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American Mythmaking: Southern Antebellum Literature in the Context of American Racism (1824-1856)

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Citation

Rietveld, J. (2022). *American Mythmaking: Southern Antebellum Literature in the Context of American Racism (1824-1856)*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

American Mythmaking:

Southern Antebellum Literature in the Context of American Racism
(1824-1856)

Master's Thesis
North American Studies
University of Leiden
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December 30, 2021
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Introduction

After several days of heavy rain, winter freeze had started to set in, while the citizens of Fredericksburg were fleeing their homes to escape an impending battle. At that same moment, Union soldiers were busy preparing for another fight with the troops of the Confederacy. Before the battle started, the soldiers thanked the incoming freeze for solidifying the ground beneath their feet, as it prevented their boots from sinking into the mud. This made their harsh living conditions a little more bearable. Meanwhile, as thousands of soldiers were waiting for the first shot to be fired, Harriet Beecher Stowe had a meeting with President Abraham Lincoln in Washington D.C., less than fifty miles from Fredericksburg.¹ On that day, November 25, 1862, Lincoln is reported to have welcomed Stowe with the famous words, “So you’re the little woman that wrote the book that started this great war!”²

Although Lincoln won the presidency with the promise of containing slavery, by the time he met Stowe he had changed his policy by vowing to free all the slaves within the Confederacy, when he held the Emancipation Proclamation two months earlier. It is therefore no surprise that Lincoln would have wanted to meet the woman famous for writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by far the best-selling work critiquing slavery. In fact, from its publication date until the start of the Civil War, the only book capable of outselling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was The Bible. The claim that Harriet Beecher Stowe started the Civil War should be taken with a grain (or two) of salt, but her novel did impact the further popularization of the the abolitionist movement.

During the late-antebellum period, it was far from clear that slavery would soon become illegal. Instead, during the decades preceding the Civil War, proslavery interest groups successfully promoted their cause. In the 1840s for example, all presidents were Southern slaveowners. But even the non-slave owning presidents of the 1850s aided the proslavery movement. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, supported by Franklin Pierce, allowed for slavecatchers and bounty hunters to capture runaway slaves within the borders of the Northern states where slavery was abolished. Franklin Pierce would be elected president in 1852. Five years later, in 1857, the *Dread Scott v. Sandford* case provided another blow for the

¹ Robert R. Kirk, *Civil War Weather in Virginia* (Tuscaloo: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 74-77.

² Roger D. Laurence, *Apostles of Equality the Birneys, the Republicans, and the Civil War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 150.

abolitionist cause. In a vote of 7-2, the Supreme Court decided that people of African descent were “beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”³ Unsurprisingly, five of the seven justices who denied African-Americans the right to citizenship, owned slaves themselves.

The encroachment of proslavery ideals within the borders of the Northern free states undoubtedly fueled abolitionist resistance and the success of Stowe’s novel. Traditionally, scholars have argued that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was so successful that it frightened Southern writers in such a significant way, that they devoted their writing almost exclusively to the defense of slavery. In 1954, Jay B. Hubbell, writer of possibly the most extensive work on southern literature to date, wrote that “Southern sensitiveness to outside criticism became extreme in the fifties.”⁴ The cultural impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, on southern literature has been consistently reiterated in the criticism. For example in 2003, Nathalie Dessens wrote that after the publishing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “The celebration of the South became uncompromising, and negative features [about slavery] almost totally disappear from descriptions of the section.”⁵

The narrative created around Southern literature, depends on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* being the focal point, creating a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the discourse on Southern literature. To illustrate this dividing line, Southern novels written in 1852 or after, have become known as ‘Anti-Tom novels,’ such as William Gilmore Simms *The Sword and the Distaff* (1852), and Caroline Lee Hentz’s *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (1854). Scholars use *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as an attractive wedge between eras in proslavery literature, as it coincides with the once very strong proslavery movement losing influence.⁶ Unfortunately this view of history is more harmful in what it fails to explain, than helpful in what it does explain. In the coming pages, I will argue that the dividing line between literature before and after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and in extension the dividing line between North and South, is a construct that exaggerates the differences between these two regions. Although there were some obvious differences between North and South, they have often been overemphasized to

³ Jill Lapore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 269.

⁴ Jay B. Hubbell, *The South & American Literature, 1607-1900* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1954), 340.

⁵ Nathalie Dessens, *Myths of the Plantation Society: Slavery in the American South and the West Indies* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), 158.

⁶ For an in-depth look at the rise and fall of the political power of the proslavery movement, I recommend reading Matthew Karp’s *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (2016).

explain why the South separated from the North, but these differences would not have been so apparent for the average antebellum American. The main purpose of this paper is to substantiate this theory, or in other words: deconstruct the oversimplified metanarrative of North versus South by proving that what is considered to be regional Southern literature should be recontextualized as American literature.

Emphasizing the importance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fits within the most widely accepted narrative of the pre-history of the Civil War: a natural sectionalism between North and South over the issue of slavery, fought over within the realms of politics and literature, and eventually on the actual battlefield. Although this view of history tries to explain why the Southern states seceded from the rest of the United States, there are several serious problems with the one-dimensionality of this view of American history. One problem with the standard narrative is that it presupposes an inherent sectionalism between the antebellum North and South. As will become apparent, academics have historically assumed that within this sectional view, the North should be seen as the 'true' United States, representing 'true' American values, whereas the South should be seen as a regional power, desperately holding on to their outmoded, or even archaic, worldviews. This is especially true in regard to Southern literature, where this view is used as an excuse to relegate Southern novels to the realm of regionalism, while Northern novels are generally seen as American. This sectionalism will be most often referred to as the 'North versus South dichotomy.'

The idea of the American South as inherently different, or unamerican, has been a common theme in the criticism. In Hubbell's *The South & American Literature 1607-1900*, we can clearly recognize the idea of the South not being a part of the real United States,

"The South was not a thoroughly integrated part of the nation; too often it was a conscious minority. Southern resentment of the anti-slavery agitation and the failure of the South to share fully in the growth and prosperity of the nation hastened the development of a movement looking toward the creation of a separate nation with slavery somewhat reluctantly acknowledged as its cornerstone."⁷

These types of claims have also been made more recently. Most notably in 2015, by Katherine A. Burnett, who argues that "the [United States] had split into two distinct regional factions

⁷ Hubbell, *The South & American Literature*, 328.

over the continued existence of slavery.”⁸ Interestingly, academics focusing on sectionalism within the United States in regard to slavery, predominantly focus on economic factors. In the quote, Hubbell writes about the “Southern resentment of... the failure to share fully in the growth and prosperity of the nation,” caused by the economic inefficiencies of institutional slavery as opposed to free market capitalism. Although Burnett does see the old South as a capitalist society, she juxtaposes the Southern impulse to modernize against the wish to keep the outdated economic model of slavery, which she describes as “the impulse toward economic (and thereby social) progress that coincided with international economic development, and the desire to maintain a “traditional” South structured around slavery.”⁹ In other words: the South was economically transforming into a modern capitalist society, but slavery is seen as antithetical to this transformation.

In 2010, the dominant narrative started to be questioned, as Jennifer Rae Greeson framed the North versus South dichotomy in the context of ‘internal othering.’ Othering is usually a process wherein the differences with other nations or cultures are enlarged in order to construct a national self-image, but Greeson applies this to the South as a region, describing it as positioned in “a different juxtaposition. As an internal other from the start of U.S. existence.” A place that “lies simultaneously inside and outside the national imaginary constructed in U.S. literature.”¹⁰ She argues that the South is used as a means for the United States to create distance between itself and “a guilty colonial past.” The process of othering of the South becomes a tool for Americans to maintain a unique sense of “exceptionalist nationalism” while simultaneously actively forgetting (or suppressing) the history of racism that created this brand of nationalism.¹¹ Greeson’s analysis exposes how and why the field of literary studies has been used to uphold the North versus South dichotomy.

Economic theory plays a large role in the othering of the South. Fortunately, a growing number of economic historians actively oppose the idea of the Old South as an insulated region of the United States. This New Slavery Movement successfully researches the connections/interdependencies between Southern slavery and Northern (and global) markets. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman describe southern slaveholders as “profit-seeking,” as

⁸ Katherine A. Burnett, “The Proslavery Social Problem Novel: Maria J. McIntosh’s Narrative of Reform in the Plantation South,” *College Literature* 42:4 (2015) 624.

⁹ Burnett, “The Proslavery Social Problem Novel,” 622.

¹⁰ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

¹¹ Greeson, *Our South*, 3-6.

Southern elites looked to expand slavery in order to maximize profits. A clear capitalist characteristic. Other historians have researched the proslavery movement's promotion of free-trade in order to boost global cotton sales, Southern innovations in cotton-growth efficiency, and many other signifiers that point to the profit-seeking motives of slaveholders. All of this has led Beckert and Rockman to call slavery the "nursing mother of the prosperity of the North."¹² As a consequence of this research, arguments of the South as an economically isolated region have been largely debunked.

It is indeed very important to realize that the history of the antebellum South is not a regional phenomenon, but an integral part of *American* history. In the field of economic history the regionalization of the South has been successfully rebuked, but the argument is incomplete, because it still focuses on Southern slavery in opposition to the free labor of the North. Looking at slave labor exclusively as an economic system, makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to fully integrate slavery into the broader field of American racism. Since Southern slavery is often used as a proxy for American racism, the South continues to be othered in order to regionalize this racism. To deconstruct the North versus South dichotomy, I will argue that Southern proslavery attitudes were not only driven by economic factors, but by an underlying racist ideology that was prevalent throughout the United States. Where literary historians such as Hubbell and Burnett have used economic arguments to portray the South as other, I will show that this othering depends fully on economic arguments, and largely falls apart when we expose the American popularity of the underlying racist ideology used to support slavery.

By pointing to the prevalence of white supremacist thought in American society and literature, it becomes apparent that the same racist ideology that legitimized slavery also legitimized the displacement of Native Americans. The underlying patterns also reveal clear similarities between the racist rationalizations for capitalist expansion for both slavery and Native American displacement. These patterns unfortunately remain hidden if we only focus on the differences between North and South.

In the year Abraham Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation and met with Harriet Beecher Stowe, he also signed the famous Homestead Act. A law that allowed for

¹² Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 1-11; Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "Biological Innovation and Productivity Growth in the Antebellum Cotton Economy," *The Journal of Economic History* 68:4 (2008) 1123-1171; Caitlin C. Rosenthal, "From Memory to Mastery: Accounting for Control in America, 1750-1880," *Enterprise & Society* 14:4 (2013) 732-748; etc.

American individuals and corporations to settle and economically exploit the West, a law that supported the displacement of the Native Americans and Mexicans already living there, as their land was annexed. In most cases, by far, this state sanctioned theft was committed by the white population and white owned companies.¹³

The killing and displacement of Native Americans in search of economic prosperity in lands to the west had already started at the very beginning of European colonization. However, the move westward truly gained steam in the nineteenth century, during a period of enfranchisement. In 1828, when, for the first time, all white men, regardless of wealth or status, were allowed to vote, they elected Andrew Jackson. As written by Dr. Jill Lapore, “Andrew Jackson rode to the White House in the arms of the people.”¹⁴ Jackson was a Tennessee slaveowner, and military commander during the Creek War, in which he enacted a state sanctioned genocidal murder spree, killing not only his military opponents, but women and children as well, effectively freeing up the land for Southern slaveowners.¹⁵

As president, Jackson would infamously sign the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This act allowed for the forceful removal of Native Americans to push white colonization westwards and provide economic opportunities for (poor) whites, while also increasing the amount of land worked by slave labor.¹⁶ The effect of Jackson’s racist policy was an overwhelming wave of support for him and his party at the ballot box in the 1832 election. It should be noted that Andrew Jackson and other slave owning presidents were not just elected by the South, but as a rule won many Midwestern and Northeastern states as well.

In many cases the suppression and economic exploitation of African-Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans are interrelated. As I have mentioned, these forms of suppression are not regional or ‘Southern,’ but are part of a wider ideology of white superiority. White superiority is not always directly connected to the Ku Klux Klan or other well-known extremist organizations, it consists of the idea that whites are, or ought to be, superior over other races and should therefore be allowed to dominate other racial groups within society. This ideology needed to be reinforced and legitimized, and this was often done through literature. Southern novelists in the antebellum were obsessed with race relations and

¹³ Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 155-156.

¹⁴ Lapore, *These Truths*, 212.

¹⁵ Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 52-53.

¹⁶ Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 57-58; “Andrew Jackson,” History, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.History.com/topics/us-presidents/andrew-jackson>; “Indian Removal Act,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://britannica.com/topic/indian-removal-act>.

the reinforcement of white superiority, only these writers were not as ‘Southern’ as is often assumed today. They were most often read and positively received throughout the nation.

I have essentially made three separate, but interconnected claims, that I will substantiate in the coming chapters. First, the South has been historically othered to confine the history of American racism to a specific region. This othering is maintained by the framing of Southern literature solely as a fight between North and South, otherwise known as the North versus South dichotomy. Second, one consequence of racism being regionalized as a Southern phenomena is the hyperfocus on slavery as the symbol for American racism. Although the suppression and brutalities committed by the slave owning class should continue to be extensively studied, institutional slavery should also be seen as part of a broader culture of racial stratification within the United States. Third, white domination and exploitation of other racial groups needed to be maintained through cultural legitimization, which can be clearly identified within antebellum literature.

The following chapters will focus on Southern antebellum literature, because this allows for this study to most efficiently address the othering of the South through the North versus South dichotomy, and emphasize the true *American* nature of antebellum racism. In the first chapter I will give an in-depth explanation of why criticism differentiates between the Southern ‘anti-Tom’ novels post-1852, and other Southern novels written before 1852. In short, the difference is most often described as a transition from a literary culture with a ‘soft’ defense of slavery, to a ‘hard’ defense of slavery, with the more extreme defense being tied to the anti-Tom novel.¹⁷ In reality, the full defense of slavery was already mounted by the 1820s, as I will argue in the coming chapter. There were no new ideas regarding proslavery thought after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written. It is true that proslavery novelists wrote explicitly about the perceived benefits of slavery for society, but they did so *any* time slavery was under attack, for *any* reason, not just after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published. To analyze the development of antebellum Southern literature in regards to slavery, I will analyze three Southern pre-anti-Tom novels, also known as plantation romance novels, *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824) by George Tucker, *Swallow Barn* (1832) by John Pendleton Kennedy, and *Sheppard Lee* (1836) by Robert Montgomery Bird. By analyzing these novels, I will show that all characteristics attributed to the anti-Tom novel already existed decades earlier. And I will provide answers to how these novels were written to defend slavery and racist

¹⁷ Read Hubbell’s and Dessens’ quotes on page 4 for examples.

ideals beyond defending against the North. Thus, the first chapter will use the pre-/post-Anti-Tom dichotomy to argue against the usefulness of this dichotomy all together.

Because classical interpretations of Southern antebellum literature focus almost solely on slavery as an economic system, they neglect the fact that these novels are preoccupied with legitimizing the entirety of white superiority. It is more accurate to regard the literary proslavery movement as part of a broader defense of political, economic, and cultural white domination, defending them against external, as well as internal threats to white supremacy. In addition, Sarah Mesle has noted that, “The skewed sample of novels... has led critics to mischaracterize the profound racism of American sentimental culture, throughout the antebellum nation.”¹⁸ The second chapter will confirm Mesle’s assessment, and expand on it, analyzing Southern antebellum novels that focus on the interaction between whites and Native-Americans, instead of maintaining the focus on slavery as *the* representation of American racism. The fact alone that so many of these novels were written undermines the modern construct of a literary world that existed around the North versus South battle over slavery. Secondly, it proves that Southern writers promoted white supremacist thinking beyond promoting slavery as a system of labor.

To argue these points, I will analyze two Southern novels on the subject: *The Yemassee* (1835), by William Gilmore Simms, and *Nick of the Woods* (1837), by Robert Montgomery Bird. Two novels that promote the genocide of Native Americans. The increase of published frontier novels directly followed the popularity of the plantation romance novel. Organizing these chapters chronologically, instead of directly juxtaposing the plantation romance against the anti-Tom novel, undermines the notion that Southern writers only wrote novels in reaction to Northern abolitionism.

The characteristics of the anti-Tom novel will be analyzed in the third chapter, specifically *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (1852), by Caroline Lee Hentz. This is Hentz’s most remembered work and is one of the more well-known proslavery novels today. The analysis of this novel will point out the similarities with pre-anti-Tom novels and will explain what the differences are. I will argue that the similarities are more important than any of the differences.

The fourth chapter will provide proof that Southern novels were not ‘Southern’ at all, but instead were considered to be American. These novels were also widely popular throughout the entire country. The main sources used for this chapter are American

¹⁸ Sarah Mesle, “Sentimentalism’s Nation: Maria J. McIntosh and the Antebellum Contexts of “Southern” Fiction,” *Studies in American Fiction* 40:2 (2013) 205, 207.

newspapers and periodicals provided by Proquest. Sources notably include *The New York Times*, *The American Quarterly Review*, and *The Knickerbocker*, among many others. As most big periodicals and newspapers at the time were published in New York and Philadelphia, the majority of the sources used in this paper were published in these places as well. Because this part of the research is based on an online database, there is a logical dependency on the digitalization of periodicals. This means that, although the most important papers of the antebellum periods are included, some smaller voices might be unavoidably absent. In this fourth chapter, it will become apparent that Southern antebellum literature was beyond regional. It will not only become clear that Southern novels were being purchased and reviewed favorably in the North, Southern writers were also explicitly considered to be representing American literature and culture. In addition, a study on the exchange of letters between Northern and Southern writers by Jonathan Daniel Wells concluded that “Writers in both sections [North and South]... believed that they were engaged in a common endeavor to convince a fickle reading public that *American* authors and themes were worth celebrating.”¹⁹

My argumentation is evidently based on the dominant antebellum culture: white culture. The silencing of other minority cultures will be discussed, but only in the context of white American discourse. In this context, African-American slave narratives occupy a peculiar space, as these narratives are written by non-whites, but published by whites and primarily sold to white audiences. The effects of these narratives on white American culture and its underlying racist structures are important. However, including these narratives in the research would shift focus from the silencing of minorities in the context of white domination, to the silencing of minorities in the context of minority resistance. This is a subtle but important difference, as these topics are closely related. Discussing these narratives would change the nature of this paper and are therefore not included. Still, it is important to remember that these narratives existed within the same literary space and effected American discourse.

At the end of this paper, it will be clear that Southern literature was part of an overarching metanarrative of white superiority. The othering of the South, and relegating its literature to regional status, also regionalizes American racism. Consequently, this othering prevents effective confrontations with the impact of American racism.

¹⁹ Jonathan Daniel Wells, “Writers, Editors, and Intellectual Exchange Between the Antebellum North and South,” *Alabama Review* 67:1 (2014) 115.

To deconstruct this narrative it is necessary to except that the North versus South dichotomy exists as a construct. It is important to remember that it is impossible to ignore this dichotomy, and I will be forced to adopt this framework in order to deconstruct it. However, it should also be clear that I do not except the idea that the existing metanarrative, which focuses more on division than similarities, can adequately help us to explain the true motivations of the novelists of the antebellum south.

Chapter I: An Artificial Dividing Line Within Proslavery Literature

“We need to find descriptors which do not invoke the cant of progress and which are not joined at the hip with nationalism.”

- Thomas King (1990)

Before dissecting Southern antebellum literature pre-1852 and its historical context, to explain why it is written, we must first look at the existing metanarrative framework and its shortcomings. Even though an extensive critique of this framework does not yet exist, it is not necessary to create one out of whole cloth. In 1990 Thomas King encountered similar problems regarding post-colonial literature. He developed a critique that is, to a large part, applicable here as well. King criticizes the terminology surrounding colonialism, because it presupposes a certain progression: from pre-colonial, to colonial, to post-colonial.²⁰ This bears similarities to the narrative surrounding anti-Tom literature, which presupposes a progressive hardening in the defense of slavery that, for the most part, did not actually exist. King also points to an “unabashed ethnocentrism,” when analyzing post-colonialism. With the term colonialism itself forcing the advent of white colonists coming to the Americas as the central focal point of post-colonial literature.²¹ The North versus South dichotomy has a similar problem: by focusing on the battle between Northern abolitionists and Southern proslavery advocates, it focuses on whiteness.

In the remainder of this chapter I will answer two major questions. First, why does the anti-Tom dichotomy exist, and how is it incomplete? To do so I will analyze *Shenandoah Valley* (1824) and *Swallow Barn* (1832). I will explain how these novels are related to the plantation myth, and how these novels are essentially similar to anti-Tom novels, rebutting the idea of the transition of a ‘soft’ defense of slavery to a strong, or ‘hard,’ defense of slavery. Second, why the North versus South dichotomy exists, and how it ignores the agency of African-American slaves. I will do this by pointing to the internal factors that effected proslavery arguments in antebellum literature, specifically slave rebellions. The novel *Sheppard Lee*

²⁰ Thomas King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” *World Literature in English* 30:2 (1990) 185.

²¹ King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” 184.

(1836) shows us how these events impacted Southern literature, and how slave voices have been effectively silenced.

Shenandoah Valley and the Birth of the Plantation Myth

Even though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often seen as the focal point of Southern antebellum literature, American novelists had been preoccupied with the boons and banes of slavery for decades. Almost thirty years before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was released to the American public, Virginian politician George Tucker wrote a novel called *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824). Today, this proslavery novel is seen as the first major 'plantation romance,' a type of novel that idealizes life on the Southern plantation. These novels describe a world wherein slaveowners are kind and loving, and their slaves are loyal and happy. A world where the slaveowner is struck with grief when he is forced to sell a slave, or when a slave dies.²² Because of the obvious aggrandizing of slaveowners and the clear attempt to cover up the atrocities of slavery, these stories are commonly known as 'plantation myths.'

As was common among slaveowners in the early United States, George Tucker's parents moved to the United States from the British West-Indies, where, at the time, owning slaves was legal. Tucker himself grew up in Virginia, and became a slaveowner as well.²³

The Valley of Shenandoah is a story about an idyllic slave plantation in Virginia, where everyone is happy. Their happiness is interrupted when it turns out Master Grayson, the slaveowner, cannot repay his debts. This event is clearly tied to Tucker's conviction that slavery was an institution in decline.²⁴ At the time when plantation romances were first written, it was the prevailing belief that owning slaves would no longer be economically viable in the (near) future. With Tucker himself believing the institution would become completely extinct on its own accord by 1920.²⁵ This assumption turned out to be false. The invention of the Cotton Gin, in 1812, made it possible for plantation owners to heavily increase their output of cotton bales. But to keep up with the machinery, an increase in input was needed as well. Slaves proved to be an efficient source of labor in the search for

²² Dessens, *Myths of the Plantation Society*, 156-157.

²³ "Tucker, George" Encyclopedia Virginia, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/tucker-george-1775-1861/>;

²⁴ Alfred L. Brophy, "Land, Slaves, and Bonds: Trust and Probate in the Pre-Civil War Shenandoah Valley," *West Virginia Law Review* 119 (2016) 355.

²⁵ Encyclopedia Virginia, "Tucker, George."

increased productivity. As a result, the use of slave labor before the Civil War did not decrease in any way whatsoever.

However, the prevailing thought of slavery as a dying institution did influence Tucker's 'soft' defense of slavery. After all, who would mount an aggressive defense for an institution that was already doomed to fail? Tucker and his contemporaries generally defended the use of slave labor as making the best of a bad situation. Still, this did not make *The Valley of Shenandoah* any less dehumanizing towards African-Americans than later novels defending slavery 'more explicitly.' The main factor that accounts for the differences between Tucker's novel and later anti-Tom novels, is the fact that Tucker did not believe slave labor would remain economically viable. The sense of white superiority is as prevalent in early plantation myths, as it is in anti-Tom novels. In this aspect, there is no sense of progression.

Within Tucker's romance we can also discover several tropes that would prove to become staples in the anti-Tom novels of the 1850s. Slaves are generally portrayed as loyal towards their masters. This is conveyed within the novel through the son of the plantation owner, Edward, who is forced to sell the family slaves during an economic downturn. Edward laments that "the debts which have come against [his] father's estate will make it necessary that the plantation should be broken up." Uncle Bristow, one of the elder slaves responds "with an accent of alarm... "What! Nigger and all?"²⁶ Bristow's responses to the news are described as the "lamentations of [an] affectionate slave."²⁷ Evidently, Tucker was trying to tell the reader that slaves did not want to be sold, and had a strong sense of loyalty towards their master.

In *The Valley of Shenandoah* this loyalty is a product of a paternal slaveowner who is kind towards his slaves, "because it pleases [him] to see them happy."²⁸ This common myth of the kind slaveowner is logically accompanied by the myth of the happy slave. When one of the white characters, Jones, watched the laboring slaves sing, "he was amused at seeing the alacrity [willingness] of the slaves, and hearing their rude songs in gathering fodder."²⁹ In this story, the slaves are not just happy, they are specifically happy to work as slaves.

Lastly, there is the myth that these plantations were akin to a family, with the slaveowner as the father, who functions as the head of the household. Within this family unit,

²⁶ George Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah, or, Memoirs of the Graysons, Vol. II*, (New York: C. Wiley, Wall-Street, 1825), 196.

²⁷ Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah*, 197.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 315.

slaves function as children. The prevalence of infantilization is psychologically considered to be a form of dehumanization, used, in this case, to ignore the very notion that the slaves can adequately think for themselves. In *The Valley of Shenandoah*, the selling of slaves is portrayed as the breaking up of a family, a process that, in the novel, “seemed to be even more painful” for the slaves than for the slaveowner, Master Grayson.³⁰ Uncle Bristow asks Grayson, ““Will you sell the pictures too?”... pointing to several family portraits”³¹ They continue to reminisce over old ‘family members’ in the pictures, who have passed away, as Master Grayson promises that he “shall not part” with the pictures, confirming the strong familial bond between him and his slaves.³²

All these myths, of the happy slave, the loyal slave, the kind slaveowner, and the plantation family unit, would remain very common in anti-Tom novels, and will reappear several times throughout the coming chapters. The pattern of aggrandizing slaveowners and dehumanizing slaves will, therefore, become increasingly clear. The only reason why Tucker’s novel is considered a more ‘soft’ defense of slavery, is because of his belief that slave labor would not remain economically viable. Eventually Master Grayson is forced to sell his slaves. As the slaves are sold they praise the ‘mother’ of the household, Miss Grayson, one more time, “God bless my mistress – we never shall get such another!”³³ The narrator then turns to the audience and writes that “it would be far better for [the slaves] to remain where they had been accustomed to live, than to go off, even for the purpose of being better used.”³⁴ Tucker described a world where slave labor is moral, and plantations were similar to family units. He essentially did not criticize slavery, instead he critiqued the breaking up of ‘families.’ We can conclude that according to Tucker slavery was moral as long as it was economically viable.

Tucker, and other early plantation novel writers, are often described as less ardent in their defense of slavery than later proslavery writers. This is only true in a limited sense. One should be aware that Tucker, in 1824, did not believe slavery was under threat, and thought that he could continue to profit from it during his lifetime. This allowed for him, and several other proslavery writers, to defend the status quo. It should also be reiterated that certain

³⁰ Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah Vol II*, 212.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

³² *Ibid.*, 213.

³³ George Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah, or, Memoirs of the Graysons, Vol. III*, (New York: C. Wiley, Wall-Street, 1825), 137.

³⁴ Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah Vol III*, 137.

ambivalences towards institutional slave labor did not, in any way, make *The Valley of Shenandoah* less racist than later proslavery novels. This is because the novel does not only defend slavery, but it also defends the larger racist ideal of white supremacy over other races.

George Tucker, born in 1775, had strong doubts about the morality of slavery as a young man, but, as he grew older, his belief in slavery strengthened. This undoubtedly had to do with his own increasing vested interest in the matter, and possibly with several other factors that will be discussed later this chapter. Ironically, the man that profited from slave labor, was killed by a falling cotton bale while traveling on an Alabaman steamboat in 1861.³⁵

Swallow Barn and the Rise of Abolitionism

Although *Shenandoah Valley* introduced a wide audience to the plantation myth, that honor is often mistakenly attributed to *Swallow Barn* (1832).³⁶ This plantation romance, published eight years after *Shenandoah Valley* by John Pendleton Kennedy, is a story about a New Yorker who heads down south to Virginia. Here he discovers the mythical form of slavery very similar to the one depicted in *Shenandoah Valley*: the master is kind, slaves are happy and loyal, and they live in a happy, even idyllic, familial community.

This begs an obvious question: why would academics tie the plantation myth to *Swallow Barn*, and not to earlier novels like *The Valley of Shenandoah*? Why would academics point to *Swallow Barn* as the origin of the plantation myth tropes that would later be repeated extensively in anti-Tom novels?³⁷ The most likely answer is that *Swallow Barn* is a better fit for the common proslavery/antislavery, or North versus South, dichotomy. As Dr. Greeson explains, from 1830 onwards, the most famous abolitionist of the time, William Lloyd Garrison, started printing pamphlets to protest slavery. In 1831 he called Southern slavery a place of “hidden depravity and vice... [such as] sexual abuse and torture,” Greeson refers to this as the ‘reimagining’ of the South.³⁸ Meaning that these pamphlets were written to affirm the otherness of the slave states. Greeson continues to argue that *Swallow Barn* was written as a direct response to these abolitionist portrayals of the South.³⁹

³⁵ Encyclopedia Virginia, “Tucker, George.”

³⁶ Jozef Pecina, ““The Slave-Holders in This Country Are Men of Kind and Humane Tempers”: Antebellum Plantations Romances and the Plantation Legend;” Greeson, *Our South*.

³⁷ Pecina, “The Slave-Holders in This Country,” 120.

³⁸ Greeson, *Our South*, 14.

³⁹ Greeson, *Our South*, 133.

Although I agree with the claims made by Dr. Greeson, using *Swallow Barn* as the origin of the plantation novel seems to me a double edged sword. On the one hand, it helps us to trace backwards to the seeds of sectionalism that would later grow into the Civil War. This is specifically argued in a way I agree with, by pointing out the historical process of othering the South. On the other hand, there is the problem that we, as a modern audience, already know that the outcome of the slavery debate was the Civil War, and so we look for patterns that explain the growing divide between North and South. The very nature of this discussion exists within the idea that the South is the other. As we have seen, this helps us explain certain aspects of Southern literature, but it pushes other aspects to the background. *Shenandoah Valley* shows us that the construction of a mythical plantation South was already in full swing before Southern writers started their preoccupation with countering Northern abolitionism. The point of this being: the foundational groundwork of these arguments are based in a white supremacist way of thinking and continually looking to legitimize white domination over nonwhites, which was affected by, but not dependent on Northern abolitionist discourse. If we look at Southern antebellum literature this way, we can see there is more continuation than change. It also makes it easier, as we will see in later chapters, to connect the Southern plantation myth to a broader field of Southern/American romance novels.

John Pendleton Kennedy and the Soft Defense of Slavery

There seems to be another reason why John Pendleton Kennedy is the most suited candidate to represent Southern literature within the North versus South dichotomy. Kennedy represents the idea, even more so than Turner, that early proslavery writers only mounted a ‘soft’ defense of slavery. Which, according to the standard narrative, turned into a ‘hard’ defense of slavery after the publishing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Therefore, Turner represents the idea of a progressively increasing sense of extremism within proslavery discourse.

Born (in 1795) in Maryland, Kennedy was raised in what is considered to be a ‘border state.’ These were the slave states that directly bordered the free Northern states, and were often considered to be the more ‘moderate’ middle-ground of the nation within the slavery debate. These states were generally more directly connected to local Northern economies, and, therefore, had a lower percentage of slaves. This, in turn, meant they were less economically dependent on the survival of the institution.

Like many Southern writers at the time, Kennedy was also a politician. He served the Maryland House of Representatives, the U.S. Congress, and was even considered for the job

of vice-president under Abraham Lincoln. Presumably to court the ‘moderate’ vote. (Moderate meaning: what was considered moderate at the time.)⁴⁰ As Dr. Andrew Black notes, Kennedy “refused to own slaves and either sold or manumitted those that came into his position.”⁴¹ But, even before the 1850s, this did not make Kennedy’s opinions the norm. It made him an outlier. More importantly, as a ‘soft’ defender of slavery, Kennedy defended all the same racist assumptions and white superiority thinking as the writers of the later anti-Tom novels.

When the Civil War started, Kennedy, as did the state of Maryland, stayed loyal to the Union. In December 1863, Kennedy spoke in front of the leading party in Maryland at the time, the Union Party. It was there that he argued in favor of the abolition of slavery. And he succeeded, the party supported the motion.

When we focus on the slavery debate, Kennedy was indeed ‘mild’ in comparison to other slave state politicians. This, however, only applies if we solely and exclusively focus on the institution of slavery, and ignore the underlying ideology of white superiority. In his speech in front of the Maryland Union Party, Kennedy indeed argued against slavery. But he did not do so for the benefit of African-Americans. Instead, he blamed the South for delegitimizing slavery by stating,

“This rebellion, and the disastrous civil war in which it has involved our country, having been instituted professedly for the purpose of protecting and perpetuating Slavery, and of extending it over the free communities of the National territory, has so utterly failed in its object, that now, after nearly three years of desolating warfare... it has not only destroyed the guarantees which the Constitution of the Union and the tolerance of public opinion had theretofore given to Slavery, but has, in fact, virtually abolished the institution, by forcing it into conditions that render it valueless to the slave-owner and in incumbrance to the society in which it exists.”⁴²

Kennedy clearly blamed the South for destroying the economic institution of slavery.

Perpetuating the myth that slavery was an “expensive and inefficient system,” in comparison

⁴⁰ “John P. Kennedy: American Author and Statesman” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 2, 2021, www.britannica.com/biography/John-P-Kennedy

⁴¹ Andrew Black, *John Pendleton Kennedy: Early American Novelist, Whig Statesman, and Ardent Nationalist*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 254.

⁴² Republican Party State Central Committee, *Immediate Emancipation in Maryland. Proceedings of the Union State Central Committee, at a meeting held in Temperance Temple, Baltimore*, (Baltimore: Bull & Turtle, 1863), 15-16.

with free labor.⁴³ When Kennedy described “the unequal and unjust distribution” between “the owners of slave property and those accorded of the rest of the community” as “odious discrimination,” he was not referring to discrimination towards the slave population, but the discrimination towards whites who could not afford to own slaves.⁴⁴

Focusing exclusively on the notion that John Pendleton Kennedy argued to end slavery, ignores the fact that he supported all the presuppositions necessary to promote white superiority, the same ones proslavery advocates supported, save for the economic argument. Of course, not all abolitionists reasoned as John Pendleton Kennedy did, but his arguments were considered to be convincing to the abolitionists of the Maryland Pro Union Party. It is, therefore, important to remember that it was not uncommon for more moderate abolitionists to argue from similar ideological frameworks as proslavery advocates.

Sheppard Lee and Nat Turner’s Rebellion

Proslavery thought did not only exist to combat external criticism, it also developed as a reaction to the internal instabilities of slavery. Throughout American history, African-American slaves have resisted their enslavement. Even before the United States was founded, an Angolan slave named Jemmy led a party of South Carolinian slaves through the low country. These twenty men marched into a local arms store, killed everyone inside, and proceeded to arm themselves. The 1739 Stono Rebellion would only last twenty-four hours, resulting in the death of twenty whites and the twenty rebelling slaves, plus at least twenty more slaves not directly involved.⁴⁵ Jemmy and others subjected to bondage proved that slaves were not willing and submissive, but people with agency and a longing for freedom.

This, and other slave rebellions, caused panic throughout the country. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a black man born into slavery, was sold to a Bermudan slaveowner who later resettled in South-Carolina. Here, he organized a rebellion against the white population. Vesey had read antislavery literature and planned an uprising with hundreds of followers, perhaps even thousands. After the white population had arrested everyone thought to be involved, thirty-two blacks were exiled, and thirty-five more were hanged. Remarkably enough, four white men were tried as well, who were then fined and briefly imprisoned for

⁴³ Republican Party, *Immediate Emancipation in Maryland*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 16-17.

⁴⁵ Edward A. Pearson, “‘A Countryside Full of Flames’: A Reconsideration of the Stono Rebellion and Slave Rebelliousness in the Early Eighteenth-Century South Carolina Lowcountry,” *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 17:2 (1996) 22-23.

inciting the slave population to rebel.⁴⁶ Clearly a much lighter punishment than black people received for similar offenses. The fact that these four white men had supported the rebellion fitted neatly into the dominant narrative of antebellum America. As Dr. Philip F. Rubio writes, it was typically believed that “slaves were not capable of staging uprisings unless manipulated by alien agitators.”⁴⁷ The people most often, but not exclusively, blamed were white ‘agitators.’ This belief took away the agency, individuality, and humanity of African-American slaves. Which, in turn, aided the perpetuation of the ideology of white superiority.

A similar story was constructed around the most famous slave rebellion in United States history: the Nat Turner Rebellion. Nat Turner was a Virginian slave, working in bondage in rural Southampton County. In 1825, when Turner was 24 years old, he started to believe God was sending him visions. According to Turner, he “saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams.”⁴⁸ Over the years, he inspired his fellow slaves to rise up against their enslavers, planning their insurrection for the fourth of July, 1831: independence day.

The day of rebellion eventually had to be postponed when Turner fell ill, but on August 21 the rebelling slaves killed their master and his entire family in their sleeps. When the ensuing revolt was all over, fifty whites had died, as well as the sixty slaves that were eventually caught. Nat Turner himself escaped, but was found two months later and sequentially hanged.⁴⁹

Whites were again frightened by the thought of slaves demanding freedom through violent action. Yet, not being able to see African-Americans as fully human, they could not, or refused to, understand why slaves revolted in the first place. Thomas R. Gray, who acted as Turner’s lawyer, wrote after the event, “Public curiosity has been on the stretch to understand the origin and progress of this dreadful conspiracy, and the motives which influences its diabolical actors.”⁵⁰ After Nat Turner was captured and had confessed, he told Gray why he rebelled. Most of what we know about Turner’s motives, is what Gray has written down. Gray was a slaveowner himself, but his father had indebted the family business, allegedly because

⁴⁶ “Denmark Vesey: American Freedman and Insurrectionist” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 2, 2021, www.brittanica.com/biography/Denmark-Vesey; Philip F. Rubio, ““Though He Had A White Face, He Was a Negro In Heart”: Examining the White Men Convicted of Supporting the 1822 Denmark Vesey Slave Insurrection Conspiracy,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 113:1 (2012) 50-51.

⁴⁷ Rubio, “Though He Had A White Face,” 52.

⁴⁸ Thomas Gray, “The Confessions of Nat Turner to the Public,” in: *A Nineteenth-Century American Reader* 3rd ed., ed. M. Thomas Inge (Washington D.C.: United States Information Agency, 2001), 300.

⁴⁹ Gray, “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” 298; These Truths, 205.

⁵⁰ Gray, “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” 299.

of a gambling addiction.⁵¹ As Gray owned slaves, and also had monetary motives to publish a sensationalist piece on an event that captured the American public, it is certain that his biases influenced his rapport. But even if the author had ulterior motives, it is generally accepted that Turner was a very religious man, and was able to read and write. Turner is reported to have said “The manner in which I learned to read and write... had great influence on my mind.”⁵² Which he had learned from his master’s wife, a white woman.

After Turner was tried and hanged, the Virginia legislature briefly debated the emancipation of all slaves, in fear of other rebellions. What happened instead was a storm of legislation to further curtail the rights of slaves throughout the slave states. The most important of which being, making it illegal for a slave to learn to read or write, as well as for whites to teach them.⁵³ Again, it is important to remember that whites did not frame their fears as the fear of slaves being educated, they framed it as the fear of whites tricking the ‘docile’ and ‘happy’ slaves into rebellion. Proslavery whites therefore did not see slaves as their direct adversaries, these were the abolitionists. They did not see their proslavery novels as a rebuke to slaves fighting for their independence, they rebuked the ‘abolitionist idea’ that slaves were unhappy at all. Although proslavery and abolitionist writers did not frame it as such, proslavery writing might have been influenced firstly and foremost by the internal realities of slavery. Instead of conceding the influence of Southern slaves, proslavery writers chose to construct a narrative wherein white abolitionists were powerful agitators.

A grand narrative including a pre- and a post-anti-Tom novel is contingent on the idea that Southern proslavery writing was reactionary to Northern abolitionist writers. It is contingent on the North versus South dichotomy. Although, it is clear proslavery writers were reactionary, they reacted to any threat to their white superiority, not just Northern abolitionists. By accepting the North versus South debate, agency was effectively taken away from the slaves themselves, whose actions prompted a response by proslavery advocates to reinforce the legitimacy of institutional racism. Therefore, even the framing, i.e. how these literary works are being discussed today, can be traced back to antebellum racial stratification. If we accept that the story about abolitionist and proslavery literature should be defined by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or even William Lloyd Garrison, we unknowingly view things from a mostly white perspective.

⁵¹ David F. Allmendinger Jr., *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014) 218-227.

⁵² Gray, “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” 299.

⁵³ Lapore, *These Truths*, 205.

In other words: if Southern literature is anti-Tom literature, it is about Northern abolitionists fighting (from a perspective influenced by whiteness) against Southern proslavery advocates, and therefore marginalizes the very real impact slaves within the South had on the development of Southern literature.

The clearest example of literature dehumanizing slaves through these described mechanisms is Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* (1836). Bird was born in Delaware, another 'border slave state.' However, he was moved to Philadelphia when only four years old, where he continued to live for the rest of his life.

Bird's novel is *not* considered to be a part of the canon of the proslavery plantation romance novel. This is, perhaps, because it is a story about a man who transfers his soul into multiple characters all over America. Only one of the characters he inhabits is a slave. So, only a part of the novel concerns itself with slavery. Perhaps he is ignored because he was more a Pennsylvanian than a Southerner. Or, perhaps the blatant racism in his novels does not fit the 'soft' defense of slavery narrative. Whatever the reason, *Sheppard Lee* should be, in my opinion, the prime example of reactionary thought in the antebellum South.

In this novel the main character, Sheppard Lee, comes to inhabit the body of a black slave. The name Bird gave to the slave was Nigger Tom, who will be called Tom throughout the rest of this chapter. As a white man inhabiting a black body, he is able to read. He is also characterized as intellectually superior to the slaves. When he sees the slaves he assumes they want freedom, and starts to devise a plan to convince the slaves to rebel. He does this with the aid of abolitionist pamphlets from the North. Clearly a reference to the then popular abolitionist pamphlets from William Lloyd Garrison. Initially, the slaves are weary. "Don't b'leeb in 'm [abolitionists]." Said Governor, one of the slaves. "Who says chain nigga in Vaginnee?.. An't I slave, hah? Who chains Gubbe'nor?... Little book big lie!"⁵⁴

Here Bird is trying to counter the abolitionist arguments of the enchaining of slaves. Bird claims that slaves were indeed freer than abolitionists suggested. It is also striking that, even for the time, the language used by the slaves is particularly dumbed down, though it was common to infantilize slaves in literature by making a caricature of the way they spoke. The excuse for this dialect was that it was meant to be comedic.

Eventually, Tom makes the slaves question their freedom. It is clear from the following passage that these fictionalized slaves do not possess the capacity to think of

⁵⁴ Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself. Vol. II.*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 184.

rebellion. When writing on the question of freedom, Bird addresses his audience directly to say that “that question had never before been asked on Ridgewood Hill. But all now asked it, and all, for the first time in their lives, began to think of their master as a foe and usurper.”⁵⁵ It was not the slaves, but a white man with Northern abolitionist propaganda, who ‘tricked’ the slaves into insurrection.

The story continues to convey the idea that slaves do not have the mental capacity to be civilized free men. Governor immediately turns against Christian values and towards bloodlust, saying “I’ll be de great man, and I shall hab my choice ob de women,” and “We shall have wifes enough when we kills white massas.”⁵⁶

Shepard Lee realizes his mistake, but he is too late. Similar to the events of the Nat Turner Rebellion, the entire white family is murdered by the strongest slave on the plantation. This mirrors what is believed to be Turner’s plan before deciding to kill the family in their sleep. Also akin to Nat Turner’s story, Tom is caught and hanged, but Shepard Lee leaves his body just before Tom is murdered.⁵⁷ Bird ends this section of the novel by warning his audience once again of the dangers of abolitionist literature,

“The power of that little pamphlet... to produce an effect for which we must charitably suppose it was not intended, was shown in the numbers of wretches by whom the prison was crowded; for it had been used to inflame the passions of the negroes on several different estates, all of whom had agreed to rise in insurrection, although, as it providentially happened, the revolt extended to the length of murder only on Ridgewood Hill.”⁵⁸

As was the case with Thomas R. Gray, Bird just could not conceive of the possibility that slaves would revolt on their own accord, because of their own struggle for humanity. Before abolitionism became a popular force, local white agitators were blamed. Now the blame could be shifted towards Northern abolitionists. Reinventing slave rebellion as a novel concept, as if it were invented and instigated by outside agitators instead.

Sheppard Lee reaffirms that the South blamed Northern abolitionists for the slave rebellions, taking away the agency of the enslaved. Unknowingly, the South was shaping the North versus South dichotomy. Not because they wanted to create a schism with the North,

⁵⁵ Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Vol II.*, 187.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 198.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 203-204.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 208-209.

but because they wanted to distance themselves from the atrocities of the slave system. The idea of the anti-Tom novel fits into this narrative, in that, today, it unknowingly supports the idea that history has a white perspective.

Antebellum plantation literature, before the anti-Tom novel, only supported a 'soft' defense of slavery in an economic sense. Ideologically the full defense of slavery had already been constructed. The tactic of proslavery novelists, was to dehumanize African-Americans by infantilizing them and taking away any sense of agency. Black slaves were considered to be happy, docile, and part of the plantation family, a complete inversion of reality on behalf of white audiences. To uphold these myths, any slave rebellion had to be orchestrated by non-slaves, who were most often white. This pattern assured that voices of rebelling slaves effectively got silenced.

This leads to the conclusion that the North versus South/Anti-Tom versus Uncle Tom dichotomies are insufficient for investigating the history of American racism, within literature or otherwise. These dichotomies were useful for the South, because the construction of the 'evil agitator' validated white supremacist ideology and distracted attention away from internal instability. The North versus South dichotomy is upheld today to explain the Civil War. However, this approach is deterministic. It presupposes a sequence of events that lead to secession, ignoring the broader pattern of normalized racism throughout the nation. (This point will be further explored in coming chapters.) This automatically means these dichotomies push academics to look for differences between the North and the South, instead of similarities.

Early plantation romances were written by people who supported slavery less ardently than their anti-Tom counterparts, though strictly in an economic sense, not in any moral sense. These novels are generally considered to be Southern literature, although none of the writers analyzed in this chapter lived in what would become the Confederate South. Proslavery literature was written as a response to abolitionism, although slave resistance in the South contributed at least as much to the development of proslavery argumentation in (fictional) literature. Therefore, there is no reason to highlight William Lloyd Garrison and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* specifically in galvanizing proslavery resistance. All of these factors lead to the conclusion that the framework in which Southern antebellum literature is studied, is not sufficiently useful.

Where this chapter has criticized the construct of the anti-Tom novel because it perpetuates the effective silencing of the slave population, the next chapter's argument will continue to deconstruct the North versus South dichotomy regarding Northern abolitionism as opposed to Southern slavery. In the coming chapter, two romance novels will be analyzed, that portray frontier life and contact/war with Native Americans. This will help to broaden the field of Southern literature as generally arguing for white superiority and racial stratification, beyond proslavery arguments. The chapter will further integrate the Southern narrative into the national one, blurring the lines between 'Southern,' and American literature.

Chapter II: The Frontier Novel and its Kinship with Proslavery Literature

Two estimates of the Indian character have generally been formed by writers upon the subject, widely different indeed in their results. By one of these, the North American Indians have been supposed to be possessed of almost every virtue which can ennoble human nature... On the other hand, their characters are alleged to be but a compound of treachery, cruelty, cowardice, ignorance, and conceit; and their boasted eloquence, a cheat.

- The American Quarterly Review (1837)

Overemphasizing the importance of Northern abolitionism on Southern antebellum literature, has led to the image of Southern novelists preoccupied with defending slavery. Although this was indeed a very important part of Southern literature, the justification of slavery in the plantation romance novels was only one of the ways Southern writers tried to reaffirm white superiority. The most prevalent example being the litany of frontier novels written in the 1830s. These were novels that helped to build an ideological justification for the genocide of Native Americans. To illustrate this phenomenon, two of the most famous frontier novels of the time: William Gilmore Simms *The Yemassee* (1835), a novel about the Yamasee War (1715-1717) fought between British settlers and Native American tribes in South Carolina, and *Nick of the Woods* (1837) written by Robert Montgomery Bird, the same author who wrote *Sheppard Lee*. *Nick of the Woods* is a frontier novel set in late eighteenth century Kentucky, right after the Revolutionary War, and just before the state was admitted into the Union.

The first chapter established the texts and figures of the existing overarching metanarrative, but this was a narrative that frontier novels are not considered to play a part of. Therefore, I will argue in favor of integrating both genres – plantation romance novels and frontier novels – into a broader metanarrative. This chapter is organized thematically, and I will discuss both of these frontier novels while comparing themes they hold in common.

By comparing these novels with each other, as well as to the common tropes seen in plantation novels, we can discover some striking similarities in regards to the dehumanization of non-whites and the affirmation of white superiority. At the same time, the similarities between plantation romance novels and frontier novels undermine the North versus South dichotomy, as the displacement and genocide of Native Americans were not specifically

Southern phenomena. Before I discuss these frontier novels extensively, it is important to give some historical context as to why these novels were specifically written in the 1830s, and why they were exclusively set in the past.

The American Frontier Wars and the ‘Vanishing Indian’

Even before the nineteenth century, American colonists profoundly adhered to the myth of the vanishing Indian. A belief that, as Dr. Kristina Bross explains, entails “that Indian deaths were necessary and inevitable – whether because of divine will, “natural” inferiority to whites, or manifest destiny.”⁵⁹ This helps explain why both Simms and Bird place their stories about Native Americans in the past, a time before the ‘vanishing Indian’ had nearly ‘disappeared.’ In *The Yemassee*, Simms describes a fictional time when settlers and natives worked together harmoniously. Until, in the eighteenth century, native “aid had ceased to be necessary to the Carolinians... The presents became fewer, the borderers grew bolder and more incursive, and new territory, daily acquired by the colonists in some way or other, drove them back.”⁶⁰ The settlers had simply become too ‘advanced’ to have any use for the natives. In his preliminary notes, Bird affirmed his belief in the myth of the vanishing Indian even more clearly, as he commented that “it has ever delighted the imaginations of romantic men, to find, in the poor barbarians, who roamed the forest and are now fading away from the prairies, of America, the relics of a once powerful and civilized community.”⁶¹ In this comment, Bird both affirms his belief in the vanishing Indian, as he rejects the romanticization of the civilized native. The second being a point we will return to later. As will be more thoroughly explained, both writers portray the vanishing Indian as a group that needs to make way for progress and civilization.

What is important at this specific part of the chapter, is the fact that these novels were not written at a time when natives had nearly vanished, they were instead written at a time when there was an increase in government sanctioned murder and displacement of Native Americans. As mentioned in the introduction, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 was a pivotal moment in Native American history when Native Americans living in the South were forced

⁵⁹ Kristina Bross, “Dying Saints, Vanishing Savages: “Dying Indian Speeches,”” *Colonial New England Literature* 36:3 (2001) 326.

⁶⁰ William Gilmore Simms, *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina. Vol. 1.* 2nd ed., (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 12.

⁶¹ Cecil B. Williams, “Introduction,” in: Robert Montgomery Bird, *Nick of the Woods, or, the Jibbenainosay: A Tale of Kentucky*, ed. Cecil B. Williams, (New York: American Book Company, 1939), XXX.

to move west of the Mississippi. According to Laura L. Mielke, “the Indian Question was crucial to the beginnings of a distinct identity for the American South before the Civil War. In the development and passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the federal government bowed before Southern state pressures.”⁶² It is more than coincidental that events in 1830 and 1832 were quickly followed by the appearance of frontier novels celebrating the slaughter of Native Americans. However, Dr. Mielke mistakenly implies that aggression against Native Americans was a predominantly Southern phenomenon. Northern tribes were displaced as well, and when one Native American leader, Black Hawk, decided to return to his ancestral land within the Michigan Territory, war ensued. Black Hawk united several tribes under his banner which resulted in the Indian Creek Massacre on May 20th, 1832. Fifteen whites were killed, and two teenage girls were captured to be ransomed. Two months later, Black Hawk and his forces were defeated by slaveowner and future president, Colonel Zachary Taylor.⁶³ Shaubena, one of the Native American warriors involved, shared his personal recollections of the war over forty years after the events.⁶⁴ Particularly interesting is the recount of the Attack at Ament’s Cabin. Shaubena described how he and the other warriors “approached the cabin cautiously, crawling on their hands and knees... with the intent of shooting the settlers as they came into the door-yard.”⁶⁵ As one of the settlers came outside, they shot “and tomahawked their victim, and surrounded the cabin.”⁶⁶ The other settlers barricaded themselves in, and a shootout ensued, until patrolling rangers chased the warriors away.⁶⁷ It is important to remember that, even though cabin attacks had been reported on since the beginning of colonization, when both Simms and Bird wrote about them, they were not writing about some far flung past, they were writing about recent events they certainly would have known about. Even the nickname of the main villain in *Nick of the Woods*, Black Vulture, is a pun on Black Hawk himself.⁶⁸

Still, these events are never mentioned in either Simms, or Bird’s novel. The aforementioned quote by Bird, in which he criticizes “the imaginations of romantic men,”

⁶² Laura L. Mielke, *Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 51, 2008), 51.

⁶³ “Black Hawk: Sauk and Fox Leader,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.brittanica.com/biography/Black-Hawk-Sauk-and-Fox-Leader>.

⁶⁴ As is the case with Nat Turner’s confession, Shaubena’s story has been written down by white men, and not by himself. This makes it hard to assess the precise accuracy, but it is known that the main events have their basis in historic fact.

⁶⁵ Nehemiah Matson, *Memories of Shaubena: With Incidents Relating to the Early Settlement of the West*, (Chicago: D.B. Cooke & Co., 1878), 227-228.

⁶⁶ Matson, *Memories of Shaubena*, 130.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 131-134.

⁶⁸ Williams, “Introduction,” XLII.

who portray Native Americans as “poor barbarians,” does give us an indication which discourse they did engage with. They either pretended, or believed, to be responding solely to other white authors. The most famous of which being James Fenimore Cooper, writer of *The Leatherstocking Tales* series. With the novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) specifically focused on the vanishing Indian myth, or “the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans.”⁶⁹ Just like the novels analyzed in this chapter, Cooper’s stories are set in colonial times, which helps perpetuate the vanishing Indian myth. However, *The Leatherstocking Tales* also perpetuate the idea of ‘the noble savage.’ A romantic version of Native Americans as a simple people in close contact with nature, unencumbered by the corrupting influences of civilization. (When Bird criticized the noble savage myth as promoting a civilized and powerful version of Native Americans, he was straw manning his ideological opponents with an opinion that was not widely held.) In the introduction of *Nick of the Woods*, Bird wrote, “the North American savage has never appeared to us the gallant and heroic personage he seems to others,” directly criticizing the noble savage myth.⁷⁰ It is striking that novelists critical of the noble savage myth started to engage in the discourse the years following 1830, seven full years after the first *Leatherstocking Tales* novel was published, while there is a direct chronological link with political events like the Trial of Tears and the Black Hawk War. Although writers like Simms and Bird responded to the myth of the noble savage, they were urged to do so because of recent political events. This process of covering up the impact of events involving Native Americans on white discourse is almost identical to the denial of the impact of slave-rebellions. Just as the agency of rebelling slaves on the writing of proslavery literature had been denied and suppressed, so had the agency of rebelling Native Americans. Even though these events directly influenced a boom in the popularity of frontier literature, the writers of these novels solely engaged with other white writers, and pretended Native Americans were historical artifacts. The refusal, or inability, to acknowledge the impact of non-whites on white society, is one of the ways an ideology of white superiority was upheld.

The March Towards Civilization

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1806, William Gilmore Simms would become the most prolific Southern writer of his time. Even so, today he is largely forgotten, and in academic circles he is most often only remembered for writing *The Sword and the Distaff*

⁶⁹ Mielke, *Moving Encounters*, 36.

⁷⁰ Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, 5.

(1854), his one and only anti-Tom novel. A logical result from the existing metanarrative regarding antebellum literature, yet strange, considering the fact that *The Yemassee* was his “most successful work considering audience appeal.”⁷¹ This novel essentially legitimizes the genocide of Native Americans by pointing to the inevitable march towards civilization. *The Yemassee*, set in early eighteenth century Carolina, starts with a clear explanation as to why war between whites and natives was inevitable. Simms describes a changing relationship between the colonists and neighboring tribes, because until the start of the eighteenth century natives “had never been troubled by that worst of tyranny of all, the consciousness of their inferiority to a power of which they were now beginning to grow jealous.”⁷² Simms argued that natives attacked whites purely out of jealousy, as he claimed the success of the colonists “prompted the Yemasseees in a desire to arrest the progress of a race with which they could never hope to acquire any real or lasting affinity.”⁷³ He continued to address his audience, and tried to convince them natives were an existential threat, arguing that “in his nakedness, the savage usually seeks to neutralize the superiority of European armour.”⁷⁴

Bird constructed a similar argument. In the preface of *Nick of the Woods*, he praised the ordinary Virginia and Carolina farmers who “wrested from the savage the garden-land of his domain, and secured to their conquest all the benefits of civil government and laws.”⁷⁵ In other words: colonists were coming to cultivate and civilize the fruitful lands that the savages were wasting. It is no accident Bird referred to Kentucky as a “garden-land,” and later as an “Eden,” as he conveyed to the reader these ‘promised lands’ are God’s gift for white settlers to colonize. The story continues with a group of settlers travelling in a caravan. Roland, a young aristocratic officer down on his luck, is charged with protecting the rear of the caravan, “which he commanded... To press forward the van, there remained only three persons, two of whom were negro slaves, both mounted and armed, that followed at a little distance behind, leading thrice their numbers of pack-horses.”⁷⁶ The subtle implication being that the march towards civilization included the expansion of slavery.

Similar to Simms, Bird let the reader know early on, that the existence of Native Americans was a threat to white survival. In *Nick of the Woods* this is done by Colonel Bruce

⁷¹ “William Gilmore Simms: American Novelist,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Gilmore-Simms>.

⁷² Simms, *The Yemassee*, Vol. 1., 12.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 13.

⁷⁵ Robert Montgomery Bird, *Nick of the Woods, or, the Jibbenainosay: A Tale of Kentucky*, ed. Cecil B. Williams, (New York: American Book Company, 1939), 4.

⁷⁶ Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, 17.

sharing his experiences fighting “Injuns” with Roland. Wars which Bruce describes as “sad affairs, indeed; and the numbers of white men murdered made them still more shocking.”⁷⁷ Bruce continues to tell stories to show that it does not matter if whites invade Native American territory, because natives will attack whites relentlessly regardless. He expresses this sentiment most clearly when he says “we’re no worse off in Kentucky than our neighbors. Thar’s them five hundred Pennsylvanians that went out in June, under old Cunnel Crawford from Pittsburg.”⁷⁸ The message is clear: no matter where they lived, white colonists were constantly threatened by bloodthirsty savages.

The Image of the Bloodthirsty Savage

For antebellum novelists, it was not enough to frame Native Americans as a weaker race that was destined to be defeated. To uphold an ideology of white superiority, white Americans needed natives to be the bad guy. If Native Americans were only seen as weak, that would logically entail that whites had massacred hapless victims. This led to a strange paradoxical trope wherein Native Americans were simultaneously portrayed as a weak and dying race, *and* a strong and menacing adversary, without civilized morals. In *The Yemassee* the natives plan their “schemes of war and violence,” because they are jealous of the superior whites.⁷⁹ Simms continuously let his readers know the natives were the aggressors, not the settlers. The Chief in *The Yemassee*, Sanutee, is very clear with his bloodthirsty intentions, as he proclaims that “he shall drink blood for strength. – He shall hunt the track of the English to the sounds of the big waters; and the war-whoop shall ring death in the ear that sleeps.”⁸⁰ However, Simms also described how a native can be, to some extent, civilized by white people. Sanutee’s son, Occonestoga, was brought up by the English and does not want to fight his white friends. Because of this, he has become to consider himself a dog as he has been civilized and lost the loyalty of his tribe. Gabriel Harrison, lead character in the *Yemassee*, and secretly the Lord Governor of Carolina, assures Occonestoga he is “Not like a dog... but like a good friend.”⁸¹

Bird’s descriptions of natives were even more dehumanizing, as in *Nick of the Woods* natives are clearly beyond any form of civilizing. Whereas both stories feature scenes of

⁷⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁹ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. 1.*, 82.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁸¹ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. 1.*, 190.

natives attacking innocent white settlers, Bird specifically focused his narrative on natives attacking women and children. For the antebellum reader it would have been clear that, not only did natives not respect the rules of war by attacking the defenseless, they were willing to attack white women, who were seen as the “moral consciousnesses” of American society.⁸² White women were often portrayed as the epitome of virtuous fragility and so, the natives in the story were attacking the essence of goodness itself. The character Colonel Bruce is especially worried about the settlers “that live in the wilderness and have wives and daughters,” as he is saddened to “think of *their* falling into the hands of the brutes, who murder and scalp a woman just as readily as a man.”⁸³ Later in the novel, another caravan member, Nathan, shares his memories of brutal natives massacring the innocent. As he tells the story of the natives that “murdered [a] poor old granny, and brained the innocent, helpless babe... he snatched the poor babe from the dying women’s arm, and struck it with the same bloody hatchet.”⁸⁴ The men in the caravan even rejoice to the chance to take revenge on the natives, as they find out their whereabouts one of the men runs up to Captain Roland and says, “Whar will they have such another chance? A thousand Injuns ready cut and dried for killing!”⁸⁵

Both novels also include very graphic cabin attacks, similar to the Attack at Ament’s Cabin. Because these scenes are for the most part very similar, it is only necessary to analyze one: the defense of the Block House in *The Yemassee*. Simms mentions “the shelter of the Block House” numerous times throughout his novel, and makes it the most prominent location in his story.⁸⁶ This cabin eventually transforms from a safe haven to a scene of horror when the natives, after several failed ambushes, manage to sneak in through the window at night. In an effort to portray the natives as amoral beings, one of the natives, Ishiagaska, goes after a sleeping woman first, as “she lay motionless... the wily savage descended to the floor.”⁸⁷ Her beauty “worked no change in the ferocious soul of Ishiagaska,” as he drew “his knife from the sheath... and the inflexible point bore down upon that sweet, white round, in which all was loveliness, and where was all of life.”⁸⁸ The girl manages to wake up in the nick of time, and starts to scream and pray. She is, of course, saved just in time by a heroic pastor,

⁸² Carol Lasser and Stacey M. Robertson, *Antebellum Women, Private, Public, Partisan* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), XIX-2.

⁸³ Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, 33.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 148, 151.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸⁶ William Gilmore Simms, *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina. Vol. II.* 2nd ed., (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 12, 54, 98, 99.

⁸⁷ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. II.*, 134.

⁸⁸ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. II.*, 135.

who kills Ishiagaska. Attacks on the innocent, especially women, are constantly used to portray the native population as savages. By making natives a threat to all white people, extermination is legitimized.

Both Simms and Bird established natives as bloodthirsty savages whose mere existence was a threat to the white settlers' survival. By doing so they legitimize the genocide of Native Americans and affirm white moral superiority. However, they also encounter a problem, the natives are too strong and powerful, something that threatens another important aspect of white superiority: physical dominance. Both novelists performed a careful balancing act between portraying Native Americans as inferior and portraying them as a threat. To accomplish this, the frontier novel uses similar tactics as its Plantation Myth counterpart. Any sense of agency of non-whites is taken away by making evil white men responsible for these attacks. Native Americans are simply seen as unable to rebel on their own accord. This idea does not originate from frontier literature, but is perpetuated by it. In fact, the very idea that whites are responsible for native warfare is enshrined in the very constitution. As it makes the claim that the British Crown,

“has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”⁸⁹

In *The Yemassee*, where the British colonists are the heroes, the role of villain falls upon the Spanish “who were at the bottom of the conspiracy.”⁹⁰ The Natives are dependent on the provision of “hatchets, knives, nails, and gaudy dresses, furnished by Spaniards, who well knew how to tempt and work upon the appetites and imagination of the savages.”⁹¹ Although the concrete aspects of the conspiracy are never discussed fully, it is clear the author tells a story very familiar to its audience: natives are not strong or clever enough to threaten colonists without outside help. A paradoxical argument, considering the novel starts out with the idea that the Yemassee attack out of their own jealousy, not because of outside

⁸⁹ “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

⁹⁰ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. II.*, 51.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

interference. The argument seems to be convincing, mostly because the general audience was already convinced of this idea beforehand.

Bird's novel has a more fantastical approach, incorporating this white supremacist trope. In *Nick of the Woods* the natives are directly controlled by two white men, Abel Doe and Braxley, who try to steal the rightful inheritance of the aristocratic protagonist, Captain Roland. In this scenario, Braxley is the rich businessman who masterminds the plan to kill Roland and steal his fortune, while Abel Doe is the poor white man who needs to implement the idea.⁹² In contrast with *The Last of the Mohicans*, where the protagonist learns and grows from his experiences with the natives, Abel Doe becomes a self-proclaimed "white Injun."⁹³ Doe essentially devolves because of his contact with the native population, as he himself declares "for I have made myself jist the d-dest rascal that was ever made of a white man. Lying, and cheating, and perjuring, and murdering."⁹⁴ One of the many strange examples of Braxley, Doe, and the natives being self-aware of how evil they are and rejoicing in it. Another example being Wenonga, one of the Indian chiefs, who cries out "me drink white-man blood! Me no heart!"⁹⁵

Although there are differences in the antebellum white perspective on African-Americans and Native Americans, the overarching process of dehumanization is very similar: non-whites are considered too uncivilized and unintelligent to form any type of resistance without the aid of white men.

Both novels end with the complete extermination of the native population, which the authors considered to be happy endings. In *Nick of the Woods* the settlers eventually take the fight to their enemy. Here they do not only conquer the tribe, but they also annihilate them, as one of the characters "the valiant Dodge displayed his trophy, a scalp of black hair, yet reeking with blood."⁹⁶ The act of scalping, considered a barbaric practice throughout the novel, is now justified as an act of revenge. Revenge is also used as a motive to justify "the destruction or capture of every inhabitant."⁹⁷ This includes the killing of women and children, again an act that, when it is perpetrated by natives, is seen as amoral and used to justify the genocide of

⁹² Many of these antebellum novels have clear classist elements in which aristocratic men have to fight to earn their rightful place on top of the social ladder. There is also an interesting interplay between racism and classism in most of these novels, a theme that is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.

⁹³ Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, 313.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 312.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 334.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 394.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 396.

Native Americans. Still, according to Bird, the wholesale murder of the natives was not enough since “the triumph was not completed until the village, with its fields of standing corn, had been entirely destroyed.”⁹⁸ Bird managed to dehumanize Native Americans in such a way that he could justify any horrific genocidal act. Although *The Yemassee* focuses more on events in the Block House, and less so on the surrounding battles, the ending is as gruesome and horrifying as the ending of *Nick of the Woods*. After the Yemassee are completely destroyed, the settlers send their slaves onto the battlefield where “the negroes, now scour[e] the field of battle with their huge clubs and hatchets, knocking upon the head all of the Indians who yet exhibited any signs of life. As wild almost as the savages, they luxuriated in a pursuit to them so very novel.”⁹⁹ By associating African-Americans with the most gruesome acts of genocide, Simms cleverly managed to uphold some sense of white moral superiority, while dehumanizing Native Americans and African-Americans simultaneously.

It is clear proslavery novels and frontier novels use very similar tactics in order to legitimize and uphold white superiority. In both types of novels non-whites can only thrive, either positively or negatively, under a paternalistic white system. Without proper guidance all non-whites are seen as a possible threat (although Bird believed natives were a threat regardless). This means non-whites could only be civilized, if at all, under white supervision. Non-whites were seen as incapable of acting fully human on their own, as dehumanizing non-whites provided a moral justification for subjugation. These racist themes are so predominant throughout both plantation myth and frontier novels, that it makes these novels more thematically similar than they are different. The dividing lines created between these types of profoundly racist literature is largely artificial, as their main purpose is to legitimize the predominant white supremacist worldview.

Now that these similarities have been established, analyzing anti-Tom literature will provide a clearer sense of the continuation of underlying racist ideologies. The next chapter will analyze Caroline Hentz’s *The Planter’s Northern Bride* to show the evident similarities between plantation romance novels and anti-Tom novels, which also confirms the similar underlying racist structures that are the foundation of frontier literature. It is important to mention the differences between anti-Tom novels, and its predecessors. These differences do not include ideological changes, but changes in messaging, and will be discussed in both the third and fourth chapter.

⁹⁸ Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, 397.

⁹⁹ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. II.*, 241-242.

Chapter III: *The Planter's Northern Bride* and the Continuation of the Plantation Myth

When she heard, with perfect surprise and consternation, Christian and humane people actually recommending the escaped fugitives into slavery... when she heard on all hands, from kind, compassionate, and estimable people, in the free States of the North, deliberations and discussions as to what Christian duty could be on this head, she could only think these men and Christians cannot know what slavery is.

- Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852)

Just as slave rebellions and early abolitionism fueled the plantation romances of the 1820s and 30s, and the displacement of Native Americans of the 1830s, fueled novels that legitimize existing racial hierarchies, the 1850s saw similar literature in response to the Fugitive Slave Act. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in opposition to the newly passed Fugitive Slave Act, and with the legitimacy of the act being challenged all over the North, anti-Tom novels naturally concerned themselves with defending the law.¹⁰⁰

Most anti-Tom novels did not achieve a lot of success, but one of several exceptions was the 1854 novel *The Planter's Northern Bride*. This became Caroline Lee Hentz's most notable work, which will be analyzed in the coming pages. First, by identifying similarities between *The Planter's Northern Bride* and older plantation romance novels, and second by explaining changes within the late-antebellum plantation romance novel, specifically as related to the Fugitive Slave Act and the process of American industrialization. In the process, it will become evident that, although there are some distinctions between pre-anti-Tom novels and anti-Tom novels, they are all plantation myth novels written to support white superiority. This strong sense of continuation further undermines the idea of a progression of sectionalism between the antebellum North and South. Similar to the first chapter, this sense of progression only makes sense if we view slavery purely in economic terms and fail to consider the strong sense of continuation regarding white supremacist ideology.

¹⁰⁰ Gerardo Del Guercio, *Fugitive Slave Law in the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: an American Society Transforms its Culture*, (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 89.

A continuation of the Tropes of the Plantation Myth

Caroline Lee Hentz was born in the year 1800 as Caroline Lee Whiting, spending her entire youth in Lancaster, Massachusetts, where she became a local teacher at the young age of seventeen. After marrying Nicholas Marcellus Hentz in 1824, the married couple lived in North Carolina, Kentucky, Alabama, and eventually Florida. All the while Hentz kept working in local schools. She wrote her first play, *Lamora; or the Western Wild*, in 1832. The play, describing frontier life and encounters with Native Americans, was most likely written with the popularity of frontier literature in mind. It would take for over a decade before Hentz became a fulltime writer in the late 1840s, after her husband fell ill, as she was one of the few writers at the time who earned enough money to quit her job and become a professional writer.¹⁰¹ Between 1850 and 1854 Hentz wrote ten different romance novels to support her family, with *The Planter's Northern Bride* being the most successful.

The plot of the novel was highly influenced by Hentz' self-described experiences, and revolves around a daughter of a Northern abolitionists who marries a Southern gentlemen and is shown the 'true' nature of slavery. In her novel's preface, Hentz described her "residence in the South," where she claimed to "have never witnessed one scene of cruelty or oppression, never beheld a chain or a manacle, or the infliction of a punishment more severe than parental authority would be justified in applying to filial disobedience or transgression."¹⁰² A sentiment repeated throughout the novel. In fact, all the myths common to the plantation romance novel: the loyal/happy slave, the kind slaveowner, and the plantation family unit, are repeated often. The happy and loyal slave character is introduced almost instantly, as the Southern slaveowner, Mr. Moreland, asks his slave Albert if he could be convinced by abolitionists to run away. Albert answers straight forwardly, "They couldn't come round this boy with that story... I ain't afraid of anything they can say and do, to get me away from you as long as you want me to stay with you." Mr. Moreland responds happily, "Well said, Albert! I do trust you, and shall surely take you with me." Albert continues, "Oh! Master, I wish I may find everybody as well off as I am."¹⁰³ Immediately, the reader knows Albert is happy and loyal, and is aware that he and Mr. Moreland have a strong connection.

¹⁰¹ Carmen ManuelCuenca, "An Angel in the Plantation: The Economics of Slavery and the Politics of Literary Domesticity in Caroline Lee Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride*," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 51:1 (1997); "Caroline Lee Hentz," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, accessed December 2, 2021, www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2449.

¹⁰² Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1854), V.

¹⁰³ Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, 16.

Mr. Moreland readily takes up the mantle of paternal figure, claiming that he as a slaveowner has nothing but good intentions. He describes the owning of slaves as the “duty to take care of them, to make their life... as much as possible a life of comfort and enjoyment,” as well as “to nurse them in sickness, provide for them in old age, and save them from the horrors and miseries of want.”¹⁰⁴ To show her readers how kind slaveowners are, Hentz briefly introduces Georgia’s state governor into her novel, who remains nameless. The short chapter involving the governor, features one of his slaves, Lem, who accidentally kills the governor’s most prized horse, while wounding himself. Upon hearing the news the governor exclaims, “I don’t care... if both horses are killed, if poor Lem is spared,” as he quickly sends help to save Lem’s life.¹⁰⁵ Lem survives, but another older slave, Charity, unfortunately dies. A death mourned by the entire ‘family.’ The mistress of the house recollects how Charity helped raise her and her siblings, as she loved them “as if we were her own children.”¹⁰⁶

Another similarity with older plantation romances is the need for proper ‘education,’ for the child-like slaves. In order to do so “Moreland paid a regular salary to an itinerant preacher for supplying [a] rustic pulpit on the Sabbath.”¹⁰⁷ But, in yet another similarity, the proper education of white slaveowners can be disrupted by abolitionist agitators. This occurs when a secret Northern abolitionist, Mr. Brainard, pretends to be “preaching to those [slaves] who have become civilized and partly Christianized by slavery,” as he secretly teaches the slaves about abolitionism.¹⁰⁸ As was the case in *Sheppard Lee*, the slaves become worse off after they are ‘tricked’ into accepting abolitionism, the result being “a spirit of insubordination gradually stealing over the plantation. There was sullenness and gloom, where, formerly cheerfulness and good-humour enlivened the labours of the field, and the merry laugh, the spontaneous song no longer were heard in the evening twilight.”¹⁰⁹ In this version of slave rebellion, the insurrection is easily quelled without any deaths. Mr. Moreland ends up magnanimously forgiving all the slaves as he blames the Northern abolitionist for inciting them.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 235.

¹⁰⁶ Hentz, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, 237.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 347.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 407.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 455.

These tropes would be as easily recognizable for readers in 1834 as in 1854. Still, there are several new characteristics related to the Fugitive Slave Act, the resulting increase in popularity of abolitionism, and the expansion of American capitalism.

The Runaway Slave and the Slavery Debate

There are two features in the anti-Tom version of the plantation romance novel that can be considered distinct from earlier iterations. These new features consist of the introduction of the escaping slave character, and a more explicit portrayal of slavery, most often represented through discussions between Northern abolitionists and southerners, or by addressing the audience directly. The escaped slave character is often a variation on the theme of the rebelling slave. In *The Planter's Northern Bride*, the escaping slave character is represented by Chrissy, who is convinced by an abolitionist couple, Mr. and Mrs. Softly, to run away. "At first Crissy resisted with respectful firmness all the arguments which her new friends urged upon her understanding; but there was one temptation... she could make a fortune, all on her own. She could do it a hundred ways, with her smartness and industry."¹¹⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Softly manage to 'trick' Chrissy into thinking life as a free woman would be easy, and that being a slave is equal to "living in sin and shame and misery and degradation."¹¹¹ Mr. and Mrs. Softly arrange Chrissy's entire escape with an irrational religious zeal. Mrs. Softly is outed as a fanatic when she exclaims "[Chrissy] must be free! She should be free! It was her duty to be so, whether she desire[s] it or not."¹¹² The abolitionist couple are also firm believers in personal responsibility, as they leave Chrissy to her own devices once she has successfully escaped. Once Chrissy lives in the North she has to fend for herself, while the white Northerners reject her. She has to work harder than ever before and starts to fall ill. Once she becomes "very meek and humble and subdued... she started on her backward pilgrimage," and eventually gets a 'happy ending' when returning to her master.¹¹³

This story has direct parallels with the slave rebellion stories: a white outsider is the agitator, the promises of a better life turn out to be false, and the slave's life is worse for it. The main difference here is that this story is specifically catered to defend the Fugitive Slave Act, instead of defending against slave rebellions. Both arguments have been designed to

¹¹⁰ Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, 270.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 381.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 392.

rationalize why slaves would desire freedom, without fully accepting their agency or humanity.

The other main difference with pre-anti-Tom novels is indeed related to an increase in sectionalism. In anti-Tom novels, this sectionalism is portrayed by Southerners and Northerners directly debating slavery, with a calm and composed Southerner arguing an emotional and irrational abolitionist. When the abolitionist Mr. Hastings asks if Mr. Moreland could justify the slave trade started by the British, Mr. Moreland explains,

“I would answer *No!* but if you mean the involuntary slavery which surrounds me and my brethren of the South, I reply, I can justify it; we had no more to do with its existence than our own. We are not responsible for it, though we are for the duties it involves, the heaviest perhaps ever imposed upon man.”¹¹⁴

Mr. Moreland accuses the British of all the historical wrongs related to slavery, while Southern gentlemen have taken up the burden to improve the lives of the captured Africans. He continues to argue that slaves actually have a better quality of life than people living in Africa, arguing that “no degradation to which they are forced in their present condition, can compare to the misery, the degradation and hopelessness of their lot, in their native Africa, where they are doomed to a slavery more galling than imagination can conceive.”¹¹⁵ The life of slaves is also juxtaposed against the life of poor Northern whites, with one white servant, Betsy, calling herself “ten times more a slave,” because at least slaves are housed and fed.¹¹⁶ Strangely, Caroline Lee Hentz was criticizing the effect of unregulated capitalism on poor whites in the North, arguing that Northerners were often worse off than slaves were under white patronage, completely ignoring the millions of severely impoverished Southern whites who lived under the same capitalist system, yet still did not prefer to be enslaved.

Although this type of attack on capitalist free labor is specific to the late antebellum, it essentially provides a similar form of escapism from the harsh realities of the industrialized North that the old plantation myths, describing an idyllic agricultural society, provided as well. This myth, of the traditional Old South defending against the cruel capitalist North, remains popular to this day. We have encountered this throughout this paper, from Kennedy’s

¹¹⁴ Hentz, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, 82.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

1863 Union Party Speech, where he called slave labor inefficient as opposed to the efficiency of free labor, all the way up to the twentieth and twenty-first century, including quotes made by Hubbell, Dekker, and others, juxtaposing the outdated economic model of the agricultural South against the efficient capitalist North. As was the case with slave rebellions, outsiders were blamed for the cruelties of capitalism, although, in reality, there were internal factors at play as well. Especially the fact that the South was industrializing at an increasing rate too, which resulted in more and more slaves being forced to work in factories, as well as being trained for specialized labor. This resulted in rising job insecurity and disaffection among poor whites towards the white elites.¹¹⁷ Some poor Southern whites even started to oppose slavery, not because of abolitionist ideals, but because of unfair competition.¹¹⁸ These indicators point to Southern novelists romanticizing and validating the slave system by denying the brutal capitalist realities of slave labor. If we follow the same pattern of Southern whites blaming outsiders for slave rebellions and runaway slaves, an increase in Southern industry would logically result in blaming outsiders for the negative effects of capitalism.

Admittedly, it is still debated to what extent capitalism exhorted external and/or internal pressures upon the South, as both were the case. Free states pushed for free labor markets, whereas proslavery advocates viewed slaves as capital goods, and thus existing outside the free labor market altogether. Meanwhile, poor Southern whites still had to compete within a free market system, being gradually outcompeted by slave labor. In the years before the Civil War, the level of landless farmers had risen to a staggering twenty percent, many of whom travelled to cities only to, again, have to compete with slave labor.¹¹⁹ Whichever factor has been most influential, it is clear that the South saw the ideal of free labor as an increasing threat, as well as an outside ideology proslavery owners could villainize to distract from the increasing internal instability. In opposition, the Fugitive Slave Act represented the encroachment of non-free labor in the North. This discussion, about what type of labor should be implemented in a modern capitalist society, plays an important role in the anti-Tom novel. When academics describe the change in Southern literature after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as becoming “uncompromising” in their defense of slavery, this is a mischaracterization.¹²⁰ If we want to name late antebellum novels in a reactionary fashion,

¹¹⁷ Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men : Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 64-69.

¹¹⁸ Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 93-99.

¹¹⁹ Gary T. Edwards, “Anything... That Would Pay, Yeoman Farmers and the Nascent Market Economy on the Antebellum Plantation Frontier,” in *Southern Society and Its Transformations, 1790-1860*, eds. Louis Gillespie ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 104-116; Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 64-99.

¹²⁰ Dessens, *Myths of the Plantation Society*, 158.

Fugitive Slave Act novels would be a more appropriate label than anti-Tom novels, although the regular description of plantation romance novels is most accurate.

The main goal of this chapter has been to further deconstruct the anti-Tom element of the North versus South dichotomy, by providing evidence for the continuation of racist tropes as adapted to recent political circumstances. This directly counters the idea of a progressive hardening of proslavery attitudes that exacerbated North versus South sectionalism. As we have seen, the arguments mounted in the defense of slavery did not change, but external factors did influence how these arguments were given shape. It is too simplistic to directly credit *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with causing some imagined increase in the Southern defense of racism. Instead, there are many interconnected factors that created sectional attitudes in the late antebellum, including the Fugitive Slave Act and industrialization. This culminated in challenges to the use of slave labor, not to the underlying structures promoting racial stratification. As we will see in the next chapter, these sectional attitudes towards slavery were not strong enough to justify a North versus South dichotomy, or to justify the regionalization of the South, because structural racism was supported throughout the United States.

The fourth chapter will address the perceived Americanness of 'Southern' novels, and how these novels started defending their previously self-evident American nature in the 1850s. To argue this point, *The Yemassee* and *Nick of the Woods* will again be used as subjects, together with the anti-Tom novel *The Planter's Northern Bride*. By analyzing these books in chronological order, the natural development of a North versus South dichotomy will be challenged, and this phenomenon will be represented as an unintended development of events taking place in the 1850s. The fourth chapter will also challenge the 'otherness' of the South, countering the idea of the South as a vault that contains the history of American racism.

Chapter IV: Southern Literature as American Literature

Rather than furnishing something so simple as a site of domestic regional variation for U.S. literature, our South always points beyond the national borders.

- Jennifer Rae Greeson (2010)

During the entire twentieth century, academics have juxtaposed the American North against the American South as if there were self-explanatory and natural differences between these two areas, as old as the founding of the United States itself. In the once famous work, *The Mind of the South* (1941), W.J. Cash wrote about the largely illiterate South, arguing Southern institutions had “no record that it ever added a single idea of any notable importance to the sum total of man’s stock.”¹²¹ He even went so far as to claim that “leaving Mr. Jefferson aside, the whole South produced, not only no original philosopher, but no derivative one to set beside Emerson and Thoreau; no novelist but poor Simms to measure against the Northern galaxy headed by Hawthorne and Melville and Cooper.” Still, even Simms did not escape his Southern inferiority, as Cash argued that Simms found his reputation “snubbed” because “he had no proper pedigree.”¹²² In short, Cash created a history of the South in which it had no cultural impact on the United States whatsoever. This process of othering the South continued in Jay B. Hubbell’s major work, *The South and American Literature, 1607-1900* (1954). Hubbell described “the Southern writer” as “suffer[ing] from isolation.” As a result “new ideas did not reach him quickly. He rarely had literary friends on whose criticism and encouragement he could rely. He had at hand no suitable means of publishing, and he had little idea of the commercial value of what he wrote.”¹²³ The only thing the South ever produced, according to Hubbell, were “such lesser figures as Simms, Kennedy, the Cookes, Hayne, and Timrod.”¹²⁴ In 1987, the othering of the South continued, as Dr. George Dekker wrote about Southern novelists that “their best work is clearly inferior to that of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville.”¹²⁵ Dekker identified the main drive for Southern novelists to write was “to preserve a regional identity... against the dominant national culture.”¹²⁶

¹²¹ Wilbur Joseph Cash, *The Mind of the South*, (New York: Random House, 1941), 95.

¹²² Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 96.

¹²³ Hubbell, *The South & American Literature*, 215.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹²⁵ George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 274.

¹²⁶ Dekker, *The American Historical Romance*, 105.

Research in the last five to ten years, from academics such as Katherine A. Burnett and Jonathan Daniel Wells, has changed the direction of Southern literary studies to find the connections between Southern novelists and their Northern counterparts. Wells specifically, researched the rigorous correspondence between Northern and Southern antebellum writers. Using the content of these letters to show that both Northern and Southern writers “believed that they were engaged in a common endeavor to convince a fickle reading public that *American* authors and themes were worth celebrating.”¹²⁷ Concluding that Southern and Northern writers built lasting friendships, and that southerners “saw much in common between the South and New York City.”¹²⁸ Many Southern novels were published in New York, including Simms’ *The Yemassee*. Although different American writers often disagreed over the issue of slavery, they did not think of themselves as involved in a North versus South divide.

The focus on integrating the literary South is a positive development, but it does not go far enough. As we have seen in the first chapter, the North versus South dichotomy remains very much alive by making the anti-Tom novel the central focal point of Southern literature. One of the effects being that Southern literature, when not focusing primarily on slavery, is to a large extent ignored, as argued in the second chapter. These are problems that are not being sufficiently addressed by modern academics, who often do not address Southern literature beyond the North versus South slavery debate, and therefore, cannot fully integrate Southern literature into the broader field of American literature.

In this chapter I will continue to argue the Americanness of Southern literature. Starting with the claims of newspapers and magazines of the historical accuracy and American character of Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* and Simms’ *The Yemassee*, which aided these novels in constructing a mythical American past of white superiority, regarding both power and morality, even though the values that these novels express are often conflated with historical *Southern* racism today. *Nick of the Woods* is important because it proves the popularity of so called ‘Southern antebellum’ values, even if written by someone often not considered Southern. The acceptance of *The Yemassee* is important because it proves that writers that are considered Southern today were able to gain national popularity. The coming pages will address the popularity of Southern antebellum novels, discussing published reviews of *The Yemassee*, *Nick of the Woods* and *The Planter’s Northern Bride*. Proving that

¹²⁷ Wells, “Writers, Editors, and Intellectual Exchange,” 115.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

the popularity of ‘Southern’ novels, and its white supremacist values, remained to be positively received by Northern media. The end of this chapter will provide the known sales numbers of these novels, and compare them to the sales of contemporary books that are considered to be true American works today.

This chapter finalizes the dismantling of the North versus South dichotomy by confirming that there was not only a national market for Southern writers, but there was also a national market specifically for explicitly proslavery novels, even in the decade before the Civil War. It will also become clear that these writers believed, as Wells argued, to be part of a generation of novelists creating a canon of national American literature, not Southern literature.

American Mythmaking

When John Pendleton Kennedy, writer of *Swallow Barn*, published his most successful novel, *Horse-Shoe Robinson, A Tale of Tory Ascendancy* (1835), he put a letter he wrote to Washington Irving into his preface. Irving was a fellow novelist from New York, most often remembered for his short stories *Rip van Winkle* (1819), and *Sleepy Hollow* (1820). He was also Kennedy’s friend. In this letter, Kennedy thanked Irving for showing him “that an American book may be richly worth reading.”¹²⁹ Although Kennedy was a proslavery writer, this did not stop him from considering both him and Irving as American novelists, trying to create an American oeuvre.

Horse-Shoe Robinson’s preface does not end when the letter does. Instead, Kennedy directly addressed his audience, stating that “my readers will perceive that I have been scrupulous to preserve the utmost historical accuracy in my narrative.”¹³⁰ He was convinced that the subject of the novel, the Revolutionary War, needed to be remembered to create a positive American self-image. Written in a time when the last Revolutionary War veterans were slowly dying of old age, their collective memory disappearing, Kennedy felt the urge to warn that “it shall go hard with us if we do not soon bring to light every remnant of tradition that the war has left,” urging the importance of remembering history in the creation of

¹²⁹ John Pendleton Kennedy, *Horse-Shoe Robinson: A Tale of Tory Ascendancy*, (New York: George P. Putnam, 1835), iii.

¹³⁰ Kennedy, *Horse-Shoe Robinson*, xiv.

‘modern day’ America.¹³¹ With these statements Kennedy joined an American antebellum convention: proclaiming to write a true American novel based on historical fact.

In Simms *The Yemassee* we encounter similar sentiments, written in his preface. Simms described his novel as a true “American romance.” One that “is so styled, as much of the material could have been furnished by no other country.”¹³² He also assured the reader of his knowledge of “the general peculiarities of the Indians, in their un-degraded condition,” as his “authorities are numerous.”¹³³ He finished his preface by adding “that the leading events are strictly true, and that the outline is to be found in several histories devoted to the region.”¹³⁴

These writers were not just writing romance novels, they were trying to create an elaborate American origin myth, actively promoting their version of American values. Values that included a strong belief in racial stratification.

Claims of historic accuracy and ‘Americanness’ of American novels were clearly thought to be virtues by leading newspapers as well. New York magazine *The Knickerbocker*, for example, praised the first volume of *The Yemassee* as a “successful effort to embody the genuine materials of American Romance.”¹³⁵ When the second volume was released, *The Knickerbocker* released a second review, praising the accuracy of the novel. Including a flowery description of Simms having “gone into the lodge of the red man, and with the pencil of a painter, has given us living, breathing sketches of aboriginal life.”¹³⁶ The review also tried to confirm the accuracy “of early border warfare, - the romance of superstition, and of wild and characteristic savage customs,” which the reviewer considers to be “portrayed with a faithfulness and skill, that mark the writer as a correct observer, and a faithful limner.”¹³⁷ Another New York magazine, *The American Monthly Magazine*, describes *The Yemassee* as “a historical romance of our own forest-land – rescuing from the oblivion, into which they are too rapidly sinking, a thousand beautiful facts, [and] a thousand fanciful superstitions of the bold spirits.”¹³⁸ Praising Simms for preserving American history, a version of history that promoted white supremacy.

¹³¹ Ibid., xiii.

¹³² Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. I*, vii.

¹³³ Ibid., vii.

¹³⁴ Ibid., vii

¹³⁵ *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 5:3 (1835) 260.

¹³⁶ *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 5:4 (1835) 841.

¹³⁷ *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 5:3 (1835) 841-842.

¹³⁸ *The American Monthly Magazine*, 5:3 (1835) 171.

Although Bird less explicitly promised complete historic accuracy when publishing *Nick of the Woods*, he did claim to describe “the character of the men by whom... were laid, upon a basis as firm as if planned by the subtlest and wisest spirits of the age, the foundations of a great and powerful State.”¹³⁹ Speaking of the Englishmen who “converted from a desert hunting-ground into the home of civilized men.”¹⁴⁰ With these claims, Bird aligned himself with other novelists occupied with integrating racism into the American myth.

The lack of historical accuracy was by far the most prominent point of criticism by American reviewers, although not in a way modern readers might expect. *The Western Monthly Magazine* from Cincinnati even called *Nick of the Woods* “a failure,” based solely on the idea that the novel failed to paint “a serious portraiture of Frontier Life, in the Early Times of Kentucky.”¹⁴¹ The magazine’s harsh criticism was not based on the portrayal of Native Americans, but on the stereotyping of white war heroes. Pointing out that Revolutionary War and American Indian War veterans like “Boone... was anything but a ‘Cunnel Bruce,’” criticizing Bruce’s uneducated accent.¹⁴² This reviewer did not accuse Bird of being too unkind in his description of Native Americans. Instead, he charged Bird with ascribing too little nobility and virtue to the white settler. *The American Quarterly Review* from Philadelphia was somewhat milder, and at least called the novel “connected” to “early history.”¹⁴³ Although this reviewer was not convinced of the complete historical accuracy of this novel either, he did “regard [Bird] as more correct than those persons who look for the perfection or even a high standard of human nature amid the woods and wilds – or among any unchristianized, warlike tribes.”¹⁴⁴ *The American Quarterly Review* specifically was very critical, being the only major outlet that negatively reviewed *The Yemassee*. Providing snarky comments like, “he is said to be actually, popular.”¹⁴⁵ Again, the only positive comment made by this magazine was connected to the negative portrayal of non-whites. As it praises Lord Craven’s loyal slave, Hector, who has not previously been discussed. Believing that “a better argument in favour of the continuance of slavery, after it has become a habit, has rarely been

¹³⁹ Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴¹ “Monthly Review: Nick of the Woods,” *The Western Monthly Magazine, and Literary Journal* 1:4 (1837) 273.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁴³ “Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay, 2 Vols.,” *The American Quarterly Review* 21:42 (1837) 520.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁴⁵ “The Yemassee: A Romance,” *The American Quarterly Review* 17:34 (1835) 545.

made, than that of the honest namesake of the Trojan hero.”¹⁴⁶ Referring to the fictional Hector’s self-proclaimed desire to be enslaved.

These media outlets overwhelmingly saw perceived historical accuracy as a virtue, and these claims of historicity were challenged only if white characters were thought to be mischaracterized. Major newspapers and magazines were not in the habit of challenging racist depictions of non-whites as a-historical. In fact, the appraisal of historicity was directly tied to American mythmaking, in the context of upholding white superiority. The perceived accuracy of historical claims were in all of these examples tied to stories legitimizing white dominance.

American Values Under Attack

In the late antebellum, especially after the Fugitive Slave Act, slave labor was increasingly criticized by abolitionists. However, sectionalism should not be conflated with a sense of Southern regionalism. In the preface of *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, Caroline Lee Hentz continues the tradition of the appeal to historicity. Proclaiming that “many of the circumstances we have recorded in these pages,” that of the slave rebellion and the runaway slaves, “are founded on truth.”¹⁴⁷ Hentz did acknowledge there was a divide over the issue of slavery, but in her eyes this was more than an attack on the South, she saw this as an attack on the American nation, as she addressed Northerners directly,

“We believe that there are a host of noble, liberal minds, of warm, generous, candid hearts, at the North, that will bear us out in our views of Southern character, and that feel with us that our national honour is tarnished, when a portion of our country is held up to public disgrace and foreign insult, by those, too, whom every feeling of patriotism should lead to defend it from ignominy and shield it from dishonour.”¹⁴⁸

Within the novel itself, Hentz frequently addressed the audience directly, asking all Americans to mount a defense against abolitionist radicals, asking the reader: “why, with frantic zeal, do they light the brand of discord, and throw it blazing into the already burning heart of a community, when the stars of the Union may be quenched in the smoking, and the

¹⁴⁶ “The Yemassee: A Romance,” 545.

¹⁴⁷ Hentz, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, viii.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, iv.

American eagle flap its wings in blood?”¹⁴⁹ At the end of the novel, Hentz again addressed the audience, making the urgent plea that “the North and the South are branches of the same parent tree, and the lightning bolt that shivers the one, must scorch and wither the other,” thereby making the argument that slavery is essential to the American character.¹⁵⁰ This was not just some new rhetorical invention, but an attempt to continue a long-standing wish of American authors to write American novels, albeit under new circumstances.

Media outlets of the time also advertised *The Planter's Northern Bride* as a novel attempting to bridge the divide between North and South, with one of the most widely distributed magazines from before the Civil War, *Godey's Ladies Books*, describing it as “an effort to reconcile the difficulties that are sometimes supposed to exist” based on “geographical positions.”¹⁵¹ The result being that, although Northern reviews of the novel were generally favorable, it is less clearly presented as American. The Philadelphia *Home Magazine* for instance, praises “her descriptions of social life at the South” which “are transcripts upon the truth of which we may depend.”¹⁵² At other times, like in the countless ads for the novel in *The New York Times*, it is described as American, calling it “a lofty strain of pure and patriotic sentiment.”¹⁵³ Similar to reviews of the 1830s, *The Planter's Northern Bride* was praised for its (historical) accuracy and was nearly exclusively reviewed positively in the North. The main difference was the increasing uncertainty whether to describe this novel as American, although it was never described as unamerican, or regional literature. The issue purely revolved around slave labor, which, although both sides disagreed, did not seem to be such a deep-rooted issue for many whites as is presumed today. Media continued to portray Southern writers favorably, Northern and Southern writers remained friends, and after the postal service was restored after the Civil War, continued their amicable relationships.¹⁵⁴ There are no specific signs that the underlying structural racism of American mythmaking as a whole was being challenged.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 237-238.

¹⁵⁰ Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, 579.

¹⁵¹ “Literary Notices: Novels, Serials, Pamphlets, & c.,” *Godey's Lady's Books* 48-49 (1854) 465.

¹⁵² *Home Magazine* 3:5 (1854) 397.

¹⁵³ *New York Daily Times*, March, 1854.

¹⁵⁴ Wells, “Writers, Editors, and Intellectual Exchange,” 127.

The Popularity of Racist literature

Antebellum reviewers generally praised negative depictions of non-whites in literature, but these novels were popular with audiences too. Media outlets seemed to be aware that these novels would sell regardless of their reviews. *The Knickerbocker* knew that *The Yemassee* would “commend itself to the reader, without the aid of the critics.”¹⁵⁵ *The New York Mirror* commented on the success of the novel as well, writing “that the sale is rapid, and it would be surprising were it otherwise.”¹⁵⁶ Even the negative reviewer of *The American Quarterly Review* had to admit Simms was popular with the general public.

As is the case with many antebellum novels, exact sales numbers are hard to find. However, Simms himself was pleasantly surprised with the rapid sales of his work. The first edition of *The Yemassee* was sold out within a month. In the second edition preface, Simms wrote that the “call for a second edition” was “sudden... so soon after the first.” He also remarked that “The first edition was a remarkably large one – twenty-five hundred copies – twice the number usually put forth in this country, of similar European publications.”¹⁵⁷ This means that, according to Simms, the novel sold the equivalent of two editions, well within a month.

There has been more research on the sales numbers of *Nick of the Woods*, and although the novel had mixed reviews, it was extremely popular among the American public and beyond. *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* remarks that *Nick of the Woods* was “the best seller of this era.”¹⁵⁸ In other words: *Nick of the Woods* was the very best sold American novel of the 1830s. The book managed to sell up to twenty-four American editions, as well as two British, one German, one Dutch, and one Polish edition, making this novel a transatlantic success.¹⁵⁹ *The Planter’s Northern Bride* was sold separately per chapter, but by the time the last chapter was released it had sold an equivalent of almost a hundred thousand copies.¹⁶⁰ In comparison, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), which was released in the same year, only sold 728 copies in its entire first year. More than half of these were sold in Massachusetts alone, and three-quarters within the

¹⁵⁵ *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 5:4 (1835) 843.

¹⁵⁶ “Review of the Week: Current Literature,” *The New York Mirror* 12:44 (1835) 350.

¹⁵⁷ Simms, *The Yemassee Vol. I*, viii.

¹⁵⁸ Jay Porter. “Historical and Cultural Contexts to Native American Literature,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, eds. Jay Porter & Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51.

¹⁵⁹ Williams, “Introduction,” xxii.

¹⁶⁰ Encyclopedia of Alabama, “Caroline Lee Hentz.”

Northeast.¹⁶¹ *Walden* had, in comparison, low sales numbers, and was sold overwhelmingly regionally. Still, authors like Henry David Thoreau (and Walt Whitman, who sold even less) are considered to be ‘true’ American writers, whereas three writers who outsold these Northerners within a month, are strangely considered regional. Although Whitman and Thoreau could be considered to be better writers, it is hard to argue that these ‘American’ writers had a bigger impact on antebellum American society than these ‘Southern’ writers. In fact, all the evidence points into the opposite direction.

It is clear that there was an increase in sectionalism between the North and the South in the late antebellum, regarding the morality of slave labor. This does not mean that the racist tropes often attributed to Southern literature were not popular in other areas of the United States, and, in the case of *Nick of the Woods*, even abroad. These ‘Southern’ novels were, in fact, incredibly popular with American papers and magazines, and with the general American public as well. Reviewers specifically praised these novels’ common racist tropes, which led them to positively review these works as historically accurate, which in turn led them to believe these novels would logically be popular with American audiences. Although American slavery was under attack, these sources do not suggest the underlying structural racism was being challenged. Instead, the prevalence of white supremacist ideals was responsible for the acceptance of these novels as American literature. The North versus South dichotomy is therefore a counterproductive construct which obfuscates the true impact of racism on American history.

¹⁶¹ Walter Harding, “The First Year’s Sales of Thoreau’s *Walden*,” *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 117 (1971) 1-3.

Conclusion

This story has been, to a large extent, about othering. A story about the in-group devaluating the out-group(s) in order to improve its self-image. Antebellum novelists had a strong sense of the other, and many devoted their time to promoting and legitimizing hierarchies that supported white superiority. One of the vehicles of white supremacy was the plantation myth, popularized in the 1820s. By portraying slaves as happy and loyal, and the slaveowner as a kind and loving paternal figure, these novels create a mythical reality of slaves and masters living happily together within a peculiar type of family unit. A family wherein slaves are childlike and need to be educated by whites. The existence of the plantation myth was entirely predicated upon the defense of racial hierarchies, and was essentially a reactionary movement to not only early abolitionism, but importantly to a number of large slave revolts within the South as well. In the 1830s, a new popular reactionary movement sprung up, defending the Indian Removal Act. Again, American authors used their pens to defend white supremacy, describing Native Americans as savages, and legitimizing genocide. After the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's condemnation of the act in 1852, the plantation romance novel gained renewed popularity. These novels were again reactionary, defending the Fugitive Slave Act and attacking abolitionism.

All of these phases of racist literature share some important commonalities: white people are portrayed as morally and militarily superior, which legitimizes their place on top of the food-chain. Non-whites are dehumanized and unable to have any semblance of rationality unless educated by a white man and, importantly, non-whites are not seen as capable of forming any form of resistance unless aided by white agitators. By focusing on outside agitators, any sense of agency of non-whites was effectively neutralized within the dominant narrative. The aspect of blaming outside agitators of internal problems could also be seen as another form of othering, specifically portraying 'agitators' as unamerican outsiders sowing discontent in an otherwise 'idyllic' society. This was of course done because the internal realities of the brutality of slavery and Native American genocide could only be legitimized by blaming others for these horrors, when not able to acknowledge the agency of non-whites without undermining white superiority ideology.

The story of proslavery literature has been historically juxtaposed against abolitionist literature in an effort to shape a North versus South narrative, ignoring similar racist

narratives surrounding Native Americans. (There are similar narratives dehumanizing Mexicans and Cubans as well, such as *The Free Flag of Cuba* (1854) by Lucy Holcombe Pickens, which are not included in this paper.) This juxtaposition continues to undervalue a large share of non-white stories. To undermine the North versus South narrative, this paper includes stories of Nat Turner and Shaubena, but further research should also emphasize the oral traditions of Native Americans and African-Americans, in order to further explain reactionary elements in antebellum literature.

The supposed progressive increase of sectionalism between North and South is often attributed to hardened proslavery attitudes in the South. This is misleading, since all proslavery arguments had been constructed by the early 1820s and remained essentially unchanged throughout the antebellum. These arguments were based on popular white supremacist beliefs, which were not limited to slavery, but structurally suppressed all non-whites. If we accept the North versus South dichotomy, we are looking at history through the lens of capitalism. More specifically: whether or not slave labor was seen as profitable, the supposed 'hardening' defense of slavery coincides with the disappearance of the belief that slavery was less profitable than free labor, as argued by Tucker in the 1820s, when he claimed slavery was an economic institution in decline. By the 1850s, proslavery advocates no longer believed that slave labor was incompatible with capitalism, although these sentiments were still being expressed by Unionists during the Civil War. There was no increase in racist justification for slavery, only continuation. An important extension of this research would be to analyze *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other white abolitionist literature, in the context of underlying structural racism, as it, for example, also infamously promotes the idea of the childlike slave. In the same vein, analyzing African-American slave-narratives in the context of dominantly white power structures, would be another valuable continuation of this research.

The evidence provided in this paper supports the theory that the fight over slavery was fought over the economic benefits and morality of slave *labor*, not over the underlying American belief in white supremacy, which ideologically supported slavery. In further research I would argue that white supremacy did morph into different iterations of itself, but was not fundamentally challenged throughout the nineteenth century. This framework could provide helpful in explaining the failures of reconstruction and the failure to address the effects of the long-lasting impact of structural racism to this day, instead of the narrow focus on the Civil War itself.

As Greeson argues, after the Civil War, the South has been reconstructed as unamerican, in an attempt of the winners of the war to distance themselves from America's racist and imperialist history. The result being that today, the "South always points beyond the national borders."¹⁶² To this day, the South is being othered in order for the rest of United States to improve *its* self-image. This process has been perpetuated by critics such as Cash, Hubbell, Dekker, Dessens and, to a lesser extent, Burnett. Most of whom portray(ed) the South as a backwards, anti-capitalist society that still used slave labor, even though it was no longer economically viable. These critics then juxtaposed Southern slave labor against the 'more efficient and successful' free labor used in the capitalist North, thereby mimicking economic myths popularized in the nineteenth century by figures as Tucker and Kennedy. All these critiques attack the supposed anti-capitalist nature of the South in order to affirm the North versus South dichotomy, because this dichotomy is dependent on looking at events from an economic perspective. The dichotomy is also perpetuated by portraying the anti-Tom novel as inherently different than what it actually is: a new iteration of the plantation romance novel. This is, again, done in order to promote the North versus South dichotomy, because it focuses almost exclusively on the influence of abolitionism on Southern literature, underemphasizing other factors.

Most of these academics have also described the South as unamerican, with all of its values, but especially slavery, juxtaposed against true American values. We have seen that this is simply untrue. Southern writers were popular both in the media and among American readers. Far more so than Henry David Thoreau or Walt Whitman. Describing these Northeastern writers as true American writers, and writers like Simms and Hentz as regional, would have made no sense to the average antebellum American. Southern writers were American writers. They were described as such by Northern newspapers and magazines, and sales numbers verify this. Bird's *Nick of the Woods* even became the national bestseller of the 1830s. Bird's popularity also blurs the line between Northern and Southern writers, as he was a Southern born Philadelphian who repeated all racist tropes that are today attributed to Southern literature. Novelists and the American media also saw their racist values as historically American, essentially using structural racism to construct the American identity. Excluding these factors from the narrative aids the denial of, what Mesle calls, "the profound racism of American sentimental culture."¹⁶³ The legacy of American racism is not a Southern problem, it is an American problem.

¹⁶² Greeson, *Our South*, 6.

¹⁶³ Mesle, "Sentimentalism's Nation," 207.

North and South had more commonalities than differences, as Simms continued his friendships with Northern novelists who opposed slavery immediately after the Civil War. Even during the Civil War, we can find sympathies for Southern writers in the North. In 1863, at the end of the year, and one year after Lincoln held the Emancipation Proclamation, signed the Homestead Act and met with Harriet Beecher Stowe, an advertisement appeared in the *New York Times*, praising Caroline Lee Hentz as a writer. Her novel “‘Ernest Linwood,’” it claimed, “should be as welcome as the dove of peace to every fireside in the Union.”¹⁶⁴ A peculiar sentiment for a Southern writer, published in a Northern newspaper, describing her as patriotic, during the Civil War. Especially peculiar since Hentz was famous for supporting slavery. This book, however, was not about slavery, it was about jealous men murdering women because of sentimentalism. It is odd that the novel is described as ‘a dove of peace.’ This seems to be related to how Hentz critiques sentimentalism similar to the way she previously criticized the sentimental and ‘irrational’ behavior of Northern abolitionists, whom she blamed for tearing the country apart, while conveniently disregarding her own sentimental attitudes towards slavery.

Under the appraisal of *Ernest Linwood* the ad continues, also sold “‘The Planter’s Northern Bride.’”¹⁶⁵

To end the conclusion, I will repeat the most apt description of antebellum literature and rebuttal to the North versus South dichotomy, as given in the introduction:

Because classical interpretations of Southern antebellum literature focus almost solely on slavery as an economic system, they neglect the fact that these novels are preoccupied with legitimizing the entirety of white superiority. It is more accurate to regard the literary proslavery movement as part of a broader defense of political, economic, and cultural white domination, defending them against external, as well as internal threats to white supremacy.

¹⁶⁴ “Ads,” *New York Daily Times*, march, 1854.

¹⁶⁵ “Ads.”

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