave narrative, Henson retained some authorship and instructed children not only to live a Christian life, but also to live by his heroic example. As William L. Andrews argues, Black writers, "instead of either conforming to the rules of the literary game or refusing to play, they set about changing the rules by which the game was played even as they played along with it."⁵¹ Despite the constant marketing of himself as Uncle Tom, which he himself willingly participated in to some extent, Henson refused to ever "give up," reminding his audiences of the legacy of slavery, and how his daring examples of masculinity and bravery led to his survival, against all the odds. While such scenes above were cut from the children's edition, he crafted his testimony at the beginning to highlight his audience's white privilege, and force them to realise that they, like Lobb, had no idea what it felt like to have 'the iron' in their soul. Henson's testimony against slavery and its white supremacist underpinnings – whether this came via an exposure of a brutal overseer like Litton, or through hidden language to a generous benefactor such as Lobb – illustrates that scholars of slavery and formerly enslaved individuals have to read between the lines to fully grasp the comprehensive, complicated and

complex ways in which Black Americans had to navigate and resist a transatlantic society that rested on a foundational anti-blackness.

Notes

¹ Lobb and Henson, *The Young People's Illustrated Edition*, 7–8.

² Amelia E. Johnson, *Clarence and Corinne; Or God's Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988/1890). See also Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Sowing and Reaping: A Temperance Story* (1876).

³ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory* (2000).

⁴ Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 16–18. See also Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory”, 83–102, in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, (ed) William Zinsser, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 89–102.

⁵ Wood, *Blind Memory*, 271.

⁶ Debate exists over the true nature of this relationship, as well as Henson's history as a community activist. See Blyden Jackson, *History of Afro-American Literature: Volume I, The Long Beginning 1746-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 144–145; Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 194–195; Mary Ellen Doyle, “Josiah Henson's Narrative: Before and After,” *Negro American Literature Forum*, 8:1 (Spring 1974), 176–180, and Yuval Taylor, *I Was Born a Slave: 1772-1849* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).

⁷ Grenby, “The Origins of Children's Literature,” 4–7.

⁸ Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature*, 28–29; 46–61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–9.

¹⁰ Golden, *Serials to Graphic Novels*, 16–18.

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- ¹¹ Oldfield, “Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Children’s Literature 1750–1850,” 44–56; Wood, *Blind Memory*, 195–197; 271.
- ¹² De Rosa, *Into the Mouths of Babes*, xv–xvii; Pinsent, “Bone and Blood a Slave,” 189–202.
- ¹³ De Rosa, *Into the Mouths of Babes*.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii; 3; 33–34; Leeds Anti-Slavery Series; Clapp-Itnyre, “Children’s Hymn Singing in Victorian Culture and Scholarship,” 2–10.
- ¹⁵ Connolly, *Slavery in American Children’s Literature 1790–2010*, 2–10; 30–31.
- ¹⁶ Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 21.
- ¹⁷ Keller, “Juvenile Antislavery Narrative and Notions of Childhood,” 97–98. See also Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Picture Book*. Massachusetts: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853; Mrs Crowe, *The Juvenile Uncle Tom’s Cabin Arranged for Young Readers*. Routledge: London, 1857; Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Young Folks Edition*. M.A. Donohue & Company Chicago, 1905.
- ¹⁸ Rohrbach, “Making it Real,” 137–138; 143; 154–157.
- ¹⁹ Kytte, *Romantic Reformers and the Antislavery Struggle in the Civil War Era*, 270–272.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143–154.
- ²¹ Henson was one of scores of African American visiting the British Isles during the nineteenth century. See my forthcoming book *To Tell The Truth: African American Activism in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). See also Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England*, (2000); Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall* (1983); Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, (2016); Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, (1985); Clare Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding*, (1974), and Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (1999). See also William L. Andrews’ seminal work on slave narratives

both in the antebellum and postbellum period: Andrews, *Slave Narratives After Slavery* (2011), vii-xiv.

²² *Birmingham Daily Post*. 6 March 1877, 5; *Liverpool Mercury*. 6 March 1877, 7; *The Morning Post*. 6 March 1877, 5.

²³ Wood, *Blind Memory*, 143–144; 195–199.

²⁴ *Christian Age*, 15 November 1876, 271, vol. XI, 11, 161.

²⁵ *Christian Age*, 24 January 1877, 281, vol. XL, 21; 28 February 1877, 286, vol. XI, 26.

²⁶ Brock, *The Road to Dawn*, 233–238; John Lobb, *Talks with the Dead*, xv-xvi.

²⁷ Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 33–34.

²⁸ *Christian Age*, 23 May 1877, 298, Vol. XII, 1; 12.

²⁹ *Young People's Illustrated Edition*, advert, n.p.

³⁰ *Christian Age*, 25 April 1877, 294, Vol. XII, 8, iv; *Christian Age*, 24 January 1877, 281, vol. XL, 21; *Christian Age*, 28 February 1877, 286, vol. XI, 26.

³¹ *Christian Age*, 28 February 1877, 286, vol. XI, 26.

³² Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of His Own Life*, 67–75; *Young People's Illustrated Edition*, 70–74.

³³ *Young People's Illustrated Edition*, 9–10. See also George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22–30. Italics in original.

³⁵ *Uncle Tom's Story of His Own Life*, 67–75; *Young People's Illustrated Edition*, 70–74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70–74.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96–102.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96–102.

³⁹ *Henson in Scotland*, 11. *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 25 April 1877, 1–6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴¹ Ibid., 33. Jan Marsh also talks briefly about Henson’s resistance against the ‘Uncle Tom’ epithet in “Slave Cabin,” 37–50.

⁴² *Uncle Tom’s Story of His Life*, 157–159.

⁴³ *Young People’s Illustrated Edition*, Henson’s introduction, 12–16.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12–16.

⁴⁵ Cutter, *The Illustrated Slave*, 15; 41–45.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians*, 13–15; 22–28; 51.

⁴⁷ *Young People’s Illustrated Edition*, 92–93.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 92–93; 126–131.

⁴⁹ *Young People’s Illustrated Edition*, Henson’s introduction, 12–16.

⁵⁰ *Uncle Tom’s Story of His Life*, 37–39. Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life*, 70–75.

⁵¹ Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 6.

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