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The American Popular Lecture System and the Public Sphere in 19th-Century America*

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A central forum for the dissemination of knowledge and communal debate, the lecture circuits represented an important manifestation of the public sphere in 19th-century America. This essay sheds light on the changing configurations of this institution. By addressing the restrictions imposed on audiences and speakers, it modifies traditional interpretations that define the lecture system as authoritative and impartial purveyor of American culture and national identity. More specifically, the rhetorical practices and performative strategies of activist women demonstrate that on the 19th-century lecture circuits competing public spheres converged in a contentious process of cultural negotiation.

1 Introduction

In his book *Voicing America*, Christopher Looby suggests that the United States was "a nation 'spoken into existence.'" (Looby 1998: 26). His examination of key texts in 18th-century American literature underlines the important cultural work of national self-creation performed by early American fiction, political discourse and vocal language. This paper is likewise built on the premise that rhetoric and, more specifically, verbally delivered oratory represents a crucial site for the negotiation of American national identity. In the following, I will explore the institutional contexts of the popular lecture system, also referred to as the lyceum system, as a crucial manifestation of the public sphere in 19th-century America.²

According to Habermas, the public sphere "is defined as the public of *private* individuals who join in debate of issues bearing on state authority" (Calhoun 1992: 7).³ Even though questions of state authority accounted for only a small portion of speeches made on the lecture circuits, this national cultural institution was frequently described by commentators and participants as an ideal manifestation of the public sphere in a Habermasian sense, as an open forum conceived for "the masses to hear all sides of all questions" ("Wendell Phillips at Milford," 1872: n.pag.). Moreover, many contemporaries celebrated the lecture system as a superb embodiment and expression of American national character, emphasizing its embrace of egalitarianism, tolerance, democracy and freedom. Historian Donald M. Scott contends that it "not only expressed a national culture; it was one of the central institutions within and by which the public had its existence" (Scott (1980): 808-9).

In order to assess the validity of these assumptions, it is useful to examine the extent to which this discursive arena was accessible to speakers outside the white male native-born middle-class, i.e. members of groups that by comparison did not possess the social, cultural, political and/or economic capital conducive to equal participation in public debate. Overall, the lecture circuit was marked by a rather narrow set of actors and rhetorical conventions. At the same time, it was sustained by exclusionary practices along the lines of race, class, and gender. It imposed significant constraints on speakers and discourses that were deemed obstructive or irrelevant to culturally prevalent definitions of the nation. The role that activist women speakers played within the institutional and conceptual frameworks of the lyceum illuminates the ways in which gender shaped the dynamics of national (self-)representation enacted on the lecture platform. Given the remarkable scope of lecture activities throughout the 19th-century-United States, the presence of activist women speakers appears rather marginal. However, through a number of rhetorical and performative strategies, women activists managed to appropriate the rhetorical space that the public platform offered and effectively used the lyceum system in pursuit of individual and collective aims. As the eventual success of social reform and political movements such as the drive for woman suffrage show, female activist speakers not only made significant contributions to the public debates of their times but also put into question and ultimately helped redefine American national identity.

2 The American Lyceum and Popular Lecture Circuits in Historical Perspective

The popular lecture system, in place from the 1820s until the 1870s, enjoyed considerable mass-appeal throughout most of the century. It functioned both as a medium for the nation-wide transmission of knowledge, attitudes and values and as an agent for the formation of a mass culture. Its origins and transformations not only help to reveal the various configurations of the public sphere—and the role of women in it—but also bear testimony to larger tendencies of cultural change in 19th-century America. The following historical overview sheds light on the altering institutional contexts defining the frameworks for rhetorical action and public performance on the platform.

There is widespread agreement in the literature that the lecture system unfolded in roughly three stages, the first of which saw the institutionalization of a growing demand for self-improvement and mutual education in the so-called lyceum movement.⁴ This local phase, rooted in New England, ran from 1826 to about 1845. In 1826, educational reformer Josiah Holbrook, together with a number of local farmers and manufacturing workers, founded the first mutual-improvement association in Millbury, Massachusetts. In an article published in the *American Journal of Education* in October of the same year, Holbrook expounds his idea of mutual education for adults and proposes a general plan for the implementation of like associations across the country. His article includes the following objectives: "to procure for youths an economical and practical education, and to diffuse rational and useful information through the community generally. [...] to apply the sciences and the various branches of education to the domestic and useful arts, and to all the common purposes of life" (Holbrook 1826: 595). Holbrook is confident that societies for mutual education modeled on his plan will raise "the moral and intellectual taste of our countrymen" and will present "some object of sufficient interest to divert the attention of the young from places and practices which lead to dissipation and to ruin" (Holbrook 1826: 595). Thus, self-improvement and moral uplift, meant to provide a scaffold buttressing the virtuousness of the young republic, stood at the center of the original concept.

Through promotion in newspapers and educational journals, and through Holbrook's personal marketing efforts, the lyceum idea was widely adopted. It rapidly expanded from the region of its initial inception to the states and territories of the Old Northwest. Lyceum speakers typically were members of the respective society or came from the immediate area. They possessed expert knowledge about the topic at hand and demonstrated how farmers, artisans and workingmen might apply abstract knowledge in the context of their daily life and labor. By 1840 several thousand lyceum groups—estimates range from 3,300 to 4,000—had been founded in large and small towns throughout the United States (Scott 1980: 791).⁵

The remarkable success of the lyceum idea in the initial phase of the movement must be understood in the context of the Jacksonian era's democratic populism. The ensuing political and cultural climate was highly conducive to the spread of mutual education societies whose rhetoric put emphasis on extending powerful means of self-improvement to the "common people" and promoted learning and debates among a community of equals. In practice, however, most lyceum groups largely failed to live up to these standards. For example, the constitutions that societies adopted typically prescribed a "democratic" conduct of affairs, i.e. decisions pertaining to the administrative and programmatic management should be made by majority vote. Lyceum offices, however, were usually held by prosperous middle to upper class "veteran community leaders" who strictly regulated the topics brought before audiences. As Carl Bode argues, lyceum officers "could be counted on to see that controversial questions were not subjects of lectures or even of debates while *they* were in control" (Bode (1968): 32).⁶ Their leadership mirrored the desire of the white middle and upper classes "to inculcate the values of the college-educated elite among a broader public" (Ray 2006: 187). The concerns over public education and, more precisely, over aligning popular values and opinions with the norms of the elite, acquired growing significance as the franchise was extended to non-property-owning white men. The concomitant unsettling of established patterns of cultural authority and the shifts in existing configurations of economic, social and political preeminence thus resonated strongly in early lyceum practices (Ray 2006: 6).

In his 1826 article, Holbrook moreover suggests that mutual education groups should be open to all classes, and proposes that anyone paying the annual fee may become a member (Holbrook 1826: 595). Even though this fee was moderate, it practically restricted participation in the lyceum movement to the members of the emerging middle class. It is important to note that this tacit social qualification went hand in hand with a systematic and successful effort at racial exclusion. The quasi-egalitarian embrace of the lyceum movement did not extend to free African Americans, who largely relied on the resources of their own communities to create mechanics' institutes, debating societies and literary associations. These organizations were mostly aimed at elevating the vocational aptitudes and intellectual skills of fellow African Americans and at advancing the abolitionist cause.⁷ Furthermore, most of the early lyceum organizations excluded women from membership and offices, even though some associations allowed women to attend presentations, if they were accompanied by male members of the lyceum group.

In the second phase of the lyceum, lasting from the 1840s to just after the Civil War, the lecture system experienced significant growth, extending its reach across the American heartland into the western states. The winter lecture season, usually running from October through early April, became the primary activity for most lyceum groups. At the same time, the main impetus of the system as originally championed by Holbrook, the idea of mutual education, receded. Instead of featuring members of the local or regional community, courses operated with invited speakers who often enjoyed a national reputation and were paid accordingly. In addition, topics no longer focused on practical instruction for artisans and farmers, but instead were intended to educate and entertain a much broader public. The contents of speeches varied widely. Lecture courses commonly included "literary lectures, historical narratives, tales of travel, reflections on U.S. political history, scientific exposition, moral uplift, and social commentary" (Ray 2006: 188).

During this period, the system was most fully developed. Scott holds that "[i]t would be difficult to exaggerate the scale and scope of public lecturing" that took place all across the country (Scott 1980: 791). By the mid-1840s, almost every northern town of 1,000 or more people had "at least one association sponsoring lectures". New York City residents could choose from more than 3,000 lectures advertised between 1840 and 1860. Boston offered twenty-six different courses of lectures in 1846 (Scott 1980: 791). Between December 1854 and March 1857, the Young Men's Association of the City of Milwaukee alone sponsored at least 36 lectures (Ray (2005): 203-5). In the 1850s, "by fairly conservative estimate attendance at public lectures in the North and West probably totaled close to 400,000 people a week" (Scott 1980: 800). By 1860, lecturing was firmly established as "a new and peculiarly American profession" (Curtis 1862: 267).

More than ever, the public lecture system figured as an integral part of a multi-pronged network of institutions through which a fur-flung population was woven into the symbolic and physical texture of the American nation. The expansion of print culture and the construction of railroads facilitated communication, trade and travel across large geographical areas and helped to turn the popular lecture system into a nation-wide phenomenon.⁸ It was now possible for speakers to tour the country with relative ease, giving the same or similar lectures to audiences in Massachusetts, Michigan and Minnesota where newspapers advertised and reported on orators and speaking events. This multi-medial, mass-communicative system was thus conducive to the creation of "a body of shared ideas and shared experiences, shaping a sense of nationhood through communal participation" (Ray 2005: 7). As contemporary comments show, this sense of nationhood was underpinned by a strong belief in the American civilizing mission of which the lecture system, disseminated across the continent with the advent of the railroad, formed an essential element. According to Higginson, "[t]hese iron rails once laid, all else follows—all the signs and appliances of American social order: the farm, the workshop, the village, the church, the schoolhouse, the *New York Tribune*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and—the popular Lecture-system" (Higginson 1886: 48). Significantly, the members of the native-born white middle-class with New England roots or, at least, a susceptibility to New England culture, served as the key standard bearers of American civilization in the lyceum. Their keen interest in spreading the lecture system into newly settled territories was frequently contrasted with the supposed indifference on the part of "foreign immigrants" who, according to Higginson, "are apt to avoid it—or to taste of it, as they do of any other national dish, with courtesy, but not with relish" (Higginson 1886: 49). Mid-19th-century observers commended the circuits for the allegedly unprejudiced manner in which topics were presented to the spectators who were assumed to not only acquire a deeper insight into the issues under discussion but to also adopt a universal, and characteristically American, spirit of tolerance. Holland argued:

[T]he popular lecture [...] has bestowed upon American society a permanent good of incalculable value. The relentless foe of all bigotry in politics and religion, the constant opponent of every form of bondage to party or sect, the practical teacher of the broadest toleration of individual opinion, it has had more to do with the steady melioration of the prejudices growing out of denominational interests in Church and State than any other agency whatever" (1865: 368-69).

While Holland's positive assessment captures to a certain degree the nature of the public lecture system during this period, it simultaneously obscures the tightly patrolled boundaries of this rhetorical space into which contentious topics and controversial speakers were rarely admitted. From the beginning, the lyceum was in fact meant to provide a sanctuary from everyday political controversies, sectarian discourses, and religious strife. "Useful to all and offensive to none" was the overarching motto circumscribing all lecture activities (Scott 1980: 793). For a short time, in the years before, during and immediately after the Civil War, political topics and social criticism did make their way onto the platform in many northern towns and cities—much to the dismay of some contemporary commentators such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who in 1868 complained about the fact that the "popular lecture is coming to be a branch of that national institution 'the stump.' Politics, long excluded by common consent, now threaten to exclude everything else" (Higginson 1886: 52). Within the overall development of the lyceum system, however, this period rather represents a deviation from the traditional pattern (Ray 2005: 41-44). The activities of many lyceums came to a halt during the war and many did not reopen after it had ended.

Nevertheless, the public lecture system as a recognizable cultural institution survived and continued into its third stage which lasted from the mid-1860s to about 1880. This period was marked by the disappearance of local lyceum groups and the rise of highly paid celebrities whose tours were conducted by commercial booking agencies such as the Redpath Lyceum Bureau. These profit-oriented institutions designed standardized lecture courses prepackaged for consumption by interested communities throughout the United States. Speakers typically signed up with an agent who in return for a share of the income took charge of the logistics involved in organizing a string of speaking events across the country. In this phase, popular demand for lectures on the local platforms was more than ever determined by the "excellence or notoriety" of the speakers whose respective market value allowed them to extract considerable remuneration from their engagements (Holland 1865: 364). While in the 1850s, well-known figures had expected to earn between fifty and one hundred dollars per night, with many speakers offering to lecture for "F.A.M.E.: Fifty And My Expenses" (Scott 1980: 793), payments to nationally renowned individuals significantly increased in the 1860s and 1870s. For example, Henry Ward Beecher in his later years commanded a fee of \$ 500 per engagement (Powell 1895: 736), Ralph Waldo Emerson collected up to \$ 300 per event (736), and temperance orator John B. Gough received between \$ 300 and \$ 500 per lecture in the 1870s (Ray 2005: 40).

Also, during this period, the balance of contents offered on the circuits notably shifted in favor of myriad forms of "popular amusement." As music acts, theatrical presentations and comedic performances made their way onto the platform, the boundaries between popular culture entertainment and the realm of middle- and high-brow culture to which the public lectures had traditionally been assigned became permeable and blurred. This development seemed to jeopardize both the previously established functions of the lecture system—democratic education and the dissemination of elite norms and attitudes among the broader public—and, by extension, the authority of those who championed the cultural dominance of the white middle and upper classes.

Some contemporary observers saw the lecture system undermined from without and within. In newspapers and magazines, they harshly criticized the crass commercialism and the poor intellectual standards that had come to govern a formerly venerable national institution. These bleak assessments partly mirror a concern over the growing complexity and diversification of knowledge as well as over the rise of a variety of new leisure pursuits that made collective practices and public discourses harder to contain and control. J.G. Holland's perspective can serve as a typical example for this narrative of decline. For instance, in 1865 he argues that the "popular lecture has fallen into disrepute with many worthy persons in consequence of the admission of buffoons and triflers to the lecturer's platform [...]," adding that "it is a gross injustice to every respectable lecturer in the field to introduce into his guild men who have no better motive and no higher mission than the stage-clown and the negro-minstrel" (Holland 1865: 366). Six years later Holland renewed and sharpened his critique in an article for *Scribner's Monthly* in which he asserted that "the 'lecture system' has degenerated into a string of entertainments that have no earnest purpose, and minister to no manly and womanly want" (Holland 1871: 561). Holland believed that there was a corrosive process unfolding within the lyceum system compounded by developments underway in the larger society. In his view, the lure of the lecture hall was diminished by a surplus supply of cultural activities available to audiences in the bigger cities such as "the opera, the play, the frequent concert, the exhibition, the club-house, the social assembly and public excitements" (Holland 1865: 366). In a rhetorical effort to stave off this competition, Holland adopted a dual strategy: He declared the lecture system a bulwark against this perceived pattern of overall cultural deterioration; and he defined the uncompromising adherence to the educational purpose of the lecture system as a mark of social and intellectual distinction:

So far as the popular lecture has taken hold of the affections of a community, and secured its constant support, it has destroyed the desire for all amusements of a lower grade; and it will be found, that, generally, those who attend the lecture rarely or never give their patronage and presence to the buffooneries of the day" (Holland 1865: 369).

In retrospect, however, this pessimistic lament voiced from an elite point of view only reflects part of the picture. Amending Holland's theme of cultural degeneration, Ray has recently argued that the entertainment function prevalent in the lecture system during and after the Civil War performed important cultural work. It opened up opportunities for political and social activists, women among them, to present audiences with potentially contentious topics. "[T]he turmoil of the impending Civil War [had] made politics and reform materially salient in the lives of lyceum lecture-goers" and, in this context, "controversial people and issues were frequently presented *as entertainment*" (Ray 2005: 47).⁹ These events, banned from the lecture hall in earlier periods, were now welcomed as long as speakers presented their arguments in ways deemed acceptable within the lecture circuit environment, i.e. as long as they did not violate the conventions of civility, "objectivity" and "tolerance" governing popular lecture etiquette. By framing controversy as a form of spectacle that was nevertheless contained by the rules of public debate and conduct established over the previous decades, the "performative norms of entertainment [...] created space for reformers and at the same time restricted their reception" (Ray 2006: 47). A perspective that conceptualizes the inclusion of new presentational formats and contents in terms of transformation and diversification, rather than in terms of intellectual decline, therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding of this final phase of the popular lecture system.

In the 1880s, audiences grew ever more mobile and had a wider range of media and institutions to choose from in order to educate and entertain themselves. As a consequence, the lecture circuits eventually lost their position as key purveyors of American culture. Some of their functions were taken up by the Chautauqua assemblies that arose in many towns across the Northeast and the Midwest after Reverend John Heyl Vincent had founded the first such institution catering to the religious and educational needs of Methodist Sunday school teachers on Lake Chautauqua, New York, in 1874. In the following decades, traveling chautauquas reached out to an even greater number of rural communities until well into the 20th-century when these itinerant companies were gradually superseded by the new mass media of radio and film.¹⁰

3 The Lecture System as a Male Public Sphere

During its heyday, the lecture system was widely celebrated as a quintessential expression of American character. Admirers frequently referred to it as "the most purely democratic of all our democratic institutions" (Holland 1865: 363) or characterized the lyceum system as "the devoted, consistent, never tiring champion of universal liberty" (Holland 1865: 370) working to "convert the world to political and social righteousness" (Powell 1895: 737). These statements, more often rooted in the commentator's subjective vision than in proven fact, take stock of the lecture system's alleged achievements. More importantly, however, they show that among supporters, the circuits worked as a mirror and mediator of cultural values that defined American national identity as well as delineated the metaphorical and material boundaries of the nation. As the foregoing historical overview suggests, this dual work of cultural construction and differentiation was partly enacted through the class, racial, and gender biases characterizing the lecture system. In the following, I will concentrate on the institution's gendered dimension. This focus promises to elucidate the mechanisms regulating the 19th-century public sphere and to shed light on some of the rhetorical and performative strategies adopted by women speakers enforcing their claims to national (self-)representation on the public platform.

Their universalistic rhetoric notwithstanding, portrayals of the lecture system firmly relied on a discourse of masculinity. This discourse tied notions of democracy, liberty, and social progress to male agency or, more precisely, to white American male agency. As a consequence, the public lecture hall was defined as a space in which the performance of national identity and the performance of masculinity were mutually constitutive practices. During and after the Civil War, numerous articles in magazines reveal this nexus between male public performance and national identity. In an 1862 editorial published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, for example, George William Curtis makes the following point:

The Lyceum in this country has been emphatically what it has been so often called—lay preaching. Its experience, and *the constant success of certain men, shows that the heart of the nation is an earnest, manly heart*; [...] the Lyceum is a common ground *for all fair and capable men*" (Curtis 1862: 266).

In a similar vein, Holland's accounts imply that the right to make one's voice heard did not depend on questions of political or religious affiliation but on the manhood of the speaker:

The platform of the lecture-hall has been common ground for the representatives of all our social, political, and religious organizations. It is there that orthodox and heterodox, progressive and conservative, have won respect for themselves and toleration for their opinions *by the demonstration of their own manhood* [...]; for one has only *to prove himself a true man*, and to show a universal sympathy with men, to secure popular toleration for any opinion he may hold" (Holland 1865: 369).

Manly conduct on and off the platform was also seen as a prerequisite for favorable audience reception: "Only he who feels that he has something to do in making the world wiser and better, and who, *in a bold and manly way*, tries persistently to do it, is always welcome" (Holland 1865: 366), for "whatever else the mass of men like or dislike, *they always like true manhood*" (Higginson 1868: 53). The audience's receptiveness to oral instruction allegedly depended on the display of strength, independence, and freedom—properties construed as exclusive to the male speaker: "The people have an earnest desire to know *what a strong, independent, free man has to say* about those facts which touch the experience, the direction, and the duty of their daily life" (Holland 1865: 367-68). On a less elevated note, reports of the practical challenges of life on the lecture circuit equally suggested that this was not an environment in which a woman could or should compete:

The fulfillment of from seventy-five to ninety engagements involves, in round numbers, ten thousand miles of railroad-travel, much of it in the night, and all of it during the most unpleasant season of the year. There is probably nothing short of a military campaign that is attended by so many discomforts and genuine hardships as a season of active lecturing. Unless a man be young and endowed with an extraordinary amount of vital power, he becomes entirely unfitted by his nightly work [...]" (Holland 1865: 368).¹¹

The gendered notions governing these conceptions of the lecture system were, of course, neither invented by the contributors and observers of the circuits, nor were they exclusive to this sector of the 19th-century American public sphere. The lecture system rather figured as a micro-cosmos of a larger cultural constellation dominated by the ideology of separate spheres and its corollary, the cult of true womanhood. As Barbara Welter and others have shown, these cultural dogmas naturalized a gendered ideal that defined women in terms of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness (Welter 1966). The place of woman, classified as physically weaker but morally superior to men, was in the home where she catered to the needs of husband and children and functioned as an ethical and religious guide for the members of her family. In so doing, she provided the moral foundation for the public activity of men. Her exclusion from the public arena was meant to protect her from the gaze of "promiscuous" audiences as well as from the ill effects of economic competition and political strife—activities that due to her delicate constitution she was held to be unfit for. In its emphasis on public male performance, lyceum rhetoric replicated these cultural assumptions but simultaneously drew on a more specific and long-standing subset of conjectures surrounding the issue of women's public speech. For men, the right to speak, expressed and reinforced through an ancient rhetorical heritage linking public speech to concepts of citizenship and personhood, was traditionally assumed. Women had to overcome the obstacles imposed on them by the male-centered precepts of the Greek rhetorical tradition, the dictates of a skewed biological discourse and the mandates of the Scripture whose prohibitions against female public speech strongly informed the 19th-century debate. These restrictions intertwined with contemporary norms in establishing the view that "femininity and rhetorical action were [...] mutually exclusive" (Campbell 1989a: 9; see also Campbell 1989b).

Women's participation in public deliberation contradicted the notions that underpinned the gendered ideology of separate spheres. Speaking in front of an audience entailed involvement in the public sphere where the demonstration of authority and expertise as well as the engagement in competition, partisanship, and aggressive persuasion were of paramount importance. Only men, by virtue of their ruthless and ambitious nature, were considered capable of fulfilling these requirements. Women who by mounting the platform violated their inner nature as domestic, modest and spiritual beings were believed to "unsex" themselves (11). They not only jeopardized their status as an exemplar of "true womanhood" but, more significantly, threatened to unhitch the moorings of the established social order.

These discourses of gender segregation permeating American culture throughout much of the 19th century notwithstanding, the lecture hall came to be seen as a public space in which the presence of women was generally deemed appropriate. Given the rigidity of the cultural norms regulating the participation of women in public activities, this fact appears striking. It is important to remember, however, that the lecture system implemented an overall censorship of political and sectarian rhetoric and that the notion of moral uplift figured as a guiding principle throughout. These standards, even if not consistently heeded, made female attendance more acceptable.

4 The Role of Women Speakers in the Lecture System

Contemporaries and subsequent generations of scholars alike have tended to neglect female achievements on the public platform. Reminiscences of 19th-century participants overwhelmingly privilege the contributions of male speakers. In his retrospective overview of the lecture circuits, Higginson, for example, focuses almost exclusively on the popularity enjoyed by individuals such as Horace Mann, Wendell Phillips, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, George Curtis, Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher, John B. Gough, Theodore Tilton, Bayard Taylor or Theodore Parker (Higginson 1868: 52-56). The only female speakers mentioned in his recollections are Lucy Stone and Anna Dickinson. The latter's rhetorical competence, supported by "good looks, perfect self possession, an effective voice, readiness of illustration, fidelity to principle, and great magnetic power" is readily conceded. Still, Higginson interprets her success as an indication of the perceived intellectual decline and growing partisanship of the lyceum which, for him, presents a great "evil":

The scholar [as lecturer] recedes from sight, and the impassioned orator takes his place. There is no time for Longfellow to analyze "Dante," nor for Longfellow to explain *Hamlet*, while [...] Anna Dickinson pleads for the enfranchisement of one half of the human race (Higginson 1868: 53).

Powell's reminiscences, published in 1895, are similarly uneven in their appraisal of male and female contributions to the lecture circuits. The same pattern is replicated by later scholarly treatments such as Oliver's *History of Public Speaking in America*, still one of the few attempts at a comprehensive overview of the topic. Even though Oliver incorporates a number of woman orators, he relegates this group to the somewhat less prestigious sphere of commercialized lecturing and construes female speech as an unoriginal and limited imitation of male rhetorical prowess furnished by the likes of Webster, Beecher, Lincoln and Douglas. In more recent years, however, research conducted by feminist scholars—Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (Campbell 1989b), Shirley Wilson Logan (Logan 1999), Andrea Lunsford (Lunsford 1995), Nan Johnson (Johnson 2002), Carol Mattingly (Mattingly 1995) and Angela G. Ray (Ray 2005) among them—has significantly revised entrenched understandings of the character and evolution of public speaking in America. By recovering the organizational activities and the rhetorical practices of women, these works do more than simply insert female achievements into male-dominated versions of the oratorical tradition. They also reconceptualize the role of public speech and, by extension, the parameters delineating the public sphere in 19th-century America. Female appearances on the lecture circuits as one manifestation of this sphere form an important, if as yet small, part of this larger project.

The difficult task of assessing the scope and nature of women's involvement in lyceum affairs is compounded by the fact that records are few, fragmentary and scattered. It is therefore difficult to make generalizations. Existing source materials and research put forth by Ray, Cameron and others suggest that practices varied widely by place and time. Many early lyceum groups operated by the white Protestant male elite barred women from membership, while some allowed women to join, as the Lincoln Lyceum in Massachusetts did in 1835. But even where women were given membership, existing records do not indicate a high level of participation as officers, speakers, or debaters. In newspaper accounts, diaries and other personal reminiscences of public speaking events, women most frequently appear as spectators accompanying a male member of the association or audience.

According to Ray, speeches addressing the contentious issue of women's roles and women's rights accounted for only a minor portion of lyceum lecture repertoires. Their frequency corresponded closely with gender-related developments unfolding within the wider culture (Ray 2006: 189). As Cameron has shown, the New England speaking tour of abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimké at the end of the 1830s gave rise to some debate about women and the rights of citizenship in a number of Massachusetts lyceums (Cameron 1969: 15-23).

In the 1838-39 season, for example, Harvard law professor Simon Greenleaf presented a lecture in the Salem lyceum entitled "The Legal Rights of Woman," in which he refuted female claims to stronger legal protection (Ray 2006: 189). The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 again intensified lyceum discussions about the issue of women's involvement in politics. In the 1840s and 1850s speakers such as James Freeman Clarke, Cornelius Conway Felton, Henry Giles, Horace Mann, and Reignold Solger offered lectures with titles like "Woman," "Woman's Rights," or "Sphere of Woman" (Cameron 1969: 15-23). Predictably, the contents of these speeches varied widely, ranging from condemnations of women's participation in public affairs to positions that supported the expansion of educational opportunities for women (Ray 2006: 191). Existing sources also show that from the 1830s to the 1850s, women rarely mounted the lyceum platform. When they did, they appeared most frequently as readers, singers or impersonators, not as lecturers.¹²

Drawing on the records kept by the Concord lyceum, Ray concludes, for example, that between the years 1829 and 1878 women constituted only 3 % of the total number of presenters, and only 5 women actually gave lectures with Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Lucy Stone and Mary Livermore among them (Ray 2006: 191). At the Franklin Lyceum in Providence, a similar pattern emerges for the years 1840 to 1881. Of 330 presentations given, 29 (or 9%) involved women as lecturers, readers, impersonators or musicians. Only 10 (or 3% of the total) of these events were lectures where women speakers presented their own ideas, and these 10 lectures were in turn delivered by only 3 individuals—Sara Lippincott, Olive Logan, and Anna Dickinson, who lectured at the Franklin Lyceum eight times between the season of 1867-68 and 1875-76 (Ray 2006: 191). These figures, due to their fragmentary nature and geographical bias, cannot claim to be representative, but it is reasonable to assume that they reflect a pattern that probably held true for the majority of lyceum activities in many parts of the country.

After the Civil War, during which women entered professions and occupied positions previously reserved for men, the number of female speakers on the lyceum platform increased. Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Anna Dickinson, Kate Field, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Mary Livermore, Olive Logan, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, all of which were dedicated to the promotion of women's rights, counted among the most active participants. Some of them were sponsored by the commercial lecture bureaus, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who between 1869 and 1880 spent eight months per year on the lecture circuit (Ray 2006: 193).

Looking back on the New England Lyceum in 1895, Powell remembers that alongside the great number of renowned male speakers, "Susan B. Anthony and Mrs. Stanton were always acceptable and drew large audiences" (Powell 1895: 734). He acknowledges that he "can think of nothing more impressive than the convicted bearing of the audiences of these two women" whose public appearances almost invariably exacted respect, even though "it was not yet quite time for American manhood to follow its convictions" (Powell 1895: 734).

In the 1870s, Anna Dickinson's level of fame equaled that of other male lyceum celebrities such as Wendell Phillips or John B. Gough despite the fact that she was frequently addressing the contentious topic of women's rights on the platform. Having in the previous electoral campaign "made a triumphant tour among the roughest mining regions of Pennsylvania [...] where almost any man of like opinions would have been mobbed into silence," Higginson muses, she had "certainly earned the right to pass from that theme to her present one, the enfranchisement of her sex" (Higginson 1886: 54). He also states that she "reweave[d] the same high compensation, and probably [...] more invitations during the year than Beecher" (Higginson 1886: 54). In 1872, the income Dickinson generated from speaking engagements totaled \$ 23.000 "at a time when the U.S. president's annual salary was \$ 25.000" (Ray 2006: 193).

In spite of these successful appearances, female activists advocating women's rights—and thus coming to the platform with a potentially oppositional agenda—navigated a particularly difficult terrain. They had to adjust their presentations to the limitations imposed by the institutional and conceptual format of the lyceum system. These limitations included the fact that public speaking was considered a male domain; that the lecture system was meant to be a space free from partisan politics and religious controversy; and that lectures were given in a commercialized setting to a popular and paying audience. Women speakers responded to these exigencies by adopting a number of performative and rhetorical strategies that helped to engage and overcome the restrictions placed upon them.

5 Women Speakers on the Platform: Performative and Rhetorical Strategies

Evidently, the women lecturing on the circuit from the 1830s through the 1870s varied greatly in terms of their personal backgrounds and experiences, the goals they pursued, the politics they subscribed to, and the periods in which they were most active. It is difficult to do justice to this rich and complicated history without underplaying the unique character of individual rhetorical acts carried out at a specific historic moment, but it is possible to provide an overview of representational tactics that female lecturers employed. More specifically, in a culture characterized by a dichotomous concept of gender roles, women speakers drew on established rhetorical formats and notions of femininity in order to convey their messages and create the ethical appeal of their public persona.

The face-to-face community created by a speaking event set it apart from other channels of (mass) communication such as the 19th-century print media. Those present at a public lecture not only had the opportunity to absorb verbalized messages, they witnessed a cultural performance with additional layers of meaning that arose, for example, from the physical presence of the speaker. The corporal immediacy of the lecture hall significantly influenced the audience's judgement, a crucial element of platform dynamics. As Higginson pointed out in 1868 in reference to male orators, "[...] the American Lecture-system [...] furnishes a ready standard by which to try all prominent men" (53). In other words, the lecturers themselves became "texts available for public reading" (Ray 2006: 197) in that "[t]hey must [...] face the people eye to eye. This ordeal of the gaslight displays to all beholders the face, the form, the bearing of the speaker. Once placed before this public he can no more evade inspection than if he were a statue in the public square" (Higginson 1868: 53).

Newspaper accounts of speaking events suggest that this aspect was especially salient for the creation of the female lecturer's public persona. While reviews of white male speakers' presentations tended to focus on his professional achievements, his reputation, and the contents of the speech, women were placed under intense scrutiny, not only as lecturers, but literally, as embodiments of their sex. Articles regularly commented at length on a woman speaker's external appearance, her dress, physique, facial expressions, gestures, and voice, thus measuring the degree of conformity with or deviation from established gender norms and notions of femininity. ¹³

When Frances Wright began a series of lectures in New York in January 1830, an account of her first lecture, published in the *New York American*, characterized the event and, more specifically, the speaker as follows:

A tall ungainly figure, of masculine proportions, dressed in broadcloth, evidently a woman's riding habit [...]. In her hand, neither white nor well-turned, her lecture. A gold watch suspended from her girdle. An English face proclaimed the welcome fact that she was no country woman of ours. Hair parted in the middle, ringlets on either side, complexion reddish and wind-worn. Her eye bold and fearless yet glazed and unsteady as if its energies had been wasted by midnight study or its lustre marred by indulgence and by sorrow. She stood unmoved, broke silence in a clear strong voice, uttered coldly and with scrupulous enunciation a string of truisms [...] (Connors 1999: 40).

Clearly, this negative response to Wright's physical presence on the platform was used to support the critic's overall rejection of her ideas. Many readers probably agreed that Wright's thoughts were too radical. Interpreted from a broader perspective, this report, and many others like it published in subsequent decades, demonstrates how women in the male-dominated public lecture field inevitably spoke from a position of difference. This position did not necessarily result from the contents of female speakers' speeches, but instead came from the mechanisms of the wider cultural context in which women's location was that of the gendered "other." The focus on the female speaking subject's physique and diction was part of a cultural negotiation meant to contain women's public agency and advocacy.

Many activist women orators were keenly aware of this fact and thus presented their audiences with culturally acceptable middle- and upper-class versions of femininity. According to Ray, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, the first woman activist who regularly and successfully spoke before lyceum audiences in the 1840s and 1850s, is a case in point. Accounts of Smith's speaking engagements suggest that her self-representation on the public platform was positively received because she personified contemporary norms of femininity. Spectators described her platform manner as "entirely womanly, elegant and prepossessing," and frequently emphasized her "feminine charm" and tasteful dress (Ray 2006: 203). In letters to other activist women Smith stated that she intended to refute the wide-spread notion "that all women's rights women are horrid old frights with beards and moustaches" (203). Smith's success as an early lyceum lecturer confirmed the effectiveness of her performance. Other women, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and temperance leader Frances Willard later in the century, followed the same path. Stanton's appeal relied heavily on the image of traditional motherhood she projected on the platform by way of her physical appearance, dress and conduct.

In a similar vein, the materials Frances Willard handed out to instruct aspiring temperance speakers consistently advised them to present "a reassuring feminine persona" in order to enhance an audience's receptiveness to women's messages: "Womanliness first—afterward what you will" (Mattingly 1995: 51). It could be argued that in so doing, these women were simply exhibiting the manners and style that they, due to their social background, were accustomed to. After all, most of them were members of the middle and upper stratum of society. Records throughout the 19th-century suggest, however, that the display of femininity was deliberately used as a tool for carving out a position in the rhetorical space of the lyceum. By offering convincing performances of gendered norms, lecturers such as Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Paulina Wright Davis, Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Frances Willard successfully invalidated the stereotype of women "unsexing" themselves in public. They thus managed to create a space for women's rights activists to inform, enlighten and sometimes to subvert existing norms of gender. It is important to note, however, that by adopting this approach, they simultaneously upheld gendered conventions to a certain degree and thus limited the possible scope of social change. Moreover, the struggle of white middle- and upper-class womanhood for public self-representation relied for its success on contemporary ideologies of race and class. In the discursive context of the lyceum platform, these remained fundamentally unchallenged and, indeed, formed the background against which these speakers made their argument for female participation in the public sphere.

The lyceum system was not a venue suitable for the display of unconventional alternatives to entrenched notions of femininity, and neither was it a forum for the delivery of speeches with subversive or radical content. Throughout its history, the lyceum's primary function was perceived to be the diffusion of educational and practical knowledge, rather than the dissemination of political, social, or cultural dissent. Accordingly, audiences tended to expect education and instruction, not contention. The lectures given by women activists typically adjusted to these requirements by choosing rhetorical modes familiar to the lyceum-going public—a paying public. In her analysis of women's contributions to the lecture circuits, Ray points out that these rhetorical formats and contents were typically non-confrontational, avoided persuasive argument and "kept calls for direct political action to a minimum," especially when it came to the issue of woman suffrage (Ray 2006: 198). Many lectures that argued for new conceptions of womanhood did not do so by straight-forward rhetorical agitation. Rather, speakers cast their propositions in the narrative conventions of the tale of travel, or the historical account, such as Anna Dickinson's "Joan of Arc," in which she emphasizes the heroine's military talent and contradicts 19th-century assertions about women's peaceful inner nature and limited professional competence (Ray 2006: 201).

In keeping with the general expectation that the content of lyceum lectures should be applicable to everyday life, messages were often conveyed in the form of practical advice, such as in Livermore's "What Shall We Do With Our Daughters?" or Stanton's "Our Girls." Both speeches advocate dress reform in the guise of anecdotal stories. By drawing on her ethical appeal as "true woman" and mother, Stanton argues for "a new standard of female beauty," thus subtly undertaking a redefinition of "womanhood" (Ray 2006: 200). Quite frequently, however, these progressive ideas found their justification in the traditional dichotomous conceptualization of gender roles. Lectures by Smith, Dickinson, and Livermore, for instance, promoted equality between men and women, challenged the ideal of married motherhood, celebrated the artistic, literary and philanthropic achievements of single women, and argued for female participation in educational institutions and the professions (Ray 2006: 201-2). At the same time, their lectures often reaffirmed the alleged innate difference between men and women and reified "True Womanhood" by invoking an image of woman as the moral stronghold of society whose function was to mitigate man's ruthless and ambitious nature. In many of her speeches, Elizabeth Smith, for example, characterizes woman as "clear, calm, courageous in thought, virginal in sentiment, and spiritual in the highest" (Ray 2006: 201). Livermore celebrates "men and women as opposite forces, with man as the head, woman as the heart, with man as wisdom, woman as love, together yearning toward God" (202). As a consequence, lyceum lectures, reflecting the tensions at work in the larger culture, frequently conveyed "competing and even logically contradictory ideas" that oscillated between female empowerment and cultural accommodation (Ray 2006: 205). This ambivalent outcome must be contributed to a number of factors: It can be read as an indication for the complex process of cultural and conceptual negotiation that was part even of the very moment of performance; as a response to the larger constraints which the lyceum system placed on the content and formats of lectures; as an attempt by the lecturer to navigate between the multiple poles of opinion that might potentially be found in the audience; and as a way to undercut dominant cultural perceptions, not by one sweeping rhetorical blow that might alienate a paying audience, but by minute persuasive steps that did not stray all too far from established viewpoints. In practice, all these aspects played an important role and were, in effect, intertwined.

6 Conclusion

In his 1895 reminiscences of the public lecture system, Plymouth church pastor Powell comes to the sweeping conclusion that this 19th-century institution "made women free" (Powell 1895: 739). While women's performances on the platform were undoubtedly instrumental in raising public awareness of women's issues and the lecture hall provided an important outlet for female empowerment, the record overall does not warrant such a far-reaching assertion. The potential for social change residing in the public presentation of reformist ideas and claims was curtailed by the multiple constraints characterizing the lecture system in terms of participants, contents, and rhetorical formats. If its institutional and conceptual setting did not require the one-sided affirmation of dominant cultural ideologies, it did encourage the careful reconciliation of activist agendas with the established precepts of the 19th-century American social order in which the doctrines of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood figured as crucial elements. These limitations were mirrored and compounded by the fact that women, either as lecture topics or as active speakers, only incidentally appeared on the platform. Nevertheless, the lecture hall constituted an essential location from which women activists could argue for equality and political participation. Even if the immediate effect of their speeches on public opinion is difficult to ascertain, the benefits garnered on a more practical level, as pointed out by Ray, cannot be denied (Ray 2006: 204).

Women activists recognized the popular lecture system as a way to influence public opinion across a broad geographical area. It provided activist women with opportunities for social networking and produced financial profits that afforded female speakers personal independence. These funds were also used to foster and sustain a multiplicity of women's organizations where advocacy and social criticism was less restrained and more radical viewpoints could be articulated in an effort to propel societal change. Women's appearances on the circuit also challenged an outlook that typically linked the notion of professionalism to male public activity. Female lecturers could build national reputations and increase their authority as representatives of social and political causes.

Most importantly, activist women's involvement in matters of public debate, on and off the platform, mandates a revision of traditional concepts of the public sphere. Their organizational endeavors and rhetorical interventions, conducted inside and outside the lecture hall, made a powerful statement for female (self-)representation and injected women's issues labeled as "private" into the realm of public deliberation. Assessing these activities in simplified terms of inclusion or exclusion, however, may lead to a skewed understanding of the public sphere, because such a view rests upon "a gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the [male] bourgeois public's claim to be *the* public" (Fraser 1992: 116).¹⁴ Acknowledging and engaging the existence of multiple competing public spheres in 19th-century America can therefore support a critical perspective that avoids replicating the ideological assumptions prevalent at that time. Rather than interpreting the presence of female speakers in the 19th-century lyceum system as an incidental addition to the (implicitly male-defined) bourgeois public sphere, female participation in the lecture circuits must be seen as a manifestation of the *entanglement* of public spheres. It was at this conflictual juncture that activist women speakers made important interventions into the debates of their age and helped to reinvent prevalent cultural norms as well as social and political practices.

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank Kristen Lindenmeyer for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² While the term "lyceum" appears in the literature throughout the period under examination here, "popular lecture," "lecture system," and "lecture circuits" enjoyed a somewhat wider usage from the mid-19th-century onward.

³ Original emphasis.

⁴ See, for example, Bode (1968), Scott (1980), and Ray (2005).

⁵ Not all of these groups carried the term "lyceum" in their organizational name. In general, however, young men's associations, library societies, mechanics' institutes or literary and debating societies functioned like lyceums in that they offered or subsidized reading rooms, libraries and public halls, and sponsored debating and public lecturing events.

⁶ Original emphasis.

⁷ For an overview of early organizational efforts by free African Americans in the Northern states see (Porter 1936). For a recent treatment of activities undertaken by African American literary societies see (McHenry 2002).

⁸ According to the literature, the lyceum system never took firm root in the Southern states—a fact that scholars have attributed to this region's overall demographic and educational lag and the restrictions placed on public and intellectual debate in a culture built on slavery (see, for example, Bode 1968: 75-87). In her more recent dissertation, Joanna Smitherman Trapp proposes to reshape these conclusions by recovering lyceum-related activities in Virginia (Trapp 2003). As more research comes to light, conceptions of the South as a lyceum-free space may have to be revised.

⁹ Emphasis added.

¹⁰ For an in-depth treatment of the original Chautauqua assembly in the state of New York see (Rieser 2003). For a recent study of the traveling chautauquas see (Canning 2005).

¹¹ In her reminiscences, *Eighty Years and More*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was an active lyceum lecturer in the 1870s, draws quite a different picture. In a humorous vein, she relates the story of how she once, in a snow storm, traveled four hours on a sleigh across the open fields of Iowa in order to fulfill a speaking engagement in a small town. Afterwards, she flaunts this 'unwomanly' act of perseverance before two male fellow lecturers: "At the Sherman House, in Chicago, three weeks later, I met Mr. Bradlaugh and General Kilpatrick, who were advertised on the same route ahead of me. 'Well,' said I, 'where have you gentlemen been?' 'Waiting here for the roads to be opened. We have lost three weeks' engagements,' they replied. As the General was lecturing on his experiences in Sherman's march to the sea, I chaffed him on not being able, in an emergency, to march across the State of Iowa. They were much astonished and somewhat ashamed, when I told them of my long, solitary drives over the prairies from day to day. It was the testimony of all the bureaus that the women could endure more fatigue and were more conscientious than the men in filling their appointments" (Stanton 1897).

¹² Elizabeth Bell has perceptively argued that at a time when the public voices of women activists became more vocal, readings and impersonations performed by women functioned as a carefully policed "site of cultural accommodation [...]." These presentations were more acceptable than female social and political deliberations because "[t]he actress/readers did not voice their own (politically charged) words, but voiced the words of literary and dramatic masters. Their public motives were not emancipatory, but cultural validation of established literary ideals" (Bell 1993: 355).

¹³ For the "othering" of non-white speakers, men or women, through a (white) discourse on the body and voice see, for example, (Logan 2004). For the cultural significance of women's speech and women's voices as a highly contested theme in 19th-century American literature see (Levander 1998).

¹⁴ Original emphasis.