

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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

Article 4

April 2021

Scenes of Slavery and the 'Chinee' in Uncle Remus and a Minstrel Picture Book

Caroline H. Yang
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl>



Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Literature Commons, Asian American Studies Commons, Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Ethnic Studies Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons

Recommended Citation

Yang, Caroline H. (2021) "Scenes of Slavery and the 'Chinee' in Uncle Remus and a Minstrel Picture Book," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol3/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research on Diversity in Youth Literature by an authorized editor of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact sagray@stkate.edu.

In the June 1889 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, the magazine's literary editor Laurence Hutton wrote an homage to the white American actors and songwriters of blackface minstrelsy since the 1830s called "The Negro on the Stage." He eulogized that the minstrels had made "the world happier and brighter for a time by their public careers, and they have left a pleasant and a cheerful memory behind them" (144). Such pronouncement that minstrelsy had become a "memory," however cheerful, was common by the 1880s, in essays such as Hutton's that narrated its history and memorialized the actors. But minstrelsy did not die with some of its most celebrated actors and the disbanding of minstrel troupes due to decreased interest in its staged performances after the Civil War. Instead, it lived on in myriad other ways and reached a wider audience, even in forms that expressly repudiated the staged practice known as "blacking up."

Providing insight into one of those forms, Hutton's essay concludes, "Mr. Joel Chandler Harris . . . startled the whole community by writing . . . that he had never seen a banjo, or a tambourine, or a pair of bones, in the hands of negroes on any of the plantations of middle Georgia" (145). Indeed, starting with an article in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1881, Harris had claimed that growing up in antebellum Georgia, he had not known of any enslaved Black people who played the instruments commonly associated with them on the minstrel stage, particularly the banjo ("Plantation" 505). Such a declaration was part of Harris's criticism of blackface minstrelsy, that it was a comical "illusion" and "all false in fact" ("Negro" 238), and that minstrel music was "written by white men who knew even less about the negro than they did about metre" ("Plantation" 505).¹ His "Uncle Remus" books and stories, then, were his purported attempt to correct those distortions and write against the minstrel form through

¹ Worth noting is that as a young boy, Harris was a part of a "mock-minstrel comic ensemble" (Brasch 8) playing the part of a clown.

literature, to present “the genuine plantation negro” (“Plantation” 506) and provide “a genuine flavor of the old plantation” in a “quaint dialect” (*Uncle* 12).

Of course, it is preposterous to read Harris’s Uncle Remus stories featuring Black *and animal* characters speaking in a “Black” dialect as *not* participating in the tradition of blackface minstrelsy. Even Hutton states, “That Uncle Remus cannot ‘pick’ the banjo, and never even heard it ‘picked,’ seems hardly credible” (145), attesting to Remus’s unmistakable characterization as a minstrel figure. Harris’s denunciation is therefore useful in revealing how minstrelsy survived without the minstrels and how the minstrel form lived on beyond the stage in literature meant for not just adults but also children. Moreover, Harris’s insistence that his figurations of Remus and “Brer Rabbit” were different from minstrel caricatures crucially reveals the post-emancipation moment as one that cemented a lasting (and disingenuous) definition of minstrelsy as one of only comical entertainment divorced from the horrors of slavery.

In truth, for both blackface minstrels and Harris, their representations of Blackness rested on the racial logic of slavery that deemed enslaved Black people to be fungible commodities. If, as C. Riley Snorton argues, slavery relied on the “blackening of blackness” and the belief in the “mutability of a [Black] body defined as inexhaustibly interchangeable” (73), blackface minstrelsy was that belief put into practice, as Blackness was rendered a form that white bodies could wholly consume and even become. By performing and “owning” Blackness during slavery, blackface minstrels enacted the imagined relations between the enslaved and the enslaver and in the process naturalized slavery, which was the condition of possibility for minstrelsy. Hutton’s claim that the world was made “happier and brighter” by the minstrels’ performances disavows the horrors of what slavery had been, and Harris’s characterization of

Remus as having “nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery” sustains (*Uncle* 12), rather than counters, that disavowal. As a white representation of slavery, minstrelsy lived on after emancipation through white accounts of slavery such as Harris’s that replicated the rightfulness of white ownership of Blackness while failing to register Black suffering. That Harris thought that writing in a white-imagined “Black” dialect was not minstrelsy merely because he believed his writing to be “genuine” shows that his misrecognition of minstrelsy corresponded with his misrecognition of slavery. Specifically, by describing U.S. racial slavery as “the mildest and gentlest that has ever been known” (“Negro” 238), he failed to see its fundamental antiblackness that turned enslaved Black people into commodities to be bought and sold while extending the right of ownership to all white people. His failure to understand slavery, therefore, was also a failure to understand race and antiblackness.

This essay examines Harris’s reliance on the minstrel form in the story “Why the Negro Is Black,” from his first and most popular Uncle Remus book, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881), as illustrating his misrecognition of slavery and antiblackness. Told to a nameless white boy by the minstrel figure of Remus, the story explains that there was a time when everyone in the world was Black, but a pond with whitening ability turned those who were fast enough to get there to dip their whole bodies in white. The fact that this fantastical explanation on the origin of race is called “Why the Negro Is Black” instead of “Why Whites Are White” points to the story’s assumptions about the fungibility of Blackness. Remus’s use of the N-word in the pronouncement that “we ’uz all [Black people] tergedder” casts blackened Blackness as something white people always and already not only possess but also *are* (Harris, *Uncle* 142). Thus presumed to be “inexhaustibly interchangeable” (Snorton 73), Blackness is made universally available, and race—or racialization of Black people, to be more precise—is

divorced from the historical existence of slavery.

Significant to note is that the story's climax, which explains how some Black people became *Chinese*, allows us to see how one of the ways that the antiblack minstrel form lived on was in and through the racialization of Chinese workers—the first sizable group of Asians in the United States—in the larger U.S. imagination after slavery. In the punch line of his absurd story, Remus calls the Chinese “Chinee.” As I show below, the term has a minstrel origin that is intertwined with antiblack racism and was made immensely popular by Bret Harte's poem “Plain Language from Truthful James” (1870), which coined the label “heathen Chinee.” By studying Harris's misrecognition of slavery and the use of the word “Chinee” through a focus on blackface minstrelsy, I highlight the indispensable and malleable role of the minstrel form that shaped U.S. culture and race-thinking far beyond slavery. The varying engagements with minstrelsy in the 1880s—memorialization, nostalgia, incorporation into other forms such as literature and vaudeville, and even Harris's misguided rejection of it as “false”—that do not explicitly name the antiblackness of slavery disclose the process through which racial slavery was naturalized after emancipation. Harris is just one representative in this collective and ongoing process, but the ramifications of his role are amplified through his book's wide reach of readers, as it “not only established standards for folklore, dialect writing, and literature itself [but also] established a future for children's books in America” (Brasch 83). Read by generations of adults and children, *Uncle Remus* perpetuated Harris's and other white writers' mischaracterizations of slavery's relationship to racism beyond the late nineteenth century.

As a means of elucidating the specific elements and stakes of that mischaracterization in the particular moment of post-Reconstruction, I pair my discussion of *Uncle Remus* with *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* (1883), a picture book for small children. The latter was a

combined volume of two books, *Pantomime: A Picture Show for Young People* and *The Minstrels: A Picture Show for Young People*, which were also published in 1883. As both books depict what is happening on stage at pantomime and minstrel shows, the Minstrels section of *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* opens with illustrations of “Black” performers engaged in typical acts at a minstrel show such as sitting in a semicircle with musical instruments or delivering a “stump speech,” followed by an invitation to go “see the fun at the minstrel show. / And hear the speeches and ancient jokes, / Got off by these make-believe colored folks” (*Pantomime*). The pairing of *Uncle Remus* with such an overt depiction of blackface minstrelsy reveals parallels between the two texts that disprove Harris’s disavowal of minstrelsy in his writings. It also intervenes in the effort to recuperate Harris as an important part of U.S. literature and children’s literature, an effort that Opal Moore and Donnarrae MacCann call a “travesty,” emblematic of the “reluctance of white America to relinquish its illegitimate and unnatural proprietorship of valuable and persuasive materials” that belong to Black people (96). As relics of white supremacy, the two texts are connected by their shared minstrel tropes as well as the surprising racialized figure of the Chinese, identified as the “Chinee” in both. Through the unlikely minstrel figure of the “Chinee” in *Uncle Remus* as well as *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes*, we can see how post-emancipation U.S. cultural productions meant for children expanded on the fungibility of the minstrel form and Blackness, obfuscated what slavery had been through a lesson on race based on sinophobia and antiblackness, and perpetuated that antiblackness by vacating Black suffering, especially of Black children.

Uncle Remus and the “Chinee” in Fantasies about the Plantation

By the mid-1880s, Harris was well on his way to becoming someone who many white

readers viewed as a reliable writer of Black people and folk tales in the United States. Harris's fame testifies to the popularization of the post-emancipation plantation nostalgia genre. Within the genre, white writers like Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and Mark Twain wrote about slavery as the "good old days" while discounting its violence and dehumanization, perpetuating the antiblack rhetoric that enslavement was a justified if not a fitting condition for Black people. We can see the obvious influence of blackface minstrelsy in these writers' representations of Black characters as loyal servants content with their condition of serving white people, but the writers alleged to base their characterizations on their authentic knowledge of Black people.

Remarkably, many white readers saw the writers' use of minstrelized "Black" dialect as evidence for their authenticity. Harris, in particular, played up his self-proclaimed authority by claiming that he could *think* in the dialect (Boskin 102). Because of such actions, as well as his books, white readers like Hutton from the aforementioned essay thought of Harris as "one of the best friends the plantation negro ever had" (145). But while Harris's feelings for Black people may be described as something like "love," that love is more in line with the double-sided coin of "love and theft" that Eric Lott says characterizes blackface minstrelsy, which we might reformulate as "theft justified as love."

Harris achieved his reputation through the retelling of Black folk tales precisely at a time when Black people were publishing such stories themselves. In 1899, for example, T.J. Bolden published a story called "Brer Rabbit's Box" in the African American journal *Southern Workman*, featuring Uncle Remus and the title character, with an ironic subtitle, "With apologies to Joel Chandler Harris" (25). While Harris implied that he was merely "preserv[ing]" the Black folk tales (*Uncle* 3), his appropriation of Black characters—which became closely associated with him as if he created them—amounted to a wholesale ownership, as seen in his practice of

sometimes signing his personal letters as “Uncle Remus” (Boskin 102). As Alice Walker famously charged, Harris “stole a good part of [her] heritage” through his retelling of Black folk tales (637), which was minstrelized in future adaptations such as Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946). Walker’s account of feeling a “vast alienation” when she encountered Harris’s legacy as a young girl elucidates the stakes of imbuing him with an authority on Blackness (636). As his stories and books were meant for children as well as adults, they taught that it was natural for white people to have ownership over Blackness. They also implicitly validated white knowledge of Blackness and naturalized the notion that white people were the authority for narrating Black people’s experiences, including slavery. This naturalization diverted attention and authority away from Black people telling their own stories, particularly those directed at younger children, in venues such as *The Brownies’ Book*, an African American children’s magazine first published in 1920. In contradistinction to such Black writings, Harris’s books told children—both white and Black—that the racial relations established in slavery were rightful, and, by extension, that slavery had been right.² This lesson required the understanding of Blackness as fungible, as well as a disavowal of actual Black narratives of slavery, both in slavery and beyond.

“Why the Negro Is Black,” a story in *Uncle Remus*, best illustrates this lesson. It begins with the nameless white boy observing that Remus’s palms were “as white as his own” and asking him to explain (Harris 141). Remus tells the boy that there was a time when everybody was Black, including white people, but one day, someone discovered a pond with water that turned people white. After seeing one person turn white, a group of people rushed to dip their bodies in the water, with those who were “soopless”—understood as “supplest”—successfully turning all white before the water ran out, and those who were “nex’ soopless” becoming

² Harris’s criticism of blackface minstrelsy, as well as his “correct” account of slavery that makes it seem downright fun, was published in a children’s magazine. See Harris, “Negro Customs.”

“merlatters” (meaning “mulattoes,” that is, mixed-race Black people) (142). The last group that got there too late could only splash water on their palms and the soles of their feet, and Remus explains that “dem wuz de [Black people]” (142). The persistence with which Remus calls Black people the N-word underscores the story’s ostensible point of devaluing Blackness—no one wanted to stay Black, and everyone wanted to be white. That is, the story rests on the premise that Blackness is inherently undesirable, as everyone rushes to the whitening pond. But is the story about getting *rid of* Blackness altogether?

Not unlike blackface minstrels, the story seeks to appropriate, not jettison, Blackness. In fact, there are several parallels between the story and minstrelsy. The white boy’s fascination with Remus’s palms is mirrored in the fastidious manner with which minstrel actors highlighted such a physical trait. In the numerous minstrel guidebooks that were published in the 1860s and onward, as staged minstrel shows evolved into more private amateur productions at home, there were instructions for achieving this effect. In a piece called “How to Black Up,” a minstrel explained in an interview, “Having blackened my features [with burnt cork], I now take my sponge and with it wipe the palms of both hands,” as “it represents the real color of the colored man’s hand” (Dumont 14–5). The belief that the white minstrel’s own body could represent something “real” about a Black person also exists in “Why the Negro Is Black,” through the white boy’s observation that Remus’s palms were “as white as his own” (141).

Harris’s story also closely resembles the lampooned “stump speeches” given on the minstrel stage. In the same guidebook that teaches people how to “black up” was a collection of jokes and comical speeches. One such speech was a “sermon” that was instructed “to be delivered in a slow-loud tremulous voice,” called “How Adam and Eve Turned White,” with the subtitle, “A Darkey’s Sermon to His Congregation” (Dumont 86). The speech mirrors Harris’s

story, as the speaker sets out to “splain how Adam and Eve turned white, for dey was originally black as you am, or I am” (86). The explanation is that Adam and Eve turned white after getting caught for stealing apples because they were so scared of God’s wrath. The speech ends with a warning about not “fool[ing] with de Lawd” lest “you’ll be arunnin’ around looking foolish, jest same as de mean white trash” (86). In addition to mocking the serious manner of the “Black” preacher, the speech fixes the social position of Black people so that if they were to turn white, they would be poor white people. Though it may appear as a jab at poor white people, the joke relies on antiblackness, especially directed at the “Black” preacher who says he “reads a great deal” and imagines his “beloved sistern and brederring” easily turning into “mean white trash” (86), and either really believes his own tale or is manipulating his congregation with a made-up story.

Both “How Adam and Eve Turned White” and Harris’s “Why the Negro Is Black” discount the fact that race is socially constructed and divorce antiblackness from slavery. Both stories refer to an ambiguous “here”—the former stating, “Dat am how de white man come *here*” (Dumont 86; emphasis added), and the latter saying that the original Black people before the pond were “blacker dan me, kaze I done bin *yer* so long dat I bin sorter bleach out” (Harris, *Uncle* 141; emphasis added). The history of racial slavery “here” in the United States goes unmentioned.

Harris’s minstrelized theory on the specificity of race in the United States sheds light on how an understanding of slavery was actively being shaped at the same time when the historical fact of slavery was being obfuscated. “Why the Negro Is Black” follows the question-and-answer format of a minstrel joke between a serious “interlocutor” and a comical “end man.” At the end, when the boy, playing the part of the interlocutor, asks questions about other races,

Remus replies in the fashion of an end man, “De Injuns en de Chinee got ter be ’counted ’long ’er de merlatter. I ain’t seed no Chinee dat I knows un, but dey tells me dey er sorter ’twix’ a brown en a brindle. Dey er all merlatters” (Harris, *Uncle* 142). In response to this information that Chinese and Native peoples are all just mixed-race Black people, the boy expresses doubt by stating, “But mamma says the Chinese have straight hair” (143). To this, Remus replies, “Co’sse, honey . . . dem wa’t git ter de pon’ time nuff fer ter git der head in de water, de water hit onkint der ha’r. Hit bleedzd ter be dat away” (143). Significant here is that the mention of Native peoples quickly drops out, and there is a focus only on the Chinese. Remus’s point that he has never seen actual Chinese people but has heard about them suggests that the “Chinese Question,” or the debate over the presence of Chinese people in the post-emancipation United States, especially as workers, was a much-discussed issue. That the story—in *Uncle Remus*—was published in 1883, just one year after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting the entrance of Chinese workers to the United States, warrants our closer look at the racialization of the Chinese both within the story and in a larger context.³

The punch line, that Chinese people are just Black people with “onkint” (meaning “unkinked”) hair, coupled with the significance of the white boy saying “Chinese” and Remus saying “Chinee,” brings to light Harris’s disavowed minstrel form situated in the larger contest over the meaning of racial slavery in the post-Reconstruction United States. A California slang, “Chinee” became part of the national lexicon during Reconstruction with the wild success of Bret Harte’s poem, “Plain Language from Truthful James” (1870). The poem became simply known as “Heathen Chinee,” referring to the poem’s Chinese character, Ah Sin, a worker who turns the tables on two white miners who try to cheat him in a card game by cheating them

³ On connections between slavery, Reconstruction, and Chinese exclusion, see Jung, Torok, Wong, and Yang, *Peculiar*.

instead. Though the word “heathen” became inseparable from “heathen Chinee” in the latter nineteenth-century United States because of the popularity of Harte’s poem, it was initially a word used to racialize Black enslaved people during slavery. As historian Sylvester Johnson states, “The heathen as a social construct . . . was symbolically associated with Native Americans and Negroes” (12). More specifically, “In the wake of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the holocaust of slavery . . . the public meaning of ‘Negro’ and ‘Africa’ were finely wedded to ‘backward,’ ‘uncivilized,’ and ‘heathen’” (24). When the Chinese workers arrived in California to work in the gold mines in 1849, they were racialized based on their religious as well as cultural difference in the context of slavery and the possibility of its expansion to potential “free” states. In 1854, Horace Greeley wrote in his widely-read *New York Tribune* that the Chinese are “uncivilized, unclean and filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations” and, “Pagan in religion, they know not the virtues of honesty, integrity or good faith.” Such characterizations enabled him to conclude, “if this Chinese immigration continues, America may some day have Slavery in California. . . . The horrors of the African slave-trade will be renewed on the shores of California” (Greeley). After emancipation, and as Chinese workers were recruited to work in other parts of the country after completing their work on the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, the antebellum connection between race and religion was invoked to target the Chinese, and the “Chinese Question” took on a national urgency.

In the months before Harte’s poem was published, Congress debated how to revise the wording of the 1790 Naturalization Act, which had granted naturalized citizenship to free, white persons. Charles Sumner, a Republican senator from Massachusetts, proposed that the law be made race-neutral, but many believed doing so would open the floodgates to the “immense,

teeming, swarming, seething hive of degraded” Chinese, and so the proposal did not pass.⁴ A crucial part of the argument against Sumner’s proposal was that the Chinese were unfree labor. William Stewart, a Republican from Nevada, declared that the Chinese could never be free workers because of their “heathen faith” to their “pagan masters”; what he objected to, then, was “naturalizing men . . . who are slaves.”⁵ In joining the word “heathen” to the Chinese, particularly in a poem about two white miners in California who try to cheat a Chinese worker but are outraged when he cheats them instead, Harte may have been trying to be ironic about the anti-Chinese racism in the West that Stewart espouses. However, the overwhelming interpretation of the poem during Reconstruction was that it affirmed the anti-Chinese rhetoric that Chinese labor, as “cheap labor” (Harte, “Plain” 288), posed a threat to free, white labor. This concern about the devaluation of white labor was reminiscent of certain antebellum antislavery arguments which assumed that it was Black people and their inherent incapacity for freedom that was the problem with slavery, not the system of dehumanization itself.

The anti-Chinese laws passed during and after Reconstruction all used the language that Chinese workers were not free and therefore deserving of exclusion, and many lawmakers used language specifically from Harte’s poem to characterize Chinese workers as such. During a congressional debate in 1871, for example, a Democrat named William Mungen from Ohio repeatedly called the Chinese “heathen Chinees” to argue that they were “cheap labor” and “in fact, slaves, although, perhaps, voluntarily assuming the position.”⁶ He testified, “This plea of cheap labor was the foundation stone of African slavery, as it is of coolie importation and

⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 41st Cong., 2d Sess. 5125 (1870). The naturalization law retained whiteness as the original and authentic marker of citizenship and added those of “African nativity and persons of African descent.”

⁵ *Cong. Globe*, 41st Cong., 2nd Sess. 5125 (1870).

⁶ *Cong. Globe*, 41st Cong., 3rd Sess. 359 (1871).

slavery now.”⁷ By defining Chinese workers as “slaves,” Mungen in effect redefined “African slavery” as a matter of “cheap labor.” To be sure, Chinese workers were *not* enslaved, and enslaved people under U.S. chattel slavery were *not* “cheap labor.” But the racial logic undergirding the exclusion of Chinese workers assumed both.

The false equivalence between the Chinese labor question and U.S. racial slavery erases the centuries of dehumanizing antiblackness on which the United States is built, but knowledge of that erasure is not common. The “joke” that Harris’s “Why the Negro Is Black” tells that Chinese people are Black people just with straight hair also performs that erasure, but the inclusion of the “Chinee” as a minstrel figure in *Uncle Remus* has not been given any attention. While studies of Chinese or Asian representations in larger U.S. children’s literature speak to the historical context of those representations, for example, they neglect to examine how Chinese workers were racialized comparatively with African Americans during and after slavery (Jenkins, Cutter). As such, digging deeper into the significance of the word is important, especially in conjunction with a focus on Harris’s misrecognition of slavery and minstrelsy.

Harte’s “heathen Chinee” appellation has minstrel roots and is a key part of the history of minstrelsy after slavery. The practice of adding an “ee” sound after a word—as in *Chinee*—was a speech pattern from the blackface minstrel stage (Yang *Peculiar*).⁸ There is also a close resemblance between Ah Sin, the “heathen Chinee,” and Topsy from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), not just from the novel but also from the many stage adaptations of the character as a minstrel figure.⁹ Topsy is described multiple times in the novel as a “heathen” or “heathenish” (Stowe

⁷ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁸ For example, in the 1853 minstrel song “Sambo’s ’Dress to He Bredren,” the “ee” sound was added to the end of certain words: “O, dat equal sod, hoo no want to go-e, / Dar we feel no rod, dar we hab no fo-e; / Dar we lib so fine, wid our coach an hors-e, / An ebry time we dine, hab one, two, tree, four cours-e.” See “Sambo’s ’Dress to He Bredren.”

www.loc.gov/resource/amss.as112220/?st=text.

⁹ For connections between blackface minstrelsy and Stowe’s novel, see Meer.

315, 310), and she has a penchant for proclaiming her own sinfulness, as she states, “I’s wicked,— I is. I’s mighty wicked,” and “I’s so wicked!” (318, 324). Topsy’s assertion of her wickedness became a popular catchphrase and a minstrel song, and when multiple minstrel troupes performed versions of the novel, the song was almost always included. Ah Sin, who is described as having a “child-like” demeanor yet is conniving enough to cheat at a card game after feigning ignorance (Harte, “Plain” 287), shares Topsy’s duplicitousness, which is described as, “The expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity” (Stowe 309-10). Like Topsy’s “veil” of solemnity, Ah Sin’s “child-like” smile that made the white miners think that they could cheat him ends up being a veil for his duplicitous nature, which is disclosed through a reading of his name as “I sin,” reminiscent of Topsy’s “I’s so wicked.” Harte’s own citation of Topsy as one of the founding figures of “American humor” (*Lectures* 22), which he tried to top with his own characters and stories about the West, further strengthens the connection between Ah Sin and Topsy, but what truly ties the two together is that they were both consumed—devoured—as minstrel figures of hilarity. In other words, without the widespread popularity of blackface minstrelsy already deeply embedded in every aspect of the nineteenth-century U.S. popular culture, neither Topsy nor Ah Sin could have become such hits.

In arguing that the “heathen Chinee” carries traces of Topsy as a minstrel figure, I am calling attention to the *process* and the *effect* of using the minstrel form, which always necessitates that we remember slavery and its dehumanization of Black people that turned them into commodities. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, this form performs the work of objectification and undergirds the characterization of Topsy as a “thing,” as seen in the description that comes before Topsy utters her first word: “the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro

melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time” (310). If the novel vacillates between the characterizations of Topsy as a “thing” on the one hand and a “neglected, abused child” on the other (313), her depiction as a minstrel figure is what seemingly negates her subject position as a child. That is, the minstrel form negates the human-ness of the Black person—as a child or an adult. The characterization of the “heathen Chinee” as the new minstrel Topsy figure, then, is constituted by the negation of Black humanity. The numerous appearances of the “Chinee” in popular culture during and after Reconstruction perpetuated this negation, as did the “Chinee” in “Why the Negro Is Black.” In what follows, I examine *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* (1883), a children’s picture book featuring a “Chinee” character and blackface “Black” characters as demonstrating how the antiblack minstrel form was kept alive through those characters in related but ultimately distinct ways.

The “Chinee” and the “Black” Children in *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes*

Like the Uncle Remus books, *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* (1883) was published when the vocabulary of blackface minstrelsy became infused into the everyday, even as staged minstrel shows were on the decline. This period also saw a boom in the printing industry that facilitated the process. After the Civil War, minstrel joke books as well as guidebooks on how to put on minstrel shows proliferated, as did books for children. Educational books for children and minstrel guidebooks were often published by the same publisher and marketed together, and the latter did not always assume that their readers were adults. For example, one guidebook had a section on conundrums, stated to be “especially arranged for ladies and juvenile minstrels” (Dumont 87). What is significant about the proliferation of the minstrel form in the home and

among children and adults alike is how the form shaped an understanding of slavery. For example, the joke book *Brudder Bones' Stump Speeches* included “Plantation Scenes” and *Tambo's End-Men's Minstrel Gags* included “Plantation Songs and Dances” (Kavanaugh). Much like Harris’s stories, these depictions obviously did not illustrate slavery as a process of dehumanization that underscored Black pain; rather, Black suffering was turned into Black enjoyment, casting slavery in a nostalgic rosy hue and justifying it.

In an indirect way, *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* also taught children that slavery was a fitting condition for Black people, but not through depictions of plantations. Instead, it did so obliquely, by teaching racism through its depictions of “Chinese” and “Black” characters using the minstrel form. As the book illustrates and describes the happenings on stage at pantomime and minstrel shows, it positions the reader (who is assumed to be white) as a participant and consumer of those shows while normalizing the abject position of the nonwhite characters as dehumanized objects of their enjoyment and entertainment. In the Pantomime section, the book introduces a “young Chineese” character “reported to have made some most delicious pies,” which turn out to be made with rats (*Pantomime*). The introduction is accompanied by a faceless depiction, which accentuates the character’s queue, as if directing the reader to connect it to what is at the center of the illustration—a box with rats coming out of it labeled as “RAT PIES” (see figure 1).



Figure 1. A “young Chinee” (left) and “Rat Pies” (center) *Pantomime: A Picture Show for Young People*. London and New York, George Routledge & Sons, 1883. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digitized at HathiTrust:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nc01.ark:/13960/t34182n50&view=1up&seq=7>

The queue is illustrated as a thin tail, not unlike those on the “big rats and little mice” that “ran all about the place” (*Pantomime*). The Chinese character is racialized as an other who is different not only because he lives in a squalid condition, or that he deems vermin to be an acceptable source of food, but most effectively because he is like the rats himself. On top of the cultural practices that dehumanize the character, the synecdochal representation of the queue dehumanizes him.

Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes's rendering of the Chinese, particularly in association with rats, is in line with the anti-Chinese racist discourse of the period in popular culture (see figure 2).¹⁰

¹⁰ For a discussion of how representations comparing Chinese people to rats extended far beyond the nineteenth century to contemporary depictions of Chinese and Asian people (and spaces, such as Chinatown) in the United States, see Kim.

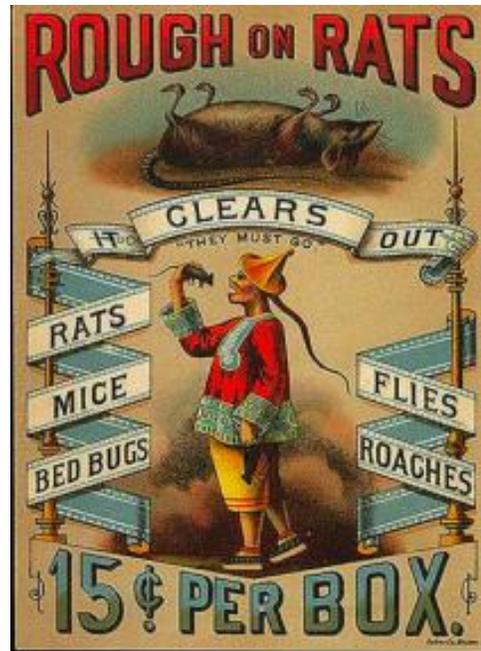


Figure 2. “Rough on Rats” advertisement printed by Forbes Co. Boston in the 1880s. Teaching Tolerance Classroom Resources.

<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/rough-on-rats>

Such a discourse led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which necessitates that we study the role of children’s literature as part of the anti-Chinese movement. And as argued previously, the anti-Chinese movement was not separate from the re-narrating of racial slavery. This point can be seen if we analyze the “Chinee” character in *Pantomime* as a minstrel character based on the “heathen Chinee” Ah Sin, inspired by Topsy. With the name “Sam Foo Lee” (*Pantomime*), the character calls to mind the minstrel practice of adding an “ee” sound to a word, which later became commonly associated with the “Chinese” dialect. The key word in the character’s name is “fool,” and true to that name, Sam Foo Lee tries to fool the white characters into imbibing his pies, which he has now labeled “MOUTON [*sic*] PIES” and even tries to sell for “two bits” (*Pantomime*). Such trickery echoes Ah Sin’s duplicity in Harte’s poem, which prompts the white narrator to state, “for ways that are dark / And for tricks that are vain, / The heathen Chinee is peculiar” (“Plain” 287). Moreover, just as Ah Sin’s name is reminiscent of

Topsy's catchphrase of "I's so wicked," Sam Foo Lee and his tricks bear a resemblance to the depiction of "Black" children derogatorily called "pickaninnies" in the Minstrels section of the book, who play "their merry pranks from day to day" (*Pantomime*).¹⁰ This link between the "young Chinee" and the "Black" children explains the text's driving away of Sam Foo Lee as if he is a literal rat, as a white character's screaming "Miauow! miauow! . . . as if a dozen kits / Were coming down the street to tear the Chinaman to bits" makes Sam Foo Lee "slink off at last" (*Pantomime*). The threat of extreme violence against Sam Foo Lee is seen in a different form later when "Sambo," a "Black" adult, sets a trap to catch "little Jakey," "that pickaninny chap," and vows to "shoot the little rascal dead!" (*Pantomime*).¹¹ Though the text does not explain why Sambo wants to kill Jakey, Jakey's sly smile in the illustration as well as his clever escape from the trap implies that Jakey deserves Sambo's wrath. Lacking in this scene is Jakey's fear or pain, as "pickaninny" characters "never experience or express pain or sustain wounds in any remotely realistic way" (34), as Robin Bernstein has shown. Seen in parallel with such a character, Sam Foo Lee's exclusion is justified as appropriate because of his characterization not only as a dehumanized vermin but also as a "pickaninny"-like figure incapable of feeling pain.

Even though Sam Foo Lee is expelled from the rest of the book, the character's expulsion should be read in conjunction with the dehumanization of the "Black" characters in the Minstrel section, particularly the "Black" children. In addition to the "Black" children as tricksters, the section includes a vignette about "little pickaninnies and their mother in bed, / With a funny little night-cap on each funny woolly head" (*Pantomime*). The repetition of "funny" to describe the "night-cap" and "woolly head" suggests that there is something inherently comical about the physicality of the children that the night-cap tops off. The designation of the children *and their*

¹¹ On the origin of the word "pickaninny," see Bernstein 34.

mother as objects of ridicule provides the guide for how this scene should be read, which is about a nighttime robbery. In the scene, a robber in blackface—like everyone in the Minstrel section—enters through the window. The robber, a man, is described as “fierce” looking, armed with “pistols and . . . knives” (*Pantomime*). The terrified reaction of the children and their mother is described as, “Four woolly heads stare up and look upon the scene amazed! / They tremble at his sight!” (*Pantomime*). There is no distinction between the mother and the children, and their humanity is reduced to un-individuated body parts, as “eight wide open eyes” that follow the robber (*Pantomime*). That the robber does not “seem the least bit conscious” of their presence is indicative of their non-recognition as human beings (*Pantomime*). To counter this non-recognition, the children and the mother “give a yell” (*Pantomime*), which frightens the robber so much that he jumps out the window and leaves behind everything, including his own belongings. The scene concludes with the statement, “For ’tis enough the bravest and the boldest to affright, / To hear four screaming darkies in the middle of the night” (*Pantomime*). The perpetrator becomes not just the victim but also a fallen hero who is “bravest and boldest,” defeated comically by the nonverbal “mighty roar” of the children and their mother (*Pantomime*).

It is problematic enough that the children and their mother are represented as more terrifying than the armed robber, changed from victims who are in danger to those endangering. But even more insidious is the illustrative representation of the children and their mother in the scene, which implicitly imparts a lesson on slavery (see figure 3).



Figure 3. “The little pickaninnies and their mother are in bed” *The Minstrels: A Picture Show for Young People*. London and New York, George Routledge & Sons, 1883. Google Books.

In the three panes depicting the characters, they are in the same position, “in bed.” This “bed” is illustrated as standing upright, as a vertical box. Such representation prompts the question, “What kind of a ‘bed’ is this?” which is answered on the next page, as the children are said to “move around uneasily within their sheeted *cage*” (*Pantomime*; emphasis added). It is uncertain if it would have been obvious to the reader right away that the vertical “bed” is a cage. But the explicit labeling of it as such most certainly colors the initial description that the children and their mother were looking forward to a “long and undisturbed repose” (*Pantomime*), which indicates the very ordinariness of their being in a cage every night. In other words, the most problematic is the naturalized way that the “Black” children and their mother are depicted in a cage. This representation stresses that their “mighty roar” be interpreted as animal-like and not human, which may call to mind the representation of the Chinese character from the *Pantomime* section as rat-like. However, the crucial distinction is that the dehumanization of the children and the mother happens through an evocation of Black captivity or un-freedom in racial slavery, which is normalized as the *natural* if not preferred state of Blackness through the minstrel form.

As Saidiya Hartman writes, the “terror of the mundane” that we see in something like the minstrel form is the “excess enjoyment imputed” to the dehumanized and commodified form of Blackness (Hartman, *Scenes* 4, 20). That is, what we see in this scene is naturalized enslavement and the consent to and desire for that condition, as the characters even try to protect it. They are initially scared and silent, but when the robber starts taking the “furniture, table and chairs” (*Pantomime*)—the accouterments that make up their condition of living un-freely—that is when they start screaming. The family is not troubled at all by their condition of captivity, which harkens back to slavery. Instead, their terror is caused by a potential threat to the terms of that condition. This depiction not only negates the terror experienced by Black people during this period, often referred as the nadir because of the Jim Crow laws, lynching, and white mobs that terrorized Black people and threatened their lives and livelihoods. It also rewrites that terror as a menacing threat.

The idea in *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* that Black children in a cage are more terrorizing/terrifying than an armed robber points to what was at stake in the popularity of plantation nostalgia such as Harris’s *Uncle Remus* after emancipation. The depiction of a character like Remus feeling at home on a plantation was part of the white misrepresentation of slavery as a necessary condition and a means of containing the supposed threat of Black people, along with justifications for lynching and incarceration. By illustrating “Black” children feeling at home in a cage, *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* shows how children’s books within the plantation nostalgia genre participated in this effort at Black containment by targeting Black children specifically. The book relies on the equivalence of children and adult, which excludes the Black child from the category of the child and therefore the category of the human. Such equivalence was par for the course in blackface minstrelsy and its belief in Black fungibility, as

evidenced by the fact that white adults, usually men, played the part of Topsy. Off-stage, this dehumanization of the Black child through the fungibility of the minstrel form worked hand in glove with the racialization of Black children in association with criminality. Far beyond the late nineteenth century, this association has had ramifications in not just the rate of incarcerations of Black youth but also their murders at the hands of the police and civilians that are sanctioned by the legal system. Just to name a few, Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice are Black youths who were murdered because their actions and mere presence were perceived as threatening, but there are also numerous lesser known names such as Kiwane Carrington, a fifteen-year-old boy who was shot to death by the Champaign police in Illinois in 2009 for trying to enter a house where he had been staying after his mother died.

As such, we might consider the representational practices of *Uncle Remus* and *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes* as key to the lasting antiblackness in what Hartman calls slavery's "afterlife"—"skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (*Lose* 8). The racialization of Asians as vermin-like, disease-carrying, and indelibly foreign and exclusion-worthy has also persisted beyond the late nineteenth century in slavery's afterlife, as seen in recent cases of widespread anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. These different forms of racism are perpetuated through the lesson imparted in cultural productions such as *Uncle Remus* and *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes*, which teach white children to take on white supremacist racism through their enjoyment of the minstrel form. In particular, *Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes*, subtitled *A Carnival for the Young*, perpetuates what Tavia Nyong'o calls the "carnavalesque" element of blackface minstrelsy that establishes "spectatorship as well as participation" (109). Perhaps the young readers of the book would have been inspired to stage their own minstrel shows, much like the

white children in Philadelphia who were photographed at the turn of the twentieth century (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Philadelphia children in blackface, photographed by James Bartlett Rich, ca. 1895. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Or, like one of Harris's grandsons named Remus, the young white readers of *Uncle Remus* could have considered it their birthright to claim Blackness and the racist language of blackface minstrelsy. In light of the virulent anti-Asian racism and antiblackness for much of the first half of the twentieth century and beyond, we see how the process of dehumanization through the minstrel form created agents and participants of those racisms, grotesquely masqueraded as entertainment and masking the "terror of the mundane."

Acknowledgments

I thank Katrina Phillips and Brigitte Fielder for all their work in including this essay in the special issue. I am grateful for the insightful comments from Brigitte Fielder as well as those from the anonymous reviewers of *RDYL* that made this essay much stronger. For reading a previous draft and talking through my ideas with me, I thank Moon-Kie Jung. This essay could not have been written without the support of the Third Space Writing Group at UMass, Amherst.

Works Cited

- Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York University Press, 2011.
- Bolden, T. J. "Brer Rabbit's Box." *The Southern Workman and Hampton School Record*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1899, pp. 25–6.
- Boskin, Joseph. *Sambo: The Rise & Demise of an American Jester*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Brasch, Walter M. *Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist": The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris*. Mercer University Press, 2000.
- Cutter, Martha J. "Empire and the Mind of the Child: Sui Sin Far's 'Tales of Chinese Children.'" *MELUS*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2002, pp. 31–48.
- Dumont, Frank. *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*. New York, Witmark & Sons, 1905.
- Greeley, Horace. *New York Tribune*, 29 Sept. 1854.
- Harris, Joel Chandler. "Negro Customs." *Youth's Companion*, vol. 58, no. 24, 1885, pp. 238–9.
- . "Plantation Music." *The Critic*, vol. 3, no. 95, 1883, pp. 505–6.
- . *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-lore of the Old Plantation*. New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1881.
- Harte, Bret. *The Lectures of Bret Harte*, edited by Charles Meeker Kozlay, Brooklyn, NY: C. M. Kozlay, 1909.
- . "Plain Language from Truthful James." *Overland Monthly*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1870, pp. 287–88.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

- . *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hutton, Laurence. "The Negro on the Stage." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 79, no. 469, 1899, pp. 132–45.
- Jenkins, Esther C., and Mary C. Austin. *Literature for Children about Asians and Asian Americans: Analysis and Annotated Bibliography, with Additional Readings for Adults*. Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Johnson, Sylvester. *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Jung, Moon-Ho. *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar Production in the Age of Emancipation*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Kavanaugh, Russell. *Kavanaugh's Juvenile Speaker for Very Little Boys And Girls*. New York, Dick & Fitzgerald, 1877.
- Kim, Claire Jean. *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Meer, Sarah. *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*. University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Moore, Opal and Donnarae MacCann. "The Uncle Remus Travesty." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1986, pp. 96–9.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

- Pantomime and Minstrel Scenes: A Picture Carnival for the Young*. London & New York, George Routledge and Sons, 1883.
- Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life Among the Lowly*. 1852. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Torok, John Hayakawa. "Reconstruction and Racial Nativism: Chinese Immigrants and the Debates on the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments and Civil Rights Laws." *Asian Law Journal*, vol. 3, 1996, pp. 55–103.
- Walker, Alice. "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2012, pp. 635–37.
- Wong, Edlie L. *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship*. New York University Press, 2015.
- Yang, Caroline H. "Bret Harte's 'Heathen Chinee' in US Literature after Slavery." *Asian American Literature in Transition Volume I (1850-1930)*, edited by Julia H. Lee and Josephine Park, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
- . *The Peculiar Afterlife of Slavery: The Chinese Worker and the Minstrel Form*. Stanford University Press, 2020.