Cover of the 1852 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or, *Life Among the Lowly*. Boston: Jewett, Proctor & Worthington.
“Oh, what a slanderous book”: Reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the Antebellum South

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Taking to her diary on January 9, 1861, Susan Bradford of Leon County, reflected on Florida’s place in the evolving Confederate movement and recalled the words of an old friend, Mr. Burgess, who had lamented: “If Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe had died before she wrote ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ this would never have happened…she has kindled a fire which all the waters of the earth cannot extinguish.” To this, Bradford added, “Isn’t it strange how much harm a pack of lies can do?” As the daughter of one of Florida’s most prominent planters, Susan Bradford rested comfortably among the Old South’s wealthiest families. By the outbreak of the Civil War, her father, Dr. Edward Bradford, owned over 300 slaves and a plantation called Pine Hill. Like many Southern elites, Susan Bradford’s resentment fixated on Stowe. Stowe’s bestselling novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had sold 300,000 copies in the United States in 1852 and, according to Bradford, embodied the worst qualities of Yankeedom. First, she surreptitiously stepped out of her gendered “sphere” with her social activism cloaked in a romantic novel. Second, as an abolitionist, Stowe opened the floodgates for open conversations about the pros and cons of slavery—floodgates that decades of American male politicians had struggled to keep shut.¹

Tempting as it may be to portray the South’s reaction to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin (UTC)* by relying solely on the reactions of people like Bradford,
Southern responses to Stowe’s work varied greatly. Historian J. C. Furmas found that while “Alabama burned shipments of it” while “Maryland jailed a free Negro preacher for having a copy.” Frederick Law Olmsted observed that the novel “sold openly on a Mississippi steamboat,” and a bookseller in Columbia, South Carolina “complained that he could not keep up with demand for it.” Most interestingly, Furmas revealed that “a former slave of Jefferson Davis’s brother remembered that a copy was smuggled into the slave quarters” and that “the Master borrowed it from the slaves.” Although the Davis account remains unconfirmed, these stories demonstrate that the white South’s response was far more complex than any wholesale ‘Bradford-like’ reaction. The ideas of a negative consensus among white Southerners has dominated much of the scholarship on *UTC* and bolsters popular ideas about the South’s political and intellectual cohesiveness in the decade prior to the American Civil War.²

However, the Old South, as much as the present-day region, was not homogeneous. Assessments of Stowe’s novel demonstrate that people in the antebellum South held varied positions on slavery. Both wealthy and non-elite Southerners vigorously engaged in the national debate on slavery’s worth and its abuses, seen through the lens of Stowe’s novel. As late as the mid-1850s, ordinary Southerners willingly published and read editorials that praised a woman who pro-slavery ideologues had condemned as the South’s worst enemy. This willingness leads us to consider what motivated some of these individuals to take up arms to defend the slaveholding way of life by 1861, preserving an institution that many of them conceded was morally suspect. Such a rapid closing of ranks among Southerners over slavery and their region’s identity would be swift and radical.³

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* (1985), Thomas F. Gossett examined Stowe’s life, both before and after the publication of her (in)famous novel. Gossett argued that the response in the South to Stowe’s work was “nearly all outrage and invective,” and that “virtually all the favorable public comments” about *UTC* occurred in the northernmost Southern states or from Southern expatriates. An intellectual historian, Gossett leaned primarily on reviews by John R. Thompson, George Frederick Holmes, and Louisa S. McCord. Most *UTC* scholars since have accepted his premise. Cindy Weinstein, however, nuanced Gossett’s thesis, claiming: “The anger generated by her [Stowe’s] novel cannot be underestimated.” She also examined the Southern reception
of other novels of the period like Mary Eastman’s *Aunt Phyllis’s Cabin* (1852) and Caroline Lee Hentz’s *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (1854). Weinstein posited that Stowe and her critics actually engaged in a “literary argument” that reflected broader political debates over slavery. Stowe herself participated in the conversation with the publication of *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), a direct response to Southern critics. Weinstein painted a more detailed picture of the book’s reception among the South’s elite by pointing to Mary Chesnut who was compelled to reread *UTC*. For Weinstein, however, Chesnut represented only a recalcitrant South.4

Although Stowe insisted that “the half is not told in that book,” the three Southern reviewers most often used by *UTC* scholars certainly ironically felt that she exceeded their very worst expectations. The first of these reviewers, John R. Thompson, despised Stowe’s novel. In an 1852 article, Thompson described Stowe as a refined writer, but also as one who “intermeddle[d] with things which concern her not.” Stowe had violated the rules of nineteenth-century gender decorum and the American patriarchal order that pervaded both North and South. Thompson found her willingness to engage publicly in the slavery debate an affront, one that might “place woman on a footing of political equality with man” and thereby “[hand] over the State to the perilous protection of diaper diplomatists and wet-nurse politicians.”5

Thompson attempted to deconstruct Stowe’s work. First, he criticized her sources, in particular, her use of slave advertisements, denying their validity and describing her section on slave hunting as “so manifestly absurd and preposterous that Mrs. Stowe will not find many readers weak enough to believe it, even in New England.” He then accused her of race-baiting, arguing that Stowe deliberately presented all black women as possessing the beauty of Helen; whereas, the fairest Southern belles in her novel always retained some “ugly marks of their descent from the erring mother of our race.” Thompson finally warned how Stowe was “the mouthpiece of a large and dangerous faction which if we [the South] do not put down with the pen, we may be compelled one day (God grant that day may never come!) to repel with bayonet.” Essentially labeling Stowe a liar, he advised her—a member of one of New England’s most well-known Protestant families—to read chapter twenty of Exodus: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” In Thompson’s eyes, Stowe was an ill-informed, Northern woman, who had misrepresented the South’s social order, one in which he was personally invested. In his review, her most flagrant lies revolved around the master-slave relation-
ship and the resultant cruelties that befell slaves. Yet, Thompson was not the only Southern intellectual who wielded an evolving pro-slavery defense of Southern society.

In December of 1852, a second Stowe diatribe appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. George Frederick Holmes who had held positions at Richmond College and the College of William and Mary and served as the president of the University of Mississippi, later joined the faculty of the University of Virginia. Like Thompson, Holmes saw *UTC* in gendered terms, and declared the book to be filled with lies. The “whole tenor of this pathetic tale,” fired Holmes “derives most of its significance and colouring from a distorted representation or a false conception of the sentiments and feelings of the slave.” Even if Stowe had assembled some factual events, Holmes leveled her analyses “furnish no evidence whatever against the propriety or expediency of slavery.” Like Thompson, Holmes disarmed Stowe for her characterizations of slave traders as well as instances of African Americans “passing” as whites. He then damned the novel with faint praise, contending that it failed to exhibit “extraordinary genius nor remarkable strength” despite strong sales. Finally, he accused Stowe of purposefully attempting to stir up social unrest, “to disturb the peace of societies, and to destroy the harmony of any community.” And agreeing with Thompson, he admonished her to consider the “commandment inscribed by the finger of God on the tablets of stone…Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

Louisa S. McCord demonstrated that the displeased Southern literary circle was not an all male venture when she reviewed *UTC* in January of 1853 for *The Southern Quarterly Review*. Daughter of Langdon Cheves, a South Carolina planter, politician, and prolific essayist on the antebellum South, McCord supported unregulated free trade and the expansion of slavery, while ardently opposing the advancement of women’s rights. In her review, McCord strongly defended the Southern slave system, and launched a brazen attack on the underlying purposes of the novel. Like Thompson and Holmes, she considered *UTC* “one mass of gross misrepresentation and ridiculous blundering.” Contending that Stowe had never visited a state in the slaveholding South, McCord declared, “it has evidently not been further south than the mere crossing of the Kentucky border…[and there] she has seen slavery in the worst condition in which it can exist.” Challenging Stowe’s “fertile imagination” and “illogical ramblings,” McCord defended slavery as the South’s most charitable establishment; even though she acknowledged that “there is crime, there
is sin, there is abuse of power under our laws,” she dared abolitionists to find any labor arrangement that did not include these conditions. Relying on the pseudo-scientific beliefs heralded by slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson and James Henry Hammond, McCord championed the benefits of slave labor, reasoning that blacks were by nature unable to be free. McCord believed that Stowe had unjustly characterized the South, its labor system, and its culture writ large. In fact, for McCord, Stowe seemed utterly “ignorant of our manners, feelings, and even habits of language.” Like fellow proslavery ideologues, McCord called on a higher power claiming that “Christian slavery, in its full development, free from the fretting annoyance and galling bitterness of abolition interference, is the brightest sunbeam which Omniscience has destined for his existence.” In McCord’s view, Stowe’s “foul imagination,” demonstrated that “the labour of Sisyphus [had been] laid upon us, the slaveholders of these southern United States.”

These three Southern critics exemplified a predictable, white consensus that condemned Stowe’s novel. Reading Thompson, Holmes, and McCord together forms a picture suggesting that all white Southerners distrusted Stowe’s intentions as well as her research. Indeed, when we study these critics, we begin to see their work as vignettes of what historians Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese called the defense of “slavery in the abstract,” that is, the slaveholding class worldview that preserved Southern slavery and its social framework. This all-encompassing outlook was a formidable set of ideas with equally strong allies: Protestant Christianity, early pseudo-sciences that linked race to biology, as well as the economic, social, gender and political power structures that benefitted white men of the American South circa 1850. Chipping through the ideological veneer crafted by Southern intellectuals who propagated this worldview is no small undertaking. One way to do so is to incorporate alternate voices—voices that offer less dogmatic and more ambiguous, even positive responses when faced with questions concerning slavery. In so doing, this essay expands what and whom we know of the intellectual environment of the antebellum South. If scholars continue to think in terms of a uniform “mind of the South,” to borrow Wilbur J. Cash’s potent phrase, they must realize that “mind” evokes a hatred of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionism and an unquestioning defense of slavery; it also embrace the unsung, everyday Southerners who did not wholly reject slavery’s most conspicuous Northern critic, nor welcome the impending crisis of America’s war over slavery.
Mary Boykin Chesnut, the daughter of former South Carolina governor and United States senator, Stephen Decatur Miller, was born into Southern planter society in 1823. At seventeen, she married James Chesnut, Jr., who like Mary’s father, became a United States senator, a member of the Confederate Congress, and a confidant of Jefferson Davis. The childless Chesnuts traveled widely throughout the antebellum and Civil War South, and lived in Montgomery, Alabama; Charleston, South Carolina; and Richmond, Virginia at crucial periods during the Civil War. Chesnut noted her own and her contemporaries’ views concerning *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in her detailed journal, calling attention to different sections of *UTC* without firmly agreeing or disagreeing with Stowe’s depiction of Southern society. For example, Chesnut wrote of a conversation with a group of Southern women in August 1861 in which they discussed Stowe’s most villainous character, Simon Legree, and miscegenation. One woman knew a man who was “half as cruel as Legree,” and Chesnut and her associates corroborated how they “hate[d] slavery” because nothing prevented slave-owning men from raping and sexually using slaves. The most tragic aspect of *UTC* for Chesnut and her friends occurred when planter wives and daughters lived with the slaves their male kin sexually used. Chesnut credited Stowe’s discretion concerning the promiscuity of slave owners noting: “Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor.”

The intricacies of Southern womanhood were on greater display as Chesnut’s group described the man they called, “half-Legree.” Fascinatingly, these women added that “half-Legree’s temper was so furious” that “the poor women…were glad to let him do as he pleased if they could only escape his everlasting fault-finding and noisy bluster.” This view met with stiff opposition as one participant questioned, “Now, now, do you know any women of this generation who would stand that sort of thing?” Chesnut strongly replied: “No, never, not for one moment. The make-believe angels were of last century. We know, and we won’t have it.” And “know” about the social conditions that Stowe described, these women surely did. For although many Southern women publicly espoused that “a nice man from the South is the nicest thing in the world,” privately, they tore back the veil on Southern planters, the “dreadful animals” who had all sorts of improper dealings with the people they owned. In 1862, Chesnut returned to “Legree and his women,” but without her earlier grateful tenor. After rereading *UTC*, Chesnut’s writing was infused with a sense of envy as she considered the plight of sexually-abused slave
women escaping the stigma of rape and sexual impropriety by marrying well: “These Negro women have a chance here that women have nowhere else. They can redeem themselves…They can marry decently and nothing is remembered against these colored ladies.” Defending Southern white women, Chesnut simultaneously sought and extended sympathy: “We are so degraded as to defend and like to live with such degraded creatures—such men as Legree and his women.” Chesnut further suggested that if Stowe had only recognized the difficulties faced by white Southern women, many of whom labored like “missionaries…to prevent and alleviate evils,” then her novel might have found a more supportive female following in the South.

No doubt many Southern women echoed Chesnut’s opinions about Stowe and UTC. In a November 28, 1861 entry, Chesnut included Stowe with the most unacceptable, Northern abolitionists and intellectuals like Horace Greeley, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Sumner, all of whom condemned her South. For Chesnut, these individuals lived in their “nice New England homes” and wrote books “which ease their hearts of their bitterness against us.” Chesnut contrasted their comfortable lives with the difficult circumstances that had beset her mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law. Such Southern matriarchs offered surprising twists to Stowe’s reflections: “These women I love have less chance to live their own lives in peace than if they were African missionaries. They have a swarm of blacks about them like children under their care, not as Mrs. Stowe’s fancy painted them, and they hate slavery worse than Mrs. Stowe does.” In Chesnut’s world, Southern women understood all too well the “life amongst the lowly” and were aware of and constantly displeased with the sexual escapades their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons had with slave women. Chesnut condemned Stowe’s incomplete portrait and empathized with white Southern women who were “doing our duty as best we may among the woolly heads” even as she demeaned their slaves. Although annoyed and, at times, angered, Chesnut did not discredit Stowe’s analysis of Southern life or slavery, but implied that planters’ wives were the real victims of a white, male-dominated South.

Although she admitted to skipping over UTC’s bloody sections,—from a small white boy beating his father’s slave to many of the horrors enacted on Legree’s Louisiana plantation—Chesnut never judged Stowe guilty of misrepresenting the violence of the slave system, as had Thompson, Holmes and McCord. By 1864, Chesnut could describe an experience
that further validated Stowe’s portrayal of Southern cruelties. Here, she relayed how her “best of maids” had refused to accompany her on a recent trip to South Carolina as “one experience here had cured her.” Although Chesnut never told her domestic’s tale, she hinted that it was quite serious: “What a story she could carry to Mrs. Stowe! Her tales made my flesh creep.” As Chesnut’s commentary suggests, the graphic details of Stowe’s novel were far too authentic given the realities that surrounded and penetrated both Chesnut’s conversations and innermost thoughts.  

Although written approximately a decade after the publication of UTC, Chesnut’s diary demonstrates how this wealthy and intelligent Southern woman saw in UTC material to condemn and also condone. Chesnut and many of her friends read Stowe, some more than once, and compared parts of her novel to their own privileged lives. Rather than condemn Stowe’s violent depiction of slavery, Chesnut mostly complained that Stowe’s examination neglected to cite all victims of the slave system—namely the wives of Southern planters. William R. Taylor puts it so well: Chesnut “seemed to say: she was right but she had no right!” It seems probable that had Stowe sympathized more with the plight of women like Chesnut and exposed the victimization of Southern white women, her book might have received more support, even if reserved to parlor conversations, from elite white women.  

During the summer of 1853, another equally ambivalent Southerner wrote a series of short reviews on UTC for the New York Daily Times under the pseudonym of “Walpole.” Unlike Chesnut’s diary, Walpole’s reviews were made for immediate public consumption. The Times included only a brief description of this anonymous writer indicating that he was “a Southern gentleman, a lawyer of distinction, an accomplished scholar, and…has filled very high and responsible public stations with honor to himself and credit to the country.” As Chesnut would, Walpole saw UTC as a very evocative and valid work in spite of its imperfections. He applauded Stowe’s picture of slavery as one that possessed emotional and engaging clarity. He testified, “It must be admitted that Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a book which no one can read with indifference; not only in the non-slaveholding States of our own country has it found favor…but in the South it has been eagerly sought for; and planters—large slave-owners have, been moved to tears reading its pages, or roused to indignation by its graphic sketches.”  

Yet, Walpole questioned the exaggerations on which Stowe based her “picture of the Southern States.” Concerning Stowe’s characters and their
interrelationships, like Mr. Shelby and Uncle Tom, for example, Walpole suggested that “The colors which make up the picture, are not the colors of this world of ours; they are in the one instance borrowed from Heaven, and in the other from Hell.” Walpole admitted the effectiveness of Stowe’s literary tactics and emotional appeals, but argued that the “demerits of the slave system...are not fairly exhibited in Mrs. Stowe’s book.” Still, the wavering Walpole avowed that Stowe’s work was “a book which we do not misconceive or undervalue.”

In a second review, Walpole delved deeper into UTC and its supposedly unrealistic depiction of slavery. “We are really pleased,” he wrote, “to see that it has attracted so much attention…the success of the sketches…satisfies us, too, that the world can be moved by a tale of wrong and oppression.” However, he challenged many of Stowe’s fictionalized situations such as the shackling of Uncle Tom in transit on the Mississippi River, the separation of slave families, and the mental anguish and physical torture experienced by slaves. Walpole confidently declared: “It is quite certain that no such scenes can be witnessed in any Southern State…we do not think them truthful.” Consistently inconsistent, he soon retreated: “yet we hope that they will result in good. Let the imagination have fair play in describing the slave trade; dip the pencil which traces the forms of the victims in the darkest colors…bring down upon the traffic the thunders of human indignation, and you yet not offend the sentiment of the Southern people.” Walpole seemed to both rebuke and invite Stowe’s creativity and artistic flourish so long as they brought about reasonable reform to the slave trade. This tension continued throughout his writing.

A similar disclaimer accompanied Walpole’s third review where he promised to “say something of Slavery as it actually exists in the Southern States.” After dismissing the horrific depictions of the deaths of Prue and Uncle Tom, two of Stowe’s key slave figures, Walpole confessed that “there are abuses of the institution of slavery, it is idle to deny…We profoundly admit that it is true.” Walpole observed how these images were balanced by those “of blended humor and pathos, which [are] true and life-like, and which will, we do not doubt, really do good.” He hoped against hope that Stowe’s imageries of shared kindness between childhood playmates, Eva and Topsy, would motivate Southern readers to “introduce into our system the law of kindness.”

In his fourth and final review, Walpole paradoxically coupled his disdain for Stowe’s grand “picture” with his appreciation for her literary
talents and her constructive criticism. Walpole balanced his appraisal, admitting, “With all its faults, we trust that the book will accomplish great good.” Stowe brought international attention to the abuses of the Southern slave system, Walpole wrote, and although her images may have seemed unrealistic to some Southerners, he believed her “extravagant descriptions…will awaken inquiry at home as to their fidelity…[and motivate] more stringent and potential laws than those already in existence.” Walpole’s suggestion that such legal reform would be beneficial gave lie to the idea that abuses did not occur.

Walpole ended his correspondence about UTC on a theoretical and defensive note, conceding that, “we have seen much with which we might find fault, but we forbear.” His fluctuating stance on Stowe’s work concluded in closing regional ranks: “The question which Mrs. Stowe has discussed in her book is a transcendentally great question; but it is a question which belongs to the South, and must be decided there.” In the end, he obviously felt conflicted about the light Stowe shone upon the slave South. While he admired the potential benefits of reform it might inspire, he argued that resolving slavery’s issues had best be left to Southerners. Like Mary Chesnut, Walpole’s reaction to UTC adds shading and nuance to the black and white portrayals of the “representative” Southern literary critics. He highlighted what he thought were falsities in Stowe’s text, but he also admired the novel for generating social awareness and potentially inspiring reforms of the slave system.16

Another perspective on the Southern reaction to UTC comes from Charles William Holbrook of Massachusetts who acquired a tutoring position on a Southern plantation in Rockingham, North Carolina after graduating from Williams College in 1851. What remains of his personal journal offers a detailed description of Holbrook’s first experiences in the South, an odyssey that began at the Gallaway plantation in Richmond, Virginia on February 25, 1852. As a Northern tutor hired to teach four children, Holbrook enjoyed his new surroundings. On April 30, Holbrook shared: “Am much delighted with the warm-heartedness and sociability of the Southerners.” On July 7, he reiterated, “I do really enjoy living here very much.” In October 1852, Holbrook noted the arrival of UTC on the Gallaway plantation. Clearly taken with the book, Holbrook praised Stowe’s work, declaring it to be the most interesting book he ever read. His students in time confirmed some of Stowe’s characterizations, only adding to its credulity for Holbrook. For example, on October 4 he recalled how “one of my pupils has told me this morning some things equal to
any in that book. Old Webster, a man living not far from here, is almost or quite as bad as old ‘Legree.’”

Of course, Holbrook’s Southern experiences with UTC did not always coincide so neatly. After reading some of the novel to one of his pupils, he watched as a local slave family endured the crisis of a slave auction. In an entry on October 9, he wrote of a slave named Henderson who was “sold from wife & children to go to N. Orleans.” However, by October 11, a dramatic turn of events had occurred and Holbrook wrote, “Mr. G[allaway] has concluded not to let Henderson go away. So there is great rejoicing among the negroes.” Like Chesnut, Holbrook documents a variety of Southern responses among his circle. On October 14, just a few days after the auction episode, Holbrook wrote, “Mr. G[allaway] likes Uncle Tom’s Cabin but Mrs. G[allaway] is bitter against it.” The next day, Holbrook avowed that there was “great talk in the house about Mrs. Stowe. Mr. G[allaway] is honest—he says he admires ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ for its true characters.” Yet, Holbrook’s account of the Gallaway

plantation, if anything, demonstrates the conflicted nature of his experiences and life in the South.17

Holbrook depicts his employer as an open-minded Southerner who read Stowe’s work, appreciated its literary value, and agreed with its powerful depiction of slavery through its “true characters.” Indeed, he allowed Holbrook to read the book to his children. However, on October 16, only one day after admiring Stowe’s work, Mr. Gallaway informed Holbrook that he intended to burn all copies of UTC. Clearly, something or someone, Holbrook inferred, “changed his mind.” Perhaps Gallaway’s wife had something to do with it; Holbrook wrote that “Mrs. Gallaway thinks Mrs. Stowe is worse than Legree!”

Soon after the Gallaway’s vehement rejection of UTC, Holbrook reported that the family no longer desired his services. Holbrook never associated these two events in his journal. It seems likely, though, that the evolution of Mr. Gallaway’s anti-Stowe views influenced Holbrook’s severance. Perhaps, the Gallaway’s felt threatened by Holbrook’s and Stowe’s shared regional affiliation.18 Regardless of the reasons for Holbrook’s dismissal, his account reveals further variations among white responses to UTC. Holbrook’s account captured two extremes of Southern reaction—Mrs. Gallaway’s angered disapproval and her husband’s remarkable approval before his abrupt threat to burn the novel. Both perspectives add to the deviation of Southern replies and to the high stakes of openly supporting Stowe’s work.

One of the most famous Northerners who traveled south before the Civil War was Frederick Law Olmsted. While en route, Olmsted interviewed a wide variety of Southerners. Renowned for his landscape designs, New York City’s Central Park and Boston’s Emerald Necklace, the Connecticut native recorded many conversations about UTC. Olmsted found numerous booksellers in Mississippi and Louisiana who quietly sold “cheap editions” of Stowe’s text. He remembered that “One of them told me he carried it because gentlemen often inquire for it, and he sold a good many: at least three copies were sold to passengers on the boat.” Perhaps it was one of these customers with whom Olmsted spoke with on the third day of his voyage. “A well-dressed, middle-aged Southern gentleman” told Olmsted after discovering that he was reading UTC that the novel “shows up slavery in very high colors.”19

Agreeing, Olmsted and his Southern acquaintance turned to Stowe’s depictions of slavery. The Southerner defended the practice of excluding slaves’ testimony from the South’s courts and tried to diminish slavery’s
brutality by comparing it to that enacted by Northern husbands upon their wives. Perhaps this Southerner had read Holmes’ and Thompson’s reviews. Nonetheless, Olmsted sidestepped these comparisons by avowing that Northern laws prohibited domestic violence. Although he did not support UTC with as much vigor as Walpole, Olmsted’s conversationalist, most importantly, conceded that Stowe’s novel possessed incredible accuracy. Even if he might quibble with Stowe’s or Olmsted’s meddling with slavery, he admitted that Stowe’s fiction was not far off the mark. Remarkably, Olmsted noted how the Southerner’s revelations corroborated “the truthfulness of Uncle Tom’s Cabin: it showed that it was all possible.” Even if he did not like Stowe’s images and felt the North shared a culture of violence, this Southerner was still willing to offer stories to affirm Stowe’s product.

In Virginia, Olmsted spoke with another man who “wish[ed] Northerners would mind their business, and leave Slavery alone…and never speak of it but in a kind and calm manner.” But Olmsted soon discovered that this unnamed slave-owner held some complex views concerning slavery; namely, he “considered the condition of slaves to have much improved since the Revolution” and that “slaves of the present day [were] of a higher character.” Strikingly, Olmsted suggested that the slave-owner also maintained many “anti-slavery sentiments” and purported that “public sentiment condemned the man who treated his slaves with cruelty.” Their exchange soon shifted, however, to a consideration of UTC. Although the slave-owner mentioned several points in which he “thought it wrong—that Uncle Tom was too highly painted…that such a character could not exist in or spring out of slavery,” the Virginian lent credence to some of Stowe’s representations and acknowledged that “cases of cruelty and suffering, equal to any described in it, might be found.” He then recounted some recent events that substantiated Stowe’s representations. Unlike the Southern literary critics, Olmsted cautioned readers not to assume “the opinions of this gentleman…representative of those of the South in general…but as to facts, he is a competent, and I believe, a wholly candid and unprejudiced witness.”

Olmsted’s third UTC commentator provided a more definitive response to Stowe’s work. In the Tennessee Mountains, Olmsted met an astute reader who thought “well of it” but also reported divergent views of fellow Tennesseans. Of other locals’ impressions, he mused: “there’s some thinks one way and some another, but there’s hardly any one here that don’t think slavery’s a curse to our country, or who wouldn’t be
glad to get rid of it.” Living in a place quite different than Louisiana, Alabama or Virginia—locations where slavery thrived, generally—the Tennessean’s comments illustrate how Southerners’ spatial or economic connectedness with the slave system influenced their defense of slavery, and thus, their receptiveness to a novel critical of the institution. Certainly, the mountaineer’s assessments contribute to the broad spectrum of Olmsted’s interviews.22

Less conflicted than many of Olmsted’s interviewees, another nameless critic offered “The Opinion of a Southerner” to the editors of The National Era, thus engaging the chorus of anti-Stowe reviews that had, by October 1852, flooded the Southern press. On one hand, the reviewer praised Stowe “for her talented work, in showing it [slavery] up in its true light.” Even though he had “not read every page of it,” the author approved Stowe’s assessment of the “position the slave occupied.” Like other reviewers we have examined, this writer noted that he “could state a case of whipping to death that would equal Uncle Tom’s.” Doubtless, the cruelty of slavery repulsed this reader, thus Stowe’s portrayal rightly discredited the institution. On the other hand, he condemned the Southern press for “advocat[ing] what is wrong.” What angered the reviewer most was the Southern press’ attack on Stowe via “exceptions” that he avowed were “not the rules of slavery.” Indeed, Southern critics had completely missed Stowe’s purpose: “The strife that [was] being stirred up [was] not to take away anything that belongs to another—neither their silver or gold, their fine linen or purple, their houses or land, their horses or cattle, or anything that is their property; but to rescue a neighbor from their unmanly cupidity.” Refuting Thompson and Holmes, this Southerner appreciated the biblical flavor of Stowe’s novel—not one that violated theological mandates but, instead, called on Christian reformers to dismantle the sinful institution of Southern slavery.23

From New Orleans, the epicenter of the Southern slave trade, a reviewer named “John” assured the editors of The Independent that their prediction that UTC would be read throughout the city had already been fulfilled by August 1852. With its “deeply interesting narratives,” John observed, Stowe’s work had generated both tears and laughter from its New Orleans audiences. While Olmsted’s bookseller secretly peddled Stowe’s novel on the banks of the Mississippi, John ordered the book from New York as many of the distributors in New Orleans apparently struggled to keep the best seller in stock. Although John could barely hold on to his copy, his friends and neighbors repeatedly requested to borrow
the text—he soon offered it to a friend who “trafficked in slaves,” and, somewhat surprisingly, the Southerner validated many of Stowe’s observations. The slave trafficker confessed: “This description is true to life; the writer must have had some personal experience of slavery.” After he returned the book, John reported that: “it [went] the rounds” ending up with a Southern lady, “a slave holder,” who confessed that the “scenes of cruelty she had witnessed, equal[ed]…the worst representation in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Denouncing biased reviews of Stowe’s text in the New Orleans press, John claimed the reviewers “never read the book and probably never saw it.” Unlike earlier reviewers, John believed, “Mrs. Stowe presented the institution in too favorable a light,” and, at the very least, that “abundant confirmation” of UTC’s characterizations of injustice and violence could “be had by any one who will take the trouble to collect the facts.” For John and many of his fellow New Orleans readers, futile claims appealing to the “truth” of Southern slavery would not undermine Stowe’s work. Boldly, John affirmed “no book [could] be made to take the place of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

In June 1852, the New York Evening Post received a letter from a second New Orleans commentator who shared John’s admiration of Stowe’s work. Identifying himself only as “a republican,” this critic had received UTC from “a young student who purchased it at the North” and when asked by the student for his opinion of Stowe’s work, he responded that though he had not read every line of the novel, he had “looked over the whole of it” and admitted that “colorings” did exist. His own experiences, however, confirmed that “Whippings to death do occur…Painful separations of master and slave…do also occur.” The republican knew the inner-workings of slavery, because, as he confessed, “I am a slaveholder myself.” “Long dissatisfied with the system,” the republican challenged Biblical endorsements of slavery and, instead, argued that slavery was “not in accordance with what God delights to honor in his creatures.” A slave-owner’s criticism of the system in which he participated may seem disingenuous, contradictory, or even hypocritical. However, the New Orleans republican’s chastisement was not limited to the South. After lauding Stowe’s work, he turned to Stowe’s Northern counterparts who “have quietly consented to leave the slave to his fate by acquiescing in and approving the late measures of government.” To overcome the evils of slavery, “Christian effort,” he wrote, “must do the work…not to destroy the union States—but honestly to speak out, and speak freely against that they know is wrong.” Furthermore, the republican was pleased to
hear of a novel that would “be a reply made to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*” Any work like Stowe’s that exposed the realities of slavery and hastened the “emancipation of the slave” would receive his support.25

Although John’s and his fellow New Orleanian’s opinions may seem extraordinary, given that most historians speak of a unilateral “Southern response,” the most remarkable Southern critique came from an unnamed Alabama planter. The Alabamian had just finished a “perusal of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” when he submitted his letter to the *New York Evening Post* in May 1853. Having “read every word to [his] wife,” the planter wrote how “three shouts for liberty, to the tops of our voices, rent the air” when Stowe’s George and Eliza Harris made their escape to Canada. The Alabama planter and his wife surely understood that their unique endorsement of Stowe’s work would bolster the novel’s legitimacy and, thus, the planter addressed the issue of authenticity directly: “Every man, woman and child, white and black, in the Southern states, can bear testimony to the truth of the portrait which Mrs. Stowe, God bless her! has drawn of slavery.” This sense of admiration was drastically at odds with the grievances articulated by elite critics like Thompson, Holmes, and McCord and attributed to all Southern readers by recent historians. Indeed, the Alabama planter opposes this now standard view. He found “slavery…one of the works of the devil which Christ was manifested in the flesh to destroy.” That a slaveholder could condemn the institution in reaction to Stowe’s work while holding slaves demonstrates one of the grossest contradictions of American slavery. While the planter applauded *UTC* as “destined to have a greater influence for good than any one single book that has been published since the close of the canon of Scripture,” he wrote how its author was “an impersonation of our Savior, going about doing good.” Like other critics, the planter praised Stowe’s wisdom of not offering a solution to the slavery question, devoting her talents instead toward creating a truthful portrayal of slavery in the South. For that the Alabamian extended his “warmest thanks and best wishes to Mrs. Stowe” whom he believed, “generations unborn will rise up and call ‘blessed.’”26

The collection of voices in this essay reveals the complicated and multi-dimensional interpretations white Southerners held of *UTC*. The observations and opinions of Mary Boykin Chesnut, “Walpole,” and Charles William Holbrook, for instance, typify the ambiguity that resounded in the South when confronting *UTC*. Comments by Olmsted’s subjects, the several New Orleans commentators, and the Alabama planter further erode the widely accepted notion of a consensus of Southern negativity.
Rather, the wide range of opinions from geographically, economically, and socially diverse male and female Southerners suggests that they responded to *UTC* with passion and nuance. The white Southern response, therefore, was certainly more complex than the collective dismissal of Stowe’s work assumed. To these Southerners, and to many historians, any denunciation of *UTC* as “a slanderous book” would be more than appropriate. But the idea of a wholly negative assessment representing all white Southerners’ reactions to *UTC* perpetuates a narrow reading of a diverse society that was not wholly dominated by a hegemonic slave-holding elite. No matter how fervently their literary spokespersons repudiated Stowe’s “pack of lies,” dissonant opinions about slavery—the keystone of Southern exceptionalism and regional identity—permeated the deepest corners of the South in the same decade that gave birth to the secession movement. The existence and strength of this discord was real and would not be fully quieted even by the loudest calls for rebellion.

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**Notes**

1. Katherine M. Jones, *Heroines of Dixie: Confederate Women Tell Their Story of the War* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1955), 9. Throughout this essay, I have consciously chosen the word—“Southerner”—to mean white individuals living, reading, and writing in the Old South as this exclusionary language was that of my subjects. Recently, Nell Irvin Painter assessed the power inherent in this kind of nomenclature as the legal and cultural constructions of race in the nineteenth-century South ordained that “‘Southerner’ meant white southerner; ‘American’ required whiteness, but mere whiteness might not suffice in society…whiteness in and of itself got one only so far toward being a part of the American.” See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2010), 201-202.

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Thompson, “Notices of New Works: Uncle Tom’s Cabin; Or Life Among the
Lowly,” 630-633 and 638.

For Holmes’s life see Neal C. Gillespie, *The Collapse of Orthodoxy: The
Intellectual Ordeal of George Frederick Holmes* (Charlottesville, University of
hti.umich.edu/t/text/gifcvtdir/acf2679.0018.012/07250721.tifs.gif.

Louis S. McCord, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *The Southern Quarterly Review* 7 (January
acp1141.2-07.013/00810081.tifs.gif. For McCord’s life, see Leigh Fought, *Southern
Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord*, 1810-1879 (Columbia:
and 120. The well-read McCord references Sisyphus from Greek mythology—a
mortal destined by the gods to be tortured by continually pushing a boulder uphill for
eternity—to emphasize how unimaginable and onerous the dismantling of slavery
would seem to Southern whites.

On the evolution of proslavery ideology and southern intellectuals see the works
of Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese: *Fatal Self-Deception:
Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and
*Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders’ New
World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); as well as those of
Michael O’Brien: *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Athens:
University of Georgia Press, 1993) and *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and
the American South, 1810-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
and David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row

Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, Ben Ames Williams, ed. (Boston:
Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 122-123, 199, 163, 247, and 403. For a detailed
history of the publishing of Chesnut’s *Diary* and her place within Southern society
see Catherine Clinton’s introduction to *Mary Chestnut’s Diary* (New York: Penguin

Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 312.

virginia.edu/utc/reviews/rere05 at.html.

“Walpole,” “Southern Slavery. A Glance at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. First Paper. By A
reviews/rere05bt.html.

utc/reviews/rere05ct.html.

“Walpole,” “Southern Slavery, A Glance at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Third Paper. By a
reviews/rere05dt.html.
18 Hall, “A Yankee Tutor in the Old South,” 90.
20 Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States In the Years 1853-1854, 269 and 272.
21 Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, With Remarks on Their Economy (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 96-98.

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_____. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among The Lowly*. Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853. Print.


