

Introduction

What exactly did performing anti-slavery sympathy mean, not for ladies who merely read sentimental literature about slaves to pass the time, not for literary men who suffered sublimely for slaves they dreamed up, but for black and white women with a direct, on-the-street involvement in the immediate abolitionist movement in the antebellum United States? What performance strategies did these activists forge, on what sorts of “stages”? As disciples of black radical David Walker (1785–1830) and white editor William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), women in what is typically called the “Garrisonian” wing of the transatlantic anti-slavery movement used various performance tactics to lambast the Constitution, the state, the church. They forged outlier political organizations disguised as literary societies, sewing circles, prayer groups, free produce associations, and anti-slavery societies. Transforming their homes, churches, and civic halls into stages, they adapted everyday performances – after-dinner conversations, neighborly visits, social events, and religious traditions – toward anti-slavery goals. They recited poems, transposed them into hymns, and sang them within family circles and at monthly “concerts” for the slave. They staged activist dialogues and plays, read essays aloud, gave speeches, and used silence productively onstage. Dividing their towns and villages into districts, they canvassed neighbors, telling anti-slavery stories door to door while gathering signatures on petitions against a democracy tethered to the business interests of Southern slaveholders and their Northern and British bankers. For four decades, black and white women debated the most efficacious strategies for performing activism, and their anti-slavery repertoire remains worth scrutiny.

They faced a difficult challenge. As they launched their efforts in the late 1820s, mainstream audiences were routinely invited to sympathize with a suffering slaveholder rather than a slave. The slaveholder was purportedly “shackled” to an inherited institution that, despite all odds, saved the souls of “insentient” slaves. Women activists’ first performance intervention was to invert this scene: to recast the suffering slaveholder as a barbaric

man-stealer and to represent the slaves as fully human, capable of actually feeling pain. After a short while, however, the women refined their anti-slavery practice by envisioning enslaved individuals as “partisan spectators” who judged not only man-stealers’ behavior but also abolitionists’ own shortcomings. This partisan spectatorship, from the imagined slave’s viewpoint, revealed the limits of America’s sham democracy and taught black and white women activists to build their performances more on self-scrutiny than on fellow feeling with others. Faced with an emerging biopolitical legal concept of race, black women started focusing on a compassion for themselves that deepened into a concern for others. For radical Quakers accustomed to predicating their behavior on an ethical “inner light,” this shift toward selfhood meant reimagining the self as provisional, pragmatic, capable of altering the customs bolstering racism and slavery. And that improvisational impulse led some anti-slavery activists to perform cosmopolitan self-possession as a key anti-slavery strategy. Analyzing activist women’s diverse performance strategies within the antebellum anti-slavery movement reveals new ways to harness affect for political purposes. It revises the established historiography of the anti-slavery movement and expands performance history to include black and white women’s dialogues about activist performance strategies. It holds practical implications for ongoing efforts to stage the relationship between the self and others. And it raises thorny questions about ongoing anti-slavery efforts.

By the mid-1830s, a network of hundreds of cross-racial female anti-slavery societies surfaced in the United States, as women helped to transform the most persistent American performance practice – a Judeo-Christian sympathy with suffering others as a pathway toward (partial) citizenship – into a more efficacious activist practice focused on dismantling systemic violence. These female societies, working within a transatlantic web, tried to overturn the Enlightenment charting of racialized, gendered bodies on a colonizationist grid. As Susan Leigh Foster argues, “the history of sympathy and then empathy when placed in parallel with the history of colonization helps to explain how the British evaluated and responded to the foreigners whom they encountered in North America, Asia, and the Pacific,” how they were “mobilized, in part, to rationalize operations of exclusion and othering.”¹ Working *against* those colonizationist impulses that represented slaves as insentient or merely sympathized with them to experience the sublime, Garrisonian women radically revised strategies for performing affect within an anti-slavery political movement that functioned, paradoxically, outside of the state. Linked to each other as well as to their transatlantic

counterparts, particularly in Great Britain and France, they gradually altered mainstream affective practices – particularly the practice of sympathy.

In his analysis of sympathy, Enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) had posited that as individuals sympathize with others, they imagine an “impartial spectator,” modeled on themselves, judging them, determining whether or not their course of action with regard to those others is apposite. However, instead of following Smith’s practice and judging themselves from the standpoint of the governing body politic of a counterfeit democracy, black and white women in Walker and Garrison’s wing of the anti-slavery movement imagined a *partisan spectator* judging them: in fact, they imagined a slave – or a more deeply committed abolitionist than themselves – judging their efforts at activism. That scrutiny forced them to keep adjusting their performance strategies. As free black women launched anti-slavery initiatives, for instance, they contemplated the newly unfolding fragility of their own material circumstances, performing a compassion for themselves that enlarged into a concern for slaves. This threw the emphasis on the self rather than the other, on systemic structures rather than suffering. Fellow abolitionists responded, proffering their own strategies, moving beyond their childhood traditions, improvising their critiques of slavery, and trying, with varying degrees of success, to staunch the Christianized glorification of pain.

Many of the women’s affective practices stemmed from a radically revised practice of sympathy, which must be distinguished from empathy. The precise constellation of concepts and performative acts that comprise “empathy” did not emerge until the late nineteenth century, long after the end of the anti-slavery movement, but abolitionist scholars routinely use the terms “sympathy” and “empathy” interchangeably, or attribute the later performance of empathy to early nineteenth-century abolitionists. Marcus Wood, for example, uses the terms “empathy” and “sympathy” as synonyms: “sentimental empathy and stoic endurance,” he claims, ground the classic 1759 text *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Adam Smith. But Smith’s analysis of sympathy, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, depends upon the idea that individuals *cannot* know what another human being is feeling, while “empathy” means precisely that individuals *can* know. This difference between sympathy and empathy matters a great deal, particularly as it is experienced in live performance contexts.² The black and white women within Walker and Garrison’s camp performed a self-critical sympathy, not empathy: for example, as black poet and lecturer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911) recited an 1854 poem onstage, she represented an enslaved wife gazing lovingly at her husband “with anguish *none may*

*paint or tell.*³ Harper acknowledged that no one, certainly not herself or the members of her audience, could represent, much less encompass, the “anguish” of the slaves. Hers was a self-critical sympathy cognizant of its boundaries. She forced spectators to witness the limits of their own clumsy efforts to imagine others’ situations; and over time, these limits were built into women’s performances of sympathy. Anti-slavery activists, then as now, performed variously, and while some practices reinforced unhelpful notions of sentiment, others simultaneously and *necessarily* created new, resistant – and institutionally productive – pathways toward holding the state as well as the slaveholders responsible for the violence of slavery.

Restoring an awareness of the performative differences between sympathy and empathy, this volume also distinguishes among disparate types of performances of anti-slavery sympathy. Evangelicals and the liberal religionists within the Garrisonian wing of the movement performed sympathy differently, and individuals within these two wings developed their own signature approaches. Furthermore, individual activists built upon each other’s approaches. Evangelical performances of sympathy typically celebrated pain and redemption, reinforcing the ideology of a “free” but blame-worthy, sinful Christian citizenry. Liberal religionists, such as black and white Unitarians and Quakers in the Garrisonian movement, in contrast, performed sympathy by rejecting the crucifixion and highlighting the dangers of assuming that the state, through citizenship or conventional political action, could fully address violence against the individual. For them, the performance of sympathy came to mean acknowledging that they could *not* know the pain experienced by the slave and that the slave’s pain was caused by the state, not the general condition of sinful humankind. It meant inhabiting the knowledge of that failure of sympathy, exercising self-judgment, recognizing one’s complicity in slavery, and building a collective politics based on an awareness that “we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one.”⁴

Certain “periperformatives” surfaced around these black and white women’s performances of sympathy with the slave. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coined the term “periperformative” to describe the unruly forces clustering around authoritative performances mandated by words like “sympathize.” In nineteenth-century mainstream culture, sympathetic performances undergirded citizenship: full citizens either denied feelings to the dispossessed to justify oppressing them, or felt sympathetically for others as a substitute for granting them equality. However, within the “mobile proscenium” of certain anti-slavery stagings of sympathy with the slave, disruptive periperformatives emerged. Particularly within

Garrisonian women's performances, counter-performances cropped up: naming suffering as a man-made breach rather than a divine opportunity for redemption; inciting a real state of emergency, exercising self-judgment, feeling a compassion for oneself as well as others, traveling beyond one's own customs toward an outlier, cosmopolitan love. These activist periperformatives worked to "warp, transform, and displace" the centrality of sympathy in radical abolitionist culture.⁵

Staging a real state of emergency

The black and white anti-slavery radicals who followed martyred black activist David Walker and white editor William Lloyd Garrison saw themselves poised at the end of a decadent empire. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker (1810–1860) encapsulated their vision in an 1850 sermon, when he asked congregants, "Do you know how empires find their end? . . . Aye, how do the *great States* come to an end? By their own injustice and no other cause."⁶ Garrisonians believed that an unprecedented political crisis started surfacing in the 1830s: Southerners, aligned with the Northern and British bankers holding mortgages on their plantations, held the United States hostage, justifying the systematic violence of chattel slavery through the spectral emergency of a bloody national slave revolt. Ruling through a state of exception, President Andrew Jackson (in office 1829–37) annexed Florida against international law; forced an entire population of Native Americans to relocate west of the Mississippi through the Trail of Tears (1830–38); and justified the ever-more-violent oppression of Southern slaves and their Northern allies by warning constantly of slave revolts and retaliation. Black and white anti-slavery women viewed "the class-based, racially segregated, gender-exclusive slugfest of the Jacksonian public sphere" with derision and horror.⁷ They were appalled, when – in the aftermath of Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion in Virginia – governmental officials across the South aided President Jackson, trading on the fear of bloody slave revolts to tighten "security."

The emergency that these Garrisonian abolitionists perceived, the end of empire that they felt themselves witnessing, was not identical to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben now calls a "state of emergency," but there are uncanny traces of abolitionists' rhetoric in present-day critiques of democracy. Agamben defines a state of emergency as a situation in which a sovereign power rules not through law or discipline but through creating a constant state of crisis that transforms lawmakers' power into pro-forma approval after the fact. Justifying constant alerts

through the idea that the present moment is an exceptional time, a time of emergency, the sovereign hails the spread of democracy even as lawmakers' powers shrink. In the distinctly 1830s abolitionist version of this phenomenon, sovereign Southerners and their British allies misprision Northerners and the United States as a whole by worrying over slave revolts, thereby justifying chattel slavery. Radical abolitionists' urgent desire to transform mainstream affect into a *real* feeling of crisis, in order to end slavery immediately – as well as their sense that the United States “empire” was about to implode – reverberates with Agamben's vision. Attempts to create a *real*, counter-state of emergency are not new within the circum-Atlantic fold.⁸

Central to the transatlantic performance of this counter-state of emergency, black and white American women emulated British counterparts who had staged a 1790s West Indian sugar boycott and had lobbied the British parliament through an 1833 petition signed by nearly 300,000 citizens. An Englishwoman, Elizabeth Coltman Heyrick (1769–1831), launched the immediate abolitionist movement through the publication of an influential 1824 pamphlet. Within the year, the first female anti-slavery society surfaced in Birmingham, England. By the 1830s American women, first within the large free black community in Salem, Massachusetts, and then in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and hundreds of other cities and small towns across the Northern and midwestern states, followed their British correspondents' lead – but American women quickly surpassed their English counterparts in experimenting with public performances, including appearances on British stages.⁹

In fact, as James Forten, Jr. (b. 1811), a young black abolitionist, explained in a 1836 lecture for the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, American women's particular province was to exhort their men during a state of emergency: “examine the records of history, and you will find that woman has been called upon in the severest trials of public emergency.”¹⁰ For women who championed the abolitionist views of Walker or Garrison, embracing this sense of public emergency meant rejecting day-to-day “democratic” politics, including the sham of voting, as ineffectual. It meant rejecting the state-supported violence embedded in the Constitution and the law. To be a radical abolitionist was to shun the semblance of democracy altogether, to show the inextricable tie between democratic freedom and slavery, in order to bring about a real democracy.

To the extent that Garrisonian abolitionists, schooled by black leaders, refused ersatz democracy, they rejected abstract citizenship and what

Saidiya Hartman calls the state's concept of the "blameworthiness" of the freed citizen.¹¹ They denied the state's definition of the individual as the responsible party in a zone of biopolitical violence. Instead, they held the state responsible by trying to live materially and affectively outside of its boundaries, sometimes within microeconomic units based on free produce, even as they petitioned for change. They wanted slaves, who were, in their view, barely allowed to live, to be incorporated into the polis, and they wanted that polis transformed by a politicized, cosmopolitan love. They tried to sensitize privileged whites and blacks to the ways in which their complicity in slavery limited not only slaves' political status but also their own.

In the eyes of these abolitionists, President Jackson and his Southern and white working-class allies were not representatives of the common man, nor were they democratic champions. In fact, they were the opposite. Through the gruesome biopolitics of slavery and Indian removals (not to mention the oppression of women), Jacksonians transformed many Americans into the walking dead: they passed state and federal edicts to tighten slave regulations and eviscerate the rights of free blacks. They singled out Northern abolitionists as well, instituting a gag rule to stifle women's anti-slavery petitions and enforcing early laws requiring Northerners to return fugitive slaves to Southern masters.

Anti-slavery advocates, in turn, viewed the United States Constitution as invalid because of its compromises with Southern pro-slavery sentiment and its inability to shut down President Jackson's sovereign usurpations of power. To sidestep the Constitution and Jackson's power, then, these black and white abolitionist women tried to instate a *real* state of emergency, to let it be known that something was truly wrong in the way in which American democracy had come to function. As Agamben explains, Walter Benjamin's eighth thesis on the concept of history sets the frame for this conversation about "exceptional" emergencies: Benjamin writes that:

the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of exception" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.¹²

Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," as Agamben notes, calls for violence "beyond the law," violence to "shatter the dialectic between lawmaking and lawpreserving violence," revolutionary violence which properly "neither makes nor preserves law, but deposes it and thus inaugurates a new historical epoch."¹³ Initially, Garrisonians simply strove to live outside of the law, in

both their circulation of affect and their material, daily lives. They refused to recognize the Constitution as the law of the land, even as they continued to utilize the remnants of citizen-based power available to them: petitioning, presenting memorials to lawmakers, forming political parties. They simultaneously improvised performances that propelled them beyond state-centered, legally-based modes of imagining citizenship.

The black and white women within the Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement rejected the notion that the slave was a figure who could legally be killed but not valued or “sacrificed” – a figure that Agamben calls “homo sacer.” Through their performances, they valued slaves’ lives – early on, paradoxically and problematically, by metaphorically “sacrificing” them and slowing down time to mourn them in same-sex societies; later by recognizing slaves’ resistance and independence and by imagining their own “privileges” extended to the emancipated, even as they simultaneously critiqued those same privileges. As homemakers, the inner core of activists adopted microeconomic policies that sidestepped the nineteenth-century version of the biopolitics of death: instead of consuming slave-produced goods, they purchased free-trade cotton, rice, and sugar. They cleaned and combed free cotton for weaving, tended sugar beet farms, set up microeconomic loans for free produce shops that traded across the eastern United States. They performed poems and plays in their parlors, sang hymns in their anti-slavery meetings as at church, and delivered speeches in town halls, inviting audiences to reassess, through the eyes of the subaltern, what Sara Ahmed calls the “stickiness” of emotions circulating in any given social gathering.¹⁴ Some simply tried to widen the family contract within “natural law” to embrace slaves as “sisters,” but many imagined past Enlightenment structures.

Eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers had developed the theory of natural law, arguing that it preceded all social contracts. “Natural” law rested upon a family compact in which the woman and child promised to obey the husband and father, who would purportedly represent their interests and protect their rights. This family contract modeled nationhood: the “whole people” of a nation (like the family members) promised to obey the propertied men who comprised the “body politic” (like the head of the family). This “body politic” purportedly represented the interests and protected the rights of the whole. John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), the sixth President of the United States (1825–29), explained this Enlightenment social contract as follows, revealing the limits of natural law: the whole people were “men, women, and children, *born or unborn*, natives, or foreigners, bond, or free” who were not “capable of

contracting” and could “have no direct agency in the formation of the social compact which constitutes the body politic.” Only those “*most capable of contracting*” could covenant “for the whole,” and they could “never amount to more than one in five of the whole.”¹⁵ From the first, the United States operated on this natural law, modeling itself on the family compact. It was never, in Adams’s view, a true democracy, nor was it ever meant to be. Black and white American women organized female anti-slavery societies to end slavery and combat this view.

These anti-slavery societies differed from one another on ideological, religious, and practical grounds, which led the women within them to adopt different activist strategies. Furthermore, individual leaders within each wing of the movement developed their own specific performance tactics, adapting and adding to each other’s approaches. Garrisonians, especially Quakers and Unitarians, supported women’s participation in their denominations’ democratic processes, so many of them emerged as anti-slavery leaders.¹⁶ This volume analyzes the performance strategies of the Garrisonian wing of the female anti-slavery movement, retrieving leaders’ strategies for creating a real state of emergency.

Many anti-slavery activists rejected the Enlightenment model of democracy, but their political challenge was complicated: they had to develop a performance practice that would prove that slaves, including female slaves, were fully human and capable of contracting, of their own accord, with the state. At the same time, they had to reveal the violent underpinnings of that state, predicated on a sovereign power that designated only one in five residents as part of the true polis, relegating all others, including themselves, to various gradations of bare life. And they had to abrogate the supposedly natural law that provided the “rational” basis for the state: as daughters and wives, as sisters and nieces and cousins, they had to demand that their menfolk, their relatives, their neighbors and fellow church-goers, as well as the strangers upon whose doorsteps they stood, validate their activities and act with them as outliers, as immediate abolitionists rejecting the legalized violence of the state. As they gathered signatures on petitions, they abrogated natural law by valuing equally all the members of wildly disparate kinds of households. For instance, they routinely aggravated their neighbors by making the “request that domestics be called to give their signatures.” To conservatives, these radical female abolitionists signaled “the destruction of the domestic constitution.”¹⁷ They reimagined the body politic and the family. Some quietly embraced same-sex relationships. This book explores their varied repertoires, which haunt present-day theatrical stages as well as ongoing efforts to end human trafficking and forced labor.

Revising genealogies of anti-slavery performance to embrace a combination of strategies

Historians traditionally separate American abolitionists into three wings. The first wing, usually described as William Lloyd Garrison's group, built in part upon David Walker's radicalism and included middle-class Unitarians, Quakers, and members of various African Methodist Episcopal churches centered in Philadelphia, Boston, greater New England, and far-flung midwestern towns and cities and linked to a transatlantic network. In Philadelphia and even more strikingly in Boston, these Garrisonian female anti-slavery societies tended to revise performances of American republicanism. In their "Address of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society to the Women of New England," for instance, Garrisonian women referred themselves as "the true descendants of the pilgrims" and called on Christian "freedom." They did not, as evangelicals did, call themselves Christian sinners or redeemers.¹⁸

While twenty-first-century scholars might be more interested in the racial and class differences that were addressed within female anti-slavery societies, nineteenth-century women were equally struck by the difficulties of overcoming religious, denominational differences, because those differences anchored attitudes toward affect. Both Unitarians and Quakers embraced affective practices that emphasized reason and an outlier viewpoint. They were skeptical of sentiment and rejected evangelical notions that blacks were the cursed children of Cain or of Ham, the wayward son of Noah; instead, they viewed all humans as of the same origin.¹⁹ Unitarians typically embraced the emergent Universalist notion that all humans were saved because no reasonable God would require suffering.

In fact, many Garrisonians did not see humans as sinful, or view Christ as a crucified savior. They viewed the crucifixion as a breach in man's reason and did not valorize salvation as the goal of human existence. Presaging the arguments of the contemporary human rights theorist Talal Asad, they came to critique the idea that a suffering, sympathetic Christianity could offer a pathway toward full humanity, and they tried to imagine other ways to force the state to recognize the rights of all. As Garrisonian activist Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880) explained to colonizationist Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789–1867), she had "ceased to shed tears" over the slaves and "the emotions that used to produce them now boil up and create steam to supply my indignation and energy, till they move at the rate of steam cars."²⁰ Rejecting both sentimental suffering and the Constitution, they championed moral suasion, even as they openly