

The Case of John L. Brown: Sex, Slavery, and the Trials of a Transatlantic Abolitionist Campaign

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Nineteenth-century abolitionists viewed their transatlantic activism as a simple strategy in which the circulation of facts about slavery in Great Britain could place effective pressure on slaveholders in the United States. But the 1844 case of John L. Brown, a South Carolina man sentenced to death for helping a runaway slave to escape, reveals that transatlantic abolitionist campaigns could still be hampered by lag times in communication, by the difficulty of confirming reports from the South, and, most of all, by damaging rumors about interracial sex spread by anti-abolitionist opponents. This article uses the Brown case, which prompted important changes in the strategies of proslavery southerners, to suggest the importance of studying not only those transatlantic abolitionist campaigns that succeeded but also those that produced outcomes other than those intended by abolitionists themselves.

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Antebellum American abolitionists traveled overseas frequently and built complex transatlantic networks with British abolitionists. Their motive was simple: they believed that publicizing facts about American slavery abroad was the best way to pressure slaveholders at home. Frederick Douglass, for example, contended that his power as an activist increased with his distance from the United States, much like the force of a lever.¹

The mechanical metaphor would have appealed to other abolitionists as well. Nineteenth-century abolitionists often viewed their international networks like a Rube Goldberg machine in which a sequence of gears, levers, and bells were set in motion by a single marble released at the top: first, white southerners would commit some barbarity; next, abolitionists would bring it to light and inform their overseas allies; then, activists on both sides of the ocean would mobilize in protest; and finally, when the facts were sufficiently publicized, embarrassed southerners would relent. Pull, roll, whir, ding, and the domino would fall. Or, as Douglass put it while in England in 1846, “Expose slavery, and it dies.”²

Yet exposure did not kill slavery outright. Exposed slaveholders fought back, often by seizing opportunities created by the abolitionists’ own methods of attack. Abolitionist publicity about the facts of slavery did pressure slaveholders by bringing

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specific charges before northern and international audiences. But by tying outrage to *particular* events and stories, abolitionist rhetoric also made it possible for slaveholders to contest specific facts and, in so doing, to suggest that the abolitionists' argument failed even on its own terms. Abolitionists imagined their fact-finding strategies as a one-directional force that would lead inexorably to slavery's demise, yet those strategies also enabled publicity-savvy opponents to throw wrenches into what one historian calls the abolitionists' "well-oiled . . . propaganda machine."³

An early example of this dynamic process of exposure and reaction occurred in 1838, when an Alabama newspaper editor challenged the authenticity of the story of James Williams, author of the first fugitive slave narrative ever published by the American Anti-Slavery Society. Unable to disprove the editor's charges, abolitionists decided to withdraw Williams's narrative from circulation. Abolitionists more successfully rebutted later challenges to the facticity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who produced a *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* containing "Facts and Documents . . . Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work." Yet, the challenges to both Williams's narrative and Stowe's novel underline that abolitionist exposures of slavery were themselves "vulnerable to exposure," as Ann Fabian notes.⁴

This article argues that transatlantic activism created additional and special vulnerabilities for abolitionists. Unique challenges arose first from the still-considerable lag time between the reportage of news in the United States and its reception in Great Britain, which potentially allowed rumors or erroneous information to spread widely before they could be corrected or refuted. By the 1840s, ocean steamships were capable of crossing the Atlantic in two weeks, but as many as four weeks could pass between the publication of news by American abolitionists and the receipt of reactions from their British counterparts. Separating signal from noise – reconciling discrepant reports, clarifying rumors, and correcting errors – would be difficult enough in the age of the telegraph or Twitter. It was even harder in an age of sail and steam.

In addition to overcoming difficulties in transmission, abolitionists also confronted several challenges of cultural translation: it was not always easy to publicize antislavery arguments in ways that did not offend the sensibilities of transatlantic audiences. That problem was heightened by the fact that abolitionists themselves could not always agree on how stories about slavery should be told. A case in point was the ambivalence that many Anglo-American abolitionists felt about the propriety of publicizing the most sensitive information about slavery, particularly when it concerned interracial sex or a confusion of accepted gender roles. On the one hand, abolitionists' broadly evangelical worldview enabled powerful critiques of slavery and facilitated their cooperation across national and cultural lines. Christian ideas about the evils of passion and sexual licentiousness, for example, contributed to the international outrage over reports of "slave-breeders" or fictional characters like Stowe's abusive Simon Legree. Yet, the evangelical sensibilities of Anglo-American abolitionists also closed off some directions that the transatlantic movement might otherwise have taken.

In other words, abolitionists' own ideas about gender and public propriety both constrained as well as enabled transatlantic abolitionism. Few proofs of this are better known than the exclusion of American women from the 1840 "World's Convention" hosted by British abolitionists, whose political culture and religious views created more limited public roles for female reformers, thereby creating conflict with transatlantic allies. But Frederick Douglass also encountered the limits of British ideas about appropriate publicity in 1845 when one English patron – a Unitarian who actually supported women's inclusion at the "World's Convention" – objected to some of the "unnecessary and disgusting" passages in Douglass's autobiographical narrative. John B. Estlin warned Douglass especially about those passages alluding to sex on southern plantations and encouraged their excision. Estlin and many abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic were still uncomfortable with public narratives of sexual license and violence and preferred to shroud accounts of illicit sex in euphemism or fiction.⁵

Both of these episodes reveal how and why the very same religious, gendered, and racialized ideas about sex that powered abolitionists' appeals also complicated efforts at transatlantic cooperation and led to some unintended consequences. But less obvious – though equally important – were the potential vulnerabilities these ideas exposed to abolitionists' opponents. If and when slaveholders could exploit abolitionists' own ambivalence about interracial sex, gender roles, or the dangers of overexposing salacious details, they could disrupt the chain of events that abolitionists hoped would lead from the exposure of slavery to emancipation. To understand fully the nature of transatlantic abolitionism before the Civil War thus requires paying attention not only to those cases in which the abolitionists' propaganda machine functioned smoothly, but also to times like these when the machine broke down.

The understudied case of John L. Brown, a southern man who was accused of helping an enslaved woman to escape, illustrates with particular clarity both the challenges of communication and the vulnerabilities to exposure that transatlantic abolitionism often entailed. The case began in November 1843 when Brown was tried and convicted under a South Carolina state law that sentenced to death anyone who aided an escaping slave. Brown appealed his case in December but lost, and newspaper reports of the sentencing appeared the next month in New York City and Philadelphia. Abolitionists, who hoped to turn Brown's impending execution into an engine of international outrage over the horrors of southern slavery, quickly amplified these reports, ensuring that they were heard overseas as well.⁶

In this particular case, the abolitionists' publicity campaign focused on an offensive speech addressed to Brown by his sentencing judge, John Bolton O'Neill, after the failure of his appeal. Newspaper reports showed that O'Neill – a prominent jurist in South Carolina – had melodramatically addressed Brown as "the vilest sinner" before condemning him to death with words that soon echoed across the Atlantic. For his role in helping a slave to run away, O'Neill told Brown, "you are to die!–Die a shameful ignominious death, the death upon the gallows." The Cincinnati *Weekly Herald* reprinted this speech from an unnamed New Orleans newspaper on 14 February under the headline "Judicial Murder!" And only two weeks later, leading

Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison reprinted that Cincinnati report in the *Liberator*, bringing the case to the attention of New England abolitionists for the first time.⁷

O'Neill's sentencing of John L. Brown came at a pivotal juncture in the history of both American and transatlantic abolitionism. First, as historian Stanley Harrold has shown, the year 1843 marked the rise of an increasingly "aggressive abolitionism," as leaders across the movement began calling for direct action against southern slaveholders and started to issue addresses to southern slaves. For some, John L. Brown's sentencing only underlined the Slave Power's depravity and the need to attack it with more than simply arguments. And the rise of aggressive abolitionism primed many antislavery audiences to see a figure like John L. Brown, who had reportedly risked his life to free a slave, as a hero, paving the way for their later celebrations of another, more famous John Brown. Indeed, within a few weeks of the first coverage of the case in the North, public meetings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Hallowell, Maine had passed resolutions censuring O'Neill, and some meetings even raised the possibility of sending delegations to northern legislatures or directly to South Carolina to seek Brown's release.⁸

The John L. Brown case occurred at an equally crucial moment in the history of transatlantic abolitionist networks. The 1838 founding of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS), led by Quaker abolitionist Joseph Sturge, signaled British abolitionists' growing interest in forging links to antislavery movements elsewhere, as did two international conferences on slavery hosted by BFASS leaders in 1840 and 1843. But as transatlantic ties among abolitionists had thickened, so too had fears among anti-abolitionists in the United States about Britain's role in the antislavery movement.

In fact, as news of John L. Brown reached the North, Americans were already closely watching British public opinion about American slavery, thanks to several recent incidents: simmering tensions over the recent liberation of slaves aboard the *Creole* by British officials; the growing pressure on South Carolina from abolitionists and British diplomats to repeal its Negro Seamen's Acts; and new rumors about British interference with closeted negotiations then underway for the annexation of Texas. Anglophobia among anti-abolitionists was also growing in response to transatlantic abolitionist efforts like Daniel O'Connell's 1842 Irish Address on American slavery. Yet to abolitionists, even negative attention suggested the power of their new international networks to provoke discussion of slavery in the United States, encouraging them to widen the search for issues that could spark international outrage.⁹

The current state of "aggressive abolitionism" and transatlantic abolitionism in 1843 virtually assured that Judge O'Neill's sentencing speech would sound like a thunderclap on both sides of the Atlantic. Abolitionists in the North were on the lookout for opportunities to attack slavery more directly and so latched onto the case quickly. And thanks to newspaper exchanges and personal correspondence between abolitionists, editors in London, Leeds, Bristol, and numerous other English cities received news of the speech quickly, too. Soon British editors were reporting breathlessly about the "hellish" crimes of slaveholders who had sentenced a man to

death “under a conviction of aiding a slave to run away!!!” The London *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, for example, printed O’Neill’s “revolting” speech on 21 February, a week after its appearance in a Cincinnati paper. Only a fortnight later the case had been mentioned in the House of Lords. And a month later it received a censure from veteran British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in a public letter in the *Reporter*. Throughout March, British newspapers continued to editorialize about the case, and in the middle and final weeks of March, public meetings were held in Birmingham and Glasgow to protest Brown’s sentence. Several British churches even prepared and forwarded to the United States a memorial bearing 1300 signatures.¹⁰

In a lengthy article on the case published on 26 April, the day Brown’s sentence was supposed to be carried out, Garrison printed the numerous reports of British protest that had arrived on the Cunard steamship, the *Acadia*, which reached Boston the Sunday before. He also declared – more hopefully than accurately – that “since the anti-slavery agitation began in this country no single event has transpired – not the mob in Boston, not the burning of Pennsylvania Hall, not even the murder of Lovejoy – that has so powerfully affected the public mind in Great Britain” as the Brown case. On the same day, at an antislavery convention in Lynn, Massachusetts, chaired by Frederick Douglass and attended by Garrison and other local abolitionists, resolutions passed noting “with a satisfaction which we lack words to express, the proceedings of the friends of humanity in Great Britain” protesting the “horrible fact that, in the nineteenth century of the Christian era, in a democratic republic,” Brown had been sentenced to die “for compassionating the mournful case of a helpless female captive.”¹¹

What these abolitionists did not stress, however, was an inconvenient truth. By the time Brown’s case had created a sensation in Britain, South Carolina Governor James Henry Hammond had already commuted the man’s sentence to public whipping, and he later even waived that lesser punishment with a full pardon. Revelations of this fact began to appear in northern newspapers by late March, including a public letter from Judge O’Neill clarifying what had occurred. News of this commutation reached British newspapers quickly, appearing in the London *Anti-Slavery Reporter* of 17 April. But by that time, the British meetings, memorials, and editorials focusing on the barbarity of Brown’s death sentence had already taken place and been reported in America.¹²

In the meantime, discussions of Brown’s case had taken a more explosive turn within the United States, thanks to a letter from O’Neill published in the northern press. In mid-March, O’Neill wrote directly to a Pittsburgh newspaper to refute a clipping that had been sent to him in the mail. Defending his sentencing of Brown, the judge now suggested that “the proof [for Brown’s conviction] created a strong belief that the woman [he helped to escape] had been his kept mistress for some time.” According to O’Neill, in other words, Brown was not the disinterested abolitionist some northern papers were making him out to be; rather, the black woman he had aided was his lover.

In a concluding jab that pandered to prejudices about interracial sex that most white northerners shared, O’Neill invited the Pittsburgh editor who had attacked him to come to South Carolina after Brown had been whipped, so that he could

escort him back to the West, “where he can soothe and cherish him as one of ‘the young and ardent men’ who *loved negro women*.” In another letter addressed to his critics in Cincinnati, O’Neill added a more elaborate accusation that Brown:

did not seek by aiding the woman to run away, to enable her to go to a free State, and there to be free; but his object either was to prolong an adulterous intercourse with the woman, or, taking advantage of the power which he thus had, to carry her off and sell her.

O’Neill made clear that Brown was no antislavery hero: “He is still in the world, and if he were today charged with being an abolitionist, he would regard it as a greater reproach than to be called a negro thief.”¹³

Determining the truth of any of these rumors was and is difficult. Even today, it is difficult to discern Brown’s actual relationship with “the slave Hetty” (who was named only in the court records) from the public narratives of his case. Brown himself pled not guilty when he appealed his conviction and sentence, claiming that in helping Hetty to travel from Fairfield County to Columbia, South Carolina, he was under the impression that she was merely returning to the home of her owner, Charlotte Hinton. Hetty had been hired out for many years to Hinton’s brother, John Taylor, who was Brown’s employer.

It is difficult to determine if Brown knew Hetty was attempting to escape or sincerely assumed that she had permission to go to Columbia, given her past history of “coming and going at her own pleasure.” It is equally impossible to cross-examine those white men who claimed that they had frequently seen Brown “in the morning, just before day, slipping out of the kitchen where the woman lodged.” Viewed in retrospect, Brown’s case may therefore be seen as one in which “Hetty” – not Brown – was the primary actor all along. While her own motives for trying to return to the city are unknown, she appears to have approached Brown, who claimed he was traveling to Columbia to look for work, about a ride to the city. She may well have convinced Brown that she went with Taylor’s knowledge.¹⁴

O’Neill’s court, however, concluded that Hetty’s powers of persuasion were ultimately sexual in nature. Indeed, allusions to an “adulterous” relationship with Brown made their way into the earliest reports of the case. While some of O’Neill’s allegations may well have been responses to abolitionist pressure, his assertion that Hetty had seduced Brown also predated the abolitionists’ publicity offensive. Even the sentencing speech itself referred elliptically to Hetty as Brown’s mistress, referring to Brown as a “dissolute” young man who had been “snared” by “the ‘strange woman,’” an allusion to the biblical warnings of the Book of Proverbs against the temptations of lust. “She ‘flattered with her words,’” O’Neill told Brown, “and you became her victim . . . led on by a desire to serve her.” O’Neill’s later letter to Cincinnati modified those claims by implying that Brown had desired to *sell* his mistress, but the gist of his accusation in the spring was already between the lines of his speech the previous winter. Instead of prompting O’Neill to invent new claims, abolitionist attack had mainly led O’Neill to make explicit and more public some charges that had earlier been swaddled in euphemism and allusion.¹⁵

Whether true or false, these charges had an immediate and, for abolitionists, damaging impact on northern discussions of the case. Some northern newspapers, accepting O'Neill's construction of the facts, soon began to report that Brown was "enamored" of the slave in question. Many editors flatly dismissed Brown as "a scamp." "It is now proven," said one Maine paper on 3 May, that Brown "attempted to sell the being who reposed confidence in him, he having satisfied the only passion he felt – one of lust."¹⁶

After O'Neill's revelations, northern papers also began, for the first time, to depict the enslaved woman who had allegedly trusted Brown as a fair-complexioned "quadroon." The origins of this ascription are unclear, since nothing in the previous reportage of the case had mentioned Hetty's skin color. But in raising the question of racial identity, these reports further complicated abolitionists' attempts to focus attention on their original story. Other scholars have shown that in northern antebellum fiction and print culture, images of the "tragic mulatta" or the "quadroon" had multiple, often contradictory meanings: sometimes sympathetic and victimized, at other times subversive and dangerous, the female "quadroon" encapsulated a host of cultural anxieties about racial mixing and sexuality that troubled even abolitionists, whose collective position on interracial sex was, as Leslie Harris puts it, "far from simple approval." While later African American abolitionists such as Sarah Parker Remond and Ellen Craft would use their ability to "pass" as white to appeal to British audiences more inclined to empathize with a "white slave" than a "black" one, in the American North in the early 1840s, a woman who was perceived as the product of racial "amalgamation" was not always an object of special sympathy. Rumors that Hetty was a "quadroon" therefore exposed volatile cultural fault lines that did not always behave the same way on both sides of the ocean. O'Neill clearly hoped to turn this very ambivalence about interracialism, sex, and "mulattas" in his favor by referring to Hetty alternately as a victimized mistress and a victimizing seductress.¹⁷

No wonder, then, that in the spring of 1844, abolitionists' responses to rumors about Brown's sex life were muted and mixed. In the 1830s, abolitionists themselves had painted images of the slaveholding South as a society where sex between white men and black women was pervasive; rape and extramarital sexual practices figured prominently in evangelical abolitionists' own indictment of slavery. But now that a charge about interracial sex had been leveled at a man whom they were already turning into a martyr and a hero, abolitionist editors had to contain the departure from their storyline with at least three deflective strategies.¹⁸

One approach was studied silence, the tack taken for the most part by Garrison's *Liberator*. Though Garrison printed all of the correspondence from O'Neill, including his charges about Brown's "kept mistress," the *Liberator*, unlike some other antislavery newspapers, never conceded anything and declined to comment on the rumored relationship at all. In a brief one-line dismissal of O'Neill's claims, Garrison simply told readers to "believe nothing he says against John L. Brown." Others addressed Brown's motives but noted, correctly, that the only source of evidence about them was the self-interested O'Neill. As one Liberty Party newspaper pointed out, "even Judge O'Neill does not say it was *proved* that she was a kept mistress."¹⁹

A third tack available to Brown's antislavery sympathizers was to redirect attention back to the prevalence of licentiousness and sexual violence on southern plantations. The *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, for example, claimed, without any evident source or proof, that Brown's "fair" mistress was "the daughter of a southern planter" – perhaps inferring this from other northern reports that the enslaved woman was a "quadroon." The paper also distinguished the union that had supposedly produced the unnamed enslaved woman in the case from her union with Brown by reporting that "we have understood that she was [Brown's] betrothed friend, and that they ran away to be lawfully married."²⁰

The thought that Brown and his mistress were betrothed proved so appealing that later abolitionist retellings claimed that they did actually marry, as indicated by the preamble to a poem written by John Greenleaf Whittier about the case. Two years after the case, yet another version of the story was offered in Paisley, Scotland, when a report on a speech by Frederick Douglass identified Hetty as Brown's "sister" and provided still further details not mentioned in earlier reports, like the claim that Brown "wrote her a pass and promised to render her whatever other assistance was in his power."²¹

These claims had no more evidentiary support than O'Neill's own accusations. Nonetheless, abolitionists' attempts to sanctify the relationship with marriage open a revealing window onto their understandings of what would make an icon of "aggressive abolitionism" acceptable. The sort of relationship O'Neill described – one of unbridled passion, seduction across the color line, and lust – made members of the predominantly evangelical abolitionist movement uncomfortable, too. Their versions of the Brown story thus reveal a difficult and delicate attempt to reconcile their initial impressions of Brown as a hero with their own preexisting convictions about the proper relationship between the aided slave and the white rescuer, as well as the proper relationship between men and women, both within and across color lines.

Ultimately, most abolitionists simply decided that the entire case was too touchy; it was better to turn their searchlight onto other campaigns with less complicated heroes and villains. Indeed, transatlantic mobilization around the case died down rapidly almost as soon as the sexual innuendo surrounding Brown crossed the Atlantic. British antislavery readers learned of O'Neill's allegations quickly when the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* printed his letter to Pittsburgh on 17 April – after the major public meetings for Brown in Birmingham, Glasgow, and Edinburgh had already taken place. But in subsequent issues of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, coverage of the case dropped off precipitously. After the arrival of O'Neill's "kept mistress" letter, John L. Brown came up in only one other major British meeting, when Irish abolitionist Daniel O'Connell lambasted Judge O'Neill and expressed shame about his Irish name at a meeting of the BFASS in May.²²

Even then, however, no mention was made of a sexual or romantic relationship. And when the Annual Report of the BFASS provided a retrospective summary of the case, it opted to say only that Brown had tried to aid a slave to whom he was "attached," a more platonic and neutral term that might have signaled discomfort with the discussion of a different sort of relationship. Ultimately, the transatlantic

movement for Brown's life that had begun with such a bang trailed off in a whimper, damaged both by rumors of Brown's lusts and the unexpected news of his pardon.²³

In the aftermath of John L. Brown's pardon and release, abolitionists believed that its lessons were clear: their transatlantic publicity machine had won a resounding victory. In retrospect, however, the lessons are not so clear-cut. Indeed, the case highlights not only the limits of abolitionists' power to reach transatlantic audiences in a timely way, but also the power of their opponents to squelch or scramble abolitionist messages, using the very publicity methods that some abolitionists favored.

In their own recollections, abolitionists did not dwell on these more troubling lessons. They claimed instead that their international protests had saved a condemned man from death. Abolitionists like Charles Torrey, for example, used Brown's case to defend more aggressive attacks on slavery; after Torrey was arrested in a southern state for his own antislavery activities in 1844, he appealed to Britain for support by associating his case with Brown's. Likewise, in one 1846 speech in Scotland, Frederick Douglass cited Brown's pardon to prove to his Scottish audience "their influence on American slavery." In Ireland, too, Douglass claimed that "the voice of Great Britain" had prevented Brown's sentence "from being carried into effect." And in an 1863 book on the abolitionist movement, Scottish abolitionist Eliza Wigham used the case as proof that "British public opinion prevailed even with the governor of South Carolina," offering a "striking" proof of "the influence" British abolitionists could have on the United States even then, at the height of the Civil War.²⁴

These assessments of their own influence appealed to abolitionists for obvious reasons, but even historians and scholars of transnational social movements today may well be tempted to echo the abolitionists' own claims about their effectiveness. On the one hand, historians who call for more transnational histories of the United States have often cited the influence of abolitionists' transatlantic efforts as examples of why such approaches are fruitful. Meanwhile, scholars of transnational activism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have often pointed to abolitionism as one of the earliest examples of a successful transnational campaign.

Political scientists Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have even cited transatlantic abolitionists as "historical precursors" for "transnational advocacy networks" in the present. On this view, abolitionists were farsighted activists who recognized that "dense exchanges of information" with receptive audiences in other countries could place pressure on opponents at home and provide "moral leverage." They pioneered a form of "information politics," or what "human rights activists a century and a half later would call the human rights methodology: 'promoting change by reporting facts.'" By describing this method as a sort of "boomerang," in which reports broadcast abroad return back to activists' home country, Keck and Sikkink even adopt a mechanical metaphor not so different from abolitionists' own conception of their movement as a powerful lever.²⁵

In the John L. Brown case, however, the effects of abolitionists' "information politics" were mixed. This was partly because communication lag times made the timely deployment of information difficult. It was partly because the information in

the case was so confused and conflicting. Most of all, however, the effectiveness of the Brown campaign was undermined when opponents used their own version of “information politics” to steal back some of the abolitionists’ leverage and throw their own boomerangs.

Let’s consider each of these ambivalent outcomes in turn. First, the chronology of the Brown campaign makes clear that lags in transatlantic communication interfered with abolitionists’ ability to apply direct pressure to the primary actors in the case. Even with new steamships like the *Acadia* that could cross the Atlantic in two weeks, news of overseas responses to the latest American news could sometimes lag twice that long behind the information possessed by readers in the United States. There was still time lag, too, in domestic information networks – American abolitionists and northern newspapers do not appear to have learned about Brown’s full pardon, made by Hammond on 29 March, until after 26 April, on which date many of them assumed that he had still been at least flogged, perhaps with the intention of killing him. Some actually reported, incorrectly, that he was publicly whipped. In retrospect, these very lags in communication also make it unlikely that transatlantic pressure had forced Hammond to overturn Brown’s sentence. Hammond’s pardon of Brown probably occurred before the extent of British protests over the case could have reached him, and his commutation of the sentence to whipping certainly predated abolitionist meetings in Britain.

These facts underline the continued difficulties facing transatlantic activism even in an age of steam. But they also reveal the considerable power of opponents to affect the pace, longevity, and shape of activist campaigns. As recent theorists of social movements like Sidney Tarrow have argued, political institutions under attack often retain the power to “take the sting out of movements” by changing policy slightly or acquiescing in the moderate demands of protesters, stopping or slowing their momentum almost as surely as if direct repression had been employed. In this case, by commuting and then pardoning Brown, Hammond deprived abolitionists of one of the main rallying points in the case – the death sentence originally handed down by O’Neill – and demonstrated for other officials one way to kill a campaign with the appearance of kindness.²⁶

More importantly, the Brown case provided slaveholders with important precedents for fighting abolitionist stories with stories of their own – a strategy they had once been reluctant to pursue. In the years immediately preceding the Brown case, the preferred strategy of anti-abolitionists in the North and the South had been to silence any public discussion on the whole issue of slavery, as evidenced, for example, by white southerners’ suppression of abolitionist publications in the mails after 1835. Although southern politicians like Henry Wise did denounce the growth of what they saw as an “Abolition-English-American party” designed to shame the white South in the eyes of the world, they usually did so in order to defend a policy of enforced silence. The most famous outcomes of this policy were the “gag rules” that existed in the House of Representatives until 1844 and in the Senate for even longer, which prevented the reading of antislavery petitions in Congress.²⁷

By the mid-1840s, however, white southerners found themselves facing an increasingly aggressive and well-organized abolitionist movement in the North and

abroad. In this changing political climate, slavery's advocates rapidly shifted from what one historian has called a "defensive offensive" against abolitionism to develop a more assertive defense of the peculiar institution. For white southerners like Hammond, who had been one of the gag rule's greatest proponents, the John L. Brown case provided a testing ground for jousting with abolitionists directly on their own chosen terrain – newspapers and transatlantic print.²⁸

Indeed, the Brown case opened the floodgates for a new wave of proslavery publications in the late 1840s. Hammond's lengthy reply to the British petitions that he received about the Brown case was published in pamphlet form in December 1844 as the *Letter of His Excellency Governor Hammond, to the Free Church of Glasgow, on the Subject of Slavery*, a book that soon became a "proslavery classic," in the words of Drew Gilpin Faust. The next year, emboldened by the praise heaped on his first pamphlet by fellow slaveholders, Hammond engaged abolitionists in further debate by publishing two letters to Thomas Clarkson in a longer and even more influential proslavery tract. Both Hammond and O'Neill also decided, in the aftermath of the Brown protests, to open brief correspondences with the very northern and British abolitionists they had once wanted to "gag." After ending his gubernatorial term in a state where abolitionist newspapers and tracts had been burned in a bonfire in 1835, Hammond even purchased subscriptions to two major abolitionist newspapers, the New York *Emancipator* and the London *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, and had them sent to him at his home in Silver Bluff.²⁹

As these developments suggest, transatlantic abolitionists not only failed to pressure Hammond directly before his pardon of Brown, but they also unintentionally created opportunities that the governor could eagerly seize and turn to his own ends. In his pamphlets, Hammond clearly delighted in being able to correct the inaccurate or outdated reports about Brown's fate that had been broadcast on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, by highlighting what abolitionists had overlooked in the sentencing speech about Brown's alleged motives, writers like Hammond and O'Neill also claimed that abolitionist exaggeration on such matters was typical. In his 1845 letters to Clarkson, for example, Hammond said that "you have read and assisted to circulate a great deal about affrays, duels and murders occurring here, and all attributed to the terrible demoralization of slavery. Not a single event of this sort takes place among us, but is caught up by the Abolitionists and paraded over the world with endless comments, variations and exaggerations. You should not take what reaches you as a mere sample, and infer that there is a vast deal more you never hear. You hear all, and more than all the truth."³⁰

Of course, it is easy to point out that Hammond's self-serving response was rife with irony and hypocrisy; historians now know that Hammond himself engaged in clandestine sexual relationships both with his slaves and with female members of his family. Likewise, it is entirely possible that O'Neill and Hammond were the ones who exaggerated the facts of the John L. Brown case. Garrison was correct to note that throughout the affair they were the only sources for claims about Brown's alleged sexual relationship with Hetty, who was never able to speak for herself.

Ultimately, however, what white southerners such as Hammond learned from the Brown case was that the *veracity* of their or the abolitionists' reports was less

important than their *unverifiability*. Confronted with the fact that Congressional “gag rules” had only inspired more aggressive and expansive abolitionist networks, proslavery southerners like Hammond and O’Neill needed new ways to respond to abolitionist attacks. And they discovered, in the John L. Brown case, some promising opportunities. By going on the offensive, engaging abolitionist claims directly, and seizing the very tools of publicity that abolitionists themselves deployed, Hammond and others learned that spreading rumors about impropriety and interracial sex could weaken an abolitionist campaign almost as surely as if the campaign were legislatively gagged. Brown’s case suggested how a politics of confrontation, innuendo, and proslavery apologetic might replace earlier strategies of containment, silence, and anti-abolitionist legislation.

This case was not the first time that anti-abolitionists had exploited white northerners’ deep ambivalence or outright hostility towards racial “amalgamation” and interracial sex to undermine abolitionist attacks, nor would it be the last. Before the institution of the “gag rule,” and again in later pamphlets like *Miscegenation*, published during the Civil War, apologists of slavery often turned the tables on abolitionists by meeting their indictments of the “erotic South” with sexually charged indictments of their own. Yet the Brown case provides an early, crucial example of this proslavery tactic in action and may well have inspired more caution amongst abolitionists.³¹

Indeed, the newly assertive publicity efforts of men like Hammond and O’Neal help to account for the gradual lessening of what historian Carol Lasser calls “voyeuristic abolitionism” – defined as antislavery rhetoric that was charged with images of illicit sex on southern plantations. Lasser connects northern abolitionists’ retreat from this rhetoric in the 1840s with changes internal to the abolitionist movement, like the growth of women’s involvement and the movement’s growth in general. But the timing of the John L. Brown case suggests that external responses may also have contributed to abolitionists’ broader rethinking of voyeuristic strategies. After tussling with the likes of Hammond and O’Neill, some abolitionists were newly aware that talk about sex could backfire, damaging their attempts at securing moral leverage more than the pamphlet-burning bonfires of the 1830s ever had.³²

At the very least, Brown’s case encouraged some abolitionists to redirect their transatlantic alliances toward campaigns less fraught with potential scandal and danger. For the evangelical American abolitionist Lewis Tappan, for example, the case’s results had been decidedly mixed. On the one hand, as Tappan told his English friend and BFASS officer John Scoble, Brown’s sentencing had been “atrocious,” and the abolitionists’ campaign had succeeded in shaming South Carolina. Tappan told Scoble that O’Neill had even sent him a pitiful letter trying “to justify himself,” proving that “he feels very sore in consequence of the judgment passed upon his conduct by so many respectable persons at home & abroad.”³³

Yet, the damaging judgments that had been passed upon the conduct of John L. Brown may also have contributed to Tappan’s advice, in the same 1844 letter, that British evangelicals would be better off directing their outrage against their own slavery-tolerating denominations than engaging in protests on behalf of men like

Brown. For the remainder of the 1840s, evangelical abolitionists such as Tappan concentrated their efforts on campaigns to embarrass the Evangelical Alliance and the Free Church of Scotland for their lenient policies toward American slaveholders. Lobbying such respectable persons, they believed, would create fewer opportunities for backlash than campaigns for unknown strangers whose respectability could be so easily called into question.

This is not to say that the John L. Brown case was directly responsible for the better-known Evangelical Alliance or “Send Back the Money” campaigns, both of which have often been emphasized as high-water marks in the history of Anglo-American abolitionism. The Brown case does highlight, however, that abolitionist decisions about which campaigns to pursue occurred in contexts that were much more complex than abolitionists admitted when describing their own strategies. Abolitionists defended their transatlantic information politics by pointing to a procession of campaigns that had supposedly worked in their favor. But in doing so they occasionally sidestepped or forgot about those flying machines – like the crusade for John L. Brown – that never quite got off the ground.

Historians, however, cannot afford to overlook such cases of grand failure if they wish to understand fully the opportunities and obstacles that confronted transatlantic activists in the mid-nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Indeed, the John L. Brown case suggests several insights that a focus on failures or partial successes might reveal.

First, although steam travel and easy access to print facilitated transatlantic protest campaigns, the Brown case highlights the differences that continued lags in transportation and communication still made. The campaign for Brown got ahead of the abolitionists partly because information still lagged far enough behind events to thwart rapid responses to isolated incidents. The case therefore suggests the need for historians to go beyond the general point that transatlantic steam travel aided Anglo-American reform; more fine-grained studies can instead illuminate why and when the speed of information exchange mattered, for better or for worse.

Second, this case draws attention to the ways that abolitionists’ opponents also used “information politics” to seize the powerful contemporary tool of publicity and wield it in their defense. More specifically, it highlights the potency of rumors about interracial sex, which could expose abolitionists’ own ambivalence about who qualified as a worthy hero or victim and thereby create a blowback effect in the court of public opinion. By the mid-1840s, the abolitionists’ own networks of print and travel coexisted with an increasingly assertive network of proslavery writers who sought to justify themselves on an international stage. Occasionally, these opponents succeeded in knocking abolitionists off-message and off-kilter by releasing powerful, if difficult-to-verify, “information” of their own. The problem with moral suasion and antislavery strategies that focused on *words* was not, as some advocates of more “aggressive abolitionism” suggested, that words had no power. The problem with words was that they could be powerful in the wrong hands as well as the right ones.

Thirdly, cases like Brown’s underline the unintended outcomes of the abolitionists’ propaganda machine as well as the intended ones. In the Brown case, it seems unlikely that British protests had a direct effect on Hammond’s decision to commute Brown’s sentence, as abolitionists hoped it would. The protests did,

however, spur men like O’Neill and Hammond to enter into public debate with abolitionists, thereby moving farther away from the defensive strategies of “gagging” and dismissal that anti-abolitionists had previously preferred. In the long run, this may have been an even more important consequence for the antebellum debate over slavery than the rescue of John L. Brown, even though this narrower goal was the one that abolitionists purportedly had in view.

Attention to these easily overlooked points reveals that the long history of transnational activism was not a simple string of increasingly successful campaigns, beginning with the abolitionists and continuing to the present day. In fact, episodes like the John L. Brown case may well enable historians to see transatlantic abolitionism in the 1830s and 1840s not just as the origin of a new story but as the continuation of old ones stretching back into the eighteenth century. Many parts of this case’s story – the efforts at abolitionist fact-finding that led to unintended expectations and consequences across the Atlantic Ocean; the efforts of proslavery planters to deflect abolitionist attacks with lurid stories and rumors of their own; and the difficulty of verifying reports from long distances about the details of slavery and emancipation – echo historians’ recent accounts of the debates over slavery that ricocheted through the British Atlantic World in the Age of Revolutions, resulting simultaneously in more concerted antislavery and proslavery movements.³⁴

Situating cases like the Brown campaign within this longer history may well underline the factor that remained most constant throughout the struggle for New World emancipation: the continuing efforts by enslaved actors like “Hetty” to control their own destinies, despite the different sets of circumstances presented by each historical moment. Though obscured and never named in abolitionist discussions of the case, though transformed in the rhetoric of abolitionists and slaveholders either into a “strange” seducer or into the passive object of Brown’s help or exploitation, this one woman’s short-lived escape in rural South Carolina was, in the final analysis, the real marble at the top of the abolitionists’ Rube Goldberg machine. At a moment of heightened attention to southern slavery on two sides of an ocean, her local action triggered a transatlantic war of words that rattled abolitionists and slaveholders alike. For historians who look beyond the transatlantic campaigns that abolitionists touted as innovative victories and begin to analyze the forgotten campaigns that did not fully succeed, more stories like hers may be waiting, too.

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Notes

1. Douglass, “Intemperance and Slavery.” On abolitionists’ transatlantic networks and strategic thinking, see Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall*; McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery*.

2. Douglass, "Reception Speech at Finsbury Chapel, Moorfields, England, May 12, 1846," in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 313.
3. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall*, 13.
4. Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth*, 79–98, quoted on 91; Andrews, *The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, 87–9; Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
5. See Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation," 301–33; Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England*, 1–10.
6. For past treatments of the Brown case, see Merritt, *James Henry Hammond*, 72–7; Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War against Slavery*, 291; Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, 295–6; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 297–8; Drescher, "Servile Insurrection and John Brown's Body in Europe," 278–9. The most recent treatment of the Brown case is in DeRamus, *Freedom By Any Means*, 51–68. Though useful as a starting point, DeRamus romanticizes Brown as an abolitionist rebel and star-crossed Romeo, and her account is sometimes marred by uncritical readings of the primary sources in the case.
7. "Judicial Murder!," *Weekly Herald and Philanthropist* (Cincinnati), February 14, 1844; "Judicial Murder!," *Liberator*, March 1, 1844.
8. Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism*. A public meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is referred to in several articles about the Brown case, but the details are murky. One of the fullest reports is in "The Case of John L. Brown," *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle* (Boston), March 27, 1844. For the Maine meeting, see "Case of John L. Brown," *Liberator*, March 24, 1844; "Case of John L. Brown," *Recorder* (Boston), April 25, 1844.
9. The Negro Seamen Acts had caused conflicts between British diplomats and South Carolina officials since its origins in 1823, but the issue was aggravated by an application of the law in the year immediately before the Brown case. See Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free*, 200. See also Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic*, 104–11, 120–6; Rugeley, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 180–221; Mitton, "The Free World Confronted"; Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution*, 177–250. On O'Connell's Irish Address, see McDaniel, "Repealing Unions"; Murphy, *American Slavery, Irish Freedom*.
10. "The Land of the Free," *Mercury* (Bristol), February 17, 1844; "The Land of the Free," *The Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser*, February 17, 1844. Both articles reprinted an earlier article from the *London Morning Chronicle*, which received the report from an unnamed New York paper dated February 10; the *Northern Star* added a comment denouncing "the cart-whip scoundrels of South Carolina who desecrate the name of Republican." See also *Newcastle Courant*, March 1, 1844. For the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* and the other notices mentioned here, see *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (London), February 21, 1844; "Case of John L. Brown," *Recorder*, April 25, 1844; "Case of John L. Brown—Immense Sensation in England, Scotland and Ireland," *Liberator*, April 26, 1844; "From our Correspondent at Birmingham," *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, May 1, 1844; "Case of John L. Brown," *Liberator*, May 17, 1844; "Man to Be Hanged in America," *Liberator*, May 17, 1844; "Meeting of the Glasgow Emancipation Society," *Liberator*, May 17, 1844. See also "American Slavery. Case of John L. Brown," *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April 17, 1844.
11. "Case of John L. Brown – Immense Sensation in England, Scotland and Ireland"; "Convention at Lynn," *Liberator*, May 10, 1844.
12. See "Court of Common Pleas," *Evening Transcript* (Boston), March 18, 1844; "The Case of John B. Brown," *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, March 27, 1844. "Safety of John L. Brown," *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April 17, 1844. News of the commutation also appeared earlier – see "The United States," *Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh), April 11, 1844, which cited an undated report from "the *Aurora*." The May 1, 1844, issue of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* also cited an American correspondent who claimed that the commutation had likely been given "because the South Carolinians 'did not dare to hang him,' in the face of the indignant feeling which such an atrocity would have aroused throughout the Union." Other British papers credited European indignation with the reversal in Brown's fate; see "Atrocious Judicial Murder in the Land of Liberty," *Aberdeen Journal*, May 1, 1844. The

- first reports of Brown's pardon seem to have reached the North in May via reprintings of an article and a letter from O'Neill printed in a 30 April issue of the *Charleston Mercury*. See "The Case of John L. Brown," *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, May 8, 1844. For reports assuming or actually reporting that he was flogged as planned, see "John L. Brown," *The Age* (Augusta, ME), March 29, 1844; "Case of John L. Brown – Immense Sensation in England, Scotland and Ireland".
13. See O'Neill's letters in "The Case of John B. Brown"; "Judge O'Neill and John L. Brown," *Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, May 15, 1844; "Case of John L. Brown – The Late Meeting in Glasgow," *Liberator*, July 12, 1844.
 14. The appeals case is reported in R.H. Speers, *Cases at Law*, 129–37.
 15. See O'Neill's speech as reprinted in "Judicial Murder!"
 16. See also "A Scamp," *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), April 27, 1844; "John L. Brown," *The Age*.
 17. For the linked reports about Brown being "enamored" with a now "quadroon slave," see "Court of Common Pleas." On the complex cultural images of amalgamation and the "quadroon" at this moment, see Harris, "From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rulers of the Five Points,'" 191–212, quoted on 195; Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*, esp. chap. 2; Raimon, *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited*; Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 110–24.
 18. See Walters, "The Erotic South"; Lasser, "Voyeuristic Abolitionism."
 19. "Case of John L. Brown," *Liberator*, July 12, 1844; "The Case of John B. Brown." See also the articles related to Brown in the May 17, 1844 issue.
 20. "The Case of John B. Brown." See also "Judge O'Neill and John L. Brown," which stressed the lack of credible proof for O'Neill's claims, and "Case of John L. Brown," *Recorder*, April 25, 1844, which repeated the claim that "Brown was wishing to marry the female slave."
 21. "British Influence on the Abolition Movement," in Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 223. See "The Sentence of John L. Brown," in Whittier, *Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, 89.
 22. See "Safety of John Brown"; "British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society," *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, May 29, 1844.
 23. "Report of the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society," *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, May 29, 1844.
 24. On Torrey, see Harrold, *Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism*, 109–10; "Torrey Meeting at Upton," *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, September 4, 1844; "British Influence on the Abolition Movement in America: An Address Delivered in Paisley, Scotland, on 17 April 1846," in Blassingame, *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 223–4; Wigham, *Anti-Slavery Cause in America and its Martyrs*, 61. See also Blassingame, *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 40, 117; See also Estlin, *A Brief Notice of American Slavery*, 34; Massie, *America*, 81; Pillsbury, *Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles*, 58–61.
 25. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 45–6. See also Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 3; David, "Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century," 367–82.
 26. Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 80.
 27. Wise quoted in McDaniel, "Repealing Unions," 266. On the "gag rule," see Miller, *Arguing about Slavery*; Wirls, "The Only Mode of Avoiding Everlasting Debate."
 28. The phrase "defensive offensive" as a way of characterizing slaveholders' political strategy prior to the rise of radical abolitionism – and to some extent continuing with the "gag rule" and the response to the mailing campaigns – is borrowed from Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic*, 24.
 29. Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South*, 246, 278–9; Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War against Slavery*, 291–2; Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, 294–5. Hammond's letters to Clarkson were also replies to a specific article by the British abolitionist published in the Boston *Liberty Bell*, offering further proof of Hammond's close study of abolitionist materials in the aftermath of the protests over John L. Brown. On the emergence of the proslavery arguments that were synthesized and newly publicized

- in Hammond's reply to the Glasgow Free Church, see Rugemer, "The Southern Response to British Abolitionism."
30. Hammond, *Selections from the Letters and Speeches*, 130.
 31. On the *Miscegenation* pamphlet, for example, see Weber, *Copperheads*, 160–3; Harris, "From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rulers of the Five Points,'" 207–8.
 32. See Lasser, "Voyeuristic Abolitionism."
 33. See Abel and Klingberg, *A Side-Light on Anglo-American Relations*, 184–5.
 34. See, for example, Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*; Rugemer, *Problem of Emancipation*; Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement*; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 76–80.

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