

Translation, Intervention, and Nation: the (Mis)Translation of *Onkel Toms Hütte* in Germany
Sofie Brown, 2023

Uncle Tom's Cabin is one of the most influential novels in our country's history and has a complicated series of meanings in America from its publication to present. *Onkel Toms Hütte*, the German version, became nearly as popular in Germany as in America. I am studying the (mis) translation of the novel in German culture and how the choices made in its adaptations, appropriations, and truncations from 1852-1900 led it to become a reflection of the German nation building process. The German versions of *Onkel Toms Hütte* in the late 1850s-1900 decontextualized, politicized, and commodified the novel through interventions of translation and translators. The multifaceted nature of German translation practices and workings of copyright law unleashed the novel as a trade object almost immediately. Through these practices, an erstwhile religious, sentimental American text became a tool reflecting the German nation building process.

In order to answer these questions, I compared primary source adaptations published between 1852-1900. I compared their publishing and translation histories and their differences from the original text and each other. I looked particularly at the prefaces of the versions, which scenes were cut or expanded, changes in illustration or not, changes in materiality (size of the book, paper quality, whether or not it was anthologized and the history of that anthology, and cover), changes in character, and changes in the characters' dialects between English and German. Then, I examined the ways those changes are reflected or not in further adaptation as tradeable objects from the period (dolls, cards, advertising trading cards, plays, newspapers, souvenirs etc). To see all of these sources, I was able to travel to archives in Germany in the Staatsbibliothek zur Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin with a grant from the Grua/O'Connell fund. I was also able to see the continued physical legacies of the *Onkel-Toms-Hütte* train station and neighborhood in Berlin in person.

This person research allowed me to see that the German versions of *Onkel Toms Hütte* in the late 1850s-1900 decontextualized the novel via its initial transatlantic move to another political context and the lack of international copyright law to protect the novel from however many proliferations were deemed profitable by publishers. The novel was politicized via the prefacing by translators and publishers that set the novel up as an image of "America" and "democracy" in action. The novel was commodified because, since Germany was still a series of small states, unified copyright law did not exist and international copyright law did not exist. This made *Onkel Tom's Hütte* into a hot "trade object."

The erstwhile religious, sentimental American text became a tool reflecting the German nation building process due to the creation of a national identity by othering America and the white washing of the text. A German national identity was constructed in the prefaces of the novel, where the German need to assist America in emancipation and the irony of the "free states" during slavery in are repeatedly expressed. Since these observations are made in the preface, they set up how a German reader should perceive the whole book—making the novel even more political. The text experiences considerable shortening and white washing by the elimination of Black characters, African American English, the substitution of race with class for certain characters, and the centering of the story around Eva and the concept of motherhood. This creates an idea of the novel as a book about class equality for Germans—a large political movement at the time as Germany wrestled with its aristocracy. A German nation was also constructed via the catering of the novel for an imagined German reading public.

Faculty Mentor: George Taylor Files Professor of Modern Languages Birgit Tautz.
Funded by the Grua/O'Connell Fund.

