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LETTING THE FLESH FLY: TOPSY, TIME, TORTURE, AND TRANSFIGURATION

"DOING" TOPSY

In the winter of 1905, Abbie Mitchell and Her Tennessee Students performed at the Palace Theatre in London to an enraptured audience. The show's "culminating triumph" was "the *pas seul* done by a little negro girl, whose wild and rapid gyrations send the house into ecstasies." This "little girl" was a five-foot one-inch, twenty-three-year-old dancer named Ida Forsyne, whose Topsy antics turned out the house.

An energetic chorus of working-class teenaged girls from the north of England accompanied Forsyne for the finale. These girls were trained to be chorus girls at the residential schools of the former cotton manufacturer and amateur dramatist John Tiller, who then hired them out to the Palace. They were energetic, "almost exuberant," as *The Era* notes. Legs flew, and sequins and feathers filled the air as "shoes and headgear . . . detached in the wild frenzy of their evolutions."[1] Forsyne's rendering of Topsy's unruly presence gave the young women of the chorus license to "raise Cain."

This chapter takes Topsy in two

choreographies of female race delineation on the urban stage. Second, in the context of black re-versionings of the iconic figure I read Topsy as a trope for black female expressive resilience. In this second section I take up questions of the black(ened) body, of how meanings of race are produced and fought over, arguing that this process must be understood as fundamentally both corporeal and relational. Black expressive forms are a strategic way to think through the theoretical problems we face when weighing the relationship between discourse, inscription, and the black body's agency.

In the first part of the chapter I trace Topsy's iconographic power as a role developed exclusively by and for white women in the more than fifty years of stage and screen productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The white woman performer in blackface, and in childface, enacted the contradictory claims of white female matronage and entitlement. I lay out some ways to think about these politics of feminized racial enactment, a dynamic that rearticulates in later historical moments and which I address in subsequent chapters.

Resisting the masculinist blind of minstrelsy studies, we find that female minstrelsy has its own history, shaped by notions of the black female body's abilities, availability, and utility. In the mid-nineteenth century, "female minstrelsy" was an official stage circuit term. It evolved into and was renamed "burlesque" in the 1880s but carried forward the practices of

racial mimicry from earlier stage conventions. Early burlesque was female-dominated popular stage work that was often satirical and always about dance, presaging the later chorus line dancers.

To make sense of various moments and instances of racial transmutation, which still operate today in popular cultural forms, I begin in the mid-1800s, with the graphic depictions of female slave suffering that traveled the abolitionist circuits, appealing to female abolitionist sensibilities. Female abolitionist appeals were empathic, imploring women to feel slave suffering in their own bodies as a way to engage their moral commitment. I argue that within this imagined process of absorption, the female body is thought to naturally yield to the sublime suffering of the slave women. This process then forms the basis, the (il)logic behind the practice of female race mimicry. I suggest that this process of sensate absorption underlies later instances of white women's racially imitative strategies evolving in the 1910s and 1920s.

Topsy manifested in a number of places and ways. I contend that the subject positioning of the actor in the mask has everything to do with the ways the act plays out and can be read. Black women's performances of Topsy carried different meanings than white women's versions. In the second half of the chapter I argue that they create a version recoverable as a symbol for black female unruliness. The disruptive creativity of the black female child, transforming herself in the place of

work, resonated in the performance strategies of black women singers, musicians, and especially dancers into the twentieth century.

Considering the heavily scarred, mischievous, and misbehaving Topsy as a figure from which to analyze the wider meanings of black dance, I focus this second section on the body. I first examine the influence of race science on popular ideas of black female subjecthood. I begin by looking at how stories proliferating out of plantation lore melted together European colonial fictions with U.S. antebellum plantation nostalgia. I then look at how scientific rhetoric shaped popular ideas of black bodies and their abilities, and how Christian rhetoric joined with it in forming discourses of the constitution of the Negro. Out of these discourses came weird laws of contact and gruesome forms of intimacy: missionary codes of discipline, laws of racial segregation and anti-miscegenation, and those rituals of pain and torture developed to control the unfree body. Physical rituals of discipline and control were used to consolidate the power of chattel slavery. These carnal practices were given names, and as I point out they formed a lexicon. Descriptions of these named rituals were powerfully evoked in struggles against the bloody regime by black activist testimony and in abolitionist writings. We should think of this strategy as not simply a lower form of appeal because it is "sensational," but instead understand it as powerful and effective because it *was* sensational, about

the flesh, based in a language of the senses. My argument rests on the premise that discourses attending systems of oppression, although they speak for and help perpetuate these systems, only work in relation to actual flesh and bone. These systems needed moving bodies, their economies first and foremost depend on muscle and sinew. I argue that it is moving black bodies that are the logical and primary medium for contrary acts of resilience, that they are literally alive in complex response to these systems.

The body in motion moves to rhythmic timed pulses. I consider the relationship of the raced body to discourses of time. According to popular ethnographic science, lesser races were governed by a simpler concept of time. I argue instead that black expressivity was formed in a complex web of time registers. Creative and improvisatory moments of bodily inflection were multi-zoned comments on geographical "origin." The centrality of dance in black culture, then, must be understood as much more than a cultural retention of (timeless ahistorical) African practices. They were formed as articulations of diasporic movement, of technologies of time and displacement. Whirling, twisting, and refusing to behave, Topsy "rags" the master's time; her movements prove that a body is never fully containable.

TALKING THE BODY

The question of how to "talk" about bodily

reception and response poses tenacious conundrums. Do we assume that the body can be read and defined completely as a discursive field? Is it always the word made flesh? Can we talk about physical expression as outside of language? Current critical work on the body addresses these questions. In her book *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz summarizes four lines of investigation. One line of thought considers the body as it is rendered through discourses of the natural and biological sciences. Understanding how race was constructed through these cruelly imaginative discourses helps dispel the concept of race as a matter of skin tone alone, or as a subset of caste relations in the United States. The second line of thought outlined by Grosz considers the body as a "vessel," which has two interpretations. On the one hand, this vessel can be occupied by "an animating, willful subjectivity"; on the other hand, it can be thought of as a "passive . . . object over which struggles between the 'inhabitant' and others/exploiters may be possible." The latter, that the body is a contested site, is the most common definition used in discussions of the body as a traversed discursive terrain. By this definition the body is like an "instrument . . . it requires discipline and training . . . subduing and occupation."[2]

Grosz introduces a third and related line taken by theorists. This line of thinking understands the body as a "signifying medium, a vehicle of expression . . . a two-

way conduit: on one hand it is a circuit for the transmission of information from outside the organism, conveyed through the sensory apparatus; on the other hand . . . a vehicle for the expression of otherwise sealed and self contained, incommunicable psyche." While this model suggests the body as more than a vessel, the body is still a medium, channeling energies from "elsewhere."[3]

Grosz's fourth conceptual point is the most productive, for it allows for right-sized renderings of resistance to seemingly hermetic systems of discursive control. Grosz explains that we can think of the body as a "productive and creative body which cannot be definitely known since it is not identical with itself across time. The body does not have a 'truth' or a 'true nature' since it is a process and its meaning and capacities will vary according to its context."[4] The crucial difference in this analysis is that it understands the body as always grounded in its historical context, as produced from and producing in specific historical conjunctures, as constantly moving and changing meaning. This helps a great deal in counteracting static, or normative, concepts of the body. It also avoids the tendency in resistance theories to search for an authentic true body, which can be recovered or restored.

Scholars working on race, performance, and the body are thinking through these problems and attempting to conceptualize the black (or racialized) body as active, signifying. "The body might be a blunt field

of matter, inscribed and reinscribed, but does not the body signify in specific historical and cultural ways?" asks E. Patrick Johnson. With the impetus to theorize the body, an important shift, as Johnson states, is "to not only describe the ways it is brought into being . . . but what it does once it is constituted and the relationship between it and the other bodies around it."[5] I would add that the body is never finally constituted, like a sealed envelope, but is continually a contested field and an instrument of contestation and question. Johnson's last point, however, that power is generated *relationally*, is particularly important to hold onto. Power is performed between bodies and groups of bodies, and, as I emphasize here, it is quite visceral.

I share the concern that we think about the body not as a *tabula rasa*, as a passive or powerless terrain upon which dominant ideologies etch their claims indelibly. Thinking about the body in motion, and about bodies in relation to each other helps us to unthink this rigid version of the individual body as produced discursively. Discursive claims compete, conflict, and are never complete. Racialized bodies wriggle through, around, with, and against these claims.

In some of the work being done on the body there is a concentration on legal and literary discourse, and the visceral, the blood and guts of race and racisms, gets lost. Race and racist regimes are made by and out of flesh—muscle and ligament,

blood and bone. Rituals of violence and torture were constitutive acts in themselves, not simply supporting or buttressing litigation. As long as bodies move, constitutive claims can never rest; they have to be repeated and intensified. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century racisms were spectacularly gruesome. Saidiya Hartman and others protest the use of the graphic and numerous accounts given by former slaves and slave owners by abolitionists and activists as a lurid strategy, appealing to people's base sensationalism. My point is that oppositional strategy is by necessity sensational, that is, of the body. The slavery regime was written in the language of the body. It was designed as spectacle. Rituals of control were choreographed for audiences and audience participation.

This is not to deny or elide the myriad extra-bodily forms through which racist hegemonies maintain control. Nor do I mean to be reductive, denying the complex relation between the physical and the discursive. But I do mean to underscore that it was and is bodies that racist regimes need. Techniques of terror, force, and coercion are devised to insure control of bodies. Furthermore, violence or its threat always shadow other forms. I do not argue that there is some discrete, boundaried space that the beleaguered self can access, outside the reach of dominant claims. I am also not arguing that all black acts are thoroughly resistant. But I am suggesting that the body is never an empty vessel, or completely open to being named and

claimed in toto.

While "doing Topsy," as Forsyne put it, at the Alhambra Theatre in 1906, a chorus line of ballet dancers, in blackface, accompanied her. "They paid white girls extra to brown up and work behind me," Forsyne recalls. For this turn, Forsyne performed her "sack dance." Carried onstage in a potato sack, she emerged limb by limb, then danced wildly until a shot rang out and she fell to the floor. "I was doing Topsy in a potato bag," Forsyne explains. "A stage hand brought me out . . . I'd eventually come out of this sack and I'd start running around like a wild woman. [My] costume was a bag and it had straw on it. I'd look here and there and then there [would] be a shot, and I [would] fall down and roll over and over and up—that was the dance."[6] This second performance moment from Forsyne's stage appearance as Topsy opens up to the larger question of what methods we can develop for talking about black dance and gestural technique as responses to the ritual violence of racist regimes. In the language of variety melodrama, her breathtaking act references the historical memory of living as a commodity, as well as the black child's familiar proximity to violence, cruelty, and death.

This dance's description suggests how tenaciously terror and pleasure were linked when it came to the spectacle of black bodies dancing.[7] But there is an interesting discrepancy between the version of Forsyne's description as published by

Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns in their seminal study *Jazz Dance* and the version from the transcriptions of Forsyne's interview. While Forsyne remembers herself at the end of the dance rolling "over and over and *up*," the published version reads that she "rolls over and over *dead*."[8] Neither version can be marked as the "truth" and both versions make sense. The staged sublimity of black human suffering had long been firmly nestled in popular imagination. So had the fantasy of black subjects' inhuman ability to survive bondage, poverty, and peonage. These qualities were linked together and animated in the figure of Topsy. The discrepancy between the descriptions suggests that there is the potential in popular performance for layered meanings, for multiple signification. The version of the dance from the transcription (over and over and up) suggests a much more complex metaphorical response to terror and violence. To wriggle out of a sack, to be shot, and to rise up is the drama of ever-present danger to life and limb; these actions also suggest that death (social, bloody, or otherwise) may be (and had been) tricked, dodged, wiggled out of.

The arts of the body, particularly vernacular dance and song, are key responses to the rituals of violence "marking" and "claiming" black people's bodies. Through the metronomic wielding of the whip, slavery had indelibly marked its disciplinary claims on Topsy's small body, leaving its history inscribed on her

back in calloused welts. I argue that, through the protean suppleness of her performance, a version of Topsy can be read as transfiguring reiterative rituals of inflicted pain.

A FEARFUL PROGENY

A large number of black children frisked and frolicked throughout the pages of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and onto the popular stage. When Topsy is introduced, she is added to what is already a physical cacophony of small black children, "mopping and mowing and grinning between the railings, and tumbling over the kitchen floor," exhibiting a ubiquitous and disruptive physicality, calling for vigilant discipline and guidance.[9] They refused to behave, defying all order necessary to the smooth running of a "home." These children were not born out of Stowe's book. The icon of the picaninny was already a familiar figure in popular imaginings of the U.S. South.

Stowe's novel is a pastiche of numerous sources. Reflecting its influences, the text acted as a condensation point; in turn versions and echoes from this text proliferated, affecting the developing genre of children's literature, the minstrel, and variety stages. Plays based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became fixtures in the United States, Britain, and Europe.

Stowe's book is intensely theatrical, its melodramatic immediacy marking it as a central text in popular culture's transition to visual mediums. "Stowe's relation to the

minstrel show was an intervention that went both ways," as minstrel stage conventions influenced Stowe's fiction as much as her fiction would then influence the popular stage.[10] Stowe's novel was immediately followed by a myriad of popular stage versions. The decades-long phenomena of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* plays congealed the tradition of plantation nostalgia, of "take me backs" and plantation fiction. George Aiken's dramatization of Stowe's novel was the longest running and the most popular stage version. This was a family business, as were most of the Tom companies that followed. Aiken wrote the play in 1852 for the Howard family—his cousin Caroline Howard, her husband George Cunnabell Howard, and their small daughter Cordelia—who ran a small stock company with whom Aiken worked and traveled.[11] The traveling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows across the United States were family affairs, either literally or scripted, and the role of Topsy was played by the mother figure of the troupe.

Momentously received abroad, Stowe's novel was quickly translated into a number of languages and distributed widely throughout Europe. Just as quickly hundreds of dramatic adaptations were staged across Europe. "Tom Shows" became a transnational cultural institution; just months following the novel's publication, staged versions ran simultaneously in New York, London, France, and Germany. Small acting

troupes, called Tommers, toured the United States and England for the next fifty or so years. Almost all of the productions were musicals, featuring the melodramas of Tom's Christian suffering and Eva's death, and the farcical antics of the mischievous Topsy.

It wasn't until after emancipation in the United States that black performers began appearing in these shows. In the mid-1870s, during the second wave of the *Uncle Tom* craze, black specialty acts were added to the bill. Troupes of African American jubilee singers began accompanying Tom shows on tour. After about 1880, black women performers began to appear more frequently in these specialty acts. "Colored women had always been barred from minstrel shows but this play opened the way for them," recalls the performer Thomas Fletcher.[12] In one version playing in the English provinces a "ballet of negro girls" was added. "They dress entirely in black and send the audience home feeling as though they had attended a funeral."[13]

In the 1890s white actors in blackface were still the only performers in the principal roles. Topsy and Uncle Tom were played by whites in burnt cork and black actors were only permitted to play the dancing and singing "slaves on the plantation."[14] That black actors were not permitted to play themselves in an anti-slavery narrative is an absurdity that will last throughout this book. Considering their long exclusion, the appearance of black actors in the principal roles has a