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## The Racial Swamps of Reconstruction: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Life in Post-Civil War Florida

By Elif S. Armbruster<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Harriet Beecher Stowe, the internationally known U.S. author and abolitionist, whom President Abraham Lincoln famously called “the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war,” referring to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and the American Civil War (1861-1865),<sup>2</sup> was also the author of numerous other works, many of them much lesser known today. Stowe's *Palmetto Leaves* (1873), the subject of this essay, was, for example, a best-selling travel narrative about life in Florida after the American Civil War and is considered to have been an impetus behind the modern tourist industry in Florida. Today, however, *Palmetto Leaves* has been mostly overlooked or forgotten by scholars. In spite of this oversight, Stowe's text about life in Florida during the post-war period of Reconstruction merits close evaluation because it exposes Stowe's racial, political, and gendered views as they evolved after the Civil War. Because the author and her work were so popular in their day, *Palmetto Leaves* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the politics of Northern White women writers and post-Civil War sentiment in the North. As I offer in this essay, Stowe, and her largely White and female readership in the North, increasingly saw the benefits of, and helped enable, a racially hierarchical society during the period of Reconstruction. Thus, in spite of Stowe's “pioneering” decision to go south in the years after the war ended, my essay complicates our understanding of the proto-feminist author and shows how Stowe ultimately eschews new frontiers in *Palmetto Leaves* and instead embraces racially regressive views.

*Keywords:* Harriet Beecher Stowe, U.S. Civil War, Florida, U.S. South, Reconstruction, *Palmetto Leaves*, Racial politics, American women writers, White women, African Americans, 19<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. literature

### Introduction

When Harriet Beecher Stowe traveled south in 1866, one year after the U.S. Civil War had ended, she saw the region for what it was—a land decimated by the physical and moral ravages of slavery and war; a place, she wrote, whose history was written “in letters of blood and fire” (*Palmetto Leaves* 211). The environment in Florida where Stowe bought land and lived for part of each year for nearly twenty years was rife with extremes, and Stowe was a daring and enterprising woman to establish herself in the area to live.<sup>3</sup> She was one of only a few Northerners to do so in

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the memory and/or myth of President Lincoln's comment about Harriet Beecher Stowe starting the Civil War, see Sachsman et al., 8.

<sup>3</sup> As will become clear in this essay, I use the word “enterprising” to signify both the creative, adventurous side of Stowe and the entrepreneurial and financially savvy side of Stowe. She was “daring” in that not many Northerners were going south at the time, and it required a trip of many days by carriage, train, and boat.

the years immediately following the Civil War; even fewer Northerners, particularly among women authors, wrote about the South, making Stowe's singular text on the region, *Palmetto Leaves* (1873), an important trove of information on the racial politics of Florida during American Reconstruction and of the politics of White women's authorship in New England. While *Palmetto Leaves* was a best-selling travel narrative in the late nineteenth century and is considered to have been an impetus behind the modern tourist industry in Florida, today it has been mostly overlooked or forgotten by scholars.<sup>4</sup> Even Joan Hedrick's excellent Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (1995) mentions *Palmetto Leaves* only once.<sup>5</sup>

Stowe's text merits close evaluation because it offers an unvarnished look at the author's racial and political views as they evolved after the Civil War, as well as reveals the complications of being a White woman writer looking at the South from the perspective of a New Englander. Because the author and her work were so popular in their day, *Palmetto Leaves* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of post-War sentiment in the North that increasingly saw the benefits of, and helped enable, a racially hierarchical society during the period of Reconstruction.

Scholars have noted the domestic, sentimental, and abolitionist ideologies that undergird Stowe's most famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and its follow-up, *Dred: A Tale of the Great, Dismal Swamp* (1856). Yet scholarship on Stowe's *Palmetto Leaves* has remained curiously sparse. In fact, the book seems to have almost completely escaped the eyes of literary critics and has been treated mainly by historians (though by no means exhaustively) as a travelogue.<sup>6</sup> If we consider the text with an eye to Stowe's language, metaphor, and imagery, and examine it within its historical context, we find that the book is loaded with import: at once it echoes the sentimentalist conventions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by offering romanticized (and stereotyped) portraits of freed African Americans and simultaneously departs from the mission of that novel to embrace the domestic concerns of the postwar nation. By the end of *Palmetto Leaves*, Stowe comes to the conclusion that emancipated African Americans in the South are best suited to become the region's "laborers," a job for which, in Stowe's estimation, they have a biological predisposition: "The negro is the natural laborer of the tropical regions," she contends, "He is immensely strong; he thrives and flourishes under a temperature that exposes a White man to disease and death"

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<sup>4</sup> The stories in *Palmetto Leaves* were originally published in *The Christian Union*, a newspaper owned by Stowe's brother, Henry Ward Beecher. They were immensely popular, especially among the paper's White women readers, and according to some historians, were responsible for the development of the state's tourist industry. See, for example, Foster and Foster and Rowe. Additional background information on Florida life and tourism in the post-Civil War years can be found in the essays by Hall, Rogers, and Youngs.

<sup>5</sup> The singular mention of Stowe's book appears on page 388, ten pages from the end of Hedrick's tome. While Hedrick includes a chapter on Florida in her biography, entitled "Florida and Oldtown Folks, 1867-1869," she does not mention *Palmetto Leaves* in this chapter. See Hedrick, 388 and 329-52. And, while James M. Cox provides a remarkable evolutionary analysis of Stowe's writing from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the end of her career and includes a worthy discussion of Stowe as a social historian in her postbellum work, he, too, omits *Palmetto Leaves* from his discussion. Similarly, Jennifer Rae Greeson, in her expansive look at the South examines *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but does not mention *Palmetto Leaves*.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* domestic ideology, see Klein, Brown, and Romines. For a discussion of the Gothic in Stowe's *Dred*, see McIntyre. As for historians, the one who gives the most treatment to Stowe and *Palmetto Leaves* is Edward J. Blum, whose interpretation of Stowe's important book helped lay the groundwork for my argument. Stowe and her presence in Florida also receive some attention in Silber and in Foster and Foster. Stowe remains beyond the scope, however, of Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*. The singular essay I have found that treats *Palmetto Leaves* is Susan Eacker's "Gender in Paradise." Eacker's approach is primarily historical, however, thus illustrating the need for a literary and interdisciplinary approach such as mine to Stowe's important text.

(283). Despite her pioneering decision to go south, I argue that Stowe ultimately eschews new frontiers in *Palmetto Leaves* and instead seems to embrace racially regressive views, which were typical of White women writers of the time. Rather than presenting herself as someone who works to educate and integrate emancipated African Americans, as she originally intended to do, or who promotes the return of African Americans to Africa, as she does at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe, through the seemingly benign means of a series of letters written to readers in the North, promulgates the subordination of African Americans and advocates their second class status when she delineates their suitability to work the land. Stowe's postwar views about race generally and African Americans specifically come across as unenlightened, uncomfortably so for modern readers who might have expected the abolitionist author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to offer a more cosmopolitan and inclusive view of the relationship between Whites and Blacks, especially once she lived among the latter.<sup>7</sup> My argument thus contributes to the efforts of third-wave and postcolonial feminists to investigate the ways in which White, Western, feminist women may serve the interests of hegemonic power in promulgating racism and classism.

### **“Demons of the Deep”: Florida's Two Sides**

In the years during and after the Civil War, in the 1860s and 1870s, Florida was an untamed, chaotic world, imagined by Jennifer Rae Greeson as a zone of “imperial power,” a place whose imperative was “improvement and profit,” and one that offered lessons on how the United States might become a world power (248-50). Patricia Yaeger describes the South in her now iconic *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* as “a spectacle of regional trauma” (1).<sup>8</sup> Stowe, like others, was ambivalent about how to view the South and specifically African Americans after the war, a sentiment that has persisted throughout much of the twentieth century as Yaeger illustrates in *Dirt and Desire*. Even well-known opponents of slavery such as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips were “unsure of their own ground” in terms of how to view the South during and after the war (Foner 90-92).<sup>9</sup> Historian George Fredrickson argues in *The Black Image in the White Mind* that this uncertainty was not surprising considering the late-nineteenth-century “verdicts” of American science and American romanticism, which in the former case would position African Americans “below” Whites biologically and in the latter as docile and jolly creatures best suited to physical labor. Fredrickson, like other Civil War historians, confirms that even radical abolitionists were “unable” in the face of these pervasive discourses to “ground their case for the black man.” According to Fredrickson, this inability helps explain the subtle but racist doctrines promulgated by Stowe after emancipation (126-127).

During the early years of her life in Florida from 1867 to 1873, Stowe's famous brother Henry Ward Beecher was professing similar messages in his own work, so it is perhaps not

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<sup>7</sup> Granted, Stowe's proposal of sending free Blacks “back” to Africa in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is hardly enlightened, but such a point of view was considered more enlightened than laboring in the South in what amounted to little-changed roles after the Civil War had ended. As Samuel Otter has argued, expatriation to Africa was Stowe's effort “to elevate her African American characters to leading roles in the next, more truly Christian phase of history,” 20. When Stowe and others promoted freed Blacks as subordinate laborers in the South, by contrast, this implied, as Elizabeth Ammons puts it, an “unwavering belief in the righteousness of Western imperialism” and nationalism (227-46).

<sup>8</sup> While highly suggestive, Patricia Yaeger's work distinguishes itself from my work here in that it treats literature about the South written by both Southern and Northern women writers who came after Stowe, and it also focuses exclusively on fiction.

<sup>9</sup> According to historian Eric Foner (90-92), Blacks themselves did not know how to respond to their freedom, though some historians have argued that they resented White efforts to minister to or educate them.

surprising to learn of Stowe's views. Beecher was the North's most popular minister and spent much of his postwar career entreating Northern Protestants to forgive Southern Whites and to receive them quickly back into the national fold; he prioritized sectional harmony between the North and South in his sermons, speeches, and writings, but not racial justice. Historian Edward J. Blum notes that Beecher had a "massive following" and was "extremely influential" (92). Furthermore, as the owner and editor of the *Christian Union*, he provided Stowe with the vehicle of publication for her letters and stories from the South; most were first published in Beecher's newspaper. In his own novel of the time, *Norwood* (1868), about life in a small New England town, Beecher endorsed national reconciliation and expressed his conviction that African Americans would never be more than second-class citizens in the nation. His singular African American character, Pete Sawmill, is depicted as childlike and bestial; he is described as "idle," "clumsy-moving," and "an overgrown child" (Beecher 20).

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Henry Ward Beecher traveled up and down the eastern seaboard speaking out for national harmony over racial justice and sharing his ideas with his equally energetic sister. Henry's presence, along with other Beecher and Stowe family members, helps explain why Stowe went south in the first place. Stowe had another brother, James, and a son, Frederick, who fought for the Union in the Civil War, both of whom decided to spend time in Florida after the battles had ended. Frederick, possibly suffering from what today we could call post-traumatic stress disorder, struggled to find his place in New England after the war. To help him secure a sense of direction, Stowe bought Frederick an orange grove in Mandarin, Florida, to set him up in business. This venture ultimately failed but it provided the original motivation for Stowe to tour the area around the St. Johns River in the town of Mandarin in northeastern Florida where she ended up buying a 30-acre plot of land for \$5,000 in 1866, an investment that proved to be financially profitable.<sup>10</sup>

At roughly the same period, in September 1869, Stowe published "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life" in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Macmillan's Magazine*. The story was widely read and broadly criticized; in fact, the public outcry was so great that less than a year later Stowe published *Lady Byron Vindicated: A History of the Byron Controversy, From Its Beginning in 1816 to the Present Time* (1870), a 400-page volume that defended not only Lady Byron but Stowe herself. The book only fanned the flames of rebuke and debate. From 1869 to 1870, at least forty-one review articles of Stowe's work were published, including a response by Mark Twain. In the same time period, eight books that treated the subject came out. It seemed that everywhere Stowe went when home in New England, someone had something to say about her writing, and by her own admission, the infamy surrounding her made these two years the most trying of her life.<sup>11</sup>

Given the public abuse she was subjected to in the North, Stowe very willingly sought refuge in Florida. It was the place, she wrote, where "the book of Nature is never shut and clasped with ice and snow as at the North; and, of course, we spend about half our time in the open air" (*Palmetto Leaves* 46). She thrived in the warm weather and spent her days absorbing the bountiful natural wonders, even stating that her "regular employment now of every afternoon is to go out ... flower-hunting" (*Palmetto Leaves* 105). But, as much as Stowe may have moved to Mandarin to

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<sup>10</sup> Within a year of arriving in Florida, Frederick gave up and fled the region; he went to sea and was never heard from again, supposedly committing suicide. Sources corroborate the idea of Frederick Stowe's mysterious death. See, for example, Hedrick, 82-83, and Stowe and Stowe, 277-79.

<sup>11</sup> Stowe's husband and grandson wrote about her as "the storm centre [sic] of a perfect cyclone of adverse criticism," and this, at the time when she was "at the summit of her fame" (Stowe and Stowe 274).

escape conflicts in the North, what Stowe found in herself while living for part of each year there shows that her travel narrative was an inner journey in terms of how she ultimately felt about the liberated south (particularly Florida) and its African American people, as much as it was a recounting of her experiences as a very popular though occasionally maligned women author.

### **“Romantic Racialism”: African Americans as Obedient Laborers**

From the start of *Palmetto Leaves*, Stowe comments on the unresolved and transitional status of postwar Florida, which she characterizes as a “tapestry” and “like a piece of embroidery” encompassing “two sides”: “One side all tag-rag and thrums; the other showing flowers and arabesques and brilliant coloring” (26-27). Stowe uses emblems of domesticity—the tapestry and the embroidery—to render the larger state of Florida (its role in the domestic realm of the United States). In her eyes, Florida appears to be in a state of contradiction and uncertainty, one where there are no longer rules or roles. The only certainty, she claims, is that “There’s a right side and a wrong side to everything [*sic*]” (27). It is possible to understand the tapestry as an allusion to Florida’s state during Reconstruction, for, at this time, the region was in flux and did seem to hold two conflicting realities. Utilizing the tapestry as a metaphor for life in postwar Florida, Stowe implicitly invokes the reality of Florida’s history—what Yaeger calls its “transgenerational haunting” (278)—which includes a past where slavery made a highly manicured and tamed plantation culture possible. As Stowe states, the “right” side is flush, smooth, and ornate; the other is ragged with the knots of handicraft and labor. Stowe’s use of pejoratives to characterize the underside of the tapestry, such as “the wrong side,” the “deficient” side, and the “necessary shadow” hints at a side produced and represented by slavery (27, 35). In the context of when and where Stowe wrote this vignette, the metaphor of the tapestry is important because it reveals the work (i.e., the slave labor) that went into making the “right,” aesthetic side.

The origin of the word “tapestry” is worthy of examination as well; in Old French, *tapisserie* means “to carpet or cover over.” Such carpeting conceals the workmanship that went into making a tapestry. Similarly, the labor that made the development of Florida’s land possible is covered over, concealed, or hidden. As John Michael Vlach has elucidated, most slave plantations in the South were delineated such that the human capital that made their success possible was often hidden behind “the big house.” Vlach notes: “The tangible glory of manorial estates served as the most persuasive propaganda for the celebration of the plantation ideal...their world was marked...by a strict, hierarchical order” (5). Nonetheless, we cannot ignore this “wrong side,” as Stowe cautions: “Prepare yourself to see a great deal that looks desolate and coarse” (36). She urges visitors to Florida to “make the best of things” (36) and expresses further “undeniable truths” (12), warning visitors that they “must not expect...to enter at once on the rest of paradise” (134) and should instead “rejoice in the good...instead of fretting at the shadow of evil” (136). Clearly, the region in Florida where Stowe chose to escape the climate and the controversies of the North in the late 1860s and 1870s proved to be far more complicated than it had first appeared.

Stowe’s depiction of life in Florida in *Palmetto Leaves* is also rife with extremes. While she is intoxicated by the lushness of her property and the scents of the jasmine and orange blossoms, she is discomfited by the troubling nature of life in postwar Florida. For example, she alludes to the state’s “evil” past and its uncertain future when she describes the treacherous and macabre sides of life while on a river journey. She notes how the “delightful weather” and “a delightful, smooth sea!” stand in contrast to the perilous black water beneath, which Stowe describes as “slippery,” “cheating,” and “most diabolic”—words that might also be used to describe Black otherness (2). The two realms contradict each other: the placid, pleasing surface of

the river and its deep, dark bottom. The dualistic nature of the water functions as an unspoken reference to the region's recent, malevolent past and seems to foretell its troubled future.

Stowe's descriptions of the tapestry and the river together illustrate the dualities of life in postwar Florida: it is full of potential and productivity and can be as beautiful as a "new heaven" on a "new earth" (35), but it is also "slippery" (2), "desolate" (28), forlorn (28), and untidy (28). By exposing two sides, Stowe metaphorically alerts the reader to the two potential directions the state might take: either enabling the integration of the emancipated population with the White population or keeping the freed African Americans disenfranchised, subservient, or outcast. Stowe's text becomes equally "slippery" because, while it does not do so overtly, it asks the reader to consider together the horrors of the past and the questionable future of freed African Americans in Florida and in the South in general.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps because the future for emancipated African Americans remains unclear at this point, Stowe often depicts them with commonly held stereotypes. She employs what historian George Fredrickson has termed "romantic racialism": the "benign stereotyping" (101-102) of Blacks to illustrate why they are better suited for subservient roles as laborers for White landowners. Her story about "Old Cudjo" (267), an elderly Black man who carefully tilled a piece of land for four years only to have a White man seize it from him, turns Cudjo into a childish and excitable, though endearing, old man. In this vignette, a neighboring White justice of the peace helps Cudjo by making the land legally his and turning his fate around. Cudjo relays the story in his Southern twang to Stowe and her husband Mr. Stowe, referring to the latter as "massa," as he "act[s] over the scene" with "his usual histrionic vigor" (277). While the story exposes the reality in the postwar South of Whites absconding with freed Blacks' land, Stowe also uses the example to reinforce stereotypes of African Americans. Here, Cudjo is a faith-bound and industrious man, who is honest to the point of being gullible. Stowe writes that he had "learned two things in his world-lesson—work and faith" (276). She ends the story with Cudjo joking with Mr. Stowe about the amount of money he was paid for his land, and Cudjo says, "'I take ten t'ousand million dollars! Dat's what I take.' Haw, haw, haw!" (278). Rather than conclude with Cudjo actually being paid for his land, Stowe leaves the ending open to the interpretation that Cudjo has no sense of the value of the dollar and guffaws over a sum that makes no sense. Stowe's infantilizing portrayal of Cudjo as well as her depictions of freed people in her final chapter suggest that Stowe questioned the idea of equality for African Americans because she paints them as overgrown children who have no place in society except as obedient laborers. Stowe's description of Cudjo ultimately exposes a commitment to second-class citizenship for Blacks, a view that was shared and exploited by her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, in the North.<sup>13</sup>

In her chapter, "The Laborers of the South," in which she writes about the African American men who worked on her land, Stowe further undermines justice for the Southern emancipated African Americans by writing that they are best suited to field labor because they toil "more actively, more cheerfully" in the "blistering hot" than during the cooler months (280). "The sun awakes all their vigor and all their boundless jollity," she writes. When Stowe asks "Simon," who has been dredging the swamp in front of her house, how he can work in such hot weather, he simply laughs and laughs, "a boiling spring of animal content [...] ever welling up within [him]"

<sup>12</sup> Henry James famously wrote about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a text as slippery as a fish. One could say the same about *Palmetto Leaves*: that it is filled with ambivalence and contradictory messages; that its meanings are hard to grasp such as a fish might be (James 167-68).

<sup>13</sup> Blum's analysis of Stowe's behavior informs my rationale here. See Blum's discussion of Henry Ward Beecher's political agenda for reunion between North and South, pp. 91-92.

(281). Likening Simon's ejaculations of laughter to an "animal's" contentment again reinforces stereotypes of Blacks as boundless, joyous creatures.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, when Stowe encounters "a gang of negroes, great, brawny, muscular fellows" who meet her steamer to unload trunks, she asserts that "never was harder work done in a more jolly [sic] spirit" (283). The chapter overflows with anecdotes such as these and reminds the reader of Stowe's characterizations of African Americans in her earlier work, such as the figure of "Uncle Tom" who epitomizes the cheerful, dutiful slave. Here, James Baldwin's critique of Stowe in his landmark essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," comes to mind. Baldwin argues that such categorizations deny the individual his humanity and rob him of the ability to "transcend" a fixed role—precisely what we see in Stowe's depiction of "a gang of negroes" (Baldwin 23). Stowe even excuses herself and her readers for the generalizations she makes, hinting at her latent racism and perhaps theirs. She writes: "*One may be pardoned* for thinking that the Negro is the natural laborer of tropical regions. He is immensely strong; he thrives and flourishes physically under a temperature that exposes a White man to disease and death" (283, emphasis mine). Stowe's use of the singular "Negro" to represent the race also recalls Baldwin's critique of Stowe's use of types to reinforce her racist point of view. As George Fredrickson has noted, employing the singular indicates a fixed social position, rather than a flexible one whereby individuals are fully integrated and move up and down an interracial status hierarchy (179).

Stowe gives two additional reasons why African Americans are better suited to labor in the South, both of which stem from prevalent but misinformed perceptions of Blacks in the 1860s. She asserts that African Americans contract malaria less frequently than Whites and reproduce more easily than Whites. Stowe writes, "The malarial fevers that bear so hard on the White race have far less effect on the negro," suggesting that Blacks make superior field hands because of evolutionary factors (283). Such racist misinformation can be traced to the epidemics of yellow fever that occurred frequently throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In one of the worst epidemics in Philadelphia in 1793, for example, Blacks were hired to tend to the sick and bury the dead because it was believed they were immune to yellow fever. What was learned later, however, is that once someone has been exposed to yellow fever, he or she cannot get it again. African slaves who were brought to this country and free people of color arriving from Haiti had been exposed to yellow fever and were thus not susceptible. As scholars have noted, the immunity of Blacks to certain diseases had nothing to do with their race, but their resistance added to racist notions nonetheless (Pernick 559-586). Stowe's view that Blacks are better able to withstand malaria stem from the sort of thinking that was promulgated after the yellow fever outbreak of 1793. Similarly, Stowe makes assumptions about the African American proclivity to reproduce: "They increase and multiply, and bear healthy children, in situations where the White race deteriorate [sic] and grow [sic] sickly" (283). As these examples reveal, Stowe works within contemporary evolutionary prejudices to intimate a political agenda in which the country is unified along regional and racial lines.

Stowe draws upon contemporary scientific theories of evolution and natural selection to describe African Americans as a subhuman species, and her chapter reinforces the notion that the freed African Americans must work the land because genetically they are better suited to do so. Stowe goes so far as to describe old Cudjo (mentioned earlier) as a "big baboon" and states that he is "the missing link of Darwin" (269). Environmental factors, Stowe claims, suit these "big baboons" to work under the scorching Florida sun, making them "the natural laborer of tropical

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<sup>14</sup> It occurs to me that Stowe's meaning of the word "content" is not clear; she could be referring to the animal's "substance" or "matter." In any event, the use of the word "animal" is the one that matters here.



regions” (283). Stowe writes, “Only those black men, with sinews of steel and nerves of wire, — men who grow stronger and more vigorous under those burning suns that wither the White men, —are competent to the task [of clearing the land]” (272). While White men are by extension shown to be effete and weak, they are nevertheless absolved from physical labor because their Black counterparts are so much stronger than they are. Indeed, the strength shown by Black laborers such as Cudjo does not serve them, for as Stowe points out, the tamed land is then usurped by “colonists,” leaving Cudjo to experience “what he had always experienced—always oppressed, always robbed and cheated” (273). In this scenario, the White man’s intellect, while not mentioned, is the obvious counterpoint to the Black man’s physicality. In Stowe’s analysis—and the point that makes *Palmetto Leaves* about much more than travel in and of itself—Northern Whites, whom she refers to as “settlers” and “foreigners,” come south and usurp land that is now legally in the hands of and toiled by Southern Blacks (273). Even though Stowe seems to sympathize with the “oppressed” and “cheated” African Americans, she herself remains one of the “settlers” who usurps and develops the Southern land. She comes across as a White, enterprising counterpart to the infantilized, baboon-like African Americans who till her land.

### “Bewildering Improprieties” and Lost Dogs

In spite of her implied “superiority” over the Black laborers who work her land, Stowe underscores the dualistic struggle that comprises life in Florida. Employing literal and metaphoric swamps, which suggest how the reader might understand Florida in the period of Reconstruction, Stowe writes that the swampland directly in front of her property in Mandarin “occasions a never-ceasing conflict of spirit” and that “what to do with it is not clear” (138). Her uncertainty about the swamp mirrors her ambivalence about how to handle the freed people around her. Rebecca McIntyre has written that in other works by Stowe the swamp functions as a stand-in for the institution of slavery and the land becomes “an apt emblem” for Southern civilization (5). McIntyre argues that in *Dred*, Stowe’s images of the swamp “captured the dark feelings that many in the north harbored towards slavery,” but “there was little doubt at the time that [Stowe’s images] were a powerful indictment of the peculiar institution” (40).

By the time Stowe writes *Palmetto Leaves* a decade and a half later, the swamp holds mixed messages, just as the tapestry and the river do: “It is a perpetual flower-garden,” she writes, “...where Nature has raptures and frenzies of growth” and “conducts herself like a crazy drunken, but beautiful *bacchante* [a typically female drunken reveler]” (138). Despite the beauty and fertility of the swamp, it is a place of danger and exaggeration: “Under all that tangle of foliage lies the foul sink of the blackest mud,” teeming with “black, unsavory moccasin-snakes,” who make their home in those “jungles” (138). Stowe’s language is ambiguous, even paradoxical, as the swamp is both beautiful and drunken; however, it is more “foul” and “unsavory” than it is romantic. She concludes that the swamp is “glorious” and “bewildering;” it is an “impropriety,” a word she uses twice to characterize it (138). Stowe nonchalantly affirms, “We will let [the swamp] alone this year,” and “we will see” what will be done to “convert” the wild *bacchante* into “a steady, orderly member of society” (139-140). The implication is there: Stowe’s swamp—with its “impropriety” but also its potential—may well stand for the liberated African American population, who may or may not grow into “steady and orderly” members of society. Stowe does not suggest that she will aid in “converting” the swamp but will “wait and see” what should be done with it, a reinforcement of her ambivalent perspective. The Southern “paradise,” as the region was often depicted, in Stowe’s rendition is precarious and seemingly dependent upon the presence

of a now-absent master.<sup>15</sup> Amidst this perilous, dualistic environment roams the hapless, masterless African American, whom Stowe characterizes in metaphoric terms to highlight his displacement.

To reinforce this dislocation, I return now to the first scene of *Palmetto Leaves* entitled “Nobody’s Dog” in which Stowe employs the “dog” to portray freed but lost African Americans (1). The dog’s future—like that of African Americans—lies in abeyance. Stowe metaphorically paints the South as a place of freed men aimlessly looking for their masters, just as the dog of the story’s title does. The newly freed African American is adrift, belonging to no one, and is “nobody’s” (1). The actual dog in the story is given numerous personified, masculine characteristics which suggest that the doomed cur functions metonymically for the emancipated people who no longer know what to do with or how to conduct themselves.<sup>16</sup> Stowe writes that the dog is “mournful,” has a “drooping tail and bowed head,” and is “not sure of his position, but [is] humbly determined to have a mistress” (6). The imagery of a forlorn dog without a master continues when Stowe notes that he is “overlooked in the bustle of the steamer” and is “kicked with emphasis” into the street; he is “desperate” and “[fights] for his mistress” (8-9). The passage emphasizes a dynamic world of men and women from the North arriving in the Southern paradise where the African American population has been legally freed, left uneducated, and at a loss for how to behave or perform in the postwar world. Without a “master” or “protectress,” the dog’s future remains similarly uncertain (8-9). One cannot help but conflate Stowe’s repeated juxtaposition of the dog seeking an owner with the emancipated African American searching for a master, particularly since Stowe describes the dog with adjectives that historically have been used to characterize Black characters, such as “dumb,” “incomplete,” and “masterless,” to name a few (10-11).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, between two pages, Stowe employs the word “master” three times, as if to underscore the relationship between the dog (the former slave) and his “master” (the White man) (10-11). Stowe also writes that the dog “roves the world...with no rights to life, liberty, or pursuit of happiness” (10). By quoting the “Declaration of Independence,” Stowe makes an explicit connection between the unlucky mongrel and the now freed but marginalized and wandering Black population, who may or may not have any actual rights, regardless of the law. Stowe uses the example of the dog to unflinchingly question the efficacy of the Thirteenth (1865) and Fourteenth (1868) Amendments to the U.S. Constitution that abolished slavery and granted citizenship to African Americans. Yet rather than state the sad condition of the freed people directly, Stowe hints at the dispossessed with references to a lost mutt searching for a master. Nevertheless, Stowe comes across as pitying the dispossessed African Americans—she uses sympathetic condescension—and she depicts them as a people in need of masters to guide their daily lives.

### **Horrors of Reconstruction: Hunters and Alligators**

The post-war “Reconstruction South” of Stowe’s *Palmetto Leaves* can be understood to be as cruel and depraved as the “Slave South,” to borrow Jennifer Rae Greeson’s terms. As we have

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<sup>15</sup> Anne Rowe makes this point in *The Enchanted Country*, where she argues that this is the case in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (9). I contend that the same holds true in Stowe’s postwar environment.

<sup>16</sup> Stowe seems to leave out the question of gender from *Palmetto Leaves* (except for the reference to *bacchante*, typically a female merrymaker), referring exclusively to Black men and utilizing images that are decidedly masculine to characterize them. In this chapter, Stowe masculinizes the dog, so I have done so as well, referring to “black man” or “men.”

<sup>17</sup> See Strausbaugh for a study of stereotypes associated with African Americans throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially p. 131, which includes the labels “dumb” and “incomplete.”

seen, Stowe uses weighty metaphors to characterize the emancipated population, likening the aged Black man to a “baboon,” and the freed Black population in general to wandering, homeless dogs. Stowe once again casts African Americans in biologically inferior terms by metaphorically connecting them to alligators when she takes a boat trip up the St Johns River.<sup>18</sup> However, such reptilian references also underscore the vulnerability of the beast in the face of savage hunters, offering another metaphor for the freed Black man’s position during Reconstruction. Stowe’s account features a primordial river journey not unlike the one taken by Huck and Jim in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) though Stowe’s story predates Twain’s by more than a dozen years. Here, the “natural” world is several times equated with the “black” world. When Stowe takes note of the water lily’s roots, she likens them in size to a “man’s arm” and “with their scaly joints” to “black serpents,” an observation she makes four times (73-74).<sup>19</sup> Stowe twice equates alligators with Blackness: “Sluggish and unwieldy,” she reports that the “half developed animal” “has a pitiful and rather shocking resemblance to a black human hand” (74-75). As if mesmerized by the size, strength, color, and “grotesqueness” of the scenery, Stowe evinces awe combined with discomfort in the surroundings. Like the swamp in front of her house, the primeval environment of the river is both promising and menacing, in the same way that the emancipation of slaves is. Stowe’s discomfort, however, is mixed with excitement when she describes a hunter dissecting the wild beast.

Not only does Stowe link the reptile to African Americans, but she also matter-of-factly, even impassively, alludes to the brutality associated with White nationalism when she observes a hunter who knives the alligator to death. Recalling Patricia Yaeger’s “throwaway body” (68), Stowe relays that the hunter “dissected one of these creatures” and reports that after his head was taken off, “This black hand and arm rose up, and gave the operator quite a formidable push in the chest” (74-75). Stowe’s alligator functions metonymically for the black man who has similarly “risen up” to push off the shackles of slavery, or the “operator.” The environment once again becomes “slippery,” literally and figuratively, as human, boat, and fish become tangled with each other. The White yachts and the White people aboard—Stowe, her husband, and a river guide—contrast with the deceptive, bewildering, dark, and grotesque waters that surround them, and the boat ride becomes a confrontation, if not a contest, between man and nature, or man and beast. The Black man is rendered as a beast and thus in terms closer to nature than the “civilized” White man. The White man wins the metaphoric battle, for Stowe’s party sails on to catch fish for dinner, and the fish, “instead of eating, [...] are eaten” (76) We can hardly be surprised by this outcome, for, in Stowe’s depiction, the fight for survival ends with the White man triumphant.

This river journey, however, contrasts with one Stowe embarks on at the end of the text in which she encounters a hunting party who, rather than fishing or hunting for food, are doing so for the sport of it. Here Stowe disapproves of the hunter’s choice of entertainment: “We detest indiscriminate and purposeless maiming and killing of happy animals, who have but one life to live....” Watching “a parcel of hulking fellows” from her boat, Stowe describes their “constant fusillade upon every living thing that shows itself on the bank” (259). In the same way that Stowe’s earlier references to alligators in the swamp function metonymically for formerly oppressed slaves,

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<sup>18</sup> In her book, Stowe writes of the “St. John’s” River, though the correct spelling is the “St. Johns.” I have used the correct spelling throughout this essay.

<sup>19</sup> The images here very much evoke Yaeger’s use of the terms “grotesque” and “monstrous” as she delineates them in chapter one of *Dirt and Desire*, but Stowe’s work predates the literature covered by Yaeger.

they do so here as well, but in this scenario, which falls later in the book, it is as if Stowe is seeing for the first time what Southern Reconstruction really entails: senseless killing for killing's sake.

The extreme brutality that pervaded the South after the end of the Civil War has been well documented by historians. Eric Foner notes in his defining text, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, that violence had been "endemic" in the South since 1865, but that the advent of Radical Reconstruction "stimulated its further expansion" (425). Stowe witnesses White hunters shooting baby alligators and takes pity on the "dying struggles" of the "harmless young alligator" (259). She writes, "[As] he threw out his poor little black paws piteously like human hands, [he] seemed to be vastly diverting to these cultivated individuals" (260). Here the Black animal is at the mercy of the "cultivated" White hunters, whose barbarity shocks Stowe. She sarcastically notes that the hunters "wanted nothing of [the alligator] except to see how he would act when he was hit, dying agonies are so very amusing!" (260). The allusion to the savagery that came to a head in the South after the war in the form of pervasive lynching permeates this scene and is especially disturbing because the shooting takes place in what Stowe describes as "the sweetest paradise God ever made" (259). Further along, Stowe repeats that the armed men ashore shoot at "something that *enjoys* and can suffer; something that loves life and must lose it" (260). She does not know how to explain this "inherent savagery," writing that it is "difficult to account for." In frustration, Stowe concludes, "Killing for killing's sake belongs not even to the tiger. The tiger kills for food; man, for amusement" (260-261).

Such gratuitous killing (both of animals and African Americans) was widespread in the South after the war; perhaps Stowe was privy to it, though her allusions to such treachery are metaphoric and oblique. Eric Foner confirms that by 1870, violent White supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, had become "deeply entrenched" in nearly every Southern state, and worked primarily to "restore racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life" by enforcing a "reign of terror" (425-26, 342). It is quite possible, given the prevalence of brutality induced by organizations like the KKK, that Stowe had the misfortune of witnessing senseless torture and/or murder of innocent Black victims. Still, the only way she can reference such heinous crimes here is through the anthropomorphizing of a harmless, vulnerable baby alligator. Nevertheless, this scene remains unique in Stowe's text in that it is more sympathetic than her earlier metaphoric references to Blacks, and thus, it indicates Stowe's ambivalence towards race in the post-war Reconstruction period in the South.

### **Capitalizing on Florida's Financial Future**

Ultimately, though, Stowe believes in taming the "beasts" of the South in the same way that the swamp must be tamed so that both can be put to good (read "economic") use. Stowe states that the freed African American population is best suited to working the land and that if they become a permanent laboring class, both the North and South will reap the financial benefits. Throughout her concluding chapter, Stowe returns to a vision of the South where the emancipated Blacks function as the natural laborers for the benefit of the White "settlers." This class of laborers is, as before, naturally subordinate and biologically inferior to Whites, and they are delineated in terms that again recall Baldwin's critique of Stowe's sentimental portraits in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A host of word choices confirms this point: she comments on the "gayety" and "good nature" of African Americans, their "docility," their "perfect subjection to discipline," their "obedience" and "submission" (284-85). Stowe returns to "romantic racialism" to depict African Americans such as she uses in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but rather than offer African colonization as a solution for the emancipated population, she proposes a social hierarchy where Blacks labor for Whites. As

historian Blum puts it, “The transition from masters and slaves to employers and employees ha[s] been a peaceful one” in Stowe’s rendering (101-02). Stowe reveals freed African Americans to be so naturally and amicably suited to laboring for Whites in the South that it seems emancipation has hardly changed society at all.

The freed African Americans, with their strength, submissiveness, and obedience, are the perfect “tools” with which to rebuild the postwar White republic. Not only are they full of “gayety” and with “good nature,” but they have the “best spirits,” “sing songs,” “play on the banjo,” and “laugh” (284), just like Uncle Tom himself from Stowe’s earlier novel. Indeed, one could argue that such contentment stems from the fact that they can now provide an effective service. After illustrating Blacks as animal-like children who can best serve the nation as a permanent laboring caste, Stowe highlights their ability to contribute to the financial solvency of the state: “We could point to more than one Black family about us steadily growing up to competence by industry and saving” (317). She enumerates the positive financial contributions Blacks have made to the state by documenting their deposits to the “Freedman’s Savings and Trust Company” (315-16), an institution that is “under the patronage of the government” (316). Stowe’s purpose is twofold, then, as she concludes her collection. She encourages Northern White readers to utilize Blacks’ abilities in order to help ensure the success of a newly united nation. She affirms the peaceful and docile nature of the freed population of African Americans and offers that with proper education and treatment, this population can help procure the economic success of the region.

Social justice for the freed people is not a part of this two-fold plan as Stowe lays it out. Instead, for her White readers, Stowe advises: “If the whites, who cannot bear tropical suns and fierce extremes, neglect to educate a docile race who both can and will bear it for them, they throw away their best chance of success in a most foolish manner” (327). The society that Stowe proposes to Northern Whites is one that looks eerily similar to the one that was desired by plantation masters before the war and by White supremacists after it. Wealth, not justice, is its aim. Stowe concludes: “The *prosperity* of the more Southern states must depend, in large degree, on the right treatment and education of the negro population” (321—emphasis added). What this view lacks, however, is any actual plan of reform and education for Black people, which Stowe early on articulated an interest in. Instead, her emphasis has become establishing and protecting Northern commerce in the South.<sup>20</sup>

Once Stowe has determined a subservient laboring class for the region, she advocates the financial benefits of taming and cultivating the land of the South, a fertile territory overflowing with as yet untapped opportunity for Northerners. Just as John Smith once advertised the “New World” to those in England, Stowe works to convince her Northern readers that one cannot lose in Florida—the state is a frontier of possibility. Stowe highlights the need for Northerners to migrate south to cultivate and develop the land. She even stops herself from getting lost in “poetic raptures” to bring herself back to “statistics” and “reports” (145). That is, rather than focus on the beauty of the landscape, Stowe delivers financial gains by giving the example of her neighbor who only “has three trees in his grounds, which this year have each borne five thousand oranges” (145). Stowe adds that he has “never failed of a steady crop from any cause” (145). Stowe presents herself as a savvy businesswoman and fixates on the value of the trees; there are “a hundred and fifteen trees on an acre and a half of ground” on her land (142). Her economic vision for her property, and for Florida in general, dominates as she prioritizes monetary profits of the land over the integration or

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<sup>20</sup> Anne Rowe confirms in *The Enchanted Country* that Stowe’s mission of reform was replaced by an emphasis on protecting Northern commerce (xvii-xviii).

reform of its inhabitants. She writes that on her land “an average crop matures [to] sixty thousand a year” and she delineates the many benefits of owning an orange plantation, stating, “The orange-crop is the most steady and certain of any known fruit” (142). Her authoritative voice resembles the one she employed to take on slavery as a distant New Englander when she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Brunswick, Maine. However, here, Stowe writes not with romantic purpose, but with an economic vision that cues resolution between Northern and Southern Whites.

Stowe's promotion of Florida continues as she responds to “showers” of inquiries from Northern readers, illuminating how popular her writings were when they were first published (176). In chapters entitled “Buying Land in Florida” and “Our Experience in Crops,” she responds to letters (which she dubs “Palmetto letters”) about the price of land and how to get to the state. Stowe replies enthusiastically with reports on the “rising” and “productive” value of the land (177). She includes nothing about the displaced African American population, but rather offers her reports to presumably White “settlers” (184). As Anne Rowe has written, once she was in Florida, Stowe's crusading zeal faded, like that of other reformers; it was time to focus on “new and more pressing problems” such as a “new economic order” (xviii). Stowe refers to the “Union” multiple times, hoping to bring the “Union” south in order to ameliorate relations between the two regions (175). In “Magnolia,” which refers to the town next door to Stowe's, Stowe again hints at the importance of Northerners coming south to buy land and inveighs against planters from the pre-Civil War period who lacked the foresight to plant orange groves after the fire of 1835: “Nothing shows more strikingly the want of enterprise that has characterized this country” than this imprudence (93). It is enterprise, and the potential of a land where “trees grow and take care of themselves,” that captivates her (94).<sup>21</sup>

In short order, Stowe has moved from inveighing against “killing for killing's sake” (261), the ultimate crime perpetrated during Reconstruction, to expounding upon the benefits of buying land and living in Florida. These two missions are not as unrelated to each other as at first they seem. Stowe's text is infused with both criticism of and idealism about the South and its people. Perhaps the only way for Stowe to reconcile the volatility and danger of the Southern frontier is to offer an economic plan in which Northerners bring their civilizing influence on the region. For Stowe, traveling south has progressed from helping her son to escaping personal conflict in the North to having the veil lifted from her eyes and seeing for the first time the reality of postwar life. This process of discovery and reckoning was fraught with difficulty and contradiction.

## Conclusion

Stowe's book, in the end, is not about her mission to “liberate” the South, even if that were her original interest. Rather, *Palmetto Leaves* grew (accumulated as it was from a series of magazine pieces) to become an exposure of Stowe's struggle to confront her deep-seated fears and racial prejudices as they came to light in this wild and untamed world. Indeed, by the end of her book, Stowe states that the freed laborers around her “seemed blacker, stranger, and more dismal, than anything [she] had ever seen” (300). Her new eyes were frightened eyes. In the foreign environment of postwar Florida, all of Stowe's roles in the North—as domestic writer, proto-feminist, abolitionist, and best-selling celebrity—were somewhat or entirely recalibrated. But even with new eyes, the “strange” and “dismal” disenfranchisement of African Americans as Stowe

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<sup>21</sup> It is this point—the fact of the enterprise that Stowe capitalizes on—that circles back to my use of the word “enterprising” to describe Stowe early in this essay. Stowe has proven herself to be both resourceful and entrepreneurial.

depicts them in *Palmetto Leaves* (300), remains the “hard fact” of Reconstruction in the postwar South.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps an even harder fact for Stowe was realizing that, though she went to Florida to shine “the light of liberation,” while there, she had yet to pierce “the darkness of discrimination” (Blum 19). As we have seen, Stowe’s entrepreneurial spirit came at great cost: it resulted in the sustained exploitation of Black people in the South and colluded with Northerners’ White supremacist mission of prioritizing their own needs above those of the people of color around them. Just as third-wave feminist scholars such as Kyla Schuller have argued, upper-class, nineteenth-century White women like Stowe used hierarchies of power to expand their own opportunities. Stowe’s sunny days in Florida, in the end, were at least somewhat shadowed by the swampy lands of Reconstruction that surrounded her.

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<sup>22</sup> “Dismal” and “strange” are Stowe’s words (*Palmetto Leaves* 300). “Hard fact” is Philip Fisher’s phrase. It is worth noting that Stowe uses the word “facts” more than once to describe what she encounters in Florida; see for example p. 319.

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