

# Pro-Slavery Appropriations and Inadvertent Agencies: The Elder(ly) “Uncle” in Plantation Fiction

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The plantation-school genre of American literature, which featured harrowing tales of the white planter class, scores of racial stereotypes, and seemingly endless defenses of enslavement, began in the early 1830s and remained popular for nearly a century. Given that the offensive racial caricatures and cringe-inducing arguments maintained by the apologist, or pro-slavery school of writers, are repugnant to the majority of modern readers and the texts themselves are derivative, tedious, and uninspiring, the genre has received little critical attention in the humanities since the time of the civil rights movement. At that time, an increasing number of scholars turned their attention to the recovery of African American histories and literature, as told or written by themselves.<sup>1</sup> Yet, on closer examination, acts of resistance emerge through the racist representations, specifically regarding their elder(ly) enslaved caricatures. In revealing glimpses of the real-life acts of agency they were attempting to disprove, apologist writers exposed unavoidable schisms between their aged characters as signifiers for slavery’s supposed benefits and how they presented them in their pro-slavery texts.

Although enslaved and formerly enslaved people were adroit at employing oratory and song for communication, commemoration, and cultural critique, the majority were not able to read the appropriations of themselves that supported their bondage and thus were unaware and unable to answer back in writing. Coupled with the fact that, more often than not, it was young and able-bodied

men and women who escaped North and subsequently shared their experiences, forced illiteracy surely accounted for the lack of accounts written by men and women who had survived enslavement into old age. Consequently, the relative absence of primary texts published by elder(ly) enslaved African Americans in the mid- to late nineteenth century leaves one searching for how this silenced group was depicted at the time as well as what effect such one-sided representation had on public perception and opinion. As William R. Taylor writes in *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, “There are many things about the history of an era that cannot be learned from its literature, but historians . . . have been too timid about searching out the things that can. Stories and novels, even bad and unskillful ones, possess an element of free fantasy which is sometimes very revealing.”<sup>2</sup> Although these authors manipulated the lives and experiences of the elder enslaved in order to depict a carefree existence and twilight years of leisure, trauma and resistance are ubiquitous in representations of the “happy South.” What these texts make plain to modern readers, if not nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century readers, is that the local color of the Deep South was haunted by racial violence to the extent that these issues could not help but permeate every attempt at description or defense. As a result, the agency of the aged enslaved materializes despite the derivative characterizations and racism to reveal certain truths about the physical and mental traumas suffered by the people on whom these caricatures were based and the often overlooked efforts they put forth to survive.

In studying the antebellum plantation fiction that fascinated northern and southern readerships, we can glean elements of the resistant and resilient lives of the elder(ly) enslaved by analyzing the many unintended implications and double meanings extant in the genre that depicted them more than any other. John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn; or, a Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832) is widely regarded as the prototype for the pro-slavery plantation romance.<sup>3</sup> Mark Littleton, the book’s narrator and cousin to the residents of a Virginia Tidewater plantation, arrives with northern ideas about the ills of slavery but leaves a southern sympathizer.<sup>4</sup> This blending of plantation romance with the popular travel writing genre was repeated throughout the 1850s and 1860s by numerous apologists, including “nonfiction” works by northern clergymen extolling the virtues of enslavement after brief visits to the South.<sup>5</sup>

As more enslaved people escaped North and disseminated their stories through abolitionist platforms in the 1840s and 1850s (e.g., meetings, pamphlets, newspapers, and full-length publications), the American literary market was inundated with both abolitionist and apologist narratives—all claiming to provide a firsthand glimpse into the “peculiar institution.” Following the unparalleled success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, “Anti-Tom” texts, such as William Gilmore Simms’s *The Sword and the Distaff*, flooded the literary scene, and most were much bolder in their racist offenses than anything that had appeared in Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* twenty years earlier.<sup>6</sup> Pro-slavery writers were eager to publish, no pun intended, “whitewashed”

accounts of slavery *as it really was*, offering up caricatures of Uncle Tom with one key change: unlike Stowe's robust, courageous, middle-aged character, the surrogate Toms were depicted as desexualized elderly figures relying on paternal white caretaking and charity for their survival.

After the end of the war in April 1865, the "Negro Question," or "Negro Problem," as the plans for the future of African Americans were then termed, was addressed by nearly every major pro- and anti-slavery figure of the day, including Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Harry Stillwell Edwards, Anna Julia Cooper, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Dubois, Charles Chesnutt, and Ida B. Wells. By donning the guise of nostalgia and preying on an American public still traumatized by war, apologists carried on the legacy of their antebellum antecedents by redeploying the "Storytelling Uncle" trope to argue that African Americans, especially the elderly, had felt happier and more secure with whites making decisions for them and determining their fates. Unfortunately, nearly everything related to America's popular culture in the nineteenth century—its literature, music, theater, toys, games, and stereograph cards—had featured unintelligent and untrustworthy caricatures of African Americans. This constant barrage of racial stereotypes surely played a part in the white public's general ambivalence toward institutionalized racism, including the dismantling of the rights of the new black citizenry, and the implementation of Jim Crow legislations that eliminated political competition from African Americans.

Analyzed alongside the freedom narratives and black-authored fiction of the nineteenth century, the once popular but relatively abandoned genre of plantation literature informs modern readers as to how antebellum southern writers articulated and expressed their fears regarding the institution of slavery and the threat of emancipation, and how they sought to quell these fears through fiction writing that further misdirected an already misinformed public. Sarah Roth's research on pro-slavery antebellum novels examines the emasculation of black males relegated to positions of servitude and childlike dependency, the latter of which became the cornerstone apologist argument for slavery as a paternalistic institution. This infantilization was complicated, however, by the forthright combativeness of David Walker's 1829 *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World*<sup>7</sup> and the bloodshed of Nat Turner's 1831 Revolt—after which, as Roth's work illustrates, pro-slavery writers concentrated on disseminating the figure of the young black man as a degenerate brute.<sup>8</sup> The subgenre of "Savage Slave" fiction published throughout the 1830s played on the fears of the American public following Turner's Revolt by portraying black "savagery, carefully concealed from whites most of the time," but which "could erupt without warning in disturbing episodes of violence."<sup>9</sup> The bold threats made against slaveholders that appeared in Walker's *Appeal* and, later in Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859), chronicled the angst of black men in such a way that would not be seen again until the late nineteenth century, when authors such as Charles Chesnutt reintegrated the subject back into mainstream American literature.<sup>10</sup>

Pro-slavery fiction writers positioned enslaved “Uncles” as both old men and children, with supposedly inferior intellects and faithful demeanors that made them ideal companions and entertainers for white youth. Whereas pro-slavery depictions of aged “Aunts” are starkly different in the antebellum period from those in the postbellum—a reflection of the changing interactions between whites and elder black women following emancipation—the trope of the “Storytelling Uncle” was apparently successful enough in both the pre- and the postwar periods that it not only was maintained but also remained highly popular in American literature and popular entertainment from the 1830s through the 1940s. Consequently, the orality of elder black men was appropriated for well over a century as a symbol of their alleged ineptitude to provide for and take care of themselves and their families. This perceived incompetence did not, however, preclude slaveholders from relying on elder black men to safeguard the well-being of their own children; thus, the “Storytelling Uncle” proved a thinly veiled attempt to suppress and discredit a wholly capable but nevertheless degraded group of men.<sup>11</sup>

After the Civil War, apologist writers *did* adapt their literary stereotypes of aged black females, yet the changes were merely a new, much crueler means of silencing their “Aunt” characters. In antebellum fiction, pro-slavery writers had restricted both the mobility and the orality of black women in their works through the “Deathbed Aunty” trope, which confined the old women to their cabin deathbeds and limited their speaking subjects to Christian conversions, serving their “white families,” and, in the majority of examples, of having nursed white children at their breasts. Since there was no longer a need to argue the contentedness of elderly “Aunties” following emancipation, apologist fiction writers decisively killed off their frail, beloved old nurses and replaced them with mentally and spiritually broken outcasts. Passing off the psychological aftereffects of chattel slavery as Deep South local color, postbellum apologists employed the “Distracted Aunty” trope to further diminish the speaking power and dismiss the traumas of black women in the minds of nineteenth-century readers.

Narratives defending enslavement consistently manipulated the experiences of black elders for sociopolitical and economic gain, misappropriating their orality to eradicate the notion of *believable* testimony by African Americans in the country’s literature and collective memory. Approached with an eye toward subtle acts of subversion, however, a pattern emerges among apologist caricatures of the aged enslaved wherein their “happy” fictions begin to blur with tragic realities. Pro-slavery writers did not consider their black subjects as equally human, and incorporating suffering slaves as specimens<sup>12</sup> of local color in their plantation romances allowed them to repeatedly expose their readers to the racial violence they were accustomed to. Because fans literally bought into the plantation myth by continually purchasing apologist works, many readers surely failed to recognize that the genre consistently revealed the extent

to which the barbarities of chattel slavery had affected conceptualizations of normalcy both within the South and well beyond its borders.

The pro-slavery texts examined here are formulaic in their attempts to reinforce the notions of racial superiority and sexual dominance held by young and middle-aged white men—the authors, narrators, and a substantial readership of such works—by making *old* black men a major focus of their stories. Plantation-school writers worked under the widely held assumption that white masculinity was under constant attack and apparently believed that the most effective means of reinforcing the collective status of their peer group was to represent black males as dependent, effeminate, eccentric, and frail. However, employing the aged “Uncle” trope to suppress black agency and diminish the concept of black masculinity did not result in the social and racial harmony depicted in apologist works. On the contrary, a large part of the Civil War and postbellum-era public—in both the North and the South—became convinced that any black man who did not meet the parameters of the simplistic, jolly, elderly stereotype was likely a deviant or rebel whose words, actions, and passions must be suppressed at all costs. The result in positioning all nonelderly black men as direct threats to the age-old security of whiteness was a damning rhetorical move that had—and continues to have—deadly consequences for black men and boys throughout America.

### Subtle Subversions in the Antebellum “Uncle”

John Pendleton Kennedy’s early plantation romance *Swallow Barn* (1832) begins with the narrator’s “Introductory Epistle” to a friend, wherein he provides context for the narrative that follows. Meant to draw readers into the “reality” of the author’s representations through his (alleged) personal letters, the epistolary motif also serves to privilege literacy over oral testimony and promotes penned adaptations over the voices of experience. As Heather Tirado Gilligan asserts, “Unlike the literature of abolition, the novel offered readers a doubly authenticated narrative; it gave not just the eyewitness testimony of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the slave narratives, but testimony that was both eye-witnessed and told from the point of view of an outsider who is persuaded to ideological transformation by the social scene before him.”<sup>13</sup> This tension between the written and the spoken word reflects the disparate lives of young, white, educated authors and their narrators and the old, black, uneducated people whose stories and traumas they stole and perverted as fodder for pro-slavery texts.

Although southern literary reactions to Walker and Turner began with the adoption of the “Savage Slave” trope in 1835, the timing of the 1832 publication of *Swallow Barn* is significant, as it followed on the heels of Nat Turner’s Revolt, which had taken place the previous year.<sup>14</sup> Despite the intense panic aroused by the uprising, Kennedy’s novel includes a rebellious and heroic young slave named Abe, who is shockingly *not* depicted as a bloodthirsty black

villain. As literary historian Jean Fagan Yellin notes, “It is strange that in the first important book to celebrate the antebellum South, the closest approximation to a true hero is a rebellious slave.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, *Swallow Barn* might very well be the *first* and *last* instance in which a “rebellious” male slave—or, indeed, any young-to-middle-aged slave—is positioned as a hero (or a character of any significance) within a pro-slavery work.

Littleton, the novel’s narrator, establishes early on that the events he is recounting took place in 1829, two years prior to the slave rebellion that shocked the country and intensified the fears and paranoia of southern slaveholders. As Littleton writes, Abe had “molested the peace of the neighbourhood by continual broils” and “was frequently detected in acts of depredation upon the adjoining farms.”<sup>16</sup> After nearly being lynched, Abe was sent to work as a seaman on the Chesapeake. Once free from the restrictions of the plantation, he thrived and achieved a name for himself, thus achieving the freedom that Frederick Douglass covets in his soliloquy about the boats on Chesapeake Bay, which are “loosed from your moorings, and are free” and “move merrily before the gentle gale . . . freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world.”<sup>17</sup> Prior to Abe’s being sent away, Littleton explains how the enslaved are reluctant to leave their birthplaces because of “a strong attachment to the places connected with their earlier associations,—what in phrenology is called inhabitiveness,” which he believes is the result of “the pride of remaining in one family of masters, and of being transmitted to its posterity with all their own generations.”<sup>18</sup> Strangely, Kennedy’s characterization of Abe disproves this pseudoscience both through his initial rebellions and through his success on leaving the plantation.

Although Kennedy devotes ample space to Abe’s story, most future apologists ceased including any admirable traits in their young, black, male characters. Shifting the collective focus to superannuated slaves, pro-slavery writers depicted the elderly as nonthreatening to both whiteness and masculine authority—easily manipulated spokespeople for the system that denied them personhood. This literary turn enabled apologist writers to effectively erase young African Americans, particularly men, from their literary genre, and with them, the passions they maintained were inextricably tied to black youth. And yet, despite the alleged superiority of youth over old age and the written over the spoken word, one of Kennedy’s central characters, an old groom named Carey who is also the resident minstrel at Swallow Barn, proves a worthy adversary against his supposed betters. Carey is (in)famously combative, and his behavior pushes the boundaries of what would have been considered acceptable, even for an elder. However, in the paternalistic, feudal world that Kennedy creates at Swallow Barn, it is clear that Carey need not worry about the cruel punishments suffered by millions of enslaved people in the real world.<sup>19</sup>

Carey regularly argues with the plantation’s steward, Meriwether, over “the affairs of the stable, [and] in such a sagacious strain of equal debate, that it would puzzle a spectator to tell which was the leading member in the council.”<sup>20</sup> Carey asserts his superior knowledge of the subject and then scolds Meriwether

for challenging him. The old man rightfully contends that his decades of first-hand experience with the horses means he knows much more than the young man, who merely owns them. Once Carey plays the “I bounced you on my knee” card, Meriwether admits defeat and, walking away, attempts to save face with Littleton by saying, “a faithful old cur, too, that licks my hand out of pure honesty; he has not many years left, and it does no harm to humour him!”<sup>21</sup> Thus, Meriwether maintains Carey’s faithfulness while admitting that the only way to “keep him” is to keep him happy by listening to and believing him and by staying out of his way. To avoid conflict with the old man, he appropriates Carey’s assertiveness and repackages it as benevolence on his part to maintain the upper hand. Although Kennedy acknowledges the wisdom of the old slave, Carey’s ability to openly declare his venerability and defend his expertise without fear of violent reprisal is indeed the stuff of fiction.

Meriwether’s nonreaction to Carey’s claims of authority is the exact opposite of what Frederick Douglass describes in his 1845 *Narrative* as the cruel and fickle temperament of Colonel Lloyd, who delights in the physical torture of his grooms, old Barney and young Barney. Unlike the fictional Frank Meriwether, “Colonel Lloyd could not brook any contradiction from a slave. When he spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble.”<sup>22</sup> Whereas Kennedy’s character regularly challenges white men without rebuke, in reality, Lloyd punished his two grooms mercilessly and without impunity for a litany of “the slightest inattentions” to his horses, for which “no excuse could shield them.”<sup>23</sup> Not only were old and young Barney prohibited from speaking in their own defense, but they also received much harsher punishment if they did. Douglass lists the offenses charged against them at length, stating it was not unusual for Lloyd to whip old Barney, “at fifty or sixty years of age,”<sup>24</sup> thirty or more lashes at a time. Additionally, since the two Barneys were father and son, their mutual inability to help the other throughout years of physical and mental abuse would have resulted in a constant cycle of violent emasculation.

Littleton further documents Carey’s equine expertise in *Volume II*, when Meriwether takes him to see the horses at pasture and proceeds to brag about their pure and noble blood. Carey quickly steps in and takes full ownership of the thoroughbreds, whom he calls his “children,” naming and explaining their prestigious lineage, to which Meriwether responds by calling him a “true herald.”<sup>25</sup> In this feudal comparison, Meriwether supposes himself the king and Carey his royal mouthpiece and keeper of family history. This chivalric sentimentalism obfuscates the existing racial power structures with a seeming camaraderie between owner and slave. Although the character of Meriwether repeatedly attempts to minimize Carey’s assertions of superiority in relation to one of the more costly and valuable ventures on the plantation, Kennedy’s desire to mimic the popular feudalism of Walter Scott leads him to inadvertently highlight the superior skills and intelligence of a black slave over a white gentleman.<sup>26</sup>

As stated previously, apologist writers began eschewing younger enslaved characters after Nat Turner's 1831 Revolt and the 1832 publication of *Swallow Barn*, and in the literary backlash that followed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, it is a rarity to find any black male character of note under age fifty. Representing the aged enslaved as little more than comedic, loyal, gray-haired children in need of white caretaking became the go-to apologist strategy for infantilizing all black peoples, and it was highly effective in influencing public opinion. If blacks were perceived as physically dangerous or sexually threatening, pro-slavery caricatures became increasingly older and more docile to suggest absolute servility. If religious readers questioned the morality of slaveholding, dying African "Aunts" recited Bible passages and thanked God that enslavement was their path to spiritual salvation. If African Americans proved their intellectual equality to whites in the public sphere, apologist caricatures were imbued with thicker dialects, increased shows of ineptitude, and more restrictive ties to the slave cabin. Simply put, the nature of pro-slavery literature was highly defensive, as evidenced by the multiple waves of refutations and reinterpretations intended to guard against abolitionist indictments.

Although apologists often acknowledged the responsibilities and accountability that the aged enslaved were subject to, they nevertheless managed to convince themselves that the black race was completely dependent on and thankful for white paternalism. One such author was William Gilmore Simms, a South Carolinian with a prolific literary career and an especially provocative (i.e., highly disturbing) perspective on master-slave "relationships." Simms's 1852 *The Sword and the Distaff: Or, "Fair, Fat, and Forty," A Story of the South, at the Close of the Revolution*<sup>27</sup> was part of the wave of southern fiction published in response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although, according to Joseph V. Ridgely, Simms tried to avoid alienating northern readers with "too blatant a defense" of slavery, as in other anti-Tom novels.<sup>28</sup> In choosing colonial America as his setting, Simms circumvented much of the traditional plantation fiction content, yet the novel nevertheless stands as a shocking example of the lengths to which apologists went to persuade northern and southern readers that those enslaved preferred bondage to freedom.

As the title relates, Simms's novel takes place at the end of the Revolutionary War, but the interactions between the corpulent, debt-ridden planter's son, Porgy, and his old slave Tom (Porgy's attendant and his regiment's cook) are very much concerned with anxieties about the tenuous future of slavery in the South. As in many pro- and anti-slavery texts, the subject of selling/collecting slaves as payment for a profligate planter's outstanding debts arises in relation to Porgy, who claims of his favorite slave, "I love Tom. Tom is virtually a free man. It's true, being a debtor, I cannot confer his freedom upon him. . . . He shall never fall into the hands of a scamp. I'll sacrifice him as a burnt offering for my sins and his own. Tom, I'm thinking, would rather die my slave, than live a thousand years under another owner."<sup>29</sup> Because Porgy's debt is worth more than the sale of all of his slaves and his mortgaged plantation combined,



he knows Tom is liable to be taken as payment toward the remaining debt, yet he goes on to say that as long as he is able to eat, Tom will be the one to cook for him. Porgy continues to assert that, even if he loses everything else, as long as Tom remains, “it is still possible for me to live.”<sup>30</sup> Porgy’s statement that he would die without Tom (and not the other way around) illustrates the dependency of slaveholders on those they claimed were in every way inferior to themselves.

When Tom is complimented on his cooking, he mentions an acquaintance of Porgy’s whom he proudly claims would do nearly anything to steal him away. Tom’s boast prompts an impassioned and disturbing speech in which Porgy reiterates his earlier promises/threats, making the additional vows: “I will neither give you, nor sell you, nor suffer you to be taken from me in any way. . . . Nothing but Death shall ever part us, Tom, and even Death shall not if I can help it. When I die, you shall be buried with me. We have fought and fed too long together, Tom, and I trust we love each other quite too well, to submit to separation.”<sup>31</sup> Porgy’s insistence that they remain side by side in life *and* interred together in death has queer connotations and goes well beyond the “normal” same-sex parameters of the owner/slave “relationship.”<sup>32</sup> Although it is unmistakable that he finds Tom’s services invaluable, to what extent he *values him* is less clear. Is it as an attentive subservient? A lifelong companion? A lover? Tom is already a feminized character, and Porgy’s morbid sexual aggressiveness is all-consuming.<sup>33</sup> Nothing will appease him but hearty consent from Tom that he desires nothing more than to be buried (in the same coffin?) together. Porgy is unyielding in his demands of Tom, and his belief in his own power and influence are palpable when he declares,

Yes, Tom! you shall never leave me. I will put a brace of bullets through your abdomen, Tom, sooner than lose you! But, it may be, that I shall not have the opportunity. They may take advantage of my absence—they may *steal* you away—coming on you by surprise! If they should do so, Tom, I rely upon you, to put *yourself* to death, sooner than abandon me, and become the slave of another. Kill yourself, Tom, rather than let them carry you off. Put your knife into your ribs, any where, three inches deep, and you will effectually baffle the blood-hounds!<sup>34</sup>

The romantic language Porgy uses to try to convince Tom to murder himself rather than be taken is more than a slaveholder demanding obedience from a slave; it is one man pleading for another to declare that his love, loyalty, and subservience extend into the afterlife.<sup>35</sup> For Tom to comply with his owner’s unusual demands would result in Porgy essentially owning the old man “body and soul,” a matter that held great significance for the enslaved, as evidenced by the common use of the fearful phrase in both freedom narratives and other abo-

litionist works. Porgy, like many of Simms's readers, believes that his old slave is utterly devoted to him, yet Tom, the supposedly faithful caricature, remains strategically silent and refuses to give his consent.<sup>36</sup>

In Porgy's ideal scenario of their death, he dies first, and Tom, like a Shakespearean lover, kills himself rather than live without his mate. Believing that their bond is strong enough to last beyond death, Porgy's jealous control over the man he purports to love prevents him from even considering manumission. In rejecting any scenario in which Tom is not by his side for eternity, Porgy ensures that Tom stays in what Porgy believes is his "proper place." Unlike Frank Meriwether's theory of inhabitiveness in *Swallow Barn*, "Simms understood social and religious development to be contingent upon a people having a permanent home and believed that African Americans were natural-born wanderers who would establish a permanent location only when forced."<sup>37</sup> Porgy indeed forces Tom into "a permanent location" by discounting any possibility of separation during their respective lifetimes; however, to require this permanency in death amounts to nothing short of obsession. Tom, less than thrilled at the idea of committing suicide, asserts, "'Wha'! me, maussa! kill mese'f! . . . Nebber, in dis worl [world] maussa!'"<sup>38</sup> Porgy's infatuation leads him to challenge Tom's manhood although paradoxically, through queer appeals, declaring, "'I thought you were more of a man—that you had more affection for me! Is it possible that you could wish to live, if separated from me? Impossible, Tom! I will never believe it. No, boy, you shall never leave me.'"<sup>39</sup> Although Porgy is aggressive in his attempts to emasculate Tom, his pleas are submissive. In reality, Porgy, like many slaveholders, relies on forced labor for nearly everything. Unable to complete the most basic tasks, Porgy cannot function on his own. Without Tom, Porgy is sedentary, incompetent, childlike in his tantrums, and no model of masculinity. Rather, Porgy *needs* Tom to sacrifice all opportunities of a better life—or any life—to validate his own vanity and sense of self-worth and to allow him to situate himself as the dominant one of the two men.

In order to wholly convince Tom that there is no escaping his fate and that the enslaved man must remain his devoted servant in the afterlife, Porgy uses the stereotype of slave superstition against Tom, who is beyond frightened: "'If you are not prepared to bury yourself in the same grave with me when I die, I shall be with you in spirit, if not in flesh; and I shall make you cook for me as now.'"<sup>40</sup> Porgy's threat that nothing, not even death, will free Tom from the master-slave power dynamic he is subject to is pure monomania. Furthermore, what he describes is a domestic partnership wherein Tom is posited as a wifely figure, expected to take care of Porgy indefinitely. Although Porgy's obsession might be due to Tom's culinary skills and his own massive appetite, it is evident from his constant attestations that he not only expects but also yearns for Tom's utter submissiveness. Porgy makes it clear that his greatest fear is to be without Tom, whom he speaks of as his temporal partner and spiritual savior, exhibiting the latter when he asserts, "'I'll sacrifice him as a burnt offering for my sins and his own.'"<sup>41</sup> The desire of white men to "master" black bodies

is a recurring theme throughout pro-slavery and abolitionist literature, yet the morbid depths of Porgy's obsession with Tom go far beyond any other anti-Tom novels. Simms's white protagonist is both maniacal and deviant, and Porgy's vacillation between anger and supplication is textbook behavior for what we now identify as psychological domestic abuse. Regardless, Tom never agrees to kill himself or to be buried with the man who so adamantly demands it, again demonstrating the slippage between the apparent purpose of the character and what Simms makes—or does not make—him say.<sup>42</sup>

As a white man, Porgy can threaten Tom into *acting* like he loves him, but he cannot guarantee that he will remain faithful—the possibility of which plagues the security of his white privilege. Tom maintains his faithfulness in serving Porgy but never agrees to take his own life or be buried with him. Thus, if Simms's character is intended to prove the love the enslaved had for their owners and the necessity of keeping them close for “their own good,” he missed the mark. What *is* clear, both from Porgy's obsession and from Tom's silence, is that the slave is not the one in need of a caretaker—literally, Porgy cannot dress himself. Instead, these scenes from *The Sword and the Distaff* illustrate an absurd dependency by whites on slave labor for anything and everything in daily life as well as the tendency to presume that the aged enslaved, having given their blood, sweat, tears, and children to the plantation system their entire lives, had no living left to do. Simms's depiction of Porgy's utter reliance on Tom not only disproves the much-touted “cradle to grave” policy of pro-slavery advocates but also demonstrates that nothing—not old age and apparently not even death—exempted the enslaved from forced labor, intimidation, and abuse.

As war between the North and South increased, slaveholders felt their way of life and pocketbooks continually threatened. Afraid of being reduced to the childlike, submissive position ascribed to blacks via paternalism, apologists devised elderly enslaved caricatures to contrast with the youth and vitality of their white characters and to act as literary spokespeople for the institution. Edward A. Pollard was a southern journalist and writer whose works focused on the politics of slavery, the nationwide advantages of reopening the slave trade, and the state of the Confederacy and its leaders during and after the Civil War. Pollard peoples his book *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (1859) with the elderly enslaved.<sup>43</sup> All the letters that make up the work are addressed to a “Mr. C,” or David M. Clarkson, Esq. of Newburgh, New York, whose beliefs on the institution purportedly contrast with the author's.<sup>44</sup> None of Mr. C's letters are included, allowing the collection to function as one sustained argument by Pollard, interjected with, but hardly interrupted by, the unseen objections of Clarkson. In the first letter of the collection (which he admits he plans to publish), Pollard explains that his intent is to provide “sketches, which may amuse you, may correct the false views of others, derived, as they chiefly are, from the libels of Northern spies, who live or travel here in disguise.”<sup>45</sup> In providing his sketches of “happy” slaves, Pollard forgoes characterizing the young and middle-aged and focuses solely on the elderly:

Uncle George (also called “Old Bones”) and his wife, Aunt Belinda, Uncle Jeamus (or Jimboo), Pompey (a “Guinea negro”), Aunt Judy, Uncle Nash, Aunt Marie, and Uncle Junk.

Knowing that the racial power structure forced the enslaved to stifle their opinions and beliefs in order to comply with whites—what bell hooks describes as “the capacity to mask feelings and lie” that serves as “a useful survival skill for black folks”—apologists employed the allegedly innocuous elderly slave population to argue that whites families and their slaves “loved” each other.<sup>46</sup> Pollard’s collection of letters focuses mainly on the aged enslaved men and women he supposedly knew over a lifetime spent in the South. Although “Diamonds” in the title refers to cultural gems “Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South,” it is also suggestive of the monetary worth of those represented as well as the longevity of his aged subjects. That any person could have lived to be seventy or eighty years old under the yoke of enslavement suggests immense physical and mental fortitude and/or creativity in acting the dehumanizing parts demanded daily. However, to the authors who depicted the aged-slave population as representative of sincere faithfulness and natural (racial) resilience and fortitude, such adaptive strategies were unlooked for and therefore often went unrecognized.

Pollard’s *Black Diamonds* is in many ways typical of apologist literature at the time, particularly regarding the “scenes of slave life” he depicts and his focus on the aged enslaved as the primary support for his pro-slavery arguments.<sup>47</sup> Never one to miss an opportunity to reiterate his love for his family’s elderly slaves, Pollard claims he “was trained in an affectionate respect for the old slaves on the plantation” and “was permitted to visit their cabins, and to carry them kind words and presents.”<sup>48</sup> He describes Uncle George, the Pollard family’s head gardener, as one who had “grown old gently,” who “had never seen any hard service,” and who, “with that regard commonly exhibited toward the slave when stricken with age,” “had every attention paid him in the evening of his life.”<sup>49</sup> Despite the great lengths Pollard’s family supposedly took to care for George in his old age, the author first introduces him as “a very genteel beggar” who “has the ugly habit of secretly waylaying [visitors], and begging them to ‘remember’ him.”<sup>50</sup> In Letter II, the author writes that once, after returning home after several years’ absence, George fell to his knees and held fast to his legs to prevent him from leaving. Ostensibly overwhelmed by the emotional recollection of this act, Pollard continues, “This poor old man was ‘a slave,’ and yet he had a place in my heart. . . . Miserable abolitionists! You prate of brotherly love and humanity. If you or any man had dared to hurt a hair of this slave, I could have trampled you into the dust.”<sup>51</sup> Pollard uses George’s advanced age to substantiate the presumed helplessness of the enslaved against the predatory nature of abolitionists and to suggest (ironically) that black elders faced physical harm at their hands.

Antebellum apologist fiction and nonfiction consistently depicted enslavement as a patriarchal system that provided and cared for its “workers” from

“cradle to grave,” or from birth until death. For many African Americans who grew old within the system of chattel slavery, there was an expectation, if not a spoken or legal understanding, that they would be cared for after lifetimes of forced labor and after seeing their children sold away to fund the livelihoods of their owners and their descendants. Both southerners and northerners viewed this unofficial policy of caregiving as an act of selfless mercy on the part of slaveholders, as it cost money to support older slaves who were no longer contributing to the plantation economy as they had formerly. The pro-slavery authors who promoted this paternalism crafted their southern settings around depictions and assertions of black contentment and even gratitude, where their enslaved characters were described as rarely sold, rarely beaten, always loved, and happily housed and fed long after they had ceased to be “valuable” members of the plantation labor force. The latter of these—the notion of security in old age—surely struck a chord with many nineteenth-century Americans anxious about their own physical or mental decline and fearful of the uncertainties of old age in a time before Social Security and twentieth-century commitments to the welfare state. As the existence of antebellum anti-manumission laws demonstrates, however, this was not always the case.<sup>52</sup> Many elderly enslaved men and women found themselves turned away from the only homes they had ever known—forced into reliance on friends and neighbors for shelter, sustenance, and care in their old age.<sup>53</sup>

For all his attestations that the aged enslaved men and women he knew were living in comparative leisure and luxury, Pollard contradicts this in Letter VII, in which he tells the story of Nash, “the old black patriarch” who “fell in harness, and died with on [*sic*; no] master but Jesus to relieve the last mysterious agonies of his death.”<sup>54</sup> Pollard wistfully recalls “the excitement of the search for Nash, and the shock to my heart, of the discovery, in the bright morning, of the corpse lying among the thick undergrowth, and in the whortleberry bushes of the wood.”<sup>55</sup> Given Pollard’s description of Uncle George’s “retirement,” Nash likewise should have been excused from field labor, and yet he “fell in harness” the same as any animal worked to death. Thus, despite the professed insights of Pollard and other pro-slavery advocates, the deadly realities of the system are clearly evident in their own narratives. Although some slaveholders realized it was counterproductive to cripple their assets and workforce, it nevertheless remains that others did not care and reveled in their cruelty. Certainly, the argument that old slaves were generally “retired” from hard labor is disproved by Pollard’s own inclusion of the circumstances of Nash’s death. The truth is that Nash dies alone in a far-off field where he spent his life enriching his owners and their estates—*not* in the relative comfort of a fire-lit cabin like the “Deathbed Aunty” depicted in *Black Diamonds* and numerous other apologist novels.

Although Pollard writes of several elder(ly) slaves, his narrative of Uncle Junk, a storyteller supposedly unaffected by his position as the property of another, is the most prolonged and in depth. And yet, on closer inspection, the

character contradicts the author's apparent aims, as his wild stories and little white lies prove a clever form of sedition and show him to be the opposite of a man tempered by time into accepting his lowly position. Letter IX gives a detailed account of Junk, a "most distinguished palavarer [*sic*], romancer, diplomat, and ultimately a cobbler of old shoes."<sup>56</sup> According to Pollard, "Junk had not always been a cobbler. To believe his own narrative, he had been a circus-rider, an alligator hunter, an attaché of a foreign legation, and a murderer, stained with the blood of innumerable Frenchmen, with whom he had quarreled when on his European tour."<sup>57</sup> As Pollard explains, Junk's owner had once intended to take him to Europe but left him home due to mounting fears that abolitionists might persuade him to run away. Pollard intended Junk's imagined experiences killing white men—because they were *French* men—to act as proof of his loyalty, yet it actually suggests more about the selective listening of whites than it does the supposed absurdity of an old slave's speech.

Apologist writers claimed that living in or even briefly visiting the South provided them with insights regarding the inner workings of enslavement and the "true nature" and/or character of the black race in general, yet many freedom narratives reference the many ways in which African Americans *performed* the racial expectations of whites as a means of survival—often through orality. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of "Signifyin(g),"<sup>58</sup> or the performing of an ascribed racialized identity, positions the black speaker within the contextual confines of enslavement as one who employs the rhetorical techniques of a trickster to simultaneously persuade and mislead the intended audience. Signifyin(g), or performing blackness in ways that seemed to validate notions of white racial superiority, helped the enslaved to survive by masking their anger and agency. Although Pollard's characterization of Junk is meant to demonstrate the tendency of aged "Uncles" to fabricate stories and humorously inflate their own importance, he instead provides an example of Signifyin(g) in which an old slave is able to publicly brag about killing white men by playing into the vanity and nationalism of white southerners. Furthermore, Pollard's narrative inadvertently highlights the importance of oral culture within the enslaved community, both as a momentary distraction from the drudgeries of bondage and as a coping mechanism through which African Americans reimagined their world.

Junk performs the role of plantation storyteller, and so his is a cultural performance, a "social process by which actors . . . display for others the meaning of their social situation," a "meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe."<sup>59</sup> By and large, the members of the enslaved community venerate Junk, defend him, and "crowd around him on every possible occasion, as he dispensed the eventful experiences of his pilgrimage."<sup>60</sup> Despite a few detractors, Junk is esteemed because he does for his fellow slaves what few can: he provides them with what Joel Chandler Harris later called a "laughin'-place"—a suggestion for white children in Harris's context but a necessity for the enslaved, as it provided momentary escapes from the unmitigated miseries of their reality.<sup>61</sup> Pollard's inclusion of Junk's wild

tales was likely meant to function within the pro-slavery narrative as a means of propagating the unreliability and gullibility of the black race through an alleged tendency toward fantasy and naïveté (which Junk and his audience represent). Rather than demonstrating that African Americans *needed* white caretakers, however, the old man and his stories are both aspirational and inspirational, as his eager application of mental and emotional distancing provides himself and his community with imaginative mobility when physical freedom is not possible. Thus, the character of Junk accomplishes much more beyond inventing entertaining stories; he conceives experiences full of dangerous thrills, far-off adventures, and racial power shifts (that his audience experiences vicariously through him), ultimately revealing a decades-long fixation on violent retribution toward whites that is anything but infantile contentedness and elder faithfulness.

### **Tales of Trauma and Survival: Local Color and the Postbellum Plantation**

Nineteenth-century African American writers fortunate enough to find publication outlets for their works were tireless in their efforts to refute the sentimental depictions of enslavement that had made antebellum plantation literature so popular with northern and southern readerships. Although contemporary readers familiar with the slave narrative genre are well acquainted with the significance of written and spoken testimonies as counternarratives to the inflammatory and paternalistic arguments of pro-slavery advocates, they may be less informed as to the ways in which African American fiction writers responded to some of the apologist texts previously discussed. In studying representations of superannuated slaves in white- and black-authored texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two things become clear: 1) black writers recognized that the elderly of their race were being appropriated and silenced as apologists' symbols for the alleged benefits of slavery, and 2) in response, those writers crafted narratives highlighting the intelligence, agency, and orality of their elders to counteract the damage of the ubiquitous black geriatric stereotypes engrained in American popular culture.

In the postbellum era, particularly post-Reconstruction, African American authors became increasingly prominent on the national literary scene, although their numbers were still comparatively low as the race struggled against the public's weariness over the topic of slavery and the introduction of Jim Crow. As Frances Smith Foster explains, "After the grim reality of the American Civil War, the emancipation of the slaves and Reconstruction, the primary concerns of slave narratives had only historical value. The slavery issue, in the opinion of the reading public, had been settled, and the wounds were too fresh for objective contemplation."<sup>62</sup>

Although the topic of slavery ceased to hold the interest of the public when written by black authors, the same cannot be said of the many white authors who continued to address the subject in their fiction and nonfiction for decades

following emancipation. In her discussion of slave narratives published post-Reconstruction, Foster notes a “revision of priorities” that prompted black authors to appease readers by avoiding the devastating descriptions of bondage featured prominently in the genre before the war. At the same time, white northern readers underwent a different “revision of priorities,” after which they turned their attention to a new niche of autobiographies flooding the literary market following the war: memoirs by Civil War soldiers.

The written accounts of Union prisoners of war corroborated reports of the inhumane treatment and living conditions of the Confederacy’s most infamous prison camps, with some authors including emaciated images of themselves taken on their release.<sup>63</sup> Such memoirs—literally dozens of them—were in constant publication from 1865 through the end of the century. What this trend demonstrates is that although the general, postbellum public were past reading about slavery, they were very much intrigued by the stories coming out of the war—which, ironically, contained many of the same issues (starvation, sickness, physical restrictions, and being hunted by “slave hounds”) that had been chronicled in antebellum narratives of the enslaved. According to Benjamin G. Cloyd’s research on Civil War prisons, the northern soldiers subjected to these pitiable conditions blamed their captors, their own leadership, and the slaves themselves for their suffering. Cloyd writes that Union prisoners “bitterly complained of the injustice imposed on them in order to protect the rights of African Americans,” as their situations “defied many prisoners’ racial logic and tested their loyalty that, as white men, they should have to endure captivity for the cause of African American freedom.”<sup>64</sup> Taking the animosity of Union prisoners and soldiers into consideration, the disregard of white northern readers to the narratives of black writers appears to have been more than an aversion to a settled topic.

The views of some northerners that the war had been fought on behalf of those who did not deserve such sacrifice surely contributed to the decline in northern readership of African American literature. When fiction writers such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page reverted to tales of plantation life in the 1870s and 1880s, however, they achieved massive popularity among readers nationwide by employing familiar, southern antebellum “local color” that reinforced the notion that although the black race may have been freed, the power dynamics and social customs of the color line would remain intact.

Whereas William Gilmore Simms had argued that African Americans would settle into a permanent location only when forced, both John Pendleton Kennedy and Edward A. Pollard addressed the idea of “inhabitiveness” among the enslaved within their antebellum fiction and used the theory to argue that the enslaved wanted to remain the property of others. Of course, Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus* is the most famous example of an emancipated elder caricature with no desire to leave the plantation where he was a slave. Like Pollard’s *Uncle George*, Remus is a “genteel beggar” who relies on charity and who often earns his meals by telling tales. In the titular story from Harris’s



*Daddy Jake the Runaway and Short Stories Told after Dark* (1889), the author takes a momentary break from his (in)famous Uncle Remus to tell the story of Jake, a hardworking and “faithful” slave who runs away after a new overseer strikes him and he strikes back.<sup>65</sup> Contrary to the apologist motif of the contented, aged slave, Daddy Jake not only returns the abuse doled out to him but also believes he has killed the overseer in the struggle. Aware that if he stays, his punishment for striking a white man might be branding with a hot iron, being sold to a speculator, or being hanged, Jake takes to a canebrake in the swamp where other runaways are hiding.

After Jake’s flight, the story’s two young protagonists, Lucien and Lillian (the children of Jake’s owner, Doctor Gaston), take to the river to retrieve their favorite source of entertainment. While everyone on the plantation is frantically trying to figure out how to find Jake—not to punish him, of course, but to bring him and the children home—two old slaves named Sandy Bill and Big Sam have a conversation in which Harris exposes the hypocrisy of the “Storytelling Uncle” trope that he had helped revive in his postbellum “Southern humor.” When Sandy Bill admits to Big Sam that he knows where the children are, Sam is shocked that his friend would hesitate to make their whereabouts known. Bill explains his secrecy, stating that although he feels bad for Gaston, “‘t’er folks got trouble too, lots wuss’n Marster.” When Sam asks, “‘Is dey los’ der chillum?” Bill replies matter-of-factly, “‘Yes—Lord! Dey done los’ eve’ybody. But Marster ain’ los’ no chillum yit.”<sup>66</sup> Although Harris does not have him spell out what he means, Bill is referencing the collective traumas of the families torn apart under enslavement, such as the old woman “Crazy Sue,”<sup>67</sup> who is hiding alongside Jake. His concern is not with the fates of the two children but rather with protecting people who have already suffered more than enough.

Bill continues, admitting not only to having directed Jake to the canebrake in the first place but also to knowing who else is hiding there. Justifying his action and subsequent inaction to Sam, he clarifies, “‘ef I ’d ’a’ showed Marster whar dem chillum landed, en tole ’im whar dey wuz, he ’d ’a’ gone ’cross dar, en seed dem niggers, an’ by dis time nex’ week ole Bill Locke’s nigger-dogs would ’a’ done run um all in jail.”<sup>68</sup> Harris’s characterization of Sandy Bill is one who is absolutely loyal but not to his owner or even his owner’s innocent children but rather to the communities of the enslaved people living in the surrounding areas. Through the hushed exchange, Harris reveals glimpses of a character within his caricature, a rarity for the author given his career-long reliance on the most loquacious “Uncle” in American literature. Rather than protecting the interests (and children) of his owners, let alone the monetary interests of the neighboring slaveholders who are seeking to reclaim their “property,” Harris maintains Bill’s silence. His decision *not* to have the old man report what he knows allows him to, paradoxically, make Jake return to the plantation willingly. However, Harris’s focus on demonstrating the faithfulness of Daddy Jake to his owner’s family does not negate or resolve his inclusion of Sandy Bill’s silent rebellion or his assertion that the lives of two white chil-

dren—Harris’s primary audience—were not worth the lives of the dozen or so runaways hiding in the swamp.

In telling the story of Jake’s flight, Harris highlights the plights of other fugitives and reveals elements of resistance within a supposedly content and docile aged slave population. Thomas Nelson Page’s 1887 *In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories*, on the other hand, aligns more with the traditional apologist strategy of depicting only the undying loyalty of the aged slave to his owner.<sup>69</sup> One of the most popular writers of late-nineteenth-century plantation literature, Page was born in Virginia to formerly affluent but nevertheless respected stock. *In Ole Virginia* is the author’s depiction of what he felt were injuries to both whites and blacks following the war and emancipation, although his descriptions of their respective experiences are, of course, vastly different. Regardless of the author’s intent to depict the faithfulness of the titular character, the collection’s most unsettling story, “Ole ’Stracted”—called such because he is *distracted* by trauma—instead confesses the great wrongs of the institution and inadvertently acknowledges the depths of despair experienced by the enslaved.

Ole ’Stracted’s suffering has made him obsessive and delusional, an outcast, yet Page presents him as a mere eccentric who takes up residence in an abandoned, dilapidated cabin. He writes how the old man was

unable to give any account of himself, except that he always declared that he had been sold by some one other than his master from that plantation, that his wife and boy had been sold to some other person at the same time for twelve hundred dollars (he was particular as to the amount), and that his master was coming in the summer to buy him back and take him home, and would bring him his wife and child when he came.<sup>70</sup>

In all, Ole ’Stracted spends forty years telling and retelling this story to anyone who will listen. Although the forced separation from his family breaks him mentally, the repetition of his narrative and the hope he finds in retelling it sustains and heals him emotionally. It was surely not Page’s aim, but ’Stracted’s orality and insistence on being reunited with his family has more in common with post-Reconstruction fiction by African American authors than it does with typical apologist fiction. The old man’s narrative differs from these, however, in that he is not concerned with making friends with the community of former enslaved men and women who live nearby. Instead, ’Stracted exerts all his energy on preparing for the long-awaited homecoming of the family he was helpless to protect.

True to the “Storytelling Uncle” trope, however, the aged outsider *is* fond of his neighbors’ children, who “steal down to his house, where they might be found any time squatting about his feet, listening to his accounts of his expected

visit from his master, and what he was going to do afterward. It was all of a great plantation, and fine carriages and horses, and a house with his wife and the boy.”<sup>71</sup> By linking his family’s return with the return of his former owner, Page attempts to make it seem as if Ole ’Stracted focuses all of his energy and efforts toward the past when the exact opposite is true of the character, just as it was with countless emancipated people in real life. According to Page, “Everything since that day was a blank to [’Stracted], and as he could not tell the name of his master or wife, or even his own name, and as no one was left old enough to remember him, the neighborhood having been entirely deserted after the war, he simply passed as a harmless old lunatic laboring under a delusion.”<sup>72</sup> The deteriorated state of the old man’s mental faculties makes him pitiable in the eyes and hearts of his neighbors, yet for him, the illusion functions as a coping mechanism without which he may not have survived as long as he has. With each retelling, ’Stracted reassures himself that the homecoming he has been imagining for decades is not only possible but also nigh at hand. His obsession with regaining what was lost leaves no room for the old man to think on or of anything else. Thus, he lives near the site of the traumatic separation and earns whatever anyone will pay him to cobble shoes.

When a new landlord takes ownership of the property, the imagined reunion of ’Stracted with his family, the lives and livelihoods of his caretaker neighbors Polly and Ephraim, and everyone else who lives on the grounds of the old plantation are threatened. The Yankee carpetbagger demands immediate mortgage payments in full or expulsion from the property, which Polly and Ephraim agree will kill ’Stracted, who not only relies on their charity to meet many of his basic needs but also, fearful of missing his family’s return, never leaves his house. When the couple visits the cabin shanty to deliver a shirt Polly has mended for ’Stracted, the old man tells them through his death throes that he has managed to save \$1,200—the purchase price of his wife and son—and has hidden it away to buy them back on their return: “‘I been savin’ it ever sence dee took me ’way. I so busy savin’ it I ain’ had time to eat, but I ain’ hongry now; have plenty when I git home.’”<sup>73</sup> Thus, Ole ’Stracted dies having sacrificed decades of his own well-being to nourish his life’s single ambition, and he dies with it unrealized.

Whereas 40 years of unrelenting toil and unrealized prospects would surely have defeated weaker, less determined individuals, ’Stracted finds a constant strength through his unshaken faith in a man’s word and his own hopeful outlook on life. In this way, the elderly man is not “distracted” at all; on the contrary, his focused determination compels him to survive, helps himself and younger generations to dream, and ultimately accomplishes in death what he cannot in life, as the money he leaves behind will provide a home and financial security for the long-lost son he had sought for so many years—his neighbor, Ephraim. In Page’s view, ’Stracted’s many retellings of his history made for compelling fiction about a slave’s love and trust for his master; hence, the author does not assume within the story any responsibility for the loving husband and father’s

prolonged suffering. Page appropriates black orality and trauma and spins them as nonsense by positing that 'Stracted's only means of remembering his family is the very proof of his insanity. By framing black trauma as an inconsequential and/or humorous aftereffect of enslavement, apologist works assuaged the guilt of northern and southern readers by masking the miseries of African Americans with nostalgic "Aunt" and "Uncle" caricatures. Although Page's story remains true to the "Storytelling Uncle" trope, Ole 'Stracted's tale is anything but light-hearted or comedic. On the contrary, it speaks volumes about the callousness of both plantation fiction writers and readers regarding the tragic experiences of enslavement.

To Page, 'Stracted's narrative illustrated how the enslaved loved and trusted their owners, yet it very clearly documents the greed and deception of whites both before and after the war. Similarly, Georgia journalist, writer, and editor Harry Stillwell Edwards betrays the apologists' touted "cradle to grave" defense as the sham it was in his story, "Mas' Craffud's Freedom," from the 1899 collection *His Defense and Other Stories*.<sup>74</sup> As the story's title suggests, the tale portrays the slaveholder—and not those who were actually enslaved—as the primary party released from the burdens of chattel slavery by forced emancipation. His professed bondage was related in no way to labor or other hardships but rather to the supposed demands of owning and managing human beings. In conversation, Major Crawford Worthington and his old (now former) slave, Isam, discuss the changes about to take place on the plantation and across the South. When Crawford asks Isam if the slaves understand that emancipation has also made *him* free, he explains his galling statement by claiming that he is "'free from the care of you lazy rascals . . . I'm free at last, and I reckon I'll say 'Thank God!' before the year is out. Every man on this place must look out for himself and family hereafter; I don't want one of them. I am going to enjoy emancipation myself until I can look round.'" <sup>75</sup> Anxious about how freedom will affect him and his newly liberated community, Isam asks where they are to find food, to which Crawford coldly responds it is no longer his concern. When Isam explains that Crawford will still need workers to make the plantation run, he scoffs, countering, "'Who's going to pay you? I wouldn't give a dollar a month for four of you.'" <sup>76</sup>

Following this exchange, Crawford addresses the rest of the nearly 300 newly freed men and women, repeating what he has previously told Isam and adding that he has hired "'two soldiers representing the government'" <sup>77</sup> to ensure he gets his money's worth out of those who wish to stay. Edwards's purpose is to make light of emancipation as if it were not a serious blow to a planter's way of life. What "Mas' Craffud's Freedom" actually describes, however, is a cultural turning point—a depiction of the exact moment in which a gentleman planter ceases all pretenses of benevolence. Edwards's story of the beleaguered slaveholder is counter to most apologist works in that it asks readers to believe that planters were relieved to be free of the "burdens" that had built and maintained their social status and way of life; it also departs from the contentment

stereotype by demonstrating the disillusionment of the aged enslaved who were callously turned out after a lifetime of deceptive “cradle-to-grave” assurances.

In 1919, twenty years after the debut of *His Defense and Other Stories*, Edwards published his most famous work, *Eneas Africanus*,<sup>78</sup> an epistolary story that begins with an advertisement (paid for by a George E. Tommey) seeking information on the whereabouts of one of his former slaves, Eneas—the last-known possessor of a silver goblet that Tommey wants to reclaim in time for his daughter’s wedding. As the title and meandering nature of Eneas’s travels make clear (in eight years he travels “3350 Miles Through 7 States”), Edwards positions the former slave as the haphazard, elderly, African American equivalent of the Trojan hero Aeneas; however, Edwards is no Virgil, and his definition of Eneas’s “heroism” is strictly limited to the old man’s faithfulness.<sup>79</sup> In Edwards’s delusional version of a newly freed slave’s experience in the world, his protagonist spends the first eight years of his freedom trying to get back to the Georgia plantation where he was enslaved—a slap to the face to the thousands of people who spent years trying to reunite with family members following emancipation.

As expected, Eneas arrives “home” just in time to bestow the silver “Bride’s Cup” to his former owner’s daughter on her wedding day, but in addition to the cup, he offers up his children, claiming excitedly, “I done brought you a whole bunch o’ new Yallerhama, Burningham Niggers, Marse George! Some folks tell me dey is free, but I know dey b’long ter Marse George Tommey, des like [the horse] Lady Chain and her colt!”<sup>80</sup> Here, Eneas goes much further than the common, derogatory “Uncle Tom” stereotype, perfecting the role of the ingratiated slave by announcing to a party full of white people that he views his own children as Tommey’s livestock. This is a calculated way to conclude the text, as Edwards knows it is exactly what southern whites wanted of blacks: for them to publicly announce that slaveholders had been right to hold them in bondage, that they were happy and had wished to remain on the plantation, that African Americans were not fit to manage for themselves, and that they did not care for their children as whites did theirs. In his discussion of stereotypical representations of African Americans, George R. Lamplugh asserts, “This process of delineating the Negro was a continuing one. Each author further refined the efforts of his predecessors, until their black cardboard creation moved with the precision of a skillfully-fashioned puppet from one ludicrous or sentimental situation to another.”<sup>81</sup> If apologists’ aged slave characters were reduced to “cardboard” by the end of the nineteenth century, by the time Edwards published *Eneas Africanus* in 1919, they had become cellophane: unbelievably thin and completely transparent.

With the exception of “Mas’ Craffud’s Freedom,” each of the works examined here betrays the foundational argument of slavery’s apologists: that it was a benevolent system that the enslaved themselves heartily endorsed. As these narratives cannot help but illustrate, the exact opposite was true—it was the enslaved, regardless of advanced age and decades of forced labor, who toiled to ensure the comfort and prosperity of their white owners from birth until death.

Thus, despite the confidence of apologist writers in their elderly slave characters, their own portrayals of aged “Aunts” and “Uncles” contradict the cornerstone stereotype of contentedness, or “inhabitiveness,” more often than not. Although their literary works were intended to elicit pathos for slaves “deprived” of their owners, pro-slavery writers could not attempt to justify the institution without depicting it—and to depict any aspect of the slave experience is to invite undeniable realities to come to the surface and make themselves known.

## Notes

1. This phrasing is a nod to the convention of the slave narrative genre, wherein authors such as Oludah Equiano and Frederick Douglass included the words “Written by Himself” in their book titles in order to demonstrate the veracity of their accounts and to make clear the intellectual and literary capabilities of Africans/African Americans; I have added “as told by” so as not to privilege literacy and discount orality.

2. William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), 16.

3. John Pendleton Kennedy, *Swallow Barn, or A Sojourn in the Old Dominion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, 1832), available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu>.

4. The converted-northerner motif was popular among apologist writers and can be found in the following: Caroline E. Rush, *The North and South, Or, Slavery and Its Contrasts: A Tale of Real Life* (Philadelphia: Crissy, 1852); Rev. Baynard R. Hall, *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* (New York: Scribner, 1852); Martha Haines Butt, *Antifanaticism: A Tale of the South* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1853); and Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1854).

5. See Nehemiah Adams, D.D., *A South-Side View of Slavery; or, Three Months at the South, in 1854* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1854), and Rev. Samuel Seabury, D.D., *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of English Theorists, and Justified by the Law of Nature* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861).

6. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852), available at <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu>.

7. David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (Boston: Revised and Published by David Walker, 1830), available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu>.

8. Sarah N. Roth, *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

9. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

10. Martin Robison Delany, *Blake, or The Huts of America*, ed. Floyd J. Miller (Boston: Beacon, 1970), available at <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu>.

11. For more on the degradation suffered by enslaved black men, see Thomas A. Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 445–64.

12. I use the word “specimens” here in reference to Joel Chandler Harris’s 1883 letter to Georgia newspaperman R. W. Grubb, in which the author, seeking tales to provide the content for his Uncle Remus books, asks, “Can’t you get some one, who has the knack, to get in with some old negro, male or female, and secure me a dozen or more specimens?” Jennifer Ritterhouse, “Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 585–622.

13. Heather Tirado Gilligan, “Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnut’s ‘Uncle Julius’ Tales,” *ELH* 74, no. 1 (2007): 200.

14. This is according to Roth’s table (2.1) on *Slavery-Related Novels and Narratives, 1830s*—in which the author lists Jerome Holgate’s *Sojourn in the City of Amalgamation* (New York: Published by the Author, 1835) as the first anti-abolitionist novel to use the “Savage Slave” trope. Roth, *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture*, 40–41.

15. Quoted in Paul Christian Jones, *Unwelcome Voices: Subversive Fiction in the Antebellum South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 147.

16. Kennedy, *Swallow Barn*, vol. 2, 240–41.

17. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 64, available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu>.

18. Kennedy, *Swallow Barn*, vol. 2, 243.

19. For more on feudal influences in plantation literature, see Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*.

20. Kennedy, *Swallow Barn*, vol. 1, 31.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 17.
23. *Ibid.*, 16.
24. *Ibid.*, 17.
25. Kennedy, *Swallow Barn*, vol. 2, 215.
26. In her discussion of enslaved black horsemen, Katherine C. Mooney writes, "Victory in competition belonged not only to the man who owned the horse. It surely belonged as well to the trainer because of his intimacy with the animal" (52–53). Mooney's argument extends to grooms such as Carey, who doubtless feels as much pride and responsibility for the accomplishments of "his" horses as the men who race them. Mooney continues, "A white man might legally own the bodies of both man and animal, but ownership might not have been the first feeling of a black man in the winner's circle. A white man could enjoy the control of a great horse by proxy, but the black man still enjoyed it in fact" (53). Since Meriwether is not heir but rather executor to *Swallow Barn*, his situation is especially relevant to this notion of success "by proxy," whereas Carey, working with the horses every day, would have felt their successes "in fact." See Mooney, *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
27. William Gilmore Simms, *The Sword and the Distaff: Or, "Fair, Fat, and Forty." A Story of the South, at the Close of the Revolution* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1852), available at <https://archive.org/index.php>.
28. Joseph V. Ridgely, "Woodcraft: Simm's First Answer to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Literature* 31, no. 4 (1960): 425.
29. *Ibid.*, 124.
30. *Ibid.*, 125.
31. *Ibid.*, 203–4.
32. As Craig Thompson Friend writes, "Until the mid- to late-nineteenth century, language exchanged in male homosocial friendships was often indistinguishable from the idiom and images of love relationships" (259). He continues, however, asking, "where was the line between homosocial intimacy and homoerotic interests drawn?" (259). In a "master–slave" relationship, the "master" drew the line (not that all slaves adhered to it), and we should not be so naive as to ignore the fact that male slaves were also forced to commit sexual acts by those who owned them. See Friend, "Sex, Self, and the Performance of Patriarchal Manhood in the Old South," in *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*, ed. L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 246–65.
33. Sarah Roth discusses how, as a cook, "Tom's manhood was symbolically submerged beneath a load of women's implements," citing Tom's own admissions that he had "a hundred poun' of pot and kettle on [his] t'ighs!" and a gridiron "well-strapped to his member!" Roth, *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture*, 150.
34. Simms, *The Sword and the Distaff*, 206.
35. According to Friend, "Premodern Americans had constructed masculinity as a status more than as a gender . . . they defined it in opposition to childhood and, more specifically, to those who were childlike—dependents." Friend, "Sex, Self, and the Performance of Patriarchal Manhood in the Old South," 261. Porgy's poetic speech, in which he proclaims his love and loyalty to his male friends, is that of a Revolutionary War–era American and is therefore consistent with the speech of premodern American males, yet his insistence of devotion from Tom—who he considers a childlike dependent—exposes both his strengths and his weaknesses.
36. See DoVeanna S. Fulton, *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).
37. Laura Ganus Perkins, "An Unsung Literary Legacy: William Gilmore Simms's African-American Characters," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 42, no. 1 (2009): 84.
38. Simms, *The Sword and the Distaff*, 205.
39. *Ibid.*, 206.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 124.
42. In Porgy's final tirade, which makes up the novel's final chapter, he shares his plans to live out his life maintaining male relationships only. Fired up amidst an all-male audience, he forswears the company of women and soliloquizes on perpetual bachelorhood. Porgy uses the same romantic language used previously to (a)rouse Tom to suicide, except that he does not take it to such a morbid, haunting conclusion—or lack of conclusion—as he does with his slave. Porgy is willing and seemingly delighted to announce his utter submissiveness to the group of white men asking nothing of them in return, suggesting that his particular brand of sexualized argumentation is reserved for Tom and, possibly, any other man over whom he can exercise authority.
43. Edward A. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (New York: Pudney, 1859), available at <https://archive.org/index.php>.
44. Likely a reference to English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson.

45. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South*, 19.
46. bell hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York: Atria, 2003), 55.
47. Although many aspects of *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* are typical of the genre, Pollard's attempts at proving a mutual devotion between owner and slave come off as desperate, morbid, and perplexing in several instances (not unlike the character of Porgy in Simms's *The Sword and the Distaff*). His extended literary treatment of the "Deathbed Aunty," Marie, is particularly disturbing, as he describes how, "horror-struck, I gazed upon the scene of death, and yet curious, eager to note every sign of the awful change, stretching forward to see each token of agony and each print of death. For twelve hours I witnessed that scene" (93).
48. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South*, 49.
49. *Ibid.*, 32.
50. *Ibid.*, 31.
51. *Ibid.*, 33.
52. For more on the anti-manumission laws of the slave states, see Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen, 1833), available at <https://archive.org/index.php>.
53. The most famous literary reference to an elder enslaved person being left to fend for herself is that of Frederick Douglass's grandmother, whose pitiable experience he chronicles in his *Narrative*.
54. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South*, 88.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, 99.
57. *Ibid.*, 99–100.
58. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
59. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2011), 28.
60. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South*, 101.
61. Joel Chandler Harris, *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* (New York: McKinlay, 1905), 56, available at <https://archive.org/index.php>.
62. Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 150.
63. Including Danville and Belle Isle prisons in Virginia; the Savannah, Charleston, and Columbia prisons in South Carolina; and, most notably, Libby prison in Virginia and Andersonville prison in Georgia.
64. Benjamin G. Cloyd, *Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in American Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 19.
65. Joel Chandler Harris, *Daddy Jake the Runaway and Short Stories Told after Dark* (New York: Century, 1889).
66. *Ibid.*, 34.
67. The character of Crazy Sue exemplifies the postbellum "Distracted Aunty" trope discussed previously. Sue tells the doctor's young children how, when younger, she accidentally fell asleep nursing her twin babies. Her punishment was to work the fields while they lay hungry in the scorching sun beyond her reach. Prevented by the overseer from attending to her suffering babes, both of Sue's children died as a result. The death of Sue's children leads to mental break, and as she relates several decades later, she still hears their cries ringing in her ears.
68. Harris, *Daddy Jake the Runaway and Short Stories Told after Dark*, 36.
69. Thomas Nelson Page, *In Ole Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu>.
70. *Ibid.*, 153.
71. *Ibid.*, 154.
72. *Ibid.*, 153.
73. *Ibid.*, 159.
74. Harry Stillwell Edwards, *His Defense and Other Stories* (New York: Century, 1899), available at <https://www.hathitrust.org>.
75. *Ibid.*, 144–45.
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Ibid.*, 157.
78. Harry Stillwell Edwards, *Eneas Africanus* (New York: Grosset, 1940). "At least 45 editions were published between 1920–2007." Joe Lockard, "Eneas Africanus," *Antislavery Literature Project*, August 24, 2015.
79. Edwards, *Eneas Africanus*, inside-cover art.
80. *Ibid.*, 36.
81. George R. Lamplugh, "The Image of the Negro in Popular Magazine Fiction, 1875–1900," *Association for the Study of African American Life and History* 57, no. 2 (1972): 180.