

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

grounds; it affirms a right of habitation. The body is inhabited, “theirs” in that sense, but not as the result of conquest, purchase, trade, or exploitative control. My analysis here assumes a humanist concept of the individual’s natural right to the body, but a tempered version. It does not assume that the body can be excavated from an exploitative system whole or intact, nor that the theoretical end game is to find it directed and governed fully by some integrated entity. The body can neither be completely wrested from the inhabitant nor governed by the inhabitant in some space free of discursive claims. This suggests that we can find a way to retain a humanistic ethical field of concern while we guard against reinstating totalizing claims of governance based on acquisition.

DOING TIME

Stowe’s text is a product of a transnational moment in theatricality, ethnographic notions of race, and colonialist mythos. The plantation is a transnational site and the New Orleans plantation of Augustine St. Clare a romantic Orientalist fantasy. The environs are presented in the text as if they were a stage set, “the galleries that surrounded the court were festooned with a curtain of some kind of Moorish stuff.” The big house is an ancient mansion, likened to an ancient feudal state, with a “court in the inside. . . . Galleries ran all around the four sides, whose Moorish arches, slender pillars, and arabesque ornaments, carried the mind back, as in a

dream, to the reign of oriental romance in Spain.”⁶⁷ It is marked, as are other colonial holdings, by bounty: uncontrollable fecundity and sexual access. Stowe’s romantic Orientalism bears the imprint of two centuries of travel writing that, along with treatises on natural science, were shaping popular understandings of race. Fantasies of the Orient combined vastly disparate lands, describing them all as “tropic climates” that were peopled with heathens and primitives and held in a timeless past.

In both Aiken’s play and Stowe’s novel, St. Clare presents Topsy to his sister from the North as a lesson in physical contact with “primitives.” Although Miss Ophelia is against the enslavement of Africans, she is loath to actually touch them. He offers her this “fresh-caught specimen,” taunting her to take on the “labor of conversion” not among the heathens abroad, but in her own house. “It might be a real missionary work,” she concedes.⁶⁸

Her first task is to bathe the battered child; Miss Ophelia is repulsed as she undertakes to cleanse the heathen. Her first bath is a mock baptismal moment, in which the heathen is dipped in the waters of holy forgiveness. Her next task is to begin Topsy’s instruction, opening with a catechism of sorts:

“How old are you, Topsy?”

“Dun no, missis.”

“Who was your mother?”

“Never had none!

“Never had any mother? What do you mean? Where were you born?”

“Never was born!” persisted Topsy.

“Have you ever heard anything about God, Topsy? . . . Do you know who made you?”

“Nobody, as I knows on,” said the child, with a short laugh. The idea seemed to amuse her considerably; for her eyes twinkled, and she added: “I ’spect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me.”⁶⁹

Topsy exists in a “primitive” state and has “no sense of time.” She exists with no understanding of its chronological ordering, for she doesn’t even know her own age; Topsy cannot be dated or placed. It seems as if what amuses Topsy is that she knows she cannot be contained by any of the criteria Miss Ophelia seeks to civilize her with. She cannot be figured in any relation to time or place, parentage or God.

One of the categories for classifying the heathen races was their relationship to time. According to these notions, slaves lack knowledge of time—they have no sense of it as a resource, of its division by the clock, or of the need for its efficient use. Their “lack” is measured against the conceptualization of time central to the epistemology of Western thought, from Christianity to the Enlightenment.⁷⁰ Johannes Fabian explains “time as a constitutive dimension of social reality” and explores how oppressive uses of time, from early anthropological projects, linked

the field of anthropology to colonialist and imperialist agendas.⁷¹ In the epistemological shift of constructions of time from the sacred to the secular, time was naturalized and spatialized. Time became not a measure of movement but of qualitative states of being. Within this framework, all cultures are placed on a temporal slope, and primitive peoples are assigned a stilled place in time, always in the past and always in the present, and are incapable of a complex scientific understanding of time.⁷² They were ruled by nature, the seasons, and their own immediate desires.

Laws of time and its regulation were created to control national and individual bodies and the terms of their interactions. They were also designed to regulate the body's relationship to time and the body's own sensorial capacities. In this respect, Topsy wreaks "nicely timed" and vengeful mischief.⁷³ Stowe drew Topsy in her narrative to function as a figure of abjection. But Topsy's rebelliousness spills out around the edges with bodily moments of rejected rules and regulations. She is a little heathen whose vocal and bodily gesticulations are in keeping with a "wild fantastic sort of time."

Both evolutionary and shifting physical/chronological conceptions of time staked a claim on the black slave body. According to Mark Smith in *Mastered by the Clock*, obedience to the clock was the "litmus test of modernity."⁷⁴ He argues that

there was an evolution of “time consciousness” in the nineteenth-century slave-owning south. It did not run according to rural or premodern uses of time but was aligned with modern forms of time usage developing in the industrial north, with “the equation of time and money, clock time, and the technological standardization of time, disseminated by the railroad system.”⁷⁵ In the South clocks and new ideas regarding time had to take place, and this shift was a battle waged on the bodies of the unfree laborers. “It is in the very essence of this battle that ideas of who owned time, who defined time, and, ultimately, who was free from and slave to time, took place,” writes Smith.⁷⁶

For the Negroes on the plantation, “time . . . was the master’s.”⁷⁷ Clock time was used in tandem with physical violence and its threat to define the power of the master and his freedom. Work time was indicated by the sound of a bell or a bugle, rung or blown by a slave, and task-oriented work was meshed with clock-regulated order. Slaves sabotaged masters’ time with acts of sloth and laziness, everyday manipulations by which they freed time from its bondage. Emancipation equaled independence from time obedience and the right to regulate one’s own rhythms of rest and work. As the former slave Sarah Wooden Johnson put it, “Dis here the new time. Let dat be.”⁷⁸

Smith’s assessment reads time only in relation to labor and its value. Black southerners are solely workers, the subjects

of the shift-in-time consciousness attending industrialization, the victims of the disciplinary violence of coerced labor. His analysis leaves no room to consider the sense of selfhood over and in time of transported Africans and their descendents in terms other than as reactive defense against its exploitative regulation. Smith tacitly reproduces a hierarchical understanding of the civilized and the primitive in relation to uses of time. He flirts with a kind of folk romanticism, claiming that for slaves clock time remained a mystical concept, and that they remained, unchangingly, governed by the agrarian conceptions of time they had brought with them from Africa. Smith does not consider that their time consciousness would also be adapting, transforming, fluctuating, aware of multiple registers and uses of time. Smith's evaluation leaves Sarah Johnson's statement, "this here is the new time, let dat be," to resonate past the bounds of his analysis.

Labor in its formal definition is an insufficient category of investigation from which to think of black people in relation to their own(ed) bodies. As Paul Gilroy suggests, "Social self-creation through labour is not the centre-piece of emancipatory hopes. . . . Artistic expression . . . becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation."⁷⁹ Black expressivity, the creative and improvisatory moments of bodily inflection, were enacted in a complex web of time registers, calling into

question the very possibility that time, or the body, could be owned. This is not to dismiss the coercive theatricality of black performance during slavery, the rituals in which slaves were forced to dance under the lash.⁸⁰ But the very necessity of such intricate and involved practices of claiming ownership suggests that completing the conquest was impossible.

Topsy has a keen sense of time, as her body has been marked by the uses to which her body, and the bodies of other slave children, were put. Topsy has no investment in keeping the “master’s time.” She contorts and bends it—syncopates it, rags it, swings it. In her performance, she weaves in and out of time with her vocal inflections, losing, keeping, wasting, and displacing time with her hands and feet. She creates play zones out of its distortion. Pushing at the boundaries of time’s rhythmic containing, the dancing slave takes time out of its routines, its disciplinary actions on her body. The dancing slave child’s body symbolically absorbs and dodges the rhythmic violence of the lash.

The picaninnies’ eccentric movements were metaphors and parodies of various human and inhuman conditions. Louis Douglas had a repertoire of “the most bewildering and eccentric tricks” and moved with lightning speed from one dance to another. His repertoire included the “skate walk,” an imitation of the smooth glide across ice interpreted by many later dancers. Douglas was

accompanied by the house chorus line of eight English “Pavilion Girls” for his appearance at the London Pavilion for a Christmas special in 1916 entitled “Pick-a-Dilly.” For this show he performed “as a call-boy, a monkey, a drum-major.” Douglas parodied European decadence by introducing his famous “Gout Walk” during the finale.⁸¹ He also performed his famous “golliwog dance.” For this act Douglas staged his own death, and “poor golly is stabbed in the back.” Like Ida Forsyne in 1906 he stages death in order to defy it and “‘rags’ off the stage.”⁸² Death, dismemberment, and the ability to transcend the body’s infliction provided a narrative for the protean faculties of the dance.

Later male dancers, such as Jigsaw Jackson, “the Human Corkscrew,” would build upon these vocabularies of bodily contortion. “It took a strong stomach to stand the things he did to his body,” *Variety* reports, “most unusual trick stuff, his midriff twisted in a knot while his head faces one way and feet another. Keeps his pedals doing a jig all of the time.”⁸³ In the 1920s, Clarence “Dancing” Dotson was known for his ragging syncopation. “He did everything around the beat . . . and he had no imitators,” remembers the dancer Charles Honi Coles. Dotson also executed a skating step in a dance entitled “Snow Time.” In the middle of his act, Dotson would exclaim, “I’m gonna throw a fit, and it’s gonna happen right over there.”⁸⁴ In

these moments of black expression, the enacted distortion of the body spelled a loosening of assumed relations between the body parts. The black expressive body was at home in its own fragmented sense of itself.

The eccentric, impressionistic, acrobatic interpretive strategies, inherited from the picaninny choruses, became primarily bodily gestures that were gendered as male. How is it that Topsy's legacy, "raising Cain," became a male property, that the rebellious black child could so easily be figured as a boy? Tap dancing, all sorts of innovative social dances after the First World War, were thought of as authored solely by men. This shift was one reason why, when Ida Forsythe returned from Russia, she could not find work. "When I got back from Europe I couldn't get a job in any [of the cabarets] . . . because I was too dark. . . . I didn't know how to shake and I never did anything vulgar," she states. "They used to boo if you did anything aesthetic."⁸⁵ Refusing to shimmy, to sexualize her performance style, Forsythe began work as a domestic.

As I explore in the next chapter, chorus lines referenced the sexual politics of raced female bodies under slavery and imperialism. And the eccentric bodily inscriptions from early picaninny performances would appear again in the interpretive techniques of the dancers Ethel Williams and Josephine Baker as they enacted the role of the mischievous little girl at the end of the chorus line.

PERFORMING THE DOMESTIC, OR GENIUS OUT OF CHAOS

The black female body carries a significant corporeality that cannot be subsumed into a universal, normative black male body (Aunt Hester springing from the head of Fredrick Douglass) or assumed as coming into its own only in relation to an imagined normative white female body. In her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister Catherine Beecher outlined the ideal division of labor between the sexes in a family. She quoted Alexis de Tocqueville, the French traveler to America. Women, he wrote, should never be "compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields, or to make any of those laborious exertions, which demand the exertion of physical strength. No families are too poor as to form an exception to this rule."⁸⁶ De Tocqueville and Beecher were, of course, speaking only of white women. Black women were to carry the labor of the female body, to be the bone and sinew of the domestic sphere.

But domestic time could be taken and ragged to creative purpose. Perhaps we can resuscitate the image of Dinah, the "gastronomic genius" of St. Clare's kitchen. Unlike Uncle Tom's wife, Claire, who moved "in an orderly domestic harness," Dinah paid no mind to method or order in her culinary art. Dinah sits in the middle of the kitchen floor, pipe in her mouth, creating "genius out of chaos." The figure suggests the potential for sedition and for creative improvisation. One does not have

to wonder why this particular rendering of the Mammy figure dropped out of circulation.

Topsy rags the same. Miss Ophelia finds Topsy with her very best scarlet India crepe shawl wound round her head for a turban, going on with her rehearsals before the glass in great style, creating a “carnival of confusion. . . . Instead of making the bed, she would amuse herself . . . she would clime the posts, and hang head downward from the tops . . . and enact various scenic performances with that—singing and whistling, and making grimaces at herself in the looking glass . . . ‘raising Cain’ generally.”⁸⁷ Topsy’s performance in the domestic site of her bondage points us toward what will be a recurring trope in the histories of African American women performers. Topsy casts off the domestic harness and transforms herself in the trappings of colonial wealth before the looking glass. Raising Cain, Topsy signifies an anarchic moment in which the working black woman transforms herself in the space of labor, reclaims her body in the place of work. In her autobiography, Ethel Waters described her own transformation from chambermaid to jazz diva. “I had the most fun at the Harrod Apartments, on the days when I substituted for one of the chambermaids,” she remembers. “I was allotted half an hour to make up each room but soon became so efficient that I could finish the work in ten minutes. Then I’d lock the door, stand in front of the mirror and transform myself into Ethel Waters,

the great actress.”⁸⁸ The symbolic power of Topsy’s raising Cain resonates in the performance strategies of black children and black women performers. The disruptive resilience of the black female child will recur in popular performance well into the twentieth century. Following these paths of black expressive forms we find the traces of many black women dancers, singers, and musicians as they traveled between the rural outposts and urban centers of the United States and Europe.