“Blood on the Leaves and Blood at the Root”: Race and the Unequal Protections of Childhood in American Culture

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Introduction

On November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old black boy, was shot by a white police officer in a park outside a Cleveland recreation center. A witness had called 911 to report that Rice was wielding what appeared to be a pistol, but turned out to be a plastic pellet gun he had won in a trade with a friend.\(^1\) Security footage of the scene shows Rice playing in the snow and sitting on a bench in a gazebo before the police arrive. When the cruiser pulls up, Rice stands. Two officers exit the car with their guns drawn and within seconds the boy falls, disappearing behind the car.\(^2\)

In the moments leading up to and following the shooting, witnesses in the park and police officers who arrived at the scene struggled to discern Rice’s age. The witness who called 911 to report the gun described Rice to the dispatcher as a black “guy,” “probably a juvenile.” He also acknowledged that the pistol was “probably fake,” but concluded, “It’s scaring the shit out of me.”\(^3\) In a subsequent interview, he estimated the boy’s age to be 18, adding, “[Rice] was being a gangster. He kept reaching in his crotch.” The police officers who reported to the scene appear to have made a similar misjudgment. In the radio transmission immediately following the shooting, the accompanying officer reported, “Shots fired! Male down. Um, black male, maybe 20 [years old].”\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Lamar Sims, Cuyahoga County Office of the Prosecutor, October 6, 2015, 5.

\(^4\) Ibid., 7.
In an expert report on the shooting, Denver Senior Chief Deputy District Attorney Lamar Sims notes that only one witness to whom Rice was unknown estimated the boy’s age accurately. Rice’s body, he explains, was misleading: “Rice was 5’7” and 195 lbs,” and thus any “reasonable officer responding to the call would have believed Rice was an older teen or young adult.” He ultimately concludes that, given the apparent ambiguity of Rice’s age, the officer’s judgment that the boy posed a serious threat was “objectively reasonable, as was his response to that perceived threat.”

Rice died the following day from his wounds. In an interview with The New York Times, the family’s lawyer declared that “the shooting did not appear to have anything to do with race.” He insisted that “the important question was why the officers did not act with more caution because they were dealing with a child.” But Rice’s shooting and the desperate attempts before and after the incident to read the boy’s body and behavior for age demonstrate the extent to which race and childhood are entwined in American society. The two are, in fact, inseparable. Questions of what it means to be a child in America—what a child looks like and acts like—are integral to questions of what it means to be black in America, and vice versa.

This thesis will grapple with these questions, examining the history of race and childhood as mutually constructed categories in nineteenth and twentieth century American literary and visual culture. Rice’s shooting occurred in the wake of similar incidents, such as the killings of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 and 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014, and in the midst of a reinvigorated debate about the

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5 Ibid., 13.
6 Ibid., 14.
7 Fitzsimmons, “12-Year-Old Boy Dies.”
criminalization of black boys in the United States. I plan to explore the interrelationship of race and childhood with these tragedies in mind, considering the following questions: How has modern American culture constructed a narrative of childhood that excludes non-white, and in particular black, children? How does this narrative distribute innocence and vulnerability along racial lines? Who is included, in Jennifer Tilton’s terms, in the “category and protections of childhood?”

Rather than focus on the lived experience of racialized childhood, I am interested in the process and purpose of racialization. That is, how is childhood constructed in racial terms in American literary and visual culture? What emotional and political burdens do children bear in discourses around race, and how did children become crucial to these discourses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? In other words, how is childhood politically useful?

Outline

Answers to these questions trace through the nineteenth century, where my study begins. My first chapter will examine the history of childhood in the nineteenth century and the historically located, if seemingly natural, associations between childhood and innocence and childhood and suffering. These associations emerged in part from material changes in the lived experience of childhood and in part, as I will show, from cultural texts that constructed and popularized a racialized ideal of childhood. I will focus on one such text, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which centers children in its

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discussion of race and slavery. While Stowe formulated a construction of childhood that was fundamentally raced white, she also connected childhood innocence and suffering to the pain of slaves and, in doing so, worked to include black children in the category of childhood.

By the turn-of-the-century, this was no longer the case: mainstream popular culture had consolidated a racist construction of childhood that broadly excluded black children. My second chapter will follow this transformation, examining how mass culture bore witness to debates around race and rights in a post-slavery era and, importantly, centered children in these efforts. I will pay particular attention to the emergence of the caricature of the “pickaninny”—the non-child, animalistic, violent, and immune to pain—in popular visual culture. As Robin Bernstein has argued, “pain, and the ability to feel it . . . is what divided white childhood from black childhood,” and what excluded black children from the category of childhood in the popular imagination.9

My final chapter will explore how mid- and late-twentieth-century black writers and activists grappled with and resisted the legacy of this racist construction of childhood. I will pay particular attention to Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye*. In many ways, Morrison followed in the tradition of civil rights activists who positioned black children as victims of a racist system. However, she also deconstructed the idea of childhood all together, revealing the extent to which hegemonic constructions of childhood were raced white. In marking, or “re-racializing” whiteness, Morrison worked to disrupt and disempower white supremacist constructions of childhood.

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My intention is not to write a comprehensive history of race and childhood in American culture, but rather to examine particular historical moments in which the two categories intersect. I argue that race and childhood are mutually constructed phenomena. In other words, not only is childhood constructed in racial terms (in particular, as being white), but childhood is also a crucial site upon which race is constructed. The centrality of children to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance, demonstrates the rhetorical power of childhood. Stowe’s Topsy and Eva mediate the violence of slavery. They are victims of a system beyond their control, bearing the emotional burden of a national struggle over race and rights, over what it means to be a citizen and what it means to be human.

Put differently, I am interested in the intersectionality of race and childhood. Over the past several decades, social science and humanities scholarship has embraced the concept of intersectionality to focus attention on the way individuals’ identities are shaped by a combination of race, class, and gender and to understand the way these categories achieve meaning through their interactions with one another. This framework is especially useful for thinking about childhood: constructions of childhood—notations of what children look like and act like—gain legibility through the signifier of race. Importantly, class and gender are both deeply involved in the construction and racialization of childhood. When witnesses of Tamir Rice’s shooting alleged that he was acting like a “gangster,” they read both his race and his gender for signs of criminality and danger. Likewise, when Victorian readers wept over Little Eva’s death, they mourned the loss not just of her childhood but of her middle-class girlhood. That being said, the relationships between childhood, gender, and class will not be the focus of this
study. I am concerned specifically with how childhood secures its meaning through race and vice versa.

Race and Childhood as Constructions

Central to my project is the understanding that both race and childhood are constructions. I am in no sense denying their reality as lived experiences. Rather, I am treating them both as categories that carry historically specific social and emotional meanings. Neither is essential; neither is fixed. While such understandings of race have become a fixture in academia over the last several decades, a social constructivist doctrine of childhood has been slower to coalesce. French historian Philippe Ariés was the first to posit childhood as an historical phenomenon, arguing, in his landmark 1960 book, Centuries of Childhood, that childhood—as distinct from adulthood—was an invention of the European Enlightenment. Although sociologists and historians following Ariés have generally accepted childhood as a construction, Karen Sánchez-Eppler points out that “the social history of children remains far scantier than that of virtually any other demographic group.”10 Children are seen foremost as private beings, objects of study for psychological development but not for social meaning.

The Political Usefulness of Childhood

I argue, in contrast, that children are crucial to our national imagination—that characters like Topsy and Eva have powerful political potential because they are children. As Karín

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Lesnik-Oberstein notes, the child’s centrality to discourses of “power, freedom, nature, innocence, sexuality, and hope” reveal “the entrenchment of the imagery” of childhood.\textsuperscript{11} There are several reasons for this. As James Kincaid writes, “Childhood can be made a wonderfully hollow category, able to be filled up with anyone’s overflowing emotions. . . .”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, children are uniquely positioned to bear the emotional and political burdens of adults—children can carry their “overflowing emotions.” But this quality reveals a crucial paradox underlying our conceptions of childhood. On the one hand, childhood is a constructed category, “wonderfully hollow” and open to changing social meaning. This instability makes it politically useful: children are easily implicated in political discourses. They can be made to argue for or against slavery, for or against civil rights. As Ala Alryyes explains, the abstract child carries distinct symbolic power: “children represent both the promise of and resistance to continuity.”\textsuperscript{13} They are determinants of the future, and thus their stories “allegorize national victimization and ‘hope.’”\textsuperscript{14} Childhood is symbolic and malleable and thus highly usable.

On the other hand, however, childhood is politically powerful because it resists these characterizations: it is imagined to be perfectly stable and natural. While sociologists insist on the child’s constructed status, most writers, like Stowe, insist on the child’s reality. Because children are understood to be essentially apolitical beings, moral and emotional rather than social, their political work appears depoliticized. According to

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 208.
Sánchez-Eppler, “Recourse to the imagery of childhood usually masks the institutional and structural forces at work—the evocation of childhood making proscriptions appear ‘natural.’” When Little Eva befriends Uncle Tom, she is ignorant of the structures of racism that prescribe their segregation; she is acting on an innocent impulse. Her expression of racial goodwill is childish and natural rather than overtly political.

**On Agency**

While historical and sociological studies of children have traditionally treated children as objects—passive recipients of adult culture—scholars in recent years have made important moves to recast children as social and political actors. For instance, feminist sociologist Barrie Thorne has argued that feminist theory should incorporate children’s experiences and perspectives to challenge its normative adult-centered framework, much in the way that feminists have challenged male-centered frameworks, and to grant children conceptual agency, much in the way that feminists have worked to grant women agency. To this end, a great deal of work has been done in sociology and history to refocus children as subjects.

For the purposes of my study, however, I am interested in children as objects. My intention is not to deny children agency or to discount them as important political actors. But in thinking about the political usefulness of imagined children—that is, Stowe’s Eva or Morrison’s Claudia—the more relevant question becomes: when in American culture

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15 Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States*, xxiii.
17 Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States*, xvii.
are children constructed as objects, when are they constructed as subjects, and what does this mean? In this approach I am following Jacqueline Rose, who argues in her classic study of Peter Pan that cultural representations of childhood are fundamentally expressions of adult desires: they reveal more about the imperatives of adults than about the lived reality of childhood.18 While Stowe tends to construct her child characters as objects—bodies onto which the horrors of slavery are inscribed—Morrison is concerned with granting her children agency. Indeed, Morrison’s resistance to racist constructions of childhood depends on the subjectivity of her black girl characters.

Black Self-Representation

It is important to note that Morrison follows a long tradition of black writers writing black childhood. In the years preceding and following the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin former slaves produced slave narratives recounting their stories, often focusing heavily on their childhoods. Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, for instance, told of his separation from his mother at an early age, his struggle to learn to read, and his coming of age under the harsh regime of a cruel overseer. Similarly, Harriet Jacobs’s powerful 1861 Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl recounted her prolonged sexual abuse, beginning in childhood, at the hands of her master. Although they were always published with help from white abolitionists and often edited, these accounts offer a crucial glimpse of childhood in bondage and an early

example of African American self-representation. Like Morrison’s writing a century later, these narratives centered the subjectivity of the black child.

Although my study is primarily concerned with black self-representation in the latter half of the twentieth century, I am in no sense discounting the importance of these earlier works. Rather, I am interested in understanding how hegemonic culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries racialized childhood, and how black writers and activists in the late twentieth century grappled with and resisted the legacy of this construction. Although Douglass and Jacobs are prominent in contemporary historical scholarship, they were largely excluded from dominant discourses around race and slavery until the 1960s and ‘70s. While abolitionism in no sense constituted mainstream culture, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was perhaps the most read book in the nineteenth century, after the Bible, and holds a powerful place in American cultural memory. Importantly, it helped to establish childhood as a central part of the American racial imagination. Likewise, popular visual culture at the turn of the century, which *was* mainstream culture, worked to consolidate and cement a hegemonic narrative of American childhood that excluded black children. It was in the context of this narrative that African American writers and activists in the second half of the twentieth century turned to childhood as a site of resistance.

**The “Protections” of Childhood**

Throughout this thesis I pose the question: “Who is included in the category and protections of childhood?” The assumption behind this question—that childhood, as distinct from all other phases of life, carries with it certain protections—is worth
unpacking. As I will argue in the first chapter, since the nineteenth century childhood has maintained a “sacralized” status in American culture: children are invested with emotional and sentimental meaning; they are understood to be special. And because childhood is sacred, it is also protected. An affront to the sanctity of childhood represents, in Viviana Zelizer’s terms, “an intolerable sacrilege.”¹⁹ When the Rice family lawyer wondered “why the officers did not act with more caution because they were dealing with a child,” he was posing a seemingly simple question: why did Tamir Rice’s childhood not protect him from violence and death? This thesis will examine the historical and cultural formation of “sacred” childhood and the process by which black children, like Rice, were removed this category’s protections.

Chapter 1: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Sentimental Child

In 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, a popular carte de visite (Figure 1) of a young slave girl began circulating among northern households. The small photograph featured Fannie Lawrence, a five-year-old slave who had been “redeemed in Virginia” and baptized by abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brother). Fannie is adorned in an elaborate dress and perched on the arm of a chair, holding a bouquet of flowers. Notably, she appears to have white skin.

The popularity of Fannie’s image prompted another series of abolitionist cartes de visite of so-called “white slaves” the next year. While this series included some dark-skinned
subjects, the majority of the *cartes* featured only the whitest-looking children—usually girls.  

The children in these photographs both captivated and disturbed northern audiences. As Mary Mitchell explains, the images “were spectacles with multiple meanings, inviting a combination of sympathy, speculation, voyeurism, and moral outrage.” The subjects’ white skin compelled the viewers to acknowledge a likeness to them, to sympathize and perhaps even to identify with them. The picture of Rosa, for instance, resembled typical portraits of white middle-class girls: rendered in vignette, only her head and the top of her white dress are visible, and she is surrounded by soft, white light, approximating the color of her skin. The style makes her look like an angel, accentuating her virtue and, above all, her whiteness. Her portrait appealed to sentimentalized notions of childhood innocence that, by midcentury, predominated white middle-class ideology. That this child, who so closely resembled a white Victorian girl, could have been born a slave signaled to white northerners that “not only freedom but virtue was at stake.”

But these photographs also troubled viewers: they appealed to pervasive fears about white enslavement and unsettled notions of determinate racial difference. Indeed, what disturbed contemporary viewers most was that these young girls, who looked “perfectly white,” were in fact not. As Mitchell notes, by encouraging viewers to identify with white-looking slaves, “white slave” propaganda may have unintentionally...

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21 Ibid., 373.
22 Ibid., 376.
23 Mitchell, “‘Rosebloom and Pure White,’” 373.
exacerbated white anxieties about the dangers of emancipation: they hinted at a post-emancipation future where racial difference was indeterminate, where white skin no longer necessarily conferred power and privilege.\textsuperscript{24}

Crucially, these photographs negotiated complicated questions of race and rights by centering children as their subjects. This strategy is not incidental: by the mid-nineteenth century, childhood had achieved a sanctified status in American culture. The unprecedented popularity of \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} a decade earlier exemplifies the preeminence of Victorian childhood: Stowe uses her child characters to navigate complicated political terrain. In both the photographs and the novel, children’s bodies mediate the violence of slavery and the struggle for rights. This chapter will explore the context in which, by midcentury, childhood became a crucial site of these racial discourses.

I will begin by tracing the historical origins of the sentimental construction of childhood, considering the requisites for childhood that this construction entailed: economic uselessness, sexual and racial innocence, and pain and suffering. Finally, I will examine how Stowe’s phenomenally popular text both reflected and actively shaped racialized constructions of childhood in the mid-nineteenth century. While the novel helped to institutionalize a construction of childhood that was fundamentally raced white, it also connected childhood innocence and suffering to the pain of slaves. In other words, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} protested slavery by working to include black children in the category and protections of childhood.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 373, 379.
A History of Childhood

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the meaning of childhood in the United States underwent dramatic changes: children were increasingly treated as distinct from adults and were valued for their emotional rather than economic labor. Childhood became defined as a state of holy innocence and supreme vulnerability: to be a child was to be pure and, often, to suffer. Most of all, though, to be a child was to be white.

In part, these changes in the conceptualization of childhood emerged from broader social and economic transformations. As Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger notes, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, most children of white, middle-class families lived in rural areas, worked to contribute to the family income, and passed from childhood into adulthood relatively quickly. Over the course of the century, technological advancements made areas like the Northeast increasingly industrial, urban, and commercial. At the same time, social reformers concerned about the effects of these changes committed to making public education a reality for all non-slave children. By 1860, over half of the nation’s children were receiving some sort of formal education. By 1897, most states had passed effective compulsory education laws. At the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of American children lived in towns and cities and

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26 Ibid., 3.
27 Heininger, “Children, Childhood, and Change in America,” 10.
attended school instead of working. This exclusion of children from the workforce prolonged childhood as a period of life distinct from working adulthood.\textsuperscript{29} It also changed what childhood meant. Viviana Zelizer argues that between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children shifted from being economically productive members of their families to “economically useless but emotionally priceless.”\textsuperscript{30} This shift was partly, as Heininger maintains, a result of “profound changes in the economic, occupational, and family structures” wrought by child labor laws and the introduction of compulsory education.\textsuperscript{31} As children were excluded from the economic sphere and located increasingly in the home, the middle-class American family became more domestic, with the child as its emotional core.

However, this shift was also symptomatic of broader changes in the cultural valuation of childhood. Zelizer maintains that, over the course of the nineteenth century, children were “sacralized.” As their work became primarily emotional, rather than economic, they became “objects invested with sentimental or religious meaning.”\textsuperscript{32} Zelizer argues that the public concern for infant and child mortality at the end of the nineteenth century and the magnification of mourning for child death in the twentieth century marked a new understanding of childhood: “If child life was sacred, child death became an intolerable sacrilege, provoking not only parental sorrow but social bereavement as well.”\textsuperscript{33} Children had become “emotionally priceless.”

\textsuperscript{29} Heininger, “Children, Childhood, and Change in America,” 1.
\textsuperscript{30} Zelizer, \textit{Pricing the Priceless Child}, 3.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 23.
While this vision of sacralized childhood took form in the mid-nineteenth century, it roots back to the mid- to late-eighteenth century. As Jacqueline Reinier explains, following the Revolutionary War, “adults focused on the child in an unprecedented way.” In the early years of the Republic, children held enormous political power: “Perhaps the malleable child of enlightened thought could be molded into the virtuous, autonomous citizen.”34 The writings of John Locke, who theorized that children were “blank slates” upon which parental and state authority could write, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who theorized that children were innocent by nature, dominated middle-class child-rearing in the period and marked a shift in the cultural value of childhood: children were meaningful because they could determine the future of the new nation.35

The Innocent Child

By the mid-nineteenth century, this shift in the meaning of childhood culminated in a highly sentimentalized notion of childhood. This new construction was predicated largely on the notion that children were innately innocent. While innocence has since been naturalized as an aspect—if not a requisite—of childhood, its relationship to childhood is in fact historically located, not essential.36 According to Sánchez-Eppler, the Romantic vision of the innocent child marked a departure from prevailing Calvinist conceptions of “infant depravity,” which posited children as inherently sinful. In the colonial era, child-rearing and religious education centered on the Calvinist belief that children were

35 Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 8; Heininger, “Children, Childhood, and Change in America,” 2.
naturally sinful and sexual. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the orthodox notion of innate sin receded from popular consciousness, replaced by a liberal notion of innate innocence. Children no longer represented damnable heathens, but rather incipient, holy angels. As Sánchez-Eppler notes, this shift marked “the desire of an increasingly domestic and child-centered American middle-class to believe that their children, at least, were innately good.”

This evolution was gradual, but it was also complete: “By the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment.” Thus, the association between childhood and innocence was so strong that innocence not only came to characterize childhood, but also to define it, to distinguish it as a distinct period of life. As Sánchez-Eppler explains, age did not become a meaningful marker until the turn of the century, and thus “for the nineteenth century, childhood is better understood as a status or idea associated with innocence and dependency than as a specific developmental or biological period.” To be a child was to be innocent.

And “to be innocent was to be innocent of something, to achieve obliviousness.” James Kincaid describes Victorian childhood as a “wonderfully hollow category,” with the purity of the child “figured as negation” of adult sinfulness and, in particular,

37 Sánchez-Eppler, Dependent States, 207.
38 Ibid., 207.
39 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 4.
40 Sánchez-Eppler, Dependent States, xxi.
41 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 6.
sexuality.

Indeed, sentimental constructions of childhood innocence centered largely on the child’s purported obliviousness to sexual desire. Whereas Calvinist notions of infant depravity posited children as inherently sexual—unrestrained by adult rationality and self-discipline—the sentimental child was eminently good and divinely pure, empty of sexual impulse. Kincaid notes that, in the Victorian period, as children were understood increasingly as a group distinct from adults, and increasingly as their own biological category, childhood came to be defined sexually—or rather, by the absence of sex. In this period, the dividing line between childhood and adulthood “seems to have achieved general currency under the name of puberty”: menstruation separated girlhood from womanhood, while nocturnal emissions and other secondary signs separated (if more vaguely) boyhood from manhood. If childhood ended with the onset of sexuality, then childhood itself was necessarily desexualized—children were naturally oblivious to, or innocent of, sex.

Importantly, Romantic constructions of childhood innocence were also inextricably tied to questions of race: to be innocent was not only to be oblivious to sex, but also to be oblivious to racial difference. Indeed, my readings of racialized childhood in nineteenth century culture rest on Robin Bernstein’s notion of “racial innocence”:

. . . sentimental childlike innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and . . . race. Of course, no nineteenth-century children existed outside race (or gender or class), nor were any children perceived as unraced. Innocence was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not-noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories.

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42 Kincaid, *Child-loving*, 12.
45 Ibid., 70.
Thus, sentimental writers like Stowe formulated childhood innocence as a “holy ignorance”—a performed forgetting of racial difference disguised as a natural obliviousness.

Moreover, while the concept of “racial innocence” alleged the child’s ability to repel racial knowledge, the “performance of not-noticing” was in fact crucial to the racialization of innocence. As Bernstein notes, the “not-noticing” of race is central, and unique, to constructions of whiteness, which “derives power from its status as an unmarked category.”

Richard Dyer has argued that because whiteness is invisible, white people make a claim to power by being normative, or “‘just’ human,” whereas people of color “are something else.” Whiteness is the invisible norm against which racial difference is defined. As George Lipsitz writes, it “never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”

Childhood “racial innocence” not only reflects this crucial quality of whiteness, but also helps to construct and maintain it.

Thus, the concept of “racial innocence” worked to racialize the category of childhood. While white children could seemingly transcend racial boundaries by the very fact of their whiteness, black children, whose race was marked, fundamentally could not. Their blackness was the defining quality of their bodies, the characteristic that distinguished them and justified their subordination. To perform obliviousness to this fact

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47 Ibid., 7.
50 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 8.
was impossible. “Racial innocence” was a quality reserved for white children. Given that, as Sánchez-Eppler argues, innocence defined childhood in the nineteenth century and not the other way around, black children’s exclusion from constructions of innocence entailed their exclusion from the category and the protections of childhood.

**The Suffering Child**

Importantly, this category was also constructed in terms of pain and the ability to feel it. Nineteenth century childhood was not just a state of innocence and dependency, but also of supreme vulnerability. In the Victorian construction of childhood, the child’s body—fragile and helpless—was uniquely susceptible to pain, suffering, and, often, death. Indeed, sentimental fiction is so replete with dying or dead children—the most famous, perhaps, being Stowe’s Little Eva—that the tragedy of childhood suffering has become a narrative cliché. As Sánchez-Eppler notes, “Dying is what children do most and do best in the literary and cultural imagination of nineteenth-century America.” Importantly, the image of the child victim in Victorian culture worked to establish vulnerability and suffering as naturalized elements of childhood. By the mid-nineteenth century, childhood and pain were inextricable in the American imagination.

And, like innocence, this pain was distributed along racial lines. In early America, the politics of pain—questions of which bodies could feel and suffer—were deeply tied to the politics of race. As David Morris explains, proponents of slavery believed firmly

that “blacks and whites lived in a very different relationship to pain.”\textsuperscript{54} Whereas white pain “cried out for relief,” “black pain, in the eyes of the white-run Southern culture, had . . . a minimal social existence.”\textsuperscript{55} Indeed, many antebellum doctors insisted that black insentience was medical fact. In his 1851 \textit{Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race}, Samuel Cartwright, a prominent Southern physician, detailed the symptoms of “dysaesthesia aethiopica,” or “hebetude of mind and obtuse sensibility of body.” According to Cartwright, the alleged disease was inherent to African Americans and resulted in “the stupidness of mind and insensibility of the nerves.”\textsuperscript{56} It left black bodies invulnerable to pain. Of course, there was little logic to this belief: white power was maintained and enforced through violence and thus relied on an implicit assumption that black slaves could feel and be controlled by pain. Nonetheless, by the mid-nineteenth century, the subjugation of African Americans had gained legitimacy under “the libel of black insensateness”\textsuperscript{57}—the claim by white slaveholders and their apologists that black bodies could not suffer.\textsuperscript{58}

There was much at stake in this claim. Elaine Scarry writes that, in American society, “the story of physical pain becomes as well a story about the expansive nature of human sentience, the felt-fact of aliveness. . . .”\textsuperscript{59} In other words, the ability to feel and

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Bernstein, \textit{Racial Innocence}, 50.
\textsuperscript{58} Morris, \textit{Culture of Pain}, 39.
suffer from pain signifies subjectivity, personhood, and fitness for citizenship.\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, abolitionists understood the gravity of pain and focused their efforts on opposing the libel of black insensateness. As Laurent Berlant argues, abolitionists worked by establishing “the trumping power of suffering,” positing “the enslaved Other as someone with subjectivity, which indicated not someone who thinks or works, but someone who has endured violence intimately.”\textsuperscript{61} Slave narratives and, in particular, sentimental fiction exposed readers to the brutal horrors of slavery and to the intimate pain of the enslaved. In doing so, they worked to establish the humanity of the dispossessed. In \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, Stowe centers children in this effort. She inscribes the horrors of slavery onto the bodies of the white Eva St. Clare and, importantly, the black Topsy. By including Topsy in the trope of the child victim—by arguing that the slave girl has the ability to feel and suffer from pain—Stowe works to establish her humanity and, importantly, her childhood.

\textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly}

Early in the novel, Eliza arrives at the bank of the Ohio river, her sleeping son in her arms. Across the frozen river lies the promise of freedom and safety, and behind her lies the threat of capture and separation from her child. Empowered by the force of “maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approach of a fearful danger,” Eliza crosses the ice:


\textsuperscript{61} Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling,” 44.
The frosty ground creaked beneath her feet, and she trembled at the sounds; every quaking leaf and fluttering shadow sent the blood backward to her heart and quickened her footsteps. She wondered within herself at the strength that seemed to come upon her; for she felt the weight of her boy as if it had been a feather, and every flutter of fear seemed to increase the supernatural power that bore her on . . .

In this moment, Stowe shifts to address the reader directly: “If it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by the brutal trader . . . how fast could you walk?” The scene is one of the novel’s most famous—a gripping display of maternal love and a heart-wrenching condemnation of slavery as a threat to the family. It does exactly what sentimental literature aimed to do, what Stowe confesses in the preface as the purpose of the novel: “to awaken sympathy and feeling” in the reader.

Stowe asks her readers—in this case, literally—not just to understand Eliza’s emotions, but to feel them as if they were their own, as if Eliza’s Harry were their Harry.

The novel is replete with scenes like the one above—heartrending portraits of families fractured by slavery, of mothers robbed of their children. But the tool that is perhaps most crucial to Stowe’s goal “to awaken sympathy” in the reader is her depiction of the children themselves. Like the “white slave” photographs a decade earlier, children are at the center of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: Stowe inscribes the horrors of slavery onto the bodies and souls of Eva St. Clare and Topsy, helpless children at the mercy of a cruel system. In doing so, she condemns slavery by rendering it a threat to the sanctity of childhood.

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 1.
Little Eva, in particular, is a paradigm of sentimental childhood: she is supremely innocent, and this innocence is raced white. When Tom first catches sight of her on the boat, he notes that “her form was the perfection of childish beauty”—“such as one might dream for some mythic and allegorical being.”\(^65\) In the extended description of Eva that follows, Stowe intertwines details of the child’s white body and dress with descriptions of her angelic, playful nature. Eva has a “noble” bust and striking “violet blue eyes, shaded by heavy fringes of golden brown,” though “her face was remarkable less for its perfect beauty of feature than for a singular and dreamy earnestness of expression.”\(^66\) She is “always dressed in white,” not a spot or stain on her.\(^67\) Her eyes are heavy with “spiritual gravity,” but she is neither “a grave child or a sad one”: “on the contrary, an airy and innocent playfulness seemed to flicker like the shadow of summer leaves over her childish face, and around her buoyant figure.”\(^68\) Watching her, Tom “half believed that he saw one of the angels stepped out of his New Testament.”\(^69\) Eva is, simply put, an angel on earth.

As such, she is empty of all sin. In Kincaid’s terms, her innocence is “figured as negation” of earthly and material evil. Stowe depicts Eva as an ethereal “sunbeam or a summer breeze,”\(^70\) a celestial child whose body and spirit transcend the physical world. She is ethereal, gliding about with a “cloud-like tread” and “undulating and aerial grace.”\(^71\) She melts from the grasp of adults “like a summer cloud,” moving “like a

\(^{65}\) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 123.
\(^{66}\) Ibid.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 123-124.
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{69}\) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 124.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 123.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 124, 123.
shadow” with “fairy footsteps.””^72 Eva’s body is without corporeal weight or earthly burden, transcendent and, in Kincaid’s terms, “wonderfully hollow.”^73 And her soul is equally empty of sin: St. Clare notes that “evil rolls off Eva’s mind like dew off a cabbage-leaf,—not a drop sinks in.”^74 Her moral purity and goodness are thus also a kind of hollowness, a negation of sin and evil.

Little Eva—“the emblematic child-angel of the nineteenth century”^75—is innocent of many things: sexual impulse and desire, greed and gluttony. But perhaps most importantly, she is innocent of prejudice. In Bernstein’s terms, she is “racially innocent,” able to slip between and beyond social categories, manifesting “a state of holy ignorance” to racial difference and the realities of white supremacy.^76 Eva is, above all else, tolerant: she is kind to Mammy, Topsy, and, in particular, to Tom, with whom she develops a close friendship. Her mother, a woman hardened by age, complains that Eva “always was disposed to be with servants,” that she “somehow always seems to put herself on an equality with every creature that comes near her.”^77 As Bernstein explains, “Little Eva loves everyone, of every race and age and gender and class, because she transcends the adult world; she is already halfway to heaven.”^78 But her ability to “not notice” race, “to put herself on an equality with every creature that comes near her,” is, in fact, a mark of her whiteness. Eva is able to slip between social categories because her race is unmarked,

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^72 Ibid., 124.
^73 Kincaid, *Child-loving*, 12.
^74 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 211.
^76 Ibid., 6.
^77 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 146.
because her whiteness “never has to speak its name.” This quality secures her innocence.

Furthermore, as Bernstein argues, this innocence is transferable, a property that makes it politically useful. When Eva and Tom play, for instance, her “aura of innocence” extends to him. As she sits on his knee, “gayly laughing,” filling his buttonholes with flowers and “hanging a wreath round his neck,” he cracks “a sober, benevolent smile.” Their kinship grants Tom access to Eva’s white, childish innocence. Eva serves as a moral lesson in tolerance, both to the other characters and to the readers. Her own virtue can make other people kinder. When she dies, for instance, her aunt Ophelia, once hardened with prejudice, resolves to love slaves, telling a distraught Topsy: “I can love you, though I am not like that dear child. I hope I’ve learnt something of the love of Christ from her. I can love you; I do. . . .” Little Eva’s innate goodness, her white childhood innocence, can be taught and learned, and therefore used politically to advance the cause of abolition.

Importantly, Eva’s friendship with Tom speaks as much to racist constructions of black adulthood as it does to constructions of white childhood: Stowe constructs Eva’s racial innocence in tandem with Tom’s adult childishness. He embodies the stereotype of the “childlike Negro”: he has “the soft, impressionable nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike.” He is simple, docile, and affectionate, and

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81 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 151.
84 Ibid., 124.
thus he and Eva are compatible in their mutual childishness. When they talk, each one is “equally earnest, and about equally ignorant,” and when they play they share in childlike wonder. According to Bernstein, the stereotype of the “childlike Negro” was common in abolitionist culture and was anything but accidental: “it strategically sutured abolition to white supremacy.” Tom is lovable and harmless, but he is also pitiable. While Eva’s innocence grants her the privilege to “put herself on an equality with every creature,” Tom’s innocence makes him an adult-child, helpless and inferior.

As Anna Mae Duane explains, Eva and Tom have something else in common in their mutual childishness: they are both victims of a system beyond their control, and they both “suffer at length and die.” Indeed, suffering is crucial to their experience of childhood: “Slavery breaks Eva’s heart and Tom’s body because neither of them has the power to alter slavery’s grasp,” because they are both defenseless and vulnerable by nature. While the violence of slavery kills Tom directly—he is beaten to death by his cruel master, Simon Legree—Eva’s death is somewhat more vague and circuitous. As she bears witness to the horrors of slavery—to the tragic stories of Topsy and Prue—she ails and dies slowly of heartbreak. “These things sink into my heart,” she tells Tom, “they sink into my heart.”

Eva’s death is, in many ways, the crux of the novel. As Bernstein notes, it occasions “a blizzard of whiteness”: “The statuettes and pictures in Eva’s room were

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85 Ibid., 200.  
87 Duane, *Suffering Childhood*, 2?  
88 Duane, *Suffering Childhood*, 3?  
89 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 185.  
shrouded in white napkins,” “the bed was draped in white,” and Eva herself lay “robbed in one of the simple white dresses she had been wont to wear when living.” It also occasions a reckoning amongst her loved ones: rocked by grief, Topsy, Ophelia, and St. Clare all vow to live more virtuously in Eva’s memory. Ophelia promises to love Topsy, who reforms her wicked ways, and St. Clare converts to Christianity, feeling “himself borne, on the tide of his faith and feeling, almost to the gates of that heaven,” brought “nearer to Eva.”

In part, the drama of Eva’s death speaks to a general preoccupation with death in sentimental culture. As Isabelle White notes, “death scenes sold novels in mid-nineteenth-century America.” A publisher’s blurb for Sarah Evans’s *Resignation*, for instance, advertised fifty-seven death scenes—“one every ten pages.” White argues that, rather than being extravagantly decorative, these death scenes served a crucial purpose in sentimental literature: they evoked a moment of communal, public mourning in the readers. Moreover, Eva’s death derives its particular power from her status as a white child. Her death is, in Zelizer’s terms, “an intolerable sacrilege,” the most extreme of all tragedies. In the drama of Eva’s death, Stowe insists that her readers grieve for the lost child and for the atrocity of slavery that killed her.

Importantly, Eva’s death is also crucial to the maintenance of her innocence. Little Eva dies before she can sin—before she matures from the “wonderfully hollow category” of childhood to damnable adolescence. The “blizzard of whiteness” that

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91 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 257.
93 Ibid., 99.
blankets her room represents the afterlife of her innocence, preserved in memory and in
death. Indeed, according to Stowe, Eva’s supreme innocence makes her death inevitable:
“Has there ever been a child like Eva? Yes, there have been; but their names are always
on grave-stones, and their sweet smiles, their heavenly eyes, their singular words and
ways, are among the buried treasures of yearning hearts.” ⁹⁴  
Eva is an angel on earth,
“already halfway to heaven,”⁹⁵ and thus her premature death fulfills her destiny.

If Eva, in her life and death, is the very embodiment of white sentimental
childhood, then what does this mean for Topsy, her foil? In both appearance and behavior
Topsy contrasts starkly with Eva, and while Eva’s innocence is raced white, Topsy’s
impurity is raced black. The young slave girl “was one of the blackest of her race,” with
“woolly hair . . . stuck out in every direction.” Her face expresses “an odd mixture of
shrewdness and cunning”⁹⁶ and her eyes are “wicked” with “sanctimonious gravity.”⁹⁷
While Eva is “cloud-like” and ethereal, pale and dressed always in white without spot or
stain, Topsy is dark, grave, and violent, “dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made
of bagging.” ⁺⁹⁸  
Stowe admits that “there was something odd and goblin-like about her
appearance,” something “heathenish.”⁹⁹  
As Bernstein notes, Stowe exploited existing
minstrel humor to create Topsy, evident in her propensity for violence and her raucous
dancing. ¹⁰⁰ 
In contrast to Eva, then, Topsy appears a non-child: she is corrupt, violent,

⁹⁴  Stowe,  Uncle Tom’s Cabin , 222.
⁹⁵  Bernstein,  Racial Innocence , 7.
⁹⁶  Stowe,  Uncle Tom’s Cabin , 202.
⁹⁷  Ibid., 203.
⁹⁸  Ibid., 202.
⁹⁹  Ibid.
¹⁰⁰  Bernstein,  Racial Innocence , 15.
and savage. She is not innocent, like Eva, and she can never pretend to slip between social categories: her blackness is unmistakably marked.

But importantly, while Stowe denies Topsy many of the privileges of childhood that she grants Eva, she also works simultaneously to include Topsy in the category of childhood. Indeed, central to Stowe’s condemnation of slavery is her insistence that Topsy is, in fact, a child. Stowe configures Topsy’s impurity as a result of a brutal system: slavery has hardened the child, robbing her of her essential innocence and making her “wicked” instead. The two children embody “the two extremes of society”: Eva, “the fair, high-bred child,” and Topsy, “her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor.” While Eva represents “the Saxon, born of ages of cultivation,” Topsy represents “the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice!”101 They are polar opposites, but, as Bernstein notes, “polarity is a form of connection.”102 To Stowe, the contrast between the children speaks to the power of the system that has brutalized Topsy, to the “ages of oppression” her race has endured, not to any innate difference.

Much of Stowe’s argument for Topsy’s inclusion in childhood rests on proving that Topsy, like Eva, can suffer from the pain she endures. In this way, Stowe follows in the tradition of other abolitionists who worked by establishing the “trumping power of suffering,” centering the slave’s ability to feel pain as proof of their humanity. The hardened Topsy often insists on her own insentience: when she misbehaves, she invites Ophelia to whip her, taunting, “‘Law Missis, you must whip me; my old Missis allers

102 Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 16.
whipped me. I an’t used to workin’ unless I gets whipped.” When Ophelia complies, Topsy proclaims that she didn’t feel a thing: “Law, Miss Feely whip!—wouldn’t kill a skeeter, her whippins.” Nor does Topsy admit to feeling the pain of her emotional abuse: when Eva insists that “‘Miss Ophelia would love you, if you were good,’” Topsy replies, “‘No; she can’t bar me, ‘cause I’m a nigger!—she’d soon have a toad touch her! There can’t nobody love niggers, and niggers can’t do nothin’! I don’t care.’”

But while Topsy often insists that she is impervious to pain, Stowe shows that the opposite is true: Topsy, like Eva, suffers deeply from a system beyond her control. Indeed, St. Clare first buys Topsy from the owners of a restaurant he passes everyday when he grows “tired of hearing her screaming, and them beating and swearing at her.” The memory of these beatings is inscribed on Topsy’s body: “on the back and shoulders of the child, great welts and calloused spots, ineffaceable marks of the system under which she had grown up thus far.” As Bernstein argues, Topsy’s scars serve as proof of her ability to feel pain: “pain, as a fundamental aspect of the system of slavery, hardened Topsy because she felt it.” Her capacity to feel and suffer from the brutality of slavery robbed her of her natural childhood innocence.

When St. Clare first puts Topsy under Ophelia’s care—a social experiment, of sorts, a “fresh-caught specimen” for her to “educate”—he intends to repair the wounds of her abuse, “to bring her up in the way she should go.” The stubborn and prejudiced

103 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 212.
104 Ibid., 239.
105 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 204.
106 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
Ophelia protests, “‘It is your system makes such children,’” and St. Clare affirms, “‘I
know it; but they are made,—they exist,—and what is to be done with them?’” Indeed,
Stowe maintains that there is much to be done with them: the injustice of slavery can be
redressed—Topsy’s childhood can be restored—if not by the reluctant Ophelia then
through contact with the angelic Eva. Little Eva, whose innocence is transferable, has the
power to heal Topsy with her righteous love.110 Before Eva dies, she confronts Topsy
about her misbehavior, asking, “‘What does make you so bad, Topsy?’” When Topsy
replies that she is unloved—“There can’t nobody love niggers”—Eva, “with a sudden
burst of feeling,” touches Topsy’s shoulder, declaring, “I love you, and I want you to be
good.” The touch of Eva’s “thin, white hand” and the kindness of her words soften
Topsy: “The round, keen eyes of the black child were overcast with tears … Yes, in that
moment, a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of her
heathen soul!” As Topsy weeps—admitting to the weight of her pain—Eva bends over
her, “like the picture of some bright angel stooping to reclaim a sinner.”111 This moment
represents more than the salvation of Topsy’s soul: it marks the restoration of her
innocence and the reclamation of her childhood.

This pivotal scene highlights a tension underlying Stowe’s notions of childhood:
Topsy is at once a non-child and a potential child, a heathen and a victim. She is a racist
caricature for comic relief and she is the crux of Stowe’s indictment of slavery. This
tension is not incidental: throughout the novel Stowe formulates a deeply complicated,
and often contradictory, relationship between race and childhood. To a great extent,

110 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 47.
111 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 239
Stowe’s construction of sentimental childhood is raced white. Little Eva, the iconic child-angel, is the embodiment of innocence and victimhood—and her whiteness is not simply decorative: it is crucial to her divine goodness, to her innocence and her pain. Topsy, on the other hand, does not meet the conditions of childhood that Eva establishes: she has been hardened by slavery, made “wicked” rather than good, corrupt rather than innocent. That she can only be restored to childhood through contact with a white child is telling: Topsy’s blackness is as crucial to her corruption as Eva’s whiteness is to her innocence. As Bernstein notes, the legacy of this construction has been profound: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped to install “a black-white logic in American visions of childhood,” whereby whiteness conferred inclusion in the category and blackness did not.\(^{112}\)

That being said, Stowe is also making a more complex and sophisticated argument: that Topsy is “wicked” because the system has made her that way, that she was once a child but has been turned something else by the inhumanity of slavery. This is the crux of her case for abolition: slavery, whose greatest evil was robbing Eva of her life and Topsy of her innocence, is a threat to the sanctity of childhood. As the following chapter will show, by the end of the nineteenth century American popular culture had erased this nuance completely. Stowe’s “black-white logic” was consolidated into an ideology of American childhood that broadly excluded black children from its protections.

Chapter 2: The Pickaninny in American Popular Culture

In 1901, Chicago-based publishing house Jamieson-Higgins released the first edition of Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Grace Duffie Boylan. The book offered a shortened, simplified, and censored version of Stowe’s classic text—of Eliza’s harrowing escape and Eva’s tragic death—aimed at children. Boylan’s Young Folks’ is far from the only adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Indeed, since its publication in 1852 the novel has undergone countless permutations, translated to stage and screen, visualized in painting and sculpture, commemorated with memorabilia like dolls and handkerchiefs. Stowe’s death in 1896—the same year that Plessy v. Ferguson upheld legal segregation in the United States—occasioned a particularly strong re-interest in the Uncle Tom story. Publishers began reissuing the novel, often, like the 1901 edition, adapted for younger audiences. Importantly, these children’s editions provide compelling evidence for changes in racialized constructions of childhood between the publication of the original text and the turn of the twentieth century.

These changes will be the focus of this chapter. I will examine how, in the context of mounting racial discrimination and violence at the end of the nineteenth century, American popular culture consolidated a racist construction of childhood that excluded black children. I will begin by looking broadly at the rise of mass culture in the late nineteenth century, and then, more specifically, at the emergence and proliferation of the “pickaninny” caricature. I argue, following Robin Bernstein, that the caricature of the

113 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 14.
pickaninny excluded black children from the category and protections of childhood by depicting them as insentient—unable to feel or suffer from pain. As Bernstein writes, “pain, and the ability to feel it . . . is what divided white childhood from black childhood in U.S. popular culture.” 115 Finally, I will look closely at Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin to understand how these changes culminated in a revision of Stowe’s text that fundamentally altered her argument about race and the nature of innocence.

**Mass Culture and Racial Representation**

The decades following the Civil War were a turbulent period American society: as blacks made the transition from bondage to freedom, whites grappled with the end of slavery. 116 Notably, the years following Reconstruction (1865-77) saw a marked deterioration of race relations. 117 As W. Fitzhugh Brundage explains, “The Civil War had left unresolved the status of African Americans as citizens,” and so at the end of the nineteenth century “white Americans engaged in strenuous debate over their ‘Negro problem.’” 118 In other words, they struggled to maintain and impose white supremacy in a post-slavery society. In the 1880s and ‘90s—sometimes referred to as “the nadir” of American race relations—legalized segregation and racial violence became the structuring forces of daily life throughout the United States, but particularly in the Jim

117 Ibid., 9.
Crow South, where blacks were systematically denied the right to vote and where riots and lynchings were epidemic.\textsuperscript{119}

This volatile historical moment coincided with the rise of mass culture in the United States. In the late nineteenth century, technological innovations gave rise to an “era of ‘public amusements’”: new forms of mass entertainment like phonograph parlors and silent films transformed and commercialized American leisure.\textsuperscript{120} The invention of steam-powered rotary printing presses in 1843 made the mass production of printed material easier and cheaper, and by the turn of the century dime novels and magazines proliferated.\textsuperscript{121} As Barry Shank explains, chromolithography, which made possible the mass production of colored prints, helped give rise to the wildly successfully greeting and postcard industries.\textsuperscript{122} Increasingly, Americans were distributing and consuming novelties and ephemera, and this burgeoning consumer culture was accompanied by a revolution in advertising: new competition necessitated new catchy slogans and colorful packaging.\textsuperscript{123}

Importantly, these developments in mass culture were deeply involved in contemporary political discourses: American popular culture bore witness to, and actively participated in, ongoing debates about the “Negro problem.”\textsuperscript{124} Visual culture in particular became a crucial site of racial discourse. As Brundage explains, because representations of African Americans “were so conspicuous in the emerging mass culture

\textsuperscript{119} Brundage, \textit{Beyond Blackface}, 2.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{122} Barry Shank, \textit{A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 70.
\textsuperscript{123} Verney, \textit{African Americans and US Popular Culture}, 11.
\textsuperscript{124} Verney, \textit{African Americans and US Popular Culture}, 7.
of the era, blacks were acutely sensitive to the power of popular culture to shape their public identity and, indeed, their status as citizens.”\textsuperscript{125} Technologies of mass culture helped to produce and disseminate racist stereotypes of African Americans on an unprecedented scale.

This is particularly evident in advertising: companies capitalized on minstrel stereotypes to market mass-produced products. In 1893, for example, the R.T. David Mill Company trademarked Aunt Jemima—the quintessential “mammy” caricature—to promote their pancake mix, and that same year, Rastus—a caricature of a kindly black cook—began appearing on Cream of Wheat cereal boxes. These caricatures evoked a romantic nostalgia for the Old South and gave the products a claim to authenticity: because of their slave heritage, blacks were believed to have a natural proclivity for household labor. By showcasing images of smiling, complaisant blacks, these advertisements also worked to assuage white fears of black rebellion and to reassure white customers of their racial supremacy.\textsuperscript{126}

**The Pickaninny in Popular Culture**

Notably, popular visual culture relied heavily on imagery of black children: the pickaninny abounded in minstrel shows, postcards, and advertisements. Although pickaninnies are not monolithic in their representation, they typically share a set of

\textsuperscript{125} Brundage, *Beyond Blackface*, 2.

characteristics that make them easily recognizable: they have dark, sometimes pitch-black skin, grotesque, grinning mouths, rolling eyes, and kinky, unkempt hair.\footnote{127}{Patricia A. Turner, \textit{Ceramic Uncle and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influences on Culture}, (New York: Anchor Books 1994), 14.}

They are often unwashed and scantily clad, if dressed at all. They tend to be highly physicalized and sexualized—sometimes their genitals and buttocks are exposed—and they are often pictured outdoors alongside animals, gorging on watermelon, dancing, climbing, and wrestling.\footnote{128}{Ibid., 15.}

Like the white slave photographs a half-century earlier, images of pickaninnies at the turn of the century made childhood a crucial site of political discourse. They implicated children in dialogues about race, citizenship, and the status of African Americans in a post-slavery society. By portraying black children as carefree,
“mischievous and ignorant to the point of being comic,” the pickaninny caricature suggested that blacks would do well in slavery.

The most notable example, perhaps, are the infamous Gold Dust Twins, the trademark pickaninnies for Fairbank’s Gold Dust Washing Powder from 1892 until the mid-1950s. The twins are typically performing work—scrubbing floors or cleaning dishes—and yet they are carefree, invariably smiling or dancing. A 1902 advertisement from *Home and Flowers* magazine shows the two twins, each naked aside from a cloth around his waist, jovially cleaning a chair. Text at the top of the ad declares, “Let the GOLD DUST twins do your work,” and at the bottom: “Slave if you will, but if you prefer to make housework easy, use GOLD DUST.”

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The implication is clear: The Gold Dust Twins are naturally disposed to do the work of slaves—they smile under the burden of their labor.

Importantly, the caricature of the pickaninny also speaks to changing constructions of racialized childhood over the second half of the nineteenth century. As the previous chapter showed, sentimental constructions of childhood were unmistakably white. To be a child was to be innocent, and to be innocent was to be innocent of racial knowledge, to slip in and out of social categories. This ability was reserved for white children. Innocence was also defined by vulnerability, by the ability to feel and suffer from pain. Sentience conferred personhood, citizenship, and, importantly, inclusion in the category of childhood. And while sentience was distributed along racial lines throughout the nineteenth century—proponents of slavery justified their violence by libeling slaves...
insentient—abolitionist writers like Stowe centered children in their efforts to oppose slavery by showing that black bodies could, in fact, suffer. In doing so, they argued for the essential childhood of black children.

By the turn of the twentieth century this was no longer the case: popular culture had consolidated Stowe’s “black-white” logic—the dichotomy that set the white Eva in opposition to the black Topsy—into an ideology of childhood that broadly excluded black children. Indeed, the pickaninny did not meet the qualifications for childhood established in the nineteenth century. As Bernstein explains, pickaninnies were in fact “nonchildren,” “juvenile yet excluded from the exalted states of ‘child.’” These nonchildren were unmistakably and inevitably black, devoid of innocence, and, most importantly, insentient. While images of pickaninnies vary in appearance, this is their uniting and defining trait: their bodies do not suffer from pain. The Gold Dust Twins smile as they polish the chair because their work and their play are indistinguishable; they do not feel the burden of their labor.

Ironically, popular culture fixated on representations of pickaninnies in danger: in advertisements and story books they are attacked by dogs, run over by boulders, and set on fire. The most common and perhaps the most disturbing motif featured black children as “alligator bait,” a staple of Southern tourist memorabilia.

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132 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 35.
133 Ibid.
Postcards and statuettes touted pickaninnies in imminent danger of being eaten alive.\textsuperscript{135} Usually the pickaninnies are unsuspecting and ignorant, but when they are afraid their fear is theatrical and comic. As Bernstein notes, “When threatened, pickaninny characters might ignore danger or quake in exaggerated fear; when attacked, they might laugh or yelp, but in either case, they never experience or express pain or sustain wounds in any remotely realistic way.”\textsuperscript{136} The image of pickaninnies in danger is comedic because their pain is not real—because they are not included in the protections of childhood.

Notably, Stowe’s Topsy is often identified as the prototypical pickaninny. Kevern Verney notes that the disreputable slave girl “set a precedent for the enduring image of

\textsuperscript{135} Verney, \textit{African Americans and US Popular Culture}, 11.
\textsuperscript{136} Bernstein, \textit{Racial Innocence}, 34.
the ‘pickaninny.’ Patricia Turner, likewise, declares Topsy “the first truly famous pickaninny.” Indeed, Topsy did serve as a model for images of the pickaninny at the turn of the century: her ragged clothes, “goblin-like” appearance, and propensity for violence and misbehavior became the standard for the caricature. But, importantly, later formulations of the pickaninny drew as much from Topsy as they omitted. As Turner later notes, these images “took a character originally intended to generate disgust for slavery and reinvented her as one whose careless actions and carefree attitude suggested that black children could thrive within the confines of the ‘peculiar institution.’” Stowe’s Topsy is wicked precisely because she has suffered; she is corrupt because slavery has robbed her of her essential childhood. By the turn of the century, popular images of the pickaninny had erased this nuance entirely: black children are wicked and corrupt by nature, are insensitive to pain, are, in fact, not children at all.

**Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin**

The 1901 edition of *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin* provides particularly rich evidence for this change. As a children’s edition, the adaptation not only adds paratextual material—new cover art and original illustrations by Ike Morgan—but also necessarily alters the text itself. It retells the familiar story with a younger audience in mind, and, importantly, with a different set of cultural and historical assumptions guiding the author. Indeed, Boylan’s adaptation reflects the imperatives of Jim Crow segregation and racism at the turn of the century. As Barbara Hochman notes, the 1901 edition virtually

139 Ibid., 14.
eliminates “Stowe’s moral, social, and religious concerns” and turns “Stowe’s racialism into unadulterated racism.”\textsuperscript{140} This is particularly evident in Boylan’s treatment of Topsy: while Stowe’s Topsy is a tragic product of a vicious system, Boylan’s Topsy is, by nature, an insentient pickaninny. And whereas Stowe argues for Topsy’s essential childhood, Boylan configures Topsy as an absurd and comedic nonchild.

Notably, descriptions of Little Eva are mostly consistent with the original text: she is “slight and fair” with “large and blue eyes,” and she is dressed always in white. The young girl appears “an angel of kindness and beauty” to “the sad hearts around her.” She remains a paradigm of white sentimental innocence, and this innocence, still, is figured as a negation of earthly evil. She is light and ethereal, unburdened by material weight, flitting about “like a fairy,” perching here and there “like a bright-winged bird.”\textsuperscript{141} Boylan’s Eva is empty of sin and prejudice; she is purely good and purely innocent.

That being said, she plays a much less crucial role in the adaptation. Boylan flattens Eva’s moral and religious drive. Stowe inscribes the horrors of slavery onto Eva’s body: she suffers so much because she feels so intensely, because these things “sink” into her heart. In \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, Eva’s death is the emotional culmination of Stowe’s condemnation of slavery: it asks the readers to mourn collectively not just for Eva but for the tragedy of slavery at large. \textit{Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin} erases this aspect of Eva’s character. She is innocent, yes, but also carefree and mostly unconcerned with the suffering of those around her. Eva’s first encounter with Tom, for instance, is markedly

\textsuperscript{140} Hochman, “Sparing the White Child,” 59, 60.
\textsuperscript{141} Grace Duffie Boylan, \textit{Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (Chicago: Jamieson-Higgins Company 1901), 79.
different from the scene in the original text. In Stowe’s account, Eva determines to buy Tom in order to save him, declaring, “if [my papa] buys you, you will have good times.”  

In *Young Folks*, Eva’s reasoning is much more superficial. She proclaims: “My papa shall buy you . . . And then you will be my Uncle Tom.” Boylan also minimizes Eva’s suffering. Her illness is vague and appears completely divorced from the problem of slavery. And her death is similarly inconclusive: the characters mourn the loss, but it does not occasion the same spiritual and moral reckoning that Stowe envisioned. Boylan preserves Eva’s supreme innocence, but she never configures this innocence as an affront to slavery. Instead, it appears entirely uncomplicated and apolitical.

Interestingly, in *Young Folks' Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Topsy assumes Eva’s role as the main child character. Her importance is evident from the outset: the cover features an image of the slave girl, dancing alone in a tattered dress, her gangly arms and legs extended. Topsy’s appearance is mostly consistent with the original text. The young girl is grotesque and “goblin-like,” “one of the blackest, funniest specimens of her race.” She is “dressed in a coffee sack,” her hair “braided with little tails which stuck out like spikes around her head.” When Miss Ophelia first sees Topsy she looks with “terror” upon that “wrinkled, old, odd little face,” “solemn” apart from her “twinkling, mischief-filled eyes.”

142 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 125.
143 Boylan, *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 80.
144 Boylan, *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 90.
In the picture above Topsy appears sad, her eyes lowered and her arms hanging limply at her side. Rather than serve as evidence of her suffering and sentience, here Topsy’s solemnity is a reminder that, unlike the ethereal Eva, who flits about without the burden of earthly weight, Topsy is grave and sinful. Importantly, Topsy’s appearance would be familiar to a turn of the century audience: she is identical to the pickaninny caricatures that proliferated in popular culture.
And like these caricatures, Topsy is mischievous, wild, and shameless. In Boylan’s adaptation, Topsy’s antics are descriptive and extensive. For instance, when Ophelia tries to question Topsy about her origins, the disinterested slave girl replies, “I dunno, missis,” and then, abruptly, falls to the floor and begins “walking on her hands, with her black feet in the air.”

Figure 9. “Walking on her hands, with her black feet in the air,” Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
In a shrill voice she sings, “‘O I’se a mis’able sinneh.” Her untamed body keeps time to the music, “knocking her knees together in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and spinning around, clapping her hands, and then suddenly turning somersaults around the room.”\(^{145}\) When she finishes her prolonged, unexpected dance, “poor” Miss Ophelia is stunned, shuddering “when she thought that she was the owner of this monkey child and was expected to make a Christian out of her.”\(^{146}\) Whereas in the original text Ophelia is one of the more intolerant, unsympathetic characters, here the reader is invited to empathize with the governess, to laugh at Topsy’s outrageous behavior and at the very idea of making “a Christian out of her.”

Topsy’s minstrel performance is not unique to the 1901 adaptation: Stowe also highlights the child’s proclivity for wild, raucous dance. But, importantly, Boylan figures physical performance as a natural function of Topsy’s race rather than a learned behavior. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsy dances when St. Clare instructs her to, whistling at her, “as a man would to call the attention of a dog,” and demanding, “‘give us a song, now, and show us some of your dancing.’”\(^{147}\) But in *Young Folks*’ she dances by her own volition, acting on an apparently natural instinct. Topsy performs physically—she leaps and somersaults and twirls—and the readers are encouraged to watch these performances from a distance, to gape in awe, like the “horrified” Ophelia, as she walks “on her hands, with her black feet in the air.” Boylan’s Topsy has no emotional or intellectual subjectivity—she is purely physical, untamed, and “wicked.”

\(^{145}\) Boylan, *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 92-93.
\(^{146}\) Ibid., 93.
Importantly, Boylan offers no explanation for how Topsy came to be so wicked. As the previous chapter showed, this question is central to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Stowe’s answer is clear: Topsy is wicked because the brutality of slavery made her that way. *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin* erases this nuance entirely. Topsy’s misbehavior is assumed to be a natural, inevitable function of her race. When St. Clare first introduces Topsy he refers briefly to her “cruel owners,” but apart from this moment Boylan omits her history of abuse completely. Topsy is, simply, a pickaninny—a “monkey child” who dances and steals because she is naturally inclined to misbehave.

Stowe’s argument for Topsy’s essential childhood rests on proving that the child is sentient—that she is hardened precisely because she can feel and suffer from pain.
Boylan makes no such effort: her Topsy is naturally immune to pain, an insentient pickaninny. In both versions Topsy insists on her own insentience: she invites Ophelia to whip her when she misbehaves, claiming that she is impervious to the pain. But whereas Stowe shows that the opposite is in fact true—Topsy’s scars and screams serve as proof of her suffering—Boylan maintains the libel of Topsy’s insentience. When Topsy is caught wearing her mistress’s clothes, she begs Miss Ophelia to whip her: “‘Yo all ‘s got ter whip me. My ole missis used ter whip me, an’ I ain’ used ter workin’ without bein’ trounced.’” When Ophelia protests, Topsy insists, “‘I’se got ter be whipped, sure ‘nuff. I’se gwine ter fetch yo in dat hick-ry now, an’ yo better tan my black hide good.’”

Ophelia complies, “gingerly” holding the stick and laying “a light stroke on the child’s back,” “scarcely” touching her at all. Topsy, in turn, howls in mock pain: “‘Oh, oh, oh, Miss Feely, don’t! Yose killin’ me! Oh, Miss Feely!’” When she leaves the room she recovers immediately. “Perched, like a blackbird, on the balcony,” she tells “a dozen admiring pickaninnies” of her experience: “‘Yo all jes’ orter feel de whippin’ I got off Miss Feely . . . One little tap dat wouldn’t kill a skeeter.’” Boasting of her own insentience Topsy declares, “‘Don’ yo all wish dat yo was wicked like me?’”

Notably, this scene takes place near the end of the book, long after Eva has died. This signifies another important revision of the original text: whereas in Uncle Tom’s Cabin Topsy virtually disappears after Eva’s death, in Young Folks’ her story continues until the very end. In the original novel Eva’s death represents Topsy’s salvation: the

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148 Boylan, Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 128.
149 Ibid., 128-129.
150 Boylan, Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 129.
151 Ibid., 129.
memory of Eva inspires her to be good and allows her to reclaim her natural innocence. Once a nonchild, she is returned to childhood. In her adaptation Boylan offers no such possibility of salvation. Because Topsy’s wickedness is natural, it is also permanent: she is inevitably, inalterably, an insentient pickaninny, a nonchild.

Indeed, the final scene of the book confirms her inability to change. Topsy, now slightly older, dances one last time: “All the mischief that had been Topsy’s strongest characteristic sprang to her face, and in a moment she was up and taking part in the merry dance with all her old time spirit.” The image of the grown Topsy dancing with the “mischief” of “her old time spirit” reveals the mutuality of the caricature of the pickaninny and the caricature of the childlike Negro. The young Topsy is juvenile but never quite a child, the old Topsy grown but never quite an adult. Boylan’s Topsy passes from childhood to adulthood without ever securing inclusion in either category—she is forever mischievous, forever absurd, forever nonhuman.

Importantly, the two versions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin represent two very different political projects: whereas Stowe’s novel condemns slavery as a moral atrocity, Boylan’s adaptation enacts the imperatives of Jim Crow segregation and racism. Boylan erases Stowe’s moral concerns largely by revising her child characters—by transfiguring Topsy, a character meant to inspire disgust in the “peculiar institution,” into a nonchild whose carelessness and mischievousness suggest that she would do well within the confines of slavery. These revisions highlight changes in the way childhood was conceptualized, and racialized, in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, American popular culture had consolidated Stowe’s “black-white logic” into a white

152 Ibid., 165.
supremacist construction of childhood that excluded black children from its protections.
The following chapter will examine how black activists and writers in the mid-twentieth century grappled with and resisted the legacy of this construction.
Chapter 3: The Bluest Eye and the Politics of Black Childhood

Perhaps the most disturbing, and the most resonant, image of the civil rights movement is the photograph of Emmett Till’s mangled corpse. The details of Till’s murder are well documented: the 14-year-old boy, originally from Chicago, was visiting family in Mississippi in August 1955. One afternoon, Till ventured into a local store, bought some gum, and allegedly whistled at a white woman behind the counter. Several days later, the woman’s husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, stole Till from his great-uncle’s home, forced him into their truck and into a barn where they tortured and killed him. They dumped his body, tied to a cotton gin fan, into the Tallahatchie River.\(^{153}\) Bryant and Milam went to trial, but the all-white, all-male jury in Sumner, Mississippi quickly declared them not guilty despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Figure 11. In 1955, Sumner, Mississippi’s motto was, ironically, “A Good Place to Raise a Boy.” *The Smithsonian Learning Lab.*

Till’s mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted that photographers attend the open-casket funeral so the whole world could mourn her son’s body, brutalized and mangled and broken. Photographs of Till’s corpse subsequently appeared in *Jet*, a black magazine, and then dozens of other publications, transforming Bradley’s private grief into a public spectacle.\(^{154}\) Newspapers and magazines typically published the photograph of Till’s mutilated corpse alongside an earlier portrait of him, smiling, dressed in a shirt and tie.

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\(^{154}\) de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 94.
As Katharine Capshaw notes, “Black children during the civil rights movement were thus aware of two images of Till: one that evoked respectability, youth, and serenity, and another that demonstrated a frightening possibility for black childhood within a racist society.”\textsuperscript{155} The image of Till’s desecrated body was made all the more devastating next to this “visual construction of his integrity.”\textsuperscript{156} These photographs—the one of Till smiling alongside the one of him dead—became visual shorthand for the depths of southern racism. They reminded the American public that, as civil rights activist Myrlie Evers observed, “even a child was not safe from racism, bigotry, and death.”\textsuperscript{157}

Till’s murder was certainly not the first of its kind—it followed in a long tradition of racially motivated Lynchings in the Jim Crow South—but it does hold a particularly important place in the collective memory of the civil rights movement. Indeed, the horrifying photographs of Till’s corpse helped to motivate a new generation of black activists. Joyce Ladner, a former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and now a prominent sociologist, recalls how the image terrified and inspired her generation: “All of us remembered the photograph of Emmett Till’s face, lying in the coffin. . . . Every one of my SNCC friends . . . recall[ed] that photograph. [It] galvanized a generation as a symbol—that was our symbol—that if they did it to him, they could do it to us.”\textsuperscript{158} In her 1981 poem, “Afterimages,” black writer and activist

\textsuperscript{155} Katharine Capshaw, \textit{Civil Rights Childhood: Picturing Liberation in African American Photobooks} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), ix.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., x.
\textsuperscript{158} J. Berger, “Understanding a Photography,” 293, quoted in Capshaw, \textit{Civil Rights Childhood}, x.
Audre Lorde offers a similar memory. She describes how the image of the boy’s corpse haunted her, “his broken body” becoming “the afterimage of [her] 21st year.” Lorde contrasts the memory of his smiling portrait—“his 15 years puffed out like bruises/on plump boy-cheeks”—with the image of his mutilated face: “the length of gash across the dead boy’s loins,” “the severed lips, how many burns/ his gouged out eyes/sewed shut upon the screaming cover.” She recalls:

. . . wherever I looked that summer
I learned to be at home with children’s blood
with savored violence
with pictures of black broken flesh.  

To the generation that came of age during the civil rights movement, Till became a child martyr, a symbol of the toll of racism and the urgency of change.  

Till’s power as a symbol rested in his status as a child. As Rebecca de Schweinitz notes, this status was highly contested: the trial that followed his murder was as much a trial of Till’s innocence as his killers’, a debate over “what kind of boy” Till was. The defense made their case largely by depicting Till as indecent and immoral, a “‘husky Negro lad’” who had molested an innocent white woman. By appealing to negative stereotypes of black men, and by pitting these stereotypes against the sanctity of white womanhood, the defendants’ lawyers and the Southern press argued that Till had invited his own death. Importantly, they also suggested that Till was not included in the category

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160 de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 94.
161 Ibid., 95.
of childhood—that his alleged actions were symptomatic of predatory black male sexuality rather than boyhood bravado. In contrast, sympathetic journalists and the legal prosecution depicted Till in terms that reflected his smiling portrait: he was respectable and happy-go-lucky, and, most of all, he was innocent. At stake in this debate was Till’s childhood.

The power of the photographs of Till and the debates over his innocence speak more broadly to the importance of children as symbols in the civil rights movement. Like the pictures of Till, photographs circulated of the Little Rock Nine assaulted by angry crowds as they entered Central High School in 1957; of young people being attacked by police dogs and fire hoses at the 1963 Birmingham Children’s Crusade; and of the four little girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that same year. While American popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century had libeled black children insentient, by midcentury black activists had made the black child’s ability to feel and suffer from pain the crux of their campaign for civil rights. The contest over “what kind of boy” Emmett Till was reveals as much: Till’s defenders insisted on his essential innocence and condemned the racist violence against him as a violation of his childhood. In centering the image of the black child victim, civil rights activists worked to include black children in the protections of sacralized childhood.

Importantly, African American literature during and after the civil rights movement also used childhood as a site of resistance. As Geta Leseur argues, in the second half of the twentieth century, African American novelists relied heavily on the

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162 de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 96.
163 Capshaw, *Civil Rights Childhood*, x.
form of the bildungsroman to construct protests that were “almost always about race, slave history, and the White establishment.”¹⁶⁴ In other words, black writers used narratives of childhood as a site of political discourse, often configuring an initiation into the reality of racism as a sort of coming-of-age. We can understand novels like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) in this context. These texts actively grappled with and resisted white supremacist constructions of childhood that turn of the century popular culture had institutionalized.

In this chapter I will examine another such novel: Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It is important to note that my approach to *The Bluest Eye* differs from my approach to earlier texts. In my studies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, I was primarily concerned with understanding how the white authors raced childhood and determining if they included black children in this category. This is not the case in my analysis of *The Bluest Eye*: here, I am interested in the way Morrison grapples with the legacy of these racist constructions of childhood. The question of whether her children count as children is null—I assume from the outset that they do. The more relevant question, in this case, is how Morrison’s child characters disrupt the hegemonic, white constructions of childhood that texts like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped to institutionalize.

In many ways, Morrison follows in the tradition of civil rights activists who position black children as victims of a racist system. She does so largely through the character of Pecola, whose life and mind fall apart as a result of abuse, neglect, and racial self-loathing. Morrison inscribes the horrors of American white supremacy onto the psyches of her black girls, and in doing so she appeals to sentimentalized notions of sacred childhood. But I am more interested in another, less obvious element of Morrison’s treatment of childhood: at the same time that she centers the pain and vulnerability of her child characters, she takes apart the idea of childhood all together. That is, she reveals the extent to which dominant constructions of childhood—our notions of what a child looks like and acts like—are raced white and exclude black children. In re-racializing whiteness, Morrison disrupts and disempowers white supremacist constructions of childhood.

_The Bluest Eye_

At the center of _The Bluest Eye_ are three black girls: our partial narrator, Claudia MacTeer, her older sister Frieda, and Pecola Breedlove, their classmate and, for some time, houseguest. We learn of Pecola’s tragic life through the eyes of Claudia: she tells us how Pecola is abused and neglected, how she is raped and impregnated by her father, how she longs for blue eyes, and how, finally, she slips into madness. The fact that the narration is mostly first person, assuming Claudia’s deeply empathetic and shrewd, if sometimes naïve, perspective, signifies from the outset that Morrison’s project is entirely different from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s a century earlier. Morrison grants her child characters subjectivity: we have access to their complicated thoughts, emotions, and
motivations, and we understand them as agents. Whereas Stowe configured childhood as a negation, a sort of “emptiness,” Morrison writes child characters who are complex and full.

Like civil rights-era photography, *The Bluest Eye* positions children as victims of American racism. But whereas the images of Till evoked the physical toll of white supremacy—racist hatred and violence inscribed onto his body—Morrison is concerned with the psychological toll: her child characters, to greater or lesser extents, internalize the hatred directed at them. In her foreword, Morrison admits that she was drawn to the particular “woundability” of girls.\(^\text{165}\) She explains, “The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily in children, before their ego has ‘legs,’ so to speak.”\(^\text{166}\) Thus she chose to focus “on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.”\(^\text{167}\) Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola must navigate the pain of a world in which their blackness signifies ugliness and their childhood is unsacred.

In this world, adults treat them with indifference at best and, at worst, disdain. When Pecola visits a local store, for instance, she notes without surprise or affect that the white shopkeeper refuses to look at her, that “somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, hover.” She observes him, studying “the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge,” and sees instead a “total absence of human recognition,” a “glazed separateness.”\(^\text{168}\) This is not the charged hatred she is


\(^{166}\) Ibid., x.

\(^{167}\) Ibid., xi.

accustomed to, the “interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes” she has seen before, but nonetheless this indifference “has an edge”: “somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste.” And Pecola, initiated into the realities of racism, knows that her blackness is the reason: “The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.”

Pecola leaves the store devastated. At first she is angry, but at least “there is a sense of being in anger.” Before long, her anger subsides to “shame,” to a dull and complacent acceptance of her inferiority.

Claudia and Frieda, who have the benefit of a stable and loving home, are mostly able to resist the force of this racism, to safeguard their self-worth in the face of enormous pressure to concede it. But Pecola is not so lucky. She spends “long hours . . . looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike.” Over time, her racial self-loathing culminates in an intense desire to see the world through blue eyes: “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed.” She accepts as self-evident the superiority of blue eyes and the whiteness they epitomize. Importantly, Pecola yearns most of all for the treatment that blue eyes would entail. She believes that “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful,” her teachers and classmates and parents would treat her differently, that is to say, well. She

169 Ibid., 49.
170 Ibid., 50.
171 Ibid., 45.
172 Ibid., 46.
imagines, “Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.’” To Pecola, blue eyes promise access to the privileges and protections of sacralized white childhood innocence.

Ultimately, Pecola bends and breaks under the force of her self-hatred. After her baby dies, the flowers that Claudia and Frieda planted in its honor dying as well, she slips into madness, believing that her wish for blue eyes has finally been granted. Claudia solemnly recalls her friend’s delirium:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. Like the photographs of Emmett Till, this final image of Pecola shows a black child destroyed by the violence of racism.

But if Morrison emphasizes Pecola’s victimhood, her other child characters, and in particular Claudia, serve a somewhat different function. While Claudia is subjected to the same hatred as Pecola, she resists internalizing assumptions of her inferiority. Unlike Pecola, she does not take as self-evident the supremacy of blue eyes or the ideal of white childhood they signify. Thus, through the character of Claudia, Morrison makes an argument about childhood that is more complicated, and more radical, than victimhood: she interrogates and dismantles hegemonic white supremacist constructions of childhood.

In contrast to Pecola, who has been conditioned to passivity through abuse and neglect, Claudia is strong-willed and critical. Unlike most girls her age, for instance, she

174 Ibid., 204.
detests Shirley Temple, a Little Eva-like icon of white girlhood. As Sam Vásquez notes, Temple’s image proliferated in the 1940s, reaching a broad audience not only through her popular films but also through commodities like the Shirley Temple cup the MacTeers have in their kitchen. Temple’s ringleted blond hair and smiling, “dimpled face”\(^{175}\) helped to disseminate white standards of beauty and innocence to children.\(^{176}\) Indeed, both Frieda and Pecola adore her: gazing “fondly” at her face on the “blue-and-white” cup, the two girls have “a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was.”\(^{177}\) To them, Temple embodies adorableness—not only in the sense of being “cu-ute” but, importantly, in the sense of being worthy of love. To Pecola in particular, Temple represents an aspiration of white childhood.

Through the resistant perspective of Claudia, Morrison makes explicit the racist underpinnings of this ideal. Temple’s “cu-ute”-ness is not self-evident, nor is the presumption that she is somehow superior, her childhood somehow more sacred, than the black girls who admire her. Morrison shows that Frieda and Pecola’s inclination to adore Temple is a behavior conditioned by white supremacist constructions of childhood. Indeed, Claudia admits that she has not yet learned this behavior: “Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred.”\(^{178}\) Interestingly, Claudia dislikes Temple “not because she was cute, but because

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she danced with Bojangles,” a black tap dancer who was often featured alongside the child actress. Claudia insists, enviously, that Bojangles “was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and . . . ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead,” she protests, “he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels.”¹⁷⁹ To Claudia, Temple represents the privileges of white childhood that she cannot access: the white girl, who is racially innocent, is able to transcend racial boundaries, to consume and perform blackness by dancing with Bojangles. Claudia does not understand why she does not have the same privileges—why she does not get to dance with Bojangles. She does not take these inequalities as self-evident.

And she is equally off-put by baby dolls. Claudia explains that her “unsullied hatred” for “all the Shirley Temples of the world” had “begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls.”¹⁸⁰ Each year she receives “a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll.” Claudia knows that she is expected to adore the doll the way other girls adore Shirley Temple. She quickly understands that the object is a script dictating a certain performance of girlhood¹⁸¹: she is meant to “rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it.” Indeed, popular culture has made this script clear: “picture books were full of little girls sleeping with their dolls.”¹⁸² On the one hand, the dolls script a gendered performance—Claudia is supposed to mother it—but it also scripts a racial performance. She is supposed to sleep

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¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
¹⁸⁰ Ibid.
with her white dolls like the white girls in picture books do—in other words, to perform white girlhood.

Everyone around Claudia seems to agree that the white baby doll, like Shirley Temple, represents an ideal of childhood: “adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.” And she knows “from the clucking sounds of adults,” that she is supposed to treasure it too, “that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish.” But Claudia resists this script. She has “no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood,” and she finds the dolls repulsive. (She is particularly revolted by Raggedy Ann dolls, whose “round moronic eyes,” “pancake face, and orangeworms hair” frighten her.) She complains that her doll turns out to be “a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion”: “When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh—the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched. If, in sleep, I turned, the bone-cold head collided with my own.” Claudia cannot quite figure out how to treasure the white baby doll the way she is expected to, the way the adults and girls around her do.

And so she dismembers it instead:

Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry ‘Mama,’ but which sounded to me like the bleat of a dying lamb, or, more precisely, our icebox door opening on rusty hinges in July. Remove the cold and stupid eyeball, it would bleat still, ‘Ahhhhh,’ take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the black against the brass bed rail, it would bleat still. The gauze back would split, and I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound. A mere metal roundness.

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183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
As Claudia destroys the doll, she imagines what it would be like to do the same to “all the Shirley Temples of the world,” to transfer the impulse of “disinterested violence” to actual white bodies.¹⁸⁶ She knows, however, that if she were to pinch them, “their cry would not be the sound of an icebox door, but a fascinating cry of pain.”¹⁸⁷ Claudia lives in a world where this sort of violence is directed at children like her and children like Emmett Till, where black bodies are imagined to be unfeeling and inhuman. The image of Claudia dismembering the baby doll represents a sort of parodic reenactment of this violence: she returns the brutality directed at black children onto the white doll, a body that is actually unfeeling and actually inhuman.

By disemboweling the white baby doll, by bending its feet and shaking out the sawdust and finding the source of its cry, Claudia attempts to discover what makes it special: “to see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me.”¹⁸⁸ If she cannot love it then at least she can “examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable”—to understand why people looked at Shirley Temple and said “‘Awwwww,’ but not for [her].”¹⁸⁹ In the end, Claudia finds nothing in the baby doll to justify its “dearness.” It is gauze and plastic and sawdust, and its cry originates from a constructed, pre-programmed disk, “a mere metal roundness.” Morrison makes a similar point about white childhood: there is nothing substantive, nothing real or material or viable, to support its claim to superiority.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 23.
¹⁸⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 22.
Importantly, Morrison also works to re-racialize whiteness. If whiteness derives its power from appearing to be unmarked, then white constructions of childhood derive their power from appearing unraced: white children are normative, or “‘just’ human,” whereas black children “are something else.” Little Eva is “just” a child, a standard of innocence and vulnerability, whereas Topsy is “something else.” But Claudia understands whiteness to be a marked racial experience, the thing that allows Shirley Temple to dance with Bojangles but not her, that makes people say “‘Awwwww’” for Temple but not for her. She understands that whiteness is tangible and real, a baby doll that she can hold in her hands and take apart and destroy, at the same time that it is fraudulent, a “mere metal roundness” with no substance or specialness. By cracking open the baby doll and finding its “dearness” to be counterfeit, Claudia reclaims her own identity as a black girl. And by unmasking and disrupting the white supremacist underpinnings of dominant constructions of childhood—what makes some children “cu-ute” but not others—Morrison creates space for herself to write child characters who are complicated and compelling and whose blackness is compatible with their childhood.

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Conclusion

When 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in February, 2012, his death immediately inspired references to Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit.” The 1939 song imagines a haunting landscape of lynchings: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit/Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze/Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees.” These references locate Martin’s death in a protracted tradition of racist violence in America. They remind us, as Jelani Cobb writes, that “history is interred in the shallowest of graves.” Indeed, Martin’s death has also inspired comparisons to Emmett Till’s. Both boys, black and teenaged, walked into a market to buy candy and both wound up dead. Both became child casualties of a system beyond their control, martyrs for those concerned about the very real and very devastating consequences of American racism. Martin’s childhood innocence, like Till’s, was eclipsed by presumptions of his guilt.

The murders of Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice are not anomalies. They are manifestations of the systematic exclusion of black children from the protections of childhood. In a 2014 report for the American Psychological Association, researchers found that black boys as young as 10 were significantly less likely to be viewed as children than their white counterparts. The report’s subjects—police officers, mostly white men, and undergraduate students, mostly white women—consistently overestimated the age of the black boys. And when asked to rate the innocence of children given their photographs, subjects deemed black children less innocent than white.

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children. The practical implications of this assumption are devastating. In the U.S. criminal justice system black children are 18 times more likely than white children to be sentenced as adults and represent 58 percent of children sentenced to adult facilities. Relative to their peers sentenced to juvenile facilities, these children “are twice as likely to be assaulted by a correctional officer, five times as likely to be sexually assaulted, and eight times as likely to commit suicide.” Black children are presumed to be guilty, and are held responsible for actions they did or did not commit, at an age when white children still benefit from the assumption that they are naturally, essentially, innocent. Black and white children share custody of youth but not of childhood.

These injustices—presumptions of black childhood guilt in criminal courts, in markets in Money, Mississippi and gated communities in Sanford, Florida—are the result of a centuries-long process whereby black children have been constructed out of childhood. They are the “blood on the leaves” that bespeak the “blood at the root.” Indeed, when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the very idea of childhood innocence first coalesced, it was unmistakably raced white. While Stowe argued for Topsy’s essential childhood, she also helped to institutionalize white sentimental innocence through the character of Eva. To be innocent in American culture was to be innocent of race, to appear to slip between and beyond social categories. This ability was reserved for white children, for the Little Evas and the Shirley Temples, whose childhood innocence appeared natural and unraced because their whiteness was unmarked.

193 Ibid., 526.
By the turn of the twentieth century, popular culture had consolidated sentimental innocence into a white supremacist ideology of childhood that excluded black children. If childhood innocence was inextricable from vulnerability, then black children’s alleged inability to suffer from pain was what disqualified them from childhood in the national imagination. To be young and white was to be a child, but to be a young and black was to be something else: a nonchild, an insentient pickaninny. Ironically, the pain endured by actual black children, by Emmett Till and Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin, was directed at them precisely because their bodies were libeled unfeeling and invulnerable, because they were removed from the protections of childhood.

The fact that, over half a century later, Morrison turned to childhood as a site of resistance is not accidental: she understood what was at stake in racist constructions of childhood that excluded black children. Her child characters bend and sometimes break under a system that deems their childhood unsacred. By centering the subjectivities of her black girls and by marking whiteness as a racial experience, Morrison disrupts the assumption that to be white is to be “just” human or “just” a child while to be black is to be something else. She works to include black children in the protections of childhood by laying bare the process by which they were excluded in the first place.

The killings of Martin and Rice remind us that this process is still very much underway. Reflecting on George Zimmerman’s acquittal, Ta-Nehisi Coates concluded, “Trayvon Martin is not a miscarriage of American justice, but American justice itself. This is not our system malfunctioning. It is our system working as intended.”

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justice system that failed Martin was never meant to protect him. And the childhood that Martin was stripped of was never meant to protect him either. There is blood at the roots.
Bibliography


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