Elaine Scarry has argued influentially that literary imagination is, ultimately, incapable of adequately conveying the pain and suffering of others in ways that make these transformatively effective, or even ultimately communicable. Efforts to appropriate pain and suffering for purposes of representation unavoidably serve the interests and purposes of those who construct and forward the respective representations. In short, any such representation will be suffused with political and ethical implications that are foreign to the pain itself. This ultimate unrepresentability of the pain and suffering of others appears to radically diverge with—if not obstruct—some of the most promising vistas for cultivating sustainable conditions of peace and justice in the midst of protracted conflict. “Transcending violence is forged by the capacity to generate, mobilize, and build the moral imagination,” writes peacebuilder John Paul Lederach in his 2005 book The Moral Imagination. Lederach unpacks this claim, writing:

Stated simply, the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.¹

The conception of literary imagination (imaginatively encountering others through forms of literary representation), and its centrality
to the creative act of seeing and understanding oneself as caught up with and akin to others, presents one point at which the literature on peacebuilding most directly intersects with the central claims of Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985).

On one hand, Scarry’s account of the unrepresentability of the suffering of others means that the imaginative act at the heart of representing others in pain is likely to be self-deceiving (i.e., subject to purposes and implications unintended and/or unrecognized by the imaginer or peacebuilder). Indeed, at first blush, this account of the unrepresentability appears to subvert the possibility of peacebuilding through the imaginative construction of relational action.

At the same time, in what is one of the most underexplored—and yet, potentially provocative—moments in *The Body in Pain*, Scarry holds open a slim possibility for exceptional instances in which works of literary imagination may successfully evoke imagination that spurs critical reflection and action in the interests of pursuing justice and building peace. Any such act must persistently turn back upon itself in an effort to “expose and make impossible” the dangers that the imaginative practices of representation will suffer from “appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power.”

This slender possibility presents a point at which Scarry’s work explicitly opens out onto significantly transformative and constructive avenues into peace and justice studies. This article attempts to expand upon this element in Scarry’s work, attending specifically to how the possibility for action-inspiring literary imagination might converse with peace studies.

As Scarry describes it, imagination is marked by a self-revising capacity. Imagination might not merely alter conceptions of the world or the human being by way of imagining other persons. Imagination might “alter the power of alteration itself”—it might enrich and change the very processes by which the work of imaginative creation occurs. This insight permits the kind of self-revising expansion upon Scarry’s own account of literary imagining that I attempt in this essay. Without sustained sociotheoretical analysis, literary imagination is at risk of remaining triflingly reformist, glibly optimistic, literary wishful thinking, or voyeurism. My aim is to critically refine and perhaps expand the “very small category” of effective literary imagining that Scarry’s account permits by integrating into it the analysis conducted through lenses of structural and
cultural violence as these have emerged in peace studies since the 1960s.

Peace studies scholars developed the analytical lenses of structural and cultural violence in response to the need to detect, illuminate, and critically intervene in forms of violence that are not intentional and, in some cases, not deadly. In some of the earliest formulations in peace research, Johan Galtung came to describe structural violence as anonymous and/or unintended “patterned relationships among components of a social system” in and through which “individuals may do enormous amounts of harm to other human beings without ever intending to do so, just performing their regular duties as a job defined in the structure ... [or] as a process, working slowly in the way misery in general, and hunger in particular, erode and finally kill human beings.” He elsewhere explained,

Thus, when one person beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence. Correspondingly, in a society where life expectancy is twice as high in the upper class as in the lower classes, violence is exercised even if there are not concrete actors one can point to directly attacking others, as when one person kills another.4

So formulated, structural violence is an analytical lens that aims to detect and assess violence that does not manifest itself as an agent-originating, intentional, objective-directed form of violence in ways that explicit or “direct” violence does.

Structural violence does not only address physical forms of deprivation of basic needs (e.g., the visible effects of poverty, inequality, and denial of basic rights). It also illuminates violence “that works on the soul.” “A violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit,” Galtung explained. It does this, for example, through processes by which those who are victimized by certain forms of direct and structural violence themselves internalize these processes of subjugation psychically, spiritually, emotionally in ways that make the socially projected, and perhaps legally reinforced, stigmatization that they suffer seem and feel inescapable or necessary. This may manifest in forms of self-abnegation, inferiority, or an experience of being unsafe, at risk or endangered due to the person’s (or group’s) pariah status.
Galtung developed the concept of “cultural violence” to conceptualize, identify, and counter cultural processes, understandings, and artifacts—literary, religious, linguistic, scientific, and so forth—that obscure, normalize, justify structural and/or direct violence to make ... direct and structural forms of violence look and feel right, or “at least not wrong.” Integrating these analytical lenses into instances of the literary representation of suffering may afford the capacity to expand the admittedly very small possibility that Scarry permits for literary imagining to adequately inspire empathetic social action. The result is that the creative, imaginative act which Lederach locates at the heart of peacebuilding, and the possibility that Scarry holds out for “making oneself available to others” and for “making the world” through imagination, may be brought into a mutually instructive encounter—if not fully reconciled—in the terms of peacebuilding. In order to demonstrate this, I examine Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) as an example that Scarry identifies as an “exceptional instance” of effective literary imaging. I explicate the ways that Stowe’s novel, in effect, integrates the power of literary imagination with analysis of structural and cultural violence (as peace studies scholars much later developed these), and in a way that at least challenges, and may overcome, the strict limitations that Scarry ascribes to literary imagination.

FOR AND AGAINST IMAGINING OTHER PERSONS

“This book is about the way other persons become visible to us, or cease to be visible to us,” Scarry concludes in her introduction to The Body in Pain. And yet, given her characterization of extreme pain, such a task of “making visible” appears to present itself as impossible. “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it,” she informs us, “bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.” In defying language, pain similarly defies representation, artistic or otherwise.

As Scarry sees it, a central problem in conveying the pain of others is that modes of representation—play or story—present a “closed system.” The unifying plot action of a story or play cannot be reversed or altered. Rather, the audience must endure the plot passively, or are at best confined to mentally reversing it (testing it counterfactually). While there are literary works which aim to be open-
ended in the sense that they “bring about actual social action,” or, in effect, lead their audience into outward moving action, the category of such works, Scarry contends, is exceedingly small.

Is it possible for literary imagination to reach beyond the “closed system” of a plot or story in ways that Scarry passes over? For instance, might literary renderings of others’ suffering have the capacity to find a pathway around or through the reasoned defenses and prejudicial blinders that render one oblivious to, and unknowingly indifferent toward that suffering? Imaginative creation is, in Scarry’s terms, the work of world making. In this task, one may take a smaller measure of pain and draw upon it in order to move outward “into the world that is the opposite of pain’s contractive potential.” Here, imagination becomes an act of work in which pain is, in effect, transformed into its opposite.

Scarry’s apparent categorical denial of pain’s representability contains a subtle paradox. The torturer uses pain to create. This insidious use of power strives to produce the fiction of absolute power (typically, of the regime sponsoring the torture). And while this fiction is the torturer’s “deconstruction of creation,” it is also an act of fiction in the original sense of fictio—“something made.” In inverse relation to the torturer, Scarry explains, “the human being who creates on behalf of the pain in her own body may remake herself to be one who creates on behalf of the pain originating in another’s body.” It would seem that this potential of creation holds open the possibility of making visible—to some degree imaginable—the pain of others. This possibility is opened only by a state that is as anomalous as pain—the imagination.

As I am articulating it for the purposes of peacebuilding, the broader objective in literary imagination is to cultivate a gradual shift of orientation in individual and culturally articulated intuitions and background understandings from which recognition of others, empathy for others’ suffering, responsive action, and thus change may ensue. Such shifts occur by cultivating capacities to see and feel differently—to engage imaginatively with the experiences of another—coming gradually to the capacity to empathize with someone previously perceived to be radically different, repellent, or simply negligible. For these purposes, literary imagining aims over time to alter and cultivate “the habit structure of everyday perception.” It is important to keep in mind that this is not to propose a fusion of the experiences of different persons, nor striving to imagine oneself as another or as
“standing in another’s shoes.” It gestures toward making oneself vulnerable to, and thus being affected by, others’ experiences.14

Sentimental narratives may evoke empathy and compassion. Indeed, Scarry herself points to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and how it profoundly altered the popular imagination of the mid-nineteenth-century United States by gradually altering the widely shared normative attitudes about the suffering of black slaves in particular. Stowe’s novel exemplifies the “very small category” of literary imagination that might afford the openness and agency for adequately imagining the pain of others.15 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Scarry acknowledges, “made blacks—the weight, solidity, injurability of their personhood—imaginable to the white population in the pre–Civil War United States.”16

The sentimental impact of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the second-best-selling book of the nineteenth-century United States (after the Bible17), contributed to the gradual, and largely imaginative, work of installing “new habits of moral perception,” and these specifically with respect to the “human representability” of black people in America at that time. Even so, Scarry argues, even the best examples of literary imagination for representing, illuminating, and altering the causes and conditions of the suffering of others run up against strict limits. The human capacity to imagine others pales in comparison with human capacities to injure others.18 Indeed, imagination of another’s suffering will itself perpetrate a form of injury. The most well-meant imagining of another’s suffering will always be somehow narcissistically inflected. It will remain the suffering of another as imagined by the imaginer. With this point, Scarry turns “from daydreaming to constitution making.”19

Relying upon moral imagination to reframe oppositional relations—to alter and perhaps generate new possibilities of recognizing the “others” in question—cannot hope to be binding unless those altered conceptions come to be grounded in legal and constitutional stipulations. Thus Scarry counters, “If the U.S. Constitution lacked the Reconstruction Amendments (prohibiting servitude; ensuring due process across race and religion; prohibiting racial restrictions on voting) no daily rereading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by the United States population ... could in [itself] have the smallest healing power.”20 In other words, any effort to cultivate capacities to imagine the suffering of others—however effective and well meaning—must be backed up by enforceable legal provisions in order to have any real impact. Moreover, fashioning enforceable laws for such purposes is too large for imagination. In con-
trast to imagining particular others, Scarry proposes *dis-imagining oneself*. This will facilitate “statistical compassion”—compassion for the masses of distant, nameless, faceless others. Rather than trying to make one’s knowledge of others as weighty and robust as one’s knowledge of oneself, the point is to “make one ignorant about oneself and therefore as weightless as all the others.” Making oneself “featureless” as a starting point for legislative efforts is the surest way to maximize conditions of equality. This becomes possible, she writes,

> Not by giving the millions of other people an imaginative weight equal to one’s own—a staggering mental labor—but by the much more efficient opposite strategy, the strategy of simply erasing for a moment one’s own dense array of attributes. By becoming featureless, by having a weightlessness, a two-dimensionality, a dryness every bit as “impoverished” as the imagined other, the condition of equality is achieved. ... One subtraction therefore has the same effect as a hundred thousand additions.21

With this, Scarry appeals to John Rawls’s “veil of ignorance” as the kind of “imaginative act” which has the power of including the perspective of all others equally.22 This “imaginative exercise” purports to take into consideration every perspective by taking up a perspective of no one in particular.

Scarry offers a formidable basis for pessimism about the possibility of ever adequately grasping the suffering of others through literary imagining. And, to be sure, the kind of formal legal provisions that Scarry advocates are indispensable. While she does not portray the relation of imagination to constitutionalism as mutually exclusive in an ironclad fashion, her allowance of the impact of imagination as powerful cultural work remains as minimized as her appeal to the default power of constitution making from behind Rawls’s veil is vast. Her quick turn to “dis-imagining” oneself behind the “veil of ignorance” as an “imaginative act” that therapeutically incorporates all perspectives in an instant neglects the painstaking cultural work—the processes of altering peoples’ habits of perception and understanding, of cultivating capacities for empathy, of adjusting normative attitudes by which relationality becomes recognized, and of spurring responsive action. Might literary imagining be enriched and reconceptualized in ways that could overcome the weaknesses in evidence here?
The seemingly self-evident hardness of legal facts, once they have been established, frequently invites forgetting of the difficulty and extensiveness of the cultural work upon which those legal changes were predicated. Laws neither articulate nor apply themselves, and social and political change is not affected by the addition of a few new laws to a society’s law books. Insofar as formal legal changes aimed to, in effect, realign the boundary between “person” and “thing” (as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did imaginatively)—and to bring about this realignment in the workaday realities and experiences of everyday life—such efforts will depend upon (and, the case of U.S. chattel slavery did, in fact, depend upon) extensive cultural work (in additional to legal and, of course, military work). In hindsight, the transformation by which a piece of property comes to be recognized as a person to whom its former “owner” is now morally and legally accountable presents itself as an alteration as easy as changing a few laws in the law books. Here Philip Fisher countervails the gravitational pull of Scarry’s argument above, writing,

The moral and perceptual change that alone could make effective a formal change had to be done by means of moral and perceptual practice, which includes repetition and even memorization. Where culture installs new habits and moral perceptions, such as the recognition that a child is a person, a black is a person, it accomplishes, as a last step, the forgetting of its own strenuous work so that what are newly learned habits are only remembered as facts.23

Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a particularly instructive case to explore in this regard. This is not only because of the role that it played in consolidating the abolitionist movement, but, more important, because of the way it drew mass readership in support of that movement that had been previously unaligned with abolitionism. It did this precisely through its imaginative and sentimental construction of the suffering and pain of black slaves. Furthermore, after nearly a century of being co-opted for purposes of minstrelsy and dismissed by twentieth-century critics and activists as sentimental propaganda, this text reemerged among feminist literary thinkers as an exemplar of the political capability, and transformative potential, through the sentimental power of literature to spark empathetic imagining in readers. Interestingly, on these later readings, the novel could be effective because its
sentimentalism and effort to convert its readers was, in effect, tempered with elements of social analysis. In an effort to develop and further expand upon the example of adequate literary imagining that Scarry gives us, I take up the case of controversies surrounding Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and place them into conversation with the peace studies categories of structural and cultural violence.

“HALFWAY BETWEEN SERMON AND SOCIAL THEORY”: THE CASE OF *UNCLE TOM’S CABIN*

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a great book, not because it is a great novel, but because it is a great revival sermon, aimed directly at the conversion of its hearers,” Ann Douglas has argued.24 Stowe’s novel appeared in the immediate shadow of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a law which compelled the apprehension and return of any suspected runaway slave, even throughout free states. Stowe’s book fired imagination and inspired empathy among noncommittal northern whites who previously found it either unthinkable, or trifling, to imagine the suffering of a slave. It sparked the imagination of fellow writers, social critics, and activists, becoming formative and inspirational for Frederick Douglass, whose abolitionist newspaper reviewed and discussed it on numerous occasions, as well as for Tolstoy, Dickens, Henry James, and W.E.B. Dubois. And yet, to characterize Stowe’s novel as exemplifying a reframing enactment through literary imagination only through the power of its sermonic expressiveness—its experiential portraiture aiming to elicit emotive responses to the suffering of slaves—is to grasp but a portion of its force at that time. This most assuredly sets it up for deep failure.

Both the artistic merits and the character of the practical impact of Stowe’s novel were contested at the time it first appeared. Contemporary critics and historians continue to wrestle with these dimensions of the novel. James Baldwin derided the novel as “sentimentalist propaganda” that exemplified the trite romanticism of much nineteenth-century literary culture. He characterized Stowe as “an impassioned pamphleteer.”25 More important, Baldwin held up *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as an exemplar of a form of “protest novel” which purported to dissolve master–slave domination through equality between whites and blacks.26 Yet this novel and others like it, he charged, attempted this without any substantial challenge or transformation of the underlying culture and social system, and the basic categories of personhood they
held in place. The result, Baldwin declared, was puerile, cosmetic
equality that left the underlying structures of domination—and thus,
the sources of black suffering—fully intact. Stowe’s novel promoted
sentimental “do-gooder-ism” that sought to persuade white people to,
in effect, “be nice to negroes” at the same time that it inspired gratify-
ing pangs of virtue in its white readers for having been willing to titil-
late themselves with the subject matter in the first place.

While his severe admonitions against reform-minded “protest” lit-
erature pertain today, Baldwin brushes up against a hasty dismissal of
Stowe’s novel that passed over the instructive critical potential that
the novel contains. In fact, upon closer inspection, Uncle Tom’s Cabin
can be read as integrating sermonic imaginative expressiveness which
illuminates and inspires response to others’ suffering (a feature that
Baldwin so despised), while also attending to—and indicting—the
structural and cultural causes and conditions of the suffering and pain
it presents. It is the paradoxical restraint—and, in some ways, even
suggestiveness—of Stowe’s uses of melodrama, interwoven with her
highly unconventional uses of domestic settings and devices to place
suffering and injustice on display, that have tempted some of its critics
and readers to an overly hasty dismissal.27

The sentimental novel is not so much a great revival sermon as a
distinctive “political enterprise,” Jane Tompkins has argued, an enter-
prise that stands “halfway between sermon and social theory.” On
one hand, it renders analysis of the values of its time in the ways that
it places those values on display. At the same time, in its attempt to
critically alter and shape those values it stands between sermon and
social theory.28 It is an open-ended imaginative enterprise that seeks
to involve its readers in (and inspire active response to) the world with
which it interweaves, rather than the kind of “closed system” that
Scarry takes typical literary representation to be. To grasp the com-
plex intervention in so positioning the novel is to grasp an example
that demonstrates how literary imagination needs to be supplemented
by elements of self-reflexive sociotheoretical analysis in order to avoid
the temptations of a glib and diluted account of literary imagination
and its power to inspire change.

In this case, the role that lenses of structural and cultural violence
might play in literary imagining has, in effect, been cast into relief by
contrasting the imaginative power of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and a much
more broadly heralded, canonical portrayal of the evils of slavery in
the United States, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
In fact, the novelist and critic Jane Smiley powerfully dissents against a consensus that counts *Huckleberry Finn* as the paradigmatic American literary representation of a white person gradually awakening to the wretchedness, suffering, and humanity of a black slave in the United States, thereby humanizing black people in the imaginations of white Americans. Smiley highlights several dangers intrinsic to literary imagining as a practice of cultivating the capacity to understand and empathize with others’ suffering when the role of structural relations, and their support by cultural manifestations, passes over-looked. Smiley echoes Scarry’s misgivings about the limits of literary imaginings, but in order to press beyond those limitations.

Specifically, Smiley answers the widely held perception that the relationship that emerges between *Huckleberry Finn*’s white, young man protagonist, Huck Finn, and Jim, his runaway slave companion, exemplifies the power of the literary imagination to gradually cultivate feeling for those perceived to be intrinsically “other.” Smiley counters: Twain thinks that Huck’s affection is a good enough reward for Jim. The sort of meretricious critical reasoning that has raised Huck’s paltry good intentions to a “strategy of subversion” (David L. Smith) and a “convincing indictment of slavery” ([T.S.] Eliot) precisely mirrors the same sort of meretricious reasoning that white people use to convince themselves that they are not “racist.” If Huck *feels* positive toward Jim, and *loves* him, and thinks of him as a man, then that’s enough. He doesn’t actually have to act in accordance with his feelings. White Americans always think racism is a feeling, and they reject it or they embrace it. To most Americans, it seems more honorable and nicer to reject it, so they do, but they almost invariably fail to understand that how they *feel* means very little to black Americans, who understand racism as a way of structuring American culture, American politics, and the American economy.29

Smiley’s description here pinpoints numerous potential pitfalls of literary imagining in its sentimental mode in a way that Scarry would affirm. Namely, if imagination humanizes by inspiring fellow feeling—even affection—by conveying the suffering of others, but is not followed by action in the interest of those reimagined and empathized with, then the relationality it engenders remains cosmetic—little more than “being nice” in refusing explicitly racist feelings. And yet, even
the recognition of the mutually shared webs of relationship, accentuated by now “acting in the interests of his humanity,” is not, in itself, a sufficient response (though the above passage from Smiley might suggest as much initially).

On one hand, interrelatedness that takes the forms of empathetic recognition of others’ suffering, and ensuing fellow feeling, all too easily goes hand in hand with inaction and self-satisfied passivity (Smiley’s criticism). At the same time, even in acting in what one may genuinely take to be the interest of one’s fellows, the actor can remain oblivious to the ways that the violence believed to be fought against, perhaps overcome, may in fact layer itself inconspicuously and insidiously into social, political, and economic structures and imbue cultural understandings in which the actor is also implicated. Acting in response to the suffering of others in ways that leaves the “reimagined” others passive or disempowered—without voice, power, and agency in the decisions and actions that affect them—becomes paternalism masked by self-satisfying benevolence. Addressing the sources of suffering only at the level of symptoms leaves the cultural, economic, and political root systems of the complex problem in place.

Smiley’s criticism is not a simple wish for Huck to have been a character who takes action, and to have acted with righteous certainty and conviction—like the radical action of a John Brown or Nat Turner—rather than one who merely comes to recognize Jim and feel for his suffering. While this concern about action versus feeling is central for Smiley, if left at this, her position falls squarely within the critical gaze of Baldwin’s indictment of the deeper racism that suffuses a self-gratified and cosmetic account of reformist equality. Moreover, if left at this, her position reflects the limits of imagination articulated by Scarry. And yet, in effect, Smiley’s criticism of the limitations of *Huckleberry Finn*’s treatment of race works to clarify and enrich the power of literary imagining, rather than justify minimizing its potential (as Scarry does). In other words, Smiley points to ways that imagining others might overcome the limits on display in *Huckleberry Finn*, limits that Baldwin and Scarry both might take as insurmountable, and as exemplifying their criticisms. In fact, the feeling/action dichotomy barely scrapes the surface of the analysis to which Smiley points. For, in effect, her analysis casts into relief the topography of structural and cultural violence.

For African Americans in the United States, racism pervasively structures American society (culture, economy, politics, and so forth).
To address these manifestations, literary and empathetic imaginings and the actions they may intend to inspire must be interrogated with regard for how a given instance of imagination may itself be either complicit in, or might illuminate and cut against, forms of violence that infuse social, political, and economic structures (i.e., structural violence). Likewise, moral and empathetic imaginings and the actions with which they interweave stand to be interrogated in terms of how they may be complicit in or illuminate and cut against religious, ideological, esthetic, and even scientific understandings and conceptual frames that underpin and support structural violence, making it appear normal, necessary, or perhaps altogether invisible (i.e., cultural violence). In fact, it is the cultural diffusion and structural pervasiveness of such violence that makes the alteration of feelings and perceptions through the cultivation of literary imagination appear to be a sufficient antidote for racism when, in fact, that remedy remains at the level of cosmetic adjustment. And yet, conversely, this means that the self-reflexivity entailed in virtuous literary imaginings—where the imaginer is compelled toward critical self-inventory as to the origins, nature, basis, and possible adjustment of his or her visceral and passionate reactions—becomes a key lens in identifying and struggling against one’s own complicity in cultural violence. What might this look like?

Smiley points to the power of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by contrasting it with the complicity she identifies in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*’s enactment of moral imagination. This power occurs, in effect, in its marriage of sentimental narrative and social analysis of interpersonal relations in conjunction with the ways that the novel displays the structural and cultural conditions in which those relations are embedded and upon which they are predicated. Stowe’s sentimental narrative, Smiley points out, places front and center the inescapably tragic—and intrinsically distortive and false—character of “I–It relationships” exemplified in slave and slave–master relations. Yet it exposes the “I–It” character of these relations in the remarkably wide—and sometimes camouflaged—array of forms in which those relationships appear. Stowe’s novel implicates even the most well-meaning liberal and activist figures as participants in I–It relationships.

Clearly, Stowe indicts the plantation owner Simon Legree, who sadistically tortures Tom, but also the well-intentioned sympathies for Tom’s plight professed by his previous master, Augustine St. Clare, and even the character of St. Clare’s principled abolitionist cousin,
Miss Ophelia, whose high-minded antislavery commitments thinly veil her visceral disgust for actual black people. Stowe implicates her reader as well, whom she warns not to feel comfortably distant from the severest evils set on display across the pages of her novel. “[The slave trader’s] heart was exactly where yours, sir, and mine could be brought,” the narrator cautions her audience as we witness Lucy discover that her ten-month-old child was sold while she was asleep. “You can get used to such things, too, my friend.”

In Stowe’s portrayal, “feeling for” the lowly, and the well-meaning, sympathetic “benevolence” of a slave owner for his or her slave—even benevolence in principled abolitionist form—participates in and turns out to be related by degrees to the radical evil over against which such benevolence purports to distinguish itself and which it intends to combat. “Stowe never forgets the logical end of any relationship in which one person is the subject and the other is the object,” Smiley notes. “No matter how the two people feel, or what their intentions are, the logic of the relationship is inherently tragic and traps both parties until the false subject/object relationship is ended. Stowe’s most oft-repeated and potent representation of this inexorable logic is the forcible separation of family members, especially of mothers from children.”

Read through the lenses of structural and cultural violence (as I am suggesting that Smiley, in effect, largely does), Stowe’s novel places on display how these interpersonal relationships are actually embedded in slavery-suffused social structures and intertwined with slavery-normalizing functions of culture, religion, and political economy of that time. Stowe does so not only through the personas of slave traders but also through northern politician beneficiaries and Christian preachers whose sermons either justify the peculiar institution or assuage the Christian consciences of those who are complicit at a comfortable remove from its horrors. In this, the narrative sketches a cross section of the topography of violence. In effect, it exposes the structural and cultural, as well as explicit (i.e., direct), forms that this violence takes.

Structurally, this cross section lays bare the economic and political layers that underpin social and political precincts that appear on their surface to be untouched by the evils of slavery. Culturally, it reveals the subterranean layers of normalizing violence which are in many cases disguised by a surface appearance of benevolence, fellow feeling, good intentions, and religious conceptions and practices which either explicitly justify slavery, assuage the Christian conscience, or blur and
camouflage slavery’s status as moral evil. These complex dimensions of Stowe’s novel made *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* perhaps a “best case scenario” of mediating the perils of cultural critique on one side and the power of sentiment-inspiring work of imagination on the other. Contrary to Baldwin’s charge that Stowe’s story has left the available roles and relationships simply in place and unperturbed—as a golden-intentioned liberal protest novel will—in fact, Stowe placed these stock positions under gentle, and therefore perhaps all the more persuasive, indictment.

Of course, even if Scarry were to acknowledge the potential of expanding and deepening the sociocritical dimensions of literary imagining as I have above, she would assuredly ask what difference it could make. For, if literary representation of others’ suffering inspires awareness and outrage—perhaps all the more so illuminating the structural diffusion of injustice—the structural violence remains. And yet, as a matter of fact, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* played pivotal roles in consolidating a reform movement to change social structures—and not only laws and constitutional provisions—by evoking and educating the shared imagination of everyday readers. In fact, its success in producing and reshaping popular imagination of that time through the suasions of sentimental narrative worked in inverse relation to the “confrontational and abstract” rhetoric of so-called immediate abolitionists whose prophetic criticism called for instantaneous renunciation and repentance for the sins of slavery. As Ronald Walters captures the point,

> Over a seven-year span in which passions about slavery dominated American politics and produced atrocious acts of violence, [Stowe] grafted an unpopular message onto a popular literary form and gained a sympathetic hearing from a large audience previously hostile or indifferent to abolitionism. She helped move the controversy over slavery from polemics, legislative debates, and mobs to parlors and to the popular stage,... She—in common with authors of ex-slaves’ narratives like Frederick Douglass—took abolitionists’ abstractions and embodied them in striking characters, dramatic dialogue, and emotionally compelling predicaments.

On one hand, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* exemplifies how a literary intervention might provoke moral outrage and compel the expansion of
shared imagination. The novel captivated, challenged, and compelled the expansion of imagination among many well-intentioned white people in the antebellum United States who were not committed to abolitionism, many of whom conceived of themselves as comfortably distant from—and unimplicated in—the evils of chattel slavery and the sources of suffering of black people. Specifically, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* inspired the cultivation of capacities to imagine and perceive black slaves in ways that opened possibilities for recognizing them—and potentially, reconceptualizing one’s self in relation to them despite entrenched predispositions to find them repellent and their experiences negligible. Yet, it was when the novel’s action-inspiring imaginative power was conjoined with its exposition and indictment of sociopolitical and economic structures and religious cultures of that time that it effected critical reflection and opened possibilities for altering those structures and cultures. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* provided a centerpiece in Stowe’s antislavery novels which together consolidated the central articles of abolitionism since the 1830s:

that slavery is contrary to the principles of the American Revolution and Christianity, that slavery is a sin to be renounced immediately, that all righteous people must come out of corrupt churches and other institutions that uphold slavery, that northerners bear moral responsibility for slavery, that the self-interest of masters provides no protection for slaves, that the essence of slavery is arbitrary power, and that the institution is evil even when the treatment of slaves is humane.

This is no mere humanizing and inspiring feeling for the slave. This is an interrogation of the structures and cultures that made slavery seemingly justifiable, at a comfortable remove, or at least not wrong.

Of course, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not without real deficiencies. Stowe essentialized the differences between whites and blacks as innate and racially grounded (e.g., whites are portrayed as unfeeling and religiously dissonant and blacks as naturally affective and religiously musical). She wrote little to imagine, or inspire others to imagine, the challenges and opportunities that would be unique to a postslavery United States—“What happens when freedom comes?” However exemplary, Stowe’s novel made no attempt to envision, nor begin to explore, moving forward toward ameliorative possible futures.
between freed slaves and former slave owners in the aftermath of the
horrors to which she powerfully awakened so many white people.37

Though interweaving literary imagination with social analysis, the
analytical self-reflexivity afforded by Stowe’s novel ultimately proved
woefully insufficient. The very features that made it such a powerful
tool for expanding shared imagination of others’ suffering ultimately
contributed to its analytical deficiency in interrogating the array of
uses to which it could be (and was) put. The novel, and its numerous
theatrical, film, and popular adaptations, became absorbed into the
culture industry of mass entertainment. Arguably, it was in virtue of
the melodramatic sentimentality by which Stowe punctured stagnant
sympathies and worked to educate imagination that Uncle Tom’s
Cabin itself became an instrument of titillation and sentimental self-
gratification.

In a 1981 retrospective piece, Ralph Ellison recalled happening
upon an advertisement for a “Tom Show” stage play in the days
before he began composing Invisible Man (1952)—in its own right, an
intervention of literary imagination that laid bare the vulnerability and
negligibility of life as a black man in the white supremacist ethos of
the mid-twentieth-century United States.38 Aware of the minstrelsy to
which previously ubiquitous “Tom Shows” had largely degraded
Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin—and discovering this phenomenon alive
and well in post–World War II New England—Ellison realized “the
tenacity which a nation’s moral evasions can take on when given the
trappings of racial stereotypes.”39 This was a neutralization of a ten-
der-yet-relentless indictment and call to conversion that simultaneously
placed on display the multivariety of a people’s structural and cultural
complicities in the evils of slavery. Ellison recognized the ever-present
possibility of an insidious counter conversion—namely, “the ease with
which [the nation’s] deepest experience of tragedy could be converted
into black face farce.”40

Insofar as the fate of Uncle Tom’s Cabin presents co-opting and
exploitation of an otherwise exemplary instance of literary imagina-
tion as a tool for inspiring recognition and transformational action in
response to the representation of others’ suffering, it does not merely
problematize Uncle Tom’s Cabin per se. It demonstrates the force of
Scarry’s argument, in effect, that literary imagination can itself become
co-opted for the ends of cultural violence. To render a history of
moral evil farce and parody, in effect, renders the depravity of that
history inconspicuous and even a subject of whimsy. It trivializes the
need to investigate the myriad ways that present conditions are complicit in—even beneficiaries of—that history. And yet, by Ellison’s own admission, his disturbing recognition of a repressed and tragic past invisible within the present was an indispensable step to realizing the potential power of literary fictional vision for effecting change. Indeed, this very recognition led him to believe, in the inspired days of drafting *Invisible Man*, that a novel “could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception, and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation’s vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal.”

**CONCLUSION: WEAPON, TOOL, AND ARTIFACT**

I have attempted to place on display and explicate the modes of critical self-reflexivity that may be afforded to literary imagination when it is integrated with the peace studies lenses of structural and cultural violence. I displayed this by taking up an example of literary imagination identified as of particular promise in *The Body in Pain* and then critically sifting its reception history. The results illuminated how Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became such a powerful instrument for both expanding but also challenging the structural limitations of abolitionism. Most important, what I described as, in effect, analyses through lenses of structural and cultural violence might account for how this novel’s sociopolitical incision—by way of literary imagination into the causes and conditions of suffering—came to be domesticated and even co-opted in ways which not only neutralized its power to challenge and awaken critical sensibilities and inspire action through evoking sentimental imagination but actually redeployed it as a tool—and indeed an artifact—of Jim Crow culture, manners, and mores. This analysis brings to light the insidiousness of cultural violence—the ways that a creative act in the “work of world making” may come to be co-opted and deployed in ways that make structural and direct violence seem and feel natural, necessary, or “at least not wrong.”

There is a paradox at the heart of Scarry’s account, in that someone who creates on behalf of the relative pain that she has experienced might remake herself as one “who creates on behalf of the pain originating in another’s body.” In fact, it is through the creative act (so conceived) that the weapon (pain’s associate symbol, on Scarry’s account) might be transformed into the tool (the associate symbol of
work, as Scarry has it). On the reading I have proposed above, the tool is that of literary imagining augmented by lenses of structural and cultural violence.

Of course, the process of creative transformation that Scarry describes moves from weapon, to tool, to artifact. And here again, Scarry can be read as anticipating the recurring danger of the violence in which the experience of pain first originates. For, in the case of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the weapon-refashioned-as-tool—despite its remarkable effectiveness at the time—quickly became an artifact through its assimilation into the broader context of Jim Crow white supremacist culture. Tool becomes artifact when it is plucked from the context and purposes in which the creativity of work gave rise to it. This process of rendering a tool an artifact not only elided its prophetic content, but rendered its main character’s name an epithet.

Even so, this case demonstrates that the possibility of bringing such insidiousness to light holds within it further possibilities for understanding the sufferings of others, and possibilities for acting to alter political and social structures as a result. In itself, Scarry’s pessimism about the impossibility of understanding and responding transformatively to others’ pain presents an unyielding obstacle for any who work in peace studies on questions of imagining others. And yet, Scarry’s complex argument might also serve as a catalyst. For any effort to conceptualize and act in order to effect change must first overcome the temptations of glib optimism, cheap empathy, and equally easily co-opted action and practice. *The Body in Pain* brings its readers to the brink of the impossibility of comprehension, much less action and change, in the face of others’ pain. And yet, as Ellison suggests, this same work might be read (despite itself) as gesturing toward a possibility that suffering might be imaginatively empowered to speak in ways which enable the work of transformation through the theoretically self-reflexive and self-correcting creative work of literary imagining.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 324.


7. Ibid., 4.

8. Ibid., 169.


11. Ibid., 162.

12. Though I have not space to explicate the position here, there are several versions of such an account that demonstrate some important parallels. Lynn Hunt, for instance, argues for the impact that literary imagination (e.g., reading accounts of torture and epistolary novels) in the nineteenth century had upon human brain changes (i.e., “individual minds”) which inspired individual empathy. Such new individual empathetic experiences, once shared broadly enough, enabled the development of new political concepts such as human rights. Richard Rorty (following Annette Baier’s account of David Hume on the “progress of moral sentiments”) portrays empathetic literary imagination as effecting an “education of sentiments” which cultivated habits of increasingly expansive moral perception and action and which came to be codified (and evolve) in forms of human rights culture. Neither addresses the need to pair the cultivation and expansion of empathetic imagination—and the moral–legal concepts that ensued therefrom—with socio theoretical analysis of structural and cultural violence. See Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: Norton and Company, 2007), 32–34; Richard Rorty in “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” in *On Human Rights: Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993).


17. The first American novel to sell more than one million copies in the United States, having sold a million copies in Britain and two million world wide, within a year of appearing in monograph form.


19. Ibid., 50.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 52.

22. Ibid., 51–2; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 137.


26. Ibid., 18.
30. As Twain biographer, Justin Kaplan, responded, “A truly responsible writer, [Smiley] seems to be saying, would not have been satisfied with Huck’s recognition of Jim’s humanity and dignity but would have evolved Huck into John Brown and Jim into Nat Turner, two people who, indeed, ‘did’ something about racism instead of just having a feeling about it.” See Kaplan’s “Selling Huck Finn Down the River,” New York Times Book Review, March 10, 1996, 2.
31. “Eliza, faced with the sale of her child, Harry, escapes across the breaking ice of the Ohio river. Lucy, whose ten-month-old is sold behind her back, kills herself. Prue, who has been used for breeding, must listen to her last child cry itself to death because her mistress won’t let her save it; she falls into alcoholism and thievery and is finally whipped to death. Cassy, prefiguring a choice made by one of the characters in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, kills her last child so that it won’t grow up in slavery. All of these women have been promised something by their owner—love, education, the privilege and joy of raising their children—but, owing to slavery, all of these promises have been broken.” Smiley, “Say it Ain’t So, Huck,” 65.
33. Ibid., 188.
34. Carol Lasser positions Stowe’s novel with reference to the emergence of what she terms “voyeuristic abolitionism,” a rhetorical current of American antislavery of the 1830s which paired highly charged and frequently sexualized characterizations of Southern slavery with the urgency of immediate abolitionism that was concurrently emerging. Lasser characterizes Uncle Tom’s Cabin as a pivotal intervention that captured the moral outrage of “voyeuristic abolitionism,” yet managed to do so it with a modesty and equilibrium that enabled it to widely infiltrate the parlors of mainstream Northern society. See Carol Lasser, “Voyeuristic Abolitionism: Sex, Gender, and the Transformation of Antislavery Rhetoric,” in Journal of the Early Republic, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 83–114 (esp. 109–110).
35. Walters, 184–185.
36. Ibid., 187.
37. See Elizabeth Ammons in “Freeing the Slaves and Banishing the Blacks: Racism, Empire, and Africa in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s


39. Ibid., 479.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., p. 483.

42. Scarry, The Body in Pain, 324.