

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

historical dimension and a trajectory that cannot be subsumed into the history of the white-cast Tom shows.

Black performers had more willing audiences in England, who had grown tired of the white blackface *dramatis personae* and were eager to see a cast of “real American freed slaves” play “themselves.”¹⁵ The veteran black performer Sam Lucas was among the first black performers to play the role of Uncle Tom, with Charles Frohman’s company in 1878.¹⁶ Lucas also appeared in a version of the play put together in 1880 by the Hyers Sisters, an African American singing duo. This version had a black and white cast, in which “whites [played] in white roles and blacks in black roles.”¹⁷ Lucas was also the first black actor to appear as Uncle Tom on film, in 1914. It wasn’t until this period that any black women began to appear as Topsy in versions of the Tom Shows, though this was most likely infrequent.¹⁸

In Britain an explosion of Uncle Tom ephemera accompanied the novel and stage versions. In Britain the “Tomist phenomenon” included children’s literature—primers, catechisms, storybooks—as well as songs, board games, dolls, and even Uncle Tom’s Cabin wallpaper. Images of black children featured prominently in the growing toy industry, with Topsy’s place most prominent.¹⁹ This is a moment to consider the centrality of race in the formation of western ideologies of childhood and

popular child culture.

The figure of Topsy circulated not only as an orphaned child from North America's plantations but also as a figure of English and European colonial subjecthood. "As for depictions of the black child," writes Harry Birdoff, "English audiences had seen but one type, the little page from India who officiates as trainbearer to Lady Teazle—and that was exactly the way the Adelphi, the theatre Royal Manchester and other playhouses presented Topsy."²⁰ But such colonial versions of Topsy were not actually that far from the figure as she appears in Stowe's novel. As well as a product of the system of U.S. chattel slavery, she is drawn in Stowe's novel to represent the childlike races of Africa and India, the uneducated natives to be tamed and trained by Christian charity. The picaninny was a lasting figure for the primitive; the project of civilizing Topsy was a metaphor for colonial missionary programs and their paternalist agendas. Topsy is framed and developed in the novel as a heathen, a native in need of the Christian missionary's ministrations. "It is in the context of established and indeed strengthening links of abolitionism with missionary activity that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a classic instructional text," writes Marcus Wood. "In the illustrated children's versions it became almost a new missionary bible, but the original novel certainly encouraged such a reading—in many ways the book increasingly becomes a missionary tract."²¹ This was part of the

reason why the English responded so readily to the character.

With the advent of colonial regimes replacing the formal system of slave labor, the racist infantilization of black people, from several sites on the map of Western empire, were represented in the figure of the black child. A political cartoon from the *Punch* issue of April 21, 1894 is titled “The Black Baby.” It features Uganda as an orphaned baby, left at the doorstep of Britain. In the cartoon Mr. Bull leans over: “What! Another? I suppose I must take it in!!!” he exclaims.²² African nations are figured as helpless infant burdens, thrust, unsolicited, on the good will of British officials. Empire becomes the result of fatherly, absent-minded benevolence. In 1895 Florence Upton and her mother Bertha authored and illustrated a children’s story called *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg*, featuring a black-faced, wide-eyed doll. This figure was a combination of images of the picaninny associated with the fictional U.S. plantation as well as with British colonial lore. The Uptons wrote twelve more *Golliwogg* books, until 1909. The iconographic power of these fictional characters had an incredible longevity, reoccurring well into the twentieth century. *Golliwoggs* appeared in early issues of Enid Blyton’s *Noddy* series, although they were replaced in later editions. Blyton’s 1944 title, *The Three Golliwogs* (named Golly, Woggy, and Nigger) has fallen out of print.²³ Yet golliwoggs can

still be found as a range of stuffed dolls and, until 2001, appeared on the jars of jam bottled by the British company Robertson's. Strangely enough, the golliwogg has become a focal point for a particular brand of British nationalist nostalgia. Defending the memory of a proud British empire, proponents pledge to fight to "save our gollywogs" from rampant anti-race censors.²⁴ "Gollies" are drawn as a grafted combination of human and animal. On a promotional website for Australian tourism, golliwoggs are referred to as having become an "endangered species" after the 1980s. "Whether it was climate, or their habitat, they were becoming very scarce."²⁵ Such language evokes the history of Britain, and her representatives in the commonwealths, as one of loving caretakers. Such nostalgia blames meddlesome multicultural politics for the loss of correct forms of recognition and appreciation between the races.

Another colonialist children's classic sprang from the picaninny convention. In 1899 Helen Bannerman, the Scottish wife of a British army surgeon stationed in Madras wrote *Little Black Sambo*. Raised in several British colonies, Helen Bannerman herself would live for thirty years in India. The story goes that Bannerman wrote the tale to amuse her children on long train rides in the hot months when they traveled from Madras to the cooler mountain regions.

In her illustrations Helen Bannerman renders Sambo quite dark, small, and slim, a composite of colonial subjects. He is at

once sub-Saharan African, South Indian, and the scampering picaninny of U.S. southern plantation fiction. The story of the small boy outwitting a group of hungry tigers ends with a feast of pancakes made by his mother. The narrative of Bannerman's story is clearly influenced by the continued commodification of U.S. plantation nostalgia, specifically the introduction of Aunt Jemima pancake flour at the Columbian Exposition in 1893, advertised by Nancy Green's performance as a 'mammy.'

While the Golliwogg figure remained a British icon with little currency in the United States, versions of Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* would cross the Atlantic. A number of children's books featuring the character of Little Black Sambo were published after 1920 in the United States, as the story was refitted for a new era of plantation and colonial nostalgia. Joining a plethora of picaninny figures, including Farina, Stymie, and Buckwheat from *Our Gang*, re-versions of *Little Black Sambo* authored by Americans would appear in children's books, cartoons, and films in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.



8 Little Black Sambo,
Helen Bannerman.

Topsy, then, birthed generations of black children characters. Some were gendered male, as in versions of Little Black Sambo, some had male and female versions, as is the case with the Upton and Blyton Golliwoggs. Some versions were rendered ambiguously when it came to gender, as in the early versions of the character Farina in *Our Gang*. Whatever the gender of the picaninny figures that followed her, Topsy herself, as a little girl, emerges from the novel to be one of the most resonant characters in popular stage versions.

Stowe fabricated the figure of Topsy, W. T. Lhamon suggests, from the minstrel stage. We can see the influence of the popular minstrel stage when Topsy is introduced as a “funny specimen in the Jim Crow line,” whose first order from her new owners St. Claire and Miss Ophelia is to

dance. “The thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race.”²⁶ Lhamon situates Stowe’s Topsy in relation to white men in blackface on the mid-century stage. “Topsy’s steam whistle imitation is one indication of her indebtedness to the minstrel stage. . . . Another indication is her ‘wild’ syncopated time,” he writes. “A third is her body-warping, which Stowe might have lifted from any of the grape-vine twisted figures spelling out the titles on minstrel show posters. Any of these signs would have pointed contemporary readers to Topsy as a wench figure from the minstrel show.”²⁷ Lhamon rightly acknowledges the fluidity of forms and figures, the porousness of cross-pollinating popular forms. But his analysis does not account for why Topsy was, from the beginning of her stage life, a role developed and delineated exclusively by white adult women, and not a role developed for, or by, male minstrel cross-dressers.

Studies of vernacular culture and minstrelsy, such as Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft*, develop and innovate within masculinist conceptual frameworks. In doing so they exclude the histories of women working in blackface and most importantly the theoretical implications of

these histories.

Topsy was not a cipher of identification for the rebellious spirit of white working-class men. Topsy was from the very beginning rendered by white women. She was not a wench role, but a female blackface role. “For white actresses, Topsy was the most promising role in the ‘Tom circuit,’” writes Judith Williams. Topsy “became a testing ground for young actresses to prove their mettle.”²⁸ In full burnt cork and wooly wig, Mrs. Caroline Howard was the first Topsy, and she would play this blackface role for thirty-five years, until her retirement in 1887. “Mrs. Howard’s dancing as Topsy was the precursor of a school of Topsies doing ‘breakdowns,’” writes Harry Birdoff.²⁹ Other white female Topsy performers, such as Charlotte Crabtree, followed, blacking up and singing Howard’s signature song, “I’se So Wicked,” for their acts. Generations of white female blackface delineators continued the practice as literal Topsies but also in other racial guises on the popular stage.

With the advent of film, screen versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were soon to follow. At least seven versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were made between 1903 and 1927. The films followed the staged plays, with white actors in the principal roles. In each of the film versions Topsy was a blackface role played by an adult white woman.³⁰ Universal Studios’ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, produced in 1927, was long and lavish. The actress Mona Ray offers a hyperbolically and painfully self-humiliating version of

Topsy.

Also in 1927 United Artists produced a film called *Topsy and Eva*, which had been designed around the long-standing vaudeville act of the Duncan Sisters, Rosetta and Vivian (see fig. 9). The film starred the black actor Noble Johnson as Uncle Tom. Rosetta Duncan, in full cork, wig, and whitened lips, became perhaps the most famous Topsy and would spend her entire career playing Topsy to her sister Vivian's Little Eva. Rosetta "played Topsy so entertainingly that for many she personified the role" (see fig. 10). The Duncan sisters' stage act opened four years before the film was made, in 1923 in San Francisco. The plot drew only loosely on the novel; Rosetta's and Vivian's farcical slapstick and vaudeville songs, such as "Sweet Onion Time," were the focus of their stage versions. The chorus line was intimately associated with blackface female roles. When the show moved to Chicago, they were joined by none other than a chorus of the London Palace Girls, dressed as picaninnies and with blackened-up skin (see fig. 11).³¹

Following the movement of female minstrelsy into burlesque, techniques of racial mimicry enacted by women proliferated on the popular stage. In the 1890s white stage women would become "coon shouters," and through the 1910s and 1920s vaudeville comediennes including Sophie Tucker and Fanny Brice would work in blackface. Even when not in literal blackface, staged delineations were

imitations of the idea of the black working female body—active, agile, licentious, ingenious. In their shimmering blonde wigs, Eva Tanguay, Mae West, and Gilda Gray fantasized black female bodily techniques in their versions of the shimmy, which they had seen black women dance on the TOBA circuit. Racial mimicry was not exclusively a working-class phenomenon. As the dance scholars Jane Desmond and Amy Koritz have discussed, early modern dancers such as Ruth St. Denis regularly “went native,” darkening their skin; Orientalist eroticisms and colonialist fantasies intertwined with those from North America.³² But literally rendered Toppies did not disappear; besides Rosetta Duncan’s frequent stage revivals, the figure would appear on film as late as 1938, when Judy Garland blacked up and donned the gingham dress for a musical sequence in the film *Everybody Sing*. This film was directed by her husband, keeping it, again, a family affair.

In *The World’s Greatest Hit*, Harry Birdoff includes a photo of the Tom Show performer Charlotte Crabtree tipping on a fence in blackface, pigtails, and ragged dress. What are we to do with this strange image of a grown white woman made up in the guise of a small black slave-child? Long-standing identifications suggest themselves as explanations. Lottie Crabtree, with her mischievous grin, reminds us of the equation in medical science, politics, and philosophy between women and children. Like children, women were imagined as

susceptible to outside stimuli, easily impressionable, emotionally immediate. Both were prone to misbehavior, both were in need of guidance and discipline. But the appeal of such acts of mimicry rests on more than just the imagined affinity between women and children. First, this particular child was not quite human, not quite tamable; she was a little demon. Second, she was also a possession, property, without the right to inhabit her own body on her own terms.



9 Rosetta and Vivian Duncan.
Image from *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*. Used with permission of John Sullivan.

10 Rosetta Duncan, from the film *Topsy and Eva*. Image from *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*. Used with permission of John Sullivan.



11 Rosetta Duncan and black-faced chorus girls, Gaiety Theatre, London, November 1928. Image from *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*. Used with permission of John Sullivan.

In this blackface act, the adult woman's body is transmogrified into the body of a prepubescent girl. On the one hand, playing a misbehaving and rebellious female picaninny represented a therapeutic opportunity for white women, providing access to realms of prepubescent expressive freedoms womanhood was otherwise