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# Harriet Beecher Stowe in the Alps: Resisting the 'Magisterial Gaze'

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## Abstract

Art historians Barbara Novak and Albert Boime have argued that American landscape painting of the nineteenth century coincided with the mass destruction of wilderness and was closely linked to the national project of manifest destiny. Boime uses the concept of "the magisterial gaze" to describe a significant number of landscape paintings of the period that share a similar, raised viewpoint, looking across a panorama, placing both viewer and artist in a position of dominance, facing a future of unlimited horizons (Boime 9, 23). In this paper, I use Harriet Beecher Stowe's depictions of the Alps to consider the way that "crossing the border," as she journeyed to Europe, allowed her to challenge the "magisterial gaze" of nineteenth century American painting, and to explore an alternative relationship to the natural world. Stowe was greatly interested in landscape: from her descriptions of the swamps of North Carolina in *Dred*, to the scenery of Florida in *Palmetto Leaves*, as well as in her own sketches and paintings. Using her representations of the Alps from her school book, *First Geography for Children* (1855), as well as her paintings and letters from the Alps from my archival research, I consider the way that she both struggles with and challenges this understanding of landscape, through her changing depiction of this scenery. I consider her recognition of nature's independent agency, away from human domination, and reflect on the implications of this to her abolitionism.

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