

THE RIGHT TO REPRESENT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF TOPSY IN ROBERT
ALEXANDER'S *I AIN'T YO'UNCLE*

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THE RIGHT TO REPRESENT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF TOPSY IN ROBERT
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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama
August 4, 2007

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts, August 4, 2007
(B.A., Columbus State University, 2005)

49 Typed Pages

Directed by Paula R. Backscheider

For my master's thesis, I intend to examine the reception of "Topsy" in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the date of publication as a novel in 1852 through 1892. I will investigate and demonstrate the struggle to control Topsy's representation and what was at stake. In conclusion, I will describe Topsy in the "New Jack" era of the 1990's as portrayed in Robert Alexander's 1992 dramatic revision of Stowe's novel, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*. My overall goal is to identify what vestiges of the original Topsy as she was received remain, and how Topsy is being used in the 1990's. Additionally, I am interested in what "work" Topsy does in the culture. It is important to know how and why Topsy is still important, and why she, a character who is only active in Stowe's novel for eighty pages, had such an impact on 19th century audiences and in 20th century popular culture

In order to accomplish my goal I have examined what Topsy says in Stowe's novel, how it was received, and in what context. I will trace decade by decade, starting with 1852 and working to 1892, how Topsy was received, portrayed, and represented, as evidenced in the media of that day.

Important also to my methodology is the search for the black response to Topsy as she is portrayed in Stowe's novel during the years from 1852-1892. In order to demonstrate the lingering influence of the struggle to control the meaning and representation of Topsy, I have chosen a contemporary version of Topsy's representation. I will examine the years surrounding the first performance of Alexander's play, 1992, to contextualize Alexander's desire to "answer" Stowe's novel with a play that centers strongly on the representation of Topsy. I will also look for the black response to Alexander's play, and Topsy in particular, and how it was received in the years it was performed on stage.

Finally, I will point out the relationship of Alexander's Topsy to the various meanings assigned to her from 1852-1892.

Style Manual or Journal Used: *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*

Computer Software Used: Microsoft Word XP

The Right to Represent: The Transformation of Topsy in Robert Alexander's *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*

Harriet: There seems to be some confusion as to who's on trial here. I'm glad you came back, Uncle Tom. I know you'll defend me. Tell them how my book helped to emancipate your race.

Tom: Let's get a few things straight, Ms. Stowe.
First of all, I ain't yo' uncle!

Robert Alexander, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*

In this essay, I will examine Topsy as she is represented in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and then in Robert Alexander's *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist "Uncle Tom's Cabin."* My analysis will demonstrate the struggle to control Topsy's representation and demonstrate what is at stake. To accomplish this, I will examine the reception of Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the date of its publication as a novel in 1852 through 1892. However, it is necessary to work backwards; an initial investigation of Alexander's play, first performed in 1992, will show how Topsy was being used in the twentieth century, and will serve to identify what vestiges of Topsy as she was originally received still remain. It is important to know how and why Topsy is still important, and why she, a character who is active in Stowe's novel for only eighty pages, had such an impact on nineteenth-century audiences and in twentieth-century popular culture.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) changed the face of this country in more ways than one. Stowe, as Abraham Lincoln was reported

to have said, “was the little lady who made this big war.”¹ Whether or not Lincoln actually made this comment to the famous author is irrelevant; *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did change the way (most, but not all) Americans looked at race, and slavery in particular. Her protest novel did much to sway popular sentiment about the “peculiar institution” of slavery, and, more than that, it gave people who knew little about the institution a peek at the plantation and a glimpse inside the slave cabin.²

Stowe, however, did more than write about slavery from an abolitionist’s point of view. Stowe created characters in her novel that came to represent the alleged “essences” of black people. Her light-skinned, or mulatto characters, although cursed with drops of black blood running through their veins, are beautiful, well-mannered, virtuous, well-spoken, highly intelligent, trustworthy, and faithful: almost exact replicas of white folks except for that pesky drop of black blood in their veins. They are deserving of their freedom, mainly because they are too beautiful to be enslaved. Eliza Harris, for example, is described as having a “peculiar air of refinement...a particular gift to the quadroon and mulatto women.” Eliza’s “air of refinement” is accompanied by “beauty of the most dazzling kind,” and with that came the privilege of being Mrs. Shelby’s “petted and indulged favorite.”³ On the other hand, the dark-skinned characters, except for Tom, of course, are shiftless, lazy, ugly, dark-complexioned with bug-eyes, huge lips, and nappy hair: loud, disrespectful good-for-nothing slaves who without the benevolence and beneficence of white slave owners wouldn’t last a day if set free. In fact, Marie St. Clare,

¹ Eric J. Sundquist, ed., introduction to *New Essays on “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,”* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1986), 10.

² Interestingly, it has been contested that Stowe “appropriated” the character of Tom from the real life experiences of escaped slave Josiah Henson. Henson penned his autobiography in 1849 and contends that he was Stowe’s model for Tom. See Sundquist, 17.

³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Barnes and Noble Edition (New York: Fine Creative Media, Inc., 2003), 15.

who becomes Tom's mistress in *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*, believes that the "servants are nothing but grown-up children." The exception to this is Tom, the good, faithful, loyal, God-fearing slave who loved his owner, Mr. Shelby, more than he loved himself and who believed that his reward for faithful service to his owner was in heaven, not on earth. By placing her blacks on such opposite ends of the spectrum, by constructing these essentialized representations of blacks, Stowe helped to reinforce the dichotomy not only between blacks and whites, but between blacks themselves that has yet to be resolved. These representations became "fixed" in the minds of whites and blacks, hardening into stereotypes that black people have not been able to shake for over one-hundred and fifty years.⁴

Certainly, blacks have attempted to discredit *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by using literature, film, television, and theater to show positive representations of blacks in order to refute the claims that darker-skinned blacks are less refined, ill-educated, and therefore more servile, while light-skinned blacks are beautiful, intelligent and worthy of more preferential treatment by whites.⁵ Several authors have also set out to reappropriate the novel by rewriting it from a black perspective, one that sheds light on the workings of the plantation and slave life, and that provides more accurate depictions of the blacks who were a part of that life. Richard Wright, Ishmael Reed, and Robert Alexander are three of the many black writers who have taken offense at *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and attempted to

⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe did not create the stereotypes that have dogged blacks for centuries, but her best-selling novel helped to cement those images in the minds of whites and blacks alike. Robert Alexander's characters give Stowe credit for creating the stereotypes in his play; however, there is no historical foundation for this accusation.

⁵ See, for example, filmmaker Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988), a film that attacks the light-skin/dark-skin dichotomy as it is played out on black college campuses. Also see Charles Chestnut's *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line* (1899), a short story collection that also discusses the divisions between light and dark-skinned blacks.

dispel some of the notions about the institution of slavery and the stereotypes that the novel helped to reinforce. Their respective works, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940), *Flight to Canada* (1976), and *I Ain't Yo Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1992), provide evidence that black people did not agree with Stowe's literary representations of blacks that have snowballed into images that have become so fixed that, even over one-hundred and fifty years later, black people are still arguing over "good and bad hair" and whether light-skinned brothers are "in or out" this year. By rewriting Stowe's novel, these authors and others have attempted to reappropriate negative representations and to dispel the myths about the "essence" of black people and show that Stowe did more harm than good with her novel. Robert Alexander's play *I Ain't Yo Uncle* is an especially scathing attack on Stowe and her novel. His characters take over a stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during a performance and put Stowe on trial for all the terrible misrepresentations of black people that they believe are her fault.

I Ain't Yo Uncle offers a version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that turns the tables on Stowe's novel. Rather than just retelling the story from an alternate point of view, according to Kim Euell, who is following Henry Louis Gates, Jr., it signifies on the original text, using a "process of repetition and revision with a signal difference."⁶ Specifically, Alexander uses black vernacular English to revise Stowe's novel. It is "double-voiced, in the sense that [its] literary antecedents are both white and black [...], but also modes of figurations lifted from the black vernacular tradition."⁷ *I Ain't Yo*

⁶ Kim Euell, "Signifyin(g) Ritual: Subverting Stereotypes, Salvaging Icons," *African American Review* 31, no. 4 (1997) : 667-675.

⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, (New York, 1988), xxiii. Gates offers a compelling theory that situates the construction of black texts in the black vernacular tradition of signifyin(g).

Uncle is just that, a “New Jack” (hip hop) revision of Stowe’s text that not only uses black vernacular English in its adaptation of her text, but is also a construction of the play that signifies on Stowe’s construction of her novel. A closer look at *I Ain’t Yo Uncle* will reveal that not only does Alexander’s play signify on Stowe’s novel to retell her story, but that Alexander revises Stowe in order to negate her representations of blacks, allowing them to finally speak for themselves about their experiences in slavery.

The title of Alexander’s play, *I Ain’t Yo Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, sets up the play as a refutation to Stowe’s novel. But it also does something else. It immediately contrasts Stowe’s representations with those of Alexander’s. In Stowe’s novel we meet Topsy in chapter twenty, midway through the novel, while Alexander opens his play with Topsy in the prologue, making it immediately apparent that in his version of the slave story Topsy has become more important than Tom. In the prologue, Harriet Beecher Stowe is dragged on stage by Topsy and Eliza. She is being placed on trial for her stereotyping atrocities and this is how the audience is introduced to Alexander’s renderings of Stowe’s characters:

George: Bring in the accused!

Harriet: What am I accused of?

George: Shut up and we’ll read the charges. Sit down!

Eliza: Don’t hurt her.

Topsy: Missy here is accused of creatin’ stereotypes—

Harriet: I did no such—

Topsy (*Gets in Harriet’s face*): And making me talk like a damn fool pickaninny!

George: We've been stuck in these stupid bug-eye images you made up for a hundred-fifty years!⁸

Before the audience is even introduced to Tom, who in Stowe's novel is the main character, Topsy takes center stage and makes serious accusations against Harriet. She is undeniably angry. Unlike the mischievous childlike Topsy in Stowe's novel, this Topsy is pissed, cursing and yelling at her creator. Here, Harriet is on trial for *creating* stereotypes that have reduced blacks to elements of a racialized difference that have served to limit them socially, politically, and economically, and Topsy more than anyone is ready to take Harriet Beecher Stowe to task for her crimes.

Although we meet her in the prologue, we are formally introduced to the character most affected by Alexander's revision of Stowe's text, Topsy, in the second act of the play, where she spits out rhymes much like a modern-day rap star. She refers to St. Clare as "G," because "he is the governor 'round here and she is the governed."⁹ Although somewhat similar in attitude to Topsy in Stowe's novel, Alexander's Topsy is revised with a signal difference. Rather than allow herself to be tormented by the other slaves in the household, Topsy beats them up, referring to them as "cream colored niggers," painfully aware that they receive preferential treatment because of their light skin color.¹⁰ She does admit that she's wicked, but again, with a marked distinction, evidenced by her rap lyrics:

I'm topsy turvy I'm wicked and I'm black.

⁸ Robert Alexander, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Robert Alexander (New York: Plume, 1996), 24.

⁹ Alexander, 43.

¹⁰ Alexander, 49.

All you yellow-ass niggers better watch your back

I'm wicked and I'm so mean

I'm the baddest black nigger you ever seen.¹¹

Not only is Alexander's Topsy not Stowe's Topsy, this Topsy is the pickaninny from hell. She spews out rap lyrics that depict her anger at being an orphaned slave, torments Eva and the other servants, and curses at everyone, including her owners. She believes that no one loves her because she is *black* and "ugly," not light-skinned with long straight hair like Jane and the other house servants. Tom, however, teaches her about Africa, where black people are kings and queens, and where black is beautiful. He gently reminds her, "We've got to love ourselves."¹² Alexander's poignant scene is a far cry from Stowe's admonitions to slaves to love God and their owners, hoping for a reward in heaven that they cannot possibly see realized on earth. Alexander is also commenting on Stowe's ideal of beauty. All through the novel it is apparent that light-skinned blacks, mulattoes in particular, are beautiful, mainly because they are so similar in appearance and demeanor to whites. When Tom encourages Topsy to love her own skin color, she attempts to do just that, having previously asked for a doll so she can give it "nappy" hair like hers.

I Ain't Yo' Uncle continues in the same vein, rewriting and reworking Stowe's novel in order to refute the stereotypes that cemented with the novel one-hundred fifty years ago. As the play steamrolls to its conclusion, Alexander's Harriet Beecher Stowe realizes that her characters have minds of their own, praising Tom for standing up to people, and even admitting that some of the changes manifested in the play might have

¹¹ Alexander, 49.

¹² Alexander, 58.

also worked in her novel. However, she does ask Tom why in the play he does not talk to Topsy about Jesus and his faith in heaven. He replies that he wants to put his faith in people, clearly a major departure from putting all his faith in Christianity, which promises him relief from slavery but only after death. Topsy runs away from Miss Ophelia after she is taken to Vermont, and Chloe returns in act four, trying to “save herself from the pancake box, realizing that from here on out, she will always be a “mammy.”¹³ Simon Legree makes his appearance in act five, and he is the only character who remains unchanged throughout both the novel and the play. Act six finds Harriet fighting for her life; she professes ignorance about her misdeeds, telling the cast that: “I am very late to understand. I was blind to so many of your feelings. I misinterpreted, misrepresented, and distorted you! My book should just be forgotten. It should be burned. I’m guilty!”¹⁴ Her attempt at making amends is as sentimental as her novel is. Nonetheless, her case is dismissed; she is forgiven. Still, George once again tells her to be quiet, “This ain’t about you anymore. It’s about us writing our own stories.”¹⁵ As a matter of fact, the end of the play belongs to Topsy who spits out another rap song she has written, this one even more angry and violent than the first. Dressed in hip-hop clothes she appears on stage and speaks directly to the audience with these shocking lines:

Dat’s right. Topsy-Turvy in effect. This ain’t no motherfucking play. I’m the governor of this bullshit story! Harriet didn’t make me up. Well, well, well...look at all these crackers and peanut butter. We’s ready for a

¹³ Alexander, 77.

¹⁴ Alexander, 89.

¹⁵ Alexander, 89.

picnic. What you looking at?! You see something you like?! You wanna leave?! I oughta fuck you up! I see the way you look at me when I get on the bus...you sit there, scared...tensed...clutchin' yo' purse...hoping I don't sit next to you. Well fuck you! I shot a bitch 'cause she looked at me wrong. I burned down Uncle Tom's condo with the nigger still in it. I love to hear glass break. I love to watch shit burn. I love to hear motherfuckers scream. Word!!!!¹⁶

Topsy embodies the attitude of the New Jack revision of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; she is angry, tired of being oppressed, violent-- a far cry from the mischievous imp of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who only wants someone to love her. Staring in helpless wonder, Tom turns to the audience and asks: "Any volunteers to take Topsy? Ya'll think she come from nowhere? Do ya 'spects she just growed?"¹⁷ Alexander ends his play with this supreme signifier on Stowe's sentimental explanation of Topsy's parentage, leaving it up to the audience to speculate on Topsy's actual origins. In Stowe's novel she has no idea of her parentage, ancestry, or heritage. No one knows why she is so "bad" or why no one can love her. I would argue that Alexander knows exactly where Topsy comes from; she is a creation of the very worst of all the stereotypes of blacks that have been formulated over the past century and half. She is dark-skinned, loud, has nappy hair, hates work, and is disrespectful to whites (along with everyone else). She is the butt of jokes, dances and sings for the amusement of whites, and she is dangerous because she refuses to stay in her "place." In other words, she is emblematic of the true essence of black folk, according to Stowe and her supporters. No longer amusing, Topsy only knows how to

¹⁶ Alexander, 90.

¹⁷ Alexander, 90.

hate, spewing out violent rap lyrics rather than learning how to read. Alexander's Topsy has not been redeemed by Christianity, the "kindness" of liberal whites, or the love of her own people. She is the new jack black, infinitely worse than Stowe and her supporters (or detractors) could have ever imagined.

The questions remain, however, what original vestiges of Stowe's Topsy are in Alexander's Topsy and why his revision of her is so radically different from Stowe's original depiction of her. What, if anything, in Stowe's novel would lend itself to such an incendiary revision of Topsy? In order to know what remains of Stowe's Topsy in Alexander's play, and perhaps why Alexander's revision of her is so radical, we must first examine how she is represented in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To do that, we will look at what she says, who she says it to, and how and in what context it was received. In other words, what does Topsy *do* in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?

Stowe's description of Topsy is long and deliberate, but it is necessary to include it here to get the full import of the effect it has on Alexander's revision of Topsy:

She was one of the blackest of her race; and her round, shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth...displayed a white and brilliant set of teeth. Her woolen hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction. The expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity.¹⁸

¹⁸ Stowe, 274.

"Topsies"

and "Evas"

I CALL THESE...

Because, like the irresistible Topsy in Uncle Tom's Cabin, these are decided Brunettes... while the other three, like angelic Little Eva, are delectable blondes. Six new desserts — do try them!

BY ELIZABETH WOODY

Figure 1. "Topsies and Evas." Advertisement (1940)

No wonder Topsy is angry at Stowe for what she refers to in Alexander's play as the "stupid bug-eye images" that immediately spring to mind when Topsy is mentioned. Stowe's description *does* emphasize the stereotype of the round face, big eyes, dark skin, nappy hair, and shining white teeth that have come to be associated with blacks, slaves in particular. It is reasonable to assume that a revision of Stowe's novel, especially by a black man, would contest those stereotypes and physical representations of blacks.

Topsy's first words in Stowe's novels are "Yes, Mas'r."¹⁹ Immediately she is placed in the realm of the "governed," as she describes herself in Alexander's play. She is introduced by her owner, Augustine St. Clare, to her new mistress, Miss Ophelia, who is actually her "govern(ess)," and is told to behave herself. With her first lines, Topsy seems to acquiesce to this directive to behave herself. However, it will become apparent that Topsy has no intention of being "governed." St. Clare is amused by Topsy, but Miss Ophelia seems rather exasperated by the thought of another slave child in the house. Her job is to teach Topsy to be a good servant and an even better Christian. Topsy utters her next lines after being questioned about her origins by Miss Ophelia. Topsy claims not to know her age, her parents, or even how she was born. Miss Ophelia, however, is incredulous, and rephrases the question, perhaps thinking she'll get a different answer. Topsy explains in a rather forthright manner that she "never had no mother or father, nor nothin'. I was raised by a speculator, with lots of others."²⁰ Topsy doesn't seem to understand what the fuss is about, but Jane, a slave in the St. Clare household, tries to clarify the matter by explaining to Miss Ophelia that it is common practice for

¹⁹ Stowe, 275.

²⁰ Stowe, 278.

speculators to buy several children and have them taken care of by an older woman until they are ready for sale on the slave market.

Jane also refers to Topsy as a “low Negro,” adding weight to the idea of a hierarchy among slaves. Even though Topsy is in training to be a house slave like Jane, she is considered low because she knows neither her age nor her parents, and is *dark*, unlike the other house slaves. Jane, and possibly Stowe’s audience, receives Topsy’s “Dunno, Missis,” when asked about her age, as an indicator of her low status. The previous scene in which Topsy is introduced into the household is a key scene in the novel. Stowe sets up Topsy as an orphan child, having neither mother nor father, and the audience is thus encouraged to feel sorry for her. However, we also get that she is “low,” not necessarily worthy of too much sympathy; she is after, only a slave child, and even the other slaves think little of her. St. Clare makes another appearance at the end of the scene and tells Miss Ophelia that she is working with “virgin soil.” His reception of what Topsy says can be taken as an opportunity for Miss Ophelia to practice what she preaches, literally and figuratively. She believes that all heathens can be saved, and St. Clare believes that this slave child is no different.

Topsy’s next four lines consist of “Yes, ma’am” twice uttered with a “deep sigh” and twice with “profound attention.”²¹ Topsy is being instructed in the art of bed-making by Miss Ophelia and she seems to take great care in listening to her. However, Topsy’s deep sighs indicate that there could be an underlying sense of ennui with her daily routine. Miss Ophelia doesn’t seem to notice Topsy’s boredom, nor does she notice Topsy stealing. Her reception of Topsy’s “yes ma’am” is met with acceptance and utter

²¹ Stowe, 280.

ignorance of what Topsy is really doing. After she finally notices the ribbon Topsy has taken, she questions her about it. Topsy vehemently denies stealing the ribbon, although it is obvious that she has done so. Miss Ophelia eventually gets Topsy to confess to lying and stealing, and when asked why she has behaved in such a manner, she can only offer up in her own defense that “I’s wicked, --I is. I’s mighty wicked, any how. I can’t help it.”²² Miss Ophelia believes her, and receives this information with resigned acceptance that Topsy is an incorrigible child. Eva, however, catches the tail end of the conversation and can’t bear to hear Miss Ophelia and Rosa speak negatively of Topsy. Rosa, another house slave, insists that Topsy’s behavior is indicative of all “niggers,” and that Eva is “too good” to believe it.

Topsy’s theft scene allows us to see what Stowe claims are innate differences between Topsy and Eva: Eva’s endearing and enduring goodness and Topsy’s pure wickedness. Stowe leaves no doubt as to her intentions when she gives this description of Topsy and Eva:

There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle cringing yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice!²³

²² Stowe, 282.

²³ Stowe, 283.

We as readers don't have to speculate or guess at what Stowe is doing with this passage. She states clearly that Eva and Topsy are "representatives" of their races. Stowe, whether intentionally or not, uses Topsy to represent all that is wrong with black/slave children, and Eva all that is good with white children.

Since she is a child born of oppression and vice, it's no wonder that Topsy is frequently in trouble in the St. Clare household. Her usual reply when asked why she behaves so badly is, "I spects cause I's so wicked!" Miss Ophelia receives the information on this particular occasion with a renewed sense of purpose. At Topsy's own suggestion, she is going to whip her, believing, because Topsy does, that it may help. However, Topsy is putting one over on Miss Ophelia; she makes fun of Miss Ophelia's attempt to whip her and brags about how wicked she is. She says to an audience of slave children, "Law, Miss Feely whip!—wouldn't kill a skeeter her whippin's."²⁴ She also claims that blacks or "niggers" are the biggest sinners of all, but that none of them is as bad as she. She actually brags to the other children, "I's so awful wicked there can't nobody do nothin' with me. I used to keep old Missis a swarin' at me half de time. I spects I's the wickedest critter in the world."²⁵ It is unclear from the text how this information is received by the other children; Stowe does not discuss their reaction to Topsy's boasts. Here again, though, Stowe's characterization of Topsy as wicked clearly works to contrast her behavior with that of the good/white child Eva. It also sets Topsy up as worse even than other black children, and even other adult blacks.

Next, Miss Ophelia shows off Topsy's amazing ability to learn her catechism.

Like a performing monkey, at a signal from Miss Ophelia, Topsy recites it. However, the

²⁴ Stowe, 288.

²⁵ Stowe, 288.

twinkle in Topsy's eye sends out a signal of its own; her next statement is a play on the catechism's phrasing. She takes the scripture to mean that she literally fell out of a state, Kentucky, not the fall from grace of mankind when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. St. Clare laughs at Topsy's unwitting (or is it?) joke, but Miss Ophelia is exasperated, perhaps realizing that St. Clare's laughter will only retard Topsy's learning process and spiritual progress.

It is also interesting to note how this scene can be likened to little Harry's dancing for Mr. Shelby at the beginning of Stowe's novel. The black children are expected to perform on command and are paraded around much like trick ponies. It is also of note that Topsy may or may not be aware of her comic abilities. I believe she knows exactly what she is doing: performing for her audience for the attention (laughs) that her behavior draws. In later years, the character of Topsy will be used for just that purpose: to add comic relief to tom shows, popular nineteenth-century stage productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Topsy, despite her claims of wickedness, does seem to care about what others think and feel about her. After declaring her ever-present wickedness to St. Clare, Topsy is joined in play by Eva, who is heartbroken by Topsy's badness. She doesn't understand Topsy's behavior, and questions her ability to love and to be good. Topsy initially denies any capacity to love, saying that she "dunno nothing 'bout love," and declares that she could only feel love if she were white. Eva, on the other hand, convinces her that even though she is black, she can love and be loved. She declares her love for Topsy, despite her badness, and this outpouring of emotion moves Topsy to tears. We also learn that Topsy knows and feels Miss Ophelia's disdain for her, and that it hurts her feelings.

Topsy decides that she will try to be good, if only for Eva's sake. St. Clare and Miss Ophelia have watched this entire episode from behind a curtain, and Miss Ophelia admits to being prejudiced and uncomfortable around Topsy. They slowly begin to realize that not only do black children have emotions, but that they are also aware of white people's dislike of them. It could also be concluded by Stowe's readers that Topsy's behavior is a direct result of Miss Ophelia's (and other whites') treatment and feelings towards her.

Topsy has only one line in her next scene, but her role in it is pivotal. Here she is transformed: she has started to love Eva and is trying to "be good." Marie, however, isn't buying it. She refers to her as a "good for nothing nigger," and slaps her when she tries to give Eva flowers. "Law, Missis!—they's for Miss Eva." Eva is on her deathbed, and since she is the only person who has ever shown Topsy any real kindness, Topsy is anxious to show her appreciation. The only way she can think to do this is to bring her fresh picked flowers.

As stated earlier, Topsy has little to say verbally in this scene, but her body language speaks volumes. She is bashful and hesitant, and "looked pleased" when Eva compliments her on her flower arrangement. She is behaving more like a child than a wild animal, and there seems to be hope she can be saved. Again, Marie only sees her as "ugly" and doesn't believe that Topsy is capable of change. Her attitude towards Topsy is that she is ugly and nothing else. Her reception of Topsy's attempt to show "goodness" is an indication that she believes nothing can change Topsy's behavior. However, as Topsy leaves Eva's room, a lone tear makes its way down her cheek, suggesting that

Topsy is indeed capable of feeling and showing love, that perhaps she is not so “wicked” as she claims.

Then, too, Stowe gives Topsy another opportunity to show her depth of emotions and her capacity to change. As one of her last acts of kindness to the slaves on the St. Clare plantation, Eva gives them all a lock of her hair. She has forgotten Topsy, and Topsy stands there crying because she also wanted something from Eva. She exclaims, “I was here, O Miss Eva, I’ve been a bad girl; but won’t you give me one, too?”²⁶ Eva gives her the lock of hair, and Topsy goes away sad but comforted, knowing that Eva loves her as well. The entire household has watched Topsy’s transformation and knows that it was Eva’s love and encouragement that led to Topsy’s attempts at “being good.” Stowe, however, makes no attempt to tell her audience what the rest of the household said about Topsy’s outburst. Miss Ophelia, though, was moved to tears. Significantly, it was Eva’s love, and her love of God that helped to transform Topsy into something that resembles a child rather than a demon. The whippings, constant scoldings, and other punishments did nothing to tame Topsy. It could be inferred that Stowe believed that Christian love could turn even the most incorrigible child (i.e., blacks) into a good person, and likewise that the harsh treatment of slaves would serve only to perpetuate their “wickedness.”

Topsy’s last two scenes in the novel are indicative of her change in attitude. She is torn by Eva’s death and can’t see life without love in it. Amazingly, this is the same child who earlier in the novel had no use for love or any kind of goodness. She was “wicked,” and didn’t seem to be able to help it. However, her utterances at Eva’s death

²⁶ Stowe, 334.

allow Miss Ophelia and St. Clare to see her in a different light. “*She* said she *loved* me, she did! O, dear! O dear, there an’t *nobody* left now, ther an’t!”²⁷ Topsy is absolutely heartbroken at Eva’s death; she truly believes that now no one will love her. When she brings a flower to put in Eva’s death chamber, Rosa is reluctant to let her in. St. Clare, however, insists that she be allowed to place her flower with the others, perhaps realizing that the girls’ love for each other has changed Topsy and that there is truly some good in the child. As a matter of fact, St. Clare sheds tears at Topsy’s cries, and even Miss Ophelia is moved by Topsy’s cries and words. She vows to try to love Topsy and teach her to be a good Christian.

Topsy’s last words in the novel are spoken to St. Clare. She had hidden away a little book given to her by Eva before she died and is begging Rosa not to take it away from her. She pleads with Rosa, “Cause,--cause,--cause, ‘twas Miss Eva. O, don’t take ‘em away, please!” The book is all that remains of Eva, and Topsy does not intend to part with it. St. Clare agrees with her and gives the book back to her. He and Miss Ophelia then arrange for ownership of Topsy to be given to Miss Ophelia. Although Miss Ophelia does not believe that she can own another person, she realizes that in order to save Topsy she must be able to protect her. She can do that only if she is her legal owner.

Overall, Topsy has very little to say in Stowe’s novel, but it is of note that when she speaks, it seems that everybody listens. More often than not, when speaking, she is in a room with only two or three people, but she is able to affect the entire household with her antics. The phrase “I’s spect’s ‘cause I’s so wicked” seems to be burned in our collective memory, even if most people have no idea where it came from. Also, the

²⁷ Stowe, 343.

picture Stowe painted of Topsy is one that is indelible in the mind's eye of most readers. It is not difficult to *see* Topsy in black children everywhere. She is the epitome of all that ails black children, then and now. If we look at Stowe as trying to accomplish "good" with her novel, it can be inferred that she wanted people to know that love and Christian values can fix what ails us. Conversely, Topsy is the pickaninny from hell. She is bad, and nothing but the love of white people and a good beating, (by Topsy's own admission), can save her.

So if at the end of Stowe's novel Topsy is redeemed and is transformed into a model of Christianity (she becomes a missionary in Liberia), why is Alexander's revision of her so radically different from Stowe's conception of her? For a black man answering a white woman's depiction of blacks, would it not have been reasonable to portray Topsy as a loving, caring child who, if not for the evils of slavery, would likely be a model of Christian charity? Then, too, some nineteenth-century blacks agreed with Stowe's representations of blacks in her novel. Therefore, it might be helpful to understand the impact of Stowe's novel on blacks in the nineteenth century.

Frederick Douglass, black abolitionist, orator, activist, and publisher, and one of the most well-known blacks in his day, was one of Harriet Beecher Stowe's most avid supporters.²⁸ His newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, served as a vehicle for many of Douglass's laudatory reviews of the novel along with his reactions to other responses to it.

²⁸ Frederick Douglass, author of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), was a prolific orator, writer, and advocate for the end of slavery. His autobiographies helped to propel the genre of slave-narratives, and his newspapers became vehicles for presenting the case for the end of slavery and the fair treatment of blacks. He was the most famous and influential black man in America in the nineteenth century.

For example, his review of April 1, 1852 mentions his gratitude to Mrs. Stowe for writing such a powerful novel. He states, “The friends of freedom owe the Authoress a large debt of gratitude for this essential service, rendered by her to the cause they love.”²⁹ Douglass believes that Stowe’s depictions of blacks in the novel are correct. He further notes in the same newspaper article that “She has wonderful powers of description, and invests her characters with a reality perfectly lifelike.”³⁰ Not only does Douglass insist that Stowe correctly characterizes blacks in her novel, he goes to visit the “real” Uncle Tom’s Cabin at Andover, Massachusetts. While visiting Stowe and her family, Douglass praises her for her “master book of the nineteenth-century” and looks for little Eva, stating that “a TOPSY we did not expect to find—that is a character for which we should look elsewhere—we think we have met with a many in our day.”³¹ Then, too, in 1893, Douglass asked permission to “stand as Uncle Tom” for an exposition at the World’s Fair. Evidently, Douglass’ response to Stowe’s novel and her characterization of blacks is whole hearted approval. However, other nineteenth-century blacks took offense at Stowe’s efforts to “assist” blacks in their fight against slavery and her stereotyping of blacks in general.

In William Still’s May 6, 1854, editorial for the *Provincial Freeman*, he refers to Stowe’s novel as “that mischievous little book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” Writing from

²⁹ Frederick Douglass, “Notice of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 1 April 1852 in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* is an electronic resource that houses primary documents related to the phenomenon of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The database also includes electronic versions of newspapers, flyers, images, songs, and other primary sources related to the novel.

³⁰ Douglass, 1.

³¹ Frederick Douglass, “A Day and a Night in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 4 March 1853 in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

Canada, William Still and others took a more antagonistic stance against Stowe and her novel. In article dated July 22, 1854, "C.V.S." denigrates Stowe for her portrayal of George Harris, "one of the most manly specimens of oppressed human nature in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."³² The unidentified author takes offense at Stowe's decisions to kill Uncle Tom and send to George Harris to Liberia. He states, "Uncle Tom must be killed,-- George Harris exiled! Heaven for dead negroes!--Liberia for living mulattoes! Neither can live on the American continent! Death or banishment is our doom, say the Slaveocrats, the Colonizationists, and,--save the mark,--Mrs. Stowe!"³³ The author is right: Stowe, even in her attempts to demonize the practice of slavery, presents an unrealistic resolution to the problem by relegating Tom to martyr status and by shipping George and his family (along with Topsy) back to Africa. Clearly, not all blacks were as appreciative as Frederick Douglass of Stowe's attempts to help the abolitionists, and the author of this piece attacks Douglass directly when he reminds him that he himself referred to colonization as a "nefarious scheme."

However, while blacks were debating the merits of Stowe's novel and her representation of blacks, whites were figuring out ways to profit from the story itself. One of the many ways in which whites appropriated the novel for their use was through tom shows. Tom shows were a direct descendant of minstrel shows, which consisted of white men performing in blackface make-up, singing "plantation songs," telling jokes, shuffling around avoiding work, dancing, and generally "playing the fool." Minstrel shows, according to W.T. Lhamon, Jr., more than likely began their American run around

³² C.V.S., "George Harris," *Provincial Freeman*, 22 July 1854 in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 21 August 2003.

³³ C.V.S., 1.

1815 in Albany, New York, not as late as 1843 in New York City as some others have posited.³⁴ The minstrel shows were an extremely popular form of entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century that had a huge impact on their mainly white audiences. It is likely that Stowe has some knowledge of the shows from perhaps her male relatives or from newspaper accounts even if she had never attended a show herself. It is also probable that the shows affected Stowe's representations of blacks. Our first glimpse of little Harry, Eliza's son, is in the Shelbys' parlor, and it attests to the fact that Stowe was knowledgeable about minstrel shows. She animates little Harry with her characterization of him as a dancing minstrel: "The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music".³⁵ A few seconds later Harry, hailed as "Jim" by Mr. Shelby, is called upon to imitate Uncle Cudjoe. Harry quickly obliges him:

Instantly the flexible limbs of the child assumed the appearance of deformity and distortion, as with his back humped up, and his master's stick in his hand, he hobbled about the room, his childish face drawn into doleful pucker, and spitting from right to left, in imitation of an old man.³⁶

Her description of little Harry's dance is strikingly similar to early accounts of "jumping jim crow" that was performed by early minstrel dancers. In fact, this sketch sounds curiously like the unsubstantiated origins of the dance itself: a white man happens upon

³⁴ W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raisin Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 56. Lhamon's text traces the development of blackface performance from its earliest beginnings in North America to the twentieth century. He posits that blackface has been re-actualized in hip-hop performances and constructs a blackface "lore cycle" to trace this evolution.

³⁵ Stowe, 5.

³⁶ Stowe, 7.

an old crippled slave who has been asked to dance. Physically unable to do so, he does the best he can, buckling his knees, flapping his arms and basically making a spectacle of himself. The white man is greatly amused and creates a dance out of this poor slave's attempt to please him.³⁷ Several stories surround the origin of "jumping jim crow," but no matter the origin, the sights and sounds of the minstrels and their antics made their way into Stowe's novel. Her characters Sam and Andy, as well as Topsy, provided comic relief, and also contributed to the cast of what will soon become "tom shows."

Even if it cannot be proven definitively that Stowe used the minstrel shows to create her characters, obviously, musicians, playwrights, and others took her novel at face value and based their shows on her well-known characters. Sarah Meer even suggests that "part of the key to Uncle Tom's success thus lies in its debts to blackface."³⁸ In other words, these shows were formulated around the characters from Stowe's novel. Tom, Topsy, Eva, Andy, Sam, Eliza, George, and Aunt Chloe all became famous (or infamous depending on one's perspective), characters in the tom shows. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so popular that the book version could not satisfy the public's thirst for more Tom. It was turned into a stage play soon after publication, and those plays were also immensely popular. The plays eventually evolved from dramatic representations of Stowe's novel into tom shows, which essentially bastardized Stowe's novel and turned her sentimental characters into caricatures of themselves, using music and comedy sketches to garner larger audiences. The original, if there can be such a thing, minstrel shows did not

³⁷ See Lhamon for an extended discussion of some of the narratives surrounding the origins of "jumping jim crow" and the "breakdown," both of which were performed in minstrel shows.

³⁸ Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 12. Meer's text traces the Tom-Mania phenomenon as it relates to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy in America and in Britain. Meer also traces the many variations of the tom show, minstrel show, and musical and dramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

transform immediately into tom shows; they were popular well before she wrote her novel. However, to help simplify the transition from minstrel show to tom show, I have connected the dots between the shows a little more straight than they can actually be drawn.



Figure 2. Advertising card for Anthony & Ellis Original Ideal *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Co. Topsy. Caption: "Topsy. Golly I's so wicked." The Courier Lith. Co. Buffalo, N.Y. c.1881.

The characters in the tom shows drew much of their inspiration from the novel, as evidenced by reviews of Stowe's book. The London *Times* stated that "a little black imp, by the name of Topsy...[is] one of the best sketches in the book;" and another review mentioned that "One Topsy is worth a dozen little Evas."³⁹ To be sure, Topsy's character was transformed by her appearance in the tom shows; she had songs written about and for her. Asa Hutchinson composed "Little Topsy's Song" (c. 1853), and the words were written by Eliza Cook. The lyrics are indicative of the types of songs sung at the tom shows and attest to the racist nature of the blackface minstrel performances. (See figure 3.) However, Frederick Douglass noted in his paper that the lines to the song "were particularly touching, and characteristic of poor Topsey and give a portraiture of the misery, darkness, and degradation of the poor negro-slave child." He goes on to say that "the music is very appropriate; the harmony of the three voices in the chorus is fine; and we should greatly enjoy to hear the sweet voices of the Hutchinsons singing."⁴⁰

³⁹ Quoted in Meer, 21.

⁴⁰ Frederick Douglass, "Musical Notes," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 30 September 1853 in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

LITTLE TOPSY'S SONG.

Words by Eliza Cook—Music by Hutchinson.

Topsy never was born, never had a mother;
 Spects I grewed a nigger best, just like any oder.
 Whip me till the blood pears down, ole Misses use to do it;
 She said she'd cut my heart right out, but never could go to it;
 Got an heart, I don't believ, niggers do without 'em;
 Never hear of God or Love, so can't tell much about 'em."

CHORUS

This is Topsy's savage song,
 Topsy 'cute and clever;
 Hurrah! then, for the white man's right!
 Slavery forever!

"I specis I'm very wicked, that's just what I am;
 Oo'y you just give me a chance, won't I raise Ole Sam!
 'Taint no use in being good, ees' I'm black, you see;
 I nuder cared for no thing yet, and no thing cares for me.
 Ah! kn! kn! Miss Noddy's hand don know how to grip me;
 Never likes to do no work, and won't, widout dey whip me."

This is Topsy's savage song,
 Topsy 'cute and clever;
 Hurrah! then, for the white man's right!
 Slavery forever!

"Don't you die, Miss Ery, ees I go dead too;
 I know I'm wicked, but I'll try, and be all good to you.
 You have taught me better things, though I'm nigger skin;
 You have found poor Topsy's heart, spite of all its sin.
 Don't you die, Miss Ery, ees I go dead too,
 Though I'm black, I'm sure that God will let me go with you."

This is Topsy's human song,
 Under love's endeavor;
 Hurrah! then, for the white child's work!
 Humanity forever!

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Figure 3. "Little Topsy's Song," written by Asa Hutchinson 1853.

In London as well as in the United States, parodies of songs were written and performed, and there, too, Topsy was just as popular as in America. *The Liberator* printed the following parody of “Poor Uncle Ned” on August 5, 1853:

“Of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ who had not had a sight?
Who of Topsy the name does not know”
If any one could wash a Blackamoor white,
It would be Mrs. Beecher Stowe.
Wherever you travel, wherever you stop,
Uncle Tom his black poll’s sure to show:
With his songs, polkas, waltzes, they fill every shop,
Till, like Topsy, ‘I ‘specs’ they must grow!’
The stage had enough of Jim Crow,
A jumping and a ‘doing just so,’
And ‘twould be quite a blessing if poor Uncle Tom
Would after that good nigger go.⁴¹

Obviously, some British audiences had had enough of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and had also grown weary of the minstrel shows that had preceded it. On the other hand, Frederick Douglass reported in his paper of the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in England in print and on stage. He reports:

The music shops are all full of songs and melodies about and from Uncle Tom. The great run of the theatres is owing to the representation of *Uncle*

⁴¹ “A Parody,” *The Liberator* 5 August 1853 in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 5 September 2006.

Tom's Cabin...all of a sudden, I saw in a window, a sable face, with bright eyes, shining teeth, with a most quizzical comical expression—undersigned in large letters—‘Topsy.’⁴²

And no small wonder, British stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were extremely popular, and added to the anti-slavery movement that had its beginnings there.⁴³

Additionally, major reviews of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were printed in London, the most notable being the *London Times* review of Friday, September 3, 1852. The unknown author of the review states that:

The lady has great skill in the delineation of character; her hand is vigorous and firm, her mastery over human feeling is unquestionable, and her humorous efforts are impeachable. We know of no book in which the negro character finds such successful interpretation, and appears so life-like and so fresh. The scenes in which the negroes are represented at their domestic labors or conversing with each other reveal a familiar acquaintance with negro life, and a capacity for displaying it that cannot be mistaken.⁴⁴

Even though the author of this review takes Stowe to task for her lack of storytelling skills and for her “gravest fault,” irritating those who want to abolish slavery with the book’s sentimentality, the reviewer still praises Stowe for her representations of blacks.

⁴² Frederick Douglass, “*Uncle Tom's Cabin* in England,” *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 31 December 1852 in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

⁴³ See Meer for a more thorough discussion of British blackface minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

⁴⁴ “American Slavery: English Opinion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.” *The London Times*, 3 September 1852 in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

However, back in America, audiences loved the minstrel and tom shows, and this “love,” according to Eric Lott, was also a form of “theft.” Lott believes that American working class whites loved the minstrel shows and tom shows and that the shows were “the heedless (and ridiculing) appropriation of ‘black’ culture by whites in the minstrel shows, [...and] little more than cultural robbery, [...], which troubled guilty whites all the more because they were so attracted to the culture they plundered.”⁴⁵ Whites stole what they believed was the essence of blackness from blacks, turning it into a commodity that was bought and sold by anyone willing to “black up.” Northern whites came to the shows in droves, eager to get a peek at “authentic” portrayals of blacks, the likes of which most of them had never seen, and most probably never would.

The tom shows, most popular soon after the Civil War, “were responsible for perpetuating the worst stereotypes of blacks.”⁴⁶ The representations of blacks in the shows, now drawn from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, cast Stowe’s heroes and heroines in a new light. To be sure, tom shows made it painfully clear with their enormous popularity that whites enjoyed seeing blacks degraded, demystified, and debased. To make matters worse, black performers soon created their own version of the minstrel show, feeding off of the tom frenzy and hoping to represent themselves in a way that white performers could not. Sadly, black performers were forced to black up as well; audiences were “used to seeing the Negro minstrel as he is depicted by the whites and when the genuine article came along, the public was a little disappointed to find that he was not so black as

⁴⁵ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8.

⁴⁶ Euell, 667.

he was painted.”⁴⁷ Evidently, the misrepresentations of blacks that had been performed by whites in blackface had become more authentic than the actual “blackness” of the black performers themselves. How was it possible that white performances of blackness were seen as more authentic than that of the black performers? Homi Bhabha insists that the concept of “fixity” is to blame for the rigid construction of the “other.” He states: “Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as a disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.”⁴⁸ The minstrel show repeats the stereotypes of the lazy, childlike, loyal slave, the coon, and the tragic mulatto even after the Civil War has ended slavery, fixing those representations in the minds of the audiences who continued to see them.

The tom shows remained popular until the end of the nineteenth-century, well after slavery had been abolished. Southerners also delighted in the tom shows, using them to wax nostalgic about the “good old days,” when “darkies” were happy on the plantation and slave owners still ruled the world. They, of course, *knew* that what was seen on stage at the tom shows was authentic; most blacks *really* were lazy and spent their time happily and hopelessly imitating their white masters, all the while devising elaborate schemes to keep from working. Lott and Bhabha both recognize that in order for the minstrel shows and tom shows to continue to be popular and thus reinforce the negative stereotypes of blacks, something had to keep the audiences coming back. What Lott terms “love and theft,” Bhabha calls “desire and derision,” both suggesting, I believe,

⁴⁷ Quoted in Shawn-Marie Garrett, “Return of the Repressed,” *Theater* 32, No .2 (2002): 27-43.

⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

an innate need of whites who despised blackness to see it objectified on the stage.⁴⁹ To illustrate, in 1878, thirteen years after the end of the Civil War, a new production of “Uncle Tom” was in the making. *The New York Times*, on February 10, 1878, advertised for “sweet singers” for the chorus of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. They already had a Topsy, unlike the more “refined” Topsy of other productions, who “could sing plantation songs like a born slave. Her nose lays right flat down on her face, too. She was made for the part. Why, she stands on the stage and turns a somersault without touching the floor. That’s the kind of a Topsy we have.”⁵⁰

Not only did the tom shows essentialize blacks through the use of stereotypes, they also, according to Stuart Hall, reduced them to what nineteenth-century whites referred to as their “biological destiny.”⁵¹ Of course, blacks were lazy, childlike, and loyal; it was in their nature! Quoting David Green, Hall explains:

As the position and status of the “inferior” races became increasingly to be regarded as fixed, so socio-cultural differences came to be regarded as dependent upon hereditary characteristics. Since these were inaccessible to direct observation they had to be inferred from physical and behavioural traits which, in turn, they were intended to explain. Socio-cultural differences among human populations became subsumed within the identity of the individual human body. In the attempt to trace the line of determination between the biological and the social, the body became the

⁴⁹ Bhabha, 67.

⁵⁰ “Sweet Singers Wanted” *The New York Times*, 10 February 1878 in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

⁵¹ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” in *Representation* (London: Sage, 2000), 225-276. Hall gives an excellent explanation of the sociological and ethnological uses of “nature” and “culture” in relation to late eighteenth and nineteenth representations of race and stereotypes.

totemic object, and its very visibility the evident articulation of nature and culture.⁵²

Rather than representing blackness, tom shows reduced blacks to what whites at the time considered to be their *natural* state of being. These representations were located in the bodies of blacks, and that allowed whites to appropriate and imitate an essence they could actualize because that is what they believed they could *see*.

In the case of Topsy, her character became so popular that even as late as the twentieth-century entire shows were built around her antics. In 1923, Catherine Chisholm Cushing wrote a musical for sisters Rosetta and Vivian Duncan based on Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The main characters in the show were Topsy and Eva, with Topsy "in half-nudity and burnt cork."⁵³

⁵² Quoted in Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other,"

⁵³ "The Duncan Sisters as Topsy and Eva" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/onstage/duncanhp.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

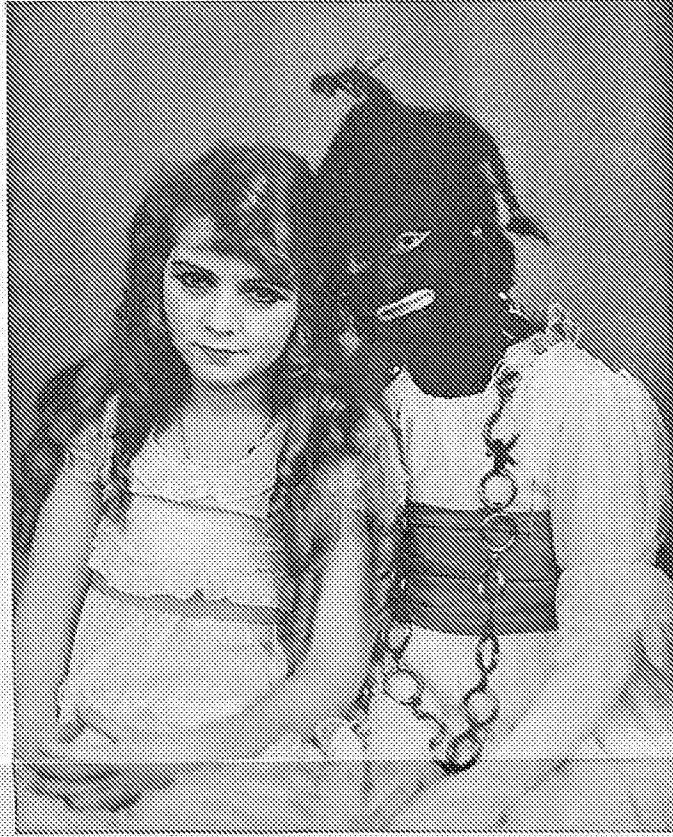


Figure 4. “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is Rented Again” Color photograph illustrating article by Genevieve Forbes in *Liberty* magazine (26 July 1924): 32. Eva, Topsy. Caption: “The Duncan Sisters—Vivian as Little Eva, and Rosetta as Topsy.”

The show ran well into the 1950s, which attests to the American audience’s love affair with Topsy and their fascination with the differences between her and Eva. Moreover, in 1925 Edna Wilson, “the beloved thief,” was brought before a judge for stealing from the affluent wife of a tobacco manufacturer. The judge called her a “white Topsy,” declaring at Wilson’s sentencing that “she was a girl who never could resist temptation.”⁵⁴ These facts add weight to my assertion that Topsy has become the most utilized and best known character from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the twentieth-century.

⁵⁴ “Sent Back to Bedford as a ‘White Topsy,’” *The New York Times* 8 May 1925 in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* [electronic database]; available from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/index2f.html>; Internet; accessed 1 October 2006.

As Robert Alexander's most volatile (and the most changed from Stowe's) character in his play, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*, Topsy has exhausted and transcended the "negro" characterizations as set forth by Sterling Brown in 1933. Brown wrote that "The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life," and that "the majority of books about Negroes merely stereotype Negro character."⁵⁵ Topsy, no longer the "comic negro" of Stowe's novel or the tom show, has now become the violent, uncontrollable "new jack black" of the 1990s, who refuses to be placed in any "box." As a matter of fact, in her last scene in Alexander's play, she is holding that box, as if in defiance to those who would place her in it by their characterizations of her. With Alexander's Topsy, all attempts to define her have failed, making it obvious that Topsy has become more than just a character in an old sentimental novel.

So what work is Topsy doing? Topsy has become a site for negotiation for the representation of blacks. Blacks and whites have both attempted to claim for themselves the right to represent blacks in literature, on stage, and in film. The character of Topsy in particular is a site for struggle because she is represented in Stowe's novel as a mischievous child who only needs the love of white folks and the Bible to transform into a model of Christian charity. Alexander, however, represents her as violent teenager who runs away from the charity of those same white folks, only to wreak havoc on whites and blacks alike. What needs further investigation are the attempts by twentieth-century blacks to reappropriate negative representations of them as written by whites.

⁵⁵ Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *The Journal of Negro Education*, no. 2 (1933) : 179-203. Professor Brown's article enumerates the seven classifications of black characters that show up in American literature: the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic negro, the brute negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color negro, and the exotic primitive. Most of these character types show up in Stowe's novel and on the minstrel stage.

Twentieth-century black critics of Stowe have been merciless in their criticism of her sentimental novel. James Baldwin in particular offered a scathing essay in 1955 that blasted Stowe for her “very bad novel,” which in its efforts to cull sympathy from liberal whites only served to alienate them from what they might truly feel for the plight of slaves if only they could remove themselves from the endless weeping and proselytizing found in the novel. He denounces Stowe for her

laudable determination to flinch from nothing in presenting the complete picture an explanation which falters only if we pause to ask whether or not her picture is indeed complete; and what constriction or failure of perception forced her to depend on the description of brutality—unmotivated, senseless—and to leave unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds.⁵⁶

Evidently, Baldwin shed no tears at the death of little Eva, St. Clare, or even Tom, realizing that Stowe’s over-sentimentalization of her sympathetic white characters and even the black ones did nothing to further the cause of truly emancipating blacks from the hellish stereotypes she relegated them to for the next century and a half. Richard Wright also realized that by writing *Uncle Tom’s Children* as an answer to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* he did a disservice to blacks, sentimentalizing them in the tradition of Stowe. Wright promised that his next work would be “so hard and deep they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”⁵⁷ Baldwin and Wright both felt that sentimentality only

⁵⁶ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-fiction 1948-1985*, (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), 29.

⁵⁷ Clayburgh, introduction to *UTC*, xl.

served to perpetuate Stowe's stereotypes, allowing liberal whites to expel their distaste for the race problem through tears rather than by accepting responsibility or performing any definitive actions that would do anything to solve the problem. In order to present an undeniably frank narrative concerned with presenting the harsh realities of the black experience in America, black authors would need to answer Stowe's novel in a different manner.

Several other black authors answered the call to rewrite or rework *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in an effort to reclaim and reappropriate nineteenth-century characterizations and representations. Most recently, in the 1990s, several black playwrights offered up dramatic revisions of Stowe's novel, striving to replace Stowe's story with their own. *The Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show* (1992), and *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1992), as well as *I Ain't Yo' Uncle; The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1992), all work to dispel the stereotypes propagated in Stowe's novel. By their very existence they refute Stowe's claims that the "gentle African" is humble or simple, incapable of speaking for himself. Additionally, using the theater allowed these authors to use the same medium that was partly responsible for the rapid dissemination of Stowe's stereotypes. Minstrel shows and tom shows provided an inexpensive means for anyone who was willing to pay, an opportunity to experience the essence of black folks. The authors who rewrote Stowe's novel for the stage realized that the performance of blackness was an integral part to the propagation of the negative stereotypes that surrounded the novel and later the tom shows. In other words, these authors knew that nineteenth-century audiences believed what they saw performed on stage and what they read in Stowe's novel was an authentic representation of blackness.

By staging their own performances of blackness, these authors hoped to dispel and dispose of the negative representations of blacks by whites by rewriting Stowe's novel on their own terms.

Obviously, then, Alexander thought he could change the way modern audiences viewed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its essentialized representations of blacks. By reappropriating the novel, he particularly appropriated the representation of Topsy, whom he transformed from a harmless child into a violent rapper. Alexander's Topsy makes no apologies for her behavior and refused to be "governed," as Stowe's Topsy was governed first by her owners and then by a society that once it freed her from the bonds of slavery, shipped her off to Liberia because it had no place for her here.

Robert Alexander's play works to rewrite, rework, and refute Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel in several ways. First, it signifies on the novel itself, using black vernacular English to subvert the negative stereotypes contained in Stowe's text. It also rewrites the novel using drama as its form, signifyin(g) on the tom shows and minstrel shows that popularized those same negative representations of blacks, before and after Stowe's novel, on the nineteenth-century stage. Even though early American film also provided a means to disseminate negative representations of blacks, they had already been instilled in the hearts and minds of Americans long before the first film version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* premiered in theatres. Alexander's play also provides a unique perspective to the novel that a white writer could never achieve. Writing as a black man, Alexander is keenly aware of the dichotomies set up in Stowe's novel, and, rather than ignore them, he confronts them directly through Topsy. Topsy makes it apparent that light-skinned blacks are privileged over dark-skinned blacks, that the love of Christian

whites is not enough to “save” black children, and that unlike the Topsy that is portrayed in tom shows and in Stowe’s novel, there is nothing funny about the New Jack Topsy.

Alexander wrote his play one-hundred and forty years after Stowe’s novel was published. Not only is he qualified to comment on the effects of Stowe’s novel based on his experiences as a black man who lives within the system that continues to perpetuate those same negative stereotypes, he can also draw from years of historical and literary evidence that prove that the stereotypes still exist. Still, Alexander’s play makes a valiant and, I would argue, successful attempt to refute the stereotypes set forth in Stowe’s novel through the use of a minor character in the novel who becomes a major character in the play: Topsy.

Even though Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped to change the racial dynamic of this country by providing an important kick-start that helped to end slavery and by providing a sympathetic look at the life of a slave, it also stereotyped blacks with her character representations, thereby subjecting them to an essentialized existence from which blacks have been trying to extricate themselves for over a century and a half. Stowe’s immensely popular novel, minstrel shows, tom shows, and whites’ desires to subjugate blacks after the end of slavery all contributed to the diffusion of negative stereotypes about blacks.

Blacks, however, have tried to do something about it. Beginning with blacks who tried to put on their own version of the minstrel show, and probably even earlier, blacks have sought to refute the images created by whites, trying to tell their own version of “life among the lowly.” Using the stage, the printed page, and film, blacks have worked to rewrite history from their own perspectives, trying, sometimes in vain, to refute

stereotypes. Even now, blacks are still writing about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to displace, dispel, and dispose of the negative representations that seem to dog blacks at every turn. At the turn of the twenty-first century, director/actor Spike Lee directed *Bamboozled* (2000), a film that lampooned and satirized minstrel shows and blacks' involvement in perpetuating their own negative images. Amusing yet disturbing, the movie takes *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* to the next level, addressing more directly the even deeper issue of internalized hatred in the black community. Evidently, the problem of stereotypes of blacks in American culture will not disappear just because blacks rather than whites are writing about them. But by rewriting Stowe's novel from a black perspective, blacks are reappropriating their histories and reconstructing negative representations, dispelling the essentialized constructions of blackness set forth in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

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