The Biopolitics of Childhood in the Long American 19th Century

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In November 1873, in their "Topics of the Time" column, *Scribner's Monthly* proudly announced the arrival of *St. Nicholas: Scribner's Illustrated Magazine for Girls and Boys*. *Scribner's* was itself established 1870 in New York and came to dominate the periodical market for an ever-growing middle-class readership.[1] Figuring its new arrival as a son, "with a face as fresh and handsome as a schoolboy's," *Scribner's* tells us: "it will be a pleasure to have him at our side, to watch his growth and development, and to minister, as we may, to his prosperity" (115). *Scribner's* birth announcement of their new "issue" presciently highlights what will become an important preoccupation for *St. Nicholas*: narratives of growth and development, especially as they pertain to white and Black boys. In *St. Nicholas Magazine*, the narratives that feature Black boys typically highlight their failure to meet developmental milestones, while stories about white boys celebrate the way they successfully navigate the journey to manhood. I argue that through iteration, *St. Nicholas* naturalizes a racialized model of child development, one that offers white boys as models of "normal" development and Black boys as figures of what I term "arrested development."

The figure of the Black boy saturates the pages of *St. Nicholas Magazine* in its early decades, typically appearing as a degrading caricature that would have been readily legible to contemporary readers as a "pickaninny." This figure appears most often in what was then an emerging genre, Lost Cause literature, associated with local color writing and produced by such writers as Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and Irwin Russell, some of the earliest contributors to the genre.[2] These writers also published in *Scribner's Monthly*, which, under the leadership of its editor Josiah Holland, built a major national readership, in part through its promotion of this literature, which looked nostalgically back to the plantation as a site of idealized hierarchical race relations.[3] Though all but forgotten today, Irwin Russell occupied a place of some prominence and exerted influence

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in the formation of what one late-nineteenth-century white Southern scholar identified as the "New Southern Literature" (Baskervill 98).[4] In this essay, I turn to two stories by Russell, "Sam's Four Bits" (1876) and "Sam's Birthday" (1878), both of which are set on a plantation in the not-so-distant past, center a boy pickaninny, and offer a thematic intersection of economics, labor, and child development. Russell's stories identify the Black boy as fungible and feebleminded, an interchangeable child who does not participate in linear development, but instead is fixed in the iterated cycles of agricultural labor. Not only will the boy pickaninny never grow up and thus never participate in the economic and political privileges of manhood, he, and by extension all Black males, are inexorably tied to manual and agrarian labor. Such depictions contribute to the biopolitical project of white power, intent on securing the stability of the population through racial taxonomies and propelled by capitalism's insatiable desire for exploitable labor in the wake of Emancipation.[5]

St. Nicholas Magazine was a cultural force. Conceived and edited by Mary Mapes Dodge and boasting contributions from such literary luminaries as Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, and Frances Hodgson Burnett, it ran for more than sixty years, becoming one of the most important and influential children's periodicals of the period. The monthly periodical offered poems, letters, games, essays, and stories, along with lavish illustrations, providing a capacious curriculum for impressible child readers.[6] The inauguration of *St. Nicholas* occurs soon after the collapse of the bank Jay Cooke and Co., which triggered the Financial Panic of 1873 and ushered in the Great Depression and the Great Railroad Strike. Fear of alliances between Southern freedmen and Northern workers produced a sense of urgency on the part of the white ruling elite to reaffirm racial hierarchies and recommit to and amplify a campaign of violent white supremacy.[7] Northern periodicals contributed to this amplification, participating in a project of North–South reconciliation that sought to consolidate wealth and economic growth along a racial axis.[8]

Through their promotion of Lost Cause literature, both *Scribner's* and *St. Nicholas* were important players in this project of North–South reconciliation. As *Scribner's* birth announcement for *St. Nicholas* makes clear, the two periodicals were politically and philosophically aligned: "Wherever 'Scribner' goes, 'St. Nicholas' ought to go. They will be harmonious companions in the family and the helpers of each other in the work of instruction, culture, and entertainment" (115). A number of scholars have commented on the way *Scribner's* announcement speaks to the shared mission of the two periodicals—as Susan Gannon notes, *St. Nicholas* was meant to "carry out the cultural program of its adult counterpart" (28).[9] Yet, with the notable exceptions of Donnarae MacCann and Janet Gray,

most overlook the white supremacist component of this cultural program.[10] In a deep dive into the inaugural volume of *St. Nicholas*, Gray astutely asserts, "race is one of the most pervasively constitutive dimensions of Dodge's project, although the least articulated" (*Hints* 41).[11]

An investigation into racialized depictions of boyhood, particularly the ubiquitous figure of the boy pickaninny, offers a productive avenue into *St. Nicholas*'s white supremacist cultural program. In *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein tracks the racialized construction of childhood in the nineteenth century and identifies some of the pickaninny's defining characteristics, focusing particularly on the figure's imperviousness to pain, a dehumanizing feature that serves to justify and rationalize the exploitation of and violence against Black children.[12] Focusing largely on girls, notably Topsy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Bernstein identifies a shift across the nineteenth century in the representation of Black childhood. From abolitionist characterizations in which they are often figures of pathos whose experience of violence causes them suffering, depictions of Black children devolve into pickaninnies by the 1870s and 1880s, dehumanized caricatures who provoke humor rather than pathos.

While the invulnerability of "the insensate pickaninny," to use Bernstein's phrase, is one of its principal features, I'm interested in foregrounding the significance of another defining characteristic: developmental impairment, what eugenics discourse terms "feeblemindedness." The figure of the boy pickaninny in the pages of *St. Nicholas Magazine* appears in narratives that highlight his failure to meet developmental markers in the trajectory to adulthood. Depicted as foolish and forgetful, unable to learn, and unable to progress, the pickaninny offers an illustration of what Lafleur and Schuller identify as a "key vector of biopolitical arrangements of power": "biopolitical tactics of governance insist on a normative chronology of life in which proper orientation within time is a key to an individual and a population's success" (611–612). In her study *Black Age*, Habiba Ibrahim usefully theorizes about the relationship of Blackness to development, noting, "[o]ver various phases of the transatlantic slave trade, the black body had been separated from its hegemonic relation to time" (4). She calls attention to the way the "malleability" of Black age sustained the exploitation of Black labor, noting that it is "construable as anything because black subjects have been alienated from the time of their own bodies" (4). Though her study focuses on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she notes that the Black subject's alienation from normative models of temporality and developmental trajectories finds its roots in the slave trade and continues to exert influence to the present day. We can read the figure of the pickaninny as non-normative, as an instantiation of a figure with an "[im]proper orientation within time" and, as such, a potential threat to the

stability of the population. Such a threat justifies the oversight and control of the Black boy by paternalistic authority and also conveniently yields the pickaninny as an exploitable site for labor extraction.

In his landmark study *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis explains how the notion of the normal—and by extension, the abnormal or deviant—emerges in the nineteenth century by way of eugenics discourse to produce our contemporary understanding of disability as a social and political construct.[13] Noting that feeblemindedness was fundamental to eugenics, Davis details the ways in which the label became increasingly expansive. Linked to criminality and/or sexually deviant behavior, feeblemindedness also became associated with intersecting identities marked as outside of the normal, including the poor, immigrants, people of color, and women.[14] Tracking the transatlantic history of eugenics from the eighteenth century to the Holocaust, Mitchell and Snyder persuasively assert that the label "feeblemindedness" became a powerful tool to pathologize those identified as not "normal," marking them as inferior and not merely unfit to freely participate in a civil society but specifically as a danger to a healthy body politic:

> By restricting the social liberties and rights of disabled people, eugenics invented the category of disability as that which grouped together hordes of people with widely divergent physical and cognitive characteristics under a single heading of "defect." While the generic grouping was comprised of proliferating subcategories of deviance, the consolidation of human variation under an exclusively derogatory classification imposed a disastrous logic of binary thinking, "Normal" and "Feebleminded."
>
> (xx)

This "disastrous logic" creates the conditions under which the label "feebleminded" becomes a biopolitical tool to promote state control over Black bodies, essentially to justify the medicalizing, surveilling, institutionalizing, sterilizing, and exploiting of such "undesirables."

While the figure of the feebleminded boy pickaninny who populates the first two decades of *St. Nicholas Magazine* appears lighthearted, offering comic relief in many tales, read in the context of the history of eugenics, a more insidious project emerges. Stories like Irwin Russell's "Sam's Four Bits" and "Sam's Birthday" offer striking examples of what were intended to be humorous depictions of boy pickaninnies set on antebellum Southern plantations, yet they also participate in the deadly serious, white supremacist project of North–South reconciliation. In a biographical essay on Russell published in 1896, part of a series on post-Reconstruction Southern writers, William Malone Baskervill offers a literary history of the

new Lost Cause genre, asserting, "[i]ts aims were to cement the bonds of good fellowship between the sections, to depict the Negro according to his real character, and to exhibit the true relations which existed between master and slave" (100–101).[15] Here, Baskervill explicitly aligns this literary tradition to North–South reconciliation, a white supremacist project that hinges on degrading depictions of Southern Black characters and their menial relationship to white power. Baskervill emphasizes the "real" and the "true" here, a revealing move given that such depictions rely on excess, caricature, and exaggeration for their intended comic effect. This contradiction exposes how much repressive work is required to naturalize racial hierarchy, as well as intimating its ultimate fragility.[16]

In an often-cited introduction to the posthumously published *Poems by Irwin Russell* (1888), Joel Chandler Harris famously identifies Russell as "among the first—if not the very first—of Southern writers to appreciate the literary possibilities of the Negro character" and concludes with an iterated sentiment about Russell's literary skills: "but I do not know where could be found to-day a happier or a more perfect representation of the Negro character" (xi). Harris echoes Baskervill's emphasis on accuracy, and central to this "perfect representation" is Russell's interest in depicting Southern Black adults as happy, loyal to white power, and most importantly, childlike. This child-like quality, attributed to Black adults and found in so much plantation literature, works emblematically to build a portrait of a non-normative racialized population. In his chapter on Joel Chandler Harris from 1886, Baskervill explicitly asserts this belief: "[t]he Southern plantation negro sprang from the child race of humanity" (28). As "the child race of humanity," Blackness is fixed in time, or as Henry Louis Gates aptly describes it, "trapped in amber" (101). Gates turns to this metaphor in a reading of Thomas Nelson Page's "Marse Chan," attributing this idea about the child-like quality of adult Black people to the race science of the day. Gates's metaphor productively evokes LaFleur and Schuller's notion about the treatment of Blackness in nineteenth-century race science as "inert material": "Blackness and indigeneity were regularly characterized in the nineteenth-century life sciences as inert material, incapable of experiencing further change and lingering into the present as contaminants from prehistory" (611).[17]

What then of Russell's representation of literal Black *children*? Or more precisely, how does Russell distinguish the child-like behavior of Black boys from that of white boys? The answer is through arrested development. Russell's "Sam's Four Bits" offers a graphic illustration of this biopolitical strategy of racialized classification, one that becomes even more striking when read against a thematically similar short story that centers white boys. Sarah Winter Kellogg's "How It Went" (1875) appeared in *St. Nicholas* within a year of "Sam's Four Bits," and both stories treat the topic of

money management. Kellogg was a prolific writer of periodical fiction until her death in 1915 and wrote her fair share of Lost Cause narratives. While "How It Went" draws on many of the conventions of the genre, it more closely aligns with popular adventure tales of white boys as they learn the skills and strategies to navigate the journey to adulthood and become successful men.[18] "How It Went" follows the adventures of Wyatt and Snaps, two cousins who have earned what to them is an impressive sum of money by entering into a contract with their fathers. The story tracks how "the capitalists" rehearse the rituals of manhood, as they manage their earnings through investment—they "invest" in as yet unneeded shaving accessories; through speculation, as they next purchase strawberries to sell at a profit; and through philanthropy enacted on the impoverished Black children in the town.

One of the objects of the white boys' philanthropy is a Black boy named Bob Davidson, who, like all the Black boys in Kellogg's work, is feeble-minded and serves as comic relief in the story. Kellogg repeatedly relies on dialect to signify intellectual inferiority, and in this story, tellingly comments on Bob's dialect: "all the schooling with which the town had been able to inoculate him during that period had not sufficed to cure his Southern dialect." Turning to the body and disease, Kellogg represents Bob's dialect as an illness that school, metaphorized as an inoculation, cannot remedy. Significantly, Kellogg's metaphor, schooling as medical cure, conflates two powerful classifying institutions—education and the medical industrial complex—that consign him permanently to an inferior status.[19] Indeed, Bob offers the story's final punchline. The white cousins, Wyatt and Snaps, have experienced some financial successes but also some failures in their money-management adventures. After being tricked out of most of their strawberries, they encounter Bob, upon whom they had earlier bestowed the philanthropic gift of free molasses. Bob desperately wants strawberries, and the boys give him a basket though he has nothing to trade for them, except a promise that he will return with compensation. The story ends with Bob offering in payment the last dregs of the molasses the cousins had given him earlier. Bob's flawed grasp of commercial exchange tickles Wyatt and Snaps so much that they return the molasses to him, along with the remainder of the berries. The implication is that the amusement that Bob provides—humor that is patronizingly at his expense—is compensation enough. Bob's naïve, childlike inability to understand commerce becomes itself an object of value and exchange, and such a move hints at the exploitability of the Black boy.

In Irwin Russell's story "Sam's Four Bits," the protagonist Sam, an enslaved boy on a Southern plantation, also finds himself with an impressive sum, though his takes the form of a shiny coin that magically appears

as a Christmas gift. Unlike the white boys in Kellogg's story, Sam comes by his money not through any agency on his part but as patronage from his master. Moreover, Sam doesn't fully understand the significance of money and values it only as a shiny object. He is charmed by "the brightness of the silver" and spends time studying the coin like an art object. Sam then undergoes several adventures in which he struggles not to lose the coin, highlighting the story's central lesson: money does not belong in the hands of Black boys. One of these adventures involves a battle with a greedy rooster, and Russell makes clear that Sam and the rooster, "Old Jack," are worthy opponents, a dehumanizing alignment that suggests that Sam values the coin in the same way a rooster would.

In case the story's message that Black people are better off without having to navigate the burden of wealth is lost on the reader, Russell hammers home his point at the conclusion. After having left his newly cleaned coin to dry by the fire, Sam foolishly picks it up and burns his hands:

> "Oh, ma-a-ammy! Dat nasty fo'bits!"
>
> "What's de matter wid it?" asked Aunt Phillis, and she stooped and picked it up. Then there was another howl of wrath and agony—a slap—an explanation.[20]
>
> (659)

The "nasty" coin in the hands of both the mother and the son becomes associated with pain, anger, and violence. The story ends with Sam sitting on the edge of a well beside his four bits, "with the air of a capitalist" contriving a blackberry-picking scheme. But unlike those of Wyatt and Snaps, the plans go nowhere when he loses the coin hopelessly down the well. For Sam, this is a happy ending because, as he wisely concludes, the coin was more trouble than it was worth. While the white boys in Kellogg's story rehearse the rituals of manhood (contracts, investment, speculation, philanthropy), Sam is denied this role. Russell's story reminds its readers that Sam is not an actor but a commodity to be managed and exploited.

In another comic plantation tale, "Sam's Birthday," published in *St. Nicholas* two years later, Irwin Russell similarly derives humor from the eponymous Sam's feeblemindedness.[21] The story appeared in *St. Nicholas* in 1877, the year most historians mark as the beginning of the post-Reconstruction period when white Southerners sought to restore white supremacy through terror, violence, and intimidation. Ushering in this period, the story reflects and participates in its pervasive racial violence, which was directed largely at Black men who dared to assume the prerogatives of (white) male citizenship, that is, who dared to seek after political and economic power. The story begins when Sam is awakened by

his mother and "greatly amazed and confounded" to learn, that unlike yesterday, he is now "nine going on ten." Sam has never heard of a birthday, nor can he quite understand what it means. Much of the narrative is then taken up with Sam, and his best friend Pumble, meditating upon "the glorious possibilities of the future," that is, how they will spend a day unexpectedly free of labor.[22] White anxiety about the "glorious possibilities of the future" of Black boys drives this narrative—anxiety about Black boys growing up and going places, achieving economic mobility and political power in the post-Reconstruction South. Significantly, birthdays were becoming increasingly important in the late nineteenth century, as rising industrialization along with growing institutionalization (asylums, schools, poor houses) required greater attention to classification and quantifiable measurement. Russell illustrates Sam's feeblemindedness precisely through his inability to understand the very thing that would have marked a "normal" developmental journey, his birthday.

Sam's developmental journey may be arrested, but it is not static. Instead, Russell associates Sam with the unchanging cycles of agricultural

"THE BOYS TROTTED MERRILY AWAY TOGETHER."

Figure 6.1 From "Sam's Birthday"

labor. Frederick Douglass offers a similar observation though in a different key. He begins all three of his autobiographies with the painful fact that, like many other enslaved people on the plantation, he has no knowledge of his birthday:

> I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.
>
> (21)

Rather than experiencing birthdays as markers of development leading to a destination out of childhood and into adulthood, enslaved people are instead tied to the cycles of nature, or more precisely, to the cycles of agricultural labor—"planting time, harvest time." For Douglass, such a move is one of the preeminent strategies of violent dehumanization on the plantation, tragically fixing this exploitable workforce to the field.

Russell recasts such ignorance about one's birthday from pathos to comedy; nonetheless, we can trace an underlying counter-narrative of violence against Black bodies that divulges both the horror of enforced labor on the slave plantation and the threatened violence in this post-Reconstruction moment against Black boys who dream of "the glorious possibilities of the future." For example, when Sam struggles to understand the concept of a birthday at the story's opening, his mother, Aunt Phillis, turns to analogy to explain:

> folks is sim'lar to de cocoa-grass whut grows up might peart, tell 'long come somebody wid a hoe to slosh id down,—but ef you libs long enough, an' nuffin happens, you'll keep on habbin a buff-day ebry yeah wunst a yeah till you dies.
>
> (483)

Here, Aunt Phillis couches her explanation about the iterative nature of birthdays in the foreboding language of impending death. Her description is particularly striking because it offers more information about the ways "folks" are vulnerable to violence and death than it does about birthdays.[23] Russell provides a justification for this violence through his choice to have Aunt Phillis compare "folks" to "cocoa-grass." Also known as purple nutsedge, cocoa-grass, is one of the most invasive weeds in the world. It creates a root system of tubers, difficult to extract, that release

a substance toxic to many other plants. Russell relies on what becomes a common strategy in Lost Cause literature, in which the most racist points of view are expressed by Black characters, thus justifying and naturalizing white violence.[24]

Sometimes, the underlying counter-narrative of racial violence exposes itself more jarringly. As the two boys, Sam and Pumble, ponder how to occupy a day with no work, they begin their holiday with a story and a song, which together powerfully illustrate an intersection of the story's central preoccupations with childhood development, the "glorious possibilities" of the future of Black boys, and death: "Shill I tell a story?" asks Pumble, who then offers a narrative about a man on a journey:

> "dis heah man lighted up he pipe an' started out on de big road. An' he went walkin' along. Right stret along. An' walkin' along, an' walkin' along, *an'* walkin' along. *an'* walkin' along. *an'* walkin' along, *an'* walkin' along."
>
> (484)

The story achieves its comic effect through excessive repetition, as Pumble offers further iterations of "an' walkin' along" until even Sam longs for some conclusion. The "impressive" resolution occurs when the man arrives at his destination and then turns around and goes right back to where he started. The narrative structure of Pumble's story is circular, and though it has no real plot, no characterization, no setting—it delights the boys. The action in the story offers no pay off—the man receives nothing for the energy exerted. The story's circularity and repetition, along with its depiction of uncompensated labor, encourages us to read it as emblematic of the life and labor of the enslaved Black boy. Like the man on his journey, these boys are going nowhere, and Russell's larger narrative conspires to naturalize this fact.

Sam is so "deeply impressed" by Pumble's tale that he is moved to song, and offers what Russell sarcastically describes as a "touching ballad" that, like the cocoa-grass, aligns Black people with death and the natural world.

> Jay-bird a-settin
> On a swingin limb,
> He wink at Stephen,
> Stephen wink at him;
> Stephen pint de gun,
> Pull on de trigger,
> Off go de load—
> An down come de nigger!
>
> (484)

In this gruesome song, we find a confrontation between a presumably white man with a gun and a Black man figured as a "jay-bird."[25] To a contemporary reader, this violence might seem out of place in a light-hearted children's tale, but given its historical context, we can read it as an encoded warning, demonstrating the consequences for Black boys who dare to grow up and seek after the privileges of manhood. In the first half of the poem, the "jay-bird" initiates the action by winking, a brazen, impertinent gesture that requires meeting "Stephen's" eye, and which provokes a reciprocated wink from the white man. This "eye-to-eye" encounter suggests a parity between the two, which must be violently crushed. The second half of the song focuses on the work of the gun and the poem's last word, the dehumanizing epithet, is the punchline. Here, Russell, with his own sly wink, transforms an innocuous story about a bird on the "swingin' limb" of a tree into an allegory about lynching. Russell most likely wrote this story sometime in the mid-1870s while living in his hometown of Port Gibson, Mississippi, during which time lynching violence pervaded the South. The Equal Justice Initiative has recently tracked at least 34 cases of mass lynchings between 1865 and 1876, and indeed, the Vicksburg Massacre of 1874 occurred only about 30 miles north of Russell's home.[26] Given this context, the song as allegory suggests the consequences for Black boys who might be dissatisfied with "walkin' along, an' walkin' along, *an'* walkin' along," that is, a journey that goes nowhere, a life journey structured by the cyclical work of "planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time" (Russell 484, Douglass 21).[27]

Russell concludes "Sam's Birthday" with a surreal dream sequence that drives home the idea that there is, in fact, no need for the violent warning of the jay-bird song because Black boys want nothing more than to labor in the field, and even when given an opportunity, fail to imagine any other way to occupy their time. To aid them in the challenging job of thinking, the boys decide to lie down and promptly fall asleep. Sam then has a "vision" in which the entire countryside is in "a perfect state of cultivation," except instead of cotton or corn, the fields were filled with crops of candy and toys, over which was "falling a drenching rain of molasses" (485). Our narrator informs us that "it was not at all surprising" that Sam not only wanted to harvest this crop, but that

> he found himself becoming highly indignant at the negligence of the planter—whoever he might be—in leaving all these good things to spoil on the bushes; and he burned with a desire to have them properly gathered and to assist in that work himself.
>
> (485)

Even in his fantasy, Sam is unable to imagine an activity outside the scope of agricultural labor. Sam burns with desire but not for the birthday treats.

It seems Sam's greatest wish is to continue to labor in the field, and his indignation suggests a deep investment in the appropriate managing of crops, all of which reflects, instead, the burning desire of the white planter class for an exploitable work force who find pleasure in uncompensated labor.

Russell then offers two final comic turns that reinforce the idea that Black boys will not develop and will instead remain fixed in the iterated cycle of exploitable agricultural labor, as much a part of the natural world to be husbanded by the planter as the crops themselves. The first comic turn speaks directly to Russell's investment in portraying the Black boy as a readily exploitable commodity. In his dream, as Sam reaches for candy and a toy, that is, as he begins to labor for a crop that he supposedly will profit from, he discovers that he has suddenly transformed into a watermelon. This conclusion echoes the end of "Sam's Four Bits" when, sitting on the edge of the well beside his coin, "with the air of a capitalist" Sam begins to imagine an entrepreneurial scheme with his coin. Russell dangles this possibility before the reader, only to quickly drop it, when the coin falls in the well, and Sam is happily relieved of the burden of money. "Sam's Birthday" offers an even more pointed message. This Sam has literally become the commodity to be harvested, and not any commodity, but one that had by 1878 become an entrenched racist stereotype deployed to argue for freed people's unfitness for citizenship.[28] The second comic turn occurs when Sam is angrily awakened from his dream by his mother who informs him that it is not, in fact, his birthday—that his birthday occurred at some unspecified time in the past, possibly last month. The final line of the story is, significantly, a command for Sam to return to work: "WALK arter dat water" (485). With no clear birthday, Sam appears as a perpetual child, consigned to the cyclical labor of planting time and harvest time.

The feebleminded pickaninny is a discursive formation of Black boyhood, specifically constructed as non-normative, and it performs the biopolitical project of white power to control populations through racial taxonomies. Depictions of white boys can vary—we find clever white boys and foolish white boys in the pages of *St. Nicholas*, while the boy pickaninny is always the same, an instantiation of Blackness *as* deviance. Normative boyhood, then, is racialized as white, and characterized by linear development into manhood, with all its attendant economic and political privileges. Pickaninnies, like Sam, represent a different kind of boyhood. Denied this development, they are represented as not only best suited for, but also satisfied with, uncompensated manual and agricultural labor.[29] But of course, Black boys do grow and develop, creating an incongruity in need of management and control. We might read the ostensibly humorous (and disparaging) depictions of Black men as child-like, so celebrated

in the work of Russell, as well as others like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, as participating in this kind of control. In this Lost Cause literature, the Black man as "boy" is specifically *not* a white boy. Instead, he is this other kind of boy, non-normative because feebleminded, a figure depicted as child-like, and thus presenting some of the qualities of boyhood, but lacking the central quality that allows access out of boyhood and into manhood (with its attendant privileges): the ability to develop. In his 1896 essay on Russell, Baskervill celebrates such humorous depictions of Southern Black people as benevolent: "This literature of the new South had for its cardinal principles good will and sympathy" (100). Yet, When Black men resisted such patronizing classifications and tried to assume the privileges of adulthood, when they pursued economic and political power, this "good will and sympathy" melted like hoarfrost and they were met with swift and vicious violence. Black boys who imagine "the glorious possibilities of the future" are offered up as a joke in Russell's work, but a joke under whose thin veneer lies an underlying threat of violence.

Notes

1 For a useful introduction to *Scribner's* see Scholnick. See also Greeson "Expropriating 'The Great South.' "
2 In his foundational study *Race and Reunion*, David Blight offers an excellent overview of Lost Cause narratives, sometimes called plantation literature. Blight often refers to this genre as the "literature of reunion" or "reconciliationist literature." See especially chapter 3. See also DuRocher 46–51, and Gates, 91–107.
3 In "Expropriating 'The Great South,' " Greeson offers fascinating background into editor Josiah Holland's strategies for building *Scribner's* readership. She suggests that Holland initiated the turn to European imperial discourse to represent "the southern states under Reconstruction as a colonized region of the U.S. parallel to colonized regions of the European powers around the globe" (499). Focusing on the links between a national and a globally conscious literature, Greeson suggests that Holland's publication of Edward King's series "The Great South" opened a pathway for local-color fiction. See also Blight 211–217.
4 Though Russell died at the age of 26, he left a literary mark, publishing poems and stories in periodicals like *Scribner's*, *Puck*, and *Appleton's Magazine*. He was most celebrated for his long poem "Christmas-Night in the Quarters," which appeared in several posthumous collections, including *Christmas-Night in the Quarters and Other Poems, by Irwin Russell*, an enlarged edition published in 1917 that offers an extended biographical introduction and illustrations by the famed illustrator E.W. Kemble.
5 In their introduction to a special issue of *American Quarterly* on biopolitics in Early America, LaFleur and Schuller build upon Foucault's concept of biopower, identifying two strands: discipline and biopolitics, which they explain performs a regulatory function that "fosters the life of the population" through racial classifications meant to determine who lives and who dies: "According to

Foucault, the logic of biological racial difference developed in the 19th century in order to delineate the recently evolved, whose vitality must be fostered, from the racialized past of the race," who must be left to perish" (606).

6 The magazine changed its name in 1880 to *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*, when *Scribner's Monthly* changed its name to *The Century*. For more on its publication history, see *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge: The Legacy of a Children's Magazine Editor*, especially Susan Gannon's "Introduction: What Was *St. Nicholas* Magazine." See also Kelly 377–388.

7 This period has been extensively explored by historians. For an excellent starting point, see especially Blight, Gates, Foner, Greeson, *Our South*.

8 In an essay on the emerging stereotype of the "Mammy" figure in popular culture, Jo-Ann Morgan writers: "*Scribner's* (renamed, after 1881, *Century*) and other periodicals contributed to what Paul S. Buck has termed 'a consistent policy of reconciliation.' From the mid-1880s into the 1890s, the popular northern periodical *Harper's Weekly*, as well as *Atlantic*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Munsey's*, *McClure's*, *Lippincott's* and others with fewer subscribers, brought 'reconciliation motives and conventional Southern themes' to ever-wider audiences." (94). See also Blight 216–217.

9 See for example Kelly, Noonan, Gannon, and Snell. Kelly writes: "*St Nicholas* reflects in every issue the influence of its adult-oriented counterparts. The same authors and illustrators appear in both magazines; the same conceptual and structural patterns control both; and the same broad editorial goals characterize both. In these parallels is perhaps the lasting significance of *St. Nicholas*, for as it presents high-quality entertainment to a juvenile audience, it communicates as well the style, attitudes, and values of an established, secure upper-middle-class culture, creating a socio-intellectual pattern that touched several generations of readers" (377).

10 See also Sneller.

11 In her monograph on women's poetics *Race and Time*, Gray calls attention to the racialized construction of childhood in *St Nicholas*: "Racial others were not simply excluded from the kind of childhood envisioned in *St. Nicholas*. . . . They were a resource exploited to address the tensions and contradictions enclosed within the implicitly white-centered category of childhood" (220).

12 See especially Bernstein 34–36.

13 Explaining the relationship of statistics to the rise of eugenics, Davis details the biopolitical work of eugenics: "Statistics is bound up with eugenics because the central insight of statistics is the idea that a population can be normed. An important consequence of the idea of the norm is that it divides the total population into standard and nonstandard subpopulations. The next step in conceiving of the population as norm and non-norm is for the state to attempt to norm the nonstandard—the aim of eugenics" (2).

14 See Baynton 19, and Mitchell and Snyder 851–852.

15 Baskervill offered six chapters each dedicated to one of the writers of this "literature of the new South" (100). First published as monthly installments and then collected into one volume, the Russell chapter appeared as the third installment in September 1896, following chapters on Joel Chandler Harris in July, and Maurice Thompson in August. Baskervill clearly valued Russell's work highly, specifically for his treatment of antebellum Southern Black people: "For the writing of negro dialect and the delineation of negro character Irwin Russell had the gift of genius" (133). Notably, when Baskervill organized his installments into a collected volume, he moved Russell to the first chapter. Baskervill

was not alone in his praise—a fascinating little announcement in the *Columbus Weekly Dispatch*, in 1907, describes "The unveiling of the bust of Irwin Russell, and its presentation to the state which counts him one of her most gifted sons and writes his name proudly in her Hall of Fame" (8).

16 Almost every commentator of Russell's work offers some praise for the accuracy of his depictions of Southern Black characters. In a long biographical introduction to an enlarged edition of Russell's poems published in 1917, Fulton writes, "The great value of his work lies in the faithfulness of his portrayal of the Negro. In this field he has no superior" (27). As late as the mid-twentieth century we find scholars commenting on Russell's skills. In an essay for the *Mississippi Quarterly* in 1962, Baird Schuman quotes Arthur Palmer Hudson, from a recent edition of the *Literary History of the United States*, edited by Robert E. Spillers, who writes that Russell "showed the possibility of a more authentic treatment of Negro life and character than had hitherto appeared in pseudo-Negro poetry" (81). Schuman goes on to note that Joel Chandler Harris was indebted to Russell, particularly for Russell's authentic use of dialect. See also Kern.

17 For more on race science and impressibility and development, see Schuller chapter 1, especially pp. 41–49.

18 Kellogg's depiction of Black childhood in "How It Went" offers the most obvious similarity to Lost Cause literature. One of the secondary characters, Bob Davidson, neatly fits the stereotype of a boy pickaninny. Bob is poor, hungry, and dressed in ragged clothing, and Kellogg describes caricatured facial expressions that draw heavily on minstrelsy and feature white rolling eyes. Her use of dialect is also notable, particularly in the way she offers it in contrast to the more elevated diction of the narrator and the "proper" English of the white boys.

19 In his study, *How Old Are You*, Howard Chudacoff reads this new emphasis in the nineteenth century on efficiencies within institutions in the context of childhood, noting how the emergence of age-based grading standards in public education along with the rise of pediatrics as a new medical specialty contribute to the way the notion of the "normal" or "healthy" child was understood specifically in terms of developmental trajectories.

20 Russell relies heavily on dialect as a powerful dehumanizing strategy in his short stories and poetry. In "Sam's Four Bits" and "Sam's Birthday," Russell specifically seeks to create comedic effect through contrast, by offering a narrator who relies on elevated, heavily academic diction to describe the exploits of the protagonist Sam. Given that most boy pickaninnies appear as sidekicks to white boys, secondary characters who offer comic relief, Russell's choice to satirize his protagonist so explicitly might speak to some insecurity about centering the Black boy as protagonist.

21 This "Sam" could be the same Sam as in "Sam's Four Bits," given that both protagonists live on a plantation and have a mother named "Aunt Phillis." However, there are enough differences, including new characters and pets, to suggest that this could be a different "Sam." I want to argue that the use of the same name merely suggests the interchangeability of the Black boy for Russell. Russell's use of the name "Aunt Phillis" might be an allusion to one of the most popular "Anti-Tom" novels of the antebellum period, Mary Henderson Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1853).

22 Pumble is named for the officious and pompous bachelor Mr. Pumblechook in *Great Expectations* (another sly poke at the "glorious possibilities of his future").

23 In their discussion about the significance of relocating a Foucauldian notion of biopolitics and disposability from urban European centers to Early America, LaFleur and Schuller turn to Mbembe's "necropolitics": "The way that the death of peoples deemed disposable by state power are locked into a zero-sum equation with the flourishing of populations deemed essential, making the flourishing of some contingent on the deaths of others" (604). LaFleur and Schuller's project shifts the focus from state power to the "markets, that demanded labor, capital and raw materials to thrive as well." This shift to market power is evocative for thinking through what they refer to as the "deadly calculations of the relative value of life" when thinking about the rapacious desire of the state for exploitable labor in the wake of Emancipation (604).

24 *In The Stony Road*, Gates comments on this strategy in his section on plantation fiction when he observes that in this literature "former slaves . . . speak ostensibly in their 'own voices,' or more accurately, in the white author's ventriloquist mimicry of their black voices, employing dialect to illustrate low intellect coupled with high devotion" (91).

25 I read the character "Stephen" as an adult: the gun and the winking suggest masculine behaviors, a reading strengthened by the fact that the story that provokes this song is about a man.

26 The Vicksburg massacre occurred on December 7, 1874, about 18 months before the publication of "Sam's Four Bits" and just 30 miles north of Russell's home in Port Gibson, when an estimated 150–300 Black citizens and two white citizens were killed when a white mob attacked Black community members who had organized a political meeting to support a Black sheriff who had been removed from office.

27 As with the cocoa-grass analogy, Russell offers this violent warning from the mouth of a Black character, in this case Sam (and Pumble who joins in the singing), again justifying and naturalizing this violent white supremacist message.

28 For an excellent investigation into the emergence of the racist watermelon trope during post-Reconstruction, see Black, who argues, "by the end of Reconstruction, the idea that freedpeople's proclivity for watermelons demonstrated their unfitness for freedom was fairly entrenched in southern popular culture" (77).

29 Robin Bernstein makes a similar argument about depictions of Black and white girlhood and agricultural labor. See her brilliant comparison of an advertisement of the "Cottoline" girl and Lewis Hine's photograph of Callie Campbell, a white girl working in the cotton field, pp. 30–36.

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