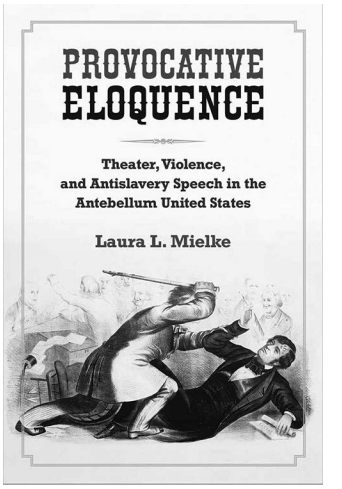
Provocative Eloquence: Theater, Violence, and Antislavery Speech in the Antebellum United States. By Laura L. Mielke. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019; 296 pp.; illustrations. $75.00 cloth; e-book available.



Violence suffused the United States during the decade preceding the US American Civil War, animated by and intensifying the political conflicts surrounding slavery. South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks viciously beat Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner in retribution for perceived calumny against the South. John Brown's abolitionist insurgencies intensified the conflagrations of "Bleeding Kansas" and culminated in his public execution following the raid on Harpers Ferry. Throughout, proslavery forces greeted antislavery speech with threats and violent reprisals.

Focusing primarily on this turbulent decade, Laura L. Mielke's *Provocative Eloquence* offers a compelling study of the role of antebellum theatre as a repertoire that mediated public discourse on violence, slavery, and freedom. Mielke draws from Joseph Roach and Diana Taylor to devise "an interperformative and intertextual approach to a culture in which print and performance overlap, influence, intersect, interact, and generally become entangled with one another" (22). Through this method, Mielke assembles a broad array of antislavery texts, orations, and performances, analyzing each for its idiosyncratic articulations of freedom and re-citations of violent rhetoric.

Centrally, the book presents historical alternatives to William Lloyd Garrison's dominant figuration of the antislavery movement as bound to "moral suasion" (19). By contrast to the ethical nonviolence of Garrisonian abolitionism, Mielke analyzes the frequent recourse to incendiary oratory at the antislavery lectern and in theatrical stagings of slavery and its envisioned demise. For instance, in an incisive account of the dramatic readings of black abolitionists William Wells Brown and Mary Webb, Mielke theorizes their practice of "dramatic suasion" as "a political-rhetorical strategy" that staged "antislavery speech's provocations of violence" to hold up proslavery brutality to public scrutiny (56, 58). In another innovative analysis, Mielke traces citations of Portia's speech from *The Merchant of Venice* as a script for antislavery rhetoricians' rationalizations of violence as a just measure in settling the "bond" of human bondage (117–56). Other chapters include analyses of popular stage actor Edwin Forrest's July 4th oration as an ambivalent articulation of the violence necessary to secure freedom; stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel *Dred* (1856); and, John Brown's militant abolitionism and its uptake onstage and in antislavery rhetoric. Across these disparate objects, the book outlines the intensity with which antebellum speech agitated toward violent ends. Moreover, Mielke traces how "the speaker's ability to provoke action through eloquence makes theater essential to the antislavery movement's consideration of forceful resistance" (3). Thus, the book persuasively demonstrates how theatrical forms such as "dramatic suasion" supplemented antislavery speech and augmented its capacity for provocation.

The central framing of antislavery speech "as *provocative* of internal transformation, outward protest, violent resistance, and/or brutal censorship" presents some methodological and theoretical quandaries for performance history (20). Namely, provocation definitionally implies incitement and instigation—that is, to provoke is to *cause* or to *prompt* something to happen. By focusing on antislavery speech as the primary archive for theorizing rhetorical provocation, Mielke's analyses place a great deal of agency in the hands (and throats) of antislavery orators whose provocations instigate theatrical and everyday scenes of violence. Rather than figuring antislavery rhetoricians as themselves provoked into action by the brutalities of slavery, the violence of proslavery mobs, or the state's authorization of racist cruelty, antebellum provocation

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204320000180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appears as a predominantly antislavery practice opposed to proslavery "censorship" (18). This tendency is most evident in the interpretation of Sumner's antislavery rhetoric as an "intentional incitement of proslavery auditors *almost* to the point of assault—a use of theatrical form terribly relevant to his caning" (90), an ironized claim that nevertheless posits Sumner as the author of his violent beating by Brooks. While this framing of speech as "provocative" celebrates the agential and productive capacities of antislavery speech, it also advances a causational logic in which antislavery utterances prompt proslavery belligerence.

Though "provocative eloquence" draws upon performative speech act theory to trouble distinctions between speech and action, broad application of the term blurs its conceptual boundaries. Mielke applies the concept primarily to antislavery speech; yet, elsewhere, "provocative eloquence" also denotes proslavery violence and rhetoric, such as "the vicious suppression of [antislavery] eloquence by resistant auditors" (84) and John Wilkes Booth's "highly theatrical work [...of] blaming disunion on abolitionist speech and exploiting the occasion of political oratory to foment violent revenge" (195). Such varied use of the term draws together oppositional camps under a shared analytic; yet the book does not clarify how proslavery violence is "eloquent," nor does it expound on the relationship between provocation, extrajudicial violence, and state censorship.

The ambiguities outlined here stem, in part, from the framing of "provocative eloquence" as "portable" across partisan lines (Levine 2015:11 in Mielke 17). While the book models the effectiveness of this methodology in constructing an expansive archive of a "shared performance culture" (5), I wonder about the limits of formalist theory when mobilized as an alternative to "ideological" historiographical interpretations (24). How might a fuller engagement with Judith Butler's work on the "politics of the performative" and the reflexive constitution of subjectivity through speech acts clarify how antebellum provocation worked in differential relation to power, authority, and the state (Butler 1997)? Could a richer theorization of violence and power trace how state and extrajudicial violence worked not only as censorial repression of speech but also as performative and provocative acts?

Despite these concerns, *Provocative Eloquence* maps the intimacy with which antislavery speech and theatrical figurations of violence interanimated one another. Through insightful readings of antebellum texts, Mielke offers a granular account of the complexity of antebellum performance culture. The book is a decidedly provocative text—one that warrants close attention from anyone interested in antebellum US American theatre, antislavery movements, the performativity of political speech, and the capacity of speech to perform violence.

—*Kellen Hoxworth*

References

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge.

Levine, Caroline. 2015. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kellen Hoxworth is Assistant Professor in the School of Theatre at Florida State University. He has published in* American Quarterly, Modern Drama, TDR, Theatre Journal, *and* Theatre Survey. *His "The Many Racial Effigies of Sara Baartman" was awarded the 2018 Errol Hill Award for outstanding research in African American theatre and performance studies. He is currently working on a monograph that traces the transnational circulations of blackface minstrelsy. khoxworth@fsu.edu

TDR 65:1 (T249) 2021 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204320000180