

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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> This is a moment to consider the centrality of race in the formation of western ideologies of childhood and

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constructed against. On the other hand, as the role was developed for and consistently played by the mother of the Tommer troupe, the process suggests itself as a response to the sublimation of female sexual maturity and desire in the Victorian bourgeois gender ideal. Disavowed or made diminutive, forced back into a child's body, female sexual maturity returns in the form of the grotesque, the monstrous, the heathenous.

The act can be thought of as a working-class response to this normative model of womanhood, a playful refusal to behave. But such mischievous disruption is held in carefully contained moments of transgression. It should not be construed as an act of alliance with unfree black female subjects. On the contrary, it stabilizes the difference between them. Female minstrel acts were performances of white women's proprietary access to the black female body, as surrogate, as servant, as always already available for use. The mimetic act gave symbolic license to the forms of racialized and gendered oppressions under which black women and girls labored.

Black children were also unfree subjects, produced in bondage. The act of performing as the black child staged a resolve to the ambiguity between the "owned" and the "free" female body. Were white women "free"? Created equal? Did they have the right, as the black children did not, to shape the terms of their own bodily inhabitation? On the one hand, the white woman could perform an affiliation with the black child, both being in some

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sense property. On the other hand, her act affirmed the profound difference between the forms of ownership binding them. (As she was inhuman, and chattel herself, what could Topsy inherit?) The ability to inhabit both meanings pivots on the performance as overdetermined as an act of power, that is, as an enactment of access to the services of the black body.

Many cultural critiques seek to recoup some egalitarian affirmation in moments of racial mimicry. I cannot share their hope. As Saidiya Hartman asserts, “The seeming transgressions of the color line and the identification forged with the blackface mask through aversion and/or desire ultimately served only to reinforce relations of mastery and servitude.”<sup>33</sup> Some versions of the role of Topsy offered a form of populist critique, and Tommers regularly toured farming regions in the Midwest. But populism does not infer egalitarianism. The use of the *idea* of black suffering, an icon for all types of suffering, does not imply active alliance with black people or their continued struggles for space and resources.

The dangerously unequal politics of “contact” are at the heart of how racial mimicry works. The historical availability of black bodies, as commodities, allows for a sense of entitlement to these bodies’ abilities and efforts. This extends into the cultural imagination as access to sets of (often contradictory) imagined properties associated with blackness—spiritual, sexual, obedient, rebellious, strong, weak.

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This sense of entitlement is affirmed and strengthened by the performance.

The boundaries separating owned from free black bodies, however, had to be heatedly defended, and needed constant reinforcement, as these bodies were under constant challenge from the owned black female bodies themselves. Black women understood these acts, after all, as false intimacies designed to maintain a white female subject category. They were imagined resolutions to white anxieties, and did not amount to a natural reach for universal suffrage.

The politics of this enacted access in female blackface have a history in the evocation of female slave suffering found in nineteenth-century abolitionist appeals. Like her male counterpart, the icon of the suffering female supplicant crying “Aren’t I Your Sister?” was stereotyped into a design used for tokens and stationery. The impassioned abolitionist poet and essayist Elizabeth Chandler rendered the supplicant figure with words, beseeching women to the anti-slavery cause with her article “Mental Metempsychosis” in 1831. This was the same year that the narrative of the escaped slave Mary Prince was published in Britain. Prince’s story was a graphic and gory account of a variety of tortures. Like Prince’s rendering, Chandler’s appeal was particularly bloody and fleshly. She appealed to women in sensorial terms. Addressing other Christian ladies, Chandler “urged them to try to identify with the enslaved,” to feel what they had felt. Free white women were urged to “Let

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the fetter be with its bearing weight upon their wrists, as they are driven off like cattle to the market, and the successive strokes of the keen thong fall upon their shoulders till the flesh rises to long welts beneath it, and the spouting blood follows every blow.”<sup>34</sup> The appeal to feel is a call to a visceral reaction before it is a call for emotional response. In this process of mental metempsychosis, then, a woman was to invite the suffering soul of the (dead) slave woman, and her painful physical memory, to pass into her own body. This spiritual appeal is thoroughly sensate and was meant to activate and intensify her Christian sensitivities, to make her feel as she felt in her faith the ecstasy of Christ’s suffering, a shiver through her body as she ate his flesh and drank his blood.

Empathic access to black bodily memory is made possible in conjunction with the history of how these bodies were understood as commodity. The body becomes the medium for the *one-way* transmission of empathic appeal. The process is based on the concept of contact, but it requires, oddly enough, no actual physical touch of any kind with living slave bodies. The empathic appeal is pornographic in its urge; in the language of eroticized violence, white women were encouraged to “feel successive strokes of the keen thong.” This is an encoded reference to the sexual violations black female slaves routinely suffered. But there is a more disturbing type of participatory

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voyeurism here, a devouring intimacy that I am loath to call love.

Thinking of imitative techniques on stage, this process of empathic access can be called absorption, suggested by the spread of cork on the skin as it seeps into the dermis. The concept of absorption is a useful one, which we will revisit in subsequent chapters. This absorption is both more than skin deep and nothing but; it is a symbolic and temporary indulgence. This process, I argue, forms the epistemic foundation for the dramatic economy of female minstrelsy and future forms of racial delineation.

White women's acts of racial delineation, in cork and out of it, do not close off the range of motion shaping the meanings of the black female body. Other possibilities are held captive under the skin and under the skirt. But I add that to critique the power relations of white female minstrelsy we do not have to reinscribe the idea of a "real" black subject or "real" set of black female cultural practices. Nor does this critique rely on stable definitions of whiteness; minstrelsy actually helps produce and stabilize these definitions and to resolve any conflicts around access to the privileges the category implied. However, I insist that the meanings of racial delineation change in relation to the historico-political subject positioning of the actor. Blackface roles resonate differently when practiced by black women. Blackface, performed by black women, operated on alternate tonal registers than that of the "real" delineators

such as Mrs. Howard and Charlotte Crabtree, whose acts were always overdetermined by the politics of proprietary power.

Black women's acts were capable of multiple articulations, coded struttings within the terms of bondage. As a purely comedic figure, this Topsy is potentially subversive. I want to reclaim a trope of black female performance, hidden in the skirts of blackface nostalgia, masculinist revision, and the forgetfulness of black communal shame.

As I stated above, this subversive quality is not equally present in manifestations of Topsy across the board. A type of transgression is available on the white female minstrel stage, a conditioned rebellion against the proscriptions of white female duty. But the transgressiveness is not the same as identification with racialized subjects themselves. The role always signifies ownership of the black female body. But when rendered by racialized subjects, performances of Topsy potentially bring alive a sense of the ability of farce to disrobe authority. Her self-denigrating antics are executed with a sly grin, suggesting the defiance behind them. As a nonperson, as a manufactured product (raised in the pen) she steals and lies, disobeys orders with impunity. The system has created its own problems: how can property steal? How can an immoral heathen, not knowing the value of truth, be held accountable for lying? These trespasses in fact reveal the arbitrary lines drawn in law between truth and deception,

theft and purchase, for, as the abolitionists argued, owning a person was a criminal act.

Topsy was the one supporting character that grew up in the plays from a comedic character into a larger role. Ultimately the narrative contains her; at Eva's death she is tamed by Christian forbearance and beneficence. But it is the Topsy *before* her salvation that remains in our cultural memory. Topsy's penitent tears cannot wash away the effect of her earlier glee-filled miscreant paganism. Perhaps this is why mid-century Tommers kept the role out of the hands of black performers. They might have run away with it.

For a black cultural elite centered in Harlem in the 1920s, black farce did not suggest social critique but rather the "pernicious influence" of blackface minstrelsy. This was understandably so in many ways; it took until 1923 for any black legitimate drama to make it to Broadway (the triple bill of black-authored *A Chip Woman's Fortune*, Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*) and that same year the Duncan sisters' *Topsy and Eva* act opened as a huge success, with the supporting chorus of Palace Girls in blackface. According to Montgomery Gregory's cultural assessment in *The New Negro*, black actors who worked in the mediums of "grotesque comedy . . . farce, mimicry and sheer burlesque" were participating in their own debasement, reproducing white racisms.<sup>35</sup>

Black cultural arbiters Alaine Locke and



others repeatedly cautioned against the deleterious effects of comedy, popular music, and dance. For the producers of the Negro Renaissance, variety hall specialty acts, blues, and jazz were forms governed by base sentiment and filled with vulgar expression, and they obstructed the world's view of the Negro's true abilities. Black artistic philanthropists needed to guard against these forms as they helped Negro art rise up and reach for the light of serious endeavor. These base forms were at best untutored folk tradition, needing to be guided in the proper channels. Intra-race class conflict over artistic representation was not new. A self-consciously black elite had long been urging the race to bring forth its best and finest, warning against the corrupting vulgarities promoted in burlesque halls, jook joints, clubs, and cabarets.

Equally, poking fun at high-toned colored folk and their elitist pretensions had long been a convention on the black comedic stage and was taken up by the comedic artists in the 1910s and 1920s. Early Williams and Walker shows included such compositions as "The Leader of the Colored Aristocracy," and "She's Getting More Like White Folks Everyday," satires of the well-heeled dilettantes from elite black communities in Washington, D.C. and New York. The primary function for such low farce was as a critique of intra-racial class hierarchies; the use of laughter was a social leveler.<sup>36</sup>

For many of the New Negro

intelligentsia, however, Topsy was the quintessential symbol of black artistic denigration and humiliation. Topsy's "baneful influence" continued to stymie serious black drama. So writes Montgomery Gregory, an English professor at Howard and a graduate of Harvard, in his essay "The Drama of Negro Life," which the editor Alain Locke included in the anthology *The New Negro*. "Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* passed into obscurity, 'Topsy' survived," Gregory writes. "She was blissfully ignorant of any ancestors, but she has given us a fearful progeny." He continued:

With her, popular dramatic interest in the Negro changed from a serious moralistic drama to the comic phase. We cannot say that as yet the public taste has generally recovered from this descent from sentimentalism to grotesque comedy, and from that in turn to farce, mimicry and sheer burlesque. The earliest expression of Topsy's baneful influence is to be found in the minstrels . . . these comedians, made up into grotesque caricatures of the Negro race, fixed in the public taste a dramatic stereotype of the race that has been almost fatal to a sincere and authentic Negro drama.<sup>37</sup>

As the Duncan sisters' *Topsy and Eva* act was in its second successful year, most likely the image of Rosetta Duncan's by then ubiquitous blackfaced and white-

mouthed Topsy sat forefront in Gregory's mind. He did concede that a few great actors (he names Bert Williams and Florence Mills) were able to rise above their tainted material and develop their talent. But for the most part the "unfortunate minstrel inheritance" found in musical comedies, had, in his assessment, "been responsible for a fearful misrepresentation of Negro life."<sup>38</sup> Black farce, mimicry, and burlesque became the "fearful progeny" of Topsy, folded into a shameful past that was best forgotten. The well-founded nervous desire for "sincere and authentic Negro drama" did much to cast an earlier era of black stage history into darkness.

In her analysis, the critic Saidiya Hartman interprets Topsy as a symbol of low farce, contrasting and heightening the melodramatic dignity of Uncle Tom. "Blows caused the virtuous black body of melodrama to be esteemed," but "humiliated the grotesque body of minstrelsy. Uncle Tom's tribulations were tempered by the slaps and punches delivered to Topsy."<sup>39</sup> But what makes farce funny is the ability of its figures to take the slaps and punches, to fall from the fist but still get up again, bruised and bleeding yet all the while slyly glancing up and around, in multiple directions. Topsy taunts her owners to inflict punishment from which she then refuses to suffer. As Bakhtin asserts, in its true form farce is layered, dialogic. The figure cannot be slapped down, but keeps rising up, keeps refusing to obey, keeps offering pun and quip.

There was power in the tactics of farcical disobedience developed by early black children performers. Looking at the character of Topsy in light of the histories of black children dancers, a version of Topsy can be understood as a way to read a quality of defiant and disruptive resilience in black expressive acts. Topsy is inured to pain and proudly so; in her defiance she refuses humiliation. She seems to erupt upon the scene as from some unearthly place; as I shall explore she exists seemingly outside the bounds of chronological time. The twisting body of the dancing girl is a reclaimable trope of black expressive transfiguration.

## **DOING SCIENCE, OR “THE DISEASE CALLED ‘RASCALITY’”**

Popular notions of racial essence and typology were developed and circulated widely in the nineteenth century. Theories of race as debated in the natural sciences did not have to travel very far to reach the realm of the popular. “Racialism was a cultural as much as a scientific idea,” writes Robert Young. “Racial theory was always fundamentally populist in tone.”<sup>40</sup> In being pitched to the popular, these theories were, from their inception, decidedly spectacular. Racial theories circulated regularly in the popular press and through a visual language of photographs and etchings. Lectures were a common form of delivery, but they were only part of the performance. Embodiments and bodily differences were enacted through

particularly grisly and carnal stagings. Body parts were dissected in hospital theaters; live specimens, skeletons, and preserved organs were displayed at fairs, museums, and zoos. The Scotsman Robert Knox procured recently murdered bodies for the good of science. Samuel Morton, the Philadelphia physician, craniologist, and founding member of the American School of Ethnography, boasted the world's largest collection of skulls.

Comparative anatomy proved that it was the physiognomy of the primitives that distinguished them from the civilized, the external features indicating, as phrenology argued, the internal temperament and workings of the nervous system and brain. The work of the American School of Ethnography, led by Samuel Morton, the Alabamian slave owner Josiah Nott and the Egyptologist George Gliddon, was committed to finding proof of black inferiority, particularly after Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 officially discredited a polygenist argument. Abolitionists, European race supremacists, and proslavery advocates all drew on the popular scientific discourses on race for their "facts" on racial constitution. Stowe's descriptions reflect this scientific thought.

In *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe's descriptions of the "Negro temperament" show the influence of Morton, Nott, and Gliddon; no surprise, as their work was available to a popular audience. "Their sensations and impressions are very vivid, and their fancy and imagination lively," Stowe writes. Particularly evident is the

influence of phrenology. This “science” proved not just that intelligence could be read from external features, but that all physical and neurological differences were dictated by the brain. “In this respect the race has an Oriental character, and betrayed its tropical origin. Like the Hebrews of old and the Oriental nations of the present . . . their whole bodily system sympathizes with the movement of their minds . . . like oriental nations, they incline much toward outward expression, violent gesticulations, and agitating movements of the body.” (Key, 45) Difference was located not just on the skin but inside the body, in the nerves and sinew.

Phrenology claimed that “mental constitution, not climate or terrain was the vital factor.”<sup>41</sup> This claim is crucial to a theory of racial inferiority in the United States, where arguments that climate dictated the temperament could not be relied on, since the “primitives” inhabited the same physical space as their masters. The reference to climate here is only to immediate environs, as there were certain inherited factors from the races’ originary lands. These factors hardened into permanent features. As the noted phrenologist George Combe wrote: “If we glance over the history of Europe, Asia, Africa and America, we shall find distinct and permanent features of character, which strongly indicate natural differences in the mental constitutions.”<sup>42</sup> Stowe describes Negroes as an “exotic race, whose

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ancestors, born beneath a tropic sun, brought with them, and perpetuated to their descendants, a character . . . unlike the hard and dominant Anglo-Saxon race” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, xiii). Stowe’s thinking reflects a commonsense understanding of the relationship between civilization and geography.

According to these popular understandings of racial fact, it was these constitutional differences that led to slaves’ deviance, and made the need for corporal punishment seem natural and necessary. Samuel Cartwright, in “Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” published in 1851 in the pro-slavery journal *De Bow’s Review*, describes the condition “Dysaesthesia aethiopica, or hebetude of mind and obtuse sensibility of body—a disease peculiar to negroes—called by overseers, ‘rascality.’” The worst symptoms of this condition, according to Cartwright, are the violation of the rights of property. The slaves are “apt to do much mischief, which appears to be intentional, but is mostly owing to the stupidity of mind and insensibility of the nerves induced by the disease. . . . [They] break, waste and destroy everything . . . paying no attention to the rights of property.” Scientific data on the Negro temperament (absurd misinterpretations of slave resistance) were used to diagnose proper treatment of the race. The “facts” were used to justify and define a range of disciplinary tactics. Since Cartwright’s disease is noted by a “partial insensibility of the skin,” he advises to “have the patient well washed . . . anoint

[the skin] all over with oil . . . slap the oil in with a broad leather strap. . . . Put the patient to some hard kind of work in the open air.”<sup>43</sup> The lasting gift of the comparative anatomists was to render blackness more than a matter of skin, to locate race in the nervous system and the mental-emotional makeup of the brain. Prone to “violent gesticulations and agitating movements of the body,”<sup>44</sup> the black body’s difference was not its color, but rather resided below the skin; it existed principally in the body’s internal electrical and chemical composition. This black body was not internally or naturally regulated according to the same rules of time and space, and the black body’s raciology was detectable in its expressivity.

## **A LEXICON OF TORTURES, OR, DERMIS, BLOOD AND BONE**

Abolitionists drew upon the graphic depictions of slavery to galvanize support for the cause. A lexicon of slave suffering came from escaped and rescued men and women; one early narrative, that of the West Indian slave woman Mary Prince, was published in 1831 by the British Antislavery Society. This was in the same year that William Lloyd Garrison launched his abolitionist publication, *The Liberator*. Numerous and bloody firsthand accounts were also given in Theodore Dwight Weld’s 1839 book *American Slavery as It Is*.

Stowe, as did William Wells Brown in his novel *Clotel*, drew upon the personal