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# “Promoting Black/White Intimacies through Listening Behind Doors: A Study of Eavesdropping,”

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**Promoting Black/White Intimacies through Listening Behind Doors:  
 A Study of Eavesdropping.**

As the title of my communication indicates, today I am going to look at instances of listening behind doors in 2 canonical texts of American literature, namely Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936).

The act of eavesdropping, overhearing or listening behind doors (whatever we may call it) is relevant, I believe, for a symposium on Black/White intimacies. Indeed, eavesdropping, because it is an improper activity on the border between inside and outside, between private and public, indicates that boundaries—whether social, racial, or gendered—may be transgressed or questioned. [...] the eavesdropper intrudes on private spaces and conversations and often finds pleasure in this violation of privacy. As a consequence, eavesdropping can suggest intimacies that should not or could not be created otherwise.[1]

**1. Intimacy is not the first thing that comes to mind when studying eavesdropping in UTC.**

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been criticized for “its reliance on offensive racial stereotypes” (Ansari 109). And we could argue that the painting of the black servant as a busy body or as an inquisitive ear, listening behind doors, certainly contributes to this racial stereotype. [2] In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, illicit listening certainly helps to paint the black servants as comic or trickster figures who spend their time “peeping, spying, and eavesdropping” (Shamir 118) behind their masters' doors. [3]

In most instances, the eavesdropping device is used as a cliché, only to reinforce, it seems, the position of the blacks as “grown-up children”, as stock figures who have escaped surveillance or parental control. Chap 1 presents Eliza, the Shelby's faithful servant, catching bits and pieces of a conversation behind doors. After sharing her doubts with her mistress Mrs. Shelby,

Eliza is being criticized for being a “foolish girl”, a “silly child,” a “goosie” that shall not “go listening at doors any more”.

In *Gone with the Wind*, eavesdropping scenes figure extensively throughout the novel. The Tarleton Twins, for instance, refer to “that black grapevine system which defies white understanding,” and present the darkies as spies who “know everything that goes on”. We read that the black servants Jeems and Mammy have notably become experts at acquiring significant pieces of information through their constant overhearing. Everyone, it seems, lives with a particular concern for public disclosure of secrets that might fall into the “wrong” ears. Scarlett’s father, Gerald, fears that someone might spy on him when coming back from one of his poker nights. Scarlett, also, lives with the fear that “if Mammy saw the closed doors she would be scandalized [. . .] but it would still be worse if Mammy should overhear this discussion of drinking” (787).

*Conclusion:* These episodes register an anxiety about the lack of private spaces, an anxiety due for the most part to the physical proximity between whites and blacks on the plantation grounds.[4] In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Miss Ophelia, the Northerner, complains to Augustine that the “house is never private” (Shamir 118).[6]. The house, she continues, is “so full of these little plagues, now, that a body can’t set down their foot without treading on ‘em. I get up in the morning, and find one asleep behind the door, and see one black head poking out from under the table, one lying on the door-mat” (280)<sup>1</sup>.[5]

2. At the most basic level, eavesdropping scenes are used to **provide narrative complication (and resolution)**. “Mandy reports that she “got into the closet” and “hearn every word” of her master’s suppressed anger toward his slaves (86). Andy decides to help Eliza escape because he overheard a dispute between his master and mistress “dis blessed mornin’, when I bring in Mas’r’s shaving water” (89). Tom equally will later learn of St. Clare’s despair over the death of his daughter Eva by “listening in the outer Verandah” (352). It is through eavesdropping that Adolph learns that his Mistress, Marie St. Clare’s, plans to sell the slaves (Tom included). We read that Adolph “hid ... behind the curtains when Missis was talking with the lawyer” (363, in *Inexpressible Privacy* 118). It is because they slept “with one ear open” that Simeon

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, Broadview Press, Apr 27, 2009

and Philleas, the two Quakers, could learn of the “track” taken by those who are chasing Eliza and George, both trying to flee to Canada (230).

The reliance upon eavesdropping does not, however, ONLY serve to sustain dramatic interest or to register the anxiety at closer intimacy with the dark other. As a matter of fact, one must remember that traditionally the plantation home in the South has been conceived as a secure, safe and insulated space, a “sanctuary of domestic felicity and peace,” (Smith) where slave-master relations were peaceful and ideal.

What both novels reveal is that eavesdropping appears as an activity that threatens the plantation as an idealized space, its inhabitants, and their secrets. The predominance of such clandestine activity within the space supposedly impervious to the terrors and vicissitudes of modern life renders suspect the ideology of the separate spheres as a raced and classed concept.

In *Gone with the Wind*, the act of eavesdropping is precisely what allows Margaret Mitchell “to complicate and disrupt the normal transactions” between masters and slaves (Shamir 118). In Mitchell’s case, the black/white intimacy is promoted by the whites’ need to acquire information through the illicit act of listening behind doors, a tool that is usually reserved or exercised by black inferiors. The Tarleton Twins, two Southern beaux from a nearby plantation (who are trying to invite Scarlett to a ball), seem to have a clear understanding of femininity and masculinity in the South (they are the ones who judge that Ashley is too queer about music and books). Yet neither can interpret Scarlett’s behavior: they do not understand why Scarlett acted so strangely upon hearing the news of Ashley’s engagement to Melanie (their secret). In order to understand what the matter is with the belle, the twins must rely on the “black grapevine system,” on Jeems, their black servant who cannot pretend “not having overheard the conversation.” The twins ask Jeems: “did you hear us say anything that might have made Miss Scarlett mad--or hurt her feelings” (16).

Here, Mitchell shows that the **rules of plantation management** and domestic ideology no longer apply. Eavesdropping shows that class and even racial divisions are inconvenient fictions. Indeed, rather than having a servant eavesdrop on its white employer in order to benefit from its secrets, here the master must appeal to the servant to benefit from his secrets. The novel here questions the respectable “domestic” virtues of a household founded upon less than virtuous racial and social intercourse: the twins here step over the racial lines, and in

doing so, they suggest that the private and public, the white and the black, the deviant and the norm, cannot, in fact, be neatly walled off from each other.

H.B. Stowe herself suggests just the same questioning of boundaries in her presentation of the St. Clare's plantation. It is indeed ironic that Stowe should describe the plantation as a glass house, suggesting that the private sphere may be easily given to public scrutiny. The house, we read, has large verandahs and sliding doors and is largely made of glass (the planter's study is described as a glass room) (Shamir 117).[7]

Not surprisingly, maybe, it is in this glass room that Stowe locates one of the most important scenes of eavesdropping in the novel. In this scene, we read: "advancing on tiptoe, he [St Clare] lifted up a curtain that covered the glass door, and looked in". In a moment, laying his finger on his lips, he made a silent gesture to Miss Ophelia to come and look". In this scene, St. Clare and Ophelia secretly listen to a private conversation between Eva, his daughter, and Topsy, the evil slave girl. Eavesdropping, here, implies proximity (certainly one between the heavenly Eva, presented as the "perfection of childish beauty" and the black girl, Topsy, presented by St. Clare, as "rather a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line".)

What the scene stresses, however, is also the paramount importance of conversation and language as an initiator of all human interaction. Indeed, at first, when Topsy makes her appearance in Chapter Twenty, she is not a positive figure. Stowe describes her in visual terms, as "one of the blackest of her race...her woolly hair braided in sundry little tails...odd and goblin-like in her appearance... so heathenish" (258). At the end of the scene, however, Topsy is turned upside down, from a specimen or a stereotypical dehumanized subject into an emotional being. Topsy confides into Eva that she is fully aware of Miss Ophelia's hidden disdain for her, saying, "She can't bar me, 'cause I'm a nigger! -She'd 's soon have a toad touch her!" (306).

This whole time Miss Ophelia and St. Clare have been listening from a window. What is important here is that this overheard conversation not only brings out the humanity into Topsy, but also embodies the entire humanization of Miss Ophelia, both in her understanding of Topsy's emotions and in the learning of her own innate prejudice as well. Miss Ophelia admits that "I never could bear to have that child touch me, but I don't think she knew it." Earlier, when she had arrived at her cousin's New Orleans mansion, Ophelia had been repelled by the sight of Eva kissing Mammy and sitting on Tom's knee. After this scene, Miss Ophelia,

the New Englander, who wanted to keep the slaves “out of sight and out of smell”, the one who could not accept the idea that “servants are human creatures” (249) is transformed into a loving character who sheds “honest tears” and later fully adopts Topsy as her daughter. Only eavesdropping on Topsy and Eva has, in his case, allowed for “touching” Topsy, for a real intimacy that upsets the logic of racial dichotomy on the plantation.[13] The text intimates that the discord between masters and slaves (enforced by ideas about the South and the visual (mis)appreciation or (mis)representation of the other) is being replaced, through eavesdropping, by a concord of feeling and emotions.

Uncle Tom’s readers, themselves, become are fully invited into acts of eavesdropping. Let me read the passage (260-261) with you:

"The child stopped on the stairs, to say something to Mammy."

And what was Eva saying to Mammy on the stairs? Listen, reader, and you will hear, though Marie does not.

"Dear Mammy, I know your head is aching dreadfully."

"Lord bless you, Miss Eva! my head allers aches lately. You don't need to worry."

"Well, I'm glad you're going out; and here,"—and the little girl threw her arms around her,—  
"Mammy, you shall take my vinaigrette."

In this scene, Marie St. Clare who is, from the beginning of the novel, presented as an expert at playing ill and at faking emotions, is not included in this space of secrecy where the intimacy between Eva and Mammy is exhibited. The reader, by contrast, is invited to participate into the black/white intimacy that only scenes of overheard conversation can, it seems, make possible. What is important here is that the center of power (Marie, the plantation mistress, the Southern Belle, and the adult) is purposefully relegated to the margins of knowledge (thus, of power). The norms of the South (in this case the Mistress and the Southern Belle, emblematic types of womanhood) are pushed off-stage and the deviant other (the “selfish” Mammy, the peculiar Eva who “always seems to put herself on an equality with every creature that comes near her”) come center-stage.

Like Mitchell, Stowe complicates and disrupts the “normal” transactions between masters and slaves. More importantly, I believe, Stowe also contests the disembodied nature of slavery and more importantly, she contradicts “the common southern view of the African Americans as an inferior emotionless race” (Jenkins). In the opening chapter, Stowe dismantles, for instance, the idea that slave-mothers (like Eliza) can be easily fooled and can easily recover from separation with their children. Mr. Shelby believes that it is enough to “arrange a drive somewhere, and carry Eliza off. Let the thing be done when she is out of sight”. (chap 5)

The belief in the credulity or silliness of mothers is justified, it seems, by the fact that slaves do not have feelings like whites. Marie St. Clare, for example, cannot imagine that Mammy (on page 151) “could [...] have the feelings that I should”. Marie asserts that “It’s a different thing altogether, - of course it is, [...] just as if Mammy could love her dirty little babies as much as I love Eva!” (151, chap 16).

Stowe, by contrast, and through eavesdropping, wishes to make visible the invisible, that is to bring to light “the true nature and inner emotions of the slaves” she portrays (Jenkins). First, when Eliza overhears Mr. Shelby talking to Mr. Haley. In a chapter titled “The Mother’s Struggle,” the reader experiences the devastating impact this has on Eliza and witnesses her overwhelming motherly emotions. She is described as, “Pale, shivering, with rigid features and compressed lips, she looked entirely altered being from the soft and timid creature she had been hitherto.” (42). “Stowe would ask readers of UTC to imagine what they would do ‘[i]f it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader’” (Karcher 205).[12]

**3.** In both novels, eavesdropping (or the information gathered through eavesdropping) offers, we understand, an aural (‘aʊ.ɪəl/) correlative to the spectacle of antebellum identities/specimens. Without this reliance on the sense of hearing or overhearing, our authors seem to suggest that trying to articulate, to think, or to represent Eva, Marie, Eliza, Topsy, Ophelia, or Scarlet in visual terms can only lead to Southern myopia (maɪ’əʊ.pɪ.ə).

So much is suggested in *Gone with the Wind*. No one, it seems, is better equipped to “see” the real Scarlett than Rhett Butler [14] In the library scene, Rhett, who can boast “a long experience in eavesdropping”, becomes the unwilling witness of Scarlett’s secret love declaration to Ashley. To Scarlett’s accusation that he is an eavesdropper, Rhett answers she has made “an apt observation” and reverses the dynamics of the accusation by adding that “no one can remain a lady after saying and doing what [he] ha[s] just overheard” (115). Of course, Scarlett’s secrets help sustain the dramatic interest in the novel. Yet, I believe that in this instance, Mitchell suggests that the point is not so much to figure out the secrets that are being disclosed but rather to explore how the idea of secrecy can figure or re-figure the Old South’s assumptions about gender, race and class. In this scene, if Rhett can boast “a long experience in eavesdropping,” it is Scarlett who is finally regarded as “the intruder” in this scene (115).

Rhett and Scarlett become equals, two intruders and two criminals placed on an equal footing. If Rhett is indeed “no gentleman,” Scarlett is “no lady” (115).

4. More importantly (and I will conclude on this), eavesdropping points to the unreliability of the visual (as a means of insight into the other). Let’s remember that *GWW*’s opening line was indeed that “Scarlett was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it”. Mitchell thus stresses that the impurity and the unreliability of the visual is a common thread running through the novel. It is again, (and maybe not surprisingly) in another scene of eavesdropping that Mitchell reconciles the public performance of the Southern lady and the private (yet real) Scarlett. Right after the library scene, Scarlett is about to regain the bedroom in which the Southern belles are taking their naps. Scarlett is about to slip into the dressing-room when she overhears one of the Southern Belles say that she (Scarlett) “acted as fast as a girl could act to-day” (117) because “all Scarlett O’Hara has ever done has been to stir up trouble and try to get other girls’ beaux” (118). In this episode, Mitchell seems to suggest that if men do fail to see that Scarlett “was not beautiful” (1) and if Scarlett’s tricks “never failed to convince foolish males of her sweetness and unselfishness” (117), these young Belles are no strangers to the real Scarlett.

Mitchell questions the ways in which the idealized female body—displayed for the pleasure of the white heterosexual “male” gaze—is made to express and reinforce cultural norms. In this scene, Mitchell reveals that the masculine (or patriarchal) gaze is not able to see beyond exteriors. We understand that, in order to get a clear picture of Scarlett (or a real intimacy with Scarlett), it is not only the (failing) male gaze that would need to be registered but the female gaze as well. In so doing, the novel, through eavesdropping, critically engages with the long history of women’s conflictual relationship with language in patriarchal culture, a culture where women’s voices have been so often discredited, marginalized or silenced.



It is important to notice that if *Gone with the Wind* opens with a line pointing to the unreliability of the visual, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* opens with a similar passage, one showing that visual features or appearances are often deceiving. Let me read that passage with you:

“Late in the afternoon of a chilly day in February, two gentlemen were sitting alone over their wine, in a well-furnished dining parlor ... For convenience sake, we have said, hitherto, two *gentlemen*. One of the parties, however, when critically examined, did not seem, strictly speaking, to come under the species ... He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world ... His companion, Mr. Shelby, had the appearance of a gentleman.” (13)

The italicization of “gentlemen” functions as a visual indicator to the reader that what these two men perform does not coincide with who they essentially are. The “short, thick-set man,” whom the reader later discovers is Haley the slave-trader, does not visually appear to belong to the gentleman “species.”

### **Conclusion:**

Quoting Rhett Butler, I believe that we can say that both authors have understood that “eavesdroppers often hear highly entertaining and instructive things” (115). Eavesdropping surely is a method of subversive exchange. At the most basic level, it highlights a subversive exchange of information or of secrets. At a deeper level, however, it also points to subversive human interactions and intimacies that forces us, readers, to question all received notions about human identity. Ansari argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a novel “determined to end a system that turns men into things” (110) [10]. We can safely argue that Harriet Beecher Stowe found that eavesdropping could be used to turn “things into fully-fleshed individuals. We realize that overheard conversation is used to bring out the humanity of the characters and to show that the slaves are more than “abstract and invisible entities”.[11] In *Gone with the Wind*, this time, and through eavesdropping, Southern beaux and belles, the “abstract, invisible, and often disembodied entities” of the Antebellum South are turned into fully-fleshed (and often deviant) individuals.

The end result, as we have shown, is that black and white intimacies can be created. Equally important, I believe, is that eavesdropping allows to create a literary intimacy between 2 authors who did not seem to have anything in common (Mitchell often ridiculed *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). They shared more than eavesdropping as a literary device. They both shared a desire

for humanization of a society often conceived uniquely in terms of stereotypes, hegemonic norms, and disembodied identities.

[1] Because eavesdropping is also a spatial definer, it also served to reinforce which frontier or which space (be it physical, racial, or social) was being transgressed and thus, needed to be reinforced or disciplined. Eavesdropping or overhearing also implies a particular placement of a listener in space; a space that transgresses the binaries of public and private areas and one that actually makes the relations between gender, identity, narrative and social agency more complex than what society and ideology often dictated.

[2] Thameemul Ansari, *Dimensions in Discourse : Elementary to Essentials*.

[3] Marie St Clare refers to listening behind doors as a common “trick” used by blacks on the plantation.

[4] A brief synopsis of the semantic field in *GWW* speaks for itself: the word “hidden” is mentioned 21 times, “secret” 96 times, “hide” 32 times and “private” 20 times. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the word “silence” is mentioned 10 times, “secret” 3 times, “hide” 3 times and “hear” 46 times.

[5] Milette Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy, The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature*.

[6] This reference is not so surprising in a society where “[a]nxiety over the establishment of boundaries played a large role in nineteenth century America’s conceptions and formulations of national identity” (Ph.D. Hollingsworth, 67). Hollingsworth, Lauren Colleen. *Reading the (In)visible Race: African-American Subject Representation and Formation in American Literature*. Lauren Colleen Hollingsworth, March 2010, University Of California, Riverside.

[7] “The proverbial glass house, both transparent and fragile, is an apt symbol for anxiety about the permeability of man’s propriety privacy, an anxiety triggered by the mere presence of the other within the house” (Shamir 117).

[8] Acts of eavesdropping certainly contribute to what Shamir would call the strategy of exposure (Shamir 102). For instance, it exposes aspects of Legree, the evil white planter, that are beyond the scope of the narratable. Cassy, Legree’s concubine, asserts that “I could make any one’s hair rise, and their teeth chatter, if I should only tell what I’ve seen and been knowing”. She says to Tom and Emmeline, “you wouldn’t sleep much, if I should tell you things I’ve seen”. As Shamir notes, “tellingly, it is the villain Legree whom Stowe depicts as harboring personality aspects that are intensely private, beyond the scope of the narration”

(Shamir, *Inexpressible Priacy*, 113). Obviously, it reveals what is hidden in plain sight, namely the haunting presence of slavery and the many skeletons living in the closets of Southern plantations and of evil masters like Legree. (Legree is literally haunted by the ghost of his dead mother and of a slave he whipped to death).

[9] If Stowe's novel forces white readers to witness the haunting (and often invisible) presence of slavery, it also forces black humanity (and feelings) to be witnessed (dans *Inexpressible Privacy*).

[10] *Dimensions in Discourse/ Elementary to Essentials*.

[11] "Though the eavesdropping device is no doubt a fictional commonplace, it takes on an additional resonance when the eavesdropper is a domestic slave (John C Havard 94). "Slavery and the Emergence of the African-American Novel," In *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature*, ed. Ezra Tawil. 86-100.

[12] *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Cindy Weinstein. « *Stowe and the Literature of Social Change* », by Carolyn L. Karcher, pages 203-218. In this instance, Stowe links Eliza's resistance as a slave and as a mother to her resistance as an eavesdropper. Stowe thus places the eavesdropping scene in a plot of prolonged defiance. Eliza does not trust her mistress' explanation. Eliza, Stowe suggests, cannot be resigned to be a docile subject under panopticon control.

[13] Of course, "this proximity [also] stands in tension with the perception that [slave holders] drew strict social boundaries between themselves and their chattel" (Havard 96).

[14] Rhett Butler, described in *Gone with the Wind* as "exceedingly dark," (179) dans *What Virtue There Is in Fire: Cultural Memory and the Lynching of Sam Hose*, Edwin T. Arnold.

[15] Krista Ratcliffe, "Eavesdropping as Rhetorical tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric" *JAC* 20.1 (2000): 87-119.

[16] De Ph.D. Hollingsworth, Lauren Colleen. « *Reading the (In)visible Race: African-American Subject Representation and Formation in American Literature* » Lauren Colleen Hollingsworth, March 2010, University Of California , Riverside.

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