Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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Volume 3 | Number 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation*
Volume 3 | Number 2 *General Issue*
April 2021

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https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl

Recommended Citation: Woo, Jewon. "Between Laughter and Tears: Topsy's Performance in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2021.

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Volume 3
Issue 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation (3.1) and General Issue (3.2)*

Article 3

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Between Laughter and Tears: Topsy's Performance in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin

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Harriet Beecher Stowe concludes the famous serialization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with a "Farewell to Readers" in *The National Era* on April 1, 1852: "Dear children, you will one day be men and women; and she hopes that you will learn from this story always to remember and pity the poor and oppressed, and, when you grow up, show your pity by doing all you can for them. Never, if you can help it, let a colored child be shut out of school, or treated with neglect and contempt, because of his color." In this message, Stowe urges children and young readers to act on compassion for the enslaved, implying the main message of the novel. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is usually regarded as an abolitionist text for white-middle-class readers, Barbara Hochman significantly argues that the novel is aimed at young readers and "featured children, spoke to children, and positioned both children and books as important grounds of domestic value" (104). In fact, Stowe's writing process always involved child readers—her own children as primary readers. According to Charles E. Stowe, who published a biography of his famous mother in 1890, the author gathered them to read what she had written before sending it to *The National Era*. One day, "[h]er two little ones of ten and twelve years of age broke into convulsions of weeping, one of them saying through his sobs, 'Oh, mamma! Slavery is the most cruel thing in the world'" (C. Stowe 148-49). By letting children express their feelings for the enslaved and against slavery, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* empowered the sentiments of her young readers for the abolitionist cause. It is not coincidental that, right after the publication of the novel in 1852, at least twenty-three adaptations of the novel for child readers appeared until the end of the nineteenth century because of the novel's educational purpose, while the full-length novel itself never ceased to attract young readers ("*Uncle Tom* as Children's Book").[1]

[1] Hochman lists writers who were fascinated by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in their childhood. They include Ellen Douglas Birdseye Wheaton, Theodore Dreiser, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Agnes Reppelier, Henry James, James Weldon Johnson, and James Baldwin. For detail, see the beginning of Chapter 4 "Beyond Piety and Social Conscience: *Uncle*

Children's literature for social justice was not uncommon in the antebellum North. As Deborah De Rosa suggests, Stowe was influenced by her literary foremothers like Eliza Lee Cabot Follen and Jane Elizabeth Jones, who asserted their political voice against slavery by targeting children and women readers. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as abolitionist children's literature was a product of this cultural mode of women writers' participation in antislavery politics.[2] At the time when a mother's role for moral and civic education of children was emphasized, Stowe as well as other domestic abolitionist writers "constructed abolitionist children protagonists from their cultural moment" (De Rosa 108). The Southern proprietor's daughter, Eva St. Clare, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exemplifies one of these protagonists. Despite her young age, she helps many characters, including her father, see Black humanity, challenging the institution of slavery on the basis of Christian morality. Eva represents a benevolent white sympathizer who shares sincere friendship with Uncle Tom and transforms Topsy, the seemingly incorrigible Black enslaved girl in the St. Clare household, into a model for other enslaved children. Jane Tompkins aligns Eva's Christlike death to a "cultural myth" that endows the "innocent victim" with the power to shape young readers' perception about slavery (130). Through the characterization of Eva, Stowe's main concern was indisputably to "persuade white children that slavery was evil so they could adopt the proper moral attitude in childhood" (Wright 71), just like the author attempted to implant the concept of abolitionism against the corrupt institution into her own children's minds by reading the story to them.

Tom's Cabin as an Antebellum Children's Book" and Notes 5 and 6 of Uncle Tom's Cabin *and the Reading Revolution* (286).

[2] Even before Stowe's publication in 1852, young readers were already familiar with abolitionism through *The Slave's Friend* and *Juvenile Poems for the Use of Free American Children of Every Complexion* (1835), printed in William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*. And, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was followed by other abolitionist children's literature like Aunt Mary's *The Edinburgh Doll* (1854), M.A.F.'s *Gertrude Lee; or, the Northern Cousin* (1856), Maria Goodell Frost's *Gospel Fruits* (1856), and Anna H. Richardson's *Little Laura, the Kentucky Abolitionist* (1859). For detail, see De Rosa's Chapter 4.

Here, when discussing those *child readers* of the novel, I use the term broadly because some children (like Stowe's own) would have likely had the book read to them rather than reading it by themselves. In addition, it should be noted that the larger cultural phenomena of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* extended the novel's influence beyond just those who had read it in print. At the same time, despite my extensive use of the *child readers* of the novel, I refer it limitedly to white readership. As Nazera Wright points out, Stowe did not target young Black readers who would only find her message to "wait for salvation through divine intervention [of a benevolent white female] instead of relying on themselves or hoping for changes in the nation's legal system" (69). Not only did Stowe exclude Black child readers as if they could not have the same emotional and intellectual capacity as white ones to be ideal readers in her racist mind, but the author also portrayed Black children as too objectified to be valued emotional commodities in a culture that empowered only white sympathy. This underlying message appears obvious to young Black readers such as James Baldwin, who as a boy once devoured the novel and later became one of the harshest critics of it.[3] For this reason, Hochman argues that Black child readers could not but read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with questions and doubts that white child readers would not necessarily have brought up.[4]

Then, we wonder how white children would find less exemplary or rather unsettling Black child characters in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If Eva represents the ideal figure of a child activist, what do the Black children such as Topsy and Harry teach child readers? In other

[3] With his reflection on how his mother kept the novel out of sight in his childhood, Baldwin criticizes Stowe's false characterization of African Americans. For example, he argues that "Tom, therefore, [Stowe's] only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded" (14).

[4] Hochman examines Black writers' experiences with the novel in her book's Epilogue: Devouring *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*. Those writers include Marion Wilson Startling, James Weldon Johnson, James Baldwin, Mary Church Terrell, and Zora Neale Hurston.

words, given that the novel targets white child readers, how would they, especially in the antebellum period, interpret the Black child characters regardless of their marginality in the novel? As an attempt to answer these questions, this essay analyzes the dynamics of Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of minstrelsy and melodrama, the main cultural phenomena of the nineteenth century, on which the author depended to create her Black characters. Examining how young white readers view Black children in a white-authored text is significant because it tells us one of the ways that Stowe's contemporary white children might understand racial dynamics, agency, and interracial alliance on the brink of the Civil War when the country was caught in a vortex of the political discourses on slavery and race.

Tracing responses of white child readers contemporary to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly its Black child characters, is difficult because any document about their reading experience is scarce and also because they might be reluctant to talk about the characters, for the characters were created to serve as fictional auxiliaries to highlight white Christian virtues in the margin of the story. Nonetheless, children's literature scholars' attention to performativity offers a clue about child readers' understanding of the Black child characters in the novel. Both Robin Bernstein and Marah Gubar consider performativity of reading practice a determining factor in children's literature because performativity as a form of play allows young readers to engage in the text by identifying, interpreting, imitating, and recreating characters, which constitute an essential childhood experience with literature.[5] Bernstein argues that "[p]erformative play makes children's literature possible—all too possible" (167). Similarly, Gubar insists that

[5] *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), the first adaptation of the novel for younger readers, encourages child readers to read the book in a form of performance in a family circle: "The prose parts of the book, which are well suited for being read aloud in the family circle, are printed in a smaller type, and it is presumed that in these our younger friends will claim the assistance of their older brothers or sisters, or appeal to the ready aid of their mamma" (*Pictures and Stories*).

"acknowledging that their reading, viewing, and playing practices can function as one of the fibers that help determine whether a text counts as children's literature opens it up" (215). Given that Stowe borrowed components from minstrelsy and melodrama to create Black characters, the novel has possibilities that child readers might find its theatricality in reviving the characters at pretend play.

Textual analysis of the novel per se does not tell us how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was actually read by antebellum children. Nevertheless, attentive examination of its child characters as performers can offer one way of understanding how child readers as performers outside of the text would view the Black children beyond Stowe's explicit message for the young readers. I am careful when saying that the characters may show more than what the author intended. Instead of the characters, it is invisible child readers who can imagine and play with narratives divergent from the places where the characters offer insufficient stories, no matter what intention the author had. According to Hochman, the Black children in the novel appeared "uncannily familiar to white antebellum children who were regularly urged to overcome thoughtlessness, fear, and anger, not to mention disobedience," so that white child readers could readily imagine themselves transcending the racial demarcation (108). In this regard, I argue that Topsy, one of the most controversial Black child characters in American literary history, demonstrates performative potential as a key element of children's literature that leads child readers to feel her unspoken sentiments, identify her frustration and rebellion with their own, create her backstory, and notice her interiority, which is less recognizable than that of other white child characters in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. White child readers' reading experience of imaginative identification with Topsy ultimately expands their emotive realm to Black children in a way not

that Stowe envisioned but that child readers would read a text through performative participation in the story.

When we look into Topsy in terms of performance, the depictions of her minstrel presentation in the novel are so powerful that she has often served as the evidence of Stowe's anti-Black racism. Augustine St. Clare, the father of Eva, whimsically purchases the enslaved girl in the street and gives her to his cousin from the North, Ophelia, who initially calls Topsy a "thing" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 339). Although Ophelia educates Topsy well enough to become a success of Christian upbringing at the end, the young Topsy appears too vivid with her spectacular performances for the reader to remember her as a refined missionary sent to Africa. Martin Delany, who was the contemporary African American journalist, physician, and author of *Blakes, or the Huts of America*, denounced Stowe's depictions of the Black characters for their false representations of the race: "[I]n all respect and difference [*sic*] to Mrs. Stowe, I beg leave to say that she knows nothing about us, 'the Free Colored people of the United States,' neither does any other white person—and, consequently, can contrive no successful scheme for our elevation; it must be done for ourselves" (qtd. in R. Levine 78).[6] For the same reason, W. T. Lhamon, Jr. equates Topsy with the white men in blackface who would play figures like her on the mid-nineteenth century stage.[7] "Topsy's steam-whistle imitation is one indication of her

[6] Nazera Wright explains that, in contrast to that in white-authored texts, Black women writers like Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs in the antebellum period portrayed Black girlhood based on their first-hand experience. Hardships that Black girls went through because of their state of ambiguity and renewal compel the characters to reach early maturation by achieving independence, deepening "awareness of their precarious positions," and seeking "methods for survival" (61).

[7] Blackface minstrelsy was a popular theatrical practice in the nineteenth-century, in which white performers and producers manufactured the caricatured stereotype of Blacks for white amusement and profit. White male performers blackened their faces with greasepaint or burnt cork, and wore ridiculous oversized and ragged costumes to present the white fantasy about the inscrutable blackness. In particular, to mimic Black girls and women, they cross-dressed as oversexualized and demoralized "wench," who was often associated with Topsy on a minstrel stage (Lhamon 142). For visual illustrations of Topsy in the published copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see also Marcus Wood 143-214. For the mutations of Topsy, see Linda Williams 86 and Elizabeth Young 37-47. As Eric Lott explains, this cross-racial and cross-gender desire "coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black

indebtedness to the minstrel stage," writes Lhamon, "[and] her body-warping [is what] Stowe might have lifted from any of the grapevine-twisted figures spelling out the titles on minstrel-show posters. . . Topsy [i]s a wench figure from the minstrel show" (142). In the context of children's literature, Brigitte Fielder argues, "Topsy is a caricature of black girlhood that is informed by racist depictions of black women and contributes to racist assumptions about African American children" (325). Likewise, Topsy has constantly been reborn as a popular—mostly minstrel—figure both on stage and in print.[8]

However, reducing Topsy to a merely racist example, as if she is always a victim of Stowe's racism, is diversionary because child readers may find more of the character outside of the apparent racist frame. Despite the author's racist depiction of the Black characters, the novel inspired Black performers to stage themselves as well. When Stowe wrote her dramatized version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* titled *The Christian Slave*, for the Black performer Mary E. Webb, Webb played all of the characters in the play in New England and London (Reynolds 179).[9] It is notable that minstrelsy in fact reveals a "constant struggle between resistance and its discipline," rather than fostering only the anti-Black stereotype for white amusement (Lhamon 117). Like Ophelia laments, "Topsy would hold a perfect carnival of confusion," Topsy's

people and their cultural practices," and "made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure" (6).

[8] The two most detailed accounts of the stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the transatlantic countries are Harry Birdoff 144-65 and Thomas Gossett 164-260. David S. Reynolds's *Mightier Than the Sword* also offers the rich history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on various stages and films. Regarding this popularity, Jim O'Loughlin claims that the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* should not be measured only by book sales, but "by the influence of American culture on subsequent representations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (576). From the 1920s, Topsy has been reborn as various Black children characters including versions of Little Black Sambo and sexless pickaninny figures. See also Jayna Brown 67-68. Most recently, the playwright Robert Alexander stages Topsy as a rebellious figure in his 1996 play, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist "Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

[9] Moreover, Sam Lucas, one of the most outstanding Black performers toured with several minstrel companies in the early 1870s, often singing minstrel-like songs that actually celebrated emancipation (Reynolds 180-81). For this reason, Sarah Meer argues, "the minstrel elements of Stowe's book may have facilitated its rereading and rewriting by drawing on the inherent instabilities and ambivalences in the racial politics of blackface" (9).

performance requires the reader to figure out the multilayered meaning of that "confusion" in her (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 354). Observing the character's chaotic performance, child readers could discover room for their engagement in the characterization of Topsy in an attempt to explain any rule of her play. In other words, we do not have to assume that children would accept Stowe's description of the character's seeming lack of interior complexity as it is.

Although Topsy is a counterexample of Stowe's desirable child characters like Eva, child readers see themselves in Topsy by feeling and behaving like her. Hochman highlights Topsy's appeal to child readers not only because she reinforces "the young white reader's sense of complacency and condescension," but also because her trouble invites the reader to "an alternative reality" through reading experience (109). In particular, Topsy kindles child readers' imaginations because Stowe does not specify Topsy's interiority while her performance of cacophony hints at the character's inner conflict and desire. Whereas interiority was essentially white in antebellum, white-authored literature, Hochman views that Stowe somewhat attributed interiority to Topsy, even if it is not obvious (107). St. Clare introduces the Black girl as "a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line" and "a fresh caught specimen" to Ophelia (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 339). The insensitive word "specimen" indicates that Topsy is an object for white observation in the white household. Additionally, Topsy's habitual excuse, "Dunno," may mean that she lacks interiority, as she claims, "I spect I grow'd" (Stowe 580). This objectification of the character calls for child readers to imagine her missing narrative. For example, one child reader, Frances Eliza Hodgson, who later became a children's book writer, Frances Burnett, found the novel to be "imperfect, unsatisfactory, filling her with vague, restless craving for greater completeness of form." Accordingly, she obtained a Black doll, named Topsy, to supplement the narrative by impersonating the character and by torturing the doll furiously "with

insensate rage," revealing the racist violence ingrained in the novel (qtd. in Bernstein 160). Like Hodgson, when experiencing an alternative reality through the character, children attempt to create an order at play by imagining what the author does not tell about Topsy's inner character or even possible subjectivity.

As a matter of fact, Topsy does not let other characters objectify her as a mere specimen of slavery when minstrelsy and melodrama collide into each other in her performance of "confusion." The most distinctive difference between the two genres can be found in their intended effect on an observer's feeling toward a performer. Minstrelsy estranges its performer for the observer's amusement. By contrast, a melodramatic performer shares perceptible sentiments with the sympathetic observer (Williams 70). The distance between a character/performer and a reader/observer depends on the accessibility to the former's sentiment. Whereas Stowe fits most of the main Black characters into either minstrelsy (Sam, Quimbo, and Chloe's "woolly-headed boys") or melodrama (Eliza and Uncle Tom), the apparent distinction between minstrelsy and melodrama becomes blurred in Topsy's theatrics. At Topsy's debut in St. Clare's house, Ophelia finds that Topsy performs out of the "odd Negro" heritage with a melodramatic performer's "most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity," which is "broken by the cunning glances which she shot askance from the corners of her eyes" of a minstrel performer (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 339). Indeed, according to Saidiya Hartman, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evokes "the grammar of sentiment and the rhetoric of minstrelsy [that] set the stage for a performance of slavery that wed cruelty and festivity" (27). In analogizing the two theatrical genres to slave auctions, Hartman argues, "the fashioning of blackness arouses pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and terror and pleasure" in the two popular genres of the nineteenth century (27). The comic moment in minstrelsy stems from the violence on the Black body ("the

terror of pleasure"), and the tearful cliché of the melodramatic plot is propelled by the observer's violent desire to see the body in pain ("the pleasure of terror") (Hartman 32). The Black body on display, whether for minstrelsy or for melodrama, offers "an essentially pained expression of the body's possibilities" for either the terror or pleasure of its observer (Hartman 32). However, Topsy's versatile performance rather turns the observers to their own desire for self-serving amusement and benevolence. St. Clare urges Ophelia to educate Topsy: "But let me see one of you [Christians] that would take one into your house with you, and take the labor of their conversion on yourselves!" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 340). His suggestion indicates that Topsy functions as "a real missionary work" to test Ophelia's virtue, the quality that Topsy ultimately entitles her to demonstrate (340).

The theatrical expression of Topsy's childish cacophony results from a paradox of childhood that insists on the likeness and difference between children and adults. Gillian Brown points out that children, separate from adult experience, are situated within two realms—actuality and imagination: "The child's imagination stands apart from the actuality in which the child lives, an actuality identified with and ratified by adults" ("Play" 79). Ophelia demands Topsy's acceptance of her Christian actuality, while Topsy already has to navigate her new role by oscillating between her own actuality (as a Black child in the white household) and imagination (as a performer of her own show). These gaps often make the child's behavior untimely and inappropriate, as it signals Topsy's inner conflict. For example, Topsy's recurrent joviality is a byproduct of these requests when she cannot follow them adroitly. Ophelia asks Topsy when she meets her for the first time:

> "Have you ever heard anything about God, Topsy?"
>
> The child looked bewildered, but grinned as usual.

"Do you know who made you?"

"Nobody, as I knows on," said the child, with a short laugh. (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 343-44)

In this dialogue, Topsy does not seem to understand Ophelia's authority with which she represents "God." Topsy is supposed to affirm Christian virtues that Ophelia believes Topsy should pursue. Turning down Ophelia's expectation, Topsy keeps grinning and laughing as if she still plays a role in her imaginative show. But, more importantly, Topsy's grin and laughter in this passage indicate that she tries to escape the inevitable paradox of childhood by resisting Ophelia's contradictory demand that forces her to move out of the realm of childhood and, at the same time, to stay in need of maternal guidance.

Furthermore, Topsy's laughter serves not only as a theatrical tool to resist Ophelia's demand but also as a symbolic weapon to protect her childish realm of actuality and imagination from Ophelia's control. The word *weapon* is borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin who studies the subversive power of laughter through the Renaissance writer François Rabelais. He emphasizes that "[l]aughter. . . overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations," and functions as "a free weapon in [oppressed and blinded] people's hands" (90, 94). In this sense, Topsy's laughter is part of her histrionic device to overcome Ophelia's authority that is reinforced by the hierarchies of their racial, religious, generational, and educational differences. Bakhtin argues that laughter is "developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness" (71). Topsy's laughter results not only from innocent amusements but also from her nonsensical absurdity that interrupts the mother figure's established order. Through the inappropriate grin, Topsy takes up the opportunity to slip out of Ophelia's intention to regiment her. Topsy's laughter even seems to hamper Ophelia's further effort to domesticate her. Ophelia

at last confesses that she could "not help feeling that so many accidents could not possibly happen in succession, yet she could not, without a watchfulness which would leave her no time for anything else, detect [Topsy]" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 352). Instead of practicing her teaching philosophy, Ophelia now becomes Topsy's attentive observer, for she has "no time for anything else." Ophelia's resignation, though, reveals what power Topsy has against a parental authority, as her name—*topsyturvydom*—implies.[10] This may lead child readers to imagine the reversed power relationship with a mother figure, requiring stories of their rebellious play and laughter.

The scene of Ophelia's hardship in teaching Topsy epitomizes how the child invents the strategic fissure for performance of her desire in between minstrelsy and melodrama. When Ophelia instructs her to make a bed, Topsy ostentatiously obliges her mistress "with a deep sigh, and a face of woeful earnestness" and "with an expression of solemnity well befitting a funeral," as if she were a melodramatic heroine (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 345). Topsy's apparent compliance with the instruction temporarily distracts Ophelia's attention from her: "[W]hat Miss Ophelia did not see, that, during the time when the good lady's back was turned, in the zeal of her manipulations, the young disciple had contrived to snatch a pair of gloves and a ribbon, which she had adroitly slipped into her sleeves, and stood with her hands dutifully folded, as before" (346). Topsy's ostensible gravity indicates that she pretends to do the assigned performance while secretly mimicking and stealing for her childish amusement. Even when Ophelia discovers Topsy's stealth, Topsy continues on her melodrama "with an air of the most surprised and unconscious innocence" (346). As soon as her lie is exposed, Topsy begs Ophelia's forgiveness "with loud

[10] Topsyturveydom refers to any radically antithetical relationship between people with different power. Lawrence Levine's quote of Henri Bergson is particularly relevant to explain Topsy's subversiveness: "Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene. . . Thus, we laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate; at a child presuming to teach its parents; in a word at everything that comes under the heading of 'topsyturvydom'" (qtd. in Levine 300).

protestations, and tears, and groans"—the gestures belonging to a Black figure of minstrelsy (348). Topsy's clamorous begging overlapped with her frolicking performance seems entertaining enough for other observers like the house servants to ignore Ophelia's seriousness about Topsy's misconduct. In doing so, Topsy transforms Ophelia's bedchamber for white-Christian chastity into Topsy's own stage for her defiant performance that cannot be settled under Ophelia's direction. On that imaginative stage, Topsy turns Ophelia's expectation for her "right" performance down, and, instead, calls for the observer's attention to herself as a performer.

Topsy offers more than pleasure of the subversive imagination to white child readers when they see Topsy struggling to gain a subjective sense through play as both a performance and a childish activity. In the nineteenth century when imitation was a key to educational theory, as Hochman argues, "a child's impulse to imitate is a formative element in the way that children read" (110). Topsy pleases herself by playing at racial cross-dressing to pretend to be an imaginative self or alternative Ophelia in the inverted form of blackface mistrelsy. Her sense of selfhood emerges when she becomes the observer of her own performance. Not much later than her arrival at St. Clare's mansion, Topsy exhibits the alternative self in front of a mirror during Ophelia's absence from her bedchamber:

> [Topsy] would amuse herself with pulling off the pillow-cases, butting her woolly head among the pillows, till it would sometimes be grotesquely ornamented with feathers sticking out in various directions; she would climb the posts, and hang head downward from the tops; flourish the sheets and spreads all over the apartment; dress the bolster up in Miss Ophelia's night-clothes, and enact various scenic performances with that,—

> singing and whistling, and making grimaces at herself in the looking-glass. (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 355)

At first glance, Topsy plays by following the observer's exploitative demand for a minstrel show. Topsy seems not to have interiority when she envisions herself as the minstrel figure created by the white observer's imagination of the Black race. Nonetheless, this experimental performance of objectifying herself is crucial to affirming her interiority because she can notice her expressive dynamics that transcend Ophelia's instruction. Notably, Topsy "amuse[s] herself." The mistress's mirror leads her to appropriate Ophelia's gaze. Accordingly, Topsy denies Ophelia's exclusive authority to direct her performance in the Christian ideal of childhood. Moreover, by producing a minstrel version of Ophelia at the cross-dressing play, Topsy undermines the mistress's authoritative decency as if it is merely a calculated performance as well. Likewise, Topsy's "heathenish" and "minstrel" blackness is not an intrinsic characteristic but an acquired performance. This mirror scene insinuates that, through the imitation play, Topsy confirms a sense of her inner self that is at once overlooked by the mother figure who only sees Topsy's need for instruction.

With the gained sense of selfhood, Topsy leads the indifferent mother figure to feel for her, even if the child cannot articulate her need for sympathy. In this way, her versatile performance expands its interpretive possibilities of inventing and representing Black childhood, which was less recognized than that of white children in the antebellum period. The process of her self-redemptive performance becomes clear when Topsy goads Ophelia to attend her melodramatic suffering in a minstrel show. Whenever her misconduct is discovered by Ophelia, Topsy demands that her mistress punish her because she is "wick'd" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 355). Once Ophelia finally whips the child, "Topsy invariably ma[kes] a terrible commotion,

screaming, groaning, and imploring, though half an hour afterwards, when roosted on some projection of the balcony, and surrounded by a flock of admiring 'young uns'" (355). As soon as Ophelia's discipline of the unruly Black girl becomes part of a minstrel show in Topsy's scenario, Topsy then turns into a melodramatic heroine confronting the torturer who neglects her pain, revealing that Ophelia's seemingly benevolent correction is actually heartless control over the Black child. This scene also suggests Topsy's emotive capacity to measure what Ophelia should feel: "Law, Miss Feely whip! Oughter see how old Mas'r made the flesh fly; old Mas'r know'd how!" (355). Calling Ophelia "Miss Feely," Topsy uses the moniker with irony. Ophelia is not "feel-ly" enough to and for Topsy because she fails to feel Topsy's pain. Consequently, Ophelia once again comes to participate in Topsy's "feely" melodrama.

Topsy insists that the observers "ought to see" her pain and to feel something empathic despite her continuously playful gestures with pretend tears and laughter. Topsy's expression of pain does not simultaneously make Ophelia and other observers confirm Black humanity. The pain that children in bondage undergoes functions as a tool for an enslaver to subject them to white surveillance and control.[11] Nevertheless, the bodily pain notably initiates Topsy's invention of these artifactual gestures. Elaine Scarry suggests that physical pain can be overcome through a sufferer's imagination. The sufferer, then, discovers the power of self-estrangement by imagining the self who is free from pain. As this self-revision "was apparent in the transformation of weapon into tool and tool into freestanding artifact" (324), Topsy constantly revises her performing body. More specifically in relation to Black pain, Cynthia J. Davis argues on how a Black woman subject manages to speak of her own pain. According to Davis,

[11] By analyzing the young Frederick Douglass's witness to Aunt H/Esther's torture, Christina Sharpe points out that "the familiar and intimate violence" against enslaved people, which the critic calls "monstrous intimacy," exemplifies "the ongoing process of subjectification during slavery" and even after slavery (3).

language, which in the case of Topsy is equivalent to her expressive performance, is not antithetical to pain; rather, language functions to make her pain and herself intelligible. Therefore, by "speaking the unspeakable, by narrating her pain, her body, her body's pain" through performance, Topsy can transform "herself from mute, pain-filled object to speaking, pain-filled subject" (Davis 399-400). In the scene above, Topsy's versatile performance evinces her continual self-revision to be a feeling subject. This versatility helps Topsy create her stages, invite the detached observers to attend her show, and convert the invisible observers into collaborating performers. In doing so, Topsy calls for other observers' testimony to the violence that is proved through her corporal, and therefore emotional, suffering. Her childish tantrum and unruliness in fact suggest a sign of her subjective awareness of the self in pain, which was caused by the cruelty of slavery and by the insensitive white observers.

If Ophelia now sees Topsy's suffering, how does her observer come to "feel" the sentience of the Black child? Topsy does not stop merely to blame Ophelia for her maternal failure to show unconditional affection. Instead, she teaches Ophelia how to feel the sentience that is hardly perceptible to the white observer. As if a child invites a playmate, St. Clare remarks: "[Topsy] is fairly introduced into our *corps de ballet*, and will figure, from time to time, in her turn, with other performers" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 358). For this, Topsy succeeds in displaying her feelings through the alliance with Eva who compels the observers to offer empathic touches on Topsy and spontaneous tears for her. The scene in which Topsy arouses Eva's sympathy resembles a staged performance. When Topsy and Eva talk together in a little glass-room, St. Clare and Ophelia lift up a curtain to look in the room. Eva seems to be a guest performer to Topsy's show, where Eva mediates Topsy's sentience that is not easily felt by the less sympathetic observers than Eva. Eva is distinctive from other white observers not only because

of her unrealistic spiritualism but also because of her body's impalpability. Eva's body intensifies the expressiveness of Topsy's emotional and bodily pains, by letting Topsy easily fill the lack of Eva's corporality with her demonstrative body: "The round, keen eyes of the black child were overcast with tears;—large, bright drops rolled heavily down, one by one, and fell on [Eva's] little white hand" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 401). Topsy's sorrowful tears roll down upon Eva's hand that functions as a white screen to make Topsy's emotion visible. The detached observers out of the glass-room, St. Clare and Ophelia, see "the beautiful child [Eva], bending over [Topsy], . . . like the picture of some bright angel stooping to reclaim a sinner" (401). Topsy now appears to be "a sinner" with pain and heart-breaking sorrows.

Topsy's performance suggests the possibility of resisting Ophelia's disciplinary practice unless the white woman is able to show compassion to a Black child. By accompanying Eva rather than showing up as a sole performer, Topsy leads Eva to bear witness to and feel with her. Eva "with a sudden burst of feeling" lays "her little thin, white hand on Topsy's shoulder," saying "'O Topsy, poor child, *I* love you!'" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 401). Without disappearing under the shadow of the playmate who is favored by parental figures, or without being "skinned, and com[ing] white," Topsy remains noticeable to the observer (400). Simultaneously, Ophelia now comes to acknowledge the indisputable sign of Topsy's sentience. St. Clare, who once innocently enjoyed Topsy's performance, declares, "[I]f we want to give sight to the blind, we must be willing to do as Christ did,—call them to us, and *put our hands on them*" (402). By letting these insensitive observers touch her, Topsy, who was once neglected, proves the sentience emerging from her little body. Ophelia is, at last, able to regard Topsy not as an uncontrollable "pickaninny" but as a child who has a sense of selfhood, which still needs a maternal guide and

affection, even while both Ophelia and Stowe wrongly believe that this affectionate guide ought to be white.

Topsy's spectacular performance is more expressive than words when white child readers picture the character in their imagination. Like doing a role-play, Topsy reinvents herself as a vicarious agent or a representative of Eva after her untimely death. Topsy's tears in remembering Eva make other characters cry along with her. Stowe comments on this scene, "[Topsy] was a curious mixture of the pathetic and the ludicrous . . . St. Clare smiled; but there were tears in his eyes" (H. Stowe, *Uncle* 438-39). What the writer calls "a curious mixture of the *pathetic* and the *ludicrous*" parallels Topsy's strategic play out of a combination of melodrama and minstrelsy. Ophelia, then, not only sees Topsy as an affectionate child but also becomes engaged in her sorrow and joy while smiling, weeping, and even grabbing her hands. Topsy, now learning from childish mischiefs, demonstrates the Black child's humanity articulated through performance between laughter and tears.

Even if Topsy does not display evident interiority, feeling like Topsy can lead child readers to discover a sign of her agency. Through that affective identification beyond the racial line, white child readers see not only Topsy as an imaginative playmate who powerfully invites them to her performance but also their own interiority that rebels disciplinary control over them. Jayna Brown encapsulates Topsy's indomitability as a rebellious subject: "Topsy is impervious to the whip, her wailing a hyperbolic satire of its intended effect. Her callousness, meant to signal her dehumanized condition and her pre-civilized nature, also signals her escape from violent forms of discipline and coercive regulation" (84). Topsy's apparent incorrigibility, insensitivity, and uncouthness may mark the characteristics of her immaturity and race from the author's limited view on Black childhood, like Topsy is at best described with images from

nineteenth-century popular theatrical genres. Nevertheless, her performance corresponds to her surreptitious challenge to expose the white-mother-figure Ophelia's self-righteousness and insensitivity to the Black child's sentience. Topsy's clamorous theatrics bespeak her self-motivated desire not to be confined to the disciplinary practice of white-Christian-sentimental maternalism that fails to empathize with her. Topsy ultimately shows that she can allow the unmarried and childless Ophelia as her surrogate mother to actualize the Christian ideals of motherhood.[12] By imagining and identifying Topsy's performance in the alternative reality of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, white child readers are guided to *feel like* and accordingly *feel for* Topsy. And, in doing so, her antebellum child readers would become aware of their feelings that empowered them to outgrow their parents for the cause of abolitionism.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this issue for their constructive suggestions and comments. And she is grateful to the librarians at Lorain County Community College for offering important scholarly works on time despite numerous difficulties caused by the pandemic.

[12] The racist aspect of Stowe's characterization of Topsy needs to be examined not simply through the character's minstrel mutations but through her relationship with her white-mother figure Ophelia. Ophelia establishes her maternal authority by fossilizing Topsy in the stereotype of Black children when she adopts Topsy as an indentured servant rather than as a daughter in a traditional sense. Many critics discuss the significance of motherhood in Stowe scholarship by focusing on the novel's heroic mothers and mother figures such as Eliza, Eva, Mrs. Bird, Mrs. Shelby, and Ophelia. See Elizabeth Ammons' "Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and American Women Writers before the 1920s," Elizabeth Barnes' Chapter 4 "Changing the Subject: Domestic Fictions of Self-Possessions" in *State of Sympathy*, and Jane Tompkins' Chapter 5 "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History" in *Sensational Design*. Ophelia's adoption and education of Topsy demonstrate how she attempts to perform and thus confirm her status as an ideal of white bourgeois womanhood. However, Stowe's glorification of the "sympathetic or affective motherhood" is limited to "the structure of bourgeois identity" of the Victorian period (Cherniavsky 13). In fact, as Gillian Brown argues, "Stowe replaces the master-slave relation with the benign proprietorship of mother to child, transferring the ownership of slaves to the mothers of America" (*Individualism* 32).

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