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## *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *The National Era*: Commentary on Chapter 1 and 2

Melissa J. Homestead

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [mhomestead2@Unl.edu](mailto:mhomestead2@Unl.edu)

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## ***Uncle Tom's Cabin in The National Era***

The first installment of Uncle Tom's Cabin appeared on June 5, 1851 in the anti-slavery newspaper, *The National Era*.

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<https://nationalera.wordpress.com/further-reading/chapter-1-2-contribution-by-melissa-homestead/>

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### **Chapter 1 and 2: Comment by Melissa Homestead**

#### **Commentary by Melissa Homestead:**

In the first chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe warns her readers that the “indulgence” of slave owners and the “affectionate loyalty” of the slaves themselves towards their masters have misled some observers to believe the “poetic legend” of slavery as a benevolent “patriarchal institution.” She does not deny the genuineness of these emotions, but she warns that “the shadow of a Law” makes a mockery of the human relationships that develop between masters and slaves: “So long as the law considers all these human beings, with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many *things* belonging to a master—so long as the failure, or misfortune, or imprudence, or death, of the kindest owner, may cause them any day to exchange a life of kind protection and indulgence for one of hopeless misery and toil, so long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best regulated administration of slavery.” We begin the novel, then, in what seems to be the model benevolent Shelby plantation in Kentucky, not the cruel Legree plantation in Louisiana, where the novel ends. Nevertheless, the “shadow of the law,” in the form of Mr. Shelby’s obligation to pay his debts, endangers the residents of the Shelby plantation.

Stowe derived her portrait of slavery primarily from reading, not from direct experience and observation in the slave states of the South. She describes Eliza Harris as “not a fancy sketch, but taken from a remembrance, as we saw her years ago in Kentucky”—that is, during Stowe’s one brief trip South of the Mason-Dixon line during her years living in Cincinnati. Some white Southerners attacked Stowe for this lack of direct knowledge of the South and slavery. However, as historian William R. Taylor observed fifty years ago, what troubled them the most about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was not that she attacked their point of view, but that she understood it too well. As Taylor explains, beginning in the 1830s white Southerners invented the legend of “plantation paternalism,” “the image of sunshine and happiness around the plantation home,” to “justif[y] their peculiar institution to themselves and to others.”<sup>[1]</sup> Stowe only “[took] the Southerner at his word”: she did “not...deny the Southern defense of slavery but...suggested that it was inadequate, even if its claims were allowed.” Stowe set out to show, Taylor explains, that “kindness, generosity and affection provided no assurance against cruelty and brutality” and that “a slave could love his master and mistress and still wish to be free.”<sup>[2]</sup>

**This semester**, I just taught (and read for the first time) Octavia Butler’s hybrid time-travel/historical novel *Kindred* (1979), in which the African-American protagonist, Dana, finds herself repeatedly and mysteriously transported from California in 1976 to a plantation in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Maryland to save the life of her white ancestor, slave master Rufus Weylin. Butler’s rich and disturbing novel made me think in new ways about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and particularly this question of love and affection across the color and status line in the plantation “family.” Dana is in a peculiar position that she never fully explains to anyone in the past—she must make sure that Rufus survives so that she can “insure [her] own family’s survival, [her] own birth,”<sup>[3]</sup> even if he impregnates her African-American female ancestor, Alice, through rape. When Dana realizes that Rufus actually loves Alice, she realizes that his love is “a destructive love, but a love, nevertheless.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Even though Alice refuses to return Rufus’s affection, Dana comes to understand that love travels in the other direction across the color line as well. The woman who nursed Rufus as a baby, Sarah,

loves Rufus, even as she bitterly hates his family for selling away all of her children. “She had done the safe thing,” Dana explains, “had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called ‘mammy’ in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter.” [5] Dana “looked down on [Sarah] for a while” based on her own seeming “moral superiority” to her. [6] However, Dana finds that she, too, must accommodate herself to the plantation system to survive. Although Dana never becomes the head cook, like Sarah, she becomes a version of Uncle Tom as described in the opening chapter of Stowe’s novel, the manager of the business affairs of a slave plantation (when Rufus inherits it on his father’s death, she rationalizes taking on this managerial role because keeping the plantation solvent will stave off the sale of slaves and the breaking up of slave families).

She also comes to realize that Rufus loves her, and she cares for him in return. At first, she believes that her feelings are a product of her peculiar situation—he is her ancestor, and she is from the future—but she eventually comes to understand that those born and raised in slavery similarly “seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time.” This recognition leads her to understand that “slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships.” [7] *Kindred* does not, of course, justify slavery based on the love and affection between slaves and masters (or mistresses). Instead, Butler, like Stowe, foregrounds these real human emotions and relationships to drive home the horror of slavery—that those who owned (and sometimes loved) slaves *knew* that their slaves were “human beings, with beating hearts and living affections,” but under the law, they could be treated as things.

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[1] William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), 300.

[2] Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 310.

[3] Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 29.

[4] Butler, *Kindred*, 147.

[5] Butler, *Kindred*, 145.

[6] Butler, *Kindred*, 145.

[7] Butler, *Kindred*, 229.

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## Melissa Homestead

Melissa J. Homestead is Susan J. Rosowski Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and will be spending the 2010-2011 academic year as a Residential Faculty Fellow at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute. Her book *American Women Authors and Literary Property, 1822-1869* (Cambridge 2005) includes a chapter on *Stowe v. Thomas*, a copyright case about a German translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the American market.