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Alexander Ernst

Hollins University, ErnstSE@hollins.edu

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Alexander Ernst

HIST 329: Slavery—A Global History

Research Paper

John Andrew Jackson: Enslaved Resistance, Uncle Tom's Cabin,
and the Downfall of American Chattel Slavery

John Andrew Jackson was a former slave who lived in the early-to-middle nineteenth century. After escaping slavery in South Carolina and making his way north to Massachusetts, Jackson was forced to head to Canada after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. Jackson lectured about his experiences as a slave after he travelled to England and he eventually returned to South Carolina after the Civil War, to the place where he was enslaved, where he worked to improve the lives of other former slaves. During his journey to Canada Jackson met Harriet Beecher Stowe, who housed Jackson and helped him escape the United States. Jackson was likely the first slave Stowe housed and Jackson describes their interaction in his memoir, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina*. Jackson told Stowe his story, and many of the events and themes Jackson spoke of in his memoir—and likely told Stowe about—have parallels to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the most influential books in American History. Who was John Andrew Jackson, and what do his life and experiences reveal about American slavery and the historical context in which he lived? In this paper I will argue that Jackson provides a specific example of how enslaved African Americans, their activism, narratives, and resistance, were critical in the creation of the circumstances leading to the downfall of chattel slavery in America.

John Andrew Jackson was born in South Carolina, one of eleven siblings, four of whom were dead by the time he escaped slavery. He grew up on a plantation owned by the English family, who were well-known for being brutal masters¹. In his memoir Jackson describes the abuse he and

the other enslaved people on the plantation would receive, with a focus on the frequent whippings delivered by members of the English family—including those delivered by the children, who were near to him in age². Jackson eventually married a woman named Louisa who lived on a plantation about a mile away. He had two children with her, one of whom died. Despite threats of violence, which were carried out whenever Jackson was discovered, he frequently escaped the plantation for short periods of time to visit his wife. Before Jackson escaped slavery, the people who owned Louisa moved to Georgia and the pair were separated—when Jackson wrote his memoir in 1862, he had still been separated from his wife and daughter, whom he had neither seen nor heard from³.

There were several contributing factors to the success of Jackson's escape—timing, his marriage to Louisa, previous experience of the landscape, the devolution of his Robert English's mental state, and Jackson's skill in talking his way out of dangerous situations. As he prepared to escape Jackson bought a horse from a slave on another plantation and hid it, something he was able to do as oversight of the plantation became less organized due to Robert English's deteriorating mental faculties⁴. Jackson enacted his plan in 1846, during a three-day Christmas holiday all the enslaved people on the English's plantation shared in. While travelling this provided the explanation to anyone who questioned him—he was on holiday. To those who asked further questions or inquired where he was going, Jackson repeatedly said he was going “To the next plantation, mas're” (Jackson 1862, Pg. 24). Instead of heading north, Jackson started his escape by heading south to Charleston, a city to which he had been before, and knew both the location and general landscape of, where he hoped to stow away on a ship heading to Boston. To hide his intent to escape Jackson used the custom of masters sending their slaves to work on the wharfs by hiding himself among the slaves there as a fellow worker. Jackson took advantage of the

assumptions made by the white people around him about who he was and what slaves were supposed to do and act like, turning those assumptions into an effective disguise.

Not all runaway slaves tried to head north or to freedom of any direction, and not all escapes were made with permanent freedom as a goal. In *Reclaiming a Fugitive Landscape*, Ashton and Hepworth explain aspects of the motivation behind short escapes and the obstacles to a successful escape to the north.

To begin with, a vast majority of runaways likely left without any specific plans to abscond north. Rather, they were often fleeing immediate punishment or danger with the intent of returning once the circumstances or threat had changed. A northern escape was a colossal undertaking for people enslaved in the Deep South who had little access to trains or boats. The geographic challenges alone were huge. (Ashton, November 2013)

Jackson had returned to the plantation he was enslaved on after short escapes to avoid specific punishments as well as to visit his wife many times before, which provided both the generalized expectation of his return and a reasonable excuse to where he might be going: to Georgia, to find his wife and daughter. In March of 1847, Thomas English, Robert English's son, posted an advertisement and 50\$ reward for capturing Jackson, including a note that he might have gone to Houston County, Georgia⁵. The searchers were looking in the wrong direction, under the wrong impressions about Jackson's goals, months after his escape, which gave Jackson crucial time to escape his pursuers. He succeeded. On February 10 of 1847 at nine o'clock in the evening⁶, Jackson stepped foot in Boston, as he described it, "*master of myself*." Jackson did not live underground or use an assumed name but lived openly as a former slave, which allowed him to fundraise with northern activists in hope of buying members of his family⁷. After sending a letter asking after buying his mother and father, slave hunters came to Boston looking for him. Jackson was in Salem at the time, and once he heard word of the search, there he remained until the Fugitive Slave Act was passed and he was forced to leave the United States altogether.

It was during his flight from Salem to Canada that John Andrew Jackson met Harriet Beecher Stowe. Their meeting was a brief one: Jackson stayed only one night at her house before continuing his journey to St. John's, Canada. In his memoir Jackson spends only a few sentences on the interaction before moving forward with his story.

I may mention, that during my flight from Salem to Canada, I met with a very sincere friend and helper, who gave me a refuge during the night, and set me on my way. Her name was Mrs. Beecher Stowe. She took me in and fed me, and gave me some clothes and five dollars. She also inspected my back, which is covered with scars which I shall carry with me to the grave. She listened with great interest to my story, and sympathized with me when I told her how long I had been parted from my wife Louisa and my daughter Jenny, and perhaps, for ever.” (Jackson 1862, Pg. 32)

This is all, in his memoir at least, that Jackson wrote on the subject. The only other mentions of Stowe in Jackson's book are found in the multiple testimonials in favor of Jackson, a handful of which mention Stowe's endorsement of him, and in the preface, a section Jackson did not write. At some point after their meeting, perhaps during his time in Canada, perhaps after he traveled to England, Jackson obtained a testimonial from Stowe; likely a letter of introduction from her. That testimony would hold the most influence sometime after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published, its popularity making Stowe famous and well-respected in abolitionist circles—and it is likely that Jackson wrote to her asking for such a testimonial after Stowe had published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for exactly that reason⁸.

Just as Jackson had worked with abolitionist groups in attempts to raise money and buy members of his family while living in America, Jackson continued to do so after traveling to England. In England he began a career giving abolitionist lectures, mainly in churches⁹. As one minister wrote on the subject, “Mr. Jackson, on producing what seemed to me sufficient testimonials, and particularly a strong one from Mrs. Beecher Stowe, was allowed to deliver two lectures in my Church. These lectures were, I have reason to know, very creditable to him—Thos. Candlish, D.D., Minister of Free St. George's” (Jackson 1862, Pg. 45). Stowe's testimonial opened

doors for Jackson, which bolstered his career giving lectures—as the closing section of Jackson’s book states, he lectured in many churches in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and continued his way to London. In 1862 he wrote his memoir titled *The Experience of A Slave in South Carolina*, which detailed his life and escape from slavery. After the Civil War he returned to the United States where he continued his activist work, raising funds and collecting donations for free black communities¹⁰. While he lived in Massachusetts, he traveled to South Carolina frequently for his activist work over the next thirty years of his life, and eventually tried to raise funds to purchase the English Family Plantation so that former slaves could work there of their own accord¹¹. It’s possible he succeeded in that matter, but it’s equally likely he did not, and land records are unclear as to this matter. Jackson did own land about six miles from the English family home, where he might have lived for a time¹².

The interaction between Jackson and Stowe was not one-sided. While Jackson was not the first fugitive slave Stowe had spoken to, he was likely the first that she hid inside her home¹³. Jackson fled for Canada because of the Fugitive Slave Act which was passed in September of 1850. Before being published as a book in 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was first serialized in *The National Era*, an abolitionist periodical, beginning in June of 1851¹⁴. In *A Genuine Article*, Ashton identifies that sometime in late 1850 or early 1851, Stowe wrote a letter to her older sister Catherine, describing events that would directly inspire a chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “In Which it Appears that a Senator is but a Man”¹⁵. In her letter Stowe describes the debate she had with Thomas Upham over the morality of following the law regarding the Fugitive Slave Act: “when I asked him flatly if he would obey the law supposing a fugitive came to him Mrs. Upham laughed & he hemmed & hawed & little Mary Upham broke out ‘I wouldn’t I know’” (Ashton, Summer 2013). The next day, a runaway slave had been directed to the Upham household—just as a

runaway slave had been directed to Senator Bird in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* after a similar debate¹⁶—and Thomas Upham, when faced with a real person in need of help, assisted the runaway slave and sent him on to the Stowe household after listening to his story and giving him some money. The runaway slave stayed only a night in the Stowe household, and Stowe described him in her letter as “A genuine article from the ‘Ole Carling State’”¹⁷. The description of the runaway slave as from the Ole Carling state—the *Old Carolina State*—the overlap in times, his staying for only a night, all suggest Jackson might have been the slave Stowe described in her letter, as well as a direct source of inspiration for a chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*¹⁸.

This is not the only possible source of inspiration Jackson may have provided. In his memoir Jackson highlighted two aspects of his interaction with Stowe: first, that he showed her the scars which covered his back, and second, that she sympathized with him when Jackson told her of his separation from his wife and daughter¹⁹. In his memoir Jackson described multiple instances in which he and the people around him were whipped, including two detailed tales of people he knew being whipped to death. The whippings Jackson described likely gave him the scars he showed to Stowe. Similarly, whipping plays a frequent role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Some characters argue about or discuss it, such as the characters of Ophelia and St. Clare debating the ‘merits’ of whipping Topsy, an enslaved child. Enslaved characters describe their experience being whipped, and the titular character of Uncle Tom is whipped to death by Legree, who is often shown with a riding-whip which he uses to beat his slaves. Whipping is mentioned, in some form, in a majority of the chapters²⁰. Jackson’s tale and his scars are likely not the only things that pushed Stowe to write of whippings, but it does present a powerful motivator. While Stowe had studied slavery and the experiences of enslaved people, while she had read widely and helped others to escape, that all occurred before the Fugitive Slave Act—an act which put her in clear and present

danger if she helped Jackson. That act superseded any of the more distant interactions and studying she had done into slavery and its effects. Jackson was real person, his scars were real, the danger was real, and that made a far different experience than reading about slavery; an experience that in all likelihood had deep effects upon Stowe's opinions on slavery and her abolitionist work.

The separation of families, the second point Jackson highlighted in his memoir, also plays a strong role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Characters frequently speak of it and against it, the separation of families takes the center stage throughout most of the plot²¹. "The dominant theme, which links the specific evil of slavery with a universal sentiment, is the tragedy of forcible separation of families" (McPherson, 2000. Pg. 29). The book's plot starts truly moving when the titular Uncle Tom and Harry—Eliza's son—are sold, prompting Eliza to take Harry and run north. Cassy, introduced later in the book, becomes a contrast to Tom's religious devotion. Where Tom holds tight to his faith, the character Cassy has lost hers with the loss of her children. Eliza and her husband George's attempts to escape north and keep their family together continue throughout the novel, and Cassy is, eventually, reunited with her daughter, Eliza, restoring her faith.

And, indeed, in two or three days, such a change has passed over Cassy, that our readers would scarcely know her. The despairing, haggard expression of her face had given way to one of gentle trust. She seemed to sink, at once, into the bosom of the family... Eliza's steady, consistent piety, regulated by the constant reading of the sacred word, made her a proper guide for the shattered and wearied mind of her mother. Cassy yielded at once, and with her whole soul, to every good influence, and became a devout and tender Christian. (Stowe 1852, chapter 43)

Not only is Stowe's happy ending for her characters deeply intertwined with the reunion of a family, family separation also helps start the plot off and the reunion and liberation of that family helps to end it. Tom died to protect Cassy as she attempts to escape slavery, an act which later results in Cassey turning to Christianity after finding her lost daughter, further endowing him in his martyr status. The message of the story's morals surrounding family separation is hammered

in by minor characters who give direct moral statements, and by Stowe more directly when she stepped out of the narrative²².

In fiction Stowe could give her characters a reunion of parent and daughter that Jackson never had. He was unable to buy his wife and daughter from slavery, and eventually remarried twice. While he might have seen his first wife Louisa and perhaps his daughter sometime after he returned to the United States, it is ultimately unclear²³. In the letter Stowe sent to her sister describing a runaway slave who was likely Jackson, she mentions the positive interactions between him and three of her young children²⁴—Jackson’s story of being separated from his wife and daughter might have hit a specific note of sympathy in Stowe because of this. For all she would have heard of family separation in her readings on slavery, Jackson would have provided a more concrete example of its effects.

One of the strongest correlations between Jackson’s story and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is one Jackson did not mention as something he specifically discussed with Stowe but remains a strong possibility: the death of one of Jackson’s sisters by whipping, because Martha English (one of Thomas English’s daughters) wanted Jackson’s sister to stop practicing her religion.

My sister was religious, and perhaps it stung her conscience, or it might have been for some other reason’ but, at all events, [Martha] ordered my sister to leave off praying, and as she discovered my sister did not obey her commands, she asked her husband, Gamble M’Farden (A member of the Salem Brick Church, who was, if possible, worse than herself, and she was a member also) to give her a hundred lashes... she died at the end of three weeks, leaving two children, a boy and a girl, who, with my father, I now hope to buy. (Jackson 1862, Pg. 8)

Tom’s death at the hands of Legree had similar context:

“Well, I’ll soon have *that* out of you. I have none o’ yer bawling, praying, singing niggers on my place; so remember. Now, mind yourself,” he said, with a stamp and a fierce glance of his gray eye, directed at Tom, “*I’m* your church now! You understand,—you’ve got to be as *I* say.” (Stowe 1852, chapter 31)

Simon Legree had Tom whipped to death in part because he would not reveal anything about Cassy and Emmeline’s escape, but narratively, it was also the climax to a conflict between two opposing

characters, a conflict heavily based in Tom's Christian faith. Whether or not Jackson told Stowe about the death of his sister is hard to determine; Jackson makes no mention of it in his story and their interaction and resulting conversations could have spanned any number of topics beyond the ones they both put to paper. However, the correlations still exist: a religious slave, whipped to death by order of their master, motivated by said slave's refusal to cease practicing their religion, just as other correlations between Jackson's life and narrative are reflected in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

If Jackson was an influence upon her writing, why did Stowe not cite him as a source of inspiration? Stowe later wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853 which provided explanation and sources of her inspiration for the novel. In explaining, and pushing back against claims her work was exaggerated or unreliable, why not make use of Jackson as another mark of her story's reliability? Ashton points out a few reasons in *A Genuine Article*.

Her illegal harboring of Jackson not only couldn't have been publicly mentioned in 1853 under penalty of prosecution. But it also would have been, almost by definition, undocumented, and wouldn't in any substantive way have helped her establish her public "authority" in constructing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It might even have served to reveal crucial details of the Underground Railroad network in Maine, something she would have scrupulously avoided. (Ashton, Summer 2013)

Whether or not she wished to cite Jackson as a source of inspiration and proof of accuracy, it remains that doing so would have implicated her in the crime of assisting a runaway slave, potentially revealing information that could result in herself or others facing serious consequences. Conversely, why wouldn't Jackson have claimed a connection to the popular novel in his 1862 memoir? Others had made their careers claiming they had been the source of inspiration for characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*²⁵. This decision likely shares a motive with his choice to say so little in his memoir about his meeting with Stowe. If Jackson had made Stowe and her novel play a greater role in his memoir, then parts of it would have ceased to be about Jackson's story, becoming Jackson's story in relation to Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His own story would have

been limited in some part, becoming comparisons to Uncle Tom and the other character's lives, rather than a book dedicated to telling the story of John Andrew Jackson. Others made their careers and staked their fame on connections to Stowe and her work, but Jackson already had a career and level of renown in abolitionist circles. Tying himself so directly to Stowe could have done more harm than good, limiting his own name by attaching it to hers.

Within a year of publishing, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had sold 300,000 copies in the United States and three million worldwide, and its popularity and sales continued to grow²⁶. As Meer points out in *Uncle Tom Mania*, Stowe's novel was published as widespread publicity and promotion as marketing strategy was developed. Agents were employed to promote the novel. John Greenleaf Whittier was hired to write a poem promoting it, and the strategy of using celebrity as a selling point was effective enough that it became an industry standard²⁷. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was also written partially as a response to the Fugitive Slave Law. While written as a compromise, the law sparked conflict between the North and the South. "The plight of freedom-seeking men and women being manacled and returned to slavery at gunpoint made this abstraction [slavery] a flesh-and-blood reality" (McPherson 2000. Pg. 26). The first iteration in *The National Era* of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a serial in June of 1851 started less than a year after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, with political tensions still high, placing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* right in the middle of that tension.

The first chapters are embedded in the notion of the Fugitive Slave Act, with a debate about it occurring directly in chapter nine, "In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was also published into an already established genre of antislavery works surrounding the suffering of slaves, giving it established and familiar ground to walk on.

Pioneered by abolitionists, identification with suffering was a central theme as well in antislavery sentimental fiction, which invoked slaves' sentient experience in a move to

bring them within the compass of humanity... Didactic tales, narratives, and sentimental fiction urging white northern audiences to empathize with slaves' plight helped shape new moral perceptions of slaves as sentient beings, qualified to become rights-bearing individuals. (Clark 1995, Pg. 492)

Stowe's writing fed into and propelled the idea of sympathy for the suffering of slaves and the genre of literature surrounding it; the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are designed to elicit sympathy for the pain and suffering they experience. The narrative presents their actions and experiences as intrinsically human and often based in personal family ties, pushing readers to see enslaved African Americans as human beings not so different than the readers themselves in the tradition of antislavery sentimental fiction²⁸. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* combined an existing and well-established genre with current political sentiments, complex and empathetic characters, and Christian imagery and morality, all of which helped propel the book into widespread popularity. It sparked tensions that were already high, pushing forward the strife that would eventually grow into the Civil War—which itself led to the end of American chattel slavery.

Uncle Tom's Cabin had profound political effect in England, as well. The book flipped the usual flow of literature between England and America at the time—an American novel gained widespread popularity in England. Stowe toured in England as a renowned and well-respected author, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* bolstered antislavery ties between American and English abolitionists.

The slavery question in particular formed the subject of extensive Anglo-American confrontation and cooperation—on all sides of the debate. British and American antislavery societies had for many years shared techniques, campaigns, and even personnel that provided the basis for lecture tours in the 1840s by former slaves and other abolitionists from the United States. These societies not only provided part of *Uncle Tom's* initial market in the British Isles, but also based campaigns around Stowe's novel, collecting funds in Uncle Tom Penny Offerings and circulating petitions that cited Stowe's text. (Meer 2005, Pg. 2)

Political movement was sparked and propelled by Stowe's novel. When the Civil War began England was faced with the decision whether to recognize the Confederacy as its own nation. The

Prime Minister at the time, Lord Palmerston, had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* three times and spoke highly of it²⁹. Public sentiment, pushed by Stowe's depictions of slavery and the American South, likely influenced the decision as well—and Britain stayed officially neutral throughout the Civil War, never recognizing the Confederate States of America as a nation.

John Andrew Jackson was likely a strong source of inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that significantly affected the political landscape in America leading up to the Civil War. The book she might have written if they had never met could have looked vastly different, focusing on different elements of slavery, if she had written it at all—or, it could have looked relatively the same. If Stowe hadn't hid Jackson the night he was sent to her for aid, he might have been captured and sent back into slavery, unable to pursue the activism work he did in Canada and England—or, he might have still escaped to do just that. The extent of their interaction cannot be known. However, as every interaction every person has with another shapes who they become, Jackson and Stowe's interaction, however brief, shaped their futures. Stowe did write a book likely influenced by Jackson and by other enslaved people that went on to change the political landscape and minds of the world and people around her, and Jackson did go on to pursue activism work, speaking out against slavery and supporting communities of formerly enslaved African Americans. By defying his masters and escaping slavery, by telling his story to Stowe and many others, Jackson helped set into motion some of the moving pieces that lead to the Civil War. John Andrew Jackson provides an example of how both enslaved and formerly enslaved people, their resistance and their voices, shaped the events that lead to the downfall of chattel slavery in America.

References

1. Jackson, 1862. Pg. 9, Jackson describes stories of how the English family were well-known among other slaves for being “the baddest massa ‘tween this an’ hell fire.”
2. Jackson, 1862. While Jackson does not specify ages, he tells multiple stories of how the English family children were, when Jackson and most of his siblings were children, relatively close in age.
3. Jackson, 1862.
4. Jackson, 1862. Pg. 23.
5. Ashton, November 2013. A copy of the posted advertisement is included in the article.
6. Jackson, 1862. Pg. 28. Jackson makes a specific note of the date and time he landed at Boston.
7. Jackson, 1862. Multiple mentions of attempts to buy members of his family and mentions of fundraising via abolitionist networks are made in Jackson’s memoir.
8. Ashton, Summer 2013.
9. Jackson, 1862. Pg. 45-48. Multiple testimonials made by reverends include references to Jackson lecturing at their Churches.
10. Ashton, Summer 2013.
11. Ashton, November 2013. “John Andrew Jackson wasn’t merely returning to a region where he had friends and relatives. He was trying to purchase back the very land on which he had picked cotton, the site where his sister had been murdered, the farm where his mother was repeatedly whipped and where he himself had been brutalized. Jackson’s land claim was one born in blood.”
12. Ashton, November 2013. Jackson owned land in South Carolina, newspapers reported it was to be sold for taxes owed in August of 1894.
13. Ashton, Summer 2013.
14. Stowe 1851.
15. Ashton, Summer 2013.
16. Stowe 1852. Chapter 9, “In Which it Appears That a Senator Is But a Man.”
17. Ashton, Summer 2013.
18. Jackson, 1852. Pg. 43. Ashton, Summer 2013. Ashton points out that in referring to the slave she housed as from “the Ole Carling State,” she may have been quoting Jackson—one of the songs included in his memoir, *The Slave’s Song*, opens with the lines “Now, freemen, listen to my song, a story I’ll relate/It happened in the valley of the old Carolina State:/They marched me to the cotton field, at early break of day,/And worked me there till late sunset, without a cent of pay.” In her letter Stowe mentioned Jackson singing for her and her children, and Ashton states, “If he knew the lyrics well enough in 1862 while in England to be able to recite them to his friends there, it seems believable he knew them well enough in 1850 to sing them for Stowe.”
19. Jackson, 1862. Pg. 32.
20. Stowe, 1852.
21. Stowe, 1852.
22. Stowe, 1852. In nearly every chapter some form of moral statement, both direct and indirect, is made regarding slavery.
23. Ashton, Summer 2013. “Census records from 1870 and 1880 indicate a Louisa Law living in Lynchburg, South Carolina, who might be Jackson’s first wife, presumably having moved back from Georgia.
24. Ashton, Summer 2013, quoting Stowe in a letter to Stowe’s sister: “There hasn’t any body in our house got waited on so abundantly & willingly for ever so long—these negroes posses some mysterious power of pleasing children for they hung around him & seemed never tired of hearing him talk and sing.”
25. Ashton, Summer 2013. “Josiah Henson and others made careers for themselves as professional muses to Stowe, claiming that they had been the ‘real’ or at least the models for various iconic characters from the Stowe oeuvre. Indeed, Josiah Henson republished his original 1849 memoir *The Life of*

Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada. Narrated by Himself in 1876 in London under the title *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life*.”

26. McPherson 2000. Pg. 24-25.
27. Meer, 2005. “In hawking the novel Jewett made a point precisely of the fact that it was selling so well, and this strategy of marketing celebrity was so patently effective that it immediately became a standard technique.” Pg. 5.
28. Clark, 1995. Pg. 492.
29. McPherson, 2000. Pg. 25.

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