

**“Rich thought and polished pen”:
Recirculation and Early African American Feminism**

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<1>The black press rivaled only the church in its centrality to nineteenth-century African American political culture and black communities. As Martin Dann observes, the black press was “one of the most potent arenas in which the battle for self-definition could be fought and won. . . . Indeed, black papers were usually the only source of information about the repression of the black community” (13). Histories of the black press in America cite the black convention movement as its birthplace, those eleven national conventions held in the Northeast between 1830 and 1861 frequently led by male editors of the emergent black press at which “an organized political response to American racism” (Dann 17), a black nationalist politics, was formulated. Recent scholarship on African American readers⁽¹⁾ enables us to understand that black literary societies were central to the emergence of the black press. As Elizabeth McHenry contends, “it is no coincidence that the rise of the African American press paralleled the development of literary societies and literary culture in northern antebellum black communities” (85). McHenry goes on to document that the literary societies predominant in the American Northeast were staging grounds for early nineteenth-century black political activism and were central to “the pursuit of a literary character” as a distinctive political strategy for African Americans (86). Indeed, as Michelle Garfield contends, the 1830s saw such literary societies amongst African Americans forming so frequently that the phenomenon “could best be characterized as a movement” (126). From 1830 through the 1850s, African American women’s literary societies outnumbered men’s (McHenry 57), meaning that the political activism and strategies that literary societies made possible were mobilized by black women in particular. By extension, this also tells us that African American women were crucial figures in establishing and sustaining a fledgling black press that they recognized as an important tool in their developing feminist politics. The “literary character” promoted by the black press and these societies was widely conceived to include not only reading but also listening to texts read aloud, so that members of literary societies need not have been textually literate. In fact, the oral presentation of texts was central to the program of any literary society, linking the twinned rhetorical forces of nineteenth-century American civic life – oratory and print – together in the development of black politics, generally, and black feminism particularly.

<2>This imbrication of oratory and print also highlights the importance of recirculation for the development of black women’s political culture. More than a site of democratic access to civic life not limited by textual literacy or gendered proscriptions regarding the “public,” literary

societies actively fostered the recirculation of lectures and addresses, creating not only an extended awareness of a developing black feminist oratory in the first half of the nineteenth century but what Dilip Parmeshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli call a “circulatory matrix . . . through which new discursive forms, practices, and artifacts carry out their routine ideological labor of constituting subjects who can be summoned in the name of a public or a people” (386). Even as black feminism was regarded as new and certainly controversial in early-nineteenth-century America, black feminist texts were also effectively naturalized through their recirculation. Recirculation actively created a public who understood these texts as recognizable within a political culture that called women to listen to and/or read the work of others, including contributions by black women, whether oratorical or written, that had been published in the press, or that called women to present their own “original creations” to those gathered each week. This paper will argue that black feminists astutely managed recirculation – the reprinting of texts that was widespread in the American press in the early nineteenth century as well as the press coverage of oratorical addresses and lectures – for their politics and the development of a public for black feminism. African American feminists understood recirculation as more than a process that transmits information and meaning to a wider audience and, instead, as a constitutive act in itself.(2)

<3>Recirculation was a hallmark of how African Americans used the press as “readers” generally. Frankie Hutton estimates that the circulation of most black newspapers from 1827 to 1860 ranged from 1,500 to 3,000, but the actual readership of such papers was “considerably wider” (39), due to the prevalent practice of sharing newspapers within a community.(3) Frederick Detweiler notes this practice was particularly common in the South, where later in the century black papers were routinely read aloud to people gathered in public places like barbershops, a long-established informal site of black political debate (7). Historiographies of the black press fail to note that literary societies were also active in the postbellum South, in cities like Raleigh and Baltimore (Logan 69), meaning the male-dominated barber shop was far from the only site of political debate fostered by reading papers aloud. The effective lending-library of black papers led some editors to estimate that for every “100 copies of the paper” an average of “1,000 readers” existed (qtd in Detweiler 6). In the Northeast, literary societies were also sites of debate and a similarly “broad notion of oral literacy that did not valorize the power of formal or individualized literacy over communal knowledge” (McHenry 13).

<4>Recirculation within African American communities North and South was further magnified by the fact that American periodicals, both black and white edited, operated in the early nineteenth century within what Meredith McGill has called an American “culture of reprinting,” that saw texts “achieve a remarkable mobility across elite and mass-cultural formats” and across regions of the nation (13).(4) Periodicals actively exchanged and reprinted material ranging from literature to news items (both national and foreign), often stripped of signature and offered anonymously, in an elaborate market of unauthorized republication that was driven, argues McGill, by republican values of decentralized power and the democratization of knowledge (4). That culture of reprinting was made possible by an American resistance to both a national and international copyright law,(5) effectively enabling not only the emergent black press to survive but also “a host of miscellanies, pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers that relied on uncopyrighted texts for much of their material” (McGill 105). But perhaps the most noteworthy effect of the American culture of reprinting, for my purposes, is the way in which it served to

elevate “local affairs to national prominence” (McGill 107) and could, consequently, give “writing by socially marginal authors a powerful cultural presence” (McGill 41). There was, then, a heightened reflexivity created by a national culture of reprinting that, when connected with an African American practice of recirculation both within literary societies and the black public at large, together offered black feminists the opportunity and means by which to create a public for their politics as well as the impression that early black feminism was national in scope.

<5> Black feminists who saw the press as an important political tool were arguably using its “reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers” to shape those readers into what Michael Warner calls “a social entity,” a public (11-12), that comes to “exist *by virtue of being addressed*” (67). Yet it was not only the “punctual rhythm of circulation” enabled by the press, but the particular practice of recirculation through the American culture of reprinting as well as the distinctly African American practice of sharing printed texts orally and the reprinting of oral texts in periodicals, that effectively produced “the sense that ongoing discussion [was] unfold[ing] in a sphere of activity” (Warner 96). Black feminists clearly understood that such reflexivity could be harnessed to signal that black feminism was a vital and developing politics addressing a like-minded public. Exactly this mobilization of recirculation as constitutive of black feminist politics – as not only transmitting that politics but actively shaping “new forms of subjectivity and identity . . . grounded in the everyday” (Lee and LiPuma 194) – is evident in what may be the earliest black feminist mobilization of press and platform as twinned forces, the work of Maria W. Stewart. While I will focus on Stewart and her understanding of recirculation as evident in the press forms she used as well as in her self-presentation, I will also gesture to the ways in which recirculation was clearly a tool for black feminists who followed her.

<6> Maria Stewart is often hailed as the first American woman to deliver a public address, yet a handful of scholars have underscored the importance of her work in the press as complicating the settled understanding of her importance to American feminism generally, and black feminism in particular.⁽⁶⁾ As a newspaper reader, Stewart was familiar with *Freedom’s Journal*, the first paper owned, operated, and edited by African Americans and in print from March 16, 1827 to March 28, 1829. In what may well have been her first appearance in the pages of a periodical, Stewart wrote the paper’s editors in 1827 to caution against the exclusion of black women in a politics of racial uplift (Moody 26). Her choice was daring, given that *Freedom’s Journal* tended to publish pieces chastising women who did not hold their tongues. What is regarded as Stewart’s first published essay, “Cause for Encouragement,” appeared in the 14 July 1832 edition of William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist paper *The Liberator*. Yet what Stewart scholarship has always referred to as an essay was actually written as “a letter to the editor in response to Garrison’s account of the ‘Second Annual Convention of the People of Color,’ held in Philadelphia June 4-15, 1832” (Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart* 126 n.68). This gathering was, of course, part of the larger black convention movement credited with midwiving the black press. It is, then, highly significant that Stewart was responding to a political event open only to black men and one that sought to establish the black press as an arm of black public politics.

<7> Stewart’s letter to the editor stresses her feminist politics through her social gospel; she saw religion as central to racial uplift: “It is that holy religion . . . whose precepts will raise and elevate us above our present condition, and cause our aspirations to ascend up in unison with

theirs [anti-slavery societies], and become the final means of bursting the bands of oppression” (“Cause” 43). As Marilyn Richardson puts it, “resistance to oppression was, for Stewart, the highest form of obedience to God” (9). Social gospel was a hallmark of Stewart’s public career, in which she repeatedly sought to “convert” African Americans through her oratory and writing to the necessity of uniting in order to better their collective condition: “It is high time for us to promote ourselves by some meritorious acts” (“Cause” 44). But Stewart also pressed African Americans to regard the black woman, herself, and black women’s education as integral to racial uplift, a highly controversial position at the time: “Many bright and intelligent ones are in the midst of us; but because they are not calculated to display a classical education, they hide their talents behind a napkin” (“Cause” 44). The black convention movement stressed the first two principles in its black nationalist politics – community solidarity and racial uplift – but made no space for black women in its political platform. In contrast, Stewart not only drew attention to the importance of black women in racial uplift, but she stressed their intelligence despite their lack of access to formal education and, in doing so, implicitly raised the question of just where they had developed that intelligence. “One of the most significant ways literary societies were instrumental in establishing the place of African American women was by exposing them to education generally,” documents McHenry. “Before formal education opportunities became available for black women, literary societies served as ‘school[s] for the encouragement and promotion of polite literature.’ They were invaluable means of educating black women beyond what was considered their ‘proper sphere’” (McHenry 68). The female literary societies and their promotion of “polite literature” were, in effect, Stewart’s “napkin” behind the cover of which African American women acquired an education despite the public political focus of the black convention movement upon formal education for black men that would develop into the 1833 proposal of a “mechanical arts” high school and a college in New Haven, Connecticut.⁽⁷⁾ Stewart’s call for a recognition of black women’s intelligence as central to racial uplift, marginal a politics as it might have been, was raised at the very heart of black public politics—the pages of a newspaper. Since 80% of *The Liberator*’s initial 450 subscribers were free African Americans, with black “organizations, churches, societies, and prosperous Negro businessmen either donat[ing] funds or [buying] blocks of subscriptions” to *The Liberator* (Pride and Wilson 26),⁽⁸⁾ Stewart clearly sought to reach a predominantly African American audience with her publications there, and one that would reach well beyond literate subscribers to those who would also hear the paper read aloud. In other words, Stewart sought recirculation as a means through which to create a public for black feminism.

<8>The organizations and societies Pride and Wilson note as part of *The Liberator*’s subscription base were undoubtedly the African American mutual benevolent and literary societies predominant in the Northeast in the 1830s. In early nineteenth-century Boston, where Stewart began her career on the platform and in the press, as in Philadelphia, New York, and further south in Washington, D.C., black men’s mutual aid societies “functioned as units of solidarity. The societies identified and promoted black leaders. They sponsored petitions and letters to the public addressing concerns of the African American community” (McHenry 44-45). Women were also active creators of mutual benevolent societies and, as with literary societies, more active than men: by 1830, of the eighty such societies Philadelphia could claim, sixty had been established by African American women and were for women only (Dunbar 60). These societies were venues for black women to continue their active support for their communities; for example, the African Dorcas Association supported the Free African Schools network in Boston

and New York and provided care for black children. Benevolent societies were also sources of sustained mutual support amongst women, providing forms of insurance for working African American women who joined and contributed a membership fee, thereby creating a fund upon which they could draw if they found themselves in need. African American female literary societies worked in related ways, offering outlets for black women's creative and political writing, acceptable venues to discuss concerns affecting the community and women within it, and an important sense of women's collectivity. The first female literary societies, the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia (1831) and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston (1832), which gave Maria Stewart her first platform, provided free African Americans with venues in which "to practice and perform literacy and allowed them to experiment with voice and self-representation in ways that approximated the ideals of civic participation" (McHenry 56). Taken together, mutual benevolent and literary societies also proved to be effective sites in which women tried on leadership roles. Many African American women who entered abolition did so by first affiliating with one of these societies and acquiring public speaking as well as leadership skills through them.

<9>In addition to being a reader of the newspaper, Stewart would have been aware of black female literary societies by the time she approached Garrison, if only of the Philadelphia Female Literary Association (PFLA) his paper covered in June of 1832. She sent "Cause for Encouragement" to Garrison only a month after he had published black women's contributions to the PFLA in *The Liberator's* "Ladies' Department" and sought more such contributions for his newspaper with this report of the PFLA in the June 30, 1832 edition: "Nearly all of [the members of this 'society of colored ladies'] write . . . original pieces, which are put anonymously into a box, and afterwards criticized by a committee. Having been permitted to bring with him several of these pieces, he ventures to commence their publication, not only for their merit, but in order to induce the colored ladies of other places to go and do likewise" (qtd in Richardson 126-27 n. 68). Stewart also joined a female literary society in New York City after leaving Boston in 1833 (Richardson 81).(9) It should come as little surprise that she would offer a none-too-discrete nod to female literary societies as sites of women's education in her letter to Garrison's *Liberator*. Stewart understood the vital link between literary societies and the press as a mutually sustaining one in the wider service of civic and rhetorical education. Shirley Wilson Logan writes that by the late nineteenth century there were established and "direct link[s] between these societies and various publication venues," meaning that "a paper presented at a literary society meeting might be published in a newspaper or by the society itself or . . . be developed into a book for even wider distribution" (69). In other words, the imbrication of oratory and print, literary society and black periodical, that was commonplace by the century's close was perceived by Stewart in the 1830s when the black press was fledgling and such a link was as fragile as the papers themselves, many of which were in operation for less than a year. Stewart recognized a potential that at the time was emergent rather than established as it would come to be some fifty or sixty years later.

<10>Just as Stewart's nod to female literary societies was deliberate, so too was her approach to Garrison: not only was his paper reaching a predominantly African American audience, meaning it was already serving an important role in a black politics of recirculation that saw it reach a far wider audience than could either subscribe to or read it, but it was also actively using a wider American culture of reprinting to achieve its radical position in American reform. Stewart's savvy use of the press is arguably one of the fruits of her friendship with black activist David

Walker, which could not help but have made her aware of the political uses of print culture.⁽¹⁰⁾ Walker was not only Stewart's political mentor in the broad sense, but was surely influential in her awareness of recirculation. Through that friendship, Stewart became attuned to the constitutive power of recirculation, for Walker's pamphlet was an incendiary publication not simply because he found ways to "smuggle" it into the proslavery Southern states, but because the Southern press would, in turn, write about its covert circulation and raise anxiety over its ability to foment rebellion. Following Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma's line of thinking, the Southern press itself was performatively creating the very public it worried Walker's pamphlet threatened by making its very circulation akin to inciting rebellion. By drawing such attention to Walker's pamphlet, the Southern press was "performative[ly] construct[ing] . . . collective agency" around the spectre of a widespread slave and "free colored" rebellion in the slave-holding South as well as what it understood to be an appropriate "reciprocal social action" (Lee and LiPuma 193). Together, these resulted in a power ascribed to Walker's pamphlet disproportionate to its ability to actually reach enslaved African Americans or those free Southern black men and women who might band with them in armed revolt and, eventually, his assassination. In effect, then, Stewart was already well schooled in print as a political force before she ever appeared in the pages of Garrison's paper.

<11>If we surmise that Stewart was not only an active newspaper reader but knew something, through that friendship with Walker, of the risks and profits of using recirculation to harness Southern anxiety, her choice of Garrison's *The Liberator* seems highly prescient. Garrison made a deliberate use of the American "culture of reprinting" to heighten the sense of his paper's impact, as Henry Mayer documents: "Southern editors not only saw the paper but reprinted material from it – accompanied by bitter condemnation – which was then picked up by other papers and eventually worked over again by Garrison in a lively cycle that . . . enabled *The Liberator* to make a noise out of proportion to its size or subscription base" (117). By the time Stewart approached Garrison in the fall of 1831, the effects of that "lively cycle" were evident. In October, 1831, Georgetown, DC passed a law prohibiting free African Americans from picking up copies of *The Liberator* at the post office and imposing a twenty-five dollar fine and thirty days imprisonment for those who did so. If found in violation of the law and unable to pay the stipulated fine, free African Americans in Georgetown would be "sold into slavery for four months" (Mayer 122). Other Southern cities offered rewards for whites found circulating the paper, rewards for Garrison's arrest, and raised calls for Boston's mayor to suppress the paper. The Washington, D.C. *National Intelligencer* called for the paper's suppression; a Raleigh, North Carolina jury indicted Garrison and his partner Isaac Knapp for distribution of incendiary material; a vigilance association in Columbia, South Carolina posted a \$1,500 reward for whites found circulating the paper; and the Georgia legislature offered a \$5,000 reward for Garrison's arrest. Garrison received death threats from both the South and within New England (Mayer 121-23). Surely Stewart knew something of Garrison's notoriety and the attention these Southern responses were creating for the paper by the time she determined to use it for her own ends, connected as she was to black political activism in Boston. Due to the recirculation *The Liberator* was already actively engaged in, Stewart's addresses and writing had the potential to reach readers not only in Boston and New England, but also across the Mason and Dixon.

<12>The argument Stewart made in "Cause for Encouragement" is central to our understanding of black feminism in the early 1830s as demanding that black nationalist politics understand

women and their education as central to racial uplift. Yet the particular form her early entry into the press took – letters to the editor – was key to the political move she was making. Benedict Anderson’s contention that periodicals facilitated a “mass ceremony” of “imagined community” (35) has been so formative in studies of print culture that it has become standard to note that through the ritual of reading the newspaper, readers imagine themselves as part of a larger community partaking of the same solitary activity. Yet Anderson pays little attention to forms within the newspaper and their function or their effect upon the reader. I would argue that letters to the editor are evidence of that very community Anderson speaks of writ large. Such letters make visible and tangible what Anderson argues readers can only imagine, a community of which one is a part. Michael Warner maintains that “the achievement of this cultural form,” the press, “is to allow participants in its discourse to understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that exists historically in secular time and has consciousness of itself” (*Publics* 105). Letters to the editor surely facilitated readers’ consciousness of themselves as part of a larger social entity that either shared the views expressed or found themselves debating. Arguably this form would both heighten that sense of direct and active belonging Warner speaks of, and lend to that individual who wrote the editor a degree of authority because the form signaled a public voice, or a voice issuing from a recognizable collective. In attending to the importance of press forms we begin to “foreground the social life of the form rather than [only] reading social life off of it” (Gaonkar and Povinelli 387). In other words, press forms must be seen to matter as not simply vessels of content but as constitutive, as forms that “regimes of recognition . . . demand” within a larger terrain in which power is distributed according to “institutions of intelligibility, livability, viability” (Gaonkar and Povinelli 396). Stewart’s letters to the editor created an authority for African American’s women’s voices as recognizable and viable ones within the collective.

<13>Yet I would also argue that the letter to the editor is a particular form within the press which enables us to see “cultures of circulation” performatively “shap[ing] new forms of subjectivity and identity that are grounded in the everyday, in the habitus, through their inscription in specific social practices such as rational calculation, reading, and democratic voting” (Lee and LiPuma 194) as well as the democratic or “rational” debate that has been regarded as the hallmark of the public sphere since Habermas.⁽¹¹⁾ Lee and LiPuma define a performative in their deliberation upon cultures of circulation as “a self-reflexive use of reference that, in creating a representation of an ongoing act, also enacts it” (195). Letters to the editor effectively stage civic debate by presenting a position on an issue alive in “secular time” and this form might be said to assume, and thereby performatively create through its address, a public likewise engaged. That Stewart chose to write letters to the editor for both *Freedom’s Journal* and *The Liberator* mark her determination to position black women as central not only to black nationalist politics but also to American reform more largely, since Garrison’s paper was abolitionist. But this form also worked to performatively shape an emergent form of subjectivity and identity, or “self-reflexively created social agents” (Lee and LiPuma 194), that existed, as Warner says, “by virtue of being addressed” (67). Central to this shaping was the sense a letter to the editor could create amongst readers that they, too, were participating in a vital debate about black women’s political potential, thereby drawing readers – strangers separated by space and circumstance – together on that common ground.⁽¹²⁾ In doing so, a black feminist like Stewart exercised a “new, creative, and distinctly modern mode of power,” the “projection of a public” for whom women were necessary political agents (Warner 108).

<14>Despite scholarly attention to Stewart's deliberate use of the press, however, nothing has been made of the fact that her first forays into the periodical press were through this form – the letter to the editor. Similarly, little has been made of the venue for her first public address in the spring of 1832 – “Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America” – beyond the fact that she spoke before a predominately black female audience. Yet, for my purposes, it is far from accidental that she first addressed a black women's literary society, and the significance of this venue extends well beyond our expectation that she would have been as welcome to address them as any woman from their own membership. In fact, as scholarship on Stewart stresses, her message was not welcome.

<15>Elizabeth McHenry surmises that, like other societies of its kind in the 1830s and 40s, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America counted roughly thirty members. Established in September 1831 and similar to the Philadelphia Female Literary Association, the Boston society collected both monthly and yearly dues, using them to purchase books and hire the room in which they met (69). Marilyn Richardson quotes its preamble to its constitution, published in *The Liberator* on 7 January 1832:

Whereas the subscribers, women of color of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, actuated by a natural feeling for the welfare of our friends, have thought fit to associate 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, sensible of the gross ignorances under which we have too long labored, but trusting, by the blessing of God, we shall be able to accomplish the object of our union – we have therefore associated ourselves under the name of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society (“Constitution”)

The group's constitution marks its awareness of acceptable activities and interests for women's literary or benevolent societies: community welfare, both economic and moral, community service rendered in the name of womanly virtue, and the humble acquiring of knowledge. Harry Reed notes that the society “rented halls and sponsored lectures by William Lloyd Garrison” and others (78), promoted “abolitionist debates, dramatic readings, fund-raising” and the establishment of “reading rooms, and other community welfare projects” (77), but “did not itself participate in public debates or lectures” (78). However, supportive as the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was of abolitionist politics, the fact that its members did not “participate in public debates or lectures” beyond presentations to their small circle of little more than thirty women is significant for the way in which they responded to Stewart's address.

<16>Maria Stewart's speeches in Boston from the fall of 1832 to her farewell address in late September of 1833 are characterized as “fatal rhetorical miscalculation[s]” (Peterson 68) that “exacted a high personal cost” (Richardson 24). Stewart is described as facing censure yet she also, tellingly, stressed her foreknowledge of that censure in her lectures and writing. In *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*, which was published by Garrison in 1831 a year before she first took to the platform, Stewart positioned herself as a lone voice in the wilderness:

I have never taken one step, my friends, with a design to raise myself in your esteem, or to gain applause. But what I have done, has been done with an eye single to the glory of God, and to promote the good of souls. I have neither kindred nor friends. I stand alone in your midst, exposed to the fiery darts of the devil, and to the assaults of wicked men. But though all the powers of earth and hell were to combine against me, though all nature should sink into decay, still I would trust in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation. (*Religion* 41)

In her first address to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, Stewart invoked her martyrdom as inevitable: “I have enlisted in the holy warfare, and Jesus is my captain; and the Lord’s battle I mean to fight, until my voice expire in death. I expect to be hated of all men, and persecuted even unto death, for righteousness and the truth’s sake” (“An Address”). In fact, such invocations were so often repeated they became a hallmark of her lectures and writing. Stewart not only understood “religious and social justice [as] so closely allied in her analysis that to her mind, one could not be properly served without a clear commitment to the other” (“Maria W. Stewart” 18), as Marilyn Richardson has rightly observed, but she also cultivated a persona as the holy warrior serving the divine will of black liberationist politics. In doing so, Stewart was marking her awareness of gender proscriptions in ways that both protected her black female peers from community censure by association – she was a lone figure, not part of the black female collective she first addressed – and her awareness of the negative attention she would receive yet was determined to channel toward her political ends. I would contend that Stewart made not a “fatal rhetorical miscalculation,” but rather a highly deliberate decision to address her audiences as she did and one that was informed by her awareness of the rhetorical force of recirculation.

<17>In order to understand Stewart as deliberately courting notoriety for its use in heightening the recirculation of her political message, we must first understand that she was appropriating a masculine political form of address in her religious rhetoric. This is not to say, however, that Stewart did so simply strategically; she firmly believed in the link between the religious and the political that drove black public politics at this moment. Eddie Glaude notes that religion was central to black politics, and black nationalism in particular in the early nineteenth century: “What sets it apart from the ideas of nation that have come to dominate black political debate is its moral component; that is, the nation is imagined not alongside religion but precisely *through* the precepts of black Christianity [O]ut of black religious life emerged a conception of black national identity” (6, emphasis added). For antebellum northern blacks, political discourse and “political languages were tied to a black Christian imagination” (Glaude 111). Stewart’s social gospel, then, must be understood as firmly in step with male-dominated political debate. Her notoriety ensued not simply because she was the first American woman to speak on the platform but because she was militant in ways that were conventionally masculine. She dared not only to take to the platform and to the press, but, in doing so, dared also to appropriate to her own purposes the existing political rhetoric and discourse of contemporary black male leaders. Her spirituality and evangelism was more than a matter of rhetorical style, but was part of that larger black nationalist political discourse that saw black national identity emerge from black Christianity.

<18>Her lecture before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society opened with a claim to be motivated by her discovery “that religion is held in low repute among some of us; and purely to promote the cause of Christ, and the good of souls, in the hope that others more experienced, more able and talented than myself might go forward and do likewise” (“An Address”). But her opening, at first in keeping with the society’s own constitution given its gendered humility and its focus on virtue and morality, gave way in just two sentences to a fiery jeremidic(13) warning that ran for paragraphs, in which Stewart indicted the African American clergy for failing to “faithfully discharge their duty” to keep the truth and the black community, generally, for working against its own interests: “Our own color are our greatest opposers” (“An Address”). She then quickly moved to the black nationalist call for community solidarity and collective uplift that was also ringing out in the black convention movement: “unless the rising generation manifest a different temper and disposition towards each other from what we have manifested, the generation following will never be an enlightened people. We this day are considered as one of the most degraded races upon the face of the earth. It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us” (“An Address”). Patrick Rael has traced religious language in black nationalism in the antebellum North, noting that “theodicy and jeremiads” were “meld[ed] . . . with important principles of nationalism” in the rhetoric of black leaders that “told African America northerners they were part of a special community with a divine mission” (266-67). Stewart’s movement in this address from a focus on religion, to an indictment of the clergy, and on to a call for black collectivity indicates her appropriation of a black nationalist politics, making her closing even more outrageous than her claim to be “fired . . . with a holy zeal” to call her community to account for their “envious and malicious disposition” (“An Address”). Stewart’s first speech ended with her exhortation to the women present to form the backbone of a renewed black nationalism: “O woman, woman! Upon you I call, for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be any thing more than we have been or not. O woman, woman! Your example is powerful, your influence great; it extends over your husbands and your children, and throughout the circle of your acquaintance” (“An Address”). While Stewart closed with a nod to woman’s influence, in keeping with gendered notions at the time, she was also resting her black nationalist call for collectivity and racial uplift upon black woman’s influence, a move far outside the bounds of black public politics and beyond the comfort zone of her audience.

<19>Yet, Stewart was deliberate in all she did. She knew she would cause a stir in Boston and presented herself as the world-weary martyr to the black nationalist cause whose “soul has been so discouraged within me, that I have almost been induced to exclaim, ‘Would to God that my tongue hereafter might cleave to the roof of my mouth and become silent forever!’” In this closing she effectively invited her listeners to indict her, to martyr her, and then she took the text of her address to Garrison’s *Liberator* offices. He published it in the 28 April 1832 edition with the header, “It is proper to state that the Address of Mrs. Stewart, in our Ladies’ Department today, is published at her own request, and not by desire of the Society before whom it was delivered” (“An Address”). Stewart recirculated her lecture as the anomalous and wholly independent act of a marginal figure to the Boston black community in a paper she already knew would reach most black Bostonians, many black communities in the Northeast, and might even become part of an anxious Southern reprinting circuit Garrison had already created. She deftly and quickly made black women’s role in black nationalism newsworthy beyond Boston by understanding she could use recirculation, and the force of Garrison’s incendiary paper and

personal reputation, in ways that not only benefited her but would be seen as mutually beneficial to his cause and *The Liberator's* viability as a newspaper. Marilyn Richardson notes that advertising the lectures of a black woman and printing them along with her essays gave Garrison not only “news in and of themselves,” but also gave him “strong statements in support of his publication’s stands” (Richardson, “What If?” 193). I would stress it was not Garrison’s idea to do so, but that Stewart very clearly set in motion a program that saw her follow her letter to the editor with *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, and advertisements for and the subsequent reprinting of her lectures in *The Liberator* “By Request,” as the header repeatedly ran from the fall of 1832 through the fall of the following year.

<20>Even appearing to have been run out of Boston seems to have worked well for Maria Stewart if we understand recirculation as foundational to her black feminist politics. Stewart left Boston in 1833 for New York City, where she remained active in reform and black feminist politics by joining the Ladies’ Literary Society and attending the Woman’s Anti-Slavery Convention of 1837 (Richardson, “Introduction” 27). Alexander Crummel recalls “listening, on more than a few occasions, to some of her compositions and declamations” produced for that society (qtd in Sterling 158-59). She continued to be visible in the press and to lecture after she left Boston, becoming a “regular contributor” to the AME *Repository of Religion and Literature, and of Science and Art* in the late 1850s to mid-1860s (Richardson, “What If?” 205 n.1).(14) And Stewart continued to use recirculation for her purposes, for much of the writing included in the *Repository* were “lectures that had been given before or were prepared in the context of men’s and women’s literary societies,” and its editors regularly called for “literary societies that sponsored the magazine to employ ‘their rich thought and polished pen’” to produce contributions to the periodical (McHenry 133). One of the *Repository's* regular columns was the “Young Ladies’ Lecture Room.” Stewart even continued to have a presence in *The Liberator*: abolitionist William C. Nell wrote *The Liberator* on March 5, 1852 to recall that in the early 1830s “Mrs. Maria W. Stewart – fired with a holy zeal [delivered] . . . public lectures [that] awakened an interest acknowledged and felt to this day” (Richardson 90). Ever attentive to how recirculation could be used, Stewart had this letter reprinted in the 1879 edition of her collected works, *Mediations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*, which she financed with her hard-won widow’s pension and sold for thirty-five cents a copy.(15) The effect was to suggest that she had never left the minds of reform-minded Bostonians during the forty-odd years since her controversial lectures in that city.

<21>Stewart’s influence can be seen in the black nationalist writings of other African American women in *The Liberator* in the 1830s, such as Sarah Mapps Douglass. She effectively opened the pages of the periodical press to a feminist black nationalism that was influential well into the 1850s. Famous black women journalists such as Mary Ann Shadd Cary in the 1850s created the impression in the pages of her *Provincial Freeman* that woman’s rights was preoccupying readers in the UK, the US and should do so in Upper Canada, by reprinting excerpts from woman’s rights debates in both countries and adding to them feminist letters to the editor she wrote herself under pseudonyms like Dolly Bangs, all tactics Stewart pioneered for black feminists in the press. Shadd Cary’s paper, one of the most successful black periodicals of the nineteenth century, circulated in African American communities in the US as well as its home of Upper Canada, where African American emigrants like “Mary Bibb . . . formed the Windsor

Ladies Club, also referred to as the Mutual Improvement Society, in 1854 . . . the first female literary society in Canada” (Logan 65).

<22>McHenry documents that “in the aftermath of the failure of Reconstruction, literary societies were reorganized in the North; although they continued to promote the promise of democracy and encourage black Americans to develop through literary work the skills necessary to become model citizens, they were also the staging ground for black communities’ increased activism” (20). Black feminists like Mary Church Terrell, a professional lecturer published in the press and nationally regarded as clubwoman and feminist, were shaped by the reconfigured landscape of literary societies. By the 1880s that terrain included racially integrated clubs like the Aelioian Literary Society (1852), founded as a branch of the Oberlin College Ladies Literary Society. Logan speculates that Terrell may have been its first African American member, joining in “the early 1880s.” Terrell credited the society “with exposing her to some of the best speakers in the country and with enabling her to argue extempore, preside over meetings and hold her own in formal debates” (Logan 86).

<23>As late as the 1890s, black feminist lecturers and journalists like Ida B. Wells would follow Stewart’s practice of reprinting her own addresses, thereby using recirculation to bolster anti-lynching politics. Wells’s own “Ida B. Wells Abroad” column in the Chicago *Inter-Ocean* was devoted to reprinting her lectures in the UK during the spring and summer of 1894. Moreover, Wells’s rhetorical signature in her anti-lynching pamphlets and speeches was to reprint, verbatim but without signature, some of the most extreme incitements to lynching the Southern press issued to its readers as a way of revealing that lynching was a carefully taught technology of racial suppression rather than some justified response to largely unfounded accusations of rape. The early nineteenth-century culture of reprinting and its use by black feminists is evident in that signature.

<24>Black feminists, schooled in the literary and benevolent societies predominately organized by and for women, entered into a male-dominated black public politics early in the nineteenth century and used the press to shape “new forms of subjectivity and identity . . . grounded in the everyday” (Lee and LiPuma 194). In order to make their feminist politics recognizable and viable they used established press forms and the larger American culture of reprinting to present black feminism as national in scope. Recirculating public addresses and writing, whether originally designed for their own literary societies or for a wider public, black feminists insisted upon the centrality of women to black nationalist political debate. The result of that early work in the 1830s was that African American women quickly came to see themselves as needing to be capable of entering into public debate and understood the literary society as the place to gain a rhetorical education, as this 1852 letter to *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* indicates: “I am not expecting to be a public speaker; but I should like to be prepared to express myself intelligibly, either before a society of ladies or a mixed assembly, if I should ever be called to do so unexpectedly” (qtd in Logan 67). And these same women were so integral, through their creation of and affiliation with literary societies, to the “pursuit of a literary character” as a liberatory political strategy that when the editors of the *Weekly Anglo-African* (1859-1861)(16) “moved to open their own reading room in November 1859 . . . [on] Prince Street in New York City” (McHenry 135) a female reader of the magazine from Hartford, Connecticut wrote to say,

“We feel glad to know that a reading room has been started in your city, . . . [I]t will be productive of good, especially if the ladies patronize it and enter into discussion upon the merits of the different periodicals on the files. Nothing calls into action and better strengthens one’s judgment as this habit of conversing on what we read” (qtd in McHenry 136). The reading room provided the venue for these types of discussions as well as “a course of popular lectures” (McHenry 135), continuing to link a broad notion of literacy, civic debate, recirculation and women’s educational development together for members of New York’s African American community. As the woman writing to Frederick Douglass’s paper underscores, little of this would have been possible without the African American women who sustained literary societies, both North and South, from the late 1820s through to the end of the century.

Endnotes

(1) Book-length studies that have dramatically altered scholarly understanding of early African American readers are Elizabeth McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers* and Shirley Wilson Logan’s *Liberating Language*, as well as selected essays in Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway (eds), *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2007).(^)

(2) Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma have drawn our attention to the fact that “circulation and exchange have been seen as processes that *transmit* meanings, rather than as constitutive acts in themselves” (192).(^)

(3) Within the larger context of American journalism, black press circulation figures approach those of the average weeklies and dailies. Between the 1830s and 1860s, “the great mass of weeklies had only a few hundred circulation each, and most of the dailies only a few thousand” (Mott 303).(^)

(4) In 1843, notes McGill, “the post office estimated that publishers received on average 364 exchanges per month” (107). These exchanges traveled by post free of charge. (^)

(5) McGill documents that “between 1837 and 1854 Congress formally rejected or tabled numerous international copyright bills, denied petitions signed by Britain’s and America’s most prominent authors, and blocked the passage of an Anglo-American copyright treaty that had been supported by two presidents” (81).(^)

(6) For example, Rodger Streitmatter has always written of Stewart as America’s first black female journalist and Marilyn Richardson has attended to Stewart’s equal importance as an orator and journalist. However, most American and African American feminist historiographies repeatedly position Stewart as orator only, and see her publications in *The Liberator* as simply Garrison’s coverage of her speeches as newsworthy. See Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice:*

African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1994).
(^)

(7) This was the same year that Prudence Crandall founded her academy for black women in Canterbury, Connecticut when her school for girls, first established in 1831, drew censure because she had admitted an African American pupil. Whatever the social stigma against educating black male youth, the education of black girls and women was regarded as much more controversial in the 1830s. (^)

(8) Benjamin Quarles notes that by the spring of 1843, African Americans formed three quarters of *The Liberator's* 2300 subscribers (20). (^)

(9) Dorothy Porter documents two black women's literary societies in New York City in the 1830s, "The Ladies Literary Society of the City of New York" and "The New York Female Literary Society" (557). (^)

(10) Walker's pamphlet *Appeal To The Coloured Citizens Of The World* (1829) sought to incite African Americans to an armed revolt against the slave system and quite likely resulted in his mysterious death. Walker is said to have "planted" his pamphlet in the pockets of clothing he "sold to sailors bound to Southern ports" (Wiltse qtd in Richardson 7). (^)

(11) See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT P, 1989). (^)

(12) Warner identifies as "important needs of Publics" the "concretiz[ing of] the world in which discourse circulates, . . . offer[ing] members direct and active membership, . . . [and] plac[ing] strangers on a shared footing" (108). (^)

(13) Stewart's most frequently used rhetorical appeal was the black jeremiad. Heavily influenced by David Walker's *Appeal*, which indicted American racism and encouraged Southern slaves to rise up and overthrow their white masters, Stewart followed the black jeremiad's focus on warning "whites . . . [of] the judgement that was to come for the sin of slavery" (Moses 30-31). Wilson Moses describes the black jeremiad as a "mainly pre-Civil War phenomenon . . . often directed at a white audience . . . Sometimes its warnings were militant and direct . . . At other times . . . the tone was that of a friendly warning, couched in the rhetoric of Christian conciliation" (31, 37). (^)

(14) The *Repository* was published monthly from 1858 to 1864, and sold for one dollar per yearly subscription and twenty-five cents per copy. (^)

(15) Stewart successfully claimed eligibility for a pension as "widow of a veteran of the War of 1812" in 1878 (Richardson, "Later life, Introduction" 79). Her pension was eight dollars per month. (^)

(16)“Thomas Hamilton, the editor and publisher of the short-lived *People's Press* (1843), made his second attempt in the business with the monthly *Anglo-African Magazine* and with a weekly newspaper, the *Weekly Anglo-African*. This paper was a companion piece to the monthly, and featured shorter articles and news coverage. Often compared to the *North Star* because of the quality of its journalism, the paper dismissed the various schemes to settle blacks in separate states or in other countries. "Our cause," Hamilton said to his readers, "was to improve the lot of blacks in America." The paper, like the monthly, featured essays on astronomy, recreation, insurrection and rebellion, intemperance, and religion, as well as poetry and passages from books. Thomas Hamilton died in 1861, and the paper was sold to James Redpath, an advocate of the migration of blacks to Haiti. It ceased publication, however, within the year” (Davis and Krekorian).(^)

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