Vesey and Gordon's Righteous Insurrection: The Legacy of Denmark Vesey's Natural Rights Revolution in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856)

Christopher Allan Black
Auburn University

Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston; remember Nathaniel Turner of Southampton; remember Shields Green and Copeland, who followed noble John Brown, and fell as glorious martyrs for the cause of the slave. Remember that in a contest with oppression, the Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with oppressors.
Frederick Douglass
"Men of Color to Arms!" (1863)

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe promoted passive resistance and firmly believed in the power of Christian sympathy and moral suasion to liberate enslaved African Americans from bondage. Stowe's purpose for her wildly successful abolitionist reform novel, serialized in *The National Era* from June 5, 1851 to April 1, 1852, was to preserve the union, rather than wage an all-out attack on the South. Judie Newman observes, "the novel was designed to reach out to a Southern audience through serial publication in *The National Era*" (28). Gamaliel Bailey was selected as editor of the abolitionist paper because of his diplomatic and moderate political position. Bailey, Newman asserts, believed that Southerners could be persuaded that slavery was more than a sectional issue. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Stowe "initially carefully emphasized the goodness of Southern planters in an attempt to use the tactics of moral suasion and bring North and South together" (28). Yet, the belief in Christian sympathy for Stowe's enslaved characters becomes tested as they experience persecution and witness acts of violence against themselves and their families.

Up to chapter fourteen, Newman observes, the novel portrays a relatively benign and benevolent relationship between the Shelby

family and their enslaved servants in Kentucky, reflecting the belief in moral suasion advocated by Bailey and William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison maintained that slavery could be abolished through an appeal to morality and religious tolerance: moral suasion. However, in chapter seventeen, "The Freeman's Defence," George Harris proclaims to the Quaker Simeon his desire to fight for his republican natural rights if he is threatened:

> I will attack no man, said George, All I ask of this country is to be let alone, and I will go out peaceably; but—he paused, and his brow darkened, and his face worked, --I've had a sister sold in that New Orleans market. I know what they are sold for; and am I going to stand by and see them take my wife and son. Can you blame me? Mortal man cannot blame thee, George. Flesh and blood could not do otherwise, said Simeon. "Woe unto to the world because of offences, but woe unto them through whom the offence cometh" (216).

While George and Eliza Harris believe in the mercy and power of God to protect them and deliver them from oppression, they employ the Bible to justify acting against those who commit violence against them. Although prior to chapter seventeen Stowe continues to hold out hope that Bible reading and Christian sympathy will lead to the abolition of slavery, as the novel develops we see its author moving toward the belief that republican revolution and justified violence may be necessary. In this study, I trace how Stowe moves from Garrison's position of moral suasion to one which defends the enslaveds' exercise of justified violence for republican ends and how Stowe carefully crafts an argument that distinguishes violent insurrection from republican revolution in defense of natural human rights.

Stowe seems conflicted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* between satisfying the desire of her editor and Garrison to advocate for moral suasion and a growing desire to side with republican abolitionist revolutionaries like John Brown, Toussaint, and Denmark Vesey. In Chapter twenty-three, titled "Henrique," Stowe appears to break with her editor's belief in Southern reconciliation and begins to move toward the justified violent position of Denmark Vesey. Newman argues that this chapter represents an ideological turning point for Stowe because of its similarity to one of the earliest antislavery novels to come

out of the Americas, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841): "Stowe models the characters of Augustine Saint Clare, his brother Alfred, the latter's son Henrique, Tom himself and Eva" on Gómez de Avellaneda's major characters (21). Drawing on *Sab's* abolitionist ideology, Stowe addresses two major questions: the ability of women to intervene and reform the institution of slavery and the possibility of the end of slavery through a republican revolution.

In this pivotal chapter, Augustine Saint Clare and his daughter Eva receive a visit from Augustine's proslavery twin brother Alfred and his son Henrique. Following Henrique's merciless whipping of the young slave Dodo, Augustine and Alfred vigorously debate the institution of slavery and the inevitably of a revolution. Augustine and Alfred witness Dodo's beating. Offended by the enslaved boy's punishment, Augustine comments, "I suppose that's what we may call republican education, Alfred?" (288). Alfred responds:

> Henrique is a devil of a fellow, when his blood's up. . . I couldn't help it, if I didn't. Henrique is a regular little tempest; --his mother and I have given him up long ago. But then Dodo is a perfect sprite—no amount of whipping can hurt him. And this by way of teaching Henrique the first verse of a republican's catechism, All men are born free and equal! (288).

Unlike Augustine, who believes that American society needs to live up to its republican ideals and grant full natural rights and liberty to the enslaved, Alfred believes in keeping enslaved blacks subservient and maintaining a strict racial hierarchy: "For my part I think half this republican talk sheer humbug. It is the educated, the intelligent, the wealthy, the refined who ought to have equal rights and not the canaille" (289). Whereas the proslavery apologist believes that the only way to maintain civil order is to keep the enslaved black working classes in a subservient position, Augustine counters by claiming that, instead of keeping order, there will be more violent unrest if enslaved persons are not granted full natural rights. Augustine's allusion to the 1851 slave revolts in Cuba coincides with Eva's death as a result of Henrique's visit.

Aware of the escalating antiabolitionist violence in the 1850s against her friend Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor and John Brown and antislavery settlers in Kansas, Stowe became increasingly

convinced that justified violence was a necessary evil to abolish slavery. In her conclusion to *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Stowe asserts that "an atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being and the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily, and justly on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race" (415). Inherent in Stowe's belief in moral suasion and "sympathetic influence" is that a healthy sympathetic atmosphere is contagious and that an individual must be morally and spiritually healthy to realize the need to abolish slavery.

However, in the mid-1850s Stowe witnessed an increasingly unhealthy atmosphere in the South that led to the dissolution of Christian sympathy and the rise of resentment and hate among slaveholders. Commenting on *Dred*, her forthcoming second novel, Stowe wrote to the duchess of Argyle: "The book is written under the impulse of our stormy times how the blood and insults of Sumner and the sack of Lawrence burn within us I hope to make a voice to say" (Hedrick 258). The continued assault on abolitionists led Stowe to create a hero vastly different from Uncle Tom. "Dred is presented as the son of Denmark Vesey, the historical figure hanged in Charleston, South Carolina for fomenting rebellion among the slaves, allegedly through his work with the African Methodist Episcopal church" (Hedrick 258). Although Dred's identity is defined by his religious faith, Stowe replaces Uncle Tom's New Testament Christian pacifism with "a militant invocation of the Old Testament prophets who called for a day of vengeance" (Hedrick 258). While Dred's Nat Turner-like call for violent retribution is ultimately rejected by Harry Gordon, Aunt Milly, and the slave community in the Great Dismal Swamp, Stowe employs the republican philosophy of justified violence to promote the need for an overthrow of slavery.

Denmark Vesey was an African Methodist Episcopal minister and activist leader of the 1822 Charleston, South Carolina conspiracy. In the decade leading up to the Civil War, Vesey's beliefs in justified violence emerged as a model of republican resistance for militant abolitionists such as Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass and John Brown, who were challenging Garrison's belief that the violent slave revolts propagated by Nat Turner and David Walker were solely terrorist acts based upon retributive violence. According

to Robert S. Levine, William Cooper Nell's historical sketches of black revolutionaries in his *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) influenced Stowe to reject the Garrisonian view of Vesey, Walker, and Turner as insurrectionists promoting retribution, but to view them instead as black activist patriots who advocated the slave's right to republican liberty. Building on the scholarship of Levine, Edlie Wong, and Christina Zwarg, I maintain that the emphasis on the republican philosophy of Toussaint in the Haitian Revolution in Nell's sketch of Vesey as a revolutionary inspired and informed Stowe's portrayal of Vesey and his fictional son as radical free blacks, who encourage Harry Gordon and the Gordon slaves to engage in justified violence to gain their natural rights.

David S. Reynolds contends that for Brown, Stowe, and Douglass representing the militant actions of Vesey, Turner, and Cinque—the leader of the 1837 Amistad revolt—as justified revolutionary violence, rather than insurrection, made these rebellions tolerable in the eyes of abolitionists, who had previously resisted advocating revolution. To argue for the necessity of justified violence, both Brown and Stowe employed black revolutionaries who they believed northern abolitionists could respect. Brown used narratives of enslaved African Americans who had acted in defense of individual liberty and justice. Since Vesey and Cinque had achieved their goals without excessive terrorism, Stowe and Brown "looked to rebellious blacks to set an example of courage. If a rebellion succeeded without excessive violence as with Cinque all the better" (Reynolds 55). As Southern support for slavery gained strength in the 1850s, voluntary liberation through moral suasion became unlikely. To persuasively convince her Garrisonian abolitionist audience of the need for a revolution to free the slaves, Stowe needed to portray activist African American figures whose cause was liberty rather than retribution.

In Harry Gordon, Stowe creates a character whose genesis was similar to that of literate educated slaves and revolutionaries like Vesey, Walker, and Turner. Though a slave, Harry is the half-brother of his white owner, Nina. Harry believes that by exhibiting good moral character and remaining loyal to his biological sister, he will be able to change Nina's belief in the inferiority of blacks, convince her of his shared humanity, and gain his freedom. Like Uncle Tom, the sentimental

protagonist of Stowe's first abolitionist novel, Harry initially thinks that these qualities will enable him to achieve manumission. He had been treated in every respect by Nina as "Colonel Gordon's son and had received advantages of education very superior to what commonly fell to the lot of his class" (38). His education and intellectual cultivation lead Harry to view himself as naturally equal to his white masters. Colonel Gordon believed that Harry's loyal devotion to his sister would make Harry's servitude tolerable, however Harry's status as the eldest male heir only made him long for republican liberty.

Due to Harry's judgment and trustworthiness, "the executors of the estate scarcely made even a faint of overseeing him; and he proceeded to all intents and purposes with the perfect ease of a free man" (39). Like literate educated slaves such as Vesey, Walker, and Turner, Harry had received advantages of education far superior to others of his race. Harry had accompanied his father and master as his valet during Colonel Gordon's tour of Europe, where he undoubtedly was exposed to the concepts of republican liberty and democracy. Eric Sundquist explains that in the post-revolutionary American South, the liberalization of slavery "had helped to create a class of highly assimilated, well-traveled, and skilled slaves who, not remarkably, first imbibed and then came to articulate the belief that the rights of the revolutionary era belonged to them as well" (55).

However, in the eyes of white slaveholders, this class of educated enslaved people were perceived as the potential source of danger. Stowe contrasts the Gordon family, who believe that slaves should not be allowed to read or educate themselves, with Edward Clayton and his sister Ann, who believe in social uplift to prepare slaves to ultimately live as free men and women. The Clayton's belief in liberal education for their slaves allows Stowe to articulate the problem that the white slaveholding community fears from educated slaves. Nina Gordon argues, "But, Miss Anne, how do you account for it that the best educated and best treated slaves—in fact as you say the most perfectly developed human beings—were those who got up the insurrection in Charleston?" (316).

Although Harry has seen the world and knows that it is not his destiny to be a slave for the rest of his life, if he hadn't chafed under the domination of his younger half-brother and overseer Tom,

who constantly reminded Harry that he was his slave, "he might have been completely happy and forgotten even the existence of the chains whose weight he never felt" (39). From the moment of his return, Harry's half-brother makes it clear that the he will not tolerate the easy ways of Nina's administration. Seeing the lack of discipline and current state of affairs on the plantation, Tom asserts:

> I say Nina, said her brother, coming in a day or two after, from a survey that he had been taking round the premises, you want me here to manage this place. Everything going at sixes and sevens and that nigger of a Harry riding round with his boots shining. That fellow cheats you and feathers his own nest well. I know these white niggers are all deceitful. (140

Unlike Nina, who trusts Harry to look out for her well-being and take care of the estate's business, Tom merely views Harry as a threat to the natural order. Tom aggressively reminds him of his enslaved status and tries to take away Harry's human rights. For example, Tom threatens to rape and abuse Harry's wife Lisette if his half-brother is disobedient. Tom's attempt to carry out further vengeance against Harry by selling Lisette is the catalyst that initially causes Harry to contemplate engaging in violence. Richard Boyd observes that resentful mimetic desire is the source of the conflict between the two brothers. "To imitate the desires and behaviors of another is revealed to be little more than a transformation of the self into a slave of that other, and the novel offers, through the relationship of the rivalrous brothers, a microcosm of the struggle for ascendency that is shown to ensue within such a pattern of reciprocal behavior" (17). That is, white slaveholders define freedom as their right to make others submit to their will. If Harry imitates his half-brother's violent behavior, he runs the risk that his actions will reinforce the stereotypical view of black men as uncontrollable savage Nat Turners.

When Stowe introduces Dred, he is a violent insurrectionist who seeks to encourage Harry to actively carry out retribution against Tom Gordon. Arguing that fear and terror are the only means to truly gain one's freedom, Dred asserts, "Go! You are a slave! But as for me, he said drawing up his head, and throwing back his shoulders with a deep inspiration, I am a free man! Free by this holding out his rifle" (199). Stowe distinguishes Dred from his alleged father, republican

revolutionary Vesey, by portraying him as an insurrectionist in the vein of Turner. Dred's kind of violence initially appeals to the angry Harry. However, pious Christian Aunt Milly convinces Harry that vengeance is not the answer. After Harry damns the actions of Gordon, he asserts that he refuses to submit and be good any longer. Appealing to Harry's sense of moral conscience Milly responds "Why, 't won't help de matter to be *bad*, will it, Harry? Cause you hate Tom Gordon, does you want to act just like him? No! said Harry, I won't be like him, but I'll have my revenge!" (201). Aunt Milly warns Harry that Dred's insurrection will only lead to death and destruction and if he fully embraces Dred's methods, he will have to go against his own flesh and blood. Milly sternly warns Harry, "Chile, if they get a going, they won't spare nobody. Don't you start up dat ar tiger, cause, I tell ye, ye, can't chain him, if ye do!" (202). According to Milly, Dred's revenge will not discriminate between individuals of immoral character and those who are legitimately benevolent toward the slaves.

In Milly's view, if Harry Gordon and the other slaves on the local plantations embrace the kind of retribution advocated by Turner and Dred, their actions would reinforce the beliefs of Garrison and the northern abolitionists that black revolutions were illegitimate forms of protest because they were motivated by revenge. Through Milly's arguments, Stowe shows that if Harry and the Gordon slaves truly believe in democratic freedom, they cannot fully endorse Dred's form of proposed insurrection. Thus, Stowe makes rebellion palatable for northern abolitionists who were on the fence about supporting acts of revolutionary violence. Had Stowe allowed Harry to exercise unrestrained vengeance against his masters "in the overheated political climate of the mid-1850s, she might as well have reinforced such arguments as George Fitzhugh makes in *Cannibals All!* (1857) that African American savagery and barbarity would result if slavery were suddenly ended" (Rowe 45). Furthermore, like Brown, Garnet, Douglass, and Nell, "Stowe explicitly links Harry and Dred's characters and the fictional revolt with the Haitian revolution and Toussaint L' Overture, Denmark Vesey's planned revolt of 1822 and Nat Turner's Southampton insurrection of 1831" (Rowe 48). Comparing the justified violent actions of the enslaved black insurrectionists in the novel to the philosophy of enslaved African American advocates for natural

rights defines Stowe's characters as moral revolutionaries entitled to liberty and equal rights with whom Stowe's republican white audience can sympathize.

While Turner's rebellion was more readily characterized as savagery and more easily suppressed, Vesey's natural rights ideology had been much harder to root out. Douglas R. Egerton writes that in the aftermath of Vesey's conspiracy "discerning Carolinians were painfully aware that no mere law no scrap of paper, could effectively prevent another Vesey from rising out of the city streets or remote plantations. Indeed, some whites feared that legislative efforts to eliminate the few meager privileges permitted to slaves might actually create rather than inhibit angry rebel leaders" (204). Unlike Turner, Vesey was not solely feared for his threat of retribution, but because he employed the Declaration of Independence and the Bible to argue that black men and women were equal to whites under God's law.

It is apparent from Stowe's interpretation of the court records of Vesey's trial that proslavery whites were not as concerned with preventing terrorism among the black community as they were with preventing their slaves' access to literacy and the Bible because they believed that blacks would ultimately use these to advocate for equal rights. Stowe has Mr. Knapp, a wealthy South Carolina planter, claim that educating the slaves will lead to the dissolution of the institution of slavery. Knapp suggests that Vesey was threatening to slaveholders since he employed his education to encourage blacks to rise and challenge the authority and privilege of the whites:

> They had all been remarkable for their good character. Why there was that Denmark Vesey, who was the head of it; for twenty years he served his master and was the most faithful creature that ever breathed; and after he got his liberty, everybody respected him and liked him. Why, at first, my father said the magistrates could not be brought to arrest him, they were so sure that he could not have been engaged in such an affair. Now, all the leaders in that affair could read and write. (530)

For South Carolina slaveholders like Knapp, "their happy slaves had paid them back by sharpening rusty sabers" (Egerton 204). The only way for slaveholders to prevent the rise of another Denmark Vesey was

to deny their slaves the liberal indulgences of literacy and constantly remind them of their racial inferiority.

In the aftermath of the 1822 Charleston Conspiracy, Vesey was portrayed by Southern slaveholders as a foreign Other who attempted to politically corrupt the black population turning them against their masters. Following Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer's successful slave revolt in Spanish Santo Domingo, the unveiling of the Vesey conspiracy in Charleston gave rise to fears of a counterrevolutionary St. Dominque on US soil. Edlie Wong notes that "Southern slaveholders mobilized a racialized discourse of disease emergence and health security in their legal efforts to contain the contagion of slave revolution and black militancy associated with the idea of Haiti" (163). Proslavery Southerners viewed the averted slave conspiracies of Gabriel Prosser (1800), Vesey (1822), and Turner (1831) as legacies of the racial violence that "St. Dominque unleashed into the Atlantic world" (Wong 164). Since Vesey had been brought to Charleston from St. Dominque, the justices in his trial imagined the conspiracy as an opportunity to import the republican ideology of St. Dominque into the American South. Proslavery politicians and ideologues "like South Carolina Governor William Aiken claimed that U.S slaves could not envision freedom for themselves unless they were acted upon by a foreign—specifically, Haitian—influence" (Wong 172). However, Harriet Beecher Stowe along with African-Americans writers including Douglass and William Wells Brown often turned to the Haitian Revolution and its black descendants such as Vesey to advocate for a justified violent Revolution of liberation

While Michael P. Johnson and Carrie Hyde confirm that the Vesey conspiracy was manufactured by the Charleston courts to instill fear among white slaveholders, the revolutionary mythic interpretation of Vesey was instrumental to the ability of Stowe, Garnet, and Brown to advocate for a natural rights Revolution. Robert Paquette is correct in his assertion that rumors of a threatened movement to emancipate the slaves had proven to be a strong catalyst for the development of organized slave revolts. Even Hyde admits that while the allegations of the Vesey conspiracy may not have been true, many African American abolitionists believed them to be true and this "fact alone had substantive consequences" (36). I agree with Robert Levine in

Dislocating Race and Nation that "Even if Vesey's plot had been the fabrication of anxious white South Carolinians" the trial transcripts provided Walker, Douglass, and Stowe with a model for promoting a republican revolution among the African American community (73).

Rather than employing the scriptures to justify vengeance against whites, Stowe, like Douglass, affirms that Vesey used the Bible to challenge the belief of proslavery whites that slavery was sanctioned by the Old Testament. Vesey's "subversive" use of the Bible to advocate for natural rights and republican liberty for slaves was at the center of the minster's public trial and execution. In many respects, the proslavery jurists and proponents of natural law who sentenced Vesey to death were not concerned with the insurrectionist's call for widespread murder; rather, they were more concerned with the perceived detrimental effects of Vesey's republican interpretation of the Bible upon the slave community.

In the same manner as Vesey, the fictional Dred employs the Bible to spread the gospel of justified violence and insurrection among slaves on the Gordon estate and neighboring plantations. However, unlike Vesey, Dred uses the scriptures to promote terrorism and violence against slaveholders. Like Turner and Vesey, literate black men who read the Bible and planned elaborate slave rebellions, Dred intensely studies the writings of the Old Testament prophets "condemnations of oppression" (Smith 294). Gail K. Smith states that Dred's choice of Biblical texts implies a reading of scripture that is "far removed from Uncle Tom [and Aunt Milly] as one could imagine: he finds in the Bible divine sanction for violence against white oppressors" (294). In his study of the Apocalyptic Jeremiad in *Dred,* Jacob Stratman also observes that Dred deliberately avoids referencing the verses of the Bible that deal with love and reconciliation. Vesey's prophetic son "focuses instead on retribution and prophetic doom" (386). Dred's sermons to Harry and the fugitive slaves argue that retribution is a divine right granted by God to the oppressed. Stratman continues that Dred extensively quotes from Old Testament texts that promote terrorism and violence against one's master. The only New Testament text he cites is the book of Revelation for its emphasis on the Second Coming and judgment (386). Dred's interpretation of the Old Testament as promoting retributive violence against slaveholders

is "no better than the slave owners and proslavery preachers who used popular misreading of the stories of Cain, Noah, and the teachings of Paul to promulgate their own truths" (386). Challenging the proslavery reading of the Old Testament at the Camp Meeting, Dred begins his sermon with a fiery condemnation of white slaveholders:

> Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end shall it be for you? The day of the Lord shall be darkness, and not light! Blow ye the trumpet in Zion! Sound an alarm in my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble! For the day of the Lord cometh. (262)

Reflecting African American views of the Apocalypse, Dred's role in the text is to violently frighten the whites into repenting of their sins— "the national sin of slavery" (Stratman 388). For Dred, slavery can only be abolished through exercising violent judgment against the whites. According to Robert S. Levine, Dred's sermon is a composite of verses from the books of Joel, Amos, Exodus, Isaiah, and Nahum. Stowe's use of these passages suggest that she does not want Dred to expound on the Biblical texts that emphasize restoration and salvation for his chosen people.

Kevin Pelletier adds that Stowe uses Dred's fiery Jeremiads to instill fear into white slaveholders in hopes of helping them sympathize with the plight of slaves and view African Americans as full human beings. Stowe's novel, like Walker's *Appeal,* "uses the threat of insurrectionary violence as a way to motivate her readers to reform their views about slavery" (262). If Stowe's goal is to convince abolitionists that justified violence is a legitimate method of abolition, then she cannot allow Dred's plan for retribution to be carried out. If Harry Gordon and Dred engage in Nat Turner-like terrorism, Stowe's white readers will continue to view blacks as insurgents underserving of sympathy or justice. Thus, Stowe ultimately encourages Gordon to reject retributive violence as a solution.

Dred as a work of abolitionist literature does not ultimately promote a widespread bloody slave insurrection. Zwarg observes that "Dred's speech summoning insurrectionary fervor contains apocalyptic tones, yet he heeds the advice of black Christians like Milly telling him to wait" (30). The price of restraint appears when an attempt at retaliation occurs for the senseless death of the slave Hark,

which results in Dred's death. Dred's rage at Hark's death is justified, yet this uncontrolled rage is also a threat to the survival of the slave population.

While Stowe began to support justified violence as a method of social protest in the mid-1850s, she was not willing to fully endorse the genocidal violence against slaveholding whites propagated by Turner. Making the character of Dred into a composite of Vesey and Turner, Stowe complicates the issue of the nature and consequences of retribution for African Americans. William P. Mullaney states that Stowe "On the one hand. . . wants to emphasize the moral basis of Turner's and Vesey's struggles for freedom. On the other hand, she is not willing to embrace the possibly bloody consequences of that struggle" (158). The figure of Denmark Vesey provides both Dred and Harry "with an intellectual father. . . whose story of an aborted rebellion inspired the novel's insurrectionary impulse, yet at the same time allowed Stowe to avoid the potentially tragic consequences of an actual slave revolt" (158). While white slaveholding southerners at the time of *Dred's* publication viewed Vesey and Turner as radical and ungovernable black men, Stowe employs Vesey as an alternative revolutionary figure to counterbalance the view of black insurrection as solely based on terrorism and retributive violence.

Harry Gordon's rejection of retributive violence is apparent when he is denied his legal right to buy his freedom, which was guaranteed by his Uncle John Gordon and his sister Nina. Following Nina's death, according to the guardians of the estate, Harry was to have his freedom by paying the sum of five hundred dollars. Yet, even with John Gordon's signature, Mr. Jekyl argues that based upon natural law a slave is not a person in the eyes of the law and cannot have a contract drawn up with him. Harry refutes Jekyl's claim by arguing that he is not subject to the principles of natural law because he is the eldest son of Colonel Gordon and as "white as my brother, whom you say owns me!" (386). At this moment, Stowe could have had Harry murder his half-brother Tom Gordon; instead, Harry merely beats Tom senseless before escaping out the window and fleeing with his wife to the maroon community in the swamp.

Harry justifies his actions by arguing in a letter to the abolitionist Edward Clayton that he committed no crime except

resisting oppression. In the same manner as Garnet and Brown, Harry defends his actions by insisting that he was doing nothing more radical than the American Founding Fathers had done when they shed blood to secure their own Natural Rights. Harry declares that the slave has more right to engage in revolution than the founders because African Americans have been stripped of their legal right to humanity--denied literacy, property and the pursuit of happiness. Asserting that the slave has a Natural Right to engage in revolution, Harry observes, "Well, how was it with our people in South Carolina? Denmark Vesey was a man! His history is just what George Washington's would have been if you had failed. What set him in his course? The Bible and your Declaration of Independence" (435). Referencing the Declaration of Independence and the Bible, Harry attempts to convince Clayton that all black men are entitled to the promise of liberty.

Clayton comes to believe that proslavery whites like Tom Gordon cannot be reformed. On her deathbed, Nina instructed Clayton to "care for her people; that he should tell Tom to be kind to them" (471). Clayton's letter asking Gordon to change his abusive behavior toward the slaves is ignored. While "a man of another nature might have melted in tears over it, indulged in the luxury of sentimental grief, and derived some comfort, from the exercise, to go on in ways of sin. Not so with Tom Gordon. He could not afford to indulge in anything that roused his moral nature" (472). Gordon stops Father Dickson from establishing an antislavery congregation because Gordon fears a revolution, "I say, said the first speaker, you shan't go to getting up rattraps and calling em' meetings! This yer preaching o' yourn is a cussed sell, and we won't stand it no longer! We shall have an insurrection among our niggers" (480). After witnessing Gordon's harassment of Father Dickson, Clayton gives up on his belief in gradual emancipation and moral suasion.

For Harry Gordon and Edward Clayton, a justified violent revolution becomes the only option for the slaves to secure their natural rights and liberty. However, the terrorism of Turner proposed by Dred cannot be allowed to continue. The type of vengeance advocated by Dred is no different than the violence carried out by Tom Gordon against the black slaves he seeks to keep in a state of bondage. When Tom discovers the location of the fugitive maroon community in the

Great Dismal Swamp, Harry's first instinct is to go out with Dred to hunt down and murder his oppressor. Dred "seized his rifle and shot-bag, and in a few moments was gone. It was Harry's instinct to have followed him; but Lisette threw herself, weeping, on his neck. Don't go—don't! she said. What shall we all do without you? Stay with us! You'll certainly be killed, and you can do no good!" (512). Stowe martyrs Dred so the revolution for the Natural Rights of the slaves can be carried out. Returning to the encampment wounded by Tom Gordon's shotgun, Dred "lifted his hand and motioned [his wife] from him. Peace he said, peace it is enough! Behold I go unto the witnesses who cry day and night" (513). In his last breath, Dred tells Harry to let the God of their fathers judge between them. Therefore, Stowe has her insurrectionists reject vengeance, so that their acts can be read as revolutionary violence in support of liberty.

Stowe's argument that activist blacks like Vesey are not the source of insurrection is particularly apparent in the ritualistic scene in the Great Dismal Swamp where the fugitive slaves plot to carry out revolution. Initially, Harry reads to the escaped slaves from the Declaration of Independence to convince Dred's disciples that they have the right to carry out justified violence. Standing by the light of a torch, he reads "that document which has been fraught with so much seed for all time. What words were those to fall on the ears of thoughtful bondmen! Governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed. When a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a determination to reduce them under absolute despotism it is their right and their duty to throw off such government" (455). This reading of the Declaration is followed by several of the slaves recounting their grievances against their masters: Harry tells of the abuse that has been perpetrated against him and his wife; Aunt Milly remembers her abuse at the hands of the slaveholders she has been rented to; Hannibal remembers how he was sold to a master in Virginia who sold off his wife and children; a quadroon man shares how his mother was beaten and raped by their master in Kentucky. After this widespread recounting of injustices, Harry and the other slaves are ready to engage in Turner-like terrorism and insurrection. However, Aunt Milly appears and urges them to temper their violent impulses and let God take his vengeance against

the whites: "O, brethren, dere's a better way. I's been whar you be. I's been in de wilderness!" (461). Through her acceptance of Jesus, Milly has been able to show a degree of compassion. Milly urges Harry and the others to engage in revolutionary social protest, but let God take his vengeance against their masters.

The continued denial by proslavery whites to deny African Americans their natural right to republican liberty in the mid-1850s caused Stowe to argue—along with Garnet, Brown, and Douglass—that engaging in justified violence was necessary to achieving liberty and equal rights. The portrayal of Vesey, Walker, and Turner as advocates for republican liberty rather than terrorists helped convince abolitionists to support the need to take up arms. This debate over the nature of Vesey and Turner's insurrections continues. In 2014, a life size statue of Vesey was unveiled in Charleston, South Carolina. Some radio hosts, academics, and newspaper bloggers condemned the monument as dignifying terrorism and violence. Egerton observes that "There's no doubt that Vesey was a violent man, who planned to attack and kill Charleston whites. But those who condemn him as a terrorist merely demonstrate how little we, as a culture, understand about slavery, and what it forced men and women it ensnared to do" (A25). As Egerton observes of Vesey and his followers, "The only path to freedom was to sharpen a sword" (A25). Stowe's protagonist Harry Gordon upholds Vesey not for his promotion of terrorist tactics, but for his personal belief in the power of revolutionary violence to advocate for Lockean natural rights. Harry Gordon employs the natural rights ideology of Denmark Vesey not to promote an apocalyptic race war against whites, but rather to protest oppression and advocate for his natural right to republican liberty.

Works Cited

Barnes, Diane L. "Insurrection as Righteous Rebellion in *The Heroic Slave* and Beyond." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 102, no. 1, Winter 2017, pp. 21-34.

Boyd, Richard. "Models of Power in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 15-30.

Douglass, Frederick. "Men of Color to Arms!" *The Portable Frederick Douglass,* edited by John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr, Penguin 2016, pp 484-87.

Downes, Kathleen. "Sick Sympathies: Pathological Affect in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*." *Women's Studies,* vol. 51, no. 6, pp 1-15.

Egerton, Douglas R. *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

---. "Abolitionist or Terrorist?" *The New York Times,* February 25, 2014, pp. A25.

Hedrick, Joan. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, Oxford UP, 1994.

Hyde, Carrie. *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship*, Harvard UP 2018.

---. "The Climates of Liberty: Natural Rights in the *Creole* Case and 'The Heroic Slave'." *American Literature*, vol. 85, no. 3, September 2013, pp. 475-504.

---. "Novelistic Evidence: The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy and Possibilistic History." *American Literary History*, vol. 27, no. 1, December 2014, pp. 26-55.

Levine, Robert S. "The African-American Presence in Stowe's *Dred*." *Criticism and the Color Line*, edited by Henry B. Wonham, Rutgers UP, 1996, pp. 171-90.

---. *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism*, North Carolina UP, 2008.

Mullaney, William P. "Ecstasy in Excess: Mysticism, Hysteria, and Masculinity in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*," *Beyond Uncle Tom's Cabin: Essays on the Writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Sylvia Mayer and Monika Mueller, Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2011.

Nell, William Cooper. *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, Independently Published, 2017.

Newman, Judie. "Staging Black Insurrection: *Dred* On Stage." *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Cindy Weinstein, Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 113-30.

---. "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Cuban Characters: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*." *Remapping the Latina/o Literary Landscape*, edited by Cristina Herrera and Larissa Mercado-Lopez, Palgrave McMillan, 2016, pp. 21-34.

Pelletier, Kevin. "David Walker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Logic of Sentimental Terror." *African American Review*, vol. 46, no. 2-3, Summer/Fall 2013, pp. 255-69.

Reynolds, David S. *John Brown Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Rowe, John Carlos. "Stowe's Rainbow Sign: Violence and Community in *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856)." *Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp 37-55.

Smith, Gail K. "Reading with the Other Politics and Hermaneutics in Stowe's Dred." *American Literature*, vol. 69, no. 2, pp. 289-313.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp,* edited by Robert S. Levine, Penguin 2000.

---. *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* edited by Stephen Railton, Bedford St. Martin's, 2008.

Stratman, Jacob. "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Preachers of the Swamp: *Dred* and the Jeremiad." *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3, Spring 2008, pp. 379-400.

Sundquist, Eric. "Signs of Power: Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass." *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Harvard UP, 1993, pp. 27-137.

Wong, Edlie. "In the Shadow of Haiti: The Negro Seamen Act, Counter Revolutionary St. Dominique, and Black Emigration." *The Haitian Revolution in the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies*, edited by Elizabeth Maddock Dillion and Michael Drexler, Pennsylvania UP, 2016, pp. 162-89.

Zwarg, Christina. "Who's Afraid of Virginia's Nat Turner? Mesmerism, Stowe, and the Terror of Things." *American Literature*, vol. 87, no. 1, March 2015, pp. 23-50.