

Performing Pennsylvania Hall: Aural Appeals in Angelina Grimké's Abolitionist Discourse

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A lone orator stands at the front of the room attempting to share a message with the immediate audience, but the space is awash in the sounds of an angry mob. The voices of the assembled masses proclaim things like "How dare you!" "Burn, burn, burn," "Kill them!" and "Silence, silence, silence." The orator is nearly overpowered by the noise of the mob but decides to use the angry masses to embolden the immediate audience. The orator passionately proclaims, "Those voices without ought to awaken and call out our warmest sympathies. Deluded beings! ... What is a mob? What would the breaking of every window be? What would the leveling of this Hall be? ... I will lift up my voice like a trumpet" (Grimké 26-27, 29).

As an example of strength and courage in the face of overwhelming oppression, there is perhaps no better example than

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Angelina Grimké. The daughter of a former Southern slaveholder, Grimké was one of the most powerful advocates for the abolitionist cause and a pioneer in the practice of women's public discourse. The scenario above is a general description of the aural environment that one might have encountered at Grimké's 1838 Pennsylvania Hall address, but it is also an environment that students at a small liberal arts college in Oregon have experienced in more recent times. In an attempt to explore the role that sound, voice, and space play in creating an environment of oppression, I have crafted and presented an audience-interactive performance of excerpts from Grimké's most famous oration. Through discussion of the aforementioned performance and textual analysis of the Pennsylvania Hall address, this essay argues that Grimké put into practice a unique genre of persuasive tactic that bridges the rhetorical and the performative: the aural appeal.

If, as Cicero and other scholars of rhetoric throughout the ages have commented, the goal of a stirring oration is to "heighten the senses," then an aural appeal is a purposeful attempt to place emphasis on sound cues and sound environments. In its most basic form, the aural appeal can be a reference to sounds in the immediate environment, familiar aural phenomena, or even elements involved in the process of sending and receiving sounds. Mark Anthony's famous line from his eulogy to Caesar ("lend me your ears") is an example of a simple aural appeal. Such appeals can, however, also take the form of performed voices, sound effects (either created by the speaker or inherent in the surrounding environment), or rhythmic cues. For instance, the cadence and rhythm of a speaker like Jesse Jackson, a paralinguistic cue that piques audience interest through means of sound, is a form of aural appeal.

The aural appeal is also an integral part of performance praxis and pedagogy. The general concern with engaging a "theatre of the mind" in performance demands a more overt focus on the voice and vocal cues. Paralinguistic cues are one of the primary mediums for communicating emotions, and the ability to convey emotional information vocally is a fundamental performance skill. Aural engagement with the audience is made possible through the vocal choices of performers, and thus skills such as articulation, pitch,

vocal quality, tempo, rhythm, pauses, and character voices are central to the teaching of performance and to the evaluation of performances.

The Aural Environment of Pennsylvania Hall

Grimké's 1838 Pennsylvania Hall address is a remarkable oration that has been a source of inspiration for scholars of rhetoric, history, civil rights, and gender studies. It was Grimké's last major public speech, and it was presented in clear defiance of popular sentiments against abolition and against women speaking in public. Suzanne Daughton explains that this oration is significant because "it was one of the earliest speeches by an American woman to a mixed audience; it is a model of women's eloquence in speaking out against oppression; and it embodies strategies for legitimating the disempowered" (20).

Many scholarly discussions of the Pennsylvania Hall Address have centered on the way in which Grimké uses the mob surrounding the hall to her rhetorical advantage. The audience inside Pennsylvania Hall is estimated to have been around 3000, but it is the mob that gathered outside that presented the greatest challenge for Grimké and the other speakers that day. Phyllis Japp explains that the opposition was well organized in their attempts to quell Grimké and the other abolitionist speakers when she notes, "In Philadelphia opponents placed placards around the city, announcing the lectures and urging anti-abolitionists and foes of women speakers to attend" (341). The exact size of the crowd that gathered outside Pennsylvania Hall is unknown, but as Stephen Brown observes, "the very size and proximity of the crowd outside must have been daunting" (153).

Throughout the speech, Grimké incorporates references to the mob in order to demonstrate to her immediate audience the effectiveness of the abolitionist movement. The mob, in a sense, is a constant reminder to the audience of their mission, which is to help such "Deluded beings!" (26). The voices and sounds of the mob not only made Grimké directly acknowledge their presence, but they also served as a sort of catalyst which led Grimké to appeal to the aural sense of those assembled in the hall. The overwhelming nature of the sounds created by the mob made Grimké acknowledge their presence

and compete with them by attempting to match or exceed their aural energy. Ellen Todras explains that, in the middle of Grimké's speech, "Bricks and stones crashed through the windows. Shattering glass sprayed the aisles, the audience, and the stage" (3). The fear and chaos created by the mob necessitated a strong appeal by Grimké to the audience's sense of sound.

The mob, however, is certainly not the only reason behind Grimké's focus on the aural sense. In fact, there are several reasons for Grimké to focus on aural appeals above and beyond the noise created by the mob. For one, Grimké's speaking career was itself a struggle about voice. Among the first women to break important barriers for women speaking in public, Grimké's entire speaking career was a struggle of voice and sound against the forces of censorship and silence. Second, the location of this address is a symbol of voice; Pennsylvania Hall was built on the premise of providing a forum for free expression of voice. Finally, Grimké's religious background certainly influenced her use of the aural sense. For instance, many aspects of Christian theology, including the voice of God speaking to Moses and the voices of a congregation in prayer, stress aurality.

Performative Insights

Grimké makes extensive use of aural appeals in her Pennsylvania Hall address, and an understanding of the scope and depth of her use of aural phenomena demands at least some grounding in performative processes. The cadence and rhythm of the speaker, the aural environment created by the voices of the angry mob, and the rich paralinguistic cues embedded in the speaker's words are all left unexplored in a textual analysis of the speech. In an attempt to address the absence of these rather significant aural elements, I developed a short performance of Grimké's address. The goal of the performance is to recreate the aurally-charged environment of Pennsylvania Hall and to hear and feel the oppression that Grimké confronted. The piece was originally presented at a scholarly convention in 2005, but I have presented it more recently as part of a unit on gendered rhetorical theories in several of my courses. The

performance was basically the same in both contexts (with a slightly smaller audience at the convention), but for the purposes of this discussion of performative insights, I will focus on the classroom performances and the pedagogical insights derived from these performances.

The performance is an attempt to recreate, on a smaller scale, the aural environment of Grimké's address. It is less a performance of Grimké (although this is certainly part of it) than it is a performance of Pennsylvania Hall. Grimké is obviously a central voice in this environment, but she is not the only voice; hence, the intent of the performance is to present all of the voices present in Pennsylvania Hall at the time of the address. Consequently, this is an audience-interactive performance since a number of other voices are needed to create the sounds of the mob. In both iterations of the performance, I played the role of Grimké and presented an edited script adapted from her Pennsylvania Hall address.¹ The selection was edited to keep the total time of the performance at approximately four minutes. As the following discussion of the performance illustrates, the decision to edit was made in response to the concern that a longer performance might be difficult to sustain.

Prior to the start of the performance, the students are instructed on their roles. Audience members are divided into four groups, and each group is assigned a word or phrase to chant to represent the mob surrounding Pennsylvania Hall. The groups of students chant words and phrases such as "torch the hall," "how dare you," "go home," and "silence." The audience members are then placed in the four corners of the room, and instructed to begin chanting their assigned word/phrase with a hand signal from "Grimké," who stands in the center of the space. After a group begins their chant, they are instructed to sustain it throughout the rest of the performance. The audience is also told that their goal is to overpower or drown out Grimké's voice. The four groups start their chants at different times throughout the address (see Appendix), and the result is a crescendo

¹ The script of the performance (an excerpt of the Pennsylvania Hall Address), including directions for the chanting mob, is included at the end of this document as an appendix.

of mob noise.

The most striking observation about the performance itself is the extent to which it physically and emotionally drains all participants. Even at four minutes in length, this performance demands a great deal of energy and emotional output. By the time all four student groups are chanting, it is nearly impossible for anyone in the space to focus on Grimké's words. The environment quickly turns into a competition for aural space. As each group joins the performance, I naturally feel the need to increase "Grimké's" volume and vocal intensity in an attempt to maintain the floor. However, with the addition of each new group of voices, the vocal and emotional strength necessary to fend off the mob wanes. The weight of oppression is a terrible burden to bear and the performance makes clear the extent to which self and identity are implicated in the struggle to voice unpopular beliefs. At the conclusion of the performances, I was overwhelmed emotionally and physically. The four minutes of performance were four minutes of direct verbal conflict between one and twenty, and the struggle to be heard takes its toll. The performance is a demanding act of somatic engagement that envelops all of the participants, and even without immediate physical contact the body bears the brunt of the energy in the room.

From the standpoint of reaching a clearer understanding of aural appeals, the performance yields several specific insights. One such bit of performative knowledge is the extent to which such appeals rely on the symbiotic relationship between Grimké and the mob. One can certainly do a reading of Grimké's address without audience members chanting, but without the additional voices, Grimké's appeal loses its urgency. The voices of the surrounding mob create an aural interplay that both propels Grimké's vocal performance and necessitates the verbal acknowledgements of the mob on Grimké's part. The symbiotic relationship between Grimké and the mob thus creates the overall aural environment that is Pennsylvania Hall.

This interplay between Grimké and the mob manifests itself in the cadence and rhythm of her address. During the performances, I took extra pauses in the oration in order to find the brief silences or downward inflections in the chants. The voices of the mob, in essence, dictated how and where "Grimké" paused, and even, to

some extent, which words and phrases she was able to emphasize vocally. Obviously, the performance places the angry mob in closer proximity to the speaker, but there is no doubt that even muffled chants and screams from behind the walls of Pennsylvania Hall would have influenced Grimké's cadence and emotional intensity.

A second insight regarding the nature of the aural appeals in Grimké's address is the extent to which vocal and physical power is foregrounded. The performance demonstrates how the struggle between Grimké and the mob takes a physical toll on all parties involved. This fatigue comes about not only from the process of bringing voice to the words, but also in the process of listening and attempting to comprehend the layers of voices within the sound environment. A class discussion was designed to follow each performance of this piece, and in every case the discussion only began after a few moments of silence. The overcharged aural environment created in the performance forces participants to expend a great deal of vocal energy, and all parties involved in the performance needed some silence to serve as a form of recovery period. In the case of one class, students were only really able to discuss and process the experience in their class blogs and at a subsequent class meeting.

A final insight about the aural appeals derived from the performance of Pennsylvania Hall is that there is pedagogical value in the process of bringing the voices involved in this situation to life. A silent reading of Grimké's speech, coupled with historical accounts of the actions of the mob, can give one a sense for the forces at work in this situation. However, a silent reading alone does not demand the same level of empathy with the parties involved. The performance asks participants to hear and feel the emotions of both oppressors and those struggling against oppression. Such experiential insights are evident in some of the comments posted on blogs by students in my class who participated in the performance. For instance, one student commented, "Through our exercise in class it was easy to feel the power and rush of being the oppressor" ("Teacher"). Another student explained, "After the exercise in class I was left feeling horrible. Without being conscious of it I participated in it and it was fun" ("Gender/Critical").

The discussion with the students in my class continued the following class session, and with a distance of several days on the experience of the performance they were better able to express their thoughts and opinions. The performance invited them to make a powerful emotional connection with Grimké's plight, and, through the process of adding their voices to the situation, they gained some valuable first-person perspective. One student's blog entry reveals the impact of these performative insights on some of the participants:

I have rights as a woman. I can write a speech and deliver it to my peers. I have the right to assemble and let others know my feelings about topics that are near and dear to me. These rights that I have were fought for by people who came before me who could not do these things freely. Who do I thank for my freedoms to express myself rhetorically? Do I thank those women who stood on the steps giving their speeches while being shouted at and threatened? Do I thank those women who were injured, spat on, and humiliated in the past for freedoms I enjoy today? ("Sunday")

Textual Analysis

Grimké's focus on the aural manifests itself in two main ways in her speech. The most obvious manifestation of Grimké's appeals to the sense of sound is in her word choices. However, another way in which she appeals to the sense of sound is by using projected quotations or character voices throughout her address. Accordingly, in the remainder of this textual analysis I will provide a few examples to illustrate how, in both word choice and the use of projected quotations, Grimké creates a strong appeal to the sense of sound.

Grimké keys in her audience to her focus on sound in the very beginning of her speech and continues this emphasis throughout her address by using words that emphasize the aural sense. After the first loud yell from the mob, Grimké calls her audience's attention to "Those voices without," and she even commands her audience to focus their attention on those voices when she says, "Hear it—hear it" (26). All in all, Grimké uses the word "voice" (26, 28-9) four times during her speech; and the word "hear" (26, 29-30) is used six times. These numbers, taken by themselves, do not seem too unusual, but if

one accounts for words related to “voice” and “hear” such as “silence,” “wailing,” “opening our mouths,” and the like, there are a total of twenty-eight direct references to sounds of human voices (or the lack thereof).

Grimké makes these references to aural phenomena in conjunction with her discussion of three main groups: the mob, the slaves, and herself. She also uses a few words related to sound when discussing the immediate audience and the opposition (pro-slavery groups). As I previously noted, Grimké begins her speech by asking the audience to hear the voices of the mob. There is one other major reference to the sound of the mob near the end of the speech when she describes the mob as “those who would stop our mouths” and once again asks the audience to “hear those cries” (30). References to sound and voice are also apparent in Grimké’s discussion of the condition of the slaves. She vividly describes how she “could no longer endure to hear the wailing” of the slave (29). Later, she recalls the “discordant tones” of the slaves as well as the “shrieks and groans, mingled with prayers and blasphemous curses” (29). Finally, Grimké makes numerous references to sound and voice when describing her own experience. As she explains near the beginning of the address, “it is my duty to stand up here to-night and bear testimony against slavery” (27). In other words, Grimké is saying that it is her obligation to give voice to this important issue. In her personal account of her decision to leave the South and fight slavery, she refers to the South as a place where there was “no voice in the wilderness” and the North as a place where there was “no ear to hear nor heart to feel” (28-9). She then states that now, with the rise of the abolition movement in the North, she has cause to “lift up [her] voice like a trumpet” (29).

While the use of sound-related words functions rhetorically to aid Grimké’s appeal in the aural-rich context of Pennsylvania Hall, Grimké’s use of projected quotations or character voices acts to further enrich the focus on “voice” in her address. Essentially, a projected quotation is a device that a speaker uses when performing the voice of another person or group of people. Bryan Crow maintains that there are two main types of projected quotations. One kind of projected quotation is a “quoting” of “actual past utterances,”

or “narrative quoting” (Crow). The second type of projected quotation occurs when a speaker is “projecting a possible/hypothetical utterance that you, or I, or someone else might have said but didn’t actually say (yet)” (Crow). Grimké incorporates both types of projected quotations into her discourse, and as with her use of sound-related words, these quotations are used primarily to highlight three main voices: the Bible, the immediate audience, and the opposition.

As a woman of strong Quaker faith, Grimké of course quotes the Bible frequently (Campbell 22-33). There are numerous allusions to the Bible in her address, and she also incorporates five direct quotations from the Bible (Grimké 26-7, 29-31). Since the Bible is a preexisting narrative, all of these quotations would classify as the first type of projected quotations. One of her strongest uses of Biblical quotations occurs at the beginning of the speech when she refers to the mob and assumes the voice of Christ on the cross saying, “they know not what they do” (26). In another instance, she makes a powerful connection between herself and the scriptures by stating, “The language of my soul was, ‘Oh tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon’” (29). This quotation serves a dual purpose because it asks the listeners to equate the voice of God (the scripture) with a thought that Grimké had in the past. In a similar fashion, she uses a quotation to suggest a connection between the words of the slaves and the words of the scripture. She quotes the slaves as saying, “When hope is extinguished, they say, ‘let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (27). Throughout the speech, Grimké cleverly creates an association between the words of the Bible, her own words, and the words of the slaves. Grimké’s voice quite literally melds with these other voices to enhance her credibility and to illustrate the extent of her empathy.

Grimké also uses several of the second type of projected quotations where she proposes hypothetical utterances for two groups: the immediate audience and the pro-slavery groups. At the very outset of the speech, she assumes the voice of her audience when she states, “Do you ask, ‘what has the North to do with slavery?’” (26). She also takes the voice of the audience when she says near the end of the speech, “Do you say, ‘It does no good?’” (31). In

both of these instances, Grimké poses a hypothetical utterance to give direct voice to some concerns that might otherwise go unmentioned. In a similar fashion, Grimké takes on the voice of those opposed to the abolitionists' cause. For instance, at one point in the speech she states, "A few years ago, and the South felt secure, and with a contemptuous sneer asked, 'Who are the abolitionists? The abolitionists are nothing'" (30). She later goes on to state, "it is said by some, our 'books and papers do not speak the truth'" (31). As with her quotations of the audience's collective voice, the performance of these quotations of the collective opposition's voice allows Grimké to raise some powerful arguments for her cause. Given the "voices" that quite literally surrounded her on that day in Pennsylvania Hall, this "hypothetical utterance" strategy is also certainly a significant element in the struggle for power. By taking voices of the audience and the opposition and making them her own, Grimké demonstrates the ability to control the voices that would control her.

Conclusions and Implications

The setting of Angelina Grimké's 1838 Pennsylvania Hall address was no doubt charged with aural energy. With the clamor of the crowd outside, the sense of sound was clearly heightened among the members of the audience. Grimké skillfully adapted to the constraints of the situation to take advantage of the audience's arousal. The analysis of her aural appeals in this essay is a sense critique. The discussion of the interactive performance revealed that the aural appeals are rich in emotional energy and that the "voicing" involved in the performance generates somatic insights that are absent in a purely textual critique. As textual analysis demonstrated, Grimké appealed to the aural sense by bring "voice" to the situation through her word choices and her quoted materials.

Grimké's discourse is more fully appreciated through the use of performative methods because such techniques allow participants to fully engage in the dramatic dialogue that was her struggle against the forces of oppression. As Browne observes, "Oratory was for Grimké a kind of performance art, a definitively public mode of address

through which she could put on display the drama of human relations” (15). The Pennsylvania Hall address was a defining moment in women’s rhetoric, the abolitionist movement, and U.S. history. Perhaps the most compelling conclusion that can be drawn regarding aural appeals and Grimké’s oration is the need to perform these experiences as a way to connect with the past and inspire action in the future. Daughton contends that “Grimké provided a model of rhetorical empowerment for the oppressed, not only for her contemporaries but also as a legacy for her rhetorical heirs” (41). Performance allows participants to place Grimké’s model of empowerment into practice, and thus serves as a means of reliving her fight to gain and maintain a public voice. The first-hand engagement with such an experience, even in the admittedly limited context of a brief performance, provides access to the aural environments that so often define struggles against the forces of oppression.



Appendix –Script for the Pennsylvania Hall Performance

(Excerpted from Angelina Grimké’s 1838 Pennsylvania Hall address)

Men, brethren and fathers – mothers, daughters and sisters, what came ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? [*audience group #1 begins chanting*] Is it curiosity merely, or a deep sympathy with the perishing slave, that has brought this large audience together?

Those voices without ought to awaken and call out our warmest sympathies. Deluded beings! “They know not what they do.” They know not that they are undermining their own right and their own happiness, temporal and eternal.

Do you ask, “What has the North to do with slavery?” Hear it – hear it. Those voices without tell us that the spirit of slavery is here,

and has been roused to wrath by our abolition speeches and conventions. This opposition shows that slavery has done its deadliest work in the hearts of our citizens. [*audience group #2 begins chanting*]

What is a mob? What would the breaking of every window be? What would the leveling of this Hall be? Any evidence that we are wrong, or that slavery is a good and wholesome institution? What if the mob should now burst in upon us, break up our meeting and commit violence upon our persons – would this be anything compared to what the slaves endure?

Many persons go to the South for a season and are hospitably entertained in the parlor and at the table of the slave-holder. They never enter the huts of the slaves; they know nothing of the dark side of the picture, and they return home with praises on their lips of the generous character of those with whom they had tarried. How wonderfully constituted is the human mind! How it resists, as long as it can, all efforts made to reclaim it from error! [*audience group #3 begins chanting*]

Many times have I wept in the land of my birth, over the system of slavery. I knew of none who sympathized in my feelings – I was unaware that any efforts were made to deliver the oppressed – no voice in the wilderness was heard calling on the people to repent – and my heart sickened within me.

But how different do I feel now! Animated with hope, nay, with an assurance of the triumph of liberty and good will to man, I will lift up my voice like a trumpet, and show this people their transgression, their sins of omission toward the slave, and what they can do towards affecting Southern mind, and overthrowing Southern oppression.

We often hear the question asked, “What shall we do?” Here is an opportunity for doing something now. Every man and every woman present may do something by showing that we fear not a mob. [*audience group #4 begins chanting*]

Women of Philadelphia! Allow me to entreat you to come up to this work. Especially let me urge you to petition. Men may settle this and other questions at the ballot box, but you have no such right; it is only through petitions that you can reach the Legislature. It is therefore particularly your duty to petition.

Men who hold the rod over slaves, rule in the councils of the nation: and they deny our right to petition and to remonstrate against abuses of our sex and of our kind. We have these rights, however, from our God. Only let us exercise them, and we may feel the satisfaction of having done what we could.

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