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"I've only to say the word!": Uncle Tom's Cabin and Performative Speech Theory



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“I’ve only to say the word!”:
Uncle Tom’s Cabin
and Performative Speech Theory

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This essay proposes a new reading of an important but neglected scene in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: the scene in volume 2, chapter 33, in which Cassy defiantly challenges Sambo as he threatens to whip her for assisting Tom. I read this scene through the lens of performative speech theory in order to raise questions about the mutually constitutive nature of language and action that inheres in Stowe’s strategy of sympathetic identification through domestic sentimentality. When viewed in light of performative speech theory, Cassy’s insubordinate retort to Sambo both signals Stowe’s understanding of the capacity of the upraised whip to elicit readers’ sympathy and simultaneously challenges the firmament on which such sympathy can lie. Cassy’s words, and Sambo’s understanding of them, rupture Stowe’s carefully constructed argument that champions ameliorative, reformatory language over force. I suggest that understanding Cassy’s speech as performative revises and extends our understanding of Stowe’s use of feminine sociomoral conversational pedagogy and that it raises questions about where for Stowe (and other antebellum women writers) linguistic authority lies: in the suasive potential of sentiment, in the assaultive nature of words, or in the ways sentiment and assault mutually authorize each other.

The scene of concern to this essay occurs as Cassy is picking cotton on Simon Legree’s plantation. She observes newcomer Tom empathetically place some cotton he has picked into the basket of an ailing slave. Realizing Tom does not know he endangers himself by helping a fellow slave, Cassy transfers to Tom’s basket some of her own cotton, explaining, “You know nothing about this place . . . or you wouldn’t have done that. When you’ve been a month, you’ll be done helping anybody.” Sambo, the acting slave driver, approaches Cassy, who

resumes the backbreaking work. He brandishes his whip at her and sneers, “Go along! yer under me now,—mind yourself, or yer’ll cotch it!” (306). This is an iconographic moment: the crouching, hunched over, cotton-picking, subservient slave threatened by a ready lash. Highly suggestive, this passage references repeated images that readers would regard as “untrammelled visualizations”—that is, truthful, mimetic images that convey reality unmediated by fictive technique (Morgan 1).¹

An astute reader of literature and culture, Stowe borrowed and reworked numerous popular images and types. For example, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* incorporates popularly repeated figures such as the innocent dying child, the tragic mulatta, the fugitive mother with youngster, the minstrel performer, the evil slave owner, and the righteous matriarch. Yet another stock image Stowe employs is that of the slave about to be whipped. Marion Wilson Starling notes, “The figure of the fugitive slave, panting in a swamp, with the slave holder brandishing a whip and surrounded by bloodhounds . . . became so popular as a symbol that dinner plates were made with the scene for a center motif; the handles of silverware were embossed with the story . . . and the fad even extended to the embellishment of transparent window blinds” (29). If this image had been codified for consumption by 1835, as Starling notes, then by mid-century Stowe’s depiction of this scene would appear familiar and formulaic. Antebellum readers would no doubt recognize at once the power dynamics that inhere in the image of a slave woman being threatened by an overseer lifting his rawhide, especially since readers would likely have seen similar imagery on china plates, silverware, and window treatments.² The scene under discussion here elicits sympathy for poor Cassy’s suffering and calls upon whites to feel outrage and indignation at her imminent abuse. Stowe wanted readers to feel for Cassy through sympathetic identification and thus be moved toward the abolitionist cause.³

Yet Cassy’s response to Sambo challenges the way readers receive Stowe’s sympathetic strategies. Cassy rages at the driver, “[T]ouch *me*, if you dare! I’ve power enough, yet, to have you torn by the dogs, burnt alive, cut to inches! I’ve only to say the word!” This threat to “say the word” makes Sambo lower the punishing whip and retreat with a sullen, “Didn’t mean no harm, Misse Cassy!” (306). What exactly is it that Cassy threatens to say? What words could make the holder of a whip cower? Cassy’s threat to “say the word” is a threat to use language performatively to cast a vodun hex on Sambo.⁴

On a pragmatic level, readers could assume that Cassy believes she still has enough influence or power over Legree to convince him to whip Sambo. Presumably Cassy could report to Legree that Sambo has beaten her or made sexual advances; a jealous Legree might logically beat his upstart slave driver.⁵ Yet

this most obvious explanation of Cassy's words cannot fully encompass the scene's meanings because Cassy indicates that she could cause Sambo to suffer from more than a whipping: Her words would cause dogs to tear him up and fire to burn him alive. It is unlikely that, if Cassy were to report attempted sexual aggression, Legree would actually burn Sambo at the stake or chop him into little pieces. Further, were Cassy threatening Sambo with a false report of sexual aggression, Sambo could whip her doubly at some point in the future for leveling a devious charge. Something else in Cassy's words disarms Sambo so suddenly. What exactly is it that Sambo so definitely fears? Is Stowe saying that words could be more blistering than rawhide?

An examination of this scene through the lens of performative speech theory reveals that violent language may prove more efficacious than sentimental petitions. Cassy's threat to Sambo thus presents a compelling narrative question because, until this point in the novel and in numerous scenes afterward, Stowe presents moral suasion as the only viable alternative to violence. In the preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe tells her readers that her purpose is to "awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race" (xiii). Gregg Crane argues that "Stowe considered sentiment the medium of human conscience. One *feels* the conflict between the law of slavery and the higher law principles of the natural rights tradition" (178). Stowe's sentimental sympathetic strategy, however, falters with Cassy's utterance.

Critics have written extensively on Stowe's ability to use bourgeois sentimentality to craft an emotionally engaging and politically motivating story. Elizabeth Barnes cogently summarizes Stowe's strategy in her claim that "sympathy is made contingent upon similarity" (92). Marianne Noble argues that "the sentimental wound" is "a bodily experience of anguish caused by identification with the pain of another" (295). Glenn Hendler claims that sentiment is "premised on the possibility of a perfect intersubjectivity of affect" (145); thus, Stowe operated on the assumption that readers would feel moved by the sentiment inherent in a young, beautiful slave being unjustly whipped for assisting our novel's hero. Carolyn Sorisio cautions that many reform writers relied on "the sentimental assumption that corporeal pain is a universally understandable and translatable experience" (49).⁶ Following sentimental tradition, Stowe crafts Cassy in such a way that readers can link themselves to her—perhaps by locating similarity in her oppression as a woman, her lovely features, her sympathetic outreach to Tom, a shared fear of corporeal wounding—or to her plight as a slave (so familiar to antebellum readers).

Stowe solidifies her case for the "sympathetic influence" of sentimentality even when her own characters' words fail. For example, in volume 1, chapter 9 ("In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man"), Senator Bird hurries

Eliza and Harry into a carriage to escape. In their final moment together, Mrs. Bird and Eliza are too overcome with emotion to exchange parting words: “Eliza leaned out of the carriage, and put out her hand,—a hand as soft and beautiful as was given in return. She fixed her large, dark eyes, full of earnest meaning, on Mrs. Bird’s face, and seemed going to speak. Her lips moved,—she tried once or twice, but there was no sound” (76). When words fall short, the clasp of hands speaks volumes. Aware that a corporeal appeal often works best, Stowe brilliantly demonstrates that, when language fails, the physicality of unmediated emotions rings true.

Although *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was serialized in the abolitionist newspaper the *National Era* (5 June 1851 to 1 April 1852, before being published in volume form, March 1852), the *Era* had not published antislavery fiction until that date. Instead, Abolitionist ideas appeared almost exclusively in the form of poetry or essays. According to Barbara Hochman, the fiction in the *Era* was didactic: “[I]t tells the reader to be diligent and patient, to obey one’s parents and trust Providence. It stresses the efficacy of individual will and the importance of emotional moderation, whether in love or death” (147). Until Stowe’s work, fiction in the *Era* actually avoided depicting slavery. Since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* marked the first significant appearance in the *Era* of fiction as a vehicle for portraying slavery, the novel represented a departure from generic norms. It is important to recall that, as sentimental fiction, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was revolutionary, for, as Hochman observes, it “established sympathetic identification as a wide-spread reading practice for consuming the story of slavery” (144). That such sympathetic identification established a far-reaching fictive strategy for abolitionism is important when considering the way Cassy’s retort to Sambo reinforces yet destabilizes Stowe’s narrative aims.

Cassy’s threat to “say the word” demonstrates the power of performative speech—that is, speech that not merely describes a situation, but, as Jacques Derrida says, “produces or transforms a situation” (186). To illustrate performative speech, J. L. Austin points to the uttering of “I do” in a wedding ceremony. Austin argues that uttering “I do” “is not to *describe* my doing . . . it is to do it” and that “I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (6). Judith Butler argues that an utterance “performs *itself*, and in the course of that performing becomes a thing done; the pronouncement is the act of speech at the same time that it is the speaking of an act” (44). In other words, Sambo finds Cassy’s speech so menacing because Cassy does not merely threaten to describe or report a future action; she warns that she has the power to articulate words that will lead to, or will themselves be, an action with violent results. Her threat shows readers “how to do things with words” (to borrow the title of Austin’s generative text) to save herself from a beating.

In this scene, language reveals itself to be a force: Words need not honorably convince, but they can constitute action powerful enough to meet violence with violence. Assaultive language proves more expeditious than persuasive language. Speech act theory relies on Austin's distinctions between "perlocutionary" speech and "illocutionary" speech, with perlocutionary speech being constantive speech that reports or describes the world while illocutionary speech is that which performs an action (109–10). An examination of Cassy's ability to cause violence through an utterance reveals links between her illocutionary speech and New World vodun. Cassy's ability to cast a hex, or evil spell, derives from the rich syncretic New Orleans milieu in which she lives. Since Cassy is a woman who uses speech *not* for its capacity for moral tutelage but for its performative force, giving Cassy such verbal power demands that readers sympathetically identify with a conjure woman who uses speech differently from other women in the novel. I will examine Stowe's nods toward black diasporic culture to contextualize Cassy's speech and to suggest how Cassy's performative utterance weakens Stowe's investment in sympathetic identification.

In the late eighteenth century, slaves and free blacks from Haiti and Cuba retained West African religious practices, including vodun, which became enmeshed with aspects of Catholicism, including saints' holidays and veneration of icons. Vodun in New Orleans reached its height around 1850 and particularly endowed blacks and women with spiritual powers (see Fessenden and Raboteau). Anna Brickhouse describes Cassy as "New Orleans-born, French-speaking, possessed of magical powers associated with vodun, and unwilling mistress to a man who 'learned his trade well, among the pirates in the West Indies'" (430). Including vodun in such an overtly Christian text could run Stowe into trouble, for although Albert Raboteau claims that "conjure was not always employed for evil" (287), he does argue that "[t]he practice of conjure was, at least in theory, in conflict with Christian beliefs about the providence of God, and indeed one way of relating conjure to Christianity was to make the former the realm of the devil" (286).

Uncle Tom's Cabin is characterized by what Brickhouse calls the "Franco-Africanist shadow cast by New Orleans and its proximity to Haiti and the larger West Indies" (430). She rightly points out the several places in the novel in which the Franco-Caribbean world impinges on the novel's concerns. For example, as Brickhouse points out, George Harris questions the ability of Haiti to serve as a stable, independent nation. He demands "a people that shall have a tangible, separate existence of its own; and where am I to look for it?" He answers his own question: "Not in Hayti; for in Hayti they had nothing to start with. . . . The race that formed the character of the Haytiens was a worn-out, effeminate one; and, of course, the subject race will be centuries in rising

to anything” (Stowe 374). Haiti also figures in Augustine St. Clare’s thoughts when, about the possibility of slave revolts, he muses, “If ever the San Domingo hour comes, Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day” (Stowe 234). Brickhouse reminds us that although Eliza and George’s son, Harry, was born in English-speaking Kentucky, “the novel’s conclusion places him securely in the franco-phone world of Louisiana, revealing him as none other than the grandson of the tragic quadroon Cassy,” and that little Harry ends up being the nephew of Cassy’s mixed-race son, Henry, who was sold in New Orleans but reappears by novel’s end (430). Finally, as Brickhouse notes, Stowe also includes George Harris’s sister, Madame de Thoux, the former slave and wife of a West Indian Creole owner, who is passing as a French woman (431).

With this Franco-Africanist shadow hovering over Cassy, readers view Cassy and her utterance in the context of a New Orleans diasporic belief system. Derrida suggests that a performative utterance draws agency by following a code or by being identified as a “citation” (191–92). In other words, Cassy’s threat can be seen as legitimate or “coded” in that it derives its force from its context within an established, recognizable tradition of vodun. In order for performative language to succeed, or to be “felicitous,” according to Austin, “[t]here must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances” (14); furthermore, “the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked” (15).

Legree’s slave driver immediately understands the implications of Cassy’s speech act and, therefore, why her speech has the potential to be assaultive. Cassy’s ability to curse Sambo exists within the “accepted conventional procedure” of vodun practice. Were Sambo unfamiliar with hexes, Cassy’s utterance would be “infelicitous.” Her language would fail to be performative if Sambo were not “appropriate for the invocation.” A failure to understand Cassy’s assaultive language would constitute what Austin calls a misinvocation, a misapplication, or a misexecution (17). Thus, when Cassy threatens to “say the word,” Sambo immediately understands the volatility of language and believes in Cassy’s powers to bring violence about, just as Cassy places credibility in Sambo’s threat to lash the whip. Cassy and Sambo meet in an understanding of the corporeal harm latent in disciplinary tools, whether linguistic or leather.

Derrida builds on Austin’s groundwork by recognizing the repetition or copycat nature of performative speech. He asks, “Could a performative succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘codified’ or iterable form, in other words if the formula that I utter to open a meeting, christen a boat, or undertake marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* to an iterable model, if it were not

thus identifiable as a kind of citation?” (191). Therefore, Austin’s “uttering of certain words” that are “appropriate for the invocation” and that have “a certain conventional effect” stand as appropriate and conventional because they have been heard before: The words are repeated from one situation to the next and thereby aggregate in authority and currency. A hex in a foreign language or a curse of nonsense syllables may misfire because the hearer cannot understand. “Language,” according to Jonathan Culler, “is performative in the sense that it doesn’t just transmit information but performs acts by its repetition of established discursive practices or ways of doing things” (98). Cassy’s performative language, then, relies on its iterability: In order for it to be felicitous, it must be a repetition of a previously successful curse drawn from a rich vodun heritage. Following Derrida, such language would be a citation, or a quoted extract, of supernatural conjure that follows a certain code within established vodun practice.

These points about felicity of utterance and citation are worth stressing because, just as Cassy’s assaultive language relies on Sambo’s understanding of its corrosive force, Stowe likewise relies on her readers’ understanding of Sambo’s reaction and on readers’ ability to situate the novel in a New Orleans context of fluid and diasporic religious traditions. If readers failed to understand that Cassy could level a debilitating verbal curse, then Sambo’s acceding to Cassy’s threat would not make sense. To make Cassy’s utterance felicitous, Stowe casts her readers as part of a community cognizant, and to a degree accepting, of the powers of vodun.

We can see Stowe acknowledging her readers’ acquaintance with vodun in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Here, Stowe reflects popular knowledge of vodun “codes” when she writes, “The African race, in their own climate, are believers in spells, in ‘fetish and obi,’ in ‘the evil eye,’ and other singular influences, for which, probably, there is an origin in this peculiarity of constitution.” Speaking about “the African race,” Stowe further reveals readers’ familiarity with African folk belief when she writes, “We are not surprised to find almost constantly, in the narrations of their religious histories, accounts of visions, of heavenly voices, of mysterious sympathies and transmissions of knowledge from heart to heart without the intervention of the senses” (28).

The use of fetishes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and characters’ appropriate reactions of fear or respect, suggests mid-century readers’ acquaintance with African folk belief. For example, in volume 2, chapter 35 (“The Tokens”), Simon Legree reacts hysterically when Sambo presents him with “a witch thing”—“something that niggers gets from witches. Keeps ’em from feelin’ when they’s flogged. [Tom] had it tied round his neck, with a black string.” Sambo opens the package to reveal Tom’s souvenirs of a silver dollar and a lock of Eva’s hair.

Recognizing the hair's totemic power, Legree screams for Sambo to "burn it up!—burn it up! . . . Don't you bring me any more of your devilish things!" (322).⁷ Dinah keeps possible occult tokens such as a bloody cloth and sweet herbs in her kitchen drawers, which, according to Lynn Wardley, remind readers of her still-vital connection to African cultural praxis (204). Further, Stowe describes Cassy in demonic terms: She has a strange "influence" over Legree (321), who calls her a "she-devil" (320), and Cassy herself claims, "I've got the devil in me!" (321).

Such inclusions of fetish, obi, tokens, witchery, conjure, influence, and devilry provide a vodun context in which Cassy's utterance can then succeed felicitously. These West African beliefs in harnessing supernatural powers were introduced into white America by slaves and immeasurably affected white society and faith. For example, as a white middle-class woman, Stowe typified her social stratum's interest in mediumship, mesmerism, and spiritualism by her participation in séances and her experimentation with a planchette, which Wardley describes as "a ouija-board-like instrument designed for extrawordly [sic] communication" (208). For an article on the planchette, Stowe gathered materials she described to her editor James T. Fields as "really very extraordinary" (qtd. in Hedrick 339). Stowe also tried to contact her dead son, Henry, claimed she held counsel with the spirit of Charlotte Brontë (Wardley 208), and believed a spiritualist medium received a "supposed communication" from Stowe's wayward son, Fred (qtd. in Hedrick 391). Russ Castronovo identifies Stowe's interest in mesmerism in the way that George Harris seems to cast a hypnotic spell over Mr. Wilson: George's former employer becomes "like one speaking in a dream," and Stowe writes that Wilson follows George "as one who walks in his sleep" (15).

Wardley argues that the "retention of African cultural practices among" slaves has "left more traces on the aesthetics of sentiment in the United States than we have yet imagined" (204). She goes on to write, "Stowe's belief that some spirit inhabits all things is not only an exoticized import from the Roman Catholic and African American religions of New Orleans and beyond. It is by 1852 one familiar element of the nineteenth-century domestic ideology the tenets of which Stowe's writing reflected and helped to shape." Wardley makes the insightful argument, important for my interests here, that "Stowe's recurrent representation of the uncanny power of Victorian material culture to elicit emotion, provoke somatic response, bewitch, heal, or avenge wrong, resonates not only with the Catholic faith in the power of relics, but also with the Pan-African religions of the antebellum South" (205).

In light of Wardley's discussion, bourgeois sentimentalism seems to bewitch, or cast a charm or spell. Far from standing as a chaste, unpolluted stronghold

against alien West African magic and slave culture, white domesticity to some extent shares vodun's tenet of animism. Lori Merish argues that, as a hallmark of sentimental materialism, "domestic material culture is represented in great detail, and . . . personal possessions are endowed with psychological or characterological import" (139). In her explanation of the power of fetish in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Gillian Brown writes of the "transformative capacity of sentimental possession" and suggests that "Stowe's sentimental fetishism invests domestic possessions with [a] sense of empathy between the object and its owner" so that there exists "a reciprocity between persons and their possessions, by seeing them as contiguous and congruent" (48, 51, 52). For example, sentimentalism grants totemic value to objects to evoke a lost loved one: Recall the tears elicited by Mrs. Bird when she gives her dead son's toys to fugitive Harry and the potent after-death conjuring power of Eva's and Legree's mothers' locks of hair. Brown argues that "the memorial lock of hair Simon Legree's mother left him operates to abet the escape of Cassy and Emmeline and to render him powerless. So powerful is this sentimental possession that its influence survives and strengthens in its disposal" (50).

This homology between sentimental bourgeois possessivism and the entrancing nature of fetishized objects facilitates readers' bonds to Cassy and her bewitching powers. Raboteau links African and Christian religions in his claim that "Christian tradition itself has always been attuned to special gifts (charisms) of the Spirit as they are manifested in prophecy, healing, and miracles. . . . In an important sense, conjure and Christianity were not so much antithetical as complementary" (287). Cassy's close link to conjure and vodun thus threatens to rupture Stowe's vision of a salvific Christianity, for how can a vodun practitioner receive God's grace. To erase Cassy's New World African diasporic heritage by the end of the novel, Stowe has Cassy implore, "If God would give me back my children, then I could pray" (356). To show that a benevolent God rewards those with moral righteousness, when Stowe restores Cassy's children to her, "Cassy yielded at once, and with her whole soul, to every good influence, and became a devout and tender Christian" (373).

Cassy's threat to performatively "say the word" thus problematizes Stowe's aim of eschewing violence in favor of matrifocal sympathetic conversion because Cassy's speech act so clearly succeeds in its execution. At the same time, however, the efficacy of Cassy's performativity relies on bourgeois sentimentalism's derivation from the very conjure that enables Cassy's words. Thus, Cassy's threat may accrete in meaning for readers who, because of vodun's syncretic influence, are familiar with the inspirited, corporeal relationships that inhere among words, objects, and feelings.

As Sarah Robbins has observed, much of Stowe's writing can be described

as “domestic didactics” that deploy “feminine sociomoral influence” (535). According to Robbins, Stowe learned “how to use a tutelary voice in print to create layers of conversation-centered learning in her narratives—to help position readers as participants in a mother-to-learner talk *about* the text’s own vivid verbal tableaux of domestic, conversational pedagogy in action.” By deploying this strategy of using dialogic exchange to attempt to shape morality, “Stowe was adapting for her antislavery narrative a recognizable approach she had already exploited in earlier domestic didactic stories” (543). We can therefore view Cassy as modeling a different—performative—way to engage language and bring about social change. As readers, we eavesdrop on Cassy’s instructive use of effective assaultive language. By saving her from an immediate beating, such belligerent language supplants a maternal, gently suasive, tutelary voice. Cassy’s utterance to Sambo retains Stowe’s tried and true method of dialogic learning as Cassy teaches readers that performative utterances (although not necessarily of vodun hexes) can stave off a beating and garner respect from men and sympathy from women readers.

Yet Cassy’s utterance also greatly revises Stowe’s previous modeling of sympathetic identification because the performative nature of Cassy’s language relies on its assaultive, not suasive, force. Cassy’s threat to “say the word” removes readers from the paradigm of moral conversion because, as Eve Allegra Raimon has written, “Cassy’s capacity for violence and incendiary speech places her outside conventional literary parameters” (111). Cassy does not use language to ask Sambo to “[s]ee . . . to [his] sympathies” or to create an “atmosphere of sympathetic influence,” as Stowe does in her concluding chapter (385). Rather, Cassy meets Sambo’s whip with something equally brutalizing: assaultive language with injurious, not suasive, powers. Since this scene is the first time we meet Cassy, her “resistant orality” (a term coined by Harryette Mullen and cited in Raimon 111) creates a hitherto unmatched portrayal of black female subjectivity. Sambo recognizes the violence inherent in Cassy’s speech and lowers his whip.

George Shelby also makes clear the violence inherent in certain verbal utterances at the end of the novel. For example, the word “nigger” proves so assaultive that it demands a similar response. When George threatens to have Legree charged with the murder of Tom, Legree sneers that no witnesses exist since blacks cannot testify against whites. Legree scorns, “After all, what a fuss, for a dead nigger!” The next sentence reads, “The word was as a spark to a powder magazine. Prudence was never a cardinal virtue of the Kentucky boy. George turned, and, with one indignant blow, knocked Legree flat upon his face” (364). Although the epithet is not hurled against George himself, he viscerally feels the punch of the hate speech and returns the attack. Jonathan Arac comments

on this scene, claiming, “[A] major point of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been to bring good-hearted white folks to realize that ‘nigger’ is a fighting word” (29).

Cassy’s assaultive language presents a dilemma. On the one hand, Stowe’s mid-nineteenth-century readers should no longer feel a sentimental attachment to Cassy as she demonstrates volatile powers alien to the middle-class white reader. White women in particular—taught to be the angel of the house, inculcated with the tenets of true womanhood, and raised to be the calm, moral center of domestic life—would have great difficulty accessing Cassy’s caustic, seditious speech. Sympathetic identification with Cassy should, at this point, fail.

On the other hand, the aggression of a black woman’s actions could be enjoyed as a fantasy for white women, including Stowe herself, who lacked social enfranchisement to hold such supremacy or command. Hochman argues,

Images of slave experience invited readers to identify with modes of behavior that were beyond the pale of white middle-class life, or at least prescriptions for it. The pleasure derived from such identifications would necessarily be multiple and complex; but *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* encouraged white mothers to try *circuiting* themselves through black ones in order to imagine states of feeling systematically forbidden to them. (154; emphasis added)

Whites “circuiting” themselves through blacks constitutes a type of blackface enjoyment. By speaking through Cassy, Stowe pleasurablely experiences the assaultive nature of speech. Indeed, Stowe gains authority for her gender in a way she never directly claims through her white characters. Sarah Meer argues that “the minstrel elements of Stowe’s book may have facilitated its rereading and rewriting by drawing on the inherent instabilities and ambivalences in the racial politics of blackface” (9). In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Cassy’s performativity contributes to this aura of unstable racial politics by inviting readers at once to sympathize sentimentally with the iconic, submissive, whip-threatened slave and to thrill to the violence of resistant verbal action safely attributed to a black person.

Via Cassy, Stowe presents a different use of speech to bring about social change. This distinction matters because Stowe uses Cassy to model the success of assaultive language, not of suasive sentimentality. The emphasis on matrifocal sympathetic conversion as an abolitionist tool is undermined in this scene as readers see the benefit of using speech performatively as an action rather than as description. Cassy’s words are more than a mere expression of anger. Because her utterance is itself an act of violence, she does not just express anger—her words have a force that can be understood as action. In this scene, Cassy’s language does not merely convey emotion; it is an action with violent results.⁸

Cassy's performative utterance in this scene encapsulates in miniature Stowe's larger challenge of a woman assuming a tone of power and consequence in a culture that ennobled a man's sermonic voice. As a woman, Stowe was not enfranchised to give moral instruction to men; according to Dawn Coleman, the writer George Frederick Holmes even took Stowe to task for violating scripture by not remaining silent and for usurping authority by attempting to teach men (265). From her minister father, Stowe acquired an appreciation of the way that sensational rhetoric bullied parishioners to conversion and the way that language, however flexible or fictional, could be used to bring about truths. Yet she struggled with a woman's lack of cultural permission similarly to arouse listeners with exhortations. As Robyn R. Warhol recognizes, through her maternal, sentimental language in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe found a way to transform "a masculine means of enforcing spiritual presence into a feminine strategy for evoking presence in fiction" (108). Cassy's threat shows us that by granting verbal power to a doubly disenfranchised human—a woman and a slave—Stowe uses language both to evoke a feminine presence of sentiment with which readers identify and sympathize and to assume the fiery, compelling challenge akin to that of a masculine minister.

Stowe's oscillation between sentimental maternal suasion and vitriolic performative speech, so succinctly encapsulated in Cassy, underscores the author's ambivalence about the role of the speaking woman. On the one hand, Stowe abided by the nineteenth-century convention of the demure woman: Even when she toured Europe in the 1850s, she did not speak before mixed crowds (Coleman 289). Furthermore, Stowe knew that abolitionist rhetoric represented a challenge to the prevailing authorities. According to Michael T. Gilmore, "Measures, often violent, to censor abolitionist agitation as seditious and 'incendiary' (the preferred adjective) brought home the potentially lethal energy of words to all the antebellum authors, including those, like Hawthorne, who were themselves alarmed by the threat that anti-slavery oratory posed to the Union" (59). But by later claiming that God wrote the novel, Stowe cannily distanced herself from masculine (especially her father's) disapproval of her outspoken ideas.⁹

Clearly Stowe claims a consequential, influential voice in her novel: The immediacy of her characters' heartfelt situations and the beseeching prayers of the narrator elicit readers' tears. Much has been written about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an extended sermon.¹⁰ As Coleman points out, adopting sermonic rhetoric proved to be a useful strategy for Stowe because "[p]reaching was the voice of ultimate conviction in the antebellum United States—a nexus of oratorical style, biblical language, and personal presence that, sanctified by the rituals of the Protestant worship service, had tremendous potential to effect

individual and social transformation” (266). Since preaching was forbidden for respectable middle-class white women, and particularly was opposed by Lyman Beecher, Stowe could safely arouse the public to action in the guise of a pressing, imploring, motherly narrator. Rather than alarming a congregation from a pulpit, Stowe proffered her radical political vision of cross-racial sympathy and abolition to her readers within the normative constraints of domestic sentimentality.

Yet readers can also detect Stowe’s ambivalence about empowered women’s speech by reading Cassy’s scene in light of what one could argue are the two different endings of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—the published novel’s ending versus the serialized form’s ending. The book version ends with a fire-and-brimstone vision of what James Baldwin has identified as “theological terror, the terror of damnation” (498). Stowe pulls out all the big guns of a frightful sermon: She writes of a “*day of vengeance*,” reveals how the “day shall burn as an oven” (adapting a quotation from Malachi 4.1), warns of “the wrath of Almighty God,” and calls for “repentance, justice and mercy” (388). The book ends on more of a doom-and-gloom note than many nineteenth-century preachers dared to intone in their sermons, which, according to Coleman, often ended with some sort of uplifting, hopeful message (277).

For a woman with deep political and religious convictions who was disenfranchised from ascending her own pulpit, this mighty ending likely proved deeply satisfactory and cathartic, similar to the satisfaction Stowe could take in vicariously speaking with force through Cassy. Both Stowe’s concluding sermon and her slave-mother character offered the author the ventriloquist’s pleasure of assuming a voice she dared not claim for herself. It was much safer to distance herself from an incendiary message by wearing the mask of a preacher or a sassy slave. But the book’s sermonic ending differs from the ending readers encountered in the serialized version. Readers who followed Stowe’s novel in the *National Era* found in the final installment on 1 April 1852 the following afterword:

The “Author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin” must now take leave of a wide circle of friends, whose faces she has never seen, but whose sympathies, coming to her from afar, have stimulated and cheered her in her work.

The thought of the pleasant family circles that she has been meeting in spirit weekly has been a constant refreshment to her, and she cannot leave them without a farewell.

In particular, the dear little children who have followed her story have her warmest love. Dear children, you will one day be men and women; and she hopes that you will learn from this story always to remember and pity the poor and

oppressed, and, when you grow up, show your pity by doing all you can for them. Never, if you can help it, let a colored child be shut out of school, or treated with neglect and contempt, because of his color. Remember the sweet example of little Eva, and try to feel the same regard for all that she did; and then, when you grow up, we hope that the foolish and unchristian prejudice against people, merely on account of their complexion, will be done away with.

Farewell, dear children, till we meet again. (53)

The tone of this afterword seems to recant the wrathful, near-apocalyptic ending of the book by replacing it with a kind, sedate, moral, affectionate, (grand) motherly one. Gone are the hellish, punishing images; instead, readers find a “wide circle of friends,” “dear little children,” “pity,” and a call to remember Eva’s “sweet example” and thereby avoid prejudicial judgment. This final installment uses language to create a mutually supportive sphere of warmth and to bind readers and writer conversationally together in a sentimental, domestic, instructive mission. How could these two widely divergent endings have flowed from the same pen?

I suggest that Stowe’s wrestling with the tension between tone and function of language in these two endings parallels her struggle with Cassy’s use of language to Sambo. In all cases, Stowe must decide how a woman speaks: Can she use forceful, compelling language to enact social change (as in the masculine sermonic rhetoric of the book version and Cassy’s conjuring performative speech) or must she demur to the authorities (as in the patriarchal norms of feminine decorum in the serialized ending and the suasive sentiment modeled by Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird, Rachel Halliday, Eva, Tom, Eliza, and others)? By penning two distinct endings to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe flexed her ministerial muscle in the book version but then recomposed her proper voice of a good housewife and mother a week later for the *National Era*. Similarly, through Cassy’s performative utterance, Stowe departs from women’s assigned, appropriate voice and instead co-opts men’s access to controlling speech. Cassy’s performative speech diminishes her male challenger and forces him to back down and assent to her dominance. Yet this model of women’s speech by no means prevails in the novel, and by the story’s end Cassy’s reunion with her long-lost children converts her to acquiescing mother and Christian. In Cassy and in the alternative endings, Stowe experiments with women’s powerful speech but then safely frames it within normative domesticity.

Stowe’s awareness of how to do things forcefully with words becomes transmuted in an interesting way in the hands of African American dramatist Robert Alexander in his 1991 play *I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in which the characters of Stowe’s novel put Stowe on trial for

creating damaging racist stereotypes. These “literary refugees,” as Samuel Otter calls them, continue the long tradition of African American rejoinders to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (16).¹¹ I am most interested in Alexander’s reimagining of Cassy’s words when she is threatened with an attack. He recasts the scene slightly by having Simon Legree, not Sambo, hostilely confront Cassy. Tired of seeing Tom being brutalized by their master, Cassy pulls a gun on Legree, who sneers at her, “Nigger, you wouldn’t dare.” Upon hearing the epithet “Nigger,” Cassy replies, “I’m tired of hearing that word.” The stage directions read, “(She blows him away.)” When Alexander’s character Harriet protests, “This is not the ending I wrote!” Cassy interjects, “You wrote every word of the rage that’s in me! You just didn’t give me a gun” (88).

I am interested in Cassy’s explosive, trigger-pulling response to Legree’s insult. I would argue that, when read against Stowe’s original version, Alexander’s Cassy, who responds by pulling the trigger, performatively speaks. Legree’s utterance, “Nigger,” exemplifies illocutionary hate speech because, as Judith Butler argues, a fighting word such as “nigger” “constitutes its addressee at the moment of its utterance; it does not describe an injury or produce one as a consequence; it is, in the very speaking of such speech, the performance of the injury itself, where the injury is understood as social subordination” (18). Butler also asks, “What kind of power is *attributed to* speech such that speech is figured as having the power to constitute the subject with such success?” Discussing Mari Matsuda’s theories of hate speech, Butler writes, “[A] social structure is enunciated at the moment of the hateful utterance; hate speech reinvoles the position of dominance, and reconsolidates it at the moment of utterance” (19). In this light, Legree’s racial slur stands as a hateful act of asserting a social structure of dominance that likewise produces an injury. The character Legree relies on the racial epithet to be “coded” (in Derrida’s sense, as mentioned above) in order to “constitute a subject [here, Cassy] through discursive means” (Butler 19). Without its loaded, painful history from which to cite, the epithet “nigger” would fail to perform felicitously. Legree wounds Cassy with words; his words enact an injury through their performative force.

In Alexander’s play, the character of Cassy does not threaten to perform an illocutionary speech act that will cause injury. She does not threaten to “say the word,” as she does in Stowe’s version. Instead, she “speaks” in a lethal way: She shoots a gun. Nor does the character Harriet recognize the ending of her own play. However, Cassy recognizes the potential of her violence that perhaps Harriet fails to see. In other words, Cassy believes her words in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to be the result of rage as explosive as a gun; thus, her appropriate and equivalent response to “Nigger” is to shoot. She uses shooting as a figure for speech; the performativity of the speaking gun injures Legree just as “Nigger!” performs an act of violence.

In *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*, the playwright does not speak in blackface, as one could accuse Stowe of doing via Cassy or other black characters. Alexander recasts Topsy as a streetwise, fast-talking hip hop rapper. Not a minstrel performer, she directly addresses whites' fears. She sasses, "I oughta fuck you up! I see the way you look at me when I get on the bus. . . . [Y]ou sit there, scared" (89). While not threatening to assault whites, Alexander's Topsy reverses the black-face tradition: Rather than white performers claiming to speak for blacks, this scene shows a black character giving voice to whites, in this case articulating whites' secret fears of black violence.

This returns us to Cassy's threat to the slave driver to "say the word." Although performative speech theory was not theorized or codified until the twentieth century, Stowe nonetheless demonstrates an awareness of the power of an utterance to be an action with assaultive force. As the daughter and sister of preachers known for their roiling, mordant sermonizing style, Stowe grew up aware of the power of "the word"—whether of God or of His earthly intermediaries—to strike fear in the hearts of believers. She understood that sympathetic identification moves readers to tears or stirs their emotions such that, as Stowe writes in the final chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "they feel right. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race" (385). In this last chapter, Stowe mightily summarizes what she has been advocating all along: Domestic sentimentality and moral Christian feeling, rather than violence, should powerfully alter public judgment about slavery. Stowe, like other sentimental writers, believed that words could create an "atmosphere of sympathetic influence" sufficient enough to sway morality and peacefully instigate social change.

Stowe therefore simultaneously advocates the power of words to encourage readers to "feel right" against the institution of slavery yet acknowledges that, because actions sometimes speak louder than words, performative speech may demonstrate more potent linguistic agency than sentimentalism and sympathetic identification. Cassy's brief scene exemplifies a larger linguistic dilemma: Readers see that Stowe's committed reliance on women's suasive sentimentality quavers when she introduces the efficacy of assaultive language. By "circuiting" through a black woman's "unruly tongue," white middle-class readers momentarily experience the thrill of the violent potential in language (Cutter). Similarly, by "circuiting" through a pulpit minister's voice in the book form of the novel, Stowe and her women readers vicariously enjoy preaching a message of moral and social reform in a powerful, hounding voice. Performatively, Cassy's threat to Sambo in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* equals a speaking gun or the force of George Shelby's indignant fist.

NOTES

For their invaluable help, I am grateful to Cindy Hamilton, Barbara Hochman, Sarah Robbins, Katherine Kish Sklar, Glenn Starkman, and the anonymous readers for *Legacy*.

1. For further discussion of pictorial representations of slavery and the performance of subjection, see the first chapter of Wood, as well as the introduction to Hartman.

2. In *Women and Sisters*, Yellin notes, “Hundreds of images dramatizing the violence related to the institution of slavery—the separation of families, the seizing, branding, selling, and torturing of men, women, and children—appeared in broadsides, newspapers, and books” (5). Her study brilliantly focuses on one image of a slave woman in particular: “Black, half nude, chained, kneeling in supplication—even now she retains her power” (3). Wood compellingly documents the importance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to nineteenth-century popular visualizations of slavery (see chapter 1).

3. For my critical understanding of sentimentalism, I am drawing upon the work of scholars such as Brown, Hender, Merish, Noble, and Wardley. In addition, the way I am discussing sentimentalism owes much to Tompkins and to Sánchez-Eppler.

4. Since the word “voodoo” is closely associated with Anglo-American ideas of black magic, many scholars prefer other orthographies, such as vodun, vodou, Vaudoux, vadoun, and vodoum. These many terms, both in Haitian Creole and in French spelling, refer to Haitian belief systems. See Dayan 34n1.

5. I am indebted to Barbara Hochman for discussing this point with me.

6. Sorisio warns that this sentimental assumption can run into trouble when the buying and selling of slaves’ fictional representations echoes their physical bodies being marketed, exploited, and sold.

7. Wolstenholme further discusses Eva’s curl of hair as a “fetishized object”: Although it “seems to carry within it its own power, such power manifests itself only as the object is read; and the object might instead be misread” (90).

8. Grasso intelligently discusses women writers’ late-nineteenth-century move toward expressing anger. She writes,

[T]he woman writer’s frustrated artistry is depicted with controlled yet seething rage. The change is significant, for the more overt expression of anger about the writing woman’s status signals a paradigmatic shift in women’s imaginative visions. Beginning in the post-bellum period, power struggles between men and women are no longer ameliorated by forgiveness or the belief in the innate goodness of the human heart; arrogant, sadistic, atheistic men are no longer converted through the goodness, patience, and humility of charitable women; there is no longer sustaining hope in a female community organized around an ethos of nurture and care; and there is no longer redemptive power in women’s suffering and sacrificing of self. Instead, Freeman and Woolson decry the waste of the sacrificed female self; they underscore the deadly effects man-made institutions and aesthetic standards

have had on the writing woman's sense of self and literary productivity. And they obviously want revenge; the very act of telling the woman's story guarantees that retribution will be done. The culprits are identified; blame is apportioned; and in the end, even though the writing woman's life and work are lost, her dignity remains intact. In this way Freeman and Woolson ennoble their own position as women writers, for their failures and achievements become part of a much larger legacy of thwarted lives, mighty hungers, and unfinished works. (98–99)

Grasso's ideas are important when considering assaultive language. My essay differs in that, while Grasso discusses anger as emotion, I am discussing language as action—an action of violence.

9. See Gossett for a discussion of Stowe's claim to divine inspiration (93–97).

10. See especially Warhol, Douglas, and Tompkins.

11. African American literary rejoinders to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* include such early examples as Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, Wilson's *Our Nig*, and Delaney's *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, as well as such recent works as Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Alexander's play here discussed.

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