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“The Public Practice of Humanity”: How Antislavery Writing Matters Now

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Abstract

Henry David Thoreau and Frances E. W. Harper offer a historical model for the public humanities grounded in racial justice and moral education. For both Thoreau and Harper, the “public practice of humanity” that Thoreau identifies in “A Plea for Captain John Brown” inescapably means taking the side of justice, creating a “liberation humanities” that is analogous to the “preferential option for the poor” in twentieth-century theologies of liberation. Both authors use a mix of theologically informed moral reasoning and wit and irony to further the cause of justice, and both are concerned with the ways in which literary form and public advocacy can coalesce.

Keywords: abolitionism; liberation theology; John Brown; Henry David Thoreau; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper; justice; irony; moral education

In Henry David Thoreau’s “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” Thoreau writes regarding Brown: “But he went to the great university of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty, for which he had early betrayed a fondness, and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of Humanity in Kansas, as you all know. Such were his humanities and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man.”¹ This passage shows how the moral content that Thoreau and other antislavery writers (Black and white) gave to their conception of how the humanities offers a way of thinking about how the humanities have operated and can continue to operate in public. Thoreau engages here directly with something that should be familiar to us in the 2020s, a debate over the value and significance of the humanities. He finds in John Brown, a man about to be executed for his leadership in the Harper’s Ferry raid, a model for what the public humanities meant for him in the mid-nineteenth century. Brown’s “Public Practice of Humanity in Kansas” was his leadership of the fight against slavery in Kansas. As David S. Reynolds discussed in his biographical study *John Brown, Abolitionist*, Brown’s role in the mini-Civil War that took place in Kansas made him an extraordinarily controversial figure in his own time, and the violence of the actions that he

¹ Thoreau 2000, 719.

undertook there render him an ambiguous figure for subsequent generations.² That Thoreau's response to Brown in "A Plea for Captain John Brown" was not evidently ambivalent may seem surprising, given Thoreau's own non-violent tendencies. What Thoreau seemed to admire most in Brown, however, was not the violence of his methods, but the moral rigor of his commitment to equality and his willingness to suffer himself rather than to abandon this commitment. This emphasis appears in Thoreau's assertion that Brown "would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man."

Given that slavery and racial injustice were the catalysts for Thoreau's understanding of "the public practice of Humanity," it is not surprising that the struggle against slavery before the Civil War and for expanded equality after the Civil War provides a context for some of the most ambitious efforts to speak to the public through literature and culture during the nineteenth century. As those of us who are scholars of the humanities in the United States and also around the world look at the continuities in how the humanities are imagined in public across the divide of the pre- and post-Civil War periods, the African American poet and novelist Frances E. W. Harper's work is a particularly representative example of the "public practice of humanity." Harper intervened in public questions in a way that wove together creative work with historical awareness and political engagement. When we consider Harper and Thoreau together, they offer us an opportunity to understand how the concept of the "public humanities" has functioned in relation to the major moral and political controversies of the nineteenth century, and they also offer a model for how humanists might envision the "public humanities" being conceptualized in our own fraught times. Crucially, Harper and Thoreau show us how rhetoric, understood as public discourse, and literature, which is often framed as occupying a distinct and more private realm of discourse, were intimately connected for nineteenth-century antislavery writers. In Harper's poetry and fiction, Thoreau's "public practice of humanity" is realized in both antebellum and Reconstruction contexts, with profound implications for the perils and promises of our twenty-first century moment.

What is striking about the confluence of Harper's and Thoreau's work in "the public practice of humanity" is how deeply both authors are invested in using religiously inflected language and allusions in order to make the case that there is a standard of justice that cannot be reduced to what is expedient. If Harper was excluded from the pulpit by her gender and Thoreau by his disaffiliation from organized systems of religious practice, there is nonetheless a sense in which each of them is a preacher in the robust sense by which the role was understood in the nineteenth century and which has been explored by literary historian Dawn Coleman in *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* in relation to writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Herman Melville. The moral content of the humanities that Thoreau attributed to Brown is also significant here. Thoreau offers an understanding of the humanities that corresponds to the "preferential option for the poor" found in twentieth-century liberation theology described by Gustavo Gutierrez in *A Theology of Liberation*. The humane for Thoreau, like the divine for Gutierrez or for James H. Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, where Cone writes of "the task of the Christian theologian to do theology in the light of the concreteness of human oppression expressed in color", must take sides, and the side in question must be with those who are suffering.

1. Thoreau's liberation humanities

We might think of Thoreau as presenting a "liberation humanities" of sorts, where the profoundly personal work of self-making that had come to define transcendentalism for

² see Renolds 480–506.

Thoreau's contemporaries, and the individual self-examination in search of grace that was so crucial to the New England Puritans, come to take on profoundly public implications, on the basis of Thoreau's claim that individual virtue, however consistent, can never be completely insulated from the injustice and suffering of the surrounding world. The "public practice of humanity," or to use our contemporary locution, the "public humanities," for Thoreau can only be defined in relation to a moral stance in support of the "dignity of human nature." This moral element in Thoreau's work echoes that of his other essays on political topics from his time, "Resistance to Civil Government" and "Slavery in Massachusetts." In the first of these essays, a rousing critique of the US invasion of Mexico and of the expansion for slavery as well as a justification for Thoreau's refusal to pay the poll tax, Thoreau makes a strong case for the primacy of morality over expedience and even apparent prudence: "If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. ... [H]e that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people."³ Striking a similar note in "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau writes, "I am surprised to see men going about their business as if nothing had happened. ... I am surprised that the man whom I just met on horseback should be so earnest to overtake his newly bought cows running away. ... Fool! does he not know that his seed-corn is worth less this year- that all beneficent harvests fail as you approach the empire of hell?... If we would save our lives, we must fight for them."⁴ These passages both reinforce the central gist of "A Plea for Captain John Brown": they suggest that the sort of internal self-building that practitioners associate with the humanities has profound and inescapable public consequences. When our reading informs our conscience, it necessarily also informs our actions, and for Thoreau, the practice of humanity is inescapably public. The genuine transcendentalist does not have the option of ignoring public life, and for the transcendentalist Thoreau it is a sign of Brown's public humanism that he realized this.

Thoreau thus offers an understanding of the humanities that is fundamentally distinct from the way in which many observers typically pigeonhole the humanities as a set of scholarly disciplines. For Thoreau, the words "humanities" and "humane" resemble the words "Puritan," "transcendentalist," "Christian," and "American," each of which he applies to Brown, not as a sort of neutral descriptive, but as a moral statement about his character. Brown is a Puritan for Thoreau because of his uncompromising morality, a transcendentalist because of his devotion to "ideas and principles" above expediency, a Christian because of his resemblance to Christ, particularly in his execution. "Some eighteen hundred years ago," Thoreau observed, "Christ was crucified; this morning, perhaps, Captain Brown was hung. These are two ends of a chain that are not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer, he is an angel of light."⁵ Brown's Americanness for Thoreau was closely correlated with his Puritanism, his transcendentalism, and his Christlike willingness to die on behalf of the oppressed: "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all" (730). It may seem jarring in a twenty-first century context to see Americanness so closely associated with a kind of egalitarianism that has often been demonized in the United States in recent decades, but for Thoreau, the correspondence is both natural and necessary. For Thoreau, "American," "transcendentalist," "Puritan," and

³ Thoreau 671–672.

⁴ Thoreau 712.

⁵ Thoreau 742.

by implication “humanist” all are terms that demand a public commitment to conscience, to equality, and to human dignity.

All this is very heavy, and it is worth noting that the profundity of Thoreau’s moral concerns here are expressed in part through irony and humor. Referring to Brown’s “public practice of Humanity” is an elaborate pun: normally, the “public practice of” anything is a reference to a professional identity, like that of a physician or lawyer, and when Thoreau converts the expression to something that transcends mere professionalism, the result is at once humorous and portentous. When he describes John Brown as a Puritan, he sardonically observes that “Some of the Puritan stock are said to have come over and settled in New England.” To the degree that Thoreau also is engaged in the “public practice of Humanity” in “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” he suggests that irony and humor are necessary skills in support of this practice.

2. Public practice in Frances E. W. Harper’s fiction and poetry

If “A Plea for Captain John Brown” offers a model for the public humanities through both Thoreau’s understanding of Brown and his commitment to telling Brown’s story, Frances E. W. Harper contributes a taxonomy of ways in which the public humanities can function through and as creative expression. Her novel *Iola Leroy* engages a series of questions related to the “public practice of humanity,” including race, slavery, labor, women’s equality, segregation, Freedman’s education, religion, and what would be recognized today as community-engaged scholarship. Her poems perform similar moves on a smaller and more versatile scale. For those who have not encountered Harper’s novel recently, it represents a wide-ranging effort to engage with the public questions raised by the Civil War and Emancipation. It begins before the war, with the story of a young girl, the title character, who believes herself to be a white southerner, but comes to realize that she was born enslaved and is thus the property of her father’s estate when he dies. This is commonplace material for abolitionist fiction, but Harper published *Iola Leroy* after the war and after Emancipation. The antislavery salvos in the opening are much more about providing a framework for how African Americans in the later nineteenth century can engage with the public sphere than simply with looking back on the antebellum period. Harper is not content to allow the United States to indulge in self-satisfaction because of Emancipation; instead, she identifies the continuities between past and present injustices, and she makes the moral critique of slavery that Thoreau identified in Brown continuous with her critique of the injustices of the post-Reconstruction era. Notably, the novel begins with a representation of the coded discourse that enslaved people could use to communicate in spite of the severe restrictions on speech and literacy imposed on enslaved people, as the several characters use coded expressions about the freshness of the eggs and milk to indicate whether there has been a Union or a Confederate victory. As with Thoreau’s punning in “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” Harper shows that wordplay itself can be a tool in the service of liberation. Her characters in the early pages of *Iola Leroy* can be said to engage in their own variety of “liberation humanities.”

This emphasis on the complexities of public communication among the oppressed is reiterated throughout the novel. The novel concludes with something that could seem rather anticlimactic in another context: a conference in which characters exchange position papers, but which here contrasts with the coded language required at the beginning of the text. Harper’s characters are now able to speak openly about their political and educational goals and the means by which they believe that they are most likely to achieve them, in particular through literacy and the full enfranchisement of African Americans in the public arena. In a

sense, the “publicness” of the public humanities is especially poignant here because of the ways that we have seen public speech being denied to Black characters earlier in the novel.

Before she was a novelist Harper was a poet, and the public emphases that would obtain in her most famous novel appear in her poetry as well. Harper’s earliest poems, published in the 1850s, included an impressive array of antislavery verse, ranging in tone from biting satire to prophetic joyousness, and she published this verse alongside temperance poems, biblical narratives, and practical relationship advice. Throughout, Harper showed that she was concerned preeminently with the ways in which the personal and the public are deeply intertwined. As discussed in my recent book on antislavery poetry, *Why Antislavery Poetry Matters Now* (2023), Harper could take an episode from the gospels like Jesus’ healing of the Syrophenician woman’s child and subtly wind it into her broader understanding of race and slavery in the United States,⁶ and she could also engage directly with a wildly popular novel like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or a story ripped from the headlines, like that of Margaret Garner, the enslaved woman who would become the model for Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novel with substantial public investments from our own time over a century later.

It is noteworthy that Harper’s poetry’s public resonance continued to evolve through the Reconstruction period, as she wrote extensively about Freedman’s education in her Reconstruction era poems from *Sketches of Southern Life*. Here her poetry connects directly with the experience of newly enfranchised (and sadly, soon to be disenfranchised) citizens and the ways in which literacy in particular is a value crucial to public engagement. This appears in a poem like “Learning to Read,” where the speaker details strategies that enslaved people had used to obtain literacy when it was forbidden:

I remember Uncle Caldwell,
Who took pot liquor fat.
And greased the pages of his book,
And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen.
The leaves upon his head,
He’d have thought them greasy papers,
But nothing to be read.⁷

In her poetry as well as her fiction, then, Harper emphasizes that creating public spaces for sharing information and ideas through literacy often requires ingenious strategies to enable literacy, in this case through Uncle Caldwell’s disguising the pages he is actually reading as wrappers for food. In this way, Harper connects the strategies that the enslaved used to receive and share information before the Civil War with the need for collective engagement with questions of justice after the war. The humor of Uncle Caldwell’s strategies recalls both the comical coded exchanges at the beginning of *Iola Leroy* and Thoreau’s wordplay in his memorial for John Brown.

As with Thoreau, Harper’s public humanities are frequently framed through analogy with religious belief, and for Harper, they can function as an extension of religious belief. Her “Bible Defense of Slavery” is a fierce critique of the practice of Christianity in the United

⁶ Yothers 195–98.

⁷ Harper *Poems* 127.

States, calling for the sort of public expressions of repentance that the Israelites performed in the Hebrew Bible and that the Puritans had adopted in New England: “Take sackcloth of the darkest dye/ And shroud the pulpits round!/ Servants of Him that cannot lie.”⁸ Notably, the tone of this poem mirrors the way in which Thoreau connects Brown’s moral principles to a Puritan tradition that favored principle over expedience. The opening calls for public acts of repentance for the sin of slavery. The concluding stanza points to the ways in which the public indecency of slavery subverts the religious faith that Harper values and that her interlocutors claim to share: “Oh! When you pray for heathen lands,/ And plead for their dark shores,/ Remember Slavery’s cruel hands/ Make heathens at your door!”⁹ Thoreau may be skeptical of organized religion, and Harper may be deeply engaged by and in it, but what they share is a sense that there are principles that are fundamental to human dignity that must be upheld, whatever the cost.

Our own context is more secular than that of Thoreau and Harper, and the degree to which their humanities are inflected by theology may seem puzzling, but there is a relevant lesson here. Both the religiously unaffiliated Thoreau and the institutionally linked Harper find resources in theological language for speaking to their nineteenth-century publics in a way that resonates with their most deeply held values, and it seems to me that this willingness to speak to matters of ultimate concern offers a way of thinking about how the humanities might speak to our present crises – from challenges to democracy in the United States, Europe, Venezuela, and Haiti (to name a few) to international conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, Lebanon, Sudan, and Ethiopia, and from the individual natural disasters that have hammered the Southeastern coastline of the United States to the global climate crisis that these localized catastrophes betoken. And for both Harper and Thoreau, the language of literature and theology alike offer opportunities for reflection and humor that are mutually reinforcing. Harper’s and Thoreau’s “liberation humanities” offer a bracing response to injustice that continues to resonate, via not only its courage but also its unexpected playfulness.

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⁸ Harper *Poems* 5.

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