***UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* RECONSIDERED**

A CONVERSATION WITH HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., HOLLIS ROBBINS, AND MARGO JEFFERSON

MODERATED BY THELMA GOLDEN

November 29, 2006

South Court Auditorium

New York Public Library

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DAVID FERRIERO: Welcome to the New York Public Library, I am David Ferriero, director of the research libraries here at NYPL. I'd like to begin by thanking the Studio Museum in Harlem, our cosponsor of tonight's discussion, and by welcoming Skip Gates, coeditor of the new, annotated edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that will be discussed here tonight. He is the W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of Humanities at Harvard and author of many works, including *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* and the editor of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. We also have Margo Jefferson, *New York Times* critic and Pulitzer Prize winner, whose latest work, *On Michael Jackson*, has been described as a book closer in spirit to a performance by the King of Pop himself, something graceful, capable of moves both liquid and percussive. And our moderator, Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem is as I said, our cosponsor tonight. Thelma came to the Studio Museum from the Whitney, where she curated many notable exhibitions, including Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art. At the Studio Museum, Thelma

oversees one of the city's cultural treasures—a rich exhibition program, an important artists in residence program, education and public programming, school, youth, senior, and family outreach programs. And finally, Hollis Robbins, who is Skip's coeditor on this book. Hollis is a member of the Humanities Faculty of the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University, and she's currently working on a wonderful book-length project entitled *Post Office Stories: Communication, Circulation, and the Structure of Narrative Literature*. Ladies and gentlemen, our four guests.

(applause)

THELMA GOLDEN: Good evening, everyone. This is a great pleasure to be here, to have this conversation with these three incredibly exciting individuals. As I told Skip earlier, I came to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through James Baldwin, as many people did, but I actually had the privilege of being a student of Baldwin's in the middle eighties in Western Massachusetts, at Smith College, and he taught us *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by way of his essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," and then gave us somewhat of a sermon **(laughter)** about why we—what we should think and feel about Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself, so it was a great introduction to me into how I understood what this book really was about, and its great impact on Baldwin, and then ultimately on all of us. But that really is the *second* half of the story, and I'm wondering if you, Skip and Hollis, can talk about what brought you to this project of reexamining *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, I wanted to—first of all, I was approached by Bob Weil, an editor at Norton, because it never occurred to me to edit this book, and he asked if I was interested in doing it, and I asked Hollis if she was interested. And the reason I was interested is that I wanted to figure out how a book that was so popular among African Americans, particularly African American intellectuals, in the nineteenth century—Frederick Douglass, William G. Allen in 1853 reviewed it. Frederick Douglass wrote about it between 1853 and 1855. Du Bois in 1903 talked about how beautifully rendered the book had been. And James Weldon Johnson said the two most important

influences on the shaping of the African American literary tradition were *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* And he wasn't being ironic or cynical, or talking about it in a negative way. How a book that those gods of the black tradition could revere so thoroughly could become reviled for our generation, and the person who was the hero of that novel become the—or his name—become the epithet for race betrayal, for the worst thing that could you could possibly be in the African American tradition. So that's why I did it. Also, I fell in love with the book because I saw it when I was about nine years old on "Little Rascals."

(laughter)

THELMA GOLDEN: Do you want to go take a look at that now before—it's the best part.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: When Eliza crosses the ice floes and then when Little Eva dies, these are two of my most vivid memories from my childhood, and it's from *The Little Rascals*. And when was the film, the 1930s?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: I think it was 1937, yes.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Thirty-seven.

(*The Little Rascals* excerpt not transcribed)

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Little Eva's about to come back to life. **(laughter)**

(*The Little Rascals* excerpt not transcribed)

HOLLIS ROBBINS: The ice floes.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: There it is.

(*The Little Rascals* excerpt not transcribed)

(laughter)

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, it was a bit more powerful when I was nine years old. **(laughter)**

THELMA GOLDEN: Can you talk a little bit about what happened between the nineteenth century and this great popularity?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: What happened was the Great Migration. And as we know, started about 1910, and ending—well, historians, I think, end the Great Migration about 1970. Millions and millions of rural southern black people moved to urban areas, first, in the South, and secondly, southern people moved north. And by the first time we—well, Stephen Railton, at the University of Virginia, records the use of the phrase "Uncle Tom" in the sense that we use it today was in 1919 at a Marcus Garvey rally, and Bishop McGuire, and he used it in the way that we would use it. And so I spent a lot of time thinking about that. There was a huge class division within the African American community. There was always a class division within the African American community, of course. But when these southern migrants came to these settled, northern, urban communities, the class tensions implicit in the race just exploded. So there were many essays. Go back and read Du Bois's "Philadelphia Negroes," published in 1899, it's very condescending about people from the south—"new arrivants," as Braithwaite would say.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And then expressions start emerging, like, you know, clothes that look kind of country, what's she doing in that mammy-made dress? You know, and it's Aunt Chloe from *Uncle Tom*.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Absolutely. So by the Harlem Renaissance, by the time that Alain Locke published *The New Negro*, in 1925, people were saying, "The day of

Aunt Jane, and the mammy or the Uncle Tom is over, there's a new negro here," so there were all different kinds of new Negroes. But it's the first time within the race that a word was used, a phrase was used to define who was in, who was out, who was politically correct, as we would say today, and who was politically incorrect, and that fascinates me, because I was born in 1950, I came of age in the mid-'60s and we know that Malcolm X famously called Martin Luther King an Uncle Tom and it *wounded* Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King—Malcolm X gave a speech in 1963 and the next night King gave a speech in the same city and was pelted with eggs because Malcolm had called him an Uncle Tom and said that he was the twentieth-century embodiment of this character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Which had come by that time to mean not only a toady to the white establishment, but absolutely lacking in any kind of virility, potency, vitality.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: That's right. Right, and James Baldwin introduced *that* concept in his essay, which you had to study in your class in Amherst. He said that Uncle Tom was sexless and that—literally and figuratively sexless, and of course you don't see him as a virile figure in the novel, but the novel certainly is not sexless at all.

THELMA GOLDEN: And you say that in your introduction. Can you speak a little bit about that?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, are we going to let Hollis talk?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, I came to it very late, actually. I didn't read it growing up. It had already not been in part of the school curriculum. So I didn't read it until graduate school, and I thought, "Oh my god, this is a book about sex." **(laughter)** I wasn't quite sure how it was, but I realized it was all in the discussion of marriages and the various marriages—like Senator Bird and his wife, he comes home for one evening, and they already have five children—one is dead—and he's like, "I thought I'd just come home for an evening of warmth." And I thought, "Oh! Okay." And I started looking at the

Quaker couples and all the other couples—George and Eliza are very loving, very caring, except the one couple that I thought *didn't* seem to be loving, though they had a lot of children, or three children, was Tom and Chloe, and I wondered what Stowe was doing with that, why she, even within his cabin, was not showing him to be virile, and it made me think, "Well, I think that probably has to do with him spending the entire book with Little Eva sitting on his lap, and that just really kind of wouldn't do." And so we started talking about that.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Right.

THELMA GOLDEN: And you talk a little bit about how you came to thinking about this format of the annotations, and the place in which you enter into the text, and begin thinking about some of these themes that in this fantastic volume, you know, get illuminated.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, Hollis was able to read it in graduate school because a really strong group of feminist critics, such as Jane Tompkins and Liz Ammons and Ann Douglas, resurrected this book and they read it through a feminist lens, and I thought, "Wouldn't it be interesting if what they were able to do for a female readership with this novel, we were able to do for an African American readership?" In other words, to recuperate *Uncle Tom* as a novel from the—this horrible history that all of us associate with the name of the character. And Hollis, it was Hollis's idea, actually, to try to use, to imitate the way a black audience talks to a movie, you know, for those of you who have never gone to a movie with a black audience, I encourage you to do so, as—

HOLLIS ROBBINS: It's very loud. It's very, very, very, very loud.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And it's call and response, and so we decided to do a call-and-response technique with the—"Uh, oh, here he comes now, don't go down those steps, don't go up those steps." **(laughter)** And we decided to do that.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, I was teaching, or writing the bulk of the annotations with Skip while teaching an African American literature class in Mississippi with a number of very loud black men in the class who had never read the book before, who were not English majors, and would call out all the time, I mean, that book among other things, and saying, you know, "What's going on there? Why is she calling him that?" You know, so I felt like a lot of my responses, a lot of our annotations, were speaking to a person who wasn't a scholar, who was being turned off by the book, was being turned off by this sort of "woolly-haired imps" language, by the overt sentimentality, who perhaps, well, as you have found, have come to like the book, your students, but need a little hand-holding.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And it's hard going. I mean, there is a lot of woolly-haired n-words in this book.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yeah, and there's a lot of preaching, a lot of very sentimental Victorian, we women are the carriers of the highest feelings, and when I'm at my best I will bestow these qualities of tenderness and sensitivity unto the Negro, and perhaps that's his gift, but these things, which leads me, actually, to my next question, they are they both sum up and then explode into the culture. Talk a little about this enormous range of illustrations you've got, because part of what happens with this book is, you know, it becomes a talking, walking, multimedia phenomenon, you know. It lives in minstrel shows, in cartoons, in dramas, in movies. Every actor from—or playwright, from Clifford Odets to D. W. Griffith plays in it at some point, I mean it's amazing.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I mean, this book never met a genre that it didn't like, or that didn't like it. It's just extraordinary. In fact there's a fascinating set of exchanges between Stowe and her publisher about the royalty rate. I mean, as you know, this became the greatest-selling novel in the history of the novel, overnight, within a month, and Stowe had been talked into taking a 10 percent royalty rather than a 20 percent royalty. And Jewett was the publisher, and he said, "Yes, but I'm going to take the other 10 percent and put it into advertising for musicals and for other forms," and even commissioned John Greenleaf Whittier to write a poem, which was set to music, about

the death of Little Eva. And, actually, it's not clear, I mean it was a publisher's hustle, Bob Weil tried the same thing on me **(laughter)** but my agent wouldn't go for that. But they were exceedingly successful in transforming this book into other genres right away. By the time she sailed for England, within a year of its publication, it had sold a million and a half copies, and there were already musical forms emerging. Five hundred thousand women had signed—in the U.K.—had signed a petition, five hundred thousand, protesting slavery, awaiting, and this petition awaited Harriet Beecher Stowe's arrival in England. I mean, it's just amazing. We can't *imagine* how hot this book was and how many forms it took. So we decided that we wanted to include a lot of the visual images, so we did a lot of research. We used the Image of the Black in Western Art Project, which is located at Harvard. Karen Dalton, who's unfortunately ill, did a lot of the research for this, and we were able to find—Hollis, why don't you walk them through?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, this one is kind of one of the more interesting ones, because Emmeline, who is a slave, let's just stop this one, stop this one, well, here's actually a good one to stop with for a while. Eva and Topsy.

MARGO JEFFERSON: This is the one by the French, a woman artist, isn't it?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Louisa Corbaux.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And they were among the—they're kind of gorgeous, actually.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: They're beautiful, yeah.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: In this one, she's, Emmeline, who ends up on the plantation with Simon Legree at the end, who is light-skinned here, extraordinarily so, I mean you see the images in a range of color. I guess this is little bit more solemn than the Little Rascals version. **(laughter)** This one's the Classics Comic Book version from 1953.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Which is a bit riskier, I believe than—

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Yeah, that's—I love that one. And the same image here, but. This one we found actually—

(laughter)

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Isn't that great?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: It's actually called "Condoleezza Rice Crossing the Ice." **(laughter)** And I called him up, Elliott Banfield, to ask, you know, if we could use this for this book, and I think he was a little surprised. Made us pay full price for it. This is one of the darker, not physically, images of Topsy. Usually she gets romanticized in some of the later images, but here is actually a little bit more as Stowe would have, I think, intended. We see a whole range of—this is, oh, this is Little Eva as Chelsea Clinton, but you see Tom growing and growing young and growing old in various ways in some of these images here. He actually looks a little bit virile, but he has gray hair and he's some distance away from Little Eva. This is kind of out of order, he's dying here. But he's gone back to being very, very manly, as we can see, and earlier on, this is the other image. Again, many of these images, the illustrators strive to make sure that when Tom is in proximity with Little Eva it is not provocative in any way. Here when he first meets her, let me go back to that, he's virile, but we don't really know what's going on under the water. **(laughter)** But this is characteristic of much of many of the later nineteenth-century images. This is a cover image, where, when Eva is, as in the earlier Hammatt Billings images, close to him, I think the word is dandling on his knee, that he becomes very old and has this fringe of white hair that we saw in the—this one's a little bit dark, but much the same here—the fringe of white hair that became so characteristic that we saw Little Rascals doing it. And again, how safe is he there?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And the text worries about his safeness. Ophelia asks, "I mean, how can you let your child, you know, hang around, hang onto this black man, I mean, kiss him, hug him," and he responds that "Well, he's just like an old dog, so you

wouldn't mind your child petting an old dog," but the first time that the sexual implications of their relationship hit me over the head, I was in an antiquarian shop, and it was an old postcard, a trade card, from probably the 1940s or the 1950s, which I stupidly didn't buy, and it was a virile black man coming out of the ocean carrying this blond-haired, blue-eyed woman in a sheer nightgown, and she was dripping wet, and the caption was "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and I went, "I have to read that book again."

(laughter)

HOLLIS ROBBINS: I just had a couple other ones here. This one I had on while you were talking, because it seemed apropos, **(laughter)** because he famously doesn't drink throughout the entire thing, and then this is sort of the most famous image, the postcard that one sees everywhere titled "Uncle Tom: An Old-Fashioned Southern Negro," who is not at all like what Stowe wanted, or, actually, I should say this one, it's kind of my favorite. You can't see it well, but he's got a really nice gleam in his eye.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Thank you, Hollis.

THELMA GOLDEN: Margo, I was wondering if you could talk about the fact—your work has been so much about dissecting images and what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has given us is a catalog of images that have lived on in a way.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And on and on and on and mutated wildly. Well, yes, Skip and Hollis have presented our Uncle Tom—Uncle Thomas—and you have—Topsy and Eva are very fascinating to me because Eva, really, as this little, blond, exquisite Victorian child—I suppose you could say she's connected to Dickens's Little Nell and all of that—but she really becomes a kind of pedophiliac pinup girl, you know, she absolutely becomes as the shows take her over and, you know, movies and all of that, she becomes this little, you know, adorable, sexualized figure who is simultaneously so innocent. Topsy, of course, becomes, you know, the little pickaninny, and the dancing, singing, this natural talent, and the reproach of every, you know, young black woman ever to be

raised. But Topsy is the unbounded spirit of black talent, but also the black with no parentage, the wild, dangerous creature. Topsy and Eva show up in all sorts of strange place. They show up in Marlene Dietrich's dressing room in *Morocco*. They're her little fetish objects. They show up on the keychain of a child molester in a Chester Himes novel. Shirley Temple, to my mind, embodies the, you know, fusion of Topsy, because she can dance and sing and she's very bodacious, and she's got Eva's little curls, and you're not supposed to feel sexual towards her, but she quickly becomes the best-selling actress, above the Ginger Rogerses, the Dietrichs, the Garbos, in Hollywood, and Graham Greene writes a piece pointing out, you know, dear God, how sexy she is. Then she gets mated with Bill Robinson, Bojangles, who's a kind of Uncle Tom, and it turns out that the man who suggested that they be paired is none other than D. W. Griffith. **(laughter)** Now, you know, so *Birth of a Nation* has come out. What did Wilson say, "History writ—"

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: "Writ with lightning," right?

MARGO JEFFERSON: There we go. That's come out four years before this wonderful fact that you've just unearthed, that "Uncle Tom" is used for the first time, so clearly this dynamic is going on. I think that Griffith is trying to outdo Eliza's by this time, you know, fabulous flight across the ice when he has Lillian Gish floating down the ice floes in, you know, in *Way Down East*, so there are all these subterranean *things* going on. It's still being turned into plays, and Cassie, you know, is the dazzling mulatto, but I would actually want to ask you two to talk more about sex in this book, because it does seem to me that Cassie, you know, the angry, bitter mulatto, she actually—she almost runs away with the book.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: She does.

MARGO JEFFERSON: She has had sex, she is full of rage and anger. She's wildly moody, she's incredibly clever, she's almost a villainess, but she's also a heroine. And she and in a funny way Topsy represent this sort of unbounded female psyche. Topsy is

created right after Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, you know, so they're the ones who in some way represent this undomesticated female anger that Harriet Beecher Stowe as a middle-class, virtuous Christian woman, can't, I think, you know, express fully.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: No, I think what you've said is absolutely spot-on. In fact, we tend to forget that Tom dies protecting two black women.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Thank you.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: You know, how bad is this? Uncle Tom, you will recall, is beaten to death because he won't say where Cassie and Emmeline are, and they're hiding up in the attic.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Let me ask you a question as two scholars, though—is that—because your footnotes also point out all the mixed motives and you know emotions and the voice of Stowe, whom you could strangle one moment and then cheer the next. Is it entirely the responsibility of the readers that one forgets that with Tom? Or does it also lie in his creation, his representation, as a character. You know, you've talked—in a sense you've touched on it with the sexuality that is muted, but not.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, he has to stay a little bit distance from her. Leslie Fiedler talks about how she's very much of a Mary Magdalene figure, this sort of long-hair fallen woman that he saves, in a way, and brings into the family structure and I think the way Stowe brings her into the family structure at the end, with all the coincidences, with everybody being related to one another, so therefore they're safe, and their past indiscretions are then forgiven, and I think that's part of the distancing that you're talking about. That then we see him as acting as—not only as a Christ figure but as somebody—you forget the plot that happened up to that point. He's dead, everybody else is happy, and so he must have done something, what was it again?

MARGO JEFFERSON: Right. Or he must have been too weak to live, even though he's a Christ figure.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Right. But Cassie uses her charms, as it were, to protect Emily, because he buys this other tragic mulatta to abuse, Simon Legree does, and Cassie, who's in and out of his bed, goes back into his bed, in effect, in order to protect this fifteen-year-old, I think she's about fifteen years old. And then concocts this brilliant strategy of going up into the attic, pretending that they've escaped to the swamp, but they're really hiding up in the attic, and they—so they manipulate the trope of the madwoman in the attic, by—invert it—by pretending to be ghosts, representing themselves as ghosts, and spooking, as it were, Simon Legree. So it's a very clever representational strategy going on, with Stowe, to be taking conventions and turning them on their head. And there's no question that Cassie's sexy to me. I mean, she is a voluptuously sexy woman in the text, and I noticed that right away.

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: As the tragic mulatta tends to be, because she's tragic, because she's genteel, and yet she's too good for her station, and she's always proving that black women are not *low*.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But think of her in relation to Eliza Harris, though. Eliza's not—

MARGO JEFFERSON: Eliza has some sex too doesn't she, yeah?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But the sex is represented in the gaze of the slave trader.

MARGO JEFFERSON: That's true.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But Cassie represents her own sexuality. She's very much in control.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes. Exactly. That's right. That's right.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And she manipulates Legree. She's brilliant. She ends up escaping by pretending to be a ghost. I mean, it's quite remarkable, but, tragically, those actions lead to the death of our hero, Uncle Tom. But it's a good question that you asked. I mean, how would you change it? If you were trying to make a hero for the ages, right? You know, I keep thinking, "Who was the audience for this book?" So we could go to Bishop T. D. Jakes's church, right, and everyone in the church could read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Uncle Tom would be a hero. I mean, he is the Christ figure, he dies to save these two black women, I mean, it's quite wonderful, but if you try it with a group of hip-hop-oriented adolescents, it's harder to pull that off, it's harder to represent him as a hero, to recuperate him from degradation back into the ranks of the hero.

THELMA GOLDEN: This takes us back to some of what you point out—both of you—the link with Baldwin. You talk, more than once, about the various homoerotic threads also going on, you know, partly set up because he is passive and feminized, or seems passive, and is a feminine Christ figure. So could you talk a little more about that?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: He is, and Leslie Fiedler also calls him a white mother, that he's the best mother in the book, that he's sweet, that he's kind, he's thin, he's soft, he's covered with flowers in the whole second part of the book.

THELMA GOLDEN: And he takes care of everyone.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: And he takes care of everybody, and it is—to get back to the Cassie question for a second, it's the one place in the book where we see Stowe's Christianity not being enough for the plot.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Exactly.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Because Cassie's—Cassie's supernatural concerns, her, the ghost stories, the Stowe having Legree thinking there's something magical about Eva's locks of hair, that Stowe has to reach for something that's out of the Christian discourse for a minute, and then brings it all back in, and has—

MARGO JEFFERSON: Exactly. And she's beside herself with happiness at that period of time.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: And again, at that moment, when Tom dies, he doesn't die in Cassie's arms, he doesn't die in Emmeline's arms, he doesn't die in Lucy's arms. He dies in George Shelby's arms.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And without Eva's locks of hair.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Exactly, so what's up with that? As my students would say.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, right. Too dangerous, too potent, that's what's up with that.

THELMA GOLDEN: Which really brings us to—how do we read this novel, now? I mean, you teach this as well, Margo, as Hollis does, so how do you imagine that with all of that, how are we able to read this novel now and understand it within contemporary culture and history?

MARGO JEFFERSON: Oh, doesn't Hollis want to go? **(laughter)** No, it's very difficult, because, if students are reading, and I think this flawed thing as a novel that Henry James, with his usual suppressed sense of sexuality, called "an enormous flying fish of a novel," you know, it's extraordinary, I think it is a kind of national epic, don't you? But you know, your national epics aren't necessarily your best novels. It came out

around the time of *Moby-Dick*, one year after, two years after *The Scarlet Letter*. So you have to—I think you partly have to teach it as this cacophonous thing that's busting, breaking all forms, for one thing. It's almost like, you know, an opera. There's all of these characters with their different voices. She has a *wonderful* ear—

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Great ear for black dialect—

MARGO JEFFERSON: And white, you know.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Better than black, than the authors of the slave narrative. I mean, look at William Wells Brown's dialect—it's terrible.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I know, it's a little lame.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And hers is—

MARGO JEFFERSON: No, hers is absolutely spot on. She's got New Englanders, she's got, you know, working-class New Englanders and southerners. And she's got this wonderful secular sense. I mean, the book opens with these two men of different classes, smoking, talking about money, property, and it's, you know, it's kind of a seductive scene.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But she's a snob.

MARGO JEFFERSON: She is a terrible—of course, what middle-class white woman, what middle-class *woman* of the nineteenth century is not going to be a snob? She's absolutely a snob, and you're right, she's too easily snobbish about the slave trader. But the problem with this book is it's so easy to feel superior to it, because she exposes her flaws at every moment. You know, because she is inside it. She is a participant. She doesn't have that full novelistic, you know, "I'm the master," and I don't even know that she wanted to. But that really is the problem—how do you get them to acknowledge that

everything this woman is talking about, you know, from struggling with what we think of as racial traits, even though we claim now that race doesn't exist, you know, to these strange marital triangles, you know, the father, the slave-holder, Eva's father, who is clearly in love with his daughter and *not* with his wife, you know, and how do you get them to see all of this complicated, you know, human, the American family, you know, the black family, the white family, this geographical sweep from North to South and not let them feel superior, that's the problem.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Or angry because of the contextual racism. I mean, there's not—any time a black character comes into the novel, you *know* that they're black because they're called woolly-haired or black-skinned or—

MARGO JEFFERSON: Ebony-hued.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And it's not a very polite thing.

MARGO JEFFERSON: For all of her snobbery, she had bad manners.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, bad manners. But if we could persuade a generation of black students to read it as an allegory of a different time in our people's history, a time of deferred gratification, a time of self-sacrifice—you know, a time when—by deferred gratification I didn't mean it in *that* way—I meant it.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I wasn't thinking that way. **(laughter)**

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I meant it in that, you know, we, our people had a future, and no matter how bad—we were the Israelites, we were the children of God, we were coming out of Egypt. And no matter how bad it looked, there was a better day coming, you just had to believe, and you had to make this crazy sacrifice in order for *us* to happen a hundred and fifty years later. And also, just *everybody* in the world wanted to read this

book. Everybody in the world wanted to read about this black man who was willing to sacrifice himself, you know, for this larger ideal of Christianity.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yeah, it's true. Who was better than any other person in the world. I mean, he really was an absolutely superior morally human being.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Right.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yeah, it's another chapter in America's obsession with the figures of black people, you know, and that's interesting, too. And it's one of the first potent chapters.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: The opening chapter.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's the opening chapter, that's right.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But it's very much too about the escape of black women, I mean, Eliza escapes, Cassie and Emmeline escape, well, George escapes, but Uncle Tom doesn't, unlike all of the narrators of the slave narratives, right—

MARGO JEFFERSON: This is very true.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: He is the one who stays back on the plantation. He is the one who picks the extra cotton for the slaves who are weak, and he's the one who is terminated at the end, for his principles. It's very—a contra-narrative, a contra-slave-narrative in that way.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, we used to get into—we had some very nice arguments about it—at what point in time *would* Tom raise his fist?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, right. If Little Eva, if Simon Legree had attacked Little Eva, I think that Tom would have lost his Christian principles and defended her. Do you think that's reasonable?

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, but I can't imagine the circumstances under which Simon Legree, unless he was molesting her, would have attacked her.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Right. Yeah. But that's the only way I can think of Tom actually fighting back. Which drove Malcolm X crazy. **(laughter)** It did. When you read Malcolm X's speech about Martin Luther King it just is this figure—the idea that you wouldn't fight back, it just is *unmanly* to him. In a different way than Baldwin. Baldwin talks about sexlessness. Malcolm talks about masculinity, about turning the other cheek, but he's anti-Christian anyway.

MARGO JEFFERSON: He is, and also, this is a woman's novel. Harriet Beecher Stowe is, you know, trumpeting, in her own way, you know, the purity, the power, of female religious self—and female secular implicitly—self-sacrifice, moral virtue. You know, it really is a struggle between the so-called male soul and female soul, that novel, don't you think?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, but that's what drove Baldwin crazy.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, indeed.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Because Tom becomes a feminine soul by not being masculine, quote-unquote, except he *is* masculine, he dies to protect these two women. So it's an ironic form of feminization, if indeed it is feminization. I interrupted you, I'm sorry.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: No, no, no, it's the book has—is getting a sort of new life in, there's a fellow named Wellington Boone, who is on the Promise Keepers circuit, and he

talks about this book as an excellent example of masculinity and he says this is Exhibit 1 of black masculinity. The name of his book is *Your Wife is Not Your Mama*. I looked in the index of the book to make sure—

MARGO JEFFERSON: This is its latest incarnation in mass culture.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: And he says, you know, "If being a man means laying down your life to protect your women, I'm an Uncle Tom, if being a man means selling yourself down into slavery to protect your family, I'll be an Uncle Tom." He takes a long list of it and apparently, I don't know how it's selling, the book, but. . . .

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Boy, if we could get on the Promise Keepers circuit, Bob, that'd be a happy day.

(laughter)

THELMA GOLDEN: What was your most interesting discovery in the research for this book. I mean, you all have some really copious, fantastic notes, and there's so much you seemed to unearth around the varying reactions and analysis. What was—for both of you, or either of you separately.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Do you want to start?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, actually, the funniest thing is something I ought to have known anyway, which I learned, actually reading Joan Hedrick's excellent biography of Stowe, is that Stowe in July, I think, of 1851, when she had started the book, wrote to Frederick Douglass to say something like, you know, can you help me out here with a little research?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, she wanted Douglass to describe what a real plantation would look like. **(laughter)** Harriet Beecher Stowe spent seventeen days in

Kentucky on a slave plantation, that was it. So she wrote to him saying, "I'm writing this thing in the *National Era*, I need a little research."

HOLLIS ROBBINS: And there's, as I think Robert Stepto said, "There's no record that he wrote back." **(laughter)** That was my favorite.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I think that the—Stowe's book was so popular, and upset so many people who were pro-slavery that all these people accused her of making it up, and particularly of exaggerating the horrors of slavery. So she immediately produced a book that was called *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was full of all these documents, a very difficult book to read. And she said that she had based Uncle Tom, the characterization of Uncle Tom, on a black man who had written a slave narrative, Josiah Henson. And Josiah Henson was a real person, and he escaped from slavery in 1849, I believe, and he escaped with his family. But there's no evidence. I mean, if you read Josiah Henson's book and you read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* there's no evidence to me that she is modeling Uncle Tom after Josiah Henson. So she's being very opportunistic, she had to cover herself in some sort of way, so there's Josiah Henson, so what does Josiah Henson do? He publishes a new edition of the book, *The Real Uncle Tom,* **(laughter)** and rewrites his life to conform to the portrait of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. **(laughter)** Now I think only in America, as Don King would say, could this possibly happen.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: And also, the other funny thing was in terms of the cultural afterlife, the book, the famous children's book *Black Beauty* was subtitled in its early editions, *The* Uncle Tom's Cabin *of the Horse*.

(laughter)

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: That's funny. I didn't know—I didn't know that Douglass—I knew about from Bob Stepto's book that she had asked Douglass to do a little bit of research for her. But I didn't know that Douglass had praised the book over and over again in his newspaper, Frederick Douglass's newspaper, and he talked about

how *authentic* its representation of slavery was. And much later, a hundred years later, black people would say, well, it's not authentic, or there were no black people who really were like this. But black people at the time thought that her portrayal of black slaves, and these are jealous, angry, you know, mean to each other, sadistic, black-black relations represented in that book.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Not all of them.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Not all of them, but plenty, showing the way that slavery debases. But I didn't know if contemporary black people would find that—because you don't find that in the slave narratives, you don't find that in the slave narratives.

MARGO JEFFERSON: You do find it in Harriet Jacobs, bless her heart, but she's you know, that's—

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Harriet Jacobs makes herself noble by showing the ignobility of the field hands. Right. She says, we were always very special.

MARGO JEFFERSON: That's true. And a few spiteful, jealous house people.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Her grandfather was a carpenter, we had a house, I could hide in the attic for seven years. And when you think about it, James Weldon Johnson was absolutely right. I mean that, in Harriet Jacobs's 1861 slave narrative, that hiding in the attic comes right out of—it's a revision of Cassie and Emmeline hiding in the garret, they even use the same word, garret.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's true, although this is interesting also. Harriet Jacobs wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe asking, you know, "Could you write an introduction? Could you help me with my book, I'm working on it." And Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote back, "Well, maybe I could use some of your life in my next book." **(laughter)** And Harriet Jacobs was furious.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: She said no way.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And then, though still angling, asked if maybe Harriet Beecher Stowe would let her young daughter, who was going to school in New England, go abroad with her, and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote back, "Well, I think that might make her a little too proud, being admired so much in Europe." This probably drove Harriet Jacobs to in fact go on and finish her book.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, Douglass, too. Douglass had an exchange, an interesting exchange with Harriet Beecher Stowe. Douglass, ever the capitalist, Douglass wanted a cut of the royalties to build a vocational school for African Americans and she promised that she would do this. And then she withdrew her pledge that she would fund his school, but Frederick Douglass—for those of you who haven't read it for a while—it ends with this long letter from George Harris to you, dear reader, about the wonders of colonization, about how the freed slaves should go back to Liberia or go to Haiti and form their own nation and then advocate for their enslaved brothers and sisters still in the South. And it *really* irritated Frederick Douglass, and that's the only part that he didn't like about the book. He said, "Dear Madam, we were born here and we are going to remain here." But Stowe thought that the solution, like Abraham Lincoln did, remember, that the solution to the problem, the Negro problem, the problem of slavery was colonization, meaning, you ship all these people back to Africa, or you ship them to Latin America and get them out of the country. It wasn't a "We Shall Overcome," miscegenation heaven that Harriet Beecher Stowe was advocating.

THELMA GOLDEN: I would love to open this to our audience, if you all are open to that at this point, and there are two microphones on either side of the room, we *are* recording, and I am going to ask that all of you who are asking questions that you actually ask a question and that you speak into the microphone. There is a question in the back, we can start on either side. The microphone holders—you guys are going to have to decide.

(technical adjustments onstage)

Q: I was wondering if that was the answers. You said that your first introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was through the Little Rascals. And for me, oddly enough, it was *The King and I*, where they actually do a staging of it, and then use it as this whole launching point to convince the king that slavery is wrong and all these things. Do you just have any—did that resonate at all with you, do you have any comments on that movie and how it was used in that story context?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, that's not how I first encountered the story, but I thought it was very powerful. I mean, I'm not sure what you're asking.

Q: I guess, as part of the resonance of the story through other forms of literature, how effective that was?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: The story within a story, I thought it was very effective.

MARGO JEFFERSON: You know it is the first time, the first version of it I ever saw and I was enraptured by that movie, and I think it's beautifully done and staged, but it seems to me that it also hooked up in the fifties with this ability to—slightly—for black people could slightly aestheticize and fetishize their suffering through certain Asian theatrical representations. I'm thinking of this in *The King and I*, I'm thinking of *Sayonara* with Marlon Brando, I'm thinking, a little later, of *Flower Drum Song*. You know, but there were a number of movies where there was the Asian/white cross, and it there was always a—all the black people I knew there was a kind of, "this is respectful, and it's subtextually erotic," and it was very aesthetic, so you could have that distance, and that seems to me an absolutely exquisite example.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But you're saying that white people—

MARGO JEFFERSON: I'm talking about black people.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But black people—but we weren't in control of those movies.

MARGO JEFFERSON: No, but I mean as audience members we often—I don't mean we fetishized and aestheticized as *makers*. I think it was a very useful—

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Oh, absolutely.

MARGO JEFFERSON: —way for us to, yeah. But, you know, you could think that the moviemakers were also, they were dealing with—it had to do with orientalism and imperialism, but you know maybe those did stand in, in the fifties, as tropes, as larger tropes for racism.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: But there's also something very interesting about that characterization in the musical, at least, that it's a harem that's putting it on, you know. And I have not quite figured out what to do with that. Why—you know, it's a group that is not part of the Christian heterosexual marriage thing that are finding something in that.

MARGO JEFFERSON: But Anna is a kind of Harriet Beecher Stowe figure, also.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Absolutely, right. And a Mrs. Bird from the novel. Yeah, absolutely. And it's a dark-complected, bald-headed king. It's a very phallic film.

(laughter)

THELMA GOLDEN: There's another question. We'll go to that side.

Q: You spoke about the desexualization of the Uncle Tom character, but I also was wondering about Topsy and how it seemed that in the life after the novel and in some of

the minstrel shows, she became this kind of genderless creature, and actually the Little Rascals, the Farina character and the Buckwheat character, which was kind of like a Topsy character, except it was played by a boy. So I was just curious if you have—

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I mean, Buckwheat is definitely neo-Topsy, to me. **(laughter)** I mean, from his hair. When I think of Topsy, I think of Buckwheat.

Q: But why the gender confusion in the depiction of the black child?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I don't know, what do you think?

MARGO JEFFERSON: She's preadolescent, she really is a child and nothing about her is ladylike, girlish in any way, you know, she really is kind of terrifying that way. She has no physical charms. She is *wildly* uncivilized. She says anything. "I never was born, no mother, no father."

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: She'll steal, she'll lie.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yeah, so I think in that way, she's set up to break through those, break across that.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But she ends up a lady in New England.

MARGO JEFFERSON: She does, alas.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I thought you were asking about Buckwheat, why would Buckwheat not be a girl in the Little Rascals, sort of? I mean, how many girls were there in the Little Rascals. Was it Marla? Darla, Darla was the only one.

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, in that Little Rascals when they saw that Topsy—that the same little kid had to play both Uncle Tom and Topsy because his little sister wasn't showing up.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Yeah, I had to do that in my school, too.

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: Just for the record, originally, the performance history is that Topsy, you know, Little Eva was always played by an exquisite young child in the theater company, or an older pretty woman, but in the early days, Topsy was always played by a grown white woman who was considered the broad comic in the company, so it became the way to act out and be naughty and wild and nasty and then it crosses gender.

Q: You were talking about wanting to introduce this novel to a contemporary African American audience and in the last five years a couple of prominent African American writers have introduced the novel. Charles Johnson introduced an edition in 2002. Christopher Paul Curtis, the Newberry-Award-winning author, introduced one.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Darryl Pinckney.

Q: I was wondering how you saw your edition in relation to those editions and what you were trying to do differently.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, they didn't do an annotated edition, that was the principal difference. We wanted to create a parallel text, really, between the visual history of the book with the critical reception to the book, and then through our annotations talk about how black people had changed their minds about this book. And to do it with a lot more patience and detail than the people that you named could possibly do, just given the limitations of their form. But, I think that Darrell Pinckney and Charles Johnson—I don't

want to be misquoted—I think all those guys did a great job introducing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Q: I'm a high-school English teacher, and you were talking about—I was very interested to hear you talk about the troubles that you have teaching *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Certainly the nineteenth-century American novel that deals with race that *does* frequently get taught at the high-school level is *Huckleberry Finn*, and I wondered if—I mean, a huge amount's been written on that, but I wonder if you could just comment on how you would maybe teach those two books together, or whether you think that one would take the place of the other? I mean they speak so much to similar themes and yet are such wildly different novels.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Margo?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Margo?

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: I would *not* replace one with the other. I think that teaching them together would be wildly interesting, in fact. Both writers—ostensibly it would be the sentimentality of Stowe and the comedy, you know, with that backbone of seriousness, of Twain, but, actually, it would break down differently. Stowe can be extremely funny. Always when she's creating kind of mean, mean male characters or ones who were, you know, sort of the—she was an admirer of Byron, who had that kind of like Augustine Byronic note, and Twain, I don't think I can pull this off, meaning, you can't call comedy that becomes too cheap, which parts of that book do, you can't call that a form of sentimentality, though I wish I could pull off that comparison. But he does maybe a certain kind of comedy that doesn't *do*. It's too easy, it's too sitcomic. That deserves as much hard, cold thought as we have been giving sentimentality and the sentimental tradition.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: You mean between Huck and Jim.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I mean more—no, I mean more when Tom, Tom Sawyer, comes back into the novel, and, you know, even those long passages between the Duke and the whatever, you know, when Twain does his often-brilliant comic set pieces and it gets thrown off. *That* would be very interesting to look at, reader response. You know, I think the whole *Huckleberry Finn* dispute has gotten pretty coarse. But the fact is there are moments when, I think, as a black reader, you find it excruciating, as with *Uncle Tom*, and then—boom!—you're somewhere else moments later, and really tracking that. By the way, they became friends in later life, Stowe and Twain, as she confessed she had an unsanctified liking for slang and they would write these, you know, snappy letters, and they were neighbors. So you know, you've just gotten me thinking about it, but I think it would be amazing to pair them, because it would say so much also about the male and female literary traditions.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And I spent so much time defending *Huckleberry Finn* that I wouldn't ever, ever throw it out of the canon. Because there are so many parent groups, particularly *black* parent groups, who want to throw it out of the high school curriculum because the word "nigger" appears.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Well, then they sure don't want *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And then *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I know, but what we have to do is help people to understand that just because the word "nigger" appears doesn't mean we have to throw the book out. I mean, we can use these as teaching opportunities. We can make a thousand and one justifications. But for goodness's sake, we can't lend ourselves to censorship.

MARGO JEFFERSON: It's not leading the way Paul Mooney thinks it's going to, no.

Q: I was just wondering how relevant you might think it that Harriet Beecher Stowe had other interests and other accomplishments, let's say, beyond *Uncle Tom*. I know we're talking about *Uncle Tom*, but, to me, she was one of the great resources when I was writing about the 1848 revolution in Paris. I mean she wrote one of the richest and most seemingly objective descriptions of what happened when the Louvre was under fire from the revolutionairies. In other words she had a pretty sophisticated political understanding of what was going on in revolutionary situations abroad. You know, she was a very astute critic and viewer of things apart from, say, her writing of *Uncle Tom* and I think in some way it's relevant to our understanding of the book to know that she had all these other interesting aspects.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I think you're right. I mean, there are many comparisons in the text to the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, and she said, when she's talking about George Harris, who is the mulatto who escapes and who fights, I mean, shoots the white men trying to capture him back into slavery. She said, "If he were a Hungarian revolutionary, we would be creating statues to this guy, instead of thinking of him as some crazy black man who's breaking the law by running away with his own property." Stowe was part of—one of the best things to happen to Harriet Beecher Stowe was Cincinnati and she was part of something called the Semi-Colon Club. And it was—seems to be, at least from Hedrick's biography, very open between the genders. I don't know if that's—not a very elegant sentence. But men and women met regularly and exchanged writing, read and critiqued each other, and I think that a lot of her cosmopolitanism, as a friend of mine might say, that you were describing in Stowe's writing comes from that time in Cincinnati. Would you agree?

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Yeah, and I think we tried very hard to bring some of that revolutionary discussion into the annotations where she talked about labor, where she talks about the various things going on in Europe, but I think it's also fair to say that we wouldn't be talking about her were it not for this book. I mean, she's very interesting, and wrote a lot of very interesting later books—some a little less uninteresting than others, or more uninteresting than others—but this is the thing she's known for, and for that reason

probably the best repository for every other bits of research that we can do for—or that somebody wants to do, to have it hover around this text.

MARGO JEFFERSON: I would certainly teach *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, it's a really fine regional novel. I would probably teach *Pink and White Tyranny* where she in a sense is—well, it's one of the first vicious, well, admirably vicious critiques of a certain kind of female consumerism, and it prefigures Edith Wharton and someone like, you know, a character like Undine Spragg, for example. So she is, she is an interesting figure.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I think her awareness of class relations in the United States just is astonishing. It's like Marxian, as it were, when she's describing middle-class life in America, as well as the relationship between slave-owners and non-slave-owners. Surprisingly keen observations about economic relations in the United States.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Yes, any novel that begins with a factual discussion of money is to be trusted, **(laughter)** which is a line I've cribbed from a friend of mine.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Is to be trusted or not to be trusted?

MARGO JEFFERSON: Is. Something honest is being told you.

Q: I just wanted to say I enjoyed this discussion and it has encouraged me to write a poem, so probably by the end I'll write a poem. But, Mr. Gates, I hear that you said that how Malcolm always referred to Martin as a Uncle Tom. Who would you consider to be a modern-day Uncle Tom? And who would **(laughter)**—if we were teaching this book to students who would we relate it to, who would we have them relate it to? Because for me, when I thought about it I thought about just a movie, I thought about *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, there was a little white girl and they had a black man and I kind of related that movie to Uncle Tom just in that sense that he was protective over her. But so who would you, would you consider. Is there anybody that you would think that you

would have the students relate to, I mean, in a sense that you would say, I know some may say Colin Powell, some may even say the mayor of Jersey.

(laughter)

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Noooo! Nooo! The mayor of Newark, Corey Booker? Noo, noo. But you see, I thought you were asking. Remember, I'm trying to interpret Uncle Tom as a black man who dies for these two black women, right? Not like Clarence Thomas. **(groans/applause)** So, you see, I'm caught because I want to critique this terrible moment in our history when we read each other out of the race, but, you know, I can't—every time there's a Supreme Court decision about affirmative action it drives me crazy that a black man is voting against affirmative action, so I'm a hypocrite. And I understand that, that's a problem for me. As a professor, you know, I have to defend the right of my students, black or whatever, to come out of whatever ideological bag they want to come out of. And if anyone would call him an Uncle Tom in my class I would, you know, crush them like a bug, I'd do the best that I could. And I theoretically defend the right of Clarence Thomas to be Clarence Thomas, but my other black self is—it's very hard for me. But I can't think of—I would not *call* anyone an Uncle Tom. I wouldn't do that. I've been called an Uncle Tom. There's a book, you know, *Uncle Tom's Among Us*. Cornel's in it, I'm in it, you know, I don't know who else is in it. I only looked up my own name in the index, **(laughter)** and then I looked up Cornel for company, **(laughter)** and that made me feel a lot better. I did buy the book. But it would be interesting for me, and I'd have to think about it, and I'd love your opinion of it.

MARGO JEFFERSON: If you could redeem it, what would you—if there were a redemptive possibility to that.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Right, who would be the self-sacrificing—I would say in my lifetime, and again I'm fifty-six years old. Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King. Malcolm was absolutely *right* and wrong at the same time. Martin Luther King gave his life to free black men and black women. I mean, he is the closest figure that I can think of

to Uncle Tom as depicted in this novel. And I don't want the King family coming—don't misquote me! **(laughter)** "Gates calls Martin Luther King an Uncle Tom."

(laughter)

MARGO JEFFERSON: We must quickly mention Gandhi.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: That's right. Just like Mahatma Gandhi. **(laughter)**

THELMA GOLDEN: Throw it in! That's it.

(laughter)

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I want to get invited to the memorial opening.

Q: There's been some conversation this evening about our early encounters with the novel, right, so in 1976 James Baldwin talks about his first encounter with UTC. He's seven or eight years old, he's reading the book obsessively, fanatically. It disturbs his mother, from the South, now in Harlem. She keeps hiding the book. She finally hides it at the highest shelf above the bathtub. He climbs up there and gets it. She stops hiding the book. In 1948 James Baldwin published "Everybody's Protest Novel." He asks the question when he talks about the kind of trap of categorization, the fictive quality of race, yet its historical persistence. He says, for those of us who traffic in what he calls the kind of medieval morality, the virtuous, the self-righteous, and hardboiled sentimentality of Stowe, why are we so loath to go beyond that liberal figure? And so I ask you guys, as you reconsider Stowe this evening, why as we deal with a persistent contemporary fact of race and we know that it's fiction, why are we returning, as Baldwin asks in that same essay, why are we so loath, as a nation, to go beyond the kind of what he calls laudable efforts of Stowe but still ensnarled, entangled with the fiction of American race?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, your question was almost a pastiche of James Baldwin. I mean, you were very Baldwinian in the way you **(laughter)**—I'm not trying to flatter you. I love Baldwin, I used to imitate him all the time when I was a kid, or a teenager, and that's what—the structure of your sentences was very Baldwinian, I had absolutely no idea what you just said, however. I didn't follow your question.

(laughter)

Q: Well, Baldwin asked "Why are we so loath to go beyond Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?" We're reconsidering the novel this evening. The persistent fact of race that Malcolm X, MLK, Emmett Till confront in American society, the kind of national, the quest for national innocence is what he's talking about.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But I think he's wrong. I think that we've gone far beyond *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of our—first of all, we have so many black voices that have emerged, representing race themselves, since 1851, you know, when it was first serialized, right? We have Baldwin himself representing race in every possible combination and venue that he could think of, apparently. I just don't think that it's true. I think that we have confronted—we haven't solved the race problem, if that's what you're asking. I think the reason we haven't solved the race problem is that it's a problem of race and class. I don't think it was *ever* just a race problem; I think it was about economic relationships, and I think that the society, through affirmative action, decided to adjust enough so that some of us could become members of the middle class and then that door shut, slammed shut, and we still have this vast underclass, and until we have a more direct economic analysis of the problem, I don't think that we're going to solve the race problem, if ever we're going to solve the race problem, because you can't solve a problem that wasn't really a problem in the first place. It was a race and class problem. Or it was a primarily a class problem manifesting itself as race. It's not as if race didn't exist. But it was about economic relations—it was always about economic relationships and everything else came after that. That's what I believe.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Are you also asking why there would be a need to go back to this text again as an emblem of certain crises, or problems we haven't—

Q: There was a direct engagement with the essay by Baldwin in '48, and—

THELMA GOLDEN: You mean a direct engagement in the introduction.

Q: Exactly, exactly. So what I'm saying is there is a part of the essay that says, "Now as then, we find ourselves bound first without and then within by the nature of our categorization, that society is held together by our need, by legend, myth, and coercion." Right? And so the legend, the myth, the fiction of race, and class and all and gender and all that kind of stuff persists, and what Baldwin was asking in 1948, I'm asking his question, it's not really that complex. I mean, it's a simple question. Why are we so loath to go beyond what's being proposed by Stowe, by liberal fiction, what people say about Melville and Twain in the nineteenth century?

MARGO JEFFERSON: I don't think that—I'm not sure who "we" is, but, you know, as a society, yeah, we are still, but I think looking at these—those fictions, with all of the experience and knowledge that we have acquired and are acquiring, does make a difference. When we were reading that book before we could never have said in the way that you just said it, "Race is a fiction." We know that it is now, in certain ways, and I think looking, taking our own history, every part of it, and by "our" I mean American, in with all of that new knowledge makes a difference. I think it's very dangerous to—you know, nations have psyches, too, just the way people do, and you cannot simply close down your past. You cannot block out parts of your psyche and believe that you are simply going on. You have to find some way to rename it, reshape it, transform it. That's how you get through it, I think, not—and then maybe past it, but we're not anywhere near that yet.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But Stowe certainly didn't believe that race was a fiction.

MARGO JEFFERSON: No. We know that in certain ways, literally, scientifically, it's a fiction. It is still not a fiction, functionally, at all, and neither is gender, and neither are economics.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: But just because it's socially constructed doesn't mean it's not real.

MARGO JEFFERSON: Exactly, exactly, exactly, so—

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: In some sense. But we've moved a lot, a long way from believing that. I mean, no one respectable can represent race in the way that Harriet Beecher Stowe did as a real thing that exists in these sort of blocs or categories that are perpetuated biologically and be taken seriously. That's a hell of a transformation over the last century and a half, and a very important one, and I think that James Baldwin played an important role in the critique of racism as a thing.

THELMA GOLDEN: I think we have time for one more question, though I know we continue this conversation for a long time—and there it is.

Q: Good evening. This panel is just so amazing and I think that looking on the website, the New York Public Library website, and just Googling you guys, it's led to me wanting to read a lot of other books, too. My question is, do you feel that the negative stereotype associated with this book has overshadowed the historical impact of the book? And also what reasons what reasons do you think the book has sold so many copies, second to the Bible?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Well, I think that certainly since the 1920s, since the Harlem Renaissance, black people stopped reading this book and black people read it like everybody else up until the 1920s, and that's what fascinates me most of all. And that's very, very important. And after 1948, 1949, when James Baldwin wrote about it,

everybody stopped reading it. Lots of people stopped reading the book after that. What was the other part of your question?

THELMA GOLDEN: Do the stereotypes take away from its historical points?

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: Oh. Well, what do you think? **(laughter)**

HOLLIS ROBBINS: Well, it's impossible to be neutral about the book. It's really impossible to be neutral. On the question of race she clearly believed that all races would be equal in Heaven, but not here, and that's a difficulty and I think that your question is a good one in terms of why Baldwin kept returning to it. If part of your question and your question is why do we return to it when there is so much racism in it? We return to it because it had an impact. Because it had a huge impact. And we've gotten beyond the impact of it, and perhaps it's—but it's not just a historical artifact. There's something more to it. And, you know, writers from Tolstoy to Henry James to Baldwin have been struggling with what that impact is and I certainly after spending three intimate years with this book don't know what its mystery is, where it lies.

MARGO JEFFERSON: But it is something of a mystery. We return to it because it is, you know, it is absolutely jammed to overflowing with everything from the most primitive impulses, you know, to describe, to categorize, subconscious eruptions, canny, canny, you know, intuitions and insights into the world, so we return to it, I think, because it's this kind of map, you know, of a somewhat unbounded artist, preacher, you know, person with all these limitations and gifts, and you can't not find something of your worst self in it, as well as, you know, bits of, in fact, at moments, your best self, but we return to it because we're never above it, we're never completely beyond it.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: And if you're writing a history of African American literature, if you're teaching African American literature, if you're studying African American literature, it is *impossible* to understand the development of the narrative tradition, in the nineteenth century particularly, without reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,

because black people spent their time rewriting this book over and over and over again in both the slave narratives and in other novels, even James Baldwin, which is a point of my essay. That Baldwin was obsessed. You're absolutely right. His mother hid it, he found it, he wrote out the sentences, he wrote out the paragraphs, he rewrote them and then internalized those sentences, I think, and various aspects of her novelistic technique played themselves out in his own novels. So that I think that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is just—other than the Bible the most important silent second text in the history of African American letters, without a doubt.

MARGO JEFFERSON: And American letters. It is, again, I'll go back to where I think it is a national epic in American literature.

THELMA GOLDEN: I want to thank Hollis Robbins, Henry Louis Gates, Margo Jefferson. **(applause)** And I would also like to thank my colleagues at the New York Public Library for having this wonderful conversation **(applause)** and I'd like to invite you all out into the lobby area, where Professors Robbins and Gates will be signing copies of the book.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: I think we should thank Thelma Golden!

MARGO JEFFERSON: Thank you to Thelma.

(applause)

THELMA GOLDEN: Thank you.