



Democracy's Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum American Writing (American Literatures Initiative)

Jennifer Greiman

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What is the hangman but a servant of law? And what is that law but an expression of public opinion? And if public opinion be brutal and thou a component part thereof, art thou not the hangman's accomplice? Writing in 1842, Lydia Maria Child articulates a crisis in the relationship of democracy to sovereign power that continues to occupy political theory today. Is sovereignty, with its reliance on singular and exceptional power, fundamentally inimical to democracy? Or might a more fully realized democracy distribute, share, and popularize sovereignty, thus blunting its exceptional character and its basic violence? In Democracy's Spectacle, Jennifer Greiman looks to an earlier moment in the history of American democracy's vexed interpretation of sovereignty to argue that such questions about the popularization of sovereign power shaped debates about political belonging and public life in the antebellum United States. In an emergent democracy that was also an expansionist slave society, Greiman argues, the problems that sovereignty posed were less concerned with a singular and exceptional power lodged in the state than with a power over life and death that involved all Americans intimately. Drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the sovereignty of the people in Democracy in America, along with work by Gustave de Beaumont, Lydia Maria Child, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, Greiman tracks the crises of sovereign power as it migrates out of the state to become a constitutive feature of the public sphere. Greiman brings together literature and political theory, as well as materials on antebellum performance culture, antislavery activism, and penitentiary reform, to argue that the antebellum public sphere, transformed by its empowerment, emerges as a spectacle with investments in both punishment and entertainment.



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