

CHRISTOPHER CASTIGLIA

INTERIOR STATES: INSTITUTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE INNER
LIFE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE ANTEBELLUM UNITED STATES

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Reviewed by Jeannine DeLombard

To say that Christopher Castiglia's inquiry into the workings of democracy in the early national and antebellum United States helps explain the current appeal of *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil* is not to trivialize this ambitious examination of American civic life. Crediting Americans with seemingly irrepressible democratic impulses, Castiglia finds those urges boomeranging back onto (or, rather, *into*) the American self. Instead of prompting direct, ongoing political negotiation among the nation's inhabitants, Castiglia maintains, these tendencies are perpetually contained through calls for self-discipline even as they are deferred via a corresponding institutionalism. (The study's pervasive passive voice evinces the influence of Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and normalization.) Faced with social and political problems, Americans tend to respond through ever-more rigorous scrutiny and management of the interiorized self. "The appearance of interiority corresponds with an estrangement of human agency into the social simulacra of institutions and their corollary interior states," Castiglia contends, outlining the

“circular” process by which this phenomenon occurs: “as institutions appropriate agency, citizens are compensated with self-management of interior states. As citizens in turn become more preoccupied and self-characterized by emotional, psychological, and spiritual states, they become more easily labeled as partisan, self-interested, and biased in ways that make the estrangement of their agency by supposedly impartial (because abstracted beyond the contingent interest of temporal location, of history) institutions appear more necessary” (294-95).

As we might expect from the scholar whose delightfully titled first book, *Bound and Determined*, juxtaposed the captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson and Patty Hearst, Castiglia is attuned to the continuities tying the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century past to the American present. On those occasions when the study pops into the contemporary U.S., it is more likely to turn up at an English Department lunch or an ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) meeting than a daytime talk show. But the tremendous influence of the simultaneously pathologizing and confessional discourses through which the likes of Oprah and Phil address cultural crises ranging from domestic abuse to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan makes much more sense when viewed against the backdrop provided by *Interior States*. (More topically, in order to appreciate Castiglia’s point regarding the persistent hetero-normative deferral of meaningful democratic political change into an unspecified futurity, one need only note the increasingly

frequent – and shrill – invocation of “our children and grandchildren” by political conservatives rationalizing cuts to currently available social services.)

Interior States opens by charting what its author calls the “federalization of affect” in the early national period (18). Based on the assumption that civil life arises “from a self-contained depth, and not the other way around,” this federal affect “had the effect of limiting citizens’ public participation within prescribed forms of ‘private’ life while promising, through the management of their interior states, a phantom social volition” (18). In response to such discursively imposed limitations, Americans produced rich – and often downright wacky – counternarratives. From Hannah Webster Foster’s melancholic *Coquette* (1797) and Maria Monk’s sadomasochistic nuns to the inebriates conjured by Timothy Shay Arthur, Walt Whitman, and George Lippard, the passions of individuals exceed (often fairly perfunctory) attempts at self-management. (Of course, by characterizing these works as “an archive of democratic aspirations that have been discredited or foreclosed, the visions of citizens who are socially dead yet living” (11), Castiglia reminds us of his own institutional affiliation with other prominent Duke University Press “New Americanists” such as Russ Castronovo, Dana Nelson, Joan/Colin Dayan, and Lauren Berlant).

Antebellum abolitionism, with its seemingly endless schisms, would appear to offer a broad testing ground for Castiglia’s thesis. Pitting members of the

American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) against first the American Colonization Society (ACS) and then the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS), ranging moral suasionists against political abolitionists, and opposing black conventioners to white reformers, the movement's institutional infighting would seem to offer a case study for the divergence of political energy from activism to institutionalism. Instead, Castiglia approaches two contending (and contentious) institutions through representative individuals, the ACS' Robert Finley and the AASS' William Lloyd Garrison. Perceptively analyzing the oratory and printed media with which the two white activists fashioned their public selves, Castiglia demonstrates how the crucible of black suffering under slavery wrought two interrelated rhetorical effects. Assigning to African Americans an "always alienated civility" (wherein "black Americans rhetorically marked a civility that they, by definition, did not possess"), white reformers laid claim to a new kind of "civic depth" for themselves (131).

With his insight that Garrisonian rhetoric positioned "black citizens as abstract markers of civic virtues" which they were simultaneously "indexical of and lacking (needing instruction in)," Castiglia captures with remarkable concision a constitutive discursive dynamic of American abolitionism. All the more reason to wish Castiglia had taken the long view on antebellum reformers' disciplinary racial pedagogy. (With its institutional origins in the all-white republican antislavery

societies of the 1790s, the movement can be said to have begun in the very cultural moment which the book as a whole takes as its starting point.) As documented by over a decade of excellent work on the First Emancipation by historians such as Joanne Pope Melish and Richard S. Newman, abolitionists' custodial rhetoric first manifests itself in what Newman has called the early republic's interracial "patron-client politics" of respectability. How, then, did antebellum activists modulate this rhetoric of moral reform? It is tempting to conclude that they did it by casting African Americans as "emulators of republican virtue" who "would be even more representative of civility than already enfranchised white citizens" (132). But as Dickson D. Bruce reminds us in the *Origins of African-American Literature*, white reformers had featured an exemplary black persona in their printed social critiques since at least the seventeenth century. Even if, during the antebellum slavery debate, African Americans in particular were barred from enacting this sort of "identificational mobility" (rendering it, as Castiglia astutely notes, "a marker of privilege"), the rhetorical strategy itself was by no means new (131). Valuable as it is, then, Castiglia's reading of antebellum abolitionism would have been richer if it had dug more deeply into the sedimented institutional discourse underlying the nineteenth-century rhetoric of reform.

Tracking how democratic urges are repeatedly deferred to futurity and reoriented toward the inner self, the book finds political hope in a perhaps

unexpected place: the romance. Turning first to Hannah Crafts' *Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1855-59) and Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859), Castiglia concludes that however much these promising black-authored romances may initially trouble conventional identities and institutions, both lead disappointingly to marriage and other forms of institutional (fore)closure. By contrast, Castiglia finds a wealth of illuminating counterfactual possibility in the work of American Renaissance men: Nathaniel Hawthorne (*House of Seven Gables* [1851]) and Herman Melville (*Pierre* [1852] and *Clarel* [1876]). The "romantic socialities" imagined by these works -- "frail, contingent, alienated, but also richly inventive, respectful of mystery, obliquely eroticized, and persistently unprivatized -- exemplify democratic practices maintained in the face of individual self-management and normative intimacy" (263). (As evidenced here, a minor distraction in Chapter 7 is the unelaborated slippage from "romance" as genre to "romanticism" as style and perhaps artistic movement in reference to works that, coincidentally, typify both terms.) This cumulatively "queer sociality" of the romance form, Castiglia suggests, provides a point of departure for "preconceiving and reanimating the inventive agency of democratic association" which works provisionally, locally, and actively to demand and enact political change in the present (299).

Sound familiar? The book was published just when the nation elected its first non-white president in a campaign that appeared to activate the very democratic transformation envisioned here. Should we take that as a good sign? Or is it yet another indicator of Americans' disturbing willingness to turn politics into a collective self-improvement project while blandly vesting "Hope" for "Change" in institutions, Democratic or otherwise?

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