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Cabin Fever, or: Back to the Future? The (Anti-)Pastoral in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Walden* (1854)

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Abstract

Canonized classics of US-American literature such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* were published at the beginning of the 1850s – that crucial moment in the history of the United States when it found itself on the brink of the Civil War. Both works epitomize the nation's contemporaneous racial climate, i.e. the legacy and workings of the institution of slavery, in the simple material form of the cabin. Deploying the theoretical frame of the pastoral, essentially qualified by the anti-pastoral (Bennett, M. 195–210) and the strategic pastoral (Klestil 85–124), this article argues that Stowe and Thoreau materialize the past and presence of slavery in the cabin in order to explicitly (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or implicitly (*Walden*) imagine and speculate about a future nation without slavery. This article hence compares and historicizes two defining literary versions of a United States the cultural influence and power of which are rooted in their respective depiction of the cabin as "both icon and shelter" (Hoagland 8).

Keywords

Cabin, 19th Century US-American Literature, strategic pastoral, environmental imagination

The cabin has become a symbol in the US-American cultural imaginary over the course of the last 200 years – indeed it has become many symbols. The cabin was one crucial site through which Black confinement was practiced during slavery. Other notorious significations include the cabin as the locus for a deadly terrorist critique of technology tied to the Unabomber's shelter, and the cabin as representation of and home to those 'deplorable' segments of the white population who are given the derogatory label "white trash." These 'dark' cultural and discursive significations coexist with the cabin as a more inspiring and future-oriented site: an icon for a cherished critique of technology as materialized in Thoreau's Walden house; a representation of the democratic values of the nation as epitomized in Abraham Lincoln's birthplace; a space in which enslaved Black people could, at times, temporarily find sanctuary despite and amid the carceral geographies of slavery.

In order to get closer to the cabin and what it actually is – symbol? icon? representation? space? home? locus? materiality? materialization? – we need to take a brief look at the existing cabin scholarship. The first academic studies on the cabin came out in the mid-20th century and were primarily interested in exploring the historical origins and prevalence of the cabin in North America (Shurtleff; Weslager). More recently, scholars have broadened the historical approach to trace the significance of the cabin in the realm of culture (Belonsky; Ahne). Current incarnations of the form of the cabin revolve around the fetishization of its aesthetic value as in Zach Klein's *Cabin Porn*.[1] While a variety of studies explore the significance of houses – and domestic spaces more broadly – in and for US-American literature (e.g. Chandler; Andrés and Alsina Rísquez), monographs zooming in on the literary cabin exclusively are, to my knowledge, lacking. In her seminal 2018 book *The Log Cabin: An American Icon*, Alison K. Hoagland explores the different narratives and counternarratives around the cabin from a cultural-historical perspective. Hoagland conceives the cabin as having always already been an object of nostalgia *and* a reasonable, practicable solution for constructing a home; this approach enables her to define the cabin as a material *and* a symbolic phenomenon, as "both icon and shelter" (8). In this regard, she characterizes the cabin as a sort of open signifier for projecting possible future versions of the nation that are, in turn, tied to differing evaluations of both the past and the present:

> The meaning Americans have found there has varied, of course, depending on who they were and what they were looking for, and it has varied, just as the log cabin has, depending on time and place. The story of the log cabin is ultimately one that is more about American values and perceptions than about the building itself. (8)

[1] For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon within Thoreau's literary frame and Bachelard's philosophical perspective, see Rosenthal.

As varied and ambiguous as the narratives and counternarratives as well as values and perceptions around the respective cabins might be, I suggest that they are nonetheless held together by one crucial characteristic: its very form. "Because 'form' is a passive description of outward appearance while being simultaneously a determining and shaping active principle," as Eugenie Brinkema defines it, and "because it can refer to an immaterial idea or a sensible shape (cast in wood or stone), . . ." (261) we are able to define the cabin as a peculiar form that simultaneously affords both the material and the symbolic dimensions Hoagland delineates. While the cabin can therefore function as all of the above – symbol, icon, representation, space, home, locus, materiality, materialization – as a form, I argue, it is a plain, small block dwelling made up of natural materials such as logs and devoid of technological sophistication, hence oftentimes without running water or electricity.

This article explores the contradictory significations of the cabin, read as a form, in two canonized classics of US-American literature, namely, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Both works functionalize their respective cabins to make present the past both symbolically and materially (by evoking this particular form on the page) in order to envision the future of the United States; and, both works were published in the first half of the 1850s – that crucial moment in the history of the nation when it found itself on the brink of the Civil War and when, according to F. O. Matthiessen's influential thesis, it witnessed an "extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression" that he termed "American Renaissance" (vii).[2]

Within a Matthiessian framework, the following close reading seeks to demonstrate that these two texts epitomize the nation's contemporaneous racial climate, understood with Christina Sharpe as the totality of racial discourses and dispositifs at a given time (102–34), in and through this very form. While the lens of the pastoral is a staple in literary and cultural studies on the cabin (Marx 242–63), its qualification through notions such as the anti-pastoral (Bennett, M. 195–210) and the strategic pastoral (Klestil 85–124) affords a more holistic theoretical perspective to explore the complex and ambivalent depictions of the cabin in mid-19th century literature. I argue that Stowe and Thoreau represent the past and presence of slavery in the cabin in order to explicitly (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or implicitly (*Walden*) imagine and speculate about a future nation without slavery. These two works thereby represent a

[2] Published in 1941, Matthiessen's canon of literary excellence focuses on five white men – Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman – and neglects literature produced by marginalized groups such as women or people of color. Christopher N. Phillips contextualizes this: "This vital focus, both highly persuasive and eminently teachable – only five authors to cover, and focused on democracy – came at a price. Matthiessen celebrated the radical impulses of the abolition movement, citing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as evidence of the abolition movement's energy, but he refused to do more than mention Stowe's book or treat her or her contemporaries, Frederick Douglass and Frances E. W. Harper, as literary authors" (3).

widespread conception of the United States as an essentially future-oriented land of opportunities rooted in speculative projection, which is reflective of Gayle Rogers' broader suggestion that "[s]peculation is part of the character of the exceptional American experience, past, present, and future" (113). This article hence compares and historicizes two defining literary versions of the United States, the cultural influence and power of which are essentially rooted in their respective use of the cabin as a form.

The Cabin in the Garden: The (Anti-)Pastoral

Conceived as one of the central myths and symbols in the US-American literary and cultural imaginary, the pastoral ideal integrates the opposites of what Roderick Frazier Nash famously conceptualizes as a "spectrum of conditions or environments ranging from the purely wild on the one end to the purely civilized on the other" (6). This spectrum comprises the apotheosis of a 'virgin land' on the one hand and the demonization of a sinister 'wilderness' on the other. According to Leo Marx, as "the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature,' that is the psychic root of all pastoralism" (6), the pastoral ideal functions as "middle ground" in the environmental imagination. 19th-century US-American literature would accordingly negotiate in a complex manner "the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction" (29). Marx finds a quintessential expression of this intrusion of technology into a pastoral scenery in "the scene in *Walden* where Thoreau is sitting rapt in a revery [in front of his log cabin] and then, penetrating his woods like the scream of a hawk, the whistle of the locomotive is heard . . ." (15). Thoreau's cabin here stages a complex encounter of the forces of 'civilization' reaching out into the realm of 'wilderness.' At the time of Marx' writing about the pastoral ideal in 1964, the cabin itself has intruded into the quasi-pastoral scenery of suburban dooryards when the "'Thoreau Cabin Kit' – a build-it-yourself replica of the original cabin – entered the market in the 1950s, selling for four thousand dollars" (Nightingale 114). Reducing the complexity of Marx' understanding of the pastoral ideal, this kind of cabin is "understood to be the form that precedes the arrival of culture. The retreat is always a retreat in time, a withdrawal to a lost simplicity, purity, immediacy, harmony ... a lost beginning" (Wigley 123). What Marx calls sentimental pastoralism thus signifies the cabin exclusively as something raw and pre-cultural, withdrawn, simple, pure, immediate, and harmonious – as a primordial 'natural' and not as a constructed cultural artifact. At the same time, however, it needs to be emphasized that the cabin – even in the wildest realms of nature and erected by the most reclusive critic of technology – remains a human construct and therefore a marker of human activity. It is, after all, the form of the cabin that always already contains the different and ambivalent significations that demarcate the

boundaries of 'wilderness'/'civilization,' 'nature'/'culture,' as well as 'inhuman'/'human' both for the individual subject and the imagined community of the nation.

Many scholars have pointed to the inadequacy of trying to capture the African American experience of and in nature through conceptual frameworks (and traditional ecocritical lenses) of the pastoral and of the wilderness. In contrast, an "anti-pastoral African American literary tradition" (195), in the words of Michael Bennett, has developed under chattel slavery which "changed the nature of nature in African American culture, necessitating a break with the pastoral tradition developed within European American literature" (205). For the enslaved, oftentimes, nature was perceived as tied to and harnessed by slavery, and as co-producing their social and literal death. In order to lay open the environmental knowledge nonetheless inherent in African American literary expressions, Matthias Klestil proposes the "strategic pastoral" (85–124) as a way to explain how slave narratives deploy the pastoral in complex and ambivalent ways that are not simply anti-pastoral. Drawing on Susan Snyder's identification of "spatial" and "temporal" aspects of the pastoral, Klestil traces how African American authors have employed "a doubled (visual) perspective" (89) that resonates with both aspects of the pastoral. The perspective of the enslaved, as Klestil exemplifies in his reading of Henry Box Brown's 1849 *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (101–6), could involve artistically creating the perception of a harmonious natural scenery and the concomitant invocation of the pastoral ideal. This very invocation, however, is then simultaneously undercut by the enslaved person's realization that given the dehumanizing regime of plantation slavery the pastoral ideal is not made for her, not even attainable as a "short-term haven" as Snyder delineates the affordance of the pastoral's spatial dimension for the hegemonic white subject position (Snyder 3; see also Klestil 90). While this spatial dimension of the strategic pastoral is oftentimes mobilizing anti-pastoral aspects and impulses,

> its temporal dimension involves not only a form of Golden Age pastoral in Snyder's sense, but is also potentially future-oriented, as it links a doubled vision enabled through the slave narrative's rhetoric of visibility to a doubling of time. Besides serving at certain points as a means for articulating environmental knowledge, the slave narrative's strategic pastoral is also a vehicle for criticizing the peculiar institution and expressing a utopian hope for a world without slavery. (Klestil 90)

Perceiving a pastoral scenery within the anti-pastoral context of plantation slavery instigates the perceiving entity, i.e. the enslaved and the reader, not only to go backwards in a Proustian search of lost time but also forward to imagine a better future where she might be enabled to enjoy the pastoral ideal after slavery will have been abolished.

Building on Klestil's take on the strategic pastoral, the following analyzes and compares both the pastoral as well as the anti-pastoral aspects in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Walden* in order to explore how the respective cabins serve as focal point for

imagining a different future, a different version of the nation without slavery. While neither Stowe's anti-slavery novel nor Thoreau's nature writing are slave narratives, the strategic pastoral still provides a fruitful theoretical perspective to explore the complex and ambivalent depictions of the cabin in nature.

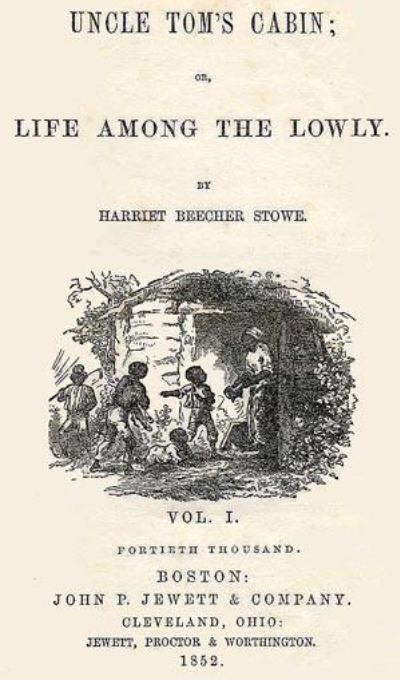
Harriet Stowe's (Anti-)Pastoral Cabin

The anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in book form in 1852 after it had been serialized in the abolitionist magazine *National Era* between June 1851 and April 1852 (Bromwich x). It is set in numerous locations across the country as it follows the fates of two enslaved people, middle-aged Uncle Tom and the young mother Eliza, after they are sold from a Kentucky plantation. Eventually, Uncle Tom dies after a long martyrdom at Simon Legree's Louisiana plantation – with the horrors of racial slavery portrayed as increasing as the setting moves further South – and Eliza is reunited with her family and flees the country.

Long disregarded by critics as sentimental and trivial literature, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the bestseller of the 19th-century United States surpassed only by the sales numbers of *The Bible* (DiMaggio 15). Its enormous influence, however, easily exceeded the confines of the literary realm and the popular text became a mass cultural phenomenon, which, in the words of Jim O'Loughlin, "played a crucial role in configuring American social and political life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century" (573). The numerous theater, musical, and film adaptations throughout the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries contributed to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s enormous popularity with many of these adaptations operating within the racist framework of blackface minstrelsy. Unsurprisingly, African American critics such as James Baldwin oftentimes perceived – and condemned – the novel's crucial role in affecting their community negatively by establishing and perpetuating racist stereotypes (Tillet 51–59). More recently, scholars have worked out the significance of domesticity for an understanding of both author and book (see, for instance, Halttunen; Askeland). The "completeness of Stowe's conformity to the domestic ideology," according to David Bromwich, enables her to "turn the tragedy of slavery into the drama of the breakup of a family" (xx). In the only article exclusively devoted to an analysis of the eponymous cabin vis-à-vis the novel's other "domestic establishments" (357), Egbert S. Oliver similarly reasons that Stowe has used "the symbolic cabin, the family center, and the family gathered peacefully in that center, as an archetypal judgment upon the broken families and the forces breaking families which make up the book" (360).[3]

[3] Lori Askeland highlights the contrasting significance of Simon Legree's house: "As Theodore Hovet has noted, the fall from spirituality to materialism could not be better symbolized in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than by Simon Legree's significantly kitchenless, utterly materialistic 'anti-home'" (788).

The actual form of what Oliver terms the "symbolic cabin" is provided through the paratext as visual representation on the frontispiece of the book (Figure 1). Common for literary publications of the time, the upper and lower parts of the front page provide bibliographic information in plain font including title, author, and publishing house. The drawing of Uncle Tom's cabin provided by Hammatt Billings, who also drew six full-page illustrations and engravings for the first edition, fills the middle of the frontispiece. In coarsely gritted style, it depicts the entrance of the dwelling, which is partly concealed by ivy on its right side. A Black woman with a saucepan is standing in the doorframe and turning towards two Black children and a toddler. To the cabin's left side, a Black man emerging from the woods is spotted by one of the children. The surrounding flora is only implied as the drawing zooms in on the cabin – evoking a romanticized image of the cabin as a home to the enslaved Black family. This is also the image that Stowe initially sets up in her writing, before she goes on to reveal how tenuous Black family life was under slavery (Figure 2).


UNCLE TOM'S CABIN;

OR,

LIFE AMONG THE LOWLY.

BY

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.

VOL. I.

FORTIETH THOUSAND.

BOSTON:
JOHN P. JEWETT & COMPANY.
CLEVELAND, OHIO:
JEWETT, PROCTOR & WORTHINGTON.
1852.

Figure 1: Title page of Harriet Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, first edition, in the public domain.

Figure 2: Advertisement for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ca. 1852, reproduction of the original frontispiece in color, in the public domain.

The eponymous cabin is introduced rather early in the novel, namely in chapter 4 entitled "An Evening at Uncle Tom's Cabin." At this point in the novel, the reader – but not Tom – has already learned about the plans of his upcoming sale and the resultant uprooting from his environment and his family:

> The cabin of Uncle Tom was a small log building, close adjoining to "the house," as the negro *par excellence* designates his master's dwelling. In front it had a neat garden-patch, where, every summer, strawberries, raspberries, and a variety of fruits and

> vegetables, flourished under careful tending. The whole front of it was covered by a large scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which, entwisting and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen. Here, also, in summer, various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four-o'clocks, found an indulgent corner in which to unfold their splendors, and were the delight and pride of Aunt Chloe's heart. Let us enter the dwelling. (Stowe 30, original emphasis)

Slavery as an institution forces Tom and his family to live in this kind of dwelling whose small log structure is contrasted with "the house," i.e. "his master's dwelling." The enforced confinement that this racialized spatial hierarchy signals has been central to the ways in which the cabin has been represented in African American narratives, such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), or W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Instigated by the inhumanity of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, it was Stowe's primary agenda to harshly criticize the horrors of slavery by depicting its ugly reality. Through this law, slavery expanded its sphere of influence into the Northern states. It strengthened the property rights of slave holders by requiring authorities in non-slaveholding states to capture and return runaways from slavery. Also, civilians and officials who assisted fugitives or were unwilling to comply with recapture efforts could be severely punished (Lennon 671). "[A]fter the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act," in the words of Sharpe, "that 'free air' of a 'free state' is denied to those in the hold who would take their freedom; slavery is enforced as the law of the entire United States. Its atmospheric density increased; slavery undeniably became the total environment" (104). Abolitionists such as Stowe, in turn, mobilized their resources more effectively to increase their efforts to fight for a future nation in which people of African descent would no longer be enslaved.

As mentioned above, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sought to expose the horrors and injustice of slavery, conveyed, for instance, by the spatial forms of the slave cabin and the master's mansion – the former being confined and rudimentary and the latter spacious and indulgent – which speak to the ways in which racial hierarchies materialized in the built environment. For Tom, however, the cabin initially provides a kind of safe haven where the family comes together: The author depicts Tom's wife Aunt Chloe cooking, the slave master's white son Young George teaching him to write, his children playing, with all of them laughing and having a good time before the entire African American community comes together in the cabin to pray and worship. Stowe, in short, presents an apparently happy cabin life of domesticity, warmth, food, shelter, education, religion, and coziness. Oliver accordingly identifies the cabin in this scene as "a secure island of pastoral contentment" (356), which thereby affords "a withdrawal to a lost simplicity, purity, immediacy, harmony … a lost beginning" (Wigley 123) before or after the times of slavery.

The text itself, however, functions as strategic pastoral that lays bare as illusionary its own portrayal of an apparently pastoral slave cabin. In contrast to the "doubled (visual) perspective" (89) that Klestil identifies for the slave narrative's strategic pastoral, it is here not an enslaved narrator who perceives the spatial aspect of the pastoral to immediately realize its elusiveness. Instead, Stowe's omniscient narrator depicts the cabin both as pastoral *and* anti-pastoral: After the reader has seen its pastoral outside, she is led to "enter the dwelling" to perceive its cozy furnishings and to be literally introduced to the main characters "till we finish our picture of the cottage" (Stowe 31). Given Stowe's abolitionist agenda, the pastoral elements of the cabin are described vividly in order to be immediately deconstructed for the reader whose previous knowledge enables her to see through the false idyll as she already supposes that Tom will soon be sold away from his family. The moments of quasi-utopian cabin community are thus not meant to last. The cabin, in fact, is haunted by the anti-pastoral for the enslaved as is disclosed at the ending of the chapter: "While this scene was passing in the cabin of the man, one quite otherwise passed in the halls of the master" (43). Mr. Shelby seals the deal to sell Tom and Eliza's son, thereby making clear to the reader that, as enslaved people, Tom and his kin are not free even if they feel to be; or as Theodor W. Adorno memorably put it in another context that "[t]here is no right life in the wrong one" (39).

The cabin as epitome of the pastoral ideal is deconstructed even more forcefully as readers learn about the racial hierarchies playing out inside its walls. Stowe's own racial bias comes to the fore as she focuses mainly on the interactions between Tom, Aunt Chloe, and the slave master's white son Young George, while their own (Black) children remain underdeveloped as characters and merely function as comic relief in the background. Young George is properly introduced. He is the pivotal element of the chapter, has agency and power. For example, Aunt Chloe cooks for him and serves him first – "'you know'd your old aunty 'd keep the best for you'" (Stowe 34) – while the Black children only receive his leftovers, in a manner signaling white benevolence toward animalized, subhuman creatures: "'Here, you Mose, Pete,' he said, breaking off liberal bits, and throwing it at them; 'you want some, don't you? Come, Aunt Chloe, bake them some cakes'" (37). Furthermore, Aunt Chloe, in preemptive obedience, wants to put her children to bed before the religious gathering commences, but Young George demands their presence exclaiming: "'La, Aunt Chloe, shove it under, and let 'em sit up,' said Mas'r George, decisively, giving a push to the rude machine" (39). Not surprisingly and tellingly, the young master is the one who subsequently reads out the last chapters of Revelation throwing in "expositions of his own, from time to time, with a commendable seriousness and gravity, for which he was admired by the young and blessed by the old; and it was agreed, on all hands, that 'a minister couldn't lay it off better than he did; that ''t was reely 'mazin'!'" (42). While the initial description

of the cabin's pastoral front evokes a harmonious relation between non-human nature and human activity therein, these examples provide an actual look inside that hints at a much more anti-pastoral impulse. This impulse, or dark underside of the pastoral, reveals the cabin as a racialized space permeated by white supremacy in which relations of any kind – while harmonious on the surface – are built on domination and dehumanization.

A clear reversal of the pastoral facets of the cabin and a divergence into explicitly anti-pastoral overtones occurs only in the tenth chapter of the novel: Tom is pulled out of the cabin and he, together with the entire Black community, is confronted with the elusiveness of the pastoral fantasy. This realization is also indicated by the chapter heading, which reads "The Property Is Carried Off." Aunt Chloe and Tom are united in dread, desolation, and sadness in the face of their impending separation and breakup of their family with the weather conditions mirroring and strengthening the anti-pastoral mood: "The February morning looked gray and drizzling through the window of Uncle Tom's cabin. It looked on downcast faces, the images of mournful hearts" (Stowe 124). The home the cabin (allegedly) provided through its evocation of the pastoral during "An Evening at Uncle Tom's Cabin" is literally invaded, the apparently utopian pastoral slave cabin destroyed when the slave trader's "unceremonious kick pushed open the door" (129). In a twisted way, the slave trader functions in Marx's "sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction" (29), with the machine here signifying the inhumane machinery of slavery itself.

After the shackled Tom is carried away amidst universal mourning, Young George meets him on the road to say goodbye in tears. Strikingly, it is again he who has the agency to define the cabin in contrast to the apparently idyllic depiction the reader encountered earlier. "'I'll build your house all over, and you shall have a room for a parlor with a carpet on it, when I'm a man. O, you'll have good times yet!'" (Stowe 134), Young George exclaims in sadness over the disposal of his father's human property, thereby pointing towards the actual inadequacy of this one-room dwelling as a shelter for an entire family and further subverting the initial pastoral image.

Young George, who is an adult at this point, also spells out the symbolic dimension of the form of the cabin (Hoagland 79). It is this articulation that makes the novel come full circle. After having freed all of the enslaved remaining on his parents' plantation, he informs them about Tom's martyrdom and Christ-like death:

> "One thing more," said George, as he stopped the congratulations of the throng; "you all remember our good old Uncle Tom?" George here gave a short narration of the scene of his death, and of his loving farewell to all on the place, and added, "It was on his grave, my friends, that I resolved, before God, that I would never own another slave, while it was possible to free him; that nobody, through me, should ever run the risk of being parted from home and friends, and dying on a lonely plantation, as he died. So, when

> you rejoice in your freedom, think that you owe it to that good old soul, and pay it back in kindness to his wife and children. Think of your freedom, every time you see *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*; and let it be a memorial to put you all in mind to follow in his steps, and be as honest and faithful and Christian as he was" (Stowe 572, original emphasis)

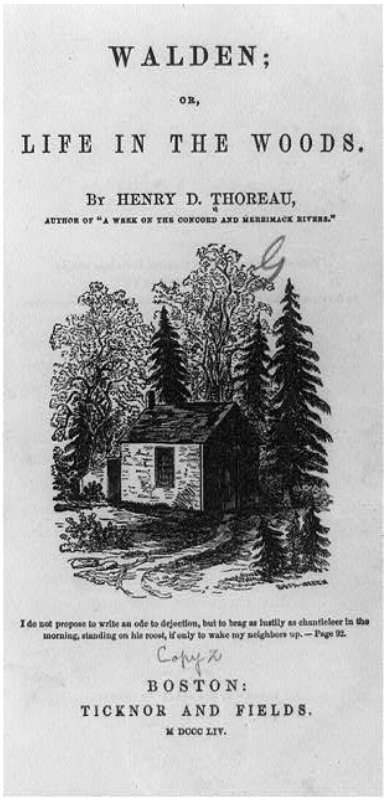
This powerful evocation of the cabin reveals its structural significance for Stowe's abolitionist agenda despite – or just because of – its relative absence from the plot. Oliver pinpoints that "[t]he cabin is more than a catchy part of the title: the cabin is the formative image for the novel. Not the cabin as structure, but the cabin as meaning" (356). However, the form of the cabin here matters as "both icon and shelter" (Hoagland 8) as Young George's evocation conflates its materiality with a symbolic glorification of Tom's Christ-like sacrifice for the future freedom of the Black – and, as Stowe implies, the entire US-American – community. Stowe's visual evocation of the pastoral's spatial aspect in the last sentence of the book – "Think of your freedom, every time you see *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* . . ." – completes her strategic pastoral defined with Klestil as "potentially future-oriented, as it links a doubled vision enabled through the slave narrative's rhetoric of visibility to a doubling of time" (90). Like a never-ending Moebius strip, this interconnected "doubled vision" and "doubling of time" turns backwards to re-envision both the pastoral and the anti-pastoral cabin as experienced before and during Tom's disposal as well as forward to "expressing a utopian hope for a world without slavery" (Klestil 90) when Tom's cabin will have been returned to its pastoral state. The fact that Stowe here uses a different font to refer to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests, as O'Loughlin highlights, "that George's speech refers not just to the physical structure of the cabin, but to Stowe's novel itself. The inspirational purpose of the novel is similar to that of the cabin, to create a memorial that could stand for and motivate ways of acting and feeling" (593–94). It is, after all, Stowe's strategic pastoral as epitomized in the form of the cabin that affords the vision and version of a nation without slavery – not only in the storyworld but also in the 'real' world.

Henry David Thoreau's (Anti-)Pastoral Cabin

From 1845 until 1847, for two years, two months, and two days, Henry David Thoreau lived in a self-built cabin on the property of his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, at Waldon Pond outside his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. In 1854, he published his experience under the title *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. After the initial reception was already rather positive, the work eventually became a classic not only of nature writing but of US-American literature (Dean and Scharnhorst). It is therefore no surprise that ecocritical scholars focused on Thoreau when ecocriticism became institutionalized as a field of academic study in the 1990s. Lawrence Buell's 1995 *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* ascribes a formative role to the author of *Walden* for the emergence of proto-

ecological awareness in the second half of the 19th century (as clearly indicated by the book's title). Buell's dictum of a "more 'ecocentric' way of being" (1) permeating Thoreau's writing influenced a wave of new scholarship that focused on themes such as Thoreau's life (Walls), his take on politics (Bennett, J.), his unorthodox view of economy/economics (Kelleter), and, crucially for the present context, the role of his cabin (Maynard; Quigley; Curtis).

Walden's portrayal of what would become one of the most iconic cabins in US history initially evokes pastoral images and associations not by meeting readers verbally but by engaging them visually through the frontispiece of the book (Figure 3). The structure of the front page shows similarities to that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: The font is plain and presents the title, author, bibliographic information, and a quote from the novel. The center of the frontispiece is occupied by the only existing visual representation of his cabin – a drawing by Thoreau's younger sister Sophia. The style of the engraving is as simple as the cabin, which seems to be merging with the surrounding trees; natural object and natural environment appear to be in organic symbiosis. This effect is achieved through the shading of the cabin's front face, which is simultaneously concealed and highlighted by the tall dark firs to its right. A few smaller fir trees frame the cabin's front while some other trees can be found along its backside.


WALDEN;

OR,

LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,

AUTHOR OF "A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS."

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up. — Page 92.

BOSTON:

TICKNOR AND FIELDS.

M DCCC LIV.

Figure 3: Title page of Henry D. Thoreau's *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, showing Thoreau's hut at Walden Pond, in the public domain.

The drawing gives the reader both a concrete representation of Thoreau's pastoral cabin and a not-so-subtle hint at the literal and literary centrality of this architectural form for the book they are about to open. It is hence surprising that any description of the cabin – and any narrative detailing of the form of life materializing therein – is

deferred until well into "Economy," the first and by far longest chapter of *Walden*. The bulk of the chapter instead engages in a fierce and often sarcastic critique of US-American society, with the first-person narrator, that is Thoreau's persona, aiming to expose what he perceives as the adversities of materialism, conformity, and acquisitiveness. The question concerning the right and proper dwelling is the focal point of this critique as "[m]ost men appear never to have considered what a house is" (Thoreau 35) – unlike the narrator as the frontispiece already indicated (Quigley 95–124). Withholding the narrator's cabin through this narrative latency marks and highlights the contrast between "[t]he mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation" (8) and the proposed antidote to this condition, namely the narrator's temporary flight from the confines of 'civilization' in order to regenerate in and through nature – this classic pastoral move. In the course of immersing themselves in the book, the readers slowly grasp what critics have identified as "the two major elements in *Walden*: the story of how [Thoreau] lived at the pond, and the comparison of what he lived for with what many people of New England lived for" (Shanley 19, qtd. in Woodson 443).

The cabin, eventually, is introduced twice in the text, for the first time roughly in the middle of the first chapter when it does not yet exist:

> Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise. (Thoreau 40–41)

Unsurprisingly, an Emersonian self-reliance underlies the Walden experiment: The narrator first has to build his dwelling instead of merely and mindlessly 'consuming' it like his fellow countrymen and -women. Nonetheless, this self-reliance has its limits as the narrator essentially also relies on his neighbor in order to be equipped and thus able to build his house in the first place.

A few pages later, the cabin has been constructed and the narrator provides a detailed description:

> I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-feet posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite. The exact cost of my house, paying the usual price for such materials as I used, but not counting the work, all of which was done by myself, was as follows; and I give the details because very few are able to tell exactly what their houses cost, . . . (Thoreau 48)

What follows is a painstakingly detailed account of the cabin's material and its prices. This passage affords a few insights crucial for the entire *Walden* endeavor. Firstly, the exact measures lay bare that this is a rather small cabin and hence indicate Thoreau's status as a single person without a family to take care of. Secondly, accounting for his cabin demonstrates the simplicity of this lifestyle and consequently lends

credibility to his foregoing critique of industrial society; he is keeping book in order to show that anybody could afford this. Thirdly, the excessive accounting of cabin materials, food, and all other expenses ironically deconstructs the underlying rationale of the United States' emerging proto-capitalist society, as Michael Zakim highlights:

> Thoreau soon made the culture of the bottom line the subject of extensive ridicule in *Walden*, which he wrote in general protest against the commodity form's deleterious effects on American civilization. His assault on the ledger was most pointedly on display in the facetiously pedantic record of expenditures with which Thoreau pretended to document the superiority of his alternative economy. (95)

The economy Thoreau has in mind is an economy of living inspired and taught by the economy of nature (Kelleter 177–92), which motivates the narrator to flee 'civilization' in favor of 'wilderness,' "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach" (Thoreau 90).

The Walden endeavor in general, and the cabin in particular, can thus be interpreted through the lens of the pastoral ideal (see Marx 242–63 for a reading of *Walden*'s pastoral). However, the book also bears traces of the anti-pastoral, traces that bear witness to the Black experience and heritage and that are relevant for my reading of the cabin as a form that enables imagining and speculating about different versions of the United States. The chapter "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors" interjects biographical sketches of those dwelling at Walden Pond before Thoreau set up his cabin there. Many of the former dwellers had been enslaved at the beginning of the 19th century and fled to the woods when they acquired their freedom. Thoreau records their lives and legacies, for example Cato's, about whom "[s]ome say that he was a Guinea Negro. There are a few who remember his little patch among the walnuts, which he let grow up till he should be old and need them" (Thoreau 257). While only a few remember him and his place in person, Thoreau makes sure to put him on record in and through his writing. Some of the former inhabitants were also cabin dwellers such as Zilpha – "a colored woman" – whose small house was to be found around the corner of his own bean field,

> where she spun linen for the townsfolk, making the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing, for she had a loud and notable voice. At length, in the war of 1812, her dwelling was set on fire by English soldiers, prisoners on parole, when she was away, and her cat and dog and hens were all burned up together. She led a hard life, and somewhat inhumane. One old frequenter of these woods remembers, that as he passed her house one noon he heard her muttering to herself over her gurgling pot, – "Ye are all bones, bones!" I have seen bricks amid the oak copse there. (257)

As passages such as these indicate, Thoreau's nature writing – just like Stowe's anti-slavery novel – can be read as a strategic pastoral consciously deploying its spatial and temporal aspects to foster a political agenda. In stark contrast to the pastoral

idyll his own cabin affords and which he delineates meticulously, Thoreau acknowledges the anti-pastoral impulse underlying his predecessor's dwelling, as Zilpha, the formerly enslaved person, had to lead "a hard life, and somewhat inhumane" that readers are enabled to visualize (257). Thoreau hence not only describes the flora and fauna of his present environment but mobilizes the temporal aspects of the pastoral. In this way he reaches out into the past to retrieve the lived experiences of the formerly enslaved who had inhabited this piece of land beforehand, thus doing justice to their very experience and existence as US-American citizens.

Tracing the often-ignored history of slavery in Concord, Massachusetts, Elise Lemire similarly acknowledges Thoreau's visionary groundwork in *Walden*, particularly in the chapter under discussion:

> That chapter . . . makes the case that the green spaces cherished in Concord today are not solely products of nature. They are the result of a highly stratified social order in which the highest echelon was comprised of Concord's wealthiest residents, more than half of whom were slaveholders, and the bottom echelon of slaves who were shunted by their former owners onto Concord's margins and left there to make a life for themselves as best they could. To put it more concisely, the history of slavery and its aftermath reveals that at least some of our nation's cherished green spaces began as black spaces, with Walden Woods a particularly striking case in point. (11–12)

Thoreau's work accordingly affords the insight that, while the present environment appears at first sight to merely comprise its flora and fauna, it is as much founded upon its past racial climate that materializes in "marks left on the landscape." If it is true that the "nation's cherished green spaces" – the various mobilizations of the pastoral ideal as in Thoreau's cabin – "began as black spaces" the latter acquire a double meaning: First, green spaces turn into Black spaces since they were the habitats of formerly enslaved Black people. Second, as Black people were forced into green spaces their relationship to them is complicated and oftentimes limited to a 'dark,' that is anti-pastoral, lens under the institution of chattel slavery.

Recalling that Thoreau was writing in a considerably worsened racial climate – marked by the "atmospheric density" of slavery (Sharpe 104) in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act – reveals his discussion of Walden Pond's prior Black inhabitants as highly political. Michael Jonik neatly pinpoints this often-overlooked dimension of *Walden* by reasoning that

> the political intervention his philosophy of dwelling-with offers is not only to be understood in terms of his own house, but also how Thoreau comes to think of those who are unhoused. His writing offers an archive of the unhoused: the African American slaves and Irish immigrants whose ruined houses and forgotten lives he memorializes in *Walden* . . . (173)

All in all, the speculative future of the nation envisioned in *Walden* is not one of monistic solitude but, quite on the contrary, one of enlightened community and

solidarity that potentially transcends the racial regimes of the day. The blistering sarcasm permeating the first part of the book has at times been read in isolation, thus contributing to the enduring stereotype of Thoreau as an anti-social hermit despising any kind of community. This one-dimensional perception overlooks the fact that, while at his Walden Pond cabin, he was still participating in communal life; most significantly, just as Thoreau needed his neighbor's axe to enable his self-reliance in the first place, solitude, here, is not a permanent escape or definite end in itself. Instead, the narrator's experience and description of nature enables him to develop a more organic and holistic understanding of the living community of all beings. In the course of the text, he increasingly replaces the ironic distance towards his human neighbors through mildness and grace, a change of perspective that is mirrored in his increasing use of "we" instead of "I." Consequently, by the end of *Walden*, both the book and the endeavor, Thoreau becomes a fellow sojourner of his neighbors again. His flight from 'civilization' into the domesticized 'wilderness' of Walden Pond probes the idea that a more natural, healthier, and more racially just future American community might be imaginable on the basis of the form of the cabin.

Cabin Fever, or: Back to the Future?

With respect to the literary imaginary, the first half of the 1850s was indeed what Matthiessen termed that "extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression" (vii), the young nation's "American Renaissance." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Walden* were part of this moment and demonstrate that its expressive power involved the cabin as a form to speculate about the future of the nation in various ways.

My readings have demonstrated that Uncle Tom's cabin is first portrayed as providing a kind of pastoral slave community, an apparent safe haven where his family is able to commune and enjoy moments of relief and peace. The initial portrayal of the cabin through a pastoral lens, however, is turned on its head to reveal its anti-pastoral underside: The presence of the slave master's white son Young George in the cabin demonstrates the reach of white supremacy into Black domestic space, while the selling of Tom explicitly deconstructs the pastoral fantasy as unattainable for the enslaved. This deployment of the cabin as strategic pastoral finds its climax at the end of the novel when it is explicitly evoked as the most powerful symbol for a future in which Tom's Christ-like martyrdom will have redeemed the nation from the past and present reality of slavery. The concrete form of the cabin brings together its material and symbolic dimensions and thus lends itself to expressing the future-oriented potential of a nation without slavery – for many a utopian vision at the time of the book's publication only two years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The immediate impact of the novel's call for a future which ought have overcome the horrors of slavery is arguably best exemplified in a popular anecdote (even though

Daniel R. Vollaro refutes its historical verifiability [18]): "Harriet Beecher Stowe's most famous introduction took place on or around Thanksgiving Day, 1862, when she was introduced to President Abraham Lincoln, who allegedly greeted her with these memorable words, 'So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!'" (Weinstein 1).

Henry David Thoreau's cabin is brought into position to contrast with the deadening living, dwelling, and working conditions of those "who are said to live in New England" (4), as the narrator sarcastically remarks. The cabin's pastoral dimension is grounded in the actual real-life counterpart Thoreau was inhabiting for two years during his flight from 'civilization' and already evoked through the iconic drawing by his sister which adorns the book's frontispiece. The painstakingly detailed account of Thoreau's building of *his* cabin might indicate a solitary, anti-social endeavor that is the basis for a merely individual spiritual regeneration. This cabin, however, also affords a political, future-oriented dimension, hinting at a version of the United States which can be explicated through the lens of the strategic pastoral: Thoreau mobilizes both the spatial and temporal aspects of the pastoral by contrasting his privileged cabin with the dwellings of the area's former inhabitants, many of whom had been enslaved. Going back in time to trace the Black heritage and experience transforms the very place he inhabits through his cabin by fostering the insight that Thoreau's former Walden neighbors most likely perceived their – and his – environment (also) as anti-pastoral given the de-humanizing regime of chattel slavery. The interplay of pastoral and anti-pastoral impulses serves as both the precondition of and the inspiration for the betterment of a society living in "quiet desperation" (Thoreau 8) and sweltering racial injustice. Thoreau, consequently, leaves the cabin and rejoins his townspeople to becoming more openly political and supporting the abolitionist movement more forcefully (Walls 169–70, 185–86; Ellis 61–95; Winkler 37–54). His veneration for wilderness and the underlying conception of nature as something beautiful, sublime, and inherently valuable has been hailed as shaping the environmental imagination of the entire nation in the 19th century, but his cabin affords much more than that, namely the vision of a more inclusive, attentive, and racially just nation.

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