“AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER?”

Activist Performance in Antebellum Black Women’s Literary Societies

A thesis submitted by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

Drama

Tufts University

May 2016

Adviser: Dr. Heather Nathans

ABSTRACT

The 1830s saw a proliferation of black women's literary societies across the antebellum North. The rise of these organizations coincided with an uptick in anti-slavery activity, and with the dawning of the early women's rights movement. This thesis explores the work of three such societies and questions how they intervened in the political discourses of their local and national communities. The first chapter explores Philadelphia's Female Literary Association through the records of their performances as published in *The Liberator.* The second chapter focuses on Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, interpreting the work of this under-documented organization by locating it within the social, economic, and activist cultures of its time. The third chapter examines New York City's Ladies' Literary Society through a study of their Third Anniversary Celebration. This thesis argues that the societies listed above used various forms of performance to publicly promote racial and gender equality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not have come to fruition without the help of so many people. First and foremost, I want to thank my adviser Heather Nathans. The initial questions that led to this thesis took shape in her Theatre Historiography course, the very first class of my graduate career. She provided unfailing encouragement as I began to explore the topic of antebellum African American performance while in her class, and her support has never wavered since. Her door was always open throughout my research, writing, and revising process. She often discussed this project with me for hours on end, sharing in my enthusiasm for the subject and adding her own insights and expertise. I cannot thank her enough for her guidance.

I am also grateful to the entire graduate faculty in Tufts University's Department of Drama. Laurence Senelick deserves special thanks for the suggestions he gave during the research phase of this thesis. His comments led me to explore varied and fruitful sources of information as I began to study this topic. Monica Ndounou also provided me with valuable direction as I turned my initial questions into a working hypothesis. Her advice in this early stage helped shape the course of this project. Thanks also to Noe Montez and Kendra Field, whose willingness to read my thesis and share their commentary helped me to strengthen and polish my final draft.

In addition, I would like to thank the many research librarians who helped me in my quest to find documentary materials related to the literary societies at the center of this study. I am particularly grateful to the staff at the Boston Public

Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Chao Chen, one of Tufts University's research librarians, also provided indispensable assistance. I would not have been able to complete this project without the aid of these dedicated people.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my cohort in the Graduate Program in Drama at Tufts University. I am lucky to be a part of a supportive group of student scholars who take a genuine interest in each other's work. I deeply appreciate their encouragement and camaraderie, and I feel privileged to call them my colleagues.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 30, 1832, William Lloyd Garrison published an article in *The Liberator* describing "one of the most interesting spectacles [he] had ever witnessed."[1] This "spectacle" was a meeting of the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, one of the first known black women's literary societies in the United States. Garrison explained the group's mission and practices, accompanying his description with the image of a kneeling black figure in chains. This picture recalled the supplicating black male figure in the "Am I Not a Man and a Brother" icon, one of the most widely-used and recognizable images of the antislavery movement.[2] For this article, however, Garrison's paper amended the well-known piece of abolitionist iconography. The male figure was replaced with a female one, and the words "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister" were added above her kneeling form.[3]

Figure 1

[1] William Lloyd Garrison, "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), June. 30, 1832.

[2] Library of Congress, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother," Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue, accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661312/.

[3] This article describing the first meeting of the Female Literary Association, along with the "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister" image, were published in *The Liberator's* "Ladies' Department." The "Ladies' Department" was a section of the newspaper devoted to covering and publishing the work of women. The written content in this section varied with each publication,

This image highlights the doubly-marginalized position of African American women, and the particular challenges antebellum black female activists faced as a result. While their gender often prevented them from full participation in male-dominated anti-slavery forums, they were also routinely shut out of or sidelined within female anti-slavery organizations due to their race. I argue that the "Am I Not a Woman and A Sister" image speaks to the position these women occupied within the activist communities of the antebellum North. The clear reference to the well-known "Am I Not a Man and a Brother" icon links these women to their black male counterparts, positioning them as united by their common racial identity. Yet the substitution of the words "sister" and "woman" for "brother" and "man" linguistically joins these black female activists to white female activists, linking them by virtue of their shared gender. Furthermore, the text itself is phrased as a question, which prompts a response from the reader. In answering this question ("Yes, you are a woman and a sister") the reader must acknowledge that these women belong to both the black and female communities, despite the fact that they were routinely marginalized within each of them. Finally, as "Am I Not a Man and a Brother" was used as a rhetorical device to promote the recognition of the African American man's humanity and equality, the use of the question "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister" can be seen as an assertion of African American women's humanity and equality as well.

I argue that the work of antebellum black women's literary societies posed the same rhetorical question. Philadelphia's Female Literary Association, formed

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but the "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister" icon was the standard header art for the "Ladies' Department."

in 1831, was among the first of these organizations. These women assembled in order to "use [their] utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding" and "cultivate the talents entrusted to [their] keeping."[4] In Boston, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was founded in 1832 by a group of black women who described themselves as being "sensible to the gross ignorance under which [they] had too long labored" and who wished to facilitate "the diffusion of knowledge."[5] In 1834, the Ladies' Literary Society was formed by a group of black New Yorkers who wanted to "cultivate the powers and dispositions of the mind."[6] In the years that followed, similar organizations sprang up not just in these major urban centers, but throughout the antebellum North and Northwest.[7]

The rise of African American women's literary organizations occurred at a critical moment in the political, social, and religious cultures of the United States. In the decades preceding the civil war, the Second Great Awakening prompted a surge in faith-based, grassroots activism. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans began to reject Calvinist teachings which posited that "election into heaven depended on the arbitrary will of a severe God." Instead, Evangelical Protestantism gained prominence. Evangelical philosophy asserted "the possibility of universal salvation through personal faith and devotional

[4] Garrison, "Female Literary Association."

[5] William Lloyd Garrison, "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 7, 1832.

[6] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society of the City of New York," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), Sept. 23, 1837.

[7] Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1936): 557-8, accessed August 2, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/ 2292029.

service."[8] Thus, for many Evangelical Protestants, participating in moral reform work was an aspect of religious practice.

As Carla L. Peterson argues, the theological philosophies of the Second Great Awakening provided a framework through which black women in particular could engage in activism at unprecedented levels. In order to participate in reform work, these women often had to transgress social barriers which barred them from achieving political influence. However, such transgressions could, according to Evangelical doctrines, be understood as the fulfilment of a religious obligation. The tenets of Evangelicalism mandated that all people, irrespective of race or gender, must engage in acts of service for the betterment of humanity in order to fully meet the requirements of their faith. Tellingly, Peterson notes that many black female activists referred to themselves as "Doers of the Word," a moniker adapted from the Epistle of James used to highlight the religious roots of their efforts to affect change.[9] As this title suggests, these women viewed themselves not simply as activists, but as Christians attempting to live out the word of God by promoting political and social reform. Thus, the black women involved in antebellum literary societies came of age during a time when participating in reform work was considered a religious necessity.

In addition to the Second Great Awakening, a number of other historical factors contributed to the rapid and widespread development of antebellum black women's literary societies. The anti-slavery movement was steadily gaining

[8] "The Second Great Awakening and the Rise of Evangelicalism," University of Virginia, accessed January 17, 2016, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma95/finseth/evangel.html.

[9] Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North*, 1830-1880, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3.

power, and the abolition of slavery across the North created a larger and more politically active free black community in this region. The Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831 brought the debate over slavery into sharper focus. Abolitionist organizations were on the rise, and the cause became increasingly visible as African American and anti-slavery periodicals began to circulate among the public.[10] In addition to the growing prominence of abolitionism, the American women's rights movement was in its incipience during the 1830s. Though many scholars mark the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 as the official beginning of the women's rights movement, it had its roots in the previous decade when women were able to enter the public sphere through their work on social and moral reform issues like abolitionism.[11]

My central research questions focus on how the members of antebellum black women's literary societies engaged in both the increasingly powerful anti-slavery movement and the emerging women's rights movement. In this thesis I explore how the members of the Female Literary Association, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Ladies' Literary Society employed performance as a tool of activist discourse. I ask how these organizations used performance to allow members to engage with the anti-slavery cause. I question the ways in which performance enabled these women to compliment, augment, or

[10] Marisa D. King and Heather A. Haveman, "Antislavery in America: The Press, the Pulpit, and the Rise of Antislavery Societies," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Sept. 2008): 492, accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27749276.

[11] Kathy Peiss, "Going Public: Women in Nineteenth-Century Cultural History," *American Literary History* 3, no. 4 (1991): 819, accessed August 4, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/489891.

even modify the messages of the abolitionist movement as a whole. I examine whether it allowed members to do the same for the nascent women's rights moment. To what extent did performance enable these women to work within or push against established social constraints? How, if at all, did performance allow the members of these associations to move themselves and their concerns out of the margins? To what extent did these performances enable the members of black female literary societies to position themselves as both "women" and "sisters" within local and national activist communities, and among the larger American population?

In the context of this thesis and these questions, performance is defined using Richard Schechner's concept of "showing doing." According to Schechner, "showing doing," or "pointing to, underlining, or explaining doing," is different from simply "doing" because it involves an audience of some kind.[12] This audience need not be confined within a designated theatrical space. Any person or group of people for whom a given action is being pointed to, underlined, or displayed constitutes an audience under Schechner's definition of performance. Therefore, the idea of "performance" itself is not limited to a traditional theatrical event. Instead, it can include a host of actions which are meant to be witnessed, received, or interpreted by a broadly-defined audience.[13]

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[12] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

[13] Richard Schechner's foundational ideas about the study of performance inform the core of my theoretical approach to the subject. However, I am also indebted to more recent works by contemporary scholars studying the intersections of performance, race, and gender in the Antebellum period. Notable examples include Douglass A. Jones Jr.'s *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North,* and Gay Gibson Cima's *Performing Anti-Slavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages.*

I argue that the women of the Philadelphia, Boston, and New York societies used performance, or "showing doing," as a tool to engage with the politics of their local cultures before an audience. This includes the politicized question of what it meant to be both black and female. Though these performances were steeped in the ideology and practices of their local political and activist communities, I argue that they were intended for both a local and a national audience. Individual performances generally cannot be transmitted in a complete form beyond their immediate viewers. However, widely circulated newspapers and publications allowed descriptions of such performances to reach a wide readership. Additionally, in some cases these publications facilitated the performances themselves. Due to the robust newspaper culture of the abolitionist period, performances by black women's literary societies had the opportunity to reach people nation-wide.

On a local level, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York were all major urban centers of the antebellum North, and each had its own unique anti-slavery culture. I argue that the performances of the Female Literary Association, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Ladies' Literary Society were all strategically crafted to address, work within, and perhaps even rise above the particularities of the specific political cultures within which they were enmeshed. In so doing, the twice-marginalized women of African American literary societies could use performance as a way to publicly demonstrate their aptitude and worth to local activist communities and beyond. At the same time, I also argue that performance gave these literary society members a platform from

which to engage with and augment the political discourse of the day with regard to both anti-slavery and women's issues.

Since this argument hinges on a location-specific understanding of antebellum political culture, I use cultural history as a historiographical lens. As the cultural historian Robert Darnton writes in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, "a small question can open up the big ones."[14] This statement expresses the central project of a cultural history, in which a narrowly-focused question or set of questions can function as a point of entry from which the historian may begin exploring larger cultural issues. In this case, the question of how performance was used by groups in each location allows me to grapple with larger issues related to the anti-slavery cultures of Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and the United States overall. It also enables me to explore how the women of black literary societies turned performance into a strategic form of activism that allowed them to work within and potentially transcend the limits of their local and national political cultures.

The lens of cultural history also enables me to approach the performances of these societies not as the products of linear sequences of events, but rather as threads in what Rhys Isaac terms "knots of dramatic encounter."[15] These performances were informed by a variety of elements that together shaped the cultural moments of their creation. Social, religious, political, economic, educational, and activist cultures among others combined to create the knots of

[14] Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996), xvii.

[15] Rhys Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 332.

dramatic encounter in which these performances occurred, and they cannot be separated from the many cultural elements that influenced them. Viewing these performances through the lens of cultural history enables me to interrogate them in conjunction with the various, intersecting threads of culture in which they were entangled.

In addition to using the lens of a cultural historian, my study of black women's literary societies is also a history from below. According to Jim Sharpe, histories from below "explore the historical experiences of those men and women whose existence is so often ignored, taken for granted or mentioned in passing in mainstream history."[16] The under-exploration and even outright dismissal of the African American experience within dominant historical narratives has often led to the whitewashing of American history. As John Ernest writes in *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861,* "most readily available documents and sources of historical information either omit African Americans or present African American experience under the slanted white light of the dominant culture."[17] These problems appear even more visibly in the historical representation of the black female experience. According to Lynda F. Dickson, many historians have a "tendency to 'not see' [black women's] activities or to consider them as insignificant and thus not worthy of study." She states that her goal as a researcher is to "fill the gaps left in both black

[16] Jim Sharpe, "History from Below," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing, Second Edition,* ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 26.

[17] Ernest, *Liberation Historiography,* 5.

and women's history."[18] My goal for this project is to contribute to the filling of a similar gap in the scholarship related to black and women's activist performances.

As a study that examines activist performances in connection to the constructs of both race and gender, this thesis also builds upon the work of various historians and theorists who have explored the concept of intersectionality. Most notable among these is Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality in 1989 and who remains one of the leading scholars on the topic. In her essay entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw argues that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."[19] In this thesis, I remain focused on the intersectionality of my subjects in order to address not only the ways in which they were subordinated, but also to explore how they used performance to combat that subordination.

While Darnton, Isaacs, Sharpe, Ernest, Dickson, and Crenshaw provide a framework for this thesis, I also consult those works that explore African American women's literary societies. Dorothy Porter, one of the first scholars to

[18] Lynda F. Dickson, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision in Uncovering Women's History: Black Women's Clubs Revisited," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no 2 (1987): 62, accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3346191.

[19] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140, accessed January 17, 2016, http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf.

research these groups, created a study entitled "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846" in which she catalogues forty-five different black literary organizations located primarily in the antebellum North and Northwest.[20] Porter characterizes the proliferation of these societies as stemming from a wish to encourage "the stimulation of reading and the spreading of useful knowledge" among communities of free black Americans during this period.[21] She briefly describes the work of some of these literary societies, particularly those found in large urban centers such as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. In reviewing the activities of these organizations, Porter examines primarily the ways in which they functioned as community-based educational tools.

Contemporary researchers who have studied these organizations focus largely on the literary achievements of their members. In *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies,* Elizabeth McHenry states that the slave narrative has often been considered the "founding paradigm of black literary production in the nineteenth century."[22] However, she argues that such an understanding is not only limited, but it also promotes the conception of the African American literary tradition as a monolithic entity.[23] Thus, McHenry asserts that studying the often-overlooked work of members of black literary societies provides a much broader and more diverse understanding

[20] Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities," 557-8.
[21] Ibid., 557.
[22] Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.
[23] Ibid., 12.

of African American literature in the 1800s and beyond. McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* also explores how members used these societies as tools for self and community education, and she touches on the political implications of this action. She notes that there was an "immutable connection established by black Americans between the forms of literacy cultivated in African American literary societies and political activity."[24] According to McHenry, this connection was particularly strong for black women involved in these societies, whose access to political power was even more limited than that of their male counterparts.

Many studies that focus on the political activity of both black and white women in the antebellum United States include a section on literary societies. A brief discussion of these organizations appears in Jean Fagen Yellen and John C. Van Horn's *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America.* Julie Roy Jeffrey's *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* mentions them as well. Studies focused on the political activity of antebellum black women tend to incorporate lengthier explorations of such groups. Shirley J. Yee's *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* examines African American women's literary societies in a chapter entitled "Working for the Welfare of Our Race." Yee situates these organizations within the larger movement for abolition and racial equality, and argues that, by participating in these groups, women were not only educating

[24] Ibid., 56.

themselves but contributing to the elevation of the antebellum black community as a whole.[25]

What the aforementioned studies do not explore, however, are the ways that the members of these societies used performance to achieve their political ends. Interestingly, much of the existing scholarship notes that performances occurred within these organizations, yet their discussion of such events is extremely limited. In her brief examination of black women's literary societies in Philadelphia, Porter states that "recitations of original and selected pieces" were common but offers no further commentary on the recitations themselves.[26] Yee also notes that public readings and addresses occurred within African American women's literary societies, and she provides a quotation from one such address.[27] However, like Porter she offers no analysis of their function. McHenry notes that the women of New York's Ladies' Literary Society regularly held fairs and festivals, but once again, no analysis of these popular entertainments accompanies her statement.[28]

One work that does discuss the way antebellum female activists used performance to pursue their political goals is Gay Gibson Cima's *Performing Anti-Slavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages.* Cima defines performance broadly, and includes activities ranging from the recitation of poetry and the giving of speeches to the participation in abolitionist dialogues. She even touches

[25] Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860 (*Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 63.
[26] Porter, "Organized Educational Activities," 561.
[27] Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists,* 63.
[28] McHenry, *Forgotten Readers,* 111.

on the work of African American women's literary societies at various points throughout her study. Cima's primary argument is that the events she explores were public performances of affect, and that these actions "enabled black and white women to transform sympathy to new ends" within the context of the anti-slavery movement.[29] However, Cima's study examines these events within the larger context of the antebellum women's abolitionist tradition in general. She touches on the work of black women within this movement, but the intersection of marginalized racial and gender identities within anti-slavery activism is not her focus.

The works of Cima, Yellen and Van Horne, Jeffrey, Yee, Porter, McHenry, and others provide a solid foundation for this project, and my study of activist performance in antebellum black women's literary societies is deeply indebted to their work. However, since relatively little has been written about African American women's literary groups, and since even less has been written about their use of performance, many of my sources are archival. I focused on those newspapers and periodicals written by or for the black and abolitionist communities, including *The Liberator, The Colored American,* and *The Genius of Universal Emancipation.* I also surveyed periodicals aimed at a female readership, such as *The Ladies' Companion and Literary Expositor* and *Godey's Lady's Book.* In addition, I consulted private sources such as the letters of literary society members and their prominent visitors. The constitutions and bylaws of the literary societies themselves were of particular use to me in conducting my research.

[29] Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Antislavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 20.

My study builds on existing scholarship in a number of ways. First, it focuses specifically on an analysis of performances by and within antebellum black women's literary societies. This emphasis on performance allows me to contribute to the field of theatre studies. Secondly, this thesis aims to define the ways in which the performances of African American women's literary societies were crafted in response to the social and political position of antebellum black women, and how they were used to intervene not just in abolitionist discourse but in the burgeoning women's movement as well. Its exploration of the work of black women in this context also allows me to contribute to the fields of women's and gender studies and African American studies. Finally, by focusing on Philadelphia's Female Literary Association, Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and New York City's Ladies' Literary Society, I explore the extent to which the distinct political cultures of these three locations drove the work of the literary groups that formed within them. Through my analysis of how black women in these societies used performance to intervene in local and national political dialogues regarding both gender and racial equality in the antebellum period, I hope that the findings of this thesis will be significant to the field of American history as well.

I begin my study with an exploration of one of the earliest antebellum African American women's literary societies, the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia. In chapter one, "Break Down the Strong Barrier of Prejudice," I address the types of performances in which members of this society typically participated. Most commonly, these women engaged in the recitation of original,

non-published work. Members submitted writings anonymously in both verse and prose for the society at large to read aloud, discuss, and criticize.[30] While this practice occurred at meetings on a weekly basis, it was not uncommon for the Female Literary Association to invite guests to witness these events. In this way, the organization's private recitations and discussions became performances held before an audience. Furthermore, the invited guests were often established political activists such as William Lloyd Garrison. The guests could (and did) describe and comment publicly on the performances they witnessed, giving the women of the Female Literary Association a much wider secondary audience.[31]

Chapter one questions how these women used performance to protect themselves from accusations of impropriety as they entered their opinions into local and national political debates. How were these performances crafted to suit the specific abolitionist culture of Philadelphia? How did they simultaneously address a national audience? To what extent did performance allow these women to overtly comment on the political questions of the time, and to what extent were their messages more covertly or subtly rendered? How did these women's performances engage with societal expectations regarding race and gender? To what extent did they uphold these expectations, and to what extent did they challenge them? Finally, in what ways did the women of the Female Literary Association leverage these expectations by using them to their own advantage?

Chapter two, "Any Member Becoming Obnoxious, May Be Removed," focuses on Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. Unlike the

[30] Garrison, "Female Literary Association."
[31] Ibid.

Female Literary Association, whose written work was recorded in *The Liberator*, only a minimal amount of information is available about Boston's first black women's literary group. For this society, nothing but its constitution remains extant. Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that the members of this organization ever delivered a public speech, participated in readings or recitations, composed or performed music or dialogues, or engaged in any other activity that might be considered a traditional performance. However, I argue that even with the minimal amount of information available about this organization, the publishing of their constitution can be understood as an activist performance under Schechner's definition of "showing doing."

To explore this performance, I examine the limited information available about this society in conjunction with the local social, economic, and activist cultures of its time. How does the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society compare to other black women's literary groups, and what does this suggest about its activist performance? How can this performance be situated within the contemporary understanding of black femininity? What can be determined about the social and economic status of the society's members, and how does that information illuminate the group's performance? How is this performance connected to the work of other black and/or female activists in the Boston area? Given all of this information, what idea or ideas does the activist performance of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society attempt to engage with, challenge, or uphold?

In the third and final chapter, "With the Greatest Propriety and Elegance," I explore New York's Ladies' Literary Society. Of the three organizations discussed in this thesis, the Ladies' Literary Society gave performances that were by far the most theatrical and the most public. I use this chapter to focus on the performances presented at the New York Ladies' Literary Society's Third Anniversary Celebration of 1837. According to *The Colored American*, a New York City-based abolitionist newspaper, the program for this public event consisted of a number of different performances, including recitations of original literary works, speeches, musical exhibitions, poetry readings, and even short dramatic dialogues, all performed by members of the society.[32]

This celebration is of interest not only as a highly public performance, but also as a performance that took place in 1830s New York City. New York was home to a relatively conservative abolitionist community with regard to women's rights. As an organization working within a local activist culture that placed a high degree of emphasis on the display of traditional femininity, how did the performances given by the Ladies' Literary Society meet this cultural expectation? By contrast, in what ways did the performances challenge it? Finally, though much of the explicit content of these performances dealt with seemingly apolitical themes, how did the member's engagement with these concepts allow them to make implicit commentaries about racial and gender equality as well?

[32] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

The members of the Female Literary Association, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Ladies' Literary Society were faced with a particular set of questions regarding their efforts to intervene in local and national political discourse. How do people with intersecting oppressed identities work as activists on behalf of their own communities when they are routinely marginalized even within them? To what extent can limiting social norms and cultural expectations be challenged, and to what extent can they be leveraged as tools for change? In a multi-front fight for equality, how can activists negotiate the tension between respectability and revolution? The work of these groups suggests that each organization had different answers, but they all grappled with the same questions. I argue that the members of the Female Literary Association, The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Ladies' Literary Society used performance as a means to turn their answers into concrete activist work.

"BREAK DOWN THE STRONG BARRIER OF PREJUDICE" THE FEMALE LITERARY ASSOCIATION OF PHILADELPHIA

The constitution of the Female Literary Association (FLA) reads like a call to arms. In its preamble, written on September 20, 1831, the members of the society proclaimed it to be "a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race" to "break down the strong barrier of prejudice."[1] These women did not shy away from their perceived duty. They used their writing to publicly intervene in some of the most pressing debates within Philadelphia's abolitionist community. Much of their written work was overtly political, a stark contrast to the more covert activism of other antebellum black women's literary societies.[2] Yet while the members of the FLA engaged directly in public political activism, the women themselves never left the private sphere. I argue that this seeming contradiction was in fact a tactical maneuver on the part of the FLA. Physically cloistering themselves within the domestic realm allowed these women to perform aspects of traditional femininity and respectability that provided a defense against potential backlash. If the written word was the FLA's weapon, their shield, I argue, was performance.

According to the society's bylaws, elements of performance were embedded within the structure of the Female Literary Association's weekly meetings. As members of a literary society, the women of the FLA engaged in "the cultivation of the intellectual powers."[3] In order to promote their own mental

[1] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), December 3, 1831.

[2] Chapters two and three discuss the more covertly political work of two of these societies in greater detail.

[3] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator*.

uplift, they crafted original essays, speeches, written debates, and works of poetry and prose. At each meeting, the women turned in their writing anonymously by dropping their work into the society's submission box.[4] Then, members used these texts as well as other abolitionist literature as scripts for recitations. [5] This practice provided the women of the FLA with opportunities to display their elocutionary skills in front of an audience.

The act of interpreting and presenting a scripted text before a group of people assembled to watch such a performance was, in itself, theatrical. The nature of elocutionary practice in the 1830s only increases this theatricality. Dwight Conquergood refers to nineteenth-century elocution as "the vocal performance of texts," and argues that the drama of the spoken word was "not just an allegory, but a concrete material practice."[6] Nineteenth-century elocutionary handbooks illuminate the link between oration and performance. One of the major texts of this genre, James Rush's *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*, was published in Philadelphia just four years before the formation of the Female Literary Association. In this 586 page text, Rush meticulously describes how to properly use the voice as an instrument of performance, with particular attention given to how "the Passions" can be vocally conveyed. *The Philosophy of the Human Voice* explains how to express specific emotions using twenty-two

[4] Ibid.

[5] Marie Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833," *Pennsylvania History* 65, no. 3 (1998): 263, 271, accessed November 3, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/ stable/27774117.

[6] Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and other Figures of Speech," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (200): 330, accessed September 21, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/10462930009366308.

different vocal tactics, such as "the Loudness of Voice," "the Quickness of Voice," "the Guttural Emphasis," "the Emphatic Vocule," and "the Tremor of the Second and Higher Intervals," among others.[7] These "definite and comprehensive" instructions taught readers how to present various emotions believably, according to nineteenth-century standards of elocution.[8]

The ability to use one's voice to convincingly express "the Passions" was a crucial elocutionary skill. As Jay Fliegelman writes, by the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century "an orator's primary obligation was no longer to communicate thoughts and feelings. Rather it was to display persuasively and spontaneously the experiencing of those thoughts and feelings."[9] Thus, elocution was not simply the art of speaking, but the art of performing. Theatrical critics in the early and mid-nineteenth century recognized the link between elocution and performance. In an 1829 article from *The Spectator* entitled "On the Art of Acting," one such critic argued that actors must study elocution as a means to improve their craft. Within the art of elocution, he claimed, lay "the foundations of the science of acting."[10] Thus, by the time the Female Literary Association was formed, there was significant overlap between elocution and theatricality.

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[7] James Rush, *The Philosophy of the Human Voice* (Philadelphia: J. Maxwell, 1827), v-vi.

[8] Ibid, i.

[9] Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 2.

[10] "On the Art of Acting," *The Spectator* (London), December 19, 1829, accessed September 23, 2014, http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/19th-december-1829/11/on-the-art-of-acting.

Yet according to Richard Schechner, performance does not only amount to the theatrical. Schechner argues that performance can take the form of "art, rituals, or ordinary life."[11] He asserts that all of these types of performance

> are made of 'twice behaved-behaviors,' 'restored behaviors,' performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse. That training and conscious effort go into making art is clear. But everyday life also involves years of training, learning appropriate bits of behavior, or finding out how to adjust and perform one's life in relation to social and personal circumstances.[12]

Schechner's argument relies on an understanding of human behavior and social norms as constructed and learned rather than natural and innate. When people adhere to certain established standards or codes of comportment (or break them in favor of others), they are engaging in "twice-behaved behavior." They must learn these behaviors, practice them, and ultimately incorporate them into their daily conduct as part of their self-presentation.

Elocution was one such learned behavior that required repeated rehearsal. Some of this practice took place in schools, where students were taught oratorical skills.[13] Elocutionary handbooks, which proliferated during the nineteenth century, also allowed budding orators and dilettantes to train themselves in the art of skillful speaking. Yet despite the fact that eloquent speech was learned, it was understood to be the most "natural spoken language." Fliegelman argues that, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the rules of elocution were considered "a

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[11] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

[12] Schechner, *Performance Studies,* 22-23.

[13] Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1993), 5.

corollary to natural law," and eloquent speech was viewed as "a language that would permit universal recognition and understanding."[14]

As Conquergood argues, "the 'natural school' of elocution demonstrates how hegemony works; that is, what is really cultured and acquired masquerades as 'nature,' thereby concealing its invention and artifice."[15] Elocution was a learned behavior, a "twice-behaved behavior" that could be performed by those privileged enough to study it. Yet because it was accepted as "natural language," those who received such an education became associated with the innate intelligence and emotional depth that eloquent speech indicated to nineteenth-century listeners. Those who did not have access to education and could not conform their speech to elocutionary standards were conversely viewed as naturally unintelligent and emotionally stunted.[16]

When Philadelphia's Female Literary Association was founded, most free black Americans were among those without access to formal education.[17] The city was home to a small number of tuition-free schools for black students, but these few institutions could only accommodate a tiny fraction of Philadelphia's nearly 15,000 free black citizens.[18] Due to segregation, most schools that accepted black students were run privately in the houses of individual instructors. These teachers

[14] Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*, 2.
[15] Conquergood, "Rethinking Elocution," 328.
[16] Ibid., 330.
[17] By formal education, I refer to schooling conducted either in the home or at a pedagogical institution by a teacher. This is in contrast to informal education, which could have been self-directed or sporadically conducted by a family member or other caregiver. This is also in contrast to any type of labor-oriented training children may have received in addition to or instead of academic schooling.
[18] The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, *The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color in the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1838), 6.

charged enrollment fees, making attendance out of reach for many.[19] According to the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the majority of people in the state's black community were relegated to "the most menial services and severest labors."[20] These occupations tended to be physically demanding, time consuming, and poorly compensated, leaving those engaged in them with little money for school tuition and little time for individual study.

The members of the Female Literary Association were exceptions to this rule. As Gay Gibson Cima notes, the members of this society were among Philadelphia's black economic elite.[21] Some worked in traditionally feminine occupations such as teaching, and others received financial support from family members involved in relatively lucrative trades. At least a few of the members, including Sarah Forten and Sarah Mapps Douglass, came from families who owned their own businesses.[22] Thus, the women of the FLA were of a distinctly higher class than much of Philadelphia's free black community. This comparatively elevated economic status probably corresponded to a higher level of education among the society's members, as their relatively wealthy families could likely afford school tuition. The women's ability to write and recite original pieces on a weekly basis further suggests that the members of the FLA received at least some formal education prior to joining the society.

[19] Ibid., 28-9.
[20] Ibid., 10.
[21] Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Antislavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 108-9.
[22] Marie Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box:" 263, 271.

If, as the evidence suggests, these women were privileged enough to receive educations, their weekly recitations were opportunities for them to show off the elocutionary skills they learned during their schooling. According to Richard Schechner, it is the display of behaviors such as eloquent speaking that transforms them from actions into performances. He argues that

> To perform can also be understood in relation to:
> - Being
> - Doing
> - Showing Doing
>
> […] "Being" is existence itself. "Doing" is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to super galactic strings. "Showing Doing" is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing.[23]

As Schechner's definition suggests, the existence of an audience is crucial. Mere actions become performances when the performer is not just "doing" them, but "showing doing" them.

This conception of performance as "showing doing" is important not only because it provides a definition for this nebulous term, but also because it points to how performance can both construct and challenge cultural hegemony. "Performances make identities" when they involve "showing doing" twice-behaved behaviors charged with culturally-ascribed significance.[24] In the nineteenth century, eloquent speech was one such loaded behavior. Since eloquence was considered a sign of innate intelligence and emotional complexity, and since the vast majority of people who could access the education necessary to learn this skill were white, elocutionary standards effectively served as

[23] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

[24] Ibid.

benchmarks by which to measure the perceived mental and emotional gaps between people of African descent and people of European descent. As a result, when white Americans engaged in "showing doing" their adherence to these standards, their performances participated in the construction of whiteness, in contrast to blackness, as an identity category marked by inherent intelligence and emotional depth. Such performances thereby helped to reify and reinforce middle- and upper-class European Americans' cultural hegemony.

However, by harnessing their educations in order to deliver skillful oratorical performances, the women of the FLA gave themselves the opportunity to challenge the notion that elocution was a specifically white ability. Such a challenge could contest the perception that only whites possessed the intellect and capacity for sentiment indicated by elocutionary talent, but only if the FLA's performances could be presented to an audience of people who harbored this belief. In this, the women of the Female Literary Association faced a conundrum. In order to use their elocutionary talents to "break down the strong barrier of prejudice," they had to make their oratorical performances public. Yet if they physically exited the private sphere to perform before an audience, they risked transgressing the boundaries of appropriate femininity and undermining their mission as a result.

In "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," Barbara Welter asserts that in order to be considered respectable, antebellum women had to display a specific set of characteristics. As she argues in this seminal text, "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her

husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."[25] Welter, who coined the term "Cult of True Womanhood" to describe this ideology, notes that these virtues were valued in part because they "did not take a woman away from her 'proper sphere,' her home."[26]

White women had some freedom to step out of the private sphere if they did so in order to advocate for moral reform movements such as abolitionism. Though their entry into the public realm contested the notion of True Womanhood, these white female activists could position their anti-slavery efforts as stemming from their feminine virtues. According to Catherine Lavender, women's participation in the abolitionist movement could be viewed "as a natural outgrowth of True Womanhood and women's role as moral guardians."[27] Black women, however, had no such latitude. They could not justify their involvement in activism as stemming from their True Womanhood, because this status was reserved for white middle- and upper-class females.

Rather than pious and pure, black women were considered inherently immoral by many in the white community. Caroline West argues that from the earliest days of African enslavement in the Americas, black women were

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[25] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-2, accessed November 16, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.

[26] Ibid., 153.

[27] Catherine Lavender, "Women, True Womanhood, and Abolitionism," *City University of New York*, accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/286/09.pdf. White women's attempts to enter the public sphere through their moral reform activism were not universally accepted. As I will discuss in the second and third chapters, some abolitionists disapproved of women's public involvement in activism regardless of their race, and viewed such efforts as attempts to forward the nascent women's rights movement through moral reform work.

systematically stereotyped as sexually promiscuous "jezebels" lacking in decency and virtue.[28] The idea that women of African descent were "temptresses with insatiable sexual appetites" can be traced in part to common justifications for the rape of black women by their white enslavers.[29] As Shirley J. Yee notes, to admit such sexual encounters were in fact rape would have "undermined notions of white moral superiority. Thus, rather than perceiving slave women as victims of sexual abuse, whites blamed them for initiating sexual relations with white men and […] portrayed black women as seducers."[30] As a result, black women were viewed by much of white society as fundamentally impure and therefore unable to achieve True Womanhood.

Even among abolitionists, who were more aware of the sexual violence perpetrated by white enslavers,[31] black women were still not generally considered True Women. Economic necessity often forced them to take jobs in the public sphere. Since low-paying menial or physical labor was often the only form of employment available to those in the black community, most women had to work outside the home in order to contribute to their families' finances.[32] This kept

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[28] Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Toward the Images of Black Women" in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, ed. Joan C Chrisler, Carla Golden, Patricia D Rozee (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2012), 294.

[29] Laurie Kaiser, "The Black Madonna: Notions of True Womanhood from Jacobs to Hurston," *South Atlantic Review* 60, no. 1 (1995): 98, accessed September 16, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3200715.

[30] Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 42-3.

[31] Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 324-325, accessed November 29, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/ 2169001. Halttunen notes that abolitionists used tales of the sexual violence perpetrated against enslaved women as a way to point out the abhorrence of slavery and forward the abolitionist cause.

[32] Julie Roy Jeffery, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Anti-Slavery Movement,"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 206.

many black women from being viewed as domestic, and thus invalidated any claims they might otherwise have to the title of True Woman.

Thus, for the members of the FLA, their status as both black and female complicated the terms of their involvement in the fight to end slavery and promote racial equality. Since True Womanhood was a status reserved almost entirely for white women, black female activists could not rely on their position as True Women to excuse any forays they might make into the public sphere on behalf of their reform work. Furthermore, since a woman's respectability was defined by her adherence to the "cardinal virtues" of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, it was disadvantageous and counterproductive for black women to defy any of these tenets in their activism. Flouting the "virtue" of domesticity by entering the public sphere would have served to further solidify the notion that white women were inherently more respectable than black women, thus hindering rather than advancing the movement for racial equality.

Therefore, the women of the Female Literary Association could not engage in public oratorical performances as part of their activist work. In order to "break down the strong barrier of prejudice," members of the FLA had to find a way to conduct these performances in the private realm while still generating a public audience for them. I argue that the fast-growing anti-slavery print culture of the time provided a solution to this challenge. In the early 1830s, abolitionists began rapidly churning out pamphlets, journals, and newspapers aimed at promoting the anti-slavery cause. Robert Fanuzzi argues that the "abolitionist tracts and newspapers blanketing the nation thus signified the prospect of an

indiscriminately composed public sphere" which enabled "civic participation by disenfranchised Americans."[33] While the women of the FLA could not conduct oratorical performances in physically public spaces, they could nonetheless use newspapers to ensure that their private recitations were made known and available to public audiences. Thus, they could work within what Fanuzzi terms "abolition's public sphere," the print media-based forum in which the readers, viewers, and writers of abolitionist material studied and shaped the national anti-slavery conversation.[34]

I argue that the FLA's decision to invite William Lloyd Garrison to one of their meetings can be viewed as a strategic choice meant to enable these women to bring their elocutionary performances into "abolition's public sphere." As the editor of *The Liberator*, Garrison made it his mission to help bring an end to slavery and to promote "*the moral and intellectual elevation of our coloured population* (emphasis original)."[35] He described this goal in a prospectus that was widely published in anti-slavery newspapers during the latter half of the year 1830.[36] Furthermore, in August of the same year Garrison came to Philadelphia to give a number of public lectures about *The Liberator* and its mission.[37] As a result, the women of the FLA were likely aware that Garrison was particularly

[33] Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition's Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xiii.

[34] Ibid., 1.

[35] William Lloyd Garrison, "Proposals for Publishing a Weekly Paper in Washington City… To be Entitled *The Liberator* and *Journal of the Times*," *Essex Gazette* (Haverhill, MA), September 11, 1830.

[36] William Lloyd Garrison, "To the Public," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 1, 1831.

[37] "Wm. Lld. Garrison," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), September 2, 1830.

interested in writing about topics related to the "mental improvement" of the black community. They could therefore be reasonably assured that Garrison would use his position as editor of *The Liberator* to give their work a wider audience.

Furthermore, as an outspoken advocate for both women's rights and racial equality, Garrison was perhaps the ideal person to make the work of the FLA accessible to the public at large. It was his stated belief that black women, along with white women, could imbue the anti-slavery movement with pious virtue. In a letter to Sarah Mapps Douglass, he argued that it was the role of women, both black and white, "to do good, to destroy prejudice, to lift up the helpless, to restore the wandering, in one word to fulfill the design of her creation."[38] According to Garrison, their example and guidance could serve as a morally edifying force for male abolitionists and for the movement as a whole. It is therefore also possible that the women of the FLA decided to invite Garrison because they felt confident that he would cast them and their organization in a respectable light.

Accordingly, after attending a meeting of the Female Literary Association, Garrison heaped compliments onto the organization and its members. In an article published immediately after his visit, he expressed the hope that other similar societies would begin to form across the country, so that they might emulate the useful work being done by the FLA. He described this work briefly, but spent the

[38] William Lloyd Garrison, "William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah Mapps Douglass, March 5, 1832," in *I Will Be Heard: The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume 1,* edited by Walter M. Merrill (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), 143.

larger part of his commentary commending the women on their talents. He assured his readers that "if the traducers of the colored race could be acquainted with the moral worth, just refinement, and large intelligence of this association, their mouths would hereafter be dumb."[39]

As his comments suggest, black Americans who took on supposedly-white cultural practices such as elocution were met with a great many 'traducers." Among the most infamous of these was E.W. Clay, the creator of the "Life in Philadelphia" cartoon series. A number of Clay's drawings, which were published between 1828 and 1830, took aim at black Americans' efforts to adhere to nineteenth-century standards for speech. These images featured black figures dressed in "hyper-elegant" clothing, often standing or sitting with their bodies unnaturally contorted, and speaking to one another in broken or malapropism-ridden English.[40] In one drawing, displayed in figure two, a woman compliments a man's "new fashion shirt" by telling him that it makes him "look just like Pluto de god of

Figure 2

[39] William Lloyd Garrison, "Ladies' Department: Female Literary Association," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), June 30, 1832.

[40] University of Virginia, "E.W. Clay's 'Life in Philadelphia' Series," Anti-Abolitionist Images, accessed September 3, 2015, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/gallclayf.html.

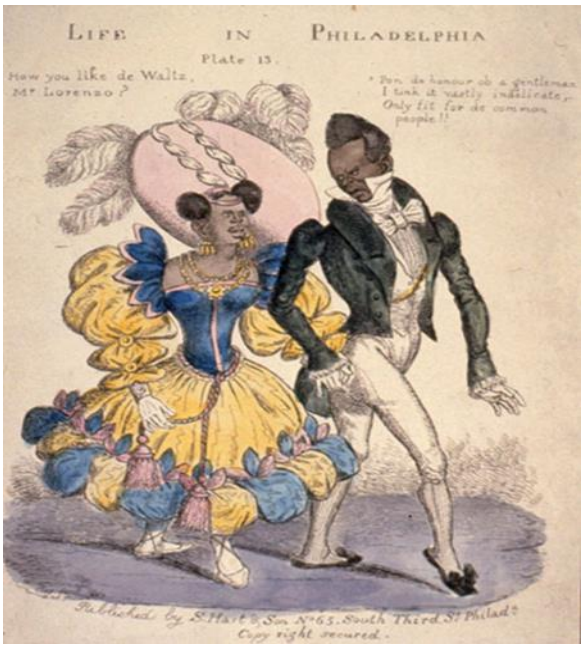

Figure 3

War!"[41] In this example, the woman's mistaken reference to Pluto as the warrior god is meant to demonstrate the lack of intelligence supposedly characteristic of all black people. In another, shown in figure three, a male character declares "pon de honor ob a gentleman" that waltzing is "onlyfit for de common people."[42] Here, the man's many mispronunciations undercut his attempt to characterize himself as a gentleman rather than a commoner. In still another, found in figure four, a woman praises a man's singing, telling him "you sing quite con a moor, as the Italians say."[43] Her mistaken use of the racially-charged "a moor" rather than

Figure 4

[41] E.W. Clay, "Life in Philadelphia [Unnumbered]" (Philadelphia: Wm. Simpson, 1828), accessed September 30, 2015, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/gallclayf.html

[42] E.W. Clay, "Life in Philadelphia, No. 13," (Philadelphia: S. Hart & Son, 1829), accessed September 30, 2015, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/gallclayf.html.

[43] E.W. Clay, "Life in Philadelphia, No. 12," (Philadelphia: S. Hart & Son, 1829), accessed September 30, 2015, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/gallclayf.html.

"amore" linguistically underscores the link between blackness and elocutionary inability that existed in the imagination of the dominant white culture. Dialogue such as this was clearly meant to suggest that black people were incapable of speaking eloquently, and that their attempts to do so were nothing short of ridiculous.

Garrison's commentary on the FLA enabled these women to offer a contrasting presentation of black elocutionary skill. They could not physically perform in public, but they could have their work described in *The Liberator* and entered into the "abolitionist public sphere." Garrison's newspaper provided a forum for these women to engage in "showing doing" eloquence without having to compromise their domesticity. His emphasis on their "just refinement" and "large intelligence," two qualities associated with elocutionary ability, served to verify their oratorical skill for their audience of readers. Thus, by using Garrison and his newspaper as facilitators for their efforts, the women of the FLA engaged in elocutionary performances that worked to "break down the strong barrier of prejudice." These women challenged the notion of black inferiority while at the same time shielding themselves and their work from accusations of impropriety by "showing doing" skillful speech through the medium of print.

In addition to describing the events that took place at the Female Literary Association's meetings and praising the members' talents, Garrison published a number of the society's original pieces. Thus, via *The Liberator*, these women's writings also entered the "abolitionist public sphere." Like their recitations, I argue that some of these written works functioned as performance-based shields

against potential attacks on their femininity. One of the defensive tactics embedded in these performances was anonymity. The women of the FLA published all of their writing under pseudonyms, never revealing their personal identities to their audience. This anonymity allowed the women to keep their names as well as their bodies safely within the private realm while entering their ideas into the public abolitionist discourse.

Through their public commitment to remaining in the private sphere, as displayed through their use of newspapers instead of stages and pseudonyms instead of names, the women of the FLA engaged in "showing doing" domesticity. In addition to this traditionally feminine virtue, these women also put their piety on display before an audience within the "abolitionist public sphere." One way these women engaged in "showing doing" their piety was through the production and publication of sentimental poetry. In the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental poetry was a staple of feminine expression and could be found across the pages of the more than one thousand women's gift books and literary annuals published between 1825 and 1865.[44] These publications were so popular with female readers that reviewer Jane F. Wilde, assessing the genre retrospectively in 1855, referred to them as "quite an epidemic."[45] Barbara Welter identifies gift books and literary annuals as among the main agents of socialization that

[44] Library of Congress, "Gift Books and Annuals," Library of Congress American Women Collection, accessed March 20, 2015, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awgc1/gift.html.

[45] Jane F. Wilde, "The Countess of Blessington," *Dublin University Magazine* 45 (1855): 340, accessed March 21, 2014, http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Dublin_University_Magazine.html?id=7lEaAQAAI AAJ.

effectively codified the characteristics of appropriate femininity.[46] The poetry found in these magazines was typically written by female contributors, and was one of the mediums through which this codification took place. It frequently demonstrated the four values (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity) that Welter identifies as the "cardinal virtues" of True Womanhood.[47]

The poetry of Female Literary Association member Sarah Forten, writing under the name "Ada,"[48] bears a great resemblance to the poetry published in the gift books and literary annuals of the time. Like the poems printed in these women's publications, Forten's work also evokes the cardinal virtues identified by Welter. She particularly emphasizes the value of piety in her poetry, and makes frequent references to faith and Christianity. For example, her poem entitled "An Address to Woman," is, in part, a didactic treatise on the need for all women to live their lives in accordance with Christian tenets. She urges her female listeners and readers to "nobly dare to act a Christian's part, / That well befits a lovely woman's heart!"[49] According to Forten, a woman could best demonstrate her worth by displaying or "showing doing" piety, just as she herself did through the publication of this poem.[50]

This performance of femininity is not devoid of political import. By "showing doing" her piety via her writing and her domesticity via her

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[46] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 151.

[47] Ibid, 152.

[48] Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box," 270. As Lindhorst notes, it is difficult to identify which pseudonym belonged to which FLA member. There are only a few women whose pseudonyms can be positively identified. Some of these women include Sarah Forten, who wrote under the names "Ada" and "Magawisca," and Sarah Mapps Douglass, who used the name "Zillah."

[49] Sarah Forten, writing as "Ada," "An Appeal to Women," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), February 1, 1834.

[50] Ibid.

demonstrable commitment to remaining in the private sphere, Forten linked herself to True Womanhood on two counts. If, as Welter argues, piety and domesticity were among the values used to judge a woman's worth and respectability, then Forten's overt demonstration of these two qualities can be viewed as a way for her to garner social capital on behalf of herself and black women in general. The text of Forten's "An Address to Woman" indicates that she was well aware of the power embedded within her performance of appropriate femininity. In the first stanza, she emphasizes the importance of piety and the need for all women, regardless of race, to demonstrate their religious faith. In the second stanza of "An Address to Woman," she specifically links this piety for which she just advocated (and, in doing so, demonstrated) to the concept of racial equality. She writes,

> We are thy sisters, - God has truly said,
> That of one blood, the nations he has made.
> Oh, Christian woman, in a Christian land,
> Canst thou unblushing read this great command?
> Suffer the wrongs which wring our inmost heart
> To draw one throb of pity on thy part;
> Our skins may differ, but from thee we claim
> A sister's privilege, in a sister's name.[51]

In this stanza, Forten addresses white women on behalf of black women. She challenges these white women to recognize their African American counterparts' equality by framing it as divinely ordained sisterhood. By asserting that equality is a "great command" from God, Forten suggests that no white woman can be a true, "unblushing" Christian unless she has compassion for her

[51] Ibid.

black sisters. Questioning the piety of white women who did not accept racial equality was a subtly powerful rhetorical maneuver, because it also called these women's femininity into question. If True Womanhood was in part a function of piety, then to assert that a woman was not appropriately religious was to also suggest that she was not appropriately feminine. Furthermore, if piety was one of the attributes by which women were judged, then Forten's poem created a framework through which black women could be viewed as superior to certain white women who, because their prejudice, did not adequately adhere to religious dictates.

Regardless of whether Forten's audience recognized or accepted her subtle claim to superiority, the religious themes in her poetry probably resonated with people in "abolition's public sphere." In Philadelphia, many of these anti-slavery activists had ties to the Quaker faith. The connection between anti-slavery activism and the Society of Friends had a long history in the city of Philadelphia. In 1688, the first known American anti-slavery document, "The Germantown Protest," was penned by four local Quaker men.[52] By 1776, leaders in Philadelphia's Society mandated that all of the city's Friends immediately

[52] Garrett Hendricks, et. al., "The Germantown Protest," February 18, 1688, accessed December 20, 2014, http://www.yale.edu/glc/aces/germantown.htm. Upon learning that some of their neighbors and fellow Friends had decided to purchase slaves, a group of four Quaker men drafted a letter now known as The Germantown Protest. In this letter, the men denounce slavery on the basis of their religious principles. "We shall do to all men like as we will be done ourselves;" the men argued, "making no difference of what generation, descent or colour they are." Furthermore, according to these protesters, slaveholding was not only inconsistent with Quaker principles, it also sullied the reputation of the Society of Friends abroad. As the Germantown Protest letter states, "this makes an ill report in all those countries of Europe, where they hear of, that ye Quakers do here handle men as they handle there ye cattle."

discontinue the practice of slaveholding.[53] Even in the 1830s, when Quakers had long since lost political control of the city and the religious community faced ideological schisms from within,[54] the vast majority of Philadelphia's abolitionist leaders still belonged to the Society of Friends.[55]

Given that Quakerism was the dominant religion among Philadelphia's abolitionists, it is not surprising that the Female Literary Association aligned their performances of piety to this faith community's practices. Published reports on the structure of the FLA's meetings indicate numerous points of connection between the literary society and the religious Society. First, meetings of the FLA began and ended with prayer and silence.[56] This is directly related to the Quaker practice of silent worship. "Friends believed that true preaching and praying could only come 'as the Spirit moved,' and that the believer must therefore wait in silence, clear the mind, 'center down' on what God might be trying to say."[57] As a result, meetings of the Society of Friends were characterized by extended periods of silence and reflection.[58]

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[53] Ira V. Brown, "Pennsylvania's Anti-Slavery Pioneers, 1688-1776," *Pennsylvania History* 55, no 2 (1988); 76, accessed December 21, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27773235.

[54] Thomas D. Hamm, "Hicksite Quakers and the Antebellum Nonresistance Movement," *Church History* 63, no. 4 (1994): 557, accessed September 20, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3167630.

[55] "Quakers and Slavery: People," The Quaker Collections at Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges, accessed September 27, 2015, http://trilogy.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/. Some of these leaders included Sarah Mapps Douglass, James and Lucretia Mott, Daniel Neall, Dillwyn Parrish, and Robert Purvis.

[56] "Mental Feasts," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), July 21, 1832.

[57] Jack Larkin, "The Quakers in Early 19th Century Rural New England: An Interpretation," Old Sturbridge Village Museum, accessed November 14, 2014, http://resources.osv.org/explore_learn/document_viewer.php ?Action=View&DocID=669.

[58] Ibid. This source describes Quaker practices the early 1800s, and as a result I discuss these practices using the past tense. However, it should be noted that many of these practices are still in use by Quaker communities today.

However, this is not to suggest that Quaker meetings typically passed without a word. On the contrary, at any point during the meeting, Friends who felt moved to speak could rise and "preach or pray extemporaneously" before the whole congregation.[59] Reports describing FLA meetings indicate that a similar practice took place during gatherings of the association. According to one of these reports, "After sitting a short time under a solemn and impressive silence […], one of the company vocally petitioned our heavenly Father for a continuance of his favor."[60] The apparently spontaneous interjection of an audible prayer into this silent moment is highly reminiscent of the traditional Quaker style of worship.

It is also significant that the prayer was offered not by any established leader of the Female Literary Association, but simply by "one of the company." While there were leaders or "ministers" within the Society of Friends, these were not individuals hired to head a congregation. Instead, these ministers were fellow Quakers selected by their worship meetings as a whole to play a leading role within the religious community.[61] However, it was not the minister's role to give a sermon or to otherwise lead the meeting through speech. Any Friend present who felt moved to do so could offer their thoughts, prayers, or reflections, just as the unnamed FLA member did with her impromptu prayer for continued divine favor.[62]

These extemporaneous interjections were not the only way that the members of the Female Literary Association participated in and contributed to

[59] Ibid.
[60] "Mental Feasts," *The Liberator.*
[61] Larkin, "The Quakers in Early 19th Century New England."
[62] Ibid.

meetings. Writing and reciting original pieces on a weekly basis provided another way in which the content of the gathering was determined by the group as a whole rather than by an individual leader. Furthermore, once a piece had been read before the group, everyone present had the opportunity to offer comments on what they heard.[63] This practice facilitated the writer's improvement by allowing her to hear others' views on her work, and it ensured that FLA meetings, like Quaker meetings, enabled the active participation of all.

Another similarity between the meetings of the Female Literary Association and the Society of Friends was the austerity with which they were held. One of the central tenets of Quaker practice emphasized that Friends should live a "plain life," or a life focused on God. In order to adhere to this tenet, Quakers avoided any excess or ornamentation (of dress, speech, diet, behavior, etc.) that could bring undue attention to earthly matters and away from the divine.[64] Reports from the FLA's meetings suggest that the society conducted their gatherings with similar minimalism, though in this case the ostensible purpose was to keep members focused on the plight of the slave. According to a published transcript of an address given at one gathering of the FLA, attendees were informed that "the refreshments which may be offered to you […] will be of the most simple kind, so that you may feel for those who have nothing to refresh body and mind."[65]

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[63] Garrison, "Ladies' Department: Female Literary Association," *The Liberator*.

[64] Ryan P. Jordan, *Slavery and the Meetinghouse: The Quakers and the Abolitionist Dilemma, 1820-1865* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 3.

[65] Sarah Mapps Douglass, "Address," in "Mental Feasts," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), July 21, 1832. Though this minimal sacrifice seems born from a hollow sincerity at best, it is

The structure of the Female Literary Association's monthly meetings also had parallels to Quaker practice. While the FLA convened on a weekly basis to read and discuss each other's original pieces, they also held an additional meeting once a month in order to conduct the society's business. All financial matters, elections, policy decisions, and any other organizational necessities were handled during this time.[66] Similarly, Quakers met to worship together at weekly or semi-weekly meetings in their communities, and also held monthly meetings that the members of five to ten local meeting houses were invited to attend. While worship took place at the monthly meetings, they also functioned as supervisory gatherings in which regional policies were established.[67]

As with all of the FLA's performances, *The Liberator* helped to shed light on these multiple points of connection between the association and the Society of Friends. Through the medium of print, these various links became performances of a location-specific piety enacted before an audience of anti-slavery readers within the "abolitionist public sphere." This newspaper allowed the members of the FLA to display their structural ties to Quaker religious practices before this audience, just as it enabled them to engage in "showing doing" elocution, domesticity, and a more generalized form of piety. Like these other performances, I argue that "showing doing" their connection to Quakerism was another way for the organization to shield itself from hostile external forces.

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nevertheless one more example of how the FLA's meetings intersected with Quaker practice (albeit shallowly in this case).

[66] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator.*

[67] Larkin, "The Quakers in Early 19th Century New England."

In this case, performing a connection to the Society of Friends warded off not just condemnation but also potential violence. The FLA broke new ground by becoming the first major black women's literary association in the country.[68] As such, backlash against the society remained an omnipresent threat. The fear of retribution must have been particularly salient for these women, as the association's founding came on the heels of an anti-abolitionist race riot that rocked Philadelphia in the fall of 1829. This was the first of six race riots to occur in the city in a span of thirteen years, marking the beginning of an especially dangerous time for Philadelphia's black community.[69] Thus, performing their connection to a prominent religious group may have been a way for the Female Literary Association to guard against potential backlash.

Given the nature of their work, members of the FLA had good reason to protect themselves. The association's many performances primarily served to shield the society by lending it respectability, and were thus only covertly political. However, most of the members' published writings directly engaged with some of the most pressing political questions of the day. As black women inserting their voices into the traditionally white, male political arena to discuss anti-slavery issues in a city recently embroiled in race riots, the members of the FLA needed their performance-based protections.

Despite the clear and well-justified caution these performances indicate, the women of the FLA approached their political subjects fervently and

[68] Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities," 557.

[69] Jenna M. Gibbs, *Performing in the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theatre, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 211.

strategically. One of the Female Literary Association's debates that Garrison made available to the public dealt with the question of colonization. The idea that formerly enslaved people should be sent to Africa gained increased popularity through the 1830s, though proposals for expatriation of the formerly-enslaved population were being publicly entertained as early as the Colonial period.[70] The 1817 founding of the American Colonization Society in Washington D.C. gave the movement a de facto mouthpiece.[71] This organization and its journal, *The African Repository* (initially published in 1825), helped lead to the increased interest in colonization by the 1830s.[72]

The American Colonization Society promoted expatriation as a way to deal with the "problem" of emancipation. While its members acknowledged slavery's "inconsistency with the dictates of Christianity," they argued that the integration of newly-freed slaves into American society following their manumission would not be in the best interests of the United States or the emancipated African American community.[73] Thus, the society resolved to facilitate the emigration of formerly-enslaved black Americans, and to gain more supporters for their cause. As support for colonization did increase, additional

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[70] Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008) 6.

[71] "The American Colonization Society: A Register of its Records in the Library of Congress," Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington: Library of Congress, 1979, accessed January 18, 2014, http://images.crl.edu/085.pdf. Some sources state that the American Colonization Society was founded in 1816. However, according to the records contained in the U.S. Library of Congress, meetings were held to discuss the possibility of forming such an organization in 1816 but the society was not officially established until January 1, 1817.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Elliott Cresson, "Introduction to *The Report of the Board of Managers,"* in *The Report of the Board of Managers of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society,* Philadelphia: 1831, 1. In his introduction to this report, Cresson describes himself as a "Representative of the American Colonization Society," though he was in fact affiliated with its Philadelphia Branch.

auxiliary societies organized across the country to promote the movement of newly-emancipated people to West Africa. At the time the Female Literary Association was founded, Philadelphia already housed one of these organizations.[74] The Pennsylvania Colonization Society, founded in 1830, provided Philadelphians with a local group through which they could support the larger national organization.[75]

When the Philadelphia Colonization Society was established, every one of its members was an Orthodox Quaker.[76] However, while many within the Society of Friends supported colonization, no consensus existed among Quakers regarding this movement.[77] This debate between the pro- and anti-colonization factions played out on a variety of stages, from the Quaker Yearly Meeting to the pages of prominent religious newspapers.[78] This sharp divide within the Quaker community caused colonization to become a particularly contentious issue in Pennsylvania.

The state's black community also lacked a stable consensus on the issue of colonization at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the movement's early years, colonization found support among a number of prominent black

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[74] Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania, "Minute Book (1843-1841)," Langston Hughes Memorial Library at Lincoln University, Historical Collections, accessed January 20, 2015, http://www. lincoln.edu/ library/specialcollections/society.html. Another organization, the Young Men's Colonization Society of Philadelphia, formed shortly thereafter in 1834. This group was eventually absorbed by the Philadelphia Colonization Society.

[75] Pennsylvania Colonization Society, "Constitution and Bylaws (1830)," Langston Hughes Memorial Library at Lincoln University, Historical Collections, accessed January 20, 2015, http://www.lincoln.edu/library/ specialcollections/society/1830.pdf

[76] Margaret Hope Bacon, "Quakers and Colonization," *Quaker History* 95, no. 1 (2006): 34, accessed January 22, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41947575.

[77] Ibid, 22, 32.

[78] Ibid., 33.

Pennsylvanians such as James Forten, who thought African colonies could provide "a refuge for newly liberated slaves from America."[79] Forten was so committed to the cause of colonization that he contemplated emigrating from the U.S. to Freetown, Sierra Leone and reestablishing his flourishing sail-making business in the colony.[80] It was his stated belief that blacks "will never become a people until they come out from amongst the white people."[81] For Forten, and for many other black leaders, colonization was seen as a means to achieve this end.

However, as James T. Campbell notes in *Middle Passages*: *African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005,* the community's attitude toward colonization began to change rapidly in the late 1810s.[82] Campbell connects this shift to the remarks of white pro-colonization leaders such as Henry Clay, who, at a meeting of the American Colonization Society, publically advocated for expatriation as a means to "rid our own country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous portion of its population."[83] Comments such as these, which were widely reprinted in newspapers, galvanized many free black Americans against the colonization movement. Following Clay's infamous speech, James Forten himself served as the elected chairman of a meeting attended by approximately three thousand black Philadelphians. At this meeting, the attendees denounced

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[79] Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62.

[80] James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages*: *African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 44.

[81] James Forten, "Letter to Paul Cuffe," January 25, 1817, in *Speak Out in Thunder Tones: Letters and Other Writings by Black Northerners*, 1787-1865, ed. by Dorothy Sterling (Garden City, NY: Da Capo Press, 1973), 26.

[82] Campbell, *Middle Passages,* 44.

[83] Henry Clay, "Speech at Organization of American Colonization Society," in *The Papers of Henry Clay: The Rising Statesman 1815--1820, Volume 2,* ed. by James F. Hopkins and Mary W.M. Hargreaves (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 264.

Clay's remarks and "asserted their determination to remain in the United States, fighting for their rights as American citizens."[84] Though Forten stated after the meeting that he still considered colonization a viable option,[85] he eventually aligned himself with the anti-colonizationists. By the time the Female Literary Association was founded, he had become one of the most vocal opponents of expatriation, routinely adding his anti-emigration speeches and writings to the rapidly intensifying national debate over colonization.[86]

The primary contributors to this debate were men. Black women, in particular, were rarely afforded the opportunity to enter into this public conversation. Through *The Liberator,* the members of the Female Literary Association became some of the only black women able to join the chorus of predominantly male and typically white voices engaging with the question of colonization. Print media allowed their opinions and arguments to become public political discourse. Sarah Mapps Douglass, writing under the name Zillah, entered the debate by submitting "an extract from a letter to a friend" regarding the topic of emigration. In this letter, which was later published in *The Liberator,* Douglass wrote "You do not agree with me, in regard to emigration. […] You say 'if we may better our situation by removing, why oppose?' Believe me, my friend, there is no spot in the known world where people are happier than in America."[87] After arguing that other countries were less secure, less moral, and less able to

[84] Campbell, *Middle Passages,* 44
[85] Forten, "Letter to Paul Cuffe," in *Speak Out in Thunder Tones,* 26.
[86] Winch, *A Gentleman of Color,* 201.
[87] Sarah Mapps Douglass, writing as "Zillah," "Extract from a Letter to a Friend, February 23, 1832," *The Liberator,* (Boston, MA), July 21, 1832.

provide for their citizens, she concluded her submission with the following: "'All those nameless ties,/ In which the charm of country lies,/ Have round my heart been hourly spun,/ Till Columbia's cause and mine are one.' Although she unkindly strives to throw me from her bosom, I will but embrace her the closer, desiring never to part with her whilst I have breath."[88]

While Douglass stated that she originally wrote this letter as part of a private correspondence, her decision to submit this particular extract appears calculated. First, in this selection she addresses the idea that free black Americans would be able to live a better life outside of the United States, a claim that was often cited by supporters of colonization. The Pennsylvania Colonization Society argued that while "the condition of a slave suddenly emancipated, and thrown upon his own resources, is very far from being improved," formerly-enslaved blacks could establish "a prosperous colony of free people on the shores of Africa."[89] Douglass countered this assertion with the claim that the United States provided a better life than any other nation. By specifically citing the security, morality, and prosperity of America as compared to other countries, Douglass not only argued against colonization but also highlighted her patriotism as a free black woman. With this claim, Douglass engaged in "showing doing" her patriotism. Her performance of national allegiance demonstrated that it was possible for black Americans to be loyal to the United States, thus indirectly challenging any readers who might have questioned free blacks' right to remain in the country based on a perceived lack of fidelity to the nation.

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Cresson, "Introduction to *The Report of the Board of Managers*," 11-12.

Douglass then cited a selection from Thomas Moore's "Lalla-Rookh: The Fire-Worshippers," substituting the word "Columbia" for "Iran" in a continued display of patriotism. I argue that even to a reader unfamiliar with Moore's work, Douglass's decision to quote from a poem exhibited her personal intellect and refinement, and demonstrated the fact that black Americans were capable of such sophistication. Yet it is likely that a good deal of the population was familiar with "Lalla-Rookh." A number of American companies published the poem beginning in 1817, and least one of these companies, M. Thomas Publishers, was located in Philadelphia.[90] In the decades that followed, other artists such as Robert Schumann[91] and Adam Forepaugh,[92] among others, adapted Moore's text into various operas, ballets, choral pieces, and even circus acts. Though not all of these adaptations had been created at the time Douglass published her letter, they do indicate the general popularity of "Lalla-Rookh" with nineteenth-century American readers and audiences. Given the broad circulation of Moore's work and its many adaptations, it is likely that a substantial number of those who read Douglass's letter were familiar with "Lalla-Rookh."

For readers who were acquainted with this poem, Douglass's chosen quotation may have held added significance. In Moore's piece, the lines Douglass appropriated were originally spoken by a hero named Hafed, the leader of a group

[90] "Moore's Poem, with a Portrait," *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), July 19, 1817.

[91] Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, Volume Four: The Oratorio in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,"* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 186-187.

[92] Anirudra Thapa, "The Indic Orient, Nation, and Transnationalism: Exploring Imperial Outposts of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literary Culture, 1840-1900," (Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 1989). 34.

of indigenous Persians who fought against enemy invaders who had ransacked his country. Just a few lines before Hafed spoke the words quoted by Douglass, he described himself and his countrymen as being of a different race than the invaders, and expressed anger at the destruction these aggressors caused. He then pledged "before God's burning eye, / To break our country's chains, or die!"[93] Thus, by using Hafed's words as her own in her published letter, Douglass aligned herself with the leader of a subjugated race who openly and vehemently expressed his rage against his oppressors, and who was willing to die fighting them in order to free his people.

This is a marked contrast to her prior assertion of America's greatness, yet I argue that this disparity can be read as both reflective of Douglass's position as a black woman and a further indication of her rhetorical skill. The obvious performance of patriotism in her letter situated her as a true American before those who might have challenged her right to remain in the country. Had she openly expressed anger against the United States or white Americans for their abuses of the black community, particularly while arguing against colonization, she would have risked confirming the notion that free blacks could not exist harmoniously in American society. However, by quoting from "The Fire-Worshippers" to express her disdain for colonization, she asserted that "Columbia's cause and [hers were] one" while subtly evoking the character of Hafed and his righteous rage against an oppressive race.

[93] Thomas Moore, *Lalla-Rookh: An Oriental Romance, 20th Edition* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1842), 222.

For Douglass, it was of the utmost importance that this connection between Hafed's anger and that of her own community be made in an obscure fashion. Giving clear voice to anti-American or anti-white sentiments would not only have been politically inexpedient, it could potentially have been dangerous as well. Douglass published her letter in July of 1832, less than one year after the Nat Turner rebellion. Though not the first revolt of its kind, it prompted what John W. Cromwell calls a "reign of terror" following the uprising. During this protracted backlash, white Americans violently asserted their institutionalized supremacy. Hundreds of free and enslaved blacks were tortured and killed in the months after the rebellion, particularly in the southern states.[94]

However, such violence was not limited to the South, as the fear of further uprisings reverberated throughout the nation. In a letter to the Pennsylvania State Legislature in 1832, James Forten wrote, "prejudice has recently been incited against [Pennsylvania's black community] by unfounded reports of their concurrence in promoting servile insurrections." Forten adamantly rejected such claims as "slander," calling black Pennsylvanians "children of the state" and noting that "many of them were descended from ancestors, who were raised with yours on this soil, to which they feel the strongest ties." As such, Forten wrote, each black citizen of Pennsylvania viewed him or herself as "a guardian and a

[94] John W. Cromwell, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," *The Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 2 (1920): 212, accessed January 23, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713592.

protector" of the state who understood "the necessity of maintaining law and order, for the promotion of the common wealth."[95]

Forten's resolute insistence that black Pennsylvanians felt compelled to discourage unrest due to their ancestral ties to the state demonstrates the precarious position of northern African American communities, particularly following the Nat Turner uprising. His strident assertion that black Pennsylvanians were "children of the state" points to the growing conception among many in the white community that blacks lacked allegiance to the governments under which they lived. His further disavowal of the idea that black Pennsylvanians encouraged insurgence indicates a link between this perceived lack of national loyalty and the notion that free blacks were dangerous to the white population. Thus, Forten's attempt to dispel such ideas can be viewed in conjunction with Douglass's published letter. Yet, while Forten and Douglass both asserted their loyalty to state and country, Douglass merged her display of patriotism with a veiled indication of rage and a willingness to fight against the oppression leveled at the black community.

This increased oppression following Turner's revolt did not just take the form of escalating "prejudice" against free blacks or "unfounded reports" of their involvement in rebellions. After the insurrection of 1831, new laws were proposed in many states including Pennsylvania aimed at restricting the rights of black Americans living within their boundaries. In Pennsylvania specifically, House Bill 446 was introduced in 1832 as an attempt to "prohibit the migration of

[95] James Forten, "To the Honorable the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), April 14, 1832.

negroes and mulattoes into this Commonwealth."[96] In addition to limiting the immigration of people of African descent into Pennsylvania, this bill would have required all black citizens to carry registration papers certifying their legal residence in the state or risk being arrested as fugitives.[97] Though the bill did not ultimately pass, it was tabled in the summer of 1832 and not voted on until the following year. This left Pennsylvania's black community in suspense as they waited for the legislature to decide their fate.[98]

During this period of uncertainty, Douglass delivered an address before the Female Literary Association. In this speech, which was later published in *The Liberator*, she expressed her growing commitment to activism with the following words:

> My Friends – My Sisters, […] An English writer has said, "We must feel deeply before we can act rightly […]." This is my experience. One short year ago, how different were my feelings on the subject of slavery! It is true, the wail of the captive sometimes came to my ear in the midst of my happiness, and caused my heart to bleed for his wrongs; but, alas! the impression was as evanescent as the early cloud and morning dew. I had formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts. But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own.[99]

In this excerpt from her address, Douglass frames her increasing devotion to the anti-slavery cause as a direct consequence of "the oppressor lurking on the border of [her] own peaceful home." As she claimed that such a localized danger

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[96] James Forten, "The Memorial of the Subscribers to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Pennsylvania," 1832, American Broadsides and Ephemera, record number 10F453EBA5069B70.

[97] Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box," 267.

[98] Winch, *A Gentleman of Color*, 287.

[99] Douglass, "Address" in "Mental Feasts."

was not present one year previously, I argue that House Bill 446 may have been the source of this threat. If this was indeed the case, then this published address represents one more instance in which Douglass inserted her voice as a black woman into a largely male-dominated public debate. James Forten led the fight against this bill, gathering a group of all-male signatories to endorse a memorial against it.[100] His open letter to the legislature was also signed only by men.[101] However, through its publication in *The Liberator*, Douglass's address transformed from a private oratorical performance given before the Female Literary Association to a public entry in one of Pennsylvania's most pressing political debates of the time.

Much like in her earlier "extract from a letter to a friend," Douglass's use of language in this speech seems particularly deliberate. By including the opening salutation "My Friends – My Sisters" in the published version of the address, Douglass reminds readers that the initial speech was given before the all-female audience of the FLA. This reference to the address's private origins may have helped shield her from any implications of impropriety related to her public foray into this debate. Furthermore, as she does in the "extract," she again offers a quotation from a published author. This allusion positioned her as both cultured and refined, two desirable traits for a woman of elevated social standing that likely lent her increased respectability in the eyes of her readers.

Yet perhaps the most crucially strategic use of language comes in the second half of her address, in which she reminds any of her "sisters" who might

[100] Forten, "The Memorial of the Subscribers."
[101] Forten, "To the Honorable."

wish to join her in anti-slavery activism of "the necessity of placing [their] whole dependence on God." Following this assertion, Douglass launches into an extended explanation of piety's importance in activism. "Poor, weak, frail creatures as we are," she claims, "we can do nothing for ourselves. He is all powerful; He is waiting to be gracious to us as a people."[102] This directive to rely on an omnipotent God in the course of one's activist work aligned with the views of many abolitionists, as evangelical and (particularly in the case of Philadelphia) Quaker teachings motivated many to join the anti-slavery movement. Through these words, Douglass put her piety on display for her audience. She played the part of a traditional woman, fervently religious and entirely self-effacing, in order to access respectability and shield herself and her ideas from ridicule or worse. Yet while performing the role of a "poor, weak, frail," woman who is unable to accomplish anything, she successfully inserted her political perspective into the public debate.

In this address, as in all of the FLA's work, a carefully-crafted performance of self coincides with political activism. When "showing doing" elocutionary ability, domesticity, piety, and a connection to the Society of Friends, the women of the Female Literary Association foregrounded their respectability while subtly challenging the notion of racial inferiority. In their published political letters and speeches, they emphasized their activist messages while relying on their demonstrated adherence to traditionally feminine norms to protect them from potential hostility. I argue that their written words *and* their

[102] Douglass, "Address" in "Mental Feasts."

displayed actions, their publications *and* their performances, their overt *and* their covert activism were all equally important to their work. Those who attempt to "break down the strong barrier of prejudice" must use both swords and shields.

"ANY MEMBER BECOMING OBNOXIOUS, MAY BE REMOVED" THE AFRIC-AMERICAN FEMALE INTELLIGENCE SOCIETY OF BOSTON

"Any member becoming obnoxious, may be removed from the Society by a vote of the majority."[1] These words appeared in *The Liberator* on January 7, 1832, as part of a notice announcing the formation of Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society (AAFIS). This group, formed less than four months after Philadelphia's Female Literary Association (FLA), became the second major black women's literary society in the United States.[2] Unlike the FLA, little is known about the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society or its members. Through the medium of print, groups like the Female Literary Association introduced their poetry, speeches, and debates to an outside audience. In this way, their private performances were made available to their contemporaries and ultimately preserved. When it comes to the AAFIS, however, the archive is almost silent. Yet when the little available information about the AAFIS is examined in connection with other black women's literary societies, other black female activists, and the culture in which the organization was embroiled, the silent archive begins to speak. Even with the limited available information about the society, I argue that the work of the AAFIS can be viewed as an activist performance aimed at redefining black femininity through the politics of respectability and the eschewal of all things "obnoxious."

[1] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 7, 1832, accessed March 3, 2015, http://phw01.newsbank.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/cache/ean/fullsize/pl_012272014_1331_15505_868.pdf.

[2] Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1936): 557-8, accessed August 2, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/ 2292029.

Examining the performance of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society requires a re-examination of what constitutes a performance. As I discussed in the introduction, in the context of this project a performance is defined in accordance with Richard Schechner's concept of "showing doing." According to this definition, the action of "showing doing" is different from simply "doing" because it involves an audience of some kind.[3] This audience need not be traditional. Anyone for whom a given action is being pointed to, underlined, or displayed constitutes an audience under this definition of performance.

While the concept of "showing doing" as performance remains constant across the three chapters contained in this project, studying the performance of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society raises questions about audience and embodiment. Performance, or "showing doing," describes a type of action a person or group of people can take. Implicit in this definition of performance is the idea that this action must be embodied before the intended audience. If it is not, how can it have an audience at all? The practices of the AAFIS were not physically enacted before an outside audience. Their meetings were private, their members did not speak publicly, and no essays or artistic works by AAFIS members were ever published. However, I argue that to view the practices of the AAFIS as occurring without an audience is to fail to consider the circumstances involved with being defined as an Other on the basis of one's body.

[3] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

As a function of their power, dominant groups are to varying degrees rendered neutral or invisible to themselves. Richard Dyer describes this phenomenon in *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, arguing that whites have the privilege of viewing themselves as raceless. He writes that "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we [whites] are just people."[4] Simone de Beauvoir articulated a similar concept with regard to gender in *The Second Sex,* positing that "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity."[5] A dominant group's ability to view its members as neutral or "just people" positions the very characteristic(s) aligned with their dominance (whiteness, maleness, etc.) as the least salient fact(s) about them. On the other hand, non-dominant subjects become defined by the characteristic(s) associated with their marginalized status. If that which is dominant is invisible, then that which is non-dominant becomes hyper-visible.

Therefore, if the non-dominant characteristic is related to the body of the non-dominant subject, as is the case with blackness and femaleness, then the non-dominant subject must endure a forced bodily conspicuousness. Even when the actual body is not present, this conspicuousness remains. For an example of this concept as it relates to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, one need

[4] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6.
[5] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. H.M. Parshley (New York, Knopf, 1953), 1.

look no further than the newspapers that announced its formation. In *The Liberator,* the AAFIS's constitution was published in the "Ladies' Department," a small section near the end of the publication devoted to the work of women.[6] The paper contained no "Men's Department," because as members of the dominant sex men were considered "just people," the neutral norm. Just as men's work was not specifically marked as such, the race of white writers was rarely specified within *The Liberator.* Black writers, however, were routinely identified according to their race. Despite the fact that the women of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society made the group's racial makeup clear by its title, *The Liberator* still identified the members of the AAFIS as "respectable females of color."[7] The *Genius of Universal Emancipation,* in its announcement of the AAFIS's formation, also took care to mention that the organization was composed of a group of "our colored sisters."[8] In this way, the AAFIS members' bodies were made salient even when the bodies themselves were not present. It was not simply a group of "people" who formed a literary society, but a group of black women.

As far as the historical record illuminates, there was no event at which members of the AAFIS physically presented themselves before an audience. They did, however, participate in their own forced bodily conspicuousness. They

[6] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," *The Liberator.*

[7] "Untitled Introduction" *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 7, 1832.

[8] Female Associations" *Genius of Universal Emancipation,* (Baltimore, MA), March 1832, accessed July 3, 2015, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=zctbAAAAQAAJ& printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl= en& pg=GBS.PA163. The "literary association […] organized by some of the colored females of Philadelphia" refers to the Female Literary Association.

announced their formation and published their constitution in abolitionist newspapers which marked them as "females of color" or "colored sisters."[9] They began their constitution with the words "Whereas the subscribers, women of color […]" to ensure the race and gender of the AAFIS's members was the first information given about the group. Even their title, Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, guaranteed that their blackness and femaleness were always mentioned whenever the group was discussed. As these examples suggest, the members of the AAFIS facilitated rather than fought the dominant culture's tendency to focus on their black, female bodies, thus helping to make those bodies visible to the dominant culture even when they were not physically present.

Participating in the process of making their raced and sexed bodies conspicuous was advantageous to the members of the AAFIS because it allowed them, to use Richard Schechner's words, to point to, underline, and display their work before the dominant culture. This process took place through a kind of para-embodiment, in which the performing bodies, though not physically present before their audience, still constituted that audience's focal point. By defining themselves as black women, the AAFIS's members harnessed the dominant culture's hyper-focus on black and female bodies in an effort to redefine for that culture what it meant to be a black woman. They were able to show members of that culture what black women were capable of doing by showing what *they* were

[9] The women of the AAFIS only met with William Lloyd Garrison and a few of his associates in order to announce their group's formation in *The Liberator*. Benjamin Lundy of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* learned of the group through *The Liberator's* article and decided to publish portions of their constitution in his own newspaper.

doing. They were, in short, "showing doing" black femininity, and redefining this concept for the dominant culture through their performance of it.

Unfortunately, the extant archival materials directly related to these performances are extremely limited. This lack of documentation is an absence in the archive, a hole in the evidence around black women's activist performances in antebellum literary societies. However, as Odai Johnson notes, "performances' disappearances are never utterly without a trace."[10] In "Working Up from the Post Holes: (Im)Material Witness, Evidence, and Narrativity in the Colonial American Theatre," Johnson explores the historiographical practice of working with archival absences as he constructs a study of an eighteenth-century Williamsburg playhouse using no direct evidence other than the post holes that marked the building's former location. Having nothing but these holes in the ground, Johnson digs deeper, mining information from sources outside of but relevant to the Williamsburg playhouse in order to uncover more about the theater itself. Due to the limited archival information directly related to the AAFIS, this study of the group's activist performances must employ a similar historiographical practice. Filling in the gaps in the archival documentation of the AAFIS requires looking beyond the group itself and exploring the associations, activists, and culture connected to it.

To begin understanding the AAFIS and the activist performances of its members, I start by exploring the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society in

[10] Odai Johnson, "Working Up from the Post Holes: (Im)Material Witness, Evidence, and Narrativity in the Colonial American Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 46, no. 2 (2005), 196, accessed August 1, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10. 1017/S0040557405000128.

connection with the ostensibly similar Female Literary Association. Since these two groups were the first of many antebellum black women's literary societies, and since they were formed within months of each other, scholars often link the FLA and the AAFIS and credit both with sparking the proliferation of black women's literary societies across the Northeast and northern Midwest.[11] Benjamin Lundy, the editor of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation,* hoped this would indeed be the case. An article published in his paper in March of 1832 stated

> We are glad to find that Associations, benevolent and literary appear to be multiplying among our colored sisters. We learn by the *Liberator* that one has recently been established at Boston, under the name of The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. A literary association was also some months since organized by some of the colored females of Philadelphia. We wish them both success and a long career of usefulness. We hail with delight every intimation that our Afric-American sisters are becoming more sensible of the value of mental cultivation and are exerting themselves to procure it. We have copied the Preamble and such articles of the Constitution of the Boston Society as will best explain their objects and be most useful to those who may wish to imitate them.[12]

As the comments in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* suggest, both the FLA and the AAFIS were seen as related entities and even potential forerunners of future societies almost from the time of their inceptions.

There were definite similarities between the FLA and the AAFIS, as antebellum commentators and contemporary scholars have noted. Many of these similarities become evident through an examination of the single document left behind by the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society – its constitution – and the governing text of the Female Literary Association. First, these documents

[11] Teresa Zackodnick, *Press, Platform, Pulpit: Black Feminist Publics in the Era of Reform* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 52.

[12] "Female Associations" *Genius of Universal Emancipation.*

indicate that the FLA and the AAFIS were organized under a comparable governing structure, with a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary leading each group. In both cases, the women who filled these positions were elected annually by a majority vote. Additional committees (a Board of Directors for the AAFIS and a Purchasing Committee and Examination Committee for the FLA) were also elected each year by the societies.[13]

Such a structure indicates that the women of the AAFIS, like the women of the FLA, were interested in creating and maintaining an organization entirely separate from men. It was not uncommon in the 1830s for black women's groups to be led by men, even if all the members were female. Though this phenomenon was less prevalent in cities like Boston and Philadelphia than in others such as New York,[14] the fact that the AAFIS and the FLA were led by their own, democratically-elected members sets them apart. Furthermore, both organizations' willingness to have their internal governing structure published suggests that they were committed not just to doing the work of leadership, but to "showing doing" this work being accomplished by black women. Despite the relative novelty of a black woman assuming a supervisory position even within her own organization, both the FLA and the AAFIS made it clear to the public that their societies would thrive with only their own members at the helm.

The financial structures of these organizations were also similar. Both the Female Literary Association and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society

[13] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), December 3, 1831. "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.

[14] Leslie M. Alexander, *African Or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 67.

charged organizational dues. The AAFIS required each member to pay 25 cents upon entry into the organization. After this initial fee, members were to pay 12.5 cents to the AAFIS during each month of their membership. [15] According to this payment schedule, the total dues for AAFIS members equaled $1.62½ for the first year and $1.50 for each subsequent year of their involvement in the group. The FLA asked its members to pay a comparable $1.50 annually. This fee could be tendered in full at the start of the year or divided into monthly installments depending on what "the Association may deem expedient."[16]

This similarity in organizational dues seems to suggest that the members of the FLA and the AAFIS were of comparable socioeconomic privilege.[17] Due to the relative wealth of the FLA's known participants and the solid educational background required to engage in the group's work, it is likely that many if not all of the FLA's members were among Philadelphia's black economic elite. While neither a list of members nor a description of the group's practices exists for the AAFIS, the cost of enrollment in the organization does provide clues as to what classes of women were able to join. Of the approximately 380 black household heads in Boston in the 1830s, nearly 75 percent were employed as either laborers

[15] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.
[16] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator.*
[17] While the Female Literary Association's constitution does not specify any use for these funds beyond the purchasing of books, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society used its money to rent meeting halls and finance a mutual aid program for its members. The fact that the AAFIS also functioned as a mutual aid society might imply that the women of this organization were less economically privileged than the women of the FLA. It is possible that members of the Boston society felt the need to insure themselves against illness or monetary trouble while the women of the Philadelphia association trusted their own financial solvency even in times of crisis. However, it is also possible that some or even all of the women of the Female Literary Association were part of other mutual aid groups. Thus, I argue that the differences in how these organizations used their money do not necessarily indicate any similarity or difference in the financial status of their members.

or mariners.[18] Between 1830 and 1832, the average daily pay for a male, non-farm laborer in Massachusetts was 75 cents.[19] Mariners were typically paid at a rate comparable to that of on-shore laborers during this time.[20] Female workers in Massachusetts were compensated at roughly 42 percent of the male pay-rate, which meant they earned about 31.5 cents per day for non-farm related labor.[21] Therefore, a man working six days a week as a laborer or mariner could expect to earn roughly $235.00 per year, and women working the same number of days could expect approximately $90.00 in annual compensation.

The AAFIS's 12.5 cent monthly dues only represented between 15 and 40 percent of the average, working-class head-of-household's daily income, depending on their gender. However, in 1830s Boston, the cost of living was roughly $450.00 per year.[22] Therefore a working-class, Boston family with both an adult man and an adult woman earning an income still took in $125.00 less per year on average than the annual cost of living. The gap between a household income and a living wage was even wider for African American families, as black labors were typically compensated at a lower rate than white laborers for the same work.[23] As a result, most black, working-class families in 1830s Boston could not

[18] Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds. *The Black Worker to 1869* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1978), 129-33.

[19] Stanley Lebergott, "Wage Trends, 1800-1900," in Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century, ed. The Conference on Research in Income and Wealth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 462.

[20] W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 162.

[21] Lebergott, "Wage Trends, 1800-1900," 460.

[22] Peter C. Holloran, *Boston's Wayward Children: Social Services for Homeless Children, 1830-1930* (Cranbury, NJ, Associated University Press, 1989), 140.

[23] Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 161. While black laborers were paid less than white laborers for the same work, black mariners and white mariners were typically paid comparable wages if the voyage originated from a Northern port.

afford to enroll their children in the few schools for black students within the city.[24] Instead, black children in Boston often worked rather than studied in order to contribute to the family finances.[25]

All this suggests that, for working-class black women in 1830s Boston, membership in the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was out of reach. With most of these women and their families earning at rates well below the cost of living, they were not able to afford the organizational dues. Furthermore, considering the difficulty of sending children to school due to financial constraints, setting aside money for adult women to join a literary society likely was not a priority in most households. As a result, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, as with the FLA, was probably only populated by those women who belonged to the city's relatively wealthy black families.

Perhaps the privilege of the members of both the FLA and the AAFIS, at least in comparison to other black Philadelphians and Bostonians, contributed to the similarities in each group's stated mission and purpose. The preambles for the constitutions of both the Female Literary Association and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society indicate that the women felt a sense of responsibility to their communities, and that this feeling was an inciting factor in each group's creation. The women of the FLA wrote that they felt "a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race" to engage in "the cultivation of the intellectual powers bestowed upon us by the God of nature."[26] The members of

[24] James O. Horton and Louise E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997) 151-2.
[25] Holloran, *Boston's Wayward Children,* 140.
[26] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator.*

the AAFIS wrote that they were moved "by a natural feeling for the welfare of our friends […] to associate for the diffusion of knowledge."[27]

Each group's preamble suggests that its members sought to further educate themselves not simply for personal advantage, but for the good of their friends and communities as a whole. As women of relative economic privilege, the "cultivation of [their] intellectual powers" through their involvement in these societies likely did not offer them any significant monetary benefits. They were already wealthier than the majority of black Bostonians and Philadelphians. Most probably had access to at least some education prior to their participation in these literary groups, which means they were likely not counting on these organizations to help them gain basic reading or writing proficiency. Instead, their socioeconomic status allowed them to focus not solely on personal gain, but on community uplift.

As their constitutions indicate, the women of both the FLA and the AAFIS viewed education as a means to accomplish this goal. Thus, both organizations were formed to be more than just literature circles or book clubs for relatively wealthy black women. They were intended to be activist groups. I argue that the women's participation in these societies constituted an activist performance aimed at redefining blackness. In addition to further cultivating their own intellects, the members of both the FLA and the AAFIS showed members of the dominant culture a vision of intellectualism and refinement among the black community. These groups made themselves and their missions known through the

[27] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.

medium of print by publishing their constitutions. Through not just doing intellectual work, but 'showing doing" it, these groups challenged the dominant culture's notion that people of African descent could not participate successfully in such activities.

Exploring the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society in connection to the Female Literary Association reveals similarities in the structure, finances, members, and missions of the two groups. Even the performances of femininity and blackness within the two organizations can be linked. Moreover, an examination of later black women's literary societies reveals similar points of connection. As Benjamin Lundy apparently hoped when he published portions of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society's constitution "for those who may wish to imitate them," the black women's literary societies that formed in the wake of the FLA and the AAFIS shared many of these earlier organizations' components. From the minimal extant materials available regarding later organizations, it appears that the governing structures, wealthier makeup, and to some extent the cost and use of membership fees among black women's literary societies across the antebellum north were comparable to those of the FLA and the AAFIS. Even the social justice component of these organizations was a common thread.[28]

[28] Joseph Willson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, Merrihew and Thompson, 1841), 107-109. The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, *The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color in the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1838), 10. Samuel Cornish, "On the Death of Ms. Ray (Excerpt from the Editor's Sermon)," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), March 4, 1837. There were number of known black women's literary societies in the antebellum North, but only a few whose records are still in existence. However, among those that did leave some type of record, clear similarities between them, the FLA, and the AAFIS exist. For example, the Minerva Literary Association and the

With all of the similarities between these two early literary societies and the many subsequent organizations, it is tempting to view the AAFIS as simply another version of the FLA and a secondary forerunner of those organizations that followed. Such a conclusion is particularly appealing given that the AAFIS's constitution, from which these points of connection can be drawn, is the only archival document directly related to the organization that is still in existence. When the single extant document from the AAFIS indicates so many similarities between this group and better-understood Female Literary Association, the most obvious assumption is that the two organizations were in fact analogous entities. Yet despite all their similarities, and despite the limited sources of archival information directly related to the AAFIS, significant distinctions can be determined between this society, the Female Literary Association, and even the later black women's literary groups. The contrasts between these organizations, along with the comparisons, can be used to shed more light on the lacunae surrounding the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society.

The same constitutions that highlight the similarities between the two groups also betray their differences. One of these distinctions is evident in Article Seventeen of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society's constitution,

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Edgeworth Literary Association are both mentioned in *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia,* which suggests that both of these groups were comprised of economically privileged women. *Sketches* notes that these were all-female societies and mentions no male leaders, which suggests that the organizations were governed by the women involved in the clubs. It is likely that the members of these organizations were also charged dues for the purchasing of books, as they had a combined total of eighty volumes in their libraries according the writers of *The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color in the City of Philadelphia*. The Ladies' Literary Society of New York, which will be discussed in the third chapter, was also run by its own members. The obituary of one of these women, Henrietta Regulus Ray, indicates that she served as the first president of the society. This suggests that the group was organized with a similar, all-female governing structure.

which explains that the group was able to force "any member becoming obnoxious" out of the organization by a majority vote.[29] The Female Literary Association's constitution contains no such provision. Its governing document is confined to a preamble stating the group's mission and purpose, an explanation of the FLA's organizational structure, descriptions of officers' duties, and a general outline of the events to take place at weekly and monthly group meetings. The sole commentary on membership contained within the FLA's constitution appears in Article One, which simply states that new members must be voted into the organization by a majority. Paying dues was the only requirement listed as necessary to maintain membership.[30] Edicts on the behavior of members, whether obnoxious or otherwise, are nowhere to be found.

The available information regarding other antebellum black women's literary societies provides no evidence to suggest that these groups removed members who exhibited "obnoxious" behavior. The Minerva Literary Society and the Edgeworth Society, both of Philadelphia, apparently considered decorum in their selection of reading materials, as each group was organized for "the encouragement and promotion of polite literature."[31] However, there is nothing to indicate that these groups' apparent commitment to propriety extended into a policy enabling the ejection of certain members based on their conduct. The New York Ladies' Literary Society presented public dialogues on polite behavior, but this group also seems to have had no official regulations regarding how obnoxious

[29] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.
[30] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator.*
[31] Willson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society,* 107-9.

members would be handled.[32] The amount of available information on antebellum black women's literary societies in general is extremely limited. As a result, it is not possible to be certain as to whether or not any of these groups other than the AAFIS had such a stringent policy regarding the behavior of their members. However, at least among the groups for which descriptive information does exist, it appears that the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society may have been unique in its constitutionally-granted ability to excise "any member becoming obnoxious" from its ranks.

This points to a difference in the way the members of the AAFIS envisioned themselves and their organization. By focusing on members' behavior so intently that they enshrined within their constitution the right to remove any "obnoxious" woman from their society, the AAFIS made it clear that promoting communal uplift by "associat[ing] for the diffusion of knowledge" (and by "showing doing" this process) was only one of its purposes. This literary society was also invested in cultivating a group of women who behaved in a specific, socially acceptable manner, and who were comfortable using their democratic power within the organization to enforce this conduct in others. By giving themselves the right to get rid of any member who did not meet the AAFIS's standards of behavior, this organization took the steps necessary to ensure that their society remained effectively homogenous with regard to each woman's deportment and self-presentation. This stringent behavioral management policy raises two questions which must be explored in order to better understand the

[32] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), September 23, 1837.

Afric-American Female Intelligence Society and the activist performances of its members. First, what exactly constituted unacceptable or "obnoxious" conduct according to the AAFIS, and second, why was it so important to this society that such behavior be quashed among its members?

Despite the blunt clarity with which the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society claimed the right to eject "any member becoming obnoxious," its constitution is vague about what was officially considered obnoxious conduct. No definition of such behavior is offered, and no examples of unacceptable actions are provided. However, the constitution of the AAFIS does offer some clues as to what conduct would not have been tolerated by the society. In addition to warning members against obnoxiousness, the constitution specifies that "all candidates for membership shall be of good moral character."[33] The preamble further states that the society was formed to encourage "the suppression of vice and immorality" and to foster "the cherishing of such virtues as will render us happy and useful to society." It claims that suppressing vice and cherishing useful virtues were as important to promoting "the natural welfare" of their community as the diffusion of knowledge.[34] Considering the constitution's focus on curbing immorality, vice, and obnoxiousness among members, I suggest that these concepts were linked for the women of the AAFIS.

This perceived union between the concepts of obnoxiousness, immorality, and a lack of useful virtues was consistent with contemporary arguments about a woman's proper role in society. As I note in chapter one, Barbara Welter argues

[33] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.
[34] Ibid.

in “The Cult of True Womanhood” that the most useful and necessary virtues for middle- and upper-class women during this period were “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” These were the attributes “by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society.”[35] Those who appeared to live up to these virtues could be judged True Women. Those who failed to meet this standard could be called, among other descriptors, both obnoxious and immoral.

Yet the less-than-True Woman was more than just a nuisance. She was considered by some to be a danger to society, “the enemy of God, of civilization, and of the Republic.”[36] According to this idea, it was necessary for a woman to uphold the “useful virtues” of True Womanhood because the “stable order of society depended on her maintaining her traditional place in it.”[37] Such an understanding of a woman’s place at once restricted her and ascribed to her a specific form of power. She had little control over the bounds of her behavior if she attempted to elevate herself to the status of a True Woman. Yet if she conducted herself according to the “useful virtues” of True Womanhood, she could claim to be a force for the stability and welfare of society.

Welter describes the power associated with True Womanhood by calling it “the fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility which the nineteenth-century American woman had – to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white

[35] Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152, accessed November 16, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 174.

hand."[38] As her comment suggests, True Womanhood, and the power that came with it, were typically ascribed to white women. Black women were often shut out of the opportunity to achieve this status and its concomitant power. Stereotypes about black women's sexual promiscuity kept them from being considered pious or pure by the dominant white community in general. [39] Financial necessity required many black women to work outside the home, which meant they could be viewed as neither submissive nor domestic.[40] Thus, due to the intersection of social stigma and economic constraints, black women in general could not claim the mantle of True Woman or access the social power that title conferred.

Such power should not be underestimated. Since they were perceived as maintaining the "stable order of society" by cultivating and displaying "useful virtues," those who were considered True Women were afforded a certain amount of respect. This respect benefitted white women on a personal level, but for black women it could arguably have been advantageous on a communal level. Respectability was seen by many in Boston's black community as a way to break down the notion of racial inferiority, and Black Bostonians had a history of staging events aimed, at least in part, at displaying themselves in a respectable light. One notable example of such an event was the Abolition Celebration of

[38] Ibid., 152.

[39] Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Toward the Images of Black Women" in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, ed. Joan C Chrisler, Carla Golden, Patricia D Rozee (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2012), 294.

[40] Julie Roy Jeffery, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Anti-Slavery Movement,"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 206.

1808, which commemorated the congressional act "prohibit(ing) the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States."[41] During this celebration, hundreds of people from Boston's black community paraded through the city's streets before congregating to hear a sermon in the African Meeting House. In *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts,* Margot Minardi argues that "black leaders embraced such commemorative occasions as an opportunity to display their community's respectability to their white neighbors."[42] Unfortunately, this attempt to cultivate an air of respectability before the dominant culture was not received as it was intended to be.

This parade, and others like it, prompted a series of broadsides which parodied the events. These "Bobalition" broadsides, which were published in Boston from the 1810s to the 1830s, mocked the African American community's commemorative celebration and the very notion of black respectability.[43] In *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North,* Douglas A. Jones Jr. argues that these broadsides presented a "crude and vacuous blackness" which was meant to "signify the human shortcomings of all black people."[44] This process was often accomplished through the use of drawn

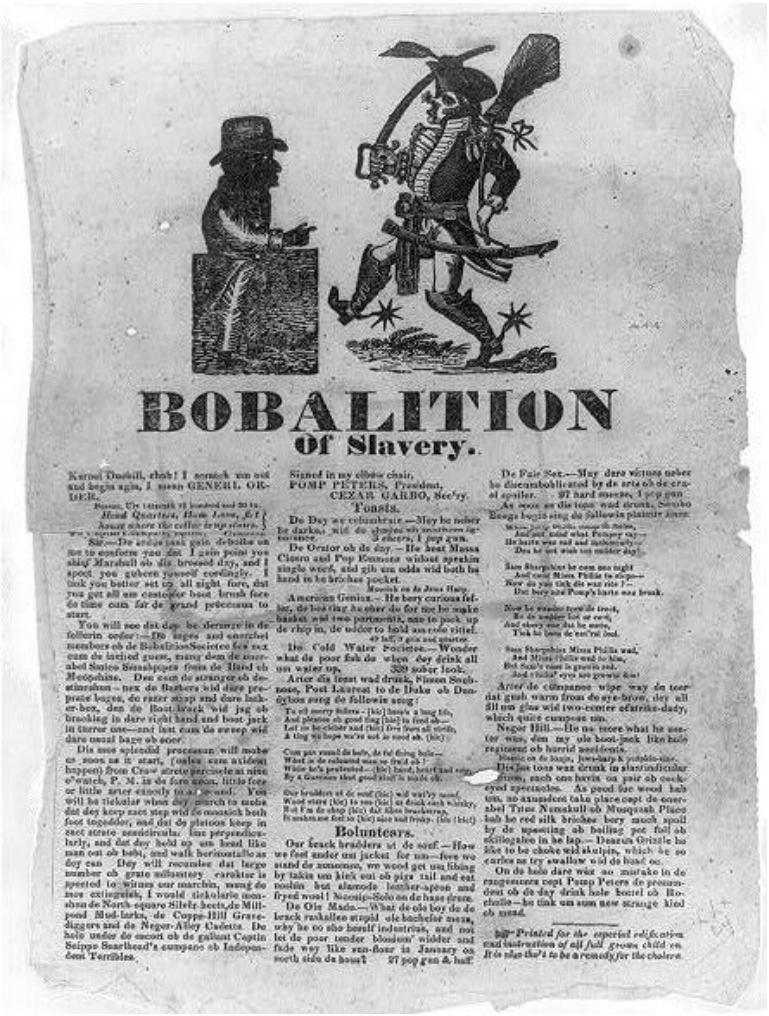
[41] The Ninth Congress of the United States of America, "Act of 1807," New York Public Library, http://abolition.nypl.org/content/docs/text/Act_of_1807.pdf?__utma=10456805.880471451.1440754646.1440754646.1440754646.1&__utmb=10456805.2.10.1440754646&__utmc=10456805&__utmx=-&__utmz=10456805.1440754646 .1.1.utmcsr =google|utmccn=%28organic%29|utmcmd=organic|utmctr=%28not%20provided%29&__utmv=-__utm k=223595419.

[42] Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 110.

[43] Ibid. These broadsides were also published in other cities, but Boston was the first place of publication. Later "Bobalition" documents were based on the initial Boston prototype.

[44] Douglas A. Jones, Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 41-3.

caricatures mocking black people who dared to claim respectability, and malapropism-laden language attributed to the people represented in those drawings.



BOBALITION
Of Slavery.

Figure 5

The "Bobalition of Slavery" broadside, published in Boston during the year of the AAFIS's formation, is typical of such documents. As shown in figure five, the top portion contains a crudely-rendered image of two figures. The first is a black man whose face is featureless and without definition. He points to the second figure, a black man dressed in ceremonial military regalia who represents the leader of the Abolition Celebration's parade. This figure holds a sword in one hand and a broom in the other. He appears to be in whiteface, though the dark circles around his eyes and

mouth make his blackness easily apparent.[45] Such an image seems calculated to suggest that blacks were incapable of attaining the respectability at which they grasped, and that any attempt by blacks to seem respectable (for example, by participating in a ceremonial event) would ultimately cause them to appear ridiculous. The figure in whiteface makes it particularly clear that respectability was considered by many within the dominant culture to be an exclusively white trait. According to this line of thinking, a black person attempting to appear respectable was analogous to a black person attempting to appear white. It was an act considered both absurd and futile.

The idea that black respectability was a ridiculous concept was further emphasized in the columns of text below these caricatures, which consist of garbled language meant to mock the African American dialect. The first two columns contain a discussion of the Abolition Celebration so full of malapropisms and faux-phonetic spellings as to be almost indecipherable.[46] The third column, as was common in the "Bobalition" series, offers a derisive ode to black women.[47] This section consists primarily of a song about a man whose love interest elopes with someone else. It begins with the following entreaty: "De Fair Sex – May dere virtues neber be discumboblicated."[48] The mocking ridiculousness of the language coupled with the song about a promiscuous black woman creates an

[45] "Bobalition of Slavery," (Boston, 1832), Library of Congress, Rare Books and Special Collections Division, accessed August 8, 2015, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph. 3a41025/. The figure in military regalia may also have evoked Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. If so, the "Bobalition" broadside may also have been away to mock these two Haitian revolutionaries and alleviate white fears around black uprisings.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 40.

[48] "Bobalition of Slavery," (Boston, 1832).

almost palpable irony. By alluding to black women's virtue in this manner, the creators of this "Bobalition" broadside clearly suggest that the entire concept of black women as moral or respectable people is ludicrous.

While such racist characterizations might be unsurprising from pro-slavery advocates like those behind the "Bobalition" series, even many whites sympathetic to the abolitionist cause remained mired in the ideology of racial inferiority. The coverage of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* is an example of this belief system at work among white anti-slavery activists. Benjamin Lundy, the white abolitionist who edited this paper, did run an article praising the women of the AAFIS for forming a literary society. However, embedded in this praise, the article expressed a paternalistic "delight" that black women were "becoming more sensible of the value of mental cultivation."[49] This phrase from the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* suggests that, in forming the AAFIS, the group's members were only doing what white men such as Lundy had long known to be the best course of action. It ostensibly commends the members of the AAFIS while simultaneously impugning their intelligence and, as a result, subtly propagating the notion of racial inferiority.

This was almost certainly not Lundy's intention when he published the article announcing the formation of the AAFIS. Lundy's work was dedicated to promoting the anti-slavery cause, not to advancing the doctrine of racial inferiority. Yet the fact that a devoted white abolitionist was unintentionally

[49] "Female Associations" *Genius of Universal Emancipation.*

promoting the concept of white supremacy within his own anti-slavery paper points to the difficulty antebellum black women faced in positioning themselves as respectable. If these women were met with a lack of esteem from their allies as well as their enemies, how could they cultivate the respect that might help them redefine blackness and combat the concept of racial inferiority?

I argue that confining their behavior strictly to those actions which remained within the bounds of True Womanhood was one strategy the AAFIS used to accomplish this goal. Though most black women would have been unable to meet the strict requirements associated with True Womanhood, the members of the AAFIS were not most black women. Their relative wealth may have allowed them to forgo working outside the home, or to remain in traditionally-feminine careers such as teaching. Thus their domesticity was not compromised by economic constraints as it was for the majority of Boston's black female community. The fact that these women led their own group might initially seem to undermine their submissiveness. However, because this was an all-female organization, I argue that the women of the AAFIS could take on leadership roles within their society while still appearing submissive to men. Their purity was confirmed by their commitment to cherishing the "useful virtues" associated with femininity while abjuring immorality and vice. Instead of falling prey to these ills, the group vowed in their preamble to "trust […], by the blessings of God" that they would be able "to accomplish the object of their union."[50] With this reference to their faith and submission to a higher power, the women of the AAFIS

[50] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.

confirmed their piety. Thus, within their constitution, the members of this society displayed all of the virtues necessary to be considered True Women.

The operative word here is "displayed." These women could have privately committed themselves to the virtues of True Womanhood. However, without their conduct becoming public knowledge this commitment would have done nothing to increase their respectability, or by extension the respectability of their community, in the eyes of the dominant culture. It was not enough to simply behave as True Women. They had to perform those behaviors for the dominant culture whose collective minds they intended to change. Yet given the nature of True Womanhood, the women of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society had to find a way to fit their performance within the boundaries of personal conduct allowed to them. True Women did not physically perform before groups of men. They remained in the private sphere, adhering to their useful virtues from within this traditionally feminine arena. The challenge for this group, then, was to turn the inherently private act of committing to True Womanhood into a public performance directed at an audience of the dominant culture without changing the nature of the act itself.

I argue that the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society met this challenge by harnessing the dominant culture's hyper-focus on their black, female bodies. Throughout their existence as a group, the members of the AAFIS never published anything publicly other than their constitution. Yet in doing so, they were identified as black women by the editors of the newspapers who printed their governing document, by their preamble's opening lines, and by their chosen

name.[51] This same document that, when published, triply emphasized their raced and sexed bodies, also outlined their commitment to conducting themselves as True Women. I therefore argue that the publication of their constitution in *The Liberator* and the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* facilitated a para-embodied performance of True Womanhood. The members of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society did not physically appear before members of the dominant culture. However, through the publication of their constitution, their black female bodies performing the behaviors associated with True Womanhood were nevertheless brought into focus.

By means of this performance, the women of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society posited a new definition of blackness and black femininity for the dominant culture. True Womanhood was considered unobtainable for black women, the exclusive purview of those with "frail, white" bodies.[52] Yet through their para-embodied performance of this traditional version of femininity, the members of the AAFIS showed that black women could also be "True Women." By extension, they too had the power to "uphold the pillars of the temple" of American society, and therefore they too were worthy of respect. I do not suggest that the members of the dominant culture agreed with or accepted to this new definition of black femininity put forth by the AAFIS. However, I argue that the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society's para-embodied

[51] "Female Associations" *Genius of Universal Emancipation.* "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.

[52] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152.

performance of True Womanhood served as a means for them to challenge the prevailing definition by forwarding one of their own.

What the women of the AAFIS did not do, however, was offer a new definition of appropriate femininity. While they certainly expanded this definition by suggesting that black women could be considered True Women, they presented little or no challenge to the concept of True Womanhood itself. A True Woman was a respectable woman, and respectability was seen as a means to combat the notion of racial inferiority. Therefore, given that achieving the status of True Women was a way for the members of the AAFIS to combat racism, these women had a vested interest in endorsing the idea of True Womanhood rather than challenging it.

The AAFIS's apparent commitment to uphold rather than break down the concept of True Womanhood is rooted in the female abolitionist culture of 1830s Boston. During this decade, a sharp divide began to emerge among Boston's female abolitionists, and those who commented on their activities, about the appropriate way for women to engage in anti-slavery activism. Debra Gold Hansen's *Strained Sisterhood* studies this division through an exploration of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. In this text, Hansen argues that religious and class differences contributed to a divergence in Boston women's understanding of their role in the abolitionist moment. She argues that wealthy, white, predominantly Unitarian women tended to support fellow Unitarian William Lloyd Garrison and his liberal political beliefs about racial and gender equality. They generally advocated for and assumed a greater degree of latitude

regarding their role as women within the abolitionist movement than did their middle-class female counterparts.[53]

These "boarding house abolitionists," as anti-slavery activist Caroline Weston derisively called them,[54] were primarily Congregationalists and Baptists. As members of more traditional religious organizations, these women objected to what they saw as the co-opting of the anti-slavery cause to forward the burgeoning women's rights movement.[55] For them, participation in abolitionism aligned with their religious beliefs and was a natural outgrowth of their prescribed role as True Women. They saw themselves as society's most pious and pure, and thus its moral arbiters. This made it nothing less than their duty to participate in the anti-slavery movement. However, they were also paragons of submissiveness and domesticity, which meant that they rejected the notion that their involvement in abolitionism should be used to expand the sphere and scope of women's influence in general.

Hansen's work illuminates this divide among Boston's white female abolitionists, but makes little mention of how the city's black women dealt with the convergence of activism and femininity. She does note that the majority of the black women in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society sided with the group's wealthy, white, Unitarian members.[56] However, I argue that this was due to the

[53] Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 93-112.

[54] Caroline Weston, "[Letter to] Dear Anne & Deborah," September 11, 1839, Chapman-Weston Papers, Boston Public Library, Anti-Slavery Collection Online, accessed November 29, 2014, https://archive.org/stream/ lettertodearanne00west12#page/n0/mode/1up.

[55] Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, 112-123.

[56] Ibid., 26.

Unitarian stance on racial equality relative to that of the Congregationalists and Baptists. When the society was formed in 1834 under the leadership of these middle-class women, only whites were allowed to join. The society did not integrate until William Lloyd Garrison declined an invitation to attend one of their meetings, citing the group's "unwillingness to admit colored females" as evidence of their "vulgar and insane prejudice."[57] Seven years later, when the organization divided along religious and class lines over the question of women's proper role in activism and in society, the majority of its black members aligned themselves with the wealthy Unitarians. However, as Shirley J. Yee notes in *Black Women Abolitionists*, this decision was likely due more to these women's support for the Unitarian Garrison than any desire to combat the notion of True Womanhood through their activism.[58]

This is not to suggest that Boston's black female community had no interest in challenging the limiting definition of traditional femininity. However, their intersectional identities made it beneficial for them to approach their activist work with a certain degree of pragmatism. Being both black and female made them doubly marginalized. Cultivating respectability was a way to combat their marginalization. The wealthy Unitarians of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, such as the Chapmans, Westons, and Southwicks, could rely on their family names and family fortunes to provide them with an automatic social

[57] William Lloyd Garrison, Letter to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society," April 9, 1834, Letterbook of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, MA).

[58] Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860 (*Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 102.

respectability. This allowed them to bypass the bounds of True Womanhood in their activism without enduring much censure. Arguably, the black women of this society who sided with these Unitarians could rely on their association with these wealthy and socially powerful white women to shield them from condemnation.

The women of the AAFIS, however, had no such advantages. No black family in Boston had the social clout of the Chapmans, Westons, or Southwicks, nor did they have the economic means. Some of the city's wealthiest black families were supported by barbers, blacksmiths, and used clothing dealers.[59] Those employed in such trades brought in enough money to pay the AAFIS's monthly dues and provide their families with a relative degree of economic privilege compared to most black Bostonians. However, their finances in no way compared to the wealth of Boston's upper-class, white abolitionists. Thus, the members of the AAFIS had to combat the double-marginalization of being both black and female, and they could not rely on either social or economic capital to mitigate that marginalization. Claiming the title of True Women was a way for them to access a degree of the respectability that white, wealthy, and socially powerful anti-slavery activists could take for granted.

While the members of the AAFIS appear to have adopted this strategy, other black female activists did challenge the concept of True Womanhood along with the notion of racial inferiority. The most famous of these was Maria Stewart, the first American woman of any race known to have spoken publicly about

[59] The David Walker Memorial Project, "Black Boston," accessed August 20, 2015, http://www.davidwalkermemorial.org/black-boston#TOC-Employment-.

abolition before an audience of men and women.[60] In doing so, she violated the social taboo against women speaking before "promiscuous audiences." This taboo was strongly linked to the notion of True Womanhood, as any woman who stepped into the public sphere and claimed the authority to address men as well as women broke with the principles of both submissiveness and domesticity.[61] In "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Woman's Rights Movement," Susan Zaeske argues that, in defying this taboo, women who spoke before mixed-gender audiences to promote the anti-slavery cause also took a "crucial early step" in the emerging movement for gender equality.[62]

As the first woman of any race to take this step, Maria Stewart provides a counterpoint through which to study the performance of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. This counterpoint is all the more appropriate considering that Stewart's first public speech was given at a meeting of the AAFIS.[63] It is clear from the text of this speech that a good portion of the society's members disapproved of Stewart. During her address, she stated that "a lady of high distinction among us, observed to me, that I might never expect your homage."[64] Likely, these women objected to her essay entitled "Religion and the

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[60] Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 1.

[61] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 9-10.

[62] Susan Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Woman's Rights Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 2 (1995): 204, accessed August 24, 2015, http://web.b. ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/ehost/pdfviewer /pdfviewer?sid=63111352-260b-44b7-be2d-363a46684545%40 sessionmgr111&vid=6&hid=128.

[63] Maria Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), April 28, 1832.

[64] Ibid.

Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build." This essay was the only work by Stewart that was published before she gave her speech to the women of the AAFIS.[65] In it, Stewart urges the "daughters of Africa" to "Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves!"[66]

While the members of the AAFIS may have opposed the assertion that women should leave the domestic sphere and "immortalize [their] names beyond the grave,"[67] Stewart made it clear that she did not seek their approval, nor did she attempt to cater to the sensibilities of the time. In the opening line of her speech, she announced that "The frowns of the world shall never discourage me, nor its smiles flatter me; for with the help of God I am resolved to withstand the fiery darts of the devil, and the assaults of wicked men."[68] She proved this true in subsequent speeches, in which she spoke about the oppression black women in particular faced in a society that devalued both their race and their sex. She declared that the black woman was "the servant of servants," and that the "powerful force of prejudice" kept her in this position. Furthermore, she specifically argued against using True Womanhood to combat this prejudice. "Let our girls possess what amiable qualities of soul they may;" she reasoned, "let their characters be fair and spotless as innocence itself; let their natural taste and

[65] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 25.

[66] Maria Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," in *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (Washington DC, Enterprise Publishing Company, 1879).

[67] Ibid.

[68] Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator.*

ingenuity be what they may; it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants."[69] In making this claim, she effectively denounced the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society's work by asserting that achieving respectability was an ineffective and ultimately useless political strategy for black women.

Stewart's speeches provide clues not just about her messages and beliefs, but also about her performance as an orator. These texts offer an image of a woman who spoke with fervor, and who envisioned her orations as a form of combat. She described herself as "active" and "bold as a lion" at the pulpit, committed to fighting "the Lord's battle" until her "voice expire in death."[70] She was "compelled […] to come forward" by a "holy indignation" which "fired [her] soul," and caused her to "exclaim" rather than simply speak.[71] Yet for all her vigor and intensity, she also described herself as firm, unyielding, and even steely in her demeanor during these performances. She credited her stubborn resolve as an orator to God, "For He hath clothed my face with steel and lined my forehead with brass. He hath put his testimony within me and engraven his seal on my forehead. And with these weapons I have indeed set the fiends of earth and Hell at defiance."[72]

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[69] Maria Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at Franklin Hall, Boston, September 21st, 1832" *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), November 17, 1832.

[70] Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator.*

[71] Maria Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston, Feb. 27th, 1833," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), April 27, 1833.

[72] Maria Stewart, "Farewell Address to her Friends in the City of Boston," in *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (Washington DC, Enterprise Publishing Company, 1879).

Stewart's words indicate that her vigorous determination was at odds with the performance of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society's members. As perhaps the only person outside the organization who attended a meeting of the AAFIS and wrote something related to the experience, Stewart was uniquely positioned to describe what this group's performance of True Womanhood actually looked like. From her disdainful vantage point, she described these women as "sit[ing] with [their] hands folded," a phrase she used literally as well as metaphorically to indicate the AAFIS's commitment to both propriety and passivity. She also suggested that there was an edge to this passivity, a coldness or lack of compassion that was woven into the AAFIS members' performances. "There is not one of you" she told women of the society, "who has given me a cup of cold water in the name of the Lord, or soothed the sorrows of my wounded heart." To Stewart, the members of the AAFIS seemed "cruel indeed."[73]

It should of course be recognized that Stewart was not speaking from a place of neutrality with regard to the AAFIS. Her views on how best to engage in activism were in conflict with those of the society, and as a person who conceived of her engagement in politics as a battle it makes sense that she might attack the character of her detractors. In fact, Stewart became known for verbally scorning people in her audiences when she disapproved of their politics or their work.[74] Yet

[73] Ibid.

[74] Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall," *The Liberator.* At this speech, Stewart famously addressed an audience that included black men by accusing the black male community in general of not adequately fighting for racial equality. She asked, "Is it blindness of mind, or stupidity of soul, or the want of education, that has caused our men who are 60 and 70 years of age; never to let their voices be heard nor their hands be raised on behalf of their color?" She continued, asking "Have the sons of Africa no souls? Feel they no ambitious desires? […] Here is the grand cause which hinders the rise and progress of the people of color. It

her claim that the AAFIS performed with passivity and even a certain lack of compassion seems to be substantiated by the group's own policies and practices. In attempting to access social respectability and redefine black femininity by performing True Womanhood, the group confined itself almost totally to the private sphere. Publishing their constitution was an act of "showing doing" their commitment to True Womanhood without physically entering into the public realm, but beyond this singular act the members of the AAFIS kept their work hidden from the community's gaze. Their policies dictated that members not disrupt the air of passivity and propriety that the group cultivated through their performance of True Womanhood. So stringent were these regulations that any member who compromised that performance by "becoming obnoxious" risked losing her place in the organization.

The AAFIS's commitment to performing True Womanhood illuminates the mission of the group. Their preamble states that the organization's goal was to "promote the welfare of our friends" by associating "for the diffusion of knowledge, the suppression of vice and immorality, and for cherishing such virtues as will render us happy and useful to society."[75] This statement of purpose seems to indicate that spreading knowledge, quashing vice, and cherishing useful virtues were all equally important to promoting communal welfare. Yet their policies and practices suggest otherwise. Though the AAFIS left no documentation of its efforts other than its constitution, I argue that by examining

is their want of laudable ambition and requisite courage." Stewart's goading of these men from the pulpit resulted in a sharp uptick of the already vocal criticism leveled against her.

[75] "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*.

the this organization in connection with other activists, other societies, and the local social, economic, and political cultures of the time, it is possible to discern more about the group than they chose to reveal in their statement of purpose. Specifically, such an examination suggests that the members of the AAFIS made the group's performance of True Womanhood its highest priority. It was the presentation of themselves as pious, pure, submissive, domestic, and thereby respectable that was viewed by the members of this organization as the most effective way to combat the notion of racial inferiority. While the "diffusion of knowledge" may also have been important to the society's members, I argue that their commitment to performing True Womanhood was paramount. After all, the women of the AAFIS apparently viewed "any member becoming obnoxious" as someone who had a great deal to learn. However, rather than teaching such a person to cherish virtue, the members of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society ensured that divergent behavior could be grounds for dismissal.

"WITH THE GREATEST POPRIETY AND ELEGANCE" THE LADIES' LITERARY SOCIETY OF NEW YORK CITY

In the summer of 1837, the members of New York's Ladies' Literary Society (LLS) engaged in a form of activism that no black women's literary group had ever attempted. As part of their Third Anniversary Celebration, these women took the stage and performed before a mixed-race and mixed-gender audience. Their work broke the social taboo against women speaking or performing publicly, particularly before "promiscuous audiences,"[1] yet a reviewer for *The Colored American* had nothing but praise for their event. This writer commended the Ladies' Literary Society's performances for having been "conducted with the greatest propriety and elegance, with an admirable display of female talent."[2] Such praise seems noteworthy because it is decidedly gendered. The writer lauds the "propriety," "elegance," and "female talent" of these women who engaged in the unfeminine activity of presenting themselves and their work before a public audience. What allowed an event that clearly breached the boundaries of traditional femininity to be met with such a positive reception? How could black women who so boldly laid claim to the public sphere through performance be considered proper, elegant, and feminine? Though such a scenario seems inherently contradictory, I suggest that the Ladies' Literary Society's

[1] Susan Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Woman's Rights Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 2 (1995): 204, accessed August 24, 2015, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=63111352-260b-44b7-be2d-363a46684545%40 sessionmgr111&vid=6&hid=128.

[2] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), September 23, 1837.

performances were, in effect, displays of appropriate femininity calculated to challenge racial and gender inequality.

The concept of a public performance given by women defied the core tenets of True Womanhood. As I discussed in the two prior chapters, True Women were pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. They remained in the home, cared for their families, and acted as the moral foundation of society.[3] Due to their supposed moral character, it was acceptable for True Women to take part in social reform movements such as abolitionism, but only from within the confines of the private sphere. Any woman who stepped outside the bounds of domesticity, even to engage in moral reform work, risked the censure of her community.

This potential censure was particularly dangerous for black women, who typically could not lay claim to True Womanhood or to the power associated with that status. A black woman who managed to achieve True Womanhood could access a degree of social capital typically unavailable to the members of her community. This social capital could, in turn, be harnessed in service of social movements such as abolitionism and the fight to promote racial equality. Thus, for middle- and upper-class white women who could more readily achieve True Womanhood, its core virtues of submissiveness and domesticity often functioned as barriers that had to be circumvented in order for them to engage in activism. However, for black women who were marginalized because of their race as well as their gender, adhering to the tenets of True Womanhood was sometimes a crucial strategy in their activist work.

[3] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152, accessed November 16, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.

The members of the Female Literary Association and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society made use of this strategy in their activist performances. Their work took place in private and was only made publicly accessible through newspapers. This allowed these black female performers to remain securely in the domestic realm while participating in activism in a public forum. They cultivated widespread audiences for their work while never violating the tenets of True Womanhood. As I argued in chapters one and two, the efforts of these black women's literary societies can be understood as performances using Richard Schechner's concept of "showing doing," which defines performance as any action that is "point[ed] to, underlin[ed], or display[ed]" for any type of audience.[4] However, they were not theatrical events. These performances were para-embodied or occasionally presented for invited, influential guests, but they were never physically embodied before the public. Such an event would have jeopardized these black women's already insecure status as True Women, and in turn robbed them of the respectability upon which their activism's efficacy was based.

The Ladies' Literary Society's Third Anniversary Celebration, however, was a collection of traditional public performances. According to the program, the members of this society put themselves in the spotlight. A woman or group of women from the LLS performed every act that took place at the Third Anniversary Celebration. Though a writer from *The Colored American* reported on the event, the members of the LLS did not need to use the press to facilitate

[4] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

their performances or cultivate an audience for them. The article reviewing the Third Anniversary Celebration undoubtedly brought more attention to this event, but the audience was physically present to witness the performances embodied before them by the women of the Ladies' Literary Society. In this way, these women engaged in a decidedly different activist tactic than the members of the Female Literary Association and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. Rather than asserting their status as True Women by remaining in the domestic sphere, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society put themselves and their talents on public display in an event open to all.

Given that a group of black women presented these public performances, New Yorkers sympathetic to the anti-slavery cause likely comprised most if not all of the audience for the LLS's Third Anniversary Celebration. However, the sympathetic nature of the audience cannot account for the public nature of the performances. The audience members may have been abolitionists, but that did not mean they supported women's rights or willingly forgave violations of the tenets of True Womanhood. New York City abolitionists, in particular, tended not to approve of women who entered the public sphere or otherwise flouted traditional femininity, even when they did so in order to engage in anti-slavery work.

Compared to other major hubs of abolitionist activity, New York City was home to a relatively conservative anti-slavery community. Philadelphia's abolitionists were largely progressive Quakers, and many of Boston's anti-slavery activists were liberal Unitarians. In New York City, however, most abolitionists

had ties to more conservative Evangelical Protestant denominations. Congregationalists formed a prominent party among New York's abolitionists.[5] Brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan, for example, were two leaders of the anti-slavery movement in New York City. Their Congregationalist beliefs lay at the root of their anti-slavery activism, and this ideology also shaped the core of their conservative stance on women's rights issues. Both men argued that while women should be involved in the abolitionist movement, they should only do so from their proper sphere. Accordingly, they opposed women taking any action in service of the anti-slavery movement that might jeopardize their "divinely ordained" feminine domesticity.[6]

Many from relatively conservative Protestant faith backgrounds shared the Tappan brothers' views on women's involvement in abolitionism. As a result, a sizable portion of New York's abolitionist community objected to what they saw as the co-opting of the anti-slavery cause to forward the burgeoning women's rights movement. The strength of this objection lead the New York delegation to the American Anti-Slavery Society (lead by Lewis Tappan) to leave this larger national organization in 1840. After the American Anti-Slavery Society determined that women could both vote and hold office within the organization, the New York delegates walked out in protest. They went on to form a new organization in which women could participate only as observers, but not as voting members or elected leaders.

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[5] Melba Jensen, "Gerrit Smith (1797-1874), Arthur Tappan (1786-1865), and Lewis Tappan (1788 – 1873)," in *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865*, edited by Mason I. Lowance (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003) 426-427.

[6] Ibid.

Interestingly, members of the Ladies' New York City Anti-Slavery Society, who were also in attendance, walked out in protest along with their male counterparts.[7] In a resolution passed by the Ladies' Society following the meeting, the members declared "We are opposed to the public voting and speaking of women in meetings, to their acting on committees or as officers of the society with men."[8] While the women's insistence on their own exclusion might seem surprising, it too was rooted in their religious faith. For the most part, these female activists shared their male counterparts' religious backgrounds.[9] So for the women, as for the men, limiting female involvement in anti-slavery work within the public sphere was a matter of religious and moral principle.

It was particularly crucial that New York's black women adhered to conventionally feminine work within their activism. As Franz Fanon writes in "The Fact of Blackness," to be black in a white-dominated society is to be "responsible at the same time for [one's] body, for [one's] race, for [one's] ancestors."[10] In other words, Fanon asserts that members of the dominant white community regard the actions and characteristics of individuals within the black community as typical of all black people. Thus, African American female anti-slavery activists had the burden of representing not just themselves, but their entire community through their work. If they stepped outside the private sphere to

[7] Ibid.

[8] Amy Swerdlow, "Abolition's Conservative Sisters: The Ladies' New York City Anti-Slavery Societies, 1834-1840)" in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014), 32.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness,*" Chicken Bones: A Journal for Literary and Artistic African-American Themes,* 3, accessed November 9, 2013, http://www.nathanielturner.com/factofblackness.htm.

conduct their activism, they risked marking their own community as immoral in the eyes of the dominant white culture, since the prominent religious ideology of New York City's anti-slavery community required women to remain out of the public sphere. The implications of such actions were evident when a group of black women from New York City publicly confronted white authorities in a courtroom where a number of formerly-enslaved women were about to be sent back to slavery. Leaders among New York City's black activists accused the female protesters of bringing "everlasting shame and remorse" upon the black community through their actions.[11] According to them, these women's failure to adhere to a traditionally feminine role in their activism put the image of the entire community in jeopardy.

Given the conservative nature of New York's abolitionist culture around issues of gender equality, it initially seems surprising that the Ladies' Literary Society's very public performances at their Third Anniversary Celebration would be found praiseworthy. Yet upon closer inspection of the event itself, it appears that the Celebration functioned effectively as an opportunity for these black women to engage in "showing doing" traditional femininity. The members of the LLS crafted each of their acts to point to, underline, display, and even celebrate an adherence to accepted norms for women's behavior. Thus, they were simultaneously artistic performances and performances of conventional

[11] Margaret Washington, "'Rachel Weeping for Her Children': Black Women and the Abolition of Slavery," The Guilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Accessed March 1, 2015, http://www.gilderlehrman. org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/essays/%E2%80%9Crachel-weeping-for-her-children%E2%80%9D-black-women-and-abo.

womanhood. This gave the members of the LLS a degree of social legitimacy even as they presented themselves before a public audience.

This legitimacy-through-femininity functioned as a kind of Trojan Horse for the women of the society. Presenting themselves as traditionally feminine through their performances allowed them to send more subversive social messages within the same event. If they had blatantly engaged with volatile topics, they would likely have been accused of venturing unacceptably far into the public sphere. Local abolitionists could have easily censured these women for embarrassing their community, just as they did the black women who confronted white authorities in a New York City courthouse.[12] Yet because they chose to use performance in order to position themselves as women who adhered to traditional gender roles and standards for femininity, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society created an opportunity to promote more subversive messages related to both race and gender without being ignored, dismissed, or criticized. Specifically, through these performances of traditional femininity, the women of the LLS could forward the radical idea that black women were every bit as worthy of respect as their white female counterparts.

The black women of New York had good reason to present this message to their city's abolitionist community in a highly public way. The complete emancipation of New York occurred in 1827, only seven years before its first

[12] Ibid.

black women's literary society was formed.[13] While a few members of Boston[14] and Philadelphia's[15] free black communities had been able to establish a degree of wealth and social prominence, New York's recent release from slavery meant that an even greater portion of its black community was forced to rely on menial labor for subsistence. Thus, the women of the Ladies' Literary Society did not have the same economic or social status as did those of the Female Literary Association or the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. For example, Henrietta Green Regulus Ray, the first president of the Ladies Literary Society, did not receive a full formal education as a child and worked in a "useful trade" throughout her life. It is likely that the other members of the society lived under similar circumstances.[16]

Unlike the women of the Female Literary Association or the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, the women of the Ladies' Literary Society

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[13] David Nathaniel Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 2.

[14] Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1998), 65. Slavery in Massachusetts was officially abolished in 1783, nearly fifty years before the founding of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society.

[15] Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, "Slavery and Resistance, 1644-1865," accessed September 3, 2015, http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bhp/blackhistory/slavery-and-resistance-1644-to-1865.pdf. Library Company of Pennsylvania, "Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic," accessed September 3, 2015, http://www.librarycompany.org/blackfounders/section6.htm. Pennsylvania ended slavery through gradual emancipation, which meant the complete abolition of slavery in the state did not occur until after the full emancipation of New York. However, Pennsylvania's free black community grew rapidly in the decades after the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1780. This was due both to the act itself and to the resistance and rebellion of many enslaved people. When the act was ratified there were 6,855 people in bondage in the state, and only around 240 free black Pennsylvanians. By 1810 there were 8,924 free black people in Pennsylvania and 795 still in slavery. Furthermore, seven rural Pennsylvania counties held ninety-four percent of the state's enslaved population. This meant that, particularly in larger cities such as Philadelphia, decades had passed between the growth of a sizable free black community and the establishment of the state's first black women's literary society.

[16] Samuel Cornish, "On the Death of Ms. Ray (Excerpt from the Editor's Sermon)," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), March 4, 1837.

could not leverage their middle-class lifestyles to position themselves as True Women. The performances of the Philadelphia and Boston societies relied, to varying degrees, on the display of their members' commitment to remaining within the domestic sphere. Thus, performances that took place in private or were facilitated by newspapers served these groups' purposes. Yet the women of the LLS could make no such commitment. For most if not all of these women, economic necessity likely forced them to abandon domesticity by working outside of the home to support themselves and their families. Thus, they had the added burden of convincing their immediate audience, as well as their imagined audience of New York's conservative abolitionist community at large, that they could be respectable women even without remaining in the domestic sphere. Given how highly New York's abolitionist community valued traditional femininity, it was particularly important that the women of the LLS be able to demonstrate it. Yet because the members of this society likely worked outside the home, they could not claim to be entirely domestic. So, rather than staying in the private sphere as a society, they embraced their lack of conventional domesticity and used public performances to display themselves enacting other traditionally feminine virtues.

Some of these performances took the form of hymns sung by the members of the Ladies' Literary Society. These religious songs were interspersed throughout the program for the event, so that no more than five acts were performed between each hymn.[17] The first, "Watchman," is about the birth of

[17] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

Christ.[18] The next, "Mary's Tears," addresses the theme of repentance and forgiveness through the story of Mary Magdalene.[19] This was followed by "There's Nothing True but Heaven,"[20] a hymn about the insignificance of worldly concerns, and "Vale of the Cross," which addresses the inner peace brought about by faith.[21]

I argue that performing these hymns intermittently throughout the Third Anniversary Celebration was a strategic decision. With these hymns, the women of the Ladies' Literary Society made their Christian faith conspicuous to everyone watching their performance. Since piety was one of the cardinal virtues of True Womanhood, displaying their faith was a way for the black female members of the Ladies' Literary Society to perform traditional femininity. Considering that their audience was likely made up of religiously-conservative New York abolitionists who opposed women defying social norms to enter the public sphere, it was crucial that the members of the Ladies' Literary Society combat this objection by demonstrating their femininity through a display of their faith. Singing hymns helped the women of the LLS to position themselves and their activist performances as religiously-motivated, just as New York City's leading abolitionists considered themselves and their activist work to be.

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[18] John Bowring, "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night," in *Hymns* (London: 1825), 57.

[19] Thomas Moore, "Were Not the Sinful Mary's Tears," in *The Works of Thomas Moore, Esq., Vol. 3,* (New York: G. Smith, 1825), 243.

[20] Thomas Moore, "There's Nothing True but Heaven," in *Melodies, Songs, Sacred Songs, and National Airs* (Bridgeport: M. Sherman, 1828), 245.

[21] William Roscoe, "Valle Crucis," in *The Athenaeum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines, Volume XI* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1822), 115.

In this way, hymn-singing enabled the women of the Ladies' Literary Society to put themselves in fellowship with their audience members. The notion of human unity and fellowship was a concept that Christian abolitionists often cited in their anti-slavery work. The fellowship of humanity, as described in Christian teachings and interpreted by abolitionists, was seen by many as the reason slavery had to be brought to an end. In *The Colored American*, Samuel Cornish defines slavery as "That wicked act of a stranger, by which he takes the image of God and reduces it to a thing, a chattel."[22] Such a definition relies on the concept of interracial human fellowship through Christianity. It hinges on the notion that all people, regardless of race, are made in the image of the Christian God. Slavery, therefore, is a wicked act because it denies the divine fellowship of all people.

While abolitionists typically used the concept of Christian fellowship to put blacks and whites in community with one another (at least in rhetorical terms),[23] the women of the Ladies' Literary Society built a fellowship through hymn-singing that put themselves in community with their audience. As women who chose to perform publicly before a religiously-conservative crowd of

[22] Samuel Cornish, "Questions and Answers," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), March 4, 1837.

[23] Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Antislavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22-3. Gay Gibson Cima notes that abolitionists did not rely solely on a Christian understanding of the common humanity between blacks and whites. In *Performing Anti-Slavery,* she discusses how activists engaged with the notion of "metempsychosis," a concept drawn from the Hindu tradition. According to Cima, "in the performance of metempsychosis, souls merged, at the moment of death, into an unstable 'all-soul.'" This all-soul "demolished individualized suffering and redemption – and indeed the very concept of the individual." Thus the idea of metempsychosis, which according to Cima was well known among American abolitionists in the 1830s and 40s, provided another system for viewing black and white people as inherently and transcendentally connected.

spectators, they were in danger of being viewed as impious outliers and immoral rogues who had little in common with the conservative Protestants who observed them. Singing hymns after every few acts in their Third Anniversary Celebration helped protect these female performers from such accusations by reminding their audience of their common Christian faith.

With this safeguard in place, the women of the LLS could engage in other types of performance throughout the rest of their Third Anniversary Celebration. Some of these performances took the form of short dialogues, written and spoken by members of the society.[24] Rather than acting out a story by portraying characters embroiled in a dramatic plot, dialogues required participants to engage in a scripted discussion of moral or philosophical issues. Thus, I argue that the members of the Ladies' Literary Society were not viewed by their audience as "acting" when they publicly performed their dialogues. Acting was considered an improper career or pastime for women particularly, and women involved in acting were often deemed immoral. The women of the Ladies' Literary Society could only present themselves as appropriately feminine if their performances did not lead the audience to associate them with actresses. Performing in dialogues was one way for these women to avoid such an association.

Writing and performing in dialogues had long been associated with education and intellectual cultivation rather than theatrical practice. Many literary societies engaged in dialogues, and students often read and performed them in school. One of the most widely-used educational readers in the early nineteenth

[24] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

century, *The Columbian Orator*, included dialogues along with speeches, essays, and poems that students read and practiced in classrooms.[25] First published in 1797, the book was repeatedly reprinted throughout the following decades in cities such as New York, Troy, NY, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cincinnati.[26] The prevalence of this book in schools, along with other oratorical primers, suggests that most educated Americans in the late 1830s would have been familiar with the dialogue as a pedagogical device rather than a theatrical form.[27]

Thus, performing in dialogues was a way for the women of the LLS, who had likely received minimal formal schooling, to display their intellectual refinement. Though intellect was not necessarily a traditionally feminine trait, most who could qualify as True Women had access to education. White middle- and upper-class women typically spent their childhoods receiving some type of formal schooling. The women from the Ladies' Literary Society were not as privileged, and as a result their access to education as children was likely limited at best. However, by performing in dialogues, the women of the LLS demonstrated intellectual parity between themselves and their affluent, white counterparts who were readily accepted as True Women. While the members of the Ladies' Literary Society may not have had the benefit of a formal education,

[25] Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces, Together with Rules, Calculated to Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence* (Boston, J.H.A. Frost, 1832) v-vii.

[26] Ibid, i.

[27] Elias Nason, *A Memoir of Mrs. Susanna Rowson* (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1870), 155. Though dialogues were distinct from plays in that they were typically performed in educational settings rather than playhouses, they were sometimes written by playwrights. In 1811, the actress, dramatist, and teacher Susanna Rowson published *Present for Young Ladies*, a book that included dialogues she composed for her students.

their performances showed they still had mastery over skills that more privileged women were taught.

Schools used the recitation or performance of dialogues to develop students' speaking skills, as excellent elocution was considered "the mark of the well-educated and thoughtful citizen."[28] Though both boys and girls recited dialogues in school, this activity was a particularly integral part of young women's education in the early nineteenth century. Dialogues were considered a "means of teaching the fair sex a graceful, easy, and elegant mode of conversation."[29] The ability to speak in a refined manner was one of the "female talent[s]" that the members of the Ladies' Literary Society "admirabl[y] displayed" at their Third Anniversary Celebration. By performing publicly in dialogues, the members of the LLS exhibited their elocutionary skills before their audience and demonstrated the feminine sophistication that polished speech suggested to their contemporaries.

The members of the Ladies' Literary Society used the subjects of their dialogues as another means of demonstrating their adherence to traditionally feminine virtues and behaviors. In schools, dialogues were used to teach content as well as oratorical skills. Reciting dialogues enabled students to practice their elocution, but reading them allowed the students to learn about the subject at hand.[30] Typically, dialogues were written to mimic the Socratic process by which

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[28] Nan Johnson, "The Popularization of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric: Elocution and the Private Learner," in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-century America: Transformations in the Practice of Rhetoric*, edited by Gregory Clark, S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale, Il: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1993), 139.

[29] Samuel Benjamin Morse, *School Dialogues,* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1797), iii.

[30] Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator,* vii.

participants arrive at a conclusion about a given subject through open conversation with one another. The process of questioning and debate itself, according to the Socratic method, clarifies the philosophical or moral matters being discussed. A true Socratic dialogue is unscripted, and thus theoretically the outcome cannot be predetermined. However, in scripted dialogues the outcome is established in advance. This allows the didactic lesson embedded in these dialogues to be prearranged by the writer. Thus, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society were able to determine how their dialogues would conclude, and what messages these conclusions would send about the subjects of their discussions.

For at least one of the dialogues performed by the Ladies' Literary Society at their Third Anniversary Celebration, the preordained outcome of the discussion emphasized the importance of behaving appropriately in social settings. Though no script of this dialogue remains extant, *The Colored American's* review of the LLS's Third Anniversary Celebration does provide information about its content. The review states that one of the dialogues performed at the event was entitled "On First Appearance in Company," and that it took "propriety of conduct" as its central theme. This information suggests that the members of the Ladies' Literary Society wrote "On First Appearance in Company" to send a message about propriety as a social necessity for young women.[31]

This performance likely mirrored the content of articles found in popular women's magazines and periodicals, which articulated acceptable feminine

[31] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

conduct.[32] According to Patricia Okker, one of these feminine standards was the ability to comport oneself appropriately in social situations.[33] Okker relies heavily on Sarah Josepha Hale's *Godey's Ladies' Book* to make this assertion, as this was the most popular and longest running women's periodical of the nineteenth century. This magazine frequently included essays on appropriate social conduct for women, as well as stories, letters, and even images which addressed this theme.[34] Hale was a southerner and a pro-slavery advocate, and therefore her magazine might not have had as great an influence on New York's abolitionist community during the 1830s as it did on nineteenth-century American readers in general. However, *Godey's Ladies' Book* was just one of hundreds of similar periodicals published in the United States throughout the nineteenth century, most of which promoted the same messages about femininity.

Although never as popular as *Godey's Ladies' Book, The Ladies' Companion and Literary Expositor* became one of Hale's top competitors during its ten year span.[35] This monthly magazine was published in New York City from 1834-1844, which means it likely influenced New York readers during the period of the Ladies' Literary Society's activity.[36] Like *Godey's Lady's Book,* this

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[32] Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century Women Editors* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 38. Okker's text is being used here due to its focus on Sarah Josepha Hale and her magazine's shifting portrayal of femininity. However, the widely recognized seminal work on periodicals and women's social roles is Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860."

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Godey's Ladies' Book," Accessible Archives, accessed May 14, 2015, http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/godeys-ladys-book/.

[35] "Gift Books – 19th Century," The University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 14, 2015, http://online books.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/browse?type=lcsubc&key=Gift%20books%20--%2019th%20century&c=x.

[36] Ibid.

periodical showcased short stories, essays, poetry, etc. which depicted and sometimes explicitly described proper social conduct to its female readers. In September of 1837, the same month that the LLS's Third Anniversary Celebration took place, *The Ladies' Companion and Literary Expositor* included a didactic essay on proper social comportment for women. This piece, entitled "Woman," provided fictional examples of women who behaved improperly in social situations. For each of the examples, the author explained how the character had behaved inappropriately as well as what she should have done in order to remain within the bounds of propriety.[37]

The Ladies' Literary Society's dialogue on appropriate social conduct probably functioned in much the same way as this essay. The structure of a dialogue requires that points be made by a character representing one ideology and countered or questioned by another character until one side clearly wins the argument. According to this structure, the Ladies' Literary Society's dialogue likely included one character who embodied impropriety and another character who depicted proper social behavior. Ultimately, the character representing propriety would win the debate, and the character representing impropriety would be exposed as an example of poor etiquette. Such a dialogue could educate viewers about propriety in social settings while allowing the women of the LLS to put their knowledge of appropriate social conduct on display for their audience.

Though this dialogue, with its focus on feminine propriety, was not particularly weighty in nature, the form was often used to make calculated and

[37] "Woman," *The Ladies' Companion and Literary Expositor: A Monthly Magazine Embracing Literature and the Arts*, (New York: William W. Snowden, September 1837), 217.

potentially powerful political statements.[38] The members of the LLS took on a politically significant subject in another dialogue they penned and performed for their Third Anniversary Celebration. In this scripted discussion, the members tackled the issue of temperance.[39] The movement to promote public abstention from alcohol, which gained strength by the 1830s, was widely considered a woman's political cause. All-female temperance groups did not become prominent until the 1840s, but women began joining anti-alcohol organizations run by men in the 1820s.[40] Since temperance was seen as an issue affecting the family, and because the family was considered women's responsibility, it was deemed appropriate for women to engage in pro-temperance political reform work. Thus, though the temperance dialogue discussed a political issue rather than a womanly virtue such as propriety, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society could still link themselves with appropriate femininity through this dialogue.

Yet temperance was more than just a political movement, it was also a moral one. Public commitments to temperance, typically in the form of signed pledges, offered evidence of the signatory's superior moral nature. Signing such a

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[38] Frederick Douglass, *Life of an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 41-42. Frederick Douglass cites the content of one politically significant dialogue from *The Columbian Orator*, entitled "Dialogue between a Master and Slave," as particularly influential to him as an enslaved boy and budding abolitionist. In his memoir, *Life of an American Slave*, he describes how this dialogue presented a conversation between a slave owner and an enslaved man on the topic of slavery. The enslaver attempts to defend the institution, but the enslaved man refutes all of the pro-slavery arguments. Ultimately, the enslaver recognizes he is wrong, reverses his views, and frees the enslaved man. According to Douglass, this brief scene from *The Columbian Orator* "gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder." Furthermore, though he read the dialogue as a child while he was still enslaved, he used the ideas found within it to "meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery," in his work as a free adult abolitionist.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Carol Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth Century Temperance Rhetoric* (Carbondale, Il: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1998), 4.

pledge was a compulsory activity for those committed enough to the movement to join a temperance organization.[41] Pledging to abstain from alcohol became something of a rite of passage for those looking to publicly assert their morality. Increasingly throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century, Americans not otherwise engaged in activism or moral reform began adding their names to such pledges, promising to abstain from distilled liquor.[42] Churches began encouraging their members to publicly commit to the cause, as abstaining from alcohol was considered a moral and therefore Christian act. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for laborers and working-class citizens to sign temperance pledges as a way to authenticate their own morality, responsibility, and trustworthiness for potential employers.[43] Though the inciting reasons behind signing a temperance pledge were different in each of these scenarios, the core motivation for committing to the pledge was the same. Specifically, these pledges made public a personal decision to abstain from alcohol, thus linking the signer to a larger imagined community that embraced the same moral code.

The association of temperance with morality helped lead abolitionists to adopt the movement. Black abolitionists in particular believed that the free black community's abstinence from alcohol was crucial to the success of anti-slavery activism. Frederick Douglass would eventually state that all black Americans should commit to temperance. According to Douglass, abstaining from alcohol benefitted the individual by ridding him of a debilitating vice. But even more

[41] Ibid., 1.

[42] Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 83.

[43] Ibid.

importantly, it benefitted the black community as a whole by demonstrating its virtue. Douglass stated that intemperance within the black community had "done much to retard the progress of the anti-slavery movement" because it "furnished arguments to the oppressors for oppressing us." However, he reasoned that if enough African Americans committed to temperance, the white community could no longer judge them, in his words "morally incapacitated."[44] This, in turn, would weaken the notion that African Americans needed to be subordinated due to their supposed moral inferiority, an argument used to justify slavery in the South and institutionalized discrimination in the free states.

Douglass's belief that a widespread commitment to temperance within the African American community would force respect from white Americans suggests that he too viewed temperance as an inherently public act. He did not specify whether he believed it was necessary for black Americans to sign temperance pledges. However, his comments on the power of temperance to influence the opinions of whites imply that, in some way, Douglass believed whites would become aware if large portions of the black community began to abstain from alcohol. Furthermore, he asserted that this awareness would be transformative. According to Douglass, if whites believed blacks to be largely temperate, it would become more difficult for them to claim that blacks lacked virtue and concomitantly easier for abolitionist ideas to be accepted.[45]

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[44] Frederick Douglass, "Intemperance and Slavery: An Address Delivered in Cork, Ireland, on October 20, 1845," The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at The MacMillan Center, Yale, accessed March 1, http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1060.htm.

[45] Ibid.

Thus, the Ladies' Literary Society's public engagement with temperance can be understood as a tactic in the abolitionist struggle. As with the dialogue addressing "propriety of conduct," there is no extant script for the scene on temperance. However, its general structure can be discerned by examining other contemporary temperance dialogues. One of the most-published books containing such scenes was Alexander Anderson's *Ten Dialogues on the Effect of Ardent Spirits*. Anderson's work contains a series of dialogues in which a father instructs his son on the horrors associated with alcohol.[46] The work was first published in New York in 1831, and was republished twice over the next two decades. Its popularity suggests that the women of the Ladies' Literary Society might have been familiar with this work, and might have constructed their temperance dialogue in a similar fashion. If so, their dialogue likely included one pro-temperance character who teaches another about the importance of abstaining from alcohol and the misery of the intemperate lifestyle. By performing in this scene, these black women could publicly display their own commitment to temperance. Such a scene could function, as Douglass would later suggest, as a public assertion of black morality that could be used to undergird calls for abolition.

Yet because the Ladies' Literary Society's audience was likely already sympathetic to the anti-slavery cause, the link between temperance and morality potentially sent a stronger message about black femininity than it did about abolitionism. Much as their performance of "On First Appearance in Company"

[46] Alexander Anderson, *Ten Dialogues on the Effect of Ardent Spirits* (New York: American Tract Society, 1831), 1-32.

allowed the members of the LLS to display their knowledge of propriety, their temperance dialogue enabled these women to showcase their personal morality. Since moral behavior and appropriate social conduct were expected of True Women, the dialogues written and performed by the LLS provided the members of the society with opportunities to present themselves as conventionally feminine before their probable audience of religiously-conservative New York abolitionists. Such performances, in turn, suggested that black women in general were capable of achieving traditional femininity, a quality typically associated with whiteness.

Yet I argue that by writing and performing these dialogues, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society went beyond presenting themselves and their community as only "capable" of propriety and morality. Instead, the women of the LLS positioned themselves as *authorities* on these feminine virtues. Simply displaying themselves enacting propriety or morality might have led their audience to consider their performances mere mimicry. During the antebellum period, images of blacks as inferior imitators of supposedly white virtues and culture could be found in abundance. E.W. Clay's "Life in Philadelphia" series, the collection of cartoons published from 1828-1830 that mocked black people who attempted to take on the values and cultural practices associated with middle- and upper-class whites, was well known even outside the city for which it was named.[47] These images circulated in newspapers across the country. They were also copied and emulated by cartoonists in various American cities including New

[47] See chapter one for further discussion of "E.W. Clay's Life in Philadelphia Series."

York in the years following their initial publication.[48] Like Clay's series, these derivative cartoons also featured black people dressed in "hyper-elegant" attire and speaking in malapropisms, suggesting that African Americans who attempted to adopt the characteristics associated with middle- and upper-class whites would never be able to rise above a substandard mimicry of those qualities. [49]

Thus, many New Yorkers could have been familiar with the notion that blacks could never do more than imitate supposedly white virtues such as propriety and morality. However, by using dialogues, an inherently didactic form, to teach their audience about these virtues rather than simply displaying them, the women of the Ladies' Literary Society positioned themselves as experts on these subjects. When they claimed the authority to instruct their audience about propriety and morality through their dialogues, they took ownership of these virtues that were considered to be within only white women's scope. In doing so, they proved that black women such as themselves were more than just "capable" of acting with propriety and morality. Instead, their dialogue performances demonstrated their mastery, rather than their mimicry, of these traditionally feminine virtues.

The didacticism of these dialogues was well-received by the audience of the Third Anniversary Celebration. A writer for *The Colored American* recalled leaving the Ladies' Literary Society's event feeling "not only amused, but what was of much greater importance, edified." After seeing the performances, this

[48] University of Virginia, "E.W. Clay's 'Life in Philadelphia Series," Anti-Abolitionist Images, accessed September 3, 2015, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/gallclayf.html.
[49] Ibid.

writer encouraged New York's young black women to "enroll their names in this useful institution," stating that the Ladies' Literary Society could help them "improve themselves and set an example for the rising generation." The writer even called for black parents to "encourage those entrusted to their care to unite with this praiseworthy institution." [50]

These comments are particularly striking given how much they contrast with the same newspaper's review of a similar event held by a black men's literary association. The exhibition, held two months earlier by the Phoenixonian Literary Society, also included dialogues, songs, speeches, and original compositions. Yet despite similarities between the two exhibitions and the fact that the young men performing in public transgressed no social or religious boundaries by doing so, the Phoenixonian Literary Society's performance received a poor review. A writer for *The Colored American* questioned whether the young men of this society did not "spend too much time getting up these public exhibitions." It was his belief that if the Phoenixonians would "give part of that time, to the study of Mechanism and Commerce, and to solid readings, they would become very efficient and useful men."[51] Based on these comments, it appears that the writer viewed the Phoenixonian Literary Society's event as frivolous and without merit. The implication seems to be that such an exhibition

[50] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

[51] "Phoenixonian Literary Society," *The Colored American* (New York, NY) July 8, 1837. Notably, the reviewer refers to the Phoenixonian Literary Society's "exhibitions," which suggests the group performed in such events more than once. Though he does not say so in his critique of the production, it is possible that the reviewer objected to the number of performances this society held. He may have disapproved of the young men's involvement in multiple "exhibitions," as this would have required a greater time commitment than simply rehearsing for one event.

interfered with the important work the young men could be doing to improve themselves and prepare for their futures.

While it is possible that what was considered frivolous for men was not considered frivolous for women, this cannot wholly explain the difference in the public's response. In an antebellum city so recently released from slavery, it was difficult for many black New Yorkers to find work beyond poorly-compensated menial or physical labor.[52] Consequently, both black men and black women worked outside the home to support their families, as evidenced by the fact that even the Ladies' Literary Society's president was engaged in a "useful trade."[53] Thus, the notion that New York's black women had the luxury of being "frivolous" does not completely hold.

The women did not receive more praise because they performed better than the men. According to *The Colored American,* the Phoenixonian Literary Society's performances "deserve[d] high praise" and "would have done credit to any class of students."[54] Thus, the compliments the young men received regarding their performances were similar to the praise heaped on the women of the Ladies' Literary Society. The difference seems rooted in the perceived merit of the exhibitions as a whole. The Phoenixonian Literary Society's exhibition was considered a distraction from activities that might help boys grow into "useful" men. However, the Third Anniversary Celebration prompted the correspondent for *The Colored American* to encourage young black women to join the Ladies'

[52] Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom,* 2.
[53] Cornish, "On the Death of Ms. Ray," *The Colored American.*
[54] "Phoenixonian Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

Literary Society. Unlike the Phoenixonian Literary Society's event, the Third Anniversary Celebration proved (to *The Colored American's* staff, at least) that becoming a member of the LLS would lead to self-improvement rather than distraction.

I argue that the positive reception of the Third Anniversary Celebration resulted from the way the members of the Ladies' Literary Society incorporated the display of traditional femininity into their event. If the ability to present oneself as a True Woman was the standard against which women were judged,[55] then the Third Anniversary Celebration helped ensure the women of the Ladies' Literary Society would be judged favorably. By publicly emphasizing piety, propriety, and morality through their performances, the women of the Ladies' Literary Society legitimized themselves and their work before an audience. Not only were they skilled performers, they also embodied ideal femininity.

Yet not all of the acts in the LLS's Third Anniversary Celebration relied on the performers' ability to engage in "showing doing" True Womanhood. In fact, some presented direct challenges to the concept of conventional femininity. One of these acts was the recitation of the Ladies' Literary Society's constitution. While this might seem to be a straightforward matter of protocol, reciting the constitution before the assembled crowd reminded all present that these women governed themselves. Many other black women's activist organizations in New York City were run entirely by men, while female members engaged in activist work from the confines of the traditionally female private sphere. The African

[55] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152.

Dorcas Association offers one illustrative example. The women of this society sewed clothing for young black children.[56] Involvement in this group positioned black women as the caretakers of the black community as a whole. They did not, however, take on leadership roles, even within their own organization. The Association's governing body was comprised entirely of men, and this board served as the public face of the society. These men publicized the work of the African Dorcas Association, presenting it as critical to the elevation of the community and thereby also to the antislavery effort. Through their work, they secured funding for the organization.[57] Meanwhile, the members of the African Dorcas Association, all of whom were women, engaged in the traditionally feminine work of sewing clothes for the community's children from the private confines of their own homes.[58] Such societies mirrored the structure of households governed by traditional gender roles, in which leaders/husbands provided money and direction while the female members/wives worked within the private sphere to carry out the instructions given.

The Ladies' Literary Society's members, however, had no male board of directors to lead them. Instead, the women themselves were in full control of their society. Their organization was run by a female president chosen from within the society's ranks, not by an external male governing board.[59] Their constitution can be viewed as a symbol of the women's control, since it was drafted, adopted, and

[56] Walter C. Rucker Jr. and Leslie M. Alexander, eds. *Encyclopedia of African American History*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 295.

[57] Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 67.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Cornish, "On the Death of Ms. Ray," *The Colored American.*

carried out by the female society members themselves. Furthermore, though this document is no longer extant, it likely resembled the constitutions written by other 1830s black women's literary organizations since those were published in newspapers. If this was indeed the case, then a reading of the constitution included a recitation of the Ladies' Literary Society's leadership structure, as well as the procedures for choosing leaders from among the group's members.[60]

By reciting their constitution, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society were "showing doing" their own ability as black women to take on leadership roles. They subverted the notion that adhering to gender norms was necessary for the orderly or successful functioning of a given organization by emphasizing the fact that they took on the traditionally "male" roles within their own society. Finally, by paring the reading of their constitution with other events that highlighted their femininity, they subtly challenged the very concept of gender norms. These women proved they were able to conform to traditional femininity while at the same time performing the masculine task of organizational governance. The juxtaposition of the Ladies' Literary Society's public display of traditionally feminine behavioral norms with their equally public command of the masculine task of leadership called the gendered nature of these roles and characteristics into question.

[60] "Female Literary Association," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), December 3, 1831. "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society," *The Liberator*. "Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 7, 1832, accessed March 3, 2015, http://phw01.newsbank.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/cache/ean/fullsize/pl_012272014_1331_15505_868.pdf.

Another performance in the Third Anniversary Celebration that subtly challenged the notion of traditional femininity was a speech on the importance of black women's education. Anti-slavery activists had long argued that improving education within the black community could aid in the fight for abolition. The address given by a member of the LLS at the Third Anniversary Celebration echoed these assertions, and augmented them by implying that black women could harness mental improvement to facilitate both abolition and their own elevation within society. As an LLS member named Miss Jennings stated in her speech entitled "On the Improvement of the Mind," "Neglect of mental cultivation will plunge us into deeper degradation and keep us groveling in the dust, while our enemies rejoice and say 'We do not believe they have any minds: if they have, they are unsusceptible to improvement.' My sisters allow me to ask a question. Shall we bring this reproach on ourselves? Doubtless your answer is no."[61]

Jennings' rallying cry for mental improvement can be interpreted as directed not at the white anti-slavery activists who may have been in the audience, but at the entire black community. Such an address reflects contemporary black leaders' calls for African Americans to actively pursue their own education. However, because she specifically appeals to her "sisters," it is also possible to interpret her speech as an address to women, and black women in particular. This interpretation is strengthened later in the speech when she challenges the "daughters of America to put on your armor and stand forth in the field of

[61]"Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American.*

improvement, for the mind is powerful and by its efforts you influence may be as near perfection as that of those which have extended over kingdoms."[62] With this, Jennings clearly links the established rhetoric of mental improvement for racial equality to mental improvement for gender equality. Thus, she subtly combats the New York City abolitionists' rejection of the burgeoning women's movement and advocates for the improved position and increased influence of black women such as herself.

Additionally, Jennings' use of the phrase "daughters of America" to describe the African American female community can be interpreted as a thinly veiled commentary on the colonization movement. Colonization was debated ardently by male abolitionists, and strongly rejected by prominent members of the black male anti-slavery community in New York City. Samuel Cornish described the colonization movement as "prejudice dwelling in the heart, and acting itself out to induce one citizen to banish another, without crime, from the land of his birth and the grave of his fathers."[63] Unlike male abolitionists, women rarely had the chance to weigh in on colonization. In contrast to temperance, which was considered both a political and a familial issue and thus the rightful concern of women, colonization was viewed as a purely political question. Thus this issue belonged to the public sphere, which meant women often lacked the opportunity to enter into the political debate about it. However, with the phrase "daughters of America," Jennings posits citizenship for African American women. In doing so, she echoes Cornish's claim to the "land of his birth." Such a phrase can be

[62] Ibid.
[63] Cornish, "Questions and Answers," *The Colored American.*

understood as an anti-colonization statement made from the black female perspective which both asserts the African American community's right to citizenship and the black female community's right to advocate for that citizenship on their own behalf.

Finally, the decision to stage a public event was, in itself, a challenge to traditional femininity. Though the members of the Ladies' Literary Society were already forced into the public sphere through economic necessity, and though they layered many of their acts with performances of traditional femininity, the fact remains that no black women's literary association had ever before attempted to engage in such a bold display of their embodied selves. In this way, the members of the Ladies' Literary Society presented a very public challenge to the concept of traditional femininity through their Third Anniversary Celebration, even as some of the acts within this event served as confirmations of their commitment to the virtues associated with conventional womanhood.

As an activist performance, the Ladies' Literary Society's Third Anniversary Celebration was something of a paradox. On one hand, the women of the society were able to use this performance to enter into the public sphere more directly than any other major black women's literary group of the time. On the other hand, much of the event was dedicated to a demonstration of traditionally feminine behaviors and attributes. Still, it was their overt adherence to conventional gender roles that allowed these women to breach the public sphere without reproach in the first place. It is important to remember that for black women in 1837, simply laying claim to constructions of femininity typically

associated with middle- and upper- class white women was, in itself, a marked form of power. I suggest that the inclusion of subtle challenges to traditional norms for feminine behavior pushes this event from a necessarily paradoxical performance to a purposefully paradoxical one. By strategically working within the dominant conceptions of femininity, the women of the Ladies' Literary Society were better positioned to subvert them.

CONCLUSION

Philadelphia's Female Literary Association, Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and New York's Ladies' Literary Society had to conduct their activist work in the space between respectability and revolution. All of their efforts toward change had to be balanced with a demonstrated adherence to the established order. In many cases, these groups harnessed social conventions such as True Womanhood, expertly using these potentially limiting boundaries to their advantage rather than simply being confined by them. Under no circumstances, however, did any of these groups break entirely with socially acceptable patterns of behavior. To do so would likely not only have been counter-productive to their overall missions, but also acutely dangerous.

In 1838, a massive mob reacted to abolitionists' overt defiance of social codes with what Heather Nathans terms "one of the largest 'performances' of violence connected to the anti-slavery movement."[1] On May 14th of that year, the newly-constructed Pennsylvania Hall opened in Philadelphia. Its founders envisioned the building as a space "wherein the principles of *Liberty,* and *Equality of Civil Rights,* could be freely discussed, and the evils of slavery fearlessly portrayed (emphasis original)."[2] Constructing the Hall cost $40,000, an expense funded by private citizens who purchased shares in the building at twenty dollars apiece. The abolitionists behind this project broke social conventions even

[1] Heather Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861: Lifting the Veil of Black* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 178.

[2] William Dorsey, "Untitled Statement Given During the Opening of Pennsylvania Hall," in *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which was Destroyed by a Mob, on the 17th of May, 1838,* ed. Samuel Webb (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 6.

in its financing, as some of these shareholders were women.[3] Yet the events that took place after the Hall was erected were what truly sparked the rage of the mob.

In Pennsylvania Hall whites socialized with blacks, and women mingled with men. People came together across lines of gender and race to discuss abolitionism and promote the anti-slavery cause. Notable activists from across the United States flocked to Pennsylvania Hall to attend the opening, express their views before the assembled audience, and listen to both male and female orators address the mixed-race and mixed-gender crowd.[4] The Hall was not an egalitarian utopia by any means. On the morning after its opening, William Lloyd Garrison expressed his disappointment that no black person had taken the stage to deliver a speech.[5] Yet despite this fact, the abolitionists who gathered within the Hall publicly broke social codes related to how black and white women and men could work together, even within the anti-slavery movement.

This violation of the established order did not go unnoticed or unpunished for long. Rioters assembled at the Hall on the third night of its existence, breaking many of its windows while a number of female speakers addressed the audience assembled inside.[6] The proprietors contacted the mayor of Philadelphia and the local sheriff to seek protection from future violence, but were told by both parties that no such defense would be given. [7] Without the assistance of local authorities,

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Samuel Webb, *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which was Destroyed by a Mob, on the 17th of May, 1838* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 70.

[5] William Lloyd Garrison, "Remarks of W. L. Garrison," in *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which was Destroyed by a Mob, on the 17th of May, 1838*, ed. Samuel Webb (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 70.

[6] Webb, *History of Pennsylvania Hall*, 136-142.

[7] Ibid. According to Webb, the mayor promised to give a speech on the matter, but stated that he would do nothing more because he believed the majority of the public was against the

the hostility aimed at Pennsylvania Hall and those within it quickly escalated. On May 17, 1838, just four days after its official opening, a group of arsonists broke in and set it ablaze. An estimated 15,000 people formed a mob outside the building, watching it burn to the ground without making any effort to extinguish the flames.[8]

According to many newspapers across the country, the Pennsylvania Hall abolitionists got exactly what they deserved. In an article written for the *Missouri Saturday News* about the destruction of the building, one reporter described these abolitionists' activities as "a parade of black and white amalgamation in the fashionable promenades of the city."[9] He claimed that "when an association of persons, with whatever avowed purpose they may gloss over their mischiefs, unite their efforts in outrage of the morals and the political institutions of this country, the summary punishment inflicted by the indignant populace of a city, is the most effectual chastening which human wisdom can devise."[10] Local leaders also placed blame for the fire squarely on the shoulders of the abolitionists. According to the report issued by the police committee charged with investigating the conflagration, "this excitement (heretofore unparalleled in our city) *was*

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activities taking place in Pennsylvania Hall. The sheriff attributed his refusal to his small police force, which he claimed was of an inadequate size to be of any use in protecting the Hall or the people within it.

[8] Ibid., 140.

[9] "Pennsylvania Hall," *The Missouri Saturday News* (St. Louis, MO), in *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which was Destroyed by a Mob, on the 17th of May, 1838*, ed. Samuel Webb (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 170. Various newspapers associated Pennsylvania Hall with amalgamation. According to Webb on page 181-182 of his *History*, this association likely stemmed in part from two false or mistaken reports about blacks and whites of different sexes walking arm in arm.

[10] "Pennsylvania Hall," *The Missouri Saturday News* (St. Louis, MO), in *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which was Destroyed by a Mob, on the 17th of May, 1838*, ed. Samuel Webb (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 170.

occasioned by the determination *of the owners* of that building and of their friends, to persevere in openly promulgating and advocating in it *doctrines repulsive to the moral sense* of a large majority of our community (emphases original)."[11] Thus, in the wake of this act of violence, the message from reporters and government officials alike was clear: anyone who publicly violated social standards regarding African American and female involvement in activism could expect untempered extrajudicial retribution.

The key word here is publicly. According to the police report, officials blamed the fire not on the abolitionists' beliefs per se, but on the fact that they "openly promulgat[ed] and advocat[ed]" for them. The writer for the *Missouri Saturday News* directed his fury at the "parade of black and white amalgamation" rather than the concept of it. According to these two sources, the public outrage against the abolitionists at Pennsylvania Hall was rooted not in these activists' actions, but in the fact that they were "showing doing" them. In this case, activist performance was met with mob violence.

The Pennsylvania Hall riot illuminates the sociopolitical culture of the 1830s. This act of destruction occurred just seven years after the formation of the Female Literary Association, six and a half years after the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was founded, and less than one year after the Ladies' Literary Society held its Third Anniversary Celebration. The members of these groups conducted their activist work in a culture that enforced its social norms around

[11] "Report of the Police Committee," in *History of Pennsylvania Hall, Which was Destroyed by a Mob, on the 17th of May, 1838,* ed. Samuel Webb (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 180.

race and gender with the omnipresent threat of violence. Engaging in activist performances that flouted these norms was a perilous endeavor. Each of these societies had to find a way to mitigate that danger while still publicly advocating for change.

The Female Literary Association addressed this challenge by using print media as a vehicle for their performances. Meetings of this society were held privately, but through *The Liberator* the events that took place at these gatherings became performances displayed before the "abolitionist public sphere." Through this newspaper, the members of the FLA made their elocutionary skills, and thereby their refinement and intelligence, known to a vast, mixed-race, and mixed-gender group of abolitionists without ever having to speak before a "promiscuous audience." They presented themselves as rooted in the Quaker tradition, and took hold of the protection that association might have offered, while never conducting a public meeting. They engaged in "showing doing" the virtues of True Womanhood, and laid claim to the respectability associated with that status, without weakening that claim by abandoning the domestic sphere. Thus, by using *The Liberator* as a medium for activist performance, these women shielded themselves from the danger associated with such work.

With these performance-based shields in place, the women of the FLA overtly engaged in political discourse. Their published writings tackled local issues like House Bill 446, and national questions such as the debate around colonization. Through such works, these black women ensured that their opinions became part of the larger anti-slavery conversation taking place within the

traditionally-male public sphere. In this way, the members of the Female Literary Association openly participated in the movement for racial equality and broke with the constraints around women's involvement in politics. Their activist work was not limited to this explicit commentary. Embedded in their performances were covert messages also aimed at deconstructing the notion of racial inferiority. By presenting themselves as refined, intelligent, pious, and feminine, the members of the FLA showed their audience that black women were as capable of these virtues as whites. Thus, the respectability conferred through such performances not only helped shield these women from potential hostility, it also functioned as another, subtler aspect of their activism.

The women of Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society relied wholly on covert messages in their political work. Like the members of the FLA, these women used *The Liberator* as a medium for activist performance. Unlike the Female Literary Association, however, the members of this society did not use Garrison's paper to circulate any political commentaries or routinely publish other original materials. The only piece of writing the AAFIS put before the public was their constitution. Still, I argue that even through this single publication, the women of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society engaged in a strategic form of activism. By having their constitution printed while otherwise remaining firmly within the domestic sphere, the members of the AAFIS engaged in a public performance of privacy. Submitting their constitution to *The Liberator* introduced the society to the paper's large readership, and thereby became a means for these women to display their commitment to the

virtues of True Womanhood. In doing so, the members of the AAFIS also laid claim to the respectability associated with the successful performance of traditional femininity, and challenged the concept of racial inferiority in the process.

The women of this society used para-embodiment to facilitate their activist performance. Physically appearing in the public realm would have undermined their display of True Womanhood, so they had to engage in "showing doing" conventionally-feminine behaviors through alternate means. To that end, the members of the AAFIS harnessed the dominant culture's hyper-focus on their bodies, using this effect of race- and gender-based oppression to their advantage. They highlighted their own blackness and femaleness, making themselves visible to the dominant culture while remaining in the domestic realm. Through para-embodiment, their commitment to enacting traditionally-feminine virtues from within the private sphere became a public display of True Womanhood.

The Ladies' Literary Society of New York used the opposite approach. Instead of remaining ensconced in the domestic sphere, these women turned their Third Anniversary Celebration into a public production order to affect social change. During this event, the members of this society embodied the virtues and characteristics of traditional femininity before their audience. They performed songs, speeches, and dialogues that "amused" and "edified" spectators who came to watch the Celebration.[12] At the same time, these acts enabled the women of the LLS to engage in "showing doing" the virtues of True Womanhood. Like the

[12] "Third Anniversary of the Ladies' Literary Society," *The Colored American* (New York, NY), September 23, 1837.

Female Literary Association and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, the Ladies' Literary Society's members used performance to position themselves as respectable and counter the ideology of racial inferiority. Unlike these two earlier groups, however, the women of the LLS conducted this activist work from the stage rather than the page.

This group also moved beyond the performance of respectability and into more subversive terrain. Though not as overtly political as the FLA, the Ladies' Literary Society nonetheless contested the boundaries of traditional femininity. By emphasizing their own self-governance, subtly expressing their opinions on debates within the abolitionist community, and simply appearing in an embodied performance before a crowd of spectators, the women of the LLS pushed against the constraints of True Womanhood even as they used the concept to their advantage. Through this work, LLS's members operated within established social norms while also finding ways to subvert them.

The members of the Female Literary Association, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Ladies' Literary Society all engaged in acts of subversion. In a culture that enforced racial and gender marginalization with violence, any attempt to advocate for equality on either of these fronts can be viewed as a radical act. As black women involved in such work, the members of these societies used performance to navigate the liminal space between revolutionary activism and the sanctions of social respectability. Often they engaged in "showing doing" feminine virtues while simultaneously deconstructing the notions of racial and gender inferiority. Some of their

performances were physically embodied before spectators, and in other instances they were facilitated through print. Sometimes these women overtly expressed their political opinions, while on other occasions their stances were more subtly rendered. The specifics of their performances varied, but each one enabled the members of the Female Literary Association, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Ladies' Literary Society to send a message to their audiences. "Yes," they avowed through performance, "I am a woman and a sister."

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