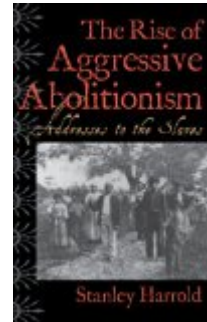


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stanley Harrold. *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. x + 246 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2290-8.

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## Ambiguous Manifestoes

In 1842 and 1843, three Northern abolitionists—William Lloyd Garrison in Boston, and Gerrit Smith and Henry Highland Garnet in New York state—delivered separate “addresses” to the slaves of the United States. Stanley Harrold’s most recent book analyzes these three addresses. Harrold deals admirably with the differences between Garrison, Smith, and Garnet, as well as the different circumstances under which each address was produced. But his main argument is that the three addresses, all of which approvingly raised the subjects of slave insurrection and escape, “each glorify slave rebelliousness” (p. 9) and together “reflect declining abolitionist commitment to peaceful persuasion directed at whites and expanding abolitionist involvement in slave escapes” (p. 2). In short, despite their differences, the addresses are presented by Harrold as signs of what he calls “the rise of aggressive abolitionism.”

This book helpfully joins other recent works that have integrated abolitionist history by including white and black reformers within a single frame.[1] It will also be useful to teachers and students, not least because it includes the full texts of all three addresses and several related primary documents at the end of the book. *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism* is therefore recommended for all students of antebellum history, even as it raises particularly provocative and open questions for antislavery specialists.

Harrold’s latest book is an elegantly concise entry into his larger historiographical project, which has been developed in several earlier works focusing on the rela-

tionship between abolitionists and the South. Here Harrold reiterates his view that abolitionists were consistently oriented towards the South, or that they tried by the early 1840s to effect a “reorientation of the antislavery movement” Southward (p. ix). *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism* can thus be seen in some ways as a companion volume to Harrold’s *Subversives*, published just last year, which examines interracial abolitionism in the District of Columbia.[2]

Whereas *Subversives* provided an on-the-ground example of abolitionists in the South, this book argues that antislavery strategies like those used in the Chesapeake forced Northern leaders to reconfigure their message. The addresses were an attempt by antislavery ideologues to catch up with abolitionists in the Upper South, who, by 1842, were already pursuing aggressive types of “cooperation with slaves”—whether through direct aid to fugitives, attempts to purchase freedom for slaves, or elaborate plans to distribute Bibles to slave communities (p. 97). The speeches did not inaugurate such activities, says Harrold, but rather represent early attempts to legitimize tactics already familiar to abolitionists in border states.

In describing these aggressive activities, Harrold often refers to them as evidence of an “abolitionist-slave alliance in the South’s borderlands” (p. 115)—a term also used by Merton Dillon in his 1990 book, *Slavery Attacked*. [3] Harrold credits Dillon at several points as an inspiration for his treatment of the addresses (pp. 2, 148). For both historians, the addresses indicate that abolitionists in the early 1840s were pursuing an active alliance

between abolitionists and slaves—an alliance in which the two groups would “cooperate” (p. 3) as “partners” (p. 17). The addresses represent a desire to “bridge” the distance between slaves and reformers in the North (p. 43). And it is central to Harrold’s argument, in this book and in the larger historiographical project with which he identifies, that abolitionists succeeded, at least to an impressive extent, in constructing such a bridge. The addresses, especially those by Smith and Garnet, reveal abolitionists both “embracing slaves as allies” and emphasizing “the spiritual, if not physical, unity of northern abolitionists and southern slaves” (p. 43).

Harrold also emphasizes, however, that the addresses were “ambiguous manifestoes,” to borrow the title of chapter 1. All three of the addresses allude favorably to the use of violence by slaves to resist their oppression, but they are also “highly tentative” (p. 1). All three, including Garnet’s, warn slaves against revolt, either because of moral opposition to violence (Garrison, and to a lesser degree, Smith) or because revolt was inexpedient (Smith and Garnet especially). The addresses are also suffused with abolitionists’ assumptions about the masculinity (or lack thereof) of slave men. And while each address urges slaves to act on their own initiatives to resist slavery, those by Smith and Garrison clearly adopt the role of a “wise fatherly northern philanthropist” (p. 20) and arrogate the right to counsel slaves.[4]

In addition to the contradictions within each text, which took back with one hand what they gave with the other, there were a variety of conflicts among the authors of the three addresses. Smith, Garrison and Garnet differed on numerous issues—including the advisability of abolitionists going directly to the South to help slaves escape, the permissibility of slaves stealing property to aid them in their escapes, and the moral status of violent resistance. As a result, the fates of the addresses were also different, as Harrold shows in two chapters detailing the setting in which each address was given, and the factional politics within the movement that often determined whether the addresses were approved and circulated by the groups that heard them first.

A close reading therefore reveals that Harrold’s book is also an “ambiguous manifesto.” On the one hand, it argues that the three addresses point in a clear “direction” towards more violent tactics within the antislavery movement, tactics that culminated in John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry and the enlistment of African American soldiers in the Civil War (see pp. 141-147). This theme connects the addresses as dots in a line that leads from the

nonresistant, moral suasion strategies of early Garrisonianism to the resistant, violent strategies of John Brown, Charles T. Torrey, Madison Washington, and the *Amistad* slaves. The addresses, in short, lent directionality to a previously divided movement, an evolution conveyed in the book’s title: “The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism.”

On the other hand, Harrold’s book convincingly shows how difficult it is to attach any single adjective to the noun “abolitionism,” since factional disputes and internal ambiguities combined to make the addresses multivalent. In the concluding sentence of chapter 1, the two themes of the book appear simultaneously: “Conflicted, contingent, and self-contradictory as they are, the Addresses point toward a future in which underground railroading and violent rhetoric characterized a northern abolitionism that sought contact with slaves” (p. 36). Throughout, the book oscillates between words like “conflicted,” “tentative,” “contingent,” and “ambiguous,” and more determinate tropes like “the rise of aggressive abolitionism” and the “abolitionist-slave alliance.”

Harrold thus combines two traditions within anti-slavery historiography—one that emphasizes continuities between abolitionism and slave resistance, as well as between abolitionism and the Civil War, and the other that stresses discontinuity and indeterminacy within the movement. Although Harrold foregrounds the first of these two alternatives, he subtly defends both, making the book a provocative one that antislavery historians should read and discuss.

In the hope that such a discussion might begin on this list, let me close with an ambiguous manifesto of my own. I believe the book is strongest when it stresses the ambivalence and fragility of the addresses, rather than when it posits a clear and strong alliance between abolitionists and slaves. Harrold is most convincing when he holds the addresses up like mirrors to the abolitionists, using them to reveal more about the reformers themselves—their views about violence, about masculinity, about strategy, about factional priorities, and about the “multiple audiences” that they had to address (p. 9). He is less convincing when he argues that of these “multiple audiences,” the slaves themselves were the immediate and most important of the abolitionists’ intended targets. In declaring their sympathy with slave violence, these abolitionists were surely talking as much (perhaps more) to each other, to pusillanimous Northerners, and to Southern slaveholders, as they were to their ostensible addressees.

Although Harrold points out that these other audi-

ences were clearly on the minds of Smith, Garrison, and Garnet, he is reluctant to emphasize them because he does not want the addresses to be dismissed as mere “rhetorical ploys” (see pp. 20, 29). Thanks in large part to Harrold’s work, it is impossible to see the addresses as merely ploys, but they still clearly demand rhetorical analysis. The book might, for instance, have compared and contrasted these speeches to other “addresses” that abolitionists produced—to Southern women, to poor Southerners, to Northern citizens, to Irish-Americans, to heads of foreign governments—and placed the addresses to the slaves more fully in the context of abolitionism’s rhetorical cadences.[5]

Whether the addresses are evidence of a full-fledged “alliance” or spiritual “unity” between abolitionists and slaves also bears close examination. As Harrold points out, no evidence exists that the addresses reached any slaves, even though the authors all spoke as though they assumed the addresses would (see pp. 9, 19, 73, 101).[6] The addresses concede, in fact, that most slaves could not read. Many antislavery arguments, even Garnet’s, depended on claims that slaves were being intellectually degraded by their masters, who systematically denied them education (p. 182). Smith’s address, for instance, promises that “we shall get as many copies of this Address, as we can into the hands of your white friends in the slave States. To these, as also to the few (alas how few!) of the colored people of the South, who ... have obtained the art of reading, we look to acquaint you with its contents” (p. 160). Far from being direct partners, then, slaves would have to be secondary recipients of the address. Smith even uses the address, which he admits slaves would not be able to read, to advise the slaves to “snatch all your little opportunities to learn to read” (p. 159). One could read the speeches, then, not as clear evidence of an alliance, but as tokens of hope against hope that isolated cases of partnership, like those discussed in *Subversives*, might become the norm instead of the exception.

In sum, one could argue that the addresses show not how normative an abolitionist-slave alliance was, but how conjectural it remained. Most cases of alliance—like the *Creole* incident and even John Brown’s raid—seem to have taken many abolitionists by surprise. And was anyone’s surprise greater than the Old Man’s himself, when he discovered belatedly at Harper’s Ferry that the thousands of “allies” he had counted on to rally around him failed to materialize? Such, at least, are the questions that make me wonder whether the final legacy of the addresses is not the abolitionists’ unrelenting realism, but

their relentless imagination.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and James Brewer Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1998): pp. 181-217.

[2]. Stanley Harrold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003). See also Harrold, *The Abolitionists and the South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

[3]. Merton Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and their Allies, 1619-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 201-223.

[4]. Harrold notes wryly that while Smith delivered his address to the 1842 New York Liberty Party’s gubernatorial nominating convention, a painting by Edwin W. Goodwin (created at Smith’s request) hung in the room picturing a helpless slave. The caption read: “Talk for me—Write for me—Print for me—Vote for me” (p. 44-45).

[5]. Harrold points out in passing that there was a veritable “genre of abolitionist literature ... singling out specific groups to receive advice, prophecies, and calls to action” (p. 42), but he does not carry out a comparative study of these appeals. The results of his work do suggest, however, that such a study could be very useful. Much like Dickson Bruce has used abolitionist literature to explore how white authors constructed an African American “voice,” studying these addresses might shed light on how abolitionists imagined the African American “ear,” as well as other audiences defined by gender, ethnicity, or location. See Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

[6]. The book notes that such a circulation of material to slaves was not impossible, since evidence exists that David Walker’s famous *Appeal*, published in 1829, did find its way into the South. See Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of*

*Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). But in the case of the addresses, Harrold has not been able to find evidence of similar circulation, beyond the claims within the addresses that they would be distributed to slaves.

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