



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

The caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, race, and ideology in the age of the Civil War

Item Type	Article
Authors	Sinha, M
DOI	10.2307/3125037
Download date	2026-04-11 02:31:43
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/1986

THE CANING OF CHARLES SUMNER: SLAVERY, RACE, AND IDEOLOGY IN THE AGE OF THE CIVIL WAR

Manisha Sinha

On May 22, 1856, Preston Smith Brooks, a South Carolinian congressman, assaulted a seated Charles Sumner, antislavery senator from Massachusetts, in the Senate chamber. Brooks rained blows on Sumner's head and shoulders with his cane while Representative Laurence M. Keitt, a secessionist colleague from South Carolina, kept others at bay. Brooks later described the caning in a letter to his brother, "I struck him with my cane and gave him about 30 first rate stripes with a gutta perch cane. . . . Every lick went where I intended. For about the first five of six licks he offered to make fight but I plied him so rapidly that he did not touch me. Towards the last he bellowed like a calf." Stunned by the assault, Sumner was unable to slide out of his chair and was pinned under his desk, which was hinged to the floor. He finally managed to extricate himself by tearing the desk off the floor, only to fall down unconscious, covered with blood. Sumner suffered from several bruises and cuts; two serious wounds on the head exposed his skull and had to be stitched. In his frenzy, Brooks had received a minor cut in his head from the backlash of his cane. He continued to hit Sumner until a northern representative physically restrained him. The cane

Manisha Sinha is an associate professor of Afro-American studies and history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is currently working on a book on African Americans and antislavery movements from 1775 to 1865. I am grateful to Eric Foner, David Blight, Jim Horton, Deborah Gray White, Bruce Laurie, Michael Morrison, and the anonymous readers for the *Journal of the Early Republic*, and audiences at the University of Muenster, Germany, University of Rome, Italy, the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in San Francisco, and the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, Harvard University, for their comments and suggestions.

had shattered from the attack, and Brooks pocketed its gold head, declining the Senate page's offer to retrieve the fragments from the floor.¹

According to the oft-repeated story, Brooks had become enraged on learning of Sumner's "The Crime Against Kansas" speech, which, he felt, had insulted South Carolina and his "relative," Senator Andrew Pickens Butler. He decided to "punish" Sumner and after lying in wait for him for a day, came upon him at his Senate desk. Brooks and his defenders claimed that Sumner incited the attack by using unusually offensive language.² As some historians have argued, Sumner's famous speech and Brooks's subsequent assault and the reactions to the caning north and south of the Mason Dixon line revealed the fundamental political divide over racial slavery in the country.³ Instead of looking at the sectionalism the caning

¹ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., 1353-67; Preston Brooks to J. H. Brooks, May 23, 1856, "Statement of Preston Brooks, 28 May, 1856," Preston Smith Brooks Papers (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia); Henry Wilson, *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (3 vols., Boston, 1872-77), 2:478-95; Elias Nason, *The Life and Times of Charles Sumner: His Boyhood, Education, and Public Career* (Boston, 1874), 222.

² This standard interpretation that dominates the historiography of the caning relies on David Donald's highly biased and unsympathetic biography, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960), 278-347; also see Frederick J. Blue, *Charles Sumner and the Conscience of the North* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1994), 39, 91-93, 215-16; Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge, 2000), 195-96; Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 166; Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1845-1860* (Athens, GA, 1996), 111; Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992), 214-15; Kenneth M. Stamp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York, 1990), 11; William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1987), 299-303; Lacy K. Ford Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York, 1988), 348; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 198; an exception is David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York, 1998), 99-100.

³ Michael D. Pierson, "'All Southern Society is Assailed by the Foulest Charges': Charles Sumner's 'The Crime Against Kansas' and the Escalation of Republican Anti-Slavery Rhetoric," *New England Quarterly*, 68 (Dec. 1995), 531-57; Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore, 1985), 144-46; William E. Gienapp, "The Crime Against Sumner: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Rise of the Republican Party," *Civil War History*, 25 (Sept. 1979), 218-45; David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 209-11, 220-21; Charles S. Sydnor, "The Southerner and the Laws," *Journal of Southern History*, 6 (Feb. 1940), 21-23; Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (2 vols., New York, 1947), 2:437-50; Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1953), 223-38; for an anachronistic, prosouthern reading of the

inspired or treating it as merely an incident of personal warfare, this article analyzes the discussion on slavery, race, and ideology that the event inspired and its aftermath, when Sumner emerged as one of the foremost voices for emancipation and black rights in the national political arena.

Most historians have failed to note sufficiently this public discourse on slavery and race and the efforts of abolitionists and free African Americans in shaping it. The assault became a departure point for contemporaries to explore the meaning and relationship among slavery, race, democracy, and republican government in nineteenth-century America. Observers drew upon analogies from slavery to describe and explain the caning and debated its ramifications for white men's democracy. The issues of slavery and race defined both southern defenders' and northern critics' reading of the event. Convenient racist dichotomies of "black slavery" and "white liberty" fell apart. The caning dramatically illustrated, instead, how the question of racial slavery could fracture the world of white republicanism. Like other conflicts over slavery, it helped clarify, to quote W. E. B. Du Bois, that "the true significance of slavery . . . lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy."⁴ The cause of the black slave was inevitably tied to larger questions of representative government in the United States.

Public discussions of the event reveal how the concepts of freedom, democracy, and citizenship were not static but constantly contested. Commentators, North and South, evoked ideas about race and gender to challenge or police the boundaries of republican citizenship and political participation. For southerners, Brooks's actions were manly and honorable, vindicating not just his family but also his state, section, and slavery. But changing manhood ideals in the North led most northerners to view the caning as a barbaric assault on the very fabric of American democracy. Southern champions of Brooks viewed abolitionists and antislavery radicals such as Sumner as threatening to their political world for insisting that republican ideals were applicable to African Americans and for some, women. They saw themselves as conservative defenders of a pristine white, male political world based on the enslavement of African Americans. Northerners, including the majority that did not advocate the rights of black people or women, felt that violent proslavery men like Brooks were a threat to the norms of republican government. The discourse about the event thus

event, see Harlan Joel Gradin, "Losing Control: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Breakdown of Antebellum Political Culture" (Ph.D. Diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1991).

⁴ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, 1935), 13; also see Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation," *Journal of American History*, 81 (Sept. 1994), 435-60.

reinforced and simultaneously redefined the racial and gendered nature of the body politic.⁵

African Americans, usually excluded from the political arena, played a seminal though often overlooked role in redefining dominant notions of representation, rights, and freedom within this discourse. African Americans viewed the caning as yet another attack on the movement to end slavery and racism in this country. It also crystallized the black critique of racial slavery as an affront to American freedom and republican government. According to most black commentators, the assault on Sumner revealed effectively that black emancipation was essential for the redemption of democratic republicanism in the country. African-American abolitionists sought to redefine the public discourse on democracy in antebellum America by arguing that racial discrimination and slavery were contrary to American notions of natural rights and representative democracy. They challenged contemporary conceptions of citizenship and democracy as being limited to white men and intervened in the public arena by highlighting the dilemma of black Americans in a commonly understood political vocabulary of democratic republicanism.

The antebellum contestation over the contours and content of American democracy, in which black and white abolitionists played a major role, set the stage for the debate on the rights and citizenship of African Americans. In the long run, abolitionist reaction to this event helped to solidify the strategic alliance among abolitionists, African Americans, and Radical Republicans, such as Sumner. It strengthened Sumner's relationship with his abolitionist and free black constituencies and further radicalized his position on slavery and racial equality. During the Civil War and Reconstruction, he would emerge as one of the most powerful voices for black emancipation and the construction of an interracial democracy in America.

Born in Boston on January 6, 1811, Sumner's lifelong championship of African-American rights led some to speculate that his grandmother might have been "partly of Negro or Indian blood." His family was of old Puritan stock but neither wealthy nor prominent. His father, Charles Pinckney Sumner, was a man of antislavery convictions. As the sheriff of

⁵ Paula Baker, "The Midlife Crisis of the New Political History," *Journal of American History*, 86 (June 1999), 93-120, 158-66; James Brewer Stewart, "The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 18 (Spring 1998), 181-217; Introduction and the articles by James Brewer Stewart, Lois E. Horton, and Joanne Pope Melish in the Special Issue on Racial Consciousness and Nation Building in the Early Republic, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19 (Winter 1999), 577-78, 629-72, 691-712.

Suffolk County, he had been involved in one of the first fugitive slave rescue controversies in 1836 and had come to William Lloyd Garrison's aid when the abolitionist editor was attacked by a Boston mob in 1835. Sumner inherited his father's antislavery beliefs and was a Unitarian like his parents. He attended the Boston Latin School where the future abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips was one of his classmates. Known for his studious and intellectual disposition, Sumner attended Harvard where he read far beyond the college's "elitist curriculum." He trained under Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, with whom he developed a close relationship. As a young lawyer, Sumner was more interested in scholarship than starting a practice. He often filled in for his mentor as a lecturer at Harvard Law School and wrote frequently on legal matters. Sumner's choice of subjects reflected his interest in the issue of slavery. Despite imbibing Story's nationalist views, he defended Britain's right to search American vessels suspected of participating in the illegal African slave trade. Sumner collaborated with William Ellery Channing in writing an antislavery pamphlet in which he strongly opposed Secretary of State Daniel Webster's letter demanding the extradition of the *Creole* slave rebels from the British West Indies.⁶

Sumner's exposure to radical interracial Garrisonian abolitionism in the 1830s and 1840s was instrumental in shaping his beliefs on slavery and race even though he, unlike Garrison, was committed to national political action against slavery. He was an early subscriber to *The Liberator*, and though he rejected Garrison's views on disunion and the proslavery nature of the U. S. Constitution, Sumner referred to him as "an angel, that we are entertaining unawares." His admiration for Garrison and long-standing friendship with Phillips made Sumner, in the words of his critical

⁶ Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 5, 130-31 (quotation); Charles Pinckney Sumner Notebook, 1836, 37, Newspaper Cuttings, "Scraps on Slave Rescues and C. P. Sumner," Charles Pinckney Sumner Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston); Leonard Levy, "The 'Abolition Riot': Boston's First Slave Rescue," *New England Quarterly*, 25 (1952), 85-92; Blue, *Charles Sumner and the Conscience of the North*, 2-10; C. Edwards Lester, *Life and Public Services of Charles Sumner* (New York, 1874), 14; Edward L. Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner* (4 vols., Boston, 1877-93), 1:24-27; *ibid.* 2:191-96, 199-205, 224-25; Archibald Grimké, *The Life of Charles Sumner: The Scholar in Politics* (New York, 1892), 14-18, 55, 119. Donald gives a very different explanation of Sumner's antislavery beliefs, attributing them to his alleged psychological troubles. See Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 81-129. For his reading of abolitionists as suffering from status anxiety, see David Donald, "Toward a Reconsideration of Abolitionists," in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, 1956), 19-36; for a recent exhaustively researched work that shows multiple errors in Donald's use of the sources, see Anne-Marie Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner and the Legacy of the American Enlightenment, 1811-1851* (Amherst, 2001).

biographer David Donald, not the least bit “embarrassed to associate with the abolitionists.” Angered by Sumner’s vocal denunciations of slavery, the conservative Brahmins and cotton magnates of Beacon Hill socially ostracized him and denied him a faculty position at Harvard Law School. But while Sumner became *persona non grata* in Boston’s high society, he gained many new friends among abolitionists and the city’s small yet politically active free black population. He was seen frequently at J. J. Smith’s barbershop, a popular venue for political discussion among black Bostonians, and he developed close personal ties with local black leaders.⁷

Sumner became deeply involved in the struggle against racial discrimination launched by free African Americans and their abolitionist allies in Massachusetts. In 1845, he refused to lecture before the segregated New Bedford Lyceum, stating that “In the sight of God and of all just institutions the white man can claim no precedence or exclusive privilege from his color.” He opposed the state law prohibiting interracial marriage, which was repealed in 1843 after a successful abolitionist campaign, and later advocated the removal of the racially exclusionary parts of the state militia law. In 1849, Sumner represented a young black girl, Sarah Roberts, at the request of her father and African-American leader Benjamin Roberts, in a landmark case against segregation in Boston’s public schools. His co-counsel was Robert Morris, the first black lawyer to be admitted to the Massachusetts Bar. Sumner’s case rested on the conviction that racial caste was anathema to democracy and that “*all men without distinction of race or color are equal before the law.*” Many of his arguments that separate was inherently unequal and that segregation harmed black and white children were repeated more than a hundred years later in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*. Although the court ruled against Sarah Roberts, forming a judicial precedent for another historic case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, black and white abolitionists continued to fight school segregation until it was outlawed by Massachusetts in 1855. Black abolitionist William Cooper Nell, the leading organizer of the Equal School

⁷ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (1970; rep., New York, 1995), 109-18; Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln’s Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York, 1969), 15-20. Donald, though, questions the influence of Garrisonian abolitionism on Sumner by partially quoting his remarks from 1850. See Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 132-34. Also see *ibid.*, 139, 160-77; on Sumner’s early commitment to antislavery idealism, see Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York, 1979), 37.

Rights movement, noted that Sumner's reasoning had a powerful effect on the state legislature.⁸

Sumner's advocacy of equal rights for all Americans, regardless of color, was unusual in political antislavery circles. Northern free soilism or sentiment against the extension of slavery was at times tainted with racism. Free Soilers such as David Wilmot were just as averse to African Americans as they were to the extension of slavery. However, Sumner, a leading figure in the rise of free soil politics, combined a devotion to racial equality with antislavery politics. Like another fellow Whig, Joshua Giddings, and unlike Salmon P. Chase and John P. Hale, Sumner had not joined the abolitionist Liberty Party but had worked against slavery within the existing two-party system in the 1840s. Chase and Hale had long abandoned the Democratic Party because of its increasingly proslavery character. In 1845, Sumner organized a protest meeting of like-minded antislavery or "Conscience Whigs" and abolitionists against the annexation of Texas. His vigorous opposition to the Mexican War and the extension of slavery into the Southwest earned him the enmity of the "Cotton Whigs," the textile factory owners who were dependent on supplies of raw cotton from the South, and their conservative allies in state politics. Sumner condemned the intersectional alliance between "the lords of the loom and the lords of the lash" represented by the Whig party, which dominated Massachusetts' politics. His view that the republic was threatened more by "the corruption of wealth than from mobs" reflected his alienation from the textile interests of his state. He argued that "the money power has joined hands with the slavery power. Selfish, grasping, subtle, tyrannical. Like its ally, it will brook no opposition."

An advocate of independent antislavery politics by the end of the Mexican War, Sumner believed that an antislavery party would act as the American equivalent of the 1848 revolutions in Europe and destroy all the

⁸ Sumner is quoted by Grimké, *Charles Sumner*, 143; Blue, *Charles Sumner and the Conscience of the North*, 35, 51-53; Charles Sumner, *The Works of Charles Sumner* (15 vols., Boston, 1870-83), 2221-27; *Argument of Charles Sumner Esq. against the Constitutionality of Separate Colored Schools in the Case of Sarah C. Roberts vs. the city of Boston before the Supreme Court of Mass., Dec. 4, 1849* (Boston, 1849); Leonard W. Levy and Harlan B. Phillips, "The Roberts Case: Source of the 'Separate But Equal' Doctrine," *American Historical Review*, 56 (Apr. 1951), 510-18; Dan Koprowski, "The Roberts Case: Robert Morris, Charles Sumner and School Desegregation Efforts in Antebellum Boston" (Unpublished paper, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in author's possess.); *Triumph of Equal School Rights in Boston. Proceedings of the Presentation Meeting Held in Boston, Dec. 17, 1855. . . .* (Boston, 1856), 7, reprinted in Leonard W. Levy and Douglas L. Jones, eds., *Jim Crow in Boston: The Origin of Separate But Equal Doctrine* (New York, 1974); William C. Nell to Sumner, Jan. 12, Apr. 22, 1850, Charles Sumner Papers (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA).

social injustices plaguing the country, slavery, and economic inequality. As one of the founders of the Free Soil party in 1848, Sumner nurtured political friendships with antislavery politicians such as the late John Quincy Adams, Giddings and Chase of Ohio, and Hale of New Hampshire. Unlike many of his patrician Conscience Whig friends, he also developed a close working relationship with Henry Wilson, the "Natick cobbler," and Francis W. Bird, antislavery men of humble origins. The so-called Bird Club engineered the Free Soil-Democratic alliance in Massachusetts that elected "the radically antislavery Sumner" to the United States Senate in 1851. During the prolonged balloting and fighting for the senatorial seat in the assembly, Sumner had offered to withdraw his name several times and viewed his victory "more saddened than elated." As a politician, he would establish a reputation for being a principled idealist who was wholly committed to the antislavery cause.⁹

Sumner's strong opposition to the Compromise of 1850, the sectional truce on slavery after the Mexican War, especially the Fugitive Slave Act, marked the start of his national political career. On his election to the Senate, Sumner led a virtually one-man crusade in Congress for the repeal of this act. The law had led to the exodus of thousands of African Americans to Canada and to the massive mobilization of northern black communities and their abolitionist allies against the repatriation of suspected fugitives. It bypassed Massachusetts' personal liberty law; but the state, one of the strongholds of northern abolitionism, became a testing ground for its efficacy. Led by Lewis Hayden, a fugitive slave himself, Boston abolitionists successfully prevented the re-enslavement of William and Ellen Craft and Shadrach Minkins. Sumner had played a prominent role in founding the abolitionist Vigilance Committee in 1846 and in the escape of the Crafts. He had also advised Shadrach's lawyers and acted as counsel in the Thomas Sims fugitive case of 1851. As senator, he managed to secure a presidential pardon for two men accused of assisting runaway slaves and the freedom of the wife and children of Seth Botts, a fugitive slave. In 1854, southern senators and the Democratic press in Washington

⁹ Eric Foner, "Politics and Prejudice: The Free Soil Party and the Negro, 1849-1852," *Journal of Negro History*, 50 (Oct. 1965), 239-56; Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 153-59, 166, 178-82; Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848-1854* (Urbana, IL, 1973), 33-39, 42, 125, 133-34, 205-31; Dale Baum, *The Civil War Party System: The Case of Massachusetts, 1848-1876* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 3-7, 28-29, 56, Sumner is quoted on 73, 211-12; Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., "Towards a National Antislavery Party: The Giddings-Sumner Alliance," *Ohio History*, 99 (Winter/Spring 1990), 51-53; Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York, 1999), 640-42; on Sumner and the 1848 revolutions, see Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*, 257-70.

accused Sumner of encouraging defiance of the law during the attempted rescue of Anthony Burns in Boston.¹⁰

Sumner's first major speech in the Senate, "Freedom National," gave voice to the abolitionist critique of the Fugitive Slave Act and to black determination to resist it at all costs. He always referred to the law as a "bill" because he refused to recognize its legality or constitutionality. Ironically, he, like other abolitionists, used states rights theory, a staple of proslavery constitutionalism, to challenge the federal fugitive law. But unlike most southern politicians he evoked the Declaration of Independence and the spirit rather than the words of the Constitution to make his case. He argued that the fugitive law was unconstitutional as it denied black people life, liberty, and the due process of law. Furthermore, it added "meanness to violation of the Constitution" by stipulating a "double stipend" for the commissioner who returned a fugitive slave. When his opposition to the fugitive law was called treason against the Constitution, Sumner questioned the right of southern states such as South Carolina to detain "northern colored citizens" under their notorious Negro Seamen laws, which violated the constitutional guarantee of equal protection to citizens of all the states of the Union. According to him, African Americans were United States citizens and entitled to all the protections and rights of citizenship granted in the Constitution. Not surprisingly, the speech elicited an overwhelmingly positive response from abolitionists, even those who condemned the Constitution as a proslavery document. Phillips referred to it as "masterly argument and noble testimony." And Theodore Parker christened him as the "Senator with a conscience." Responding to another one of Sumner's antislavery speeches, Frederick Douglass wrote to him, "All the friends of freedom, in every State, and of every color, may claim you, just now, as their representative. As one of your sable constituents—My dear Sir, I desire to thank you, for your noble speech for freedom, and for your country. . . . Heaven preserve you and strengthen you."¹¹

¹⁰ Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:227-29, 276-77, 390-93, 413-14; Arthur Reed Hogue, ed., *Charles Sumner: An Essay by Carl Schurz* (Urbana, IL, 1951), 39-50; Grimké, *Charles Sumner*, 205-13, 230-35; Jeremiah Chaplin and J. D. Chaplin, *Life of Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1874), 156-59; Stanley J. and Anita W. Robboy, "Lewis Hayden: From Fugitive Slave to Statesman," *New England Quarterly*, 46 (Dec. 1973), 591-613; Gary Collison, *Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 116; Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trial of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); my argument differs from Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 197, 208-10, 219-24, 261.

¹¹ Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 3:49-67, 73-75, 95-196, 355-414, 426-32, 529-47; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:293-99; Blue, *Charles Sumner and the Conscience of the North*, 69-72, 80-81; Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the*

If Sumner's speeches and actions in Congress earned him the praise of abolitionists, they made him extremely unpopular with the defenders of slavery. It is important to take into account the level of vituperation over slavery in Congress before Sumner made his famous Kansas speech. Sumner's opponents in the Senate blocked his participation on committees, denied him the floor, and heckled when he spoke. It was only after several months that he managed to deliver his "Freedom National" speech. The Democratic press in Washington had derisively dubbed him the "Impossible Senator." His senatorial critics called him a "puppy," "spaniel," (presumably because when asked if he would return a fugitive slave as required by the law, Sumner had responded, "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do such a thing?") "a sneaking sinuous, snake-like poltroon," "serpent," "filthy reptile," "leper," and "miscreant." Sumner responded by denouncing the "plantation manners" of southern congressmen. Senators Clement Clay of Alabama, Andrew Pickens Butler of South Carolina, James Mason of Virginia (author of the Fugitive Slave bill), and Stephen Mallory of Florida, all leading defenders of "southern rights," were particularly loud in their denunciations of Sumner. Senator John Pettit of Indiana, known for his abusive manner and his southern political sympathies, called for Sumner's expulsion because of his refusal to support the fugitive law but failed to garner enough votes for such an action. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, perhaps the most prominent Democrat in the Senate and author of the Kansas Nebraska Act, accused Sumner of advocating "the cause of niggerism."¹²

Ideas about race and conflicts over the issue of racial equality formed an important part of the confrontation between Sumner and his southern detractors, a fact that has been missed by the numerous historians of the caning. In a bizarre rebuttal of Sumner's ideas on racial equality, Butler had asked him to write a play about a "negro princess in search of a husband" and a white man's repulsion to "her white teeth . . . black skin and kinky hair." He had gone on to argue that if Sumner "wished to write poetry, he would get a negro to sit for him." Calling Massachusetts an "*anti-nigger State*," Butler had claimed that more of the state's slaves had been sold

Government of God in Antislavery Thought (Ithaca, 1973) 282; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 73-102; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 3:94 (Phillips quotation); Hogue, ed., *Charles Sumner*, 40 (Parker quotation); Frederick Douglass to Sumner, Feb. 27, 1854, Charles Sumner Papers.

¹² *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., 1554; *ibid.*, 3rd sess., 1549-59; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:238-39, 299-301, 375-86; *Works of Charles Sumner*, 3: 368-69, 370, 413-14; Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 224-25, 236, 263-66; Blue, *Charles Sumner and the Conscience of the North*, 79-82; Grimké, *Charles Sumner*, 236-42.

down south rather than freed on emancipation. He had concluded that when Sumner “speaks with so much fervor of the black race as equal of the white, let him recollect that, according to the judgment of history, they were once regarded something like puppies when they were weaned, and their mothers and fathers could be disposed of with a profit.” Butler was not above exhibiting coarseness in debate despite his common historical description as a “kindly man of charm and grace” who was insulted unjustifiably by Sumner. Thus, Sumner’s unmerciful allusion to the “blunders” and “loose exhortation” that poured forth from Butler’s mouth in his Kansas speech were not bolts out of the blue as much of the historiography would have us believe.¹³

Sumner’s Kansas speech then was not completely unusual at a time when charged rhetoric over slavery and race was common. The conflict over the repeal of the Missouri Compromise line and the extension of slavery to Kansas had precipitated a new round of verbal warfare between Sumner and southerners and their northern Democratic allies in Congress. Sumner along with Chase played a leading role in opposing the Kansas Nebraska Act and in the formation of the Republican Party. In May 1856, he delivered his famous “The Crime Against Kansas” speech. His indictment of slaveholders and proslavery forces in Kansas epitomized abolitionist reasoning and language. He argued that the attempt to introduce slavery to Kansas had subverted republican government and introduced the brutal law of force and violence. In his words, “border sorrows and African wrongs are revived together on American soil, while, for the time being, all protection is annulled, and the whole territory is enslaved.” Heartened by the speech’s abolitionist tone, a writer in *The Liberator* praised its “power and grandeur” and Phillips again commended his friend for assailing southern slavery.¹⁴

¹³ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., Appendix 232-40. Also see *ibid.*, 33rd Cong., 3rd sess., 1549-51, 1554-58; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 3:371-413, 545-46; and Moorfield Storey, *Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1900), 111-16. The description of Butler is from Gienapp, “The Crime Against Sumner,” 220. For a similar view, see Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 310; on Butler’s life and career, see John Belton O’Neill, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina* (2 vols., Charleston, SC, 1859), 1:198-204; and Theodore D. Jervy, “The Butlers of South Carolina,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 4 (Oct. 1903), 306.

¹⁴ For Sumner’s speech, see *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 529-44 (quotation at 534). For his role in the Kansas affair, see Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 3:336-47; *ibid.*, 4:121-22, 131 (*Liberator* quotation), 137-256; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:347-73, 433-53; and Chaplin and Chaplin, *Life of Charles Sumner*, 296. According to Michael Pierson, Sumner’s use of sexual imagery in his speech directly evoked the abuse of slave women. Abolitionist discourse often centered on this accusation. However, few contemporaries responded to this alleged aspect of Sumner’s

Nor were Sumner's critics innocent victims of his wit that likened Butler's ponderous defense of slavery to Don Quixote's devotion to his ugly mistress and Douglas, author of the Kansas bill, to Sancho Panza. Moreover, Butler had assumed the role of a leading defender of the slave South in the Senate, one that South Carolinian planter politicians, like the more illustrious John C. Calhoun, had long monopolized. The confrontation between Sumner and his South Carolinian opponents over his Kansas speech was far more than personal. Sumner had picked on Butler and South Carolina because Butler had disparaged Massachusetts as the home of abolitionism and because of South Carolinian planter politicians', "constant and vigorous championship of slavery" and southern separatism.¹⁵ In the context of the sectional war of words over slavery in the 1850s, it was not Sumner's Kansas speech that was unusually insulting. In fact, it was Brooks's terrifying response to the speech that introduced a new element and a more palpable level of violence in Congressional debates.

Preston Brooks was a young planter politician from the cotton growing district of Edgefield, South Carolina, whose propensity for settling quarrels with violence had already involved him in two duels. Not even his impeccable lineage prevented him from being expelled from South Carolina College, a breeding ground for the state's political elite. In 1844, when serving as the aide-de-camp to the governor of the state, he had been responsible for ensuring the expulsion of Samuel Hoar, the Massachusetts emissary sent to investigate the plight of imprisoned black seamen in South Carolina. When elected to the House of Representatives in 1853, however, he was allied with the relatively moderate national Democrats rather than the unconditional secessionists. Representing a state known for its commitment to secessionist politics, he chafed under criticism for being "too national," and his actions may have been partly motivated by a desire to establish his proslavery credentials.¹⁶

In one of his few noteworthy speeches in Congress, ignored by historians, Brooks had reiterated proslavery doctrine that the "African" was

speech. See Pierson, "All Southern Society is Assailed."

¹⁵ Charleston (SC) *Mercury*, July 25, 1856. On South Carolinian planter politicians and the politics of slavery, see Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

¹⁶ Daniel Walker Hollis, *University of South Carolina: South Carolina College* (2 vols., Columbia, SC, 1951-56), 1:138-39; Alvy L. King, *Louis T. Wigfall: Southern Fire-Eater* (Baton Rouge, 1970), 25, 29-34; Harold S. Schultz, *Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina, 1852-1860: A Study of the Movement for Southern Independence* (Durham, NC, 1950), 116; Robert Neil Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks: The Man and His Image," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 79 (Oct. 1978), 296-303; "Hon. Preston S. Brooks," *Southern Quarterly Review*, 2 (1857), 348-70.

incapable of self-government and that slavery “has been the greatest blessing to the country” for it had acted as a conservative check against fanatical movements that would have convulsed the entire nation in a “social explosion.” Antebellum proslavery thinkers often portrayed the abolitionist movement as part and parcel of a host of modern “isms,” including feminism, communitarianism, atheism, and “red republicanism,” that would ultimately not only destroy slavery but all private property, government, society, religion, and family. Defenders of racial slavery, according to this view, were also guardians of all allegedly divinely ordained social hierarchies and institutions. While black and white abolitionists appropriated and extended the idea of universal natural rights and revolutionary ideology, proslavery theorists developed a conservative philosophy that celebrated inequality, especially racial inequality. Brooks’s speech illustrated an easy familiarity with the main lines of the antebellum proslavery argument and the ideological stakes involved in the battle over slavery.¹⁷

Brooks, however, insisted that he had sought to chastise Sumner only because the latter had insulted South Carolina and Butler, his “aged” relative. Butler was distantly related to Brooks and if personal insult was the only cause of Brooks’s actions then he should have challenged Sumner according to the code duello. According to the southern code of honor, a duel could be fought only between equals. Whippings, canings, and other forms of physical chastisement were reserved for social inferiors. Brooks had chosen to beat Sumner precisely as he would a slave or a slave’s ally. The lesson that slaveholders wanted to instill was fairly simple: to take up the slave’s cause was to suffer like a slave, to have no honor, to be condemned to a “social death,” and to be virtually outside the rule of law. Five citizens of Charleston, in a public letter addressed to Brooks, cannily spelled out the lesson of the story: “You have put the Senator from Massachusetts where he should be. You have applied a blow to his back. He has undergone the infamy of personal punishment. His submission to

¹⁷ For Brooks’s speech, see *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 374; on proslavery ideology, see Eugene D. Genovese, *The Slaveholders’ Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820-1860* (Columbia, SC, 1992); Genovese, “South Carolina’s Contribution to the Doctrine of Slavery in the Abstract,” in David R. Chestnut, Clyde N. Wilson, and George C. Rogers, eds., *The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr.* (Columbia, SC, 1991), 146-59; “Introduction,” Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1981); Stephanie McCurry, “The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina,” *Journal of American History*, 78 (Mar. 1992), 1245-64; and William Sumner Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1935).

your blows has now qualified him for the closest companionship with a degraded class." Sumner had been "personally branded, morally disgraced and politically exposed" according to the *Charleston Mercury*. Brooks's eulogist in the *Southern Quarterly Review* later explained, "His design was not to kill, but to degrade. It is a foul slander to attribute to him any other motive." Physical punishment, according to one Georgia representative, was the "witness, and not the cause of . . . [Sumner's] degradation." Butler also defended Brooks's assault by noting that he had not meant to kill Sumner as was being charged in the North. Brooks only wanted "to whip" Sumner.¹⁸

The many instances of vigilante violence against suspected abolitionists in the Old South scarcely bears repeating. Southern politicians and state governments had also demanded draconian punishments for northern abolitionists and put a price on the head of the more prominent antislavery leaders. Clearly, Brooks was more than aware that Sumner was a symbol of abolitionism in Congress. As he wrote after the attack, "Every Southern man is delighted and the Abolitionists are like a hive of disturbed bees. . . . It would not take much to have the throats of every Abolitionist cut." And reminiscent of the barbaric rituals of the lynching sprees in the postbellum South, Brooks reported that "fragments" of his cane "are begged for as *sacred relicts* [*sic*]."¹⁹

Brooks's southern correspondents praised his punishment of "nigger worshippers and abolitionists." And they approved specifically of the way in which Brooks had beaten Sumner. A. W. J. Holmes wrote, "Give it to them over their shoulders." John Swanson, a correspondent from Georgia, went further: "kill the infamous scoundrel and all such." In South Carolina, local meetings and newspapers tendered the "heartly congratulations" of the

¹⁸ *Charleston Daily Courier*, June 17, 1856; the *Charleston Mercury* is quoted in *The Liberator*, Aug. 8, 1856; "Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 355; *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 739; John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor or The Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling* (Charleston, SC, 1858); Jack Kenny Williams, 54 (Apr. 1953) "The Code of Honor in Ante-Bellum South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 113-28; Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station, TX, 1980); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1984); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

¹⁹ Clement Eaton, *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South* (1940; rev. ed., New York, 1964); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century American South* (New York, 1984); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); Preston Brooks to J. H. Brooks, May 23, 1856, "Statement of Preston Brooks, 28 May, 1856," Preston Smith Brooks Papers.

state for Brooks's "summary chastisement of the Abolitionist Sumner." Governor James H. Adams, who would become famous for his state message recommending the reopening of the African slave trade, advised him to continue to "break their heads." Brooks threatened his Congressional critics, continuing his crusade against Black Republicans and abolitionists. What began as a tragedy ended up as a farce with Brooks challenging Representative Anson Burlingame of Massachusetts to a duel that was never fought. He wrote, "I can[']t fight every body who denounces me, for their name is legion, but I can again degrade the most prominent men of their party, by making a selection in the House and that is to degrade their party too."²⁰

Most prominent southerners approved of the way Brooks had beaten Sumner like a slave or an apprehended abolitionist. In the words of the Richmond *Enquirer's* much-reprinted editorial, "Our approbation is entire and unreserved. We consider the act good in conception, better in execution, and best of all in consequence. These vulgar Abolitionists in the Senate are getting above themselves. They have been humored until they forgot their position. They have grown saucy, and dare to be impudent to gentlemen. . . . They must be lashed into submission." The paper went on to recommend the usually prescribed punishment for recalcitrant slaves, "nine-and-thirty lashes early every morning" for Sumner and Hale. Massachusetts' second senator, Henry Wilson, the editorial claimed, was "absolutely dying for a beating." It asked other southern "gentlemen" to follow Brooks's example so that "a curb may be imposed on the truculence and audacity of Abolitionist speakers." According to the *Enquirer*, "Sumner and Sumner's friends must be punished and silenced." Repeating the central tenet of conservative proslavery thought, it argued, "The Black Republicans in Congress are at open war with Government, and, like their allies, the Garrisonian Abolitionists, equally at war with religion, female virtue, private property, and distinction of race." As enemies of good society, abolitionists deserved to be "silenced." Not to be outdone, the

²⁰ Samuel Girardeau to Brooks, May 29, 1856, W. J. Holmes to Brooks, May 27, 1856, John Swanson to Brooks, May 30, 1856, all in Preston Smith Brooks Papers; E. P. Jones to Brooks, Aug. 28, 1856, James H. Adams to Brooks, May 26, 1856. For similar reactions, also see Edward Noble to Brooks, May 28, 1856, A. Mazyck to Brooks, May 30, 1856, James Clark to Brooks, May 1856, *ibid.* For cane presentations to Brooks, see A. O. P. Nicholson to Brooks, July 14, 1856, Judge H. S. Bennett to Brooks, July 18, 1856, Brooks to H. B. [John Hampden Brooks], June 21, 1856, *ibid.* See also Charleston *Mercury*, June 7, 16, 17, 1856; New York (NY) *Times*, June 3, 1856; *The Liberator*, June 13, 27, July 4, Oct. 24, 1856; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4: 276-7; and James E. Campbell, "Sumner-Brooks-Burlingame or The Last of the Great Challenges," *Ohio Historical and Archeological Quarterly*, 34 (Oct. 1925), 453-73.

Richmond *Whig* approved of the caning of the “notorious and foul-mouthed Abolitionist from Massachusetts” and felt that “Seward and others should catch it next.” The *South-Side Democrat* of Petersburg, Virginia, commended “the *classical* caning which this outrageous Abolitionist received . . . at the hands of the chivalrous Brooks.”²¹

Abolitionists also believed that the assault on Sumner was a blow directed against them and their movement. Phillips noted, “Our champion was beaten to the ground for the noblest word Massachusetts ever spoke in the Senate.” The Political Radical Abolition Convention deplored the assault on “the intrepid advocate of the Slave in the American Senate Chamber.” Julia Ward Howe wrote in a poem she composed just for the occasion,

SUMNER, the task thou hast chosen was thine for its fitness.
Never on a milder brow gleamed the crown of the martyr.

News of the Sumner outrage, according to his biographer Stephen Oates, apparently inspired John Brown to wage his private war against slavery in Kansas. While planning the Harpers Ferry raid, Brown visited the ailing Sumner and saw the latter’s bloodied coat from the caning. Many of Sumner’s abolitionist admirers predicted that the assault would advance the cause of black freedom as it had exposed the “hellish malignity of the spirit which sustains slavery.”²²

The caning in fact helped to break down the seemingly impenetrable wall separating the world of white republicanism from black slavery. Public discussions of the assault resonated with the analogy of whipping a slave. Southern congressmen justified the attack specifically as a whipping. Thomas Clingman of North Carolina defended the southern custom to “hang and whip men . . . if they deserve it.” The unfortunately named

²¹ The *Richmond Enquirer* is quoted by the *Charleston Mercury*, June 4, 1856; the *Richmond Whig* and other southern newspapers are quoted by *The Liberator*, June 13, 1856; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:278-80; the *South-Side Democrat* is quoted by Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 307.

²² *The Liberator*, May 30, June 13, 1856; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:306-09, 311-13; Julia Ward Howe is quoted on 325. Also see A. G. Meacham, *Sumner: A Poem* (Rushville, IL, 1856); Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York, 1970) 129, 192; and Chauncey Clark to Sumner, May 24, 1856, Charles Sumner Papers. For the abolitionist reaction, also see Mary Grew to Sumner and enclosed resolutions of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, June 18, 1856, Louis Alexis Chamerouzu to Sumner and enclosed resolutions of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, July 5, 1856, Lydia Maria Child to Sumner, July 7, 1856, Wendell Phillips to Sumner, July 12, 1856, all in Charles Sumner Papers.

Representative John Savage of Tennessee was convinced that many members of the House could also do with a “good whipping.” John H. Means, the former secessionist governor of South Carolina, and John Hampden Brooks, Preston Brooks’s brother, wrote that he should have used the more appropriate southern instrument of chastisement, a “cowhide” instead of a cane. Brooks made the comparison to a slave whipping more emphatically in his remarkable resignation speech in Congress, which has been strangely neglected by historians of the event. He questioned the authority of the House to punish him in these words, “Why, sir, if I go to my home, and find that one of my slaves has behaved badly in my absence, and I direct him to be flogged, I may be charged with—to use the language which is familiar here—‘crime the most blackest and most heinous’; and . . . may be punished myself for inflicting a chastisement which, by the common law and constitutional laws of my country, I have the right to inflict upon my slave, who is my property. . . . But if your authority goes into the Senate chamber. . . . Why not pursue me . . . to my plantation?”²³

Brooks’s actions conjured up the image of slavery and the slaveholder, common in the folk tradition of black slaves, slave narratives, and abolitionist tracts and newspapers, for the whole country to witness. Most masters and overseers tended to describe carefully the number of lashes they administered to slaves as had Brooks. However, the lasting impression created by whippings in the slave’s mind was usually the frenzied application of physical punishment. The image of being beaten until blood flowed freely or until one was rendered unconscious was a common motif of most slaves’ and ex-slaves’ memories of whippings. As Carolinian Jacob Stroyer described a fellow slave who was whipped in a particularly cruel manner by his master, “the blood flowed from his body like water thrown upon him in cupfuls.” Although physical chastisement marked a breakdown in the master-slave relationship and was geared to check any form of slave resistance, whippings as one historian has reminded us were also “a conscious device to impress upon slaves that they were slaves; it was a crucial form of social control.” Physical coercion, for even those slaves who had not been whipped themselves, was an ubiquitous hallmark of slavery and the fear of being whipped was universal in the slave community. When disability and infection prevented Sumner from resuming his seat in the Senate, the southern press charged him with “playing possum,” a phrase used for slaves who feigned illness and malingered to slow down and disrupt plantation work routines. The

²³ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix 633, 738, 913 (for Brooks’s speech, see 832); J. H. Means to Brooks, May 28, 1856 [John Hampden Brooks] to Brooks, May 30, 1856, Preston Smith Brooks Papers.

Charleston *Daily Courier* complained that, “a Southern gentleman would be strongly tempted to give away any servant who would shirk his duties and lounge in the hospital under equal circumstances.”²⁴

Northerners also compared the assault to a slave whipping, but they of course used the analogy to condemn Brooks’s conduct. Wilson, in his spirited defense of Sumner, stated that slaveholders “shall not hold over me the plantation whip.” Representative John Bingham of Ohio alluding to Sumner’s ordeal argued dramatically, “Let him be beaten with rods in the forum of the people—let him suffer . . . in the very presence of his country, of liberty and the laws, and let America see her son die by the miserable and painful punishment inflicted on slaves.” Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* wondered whether Congress was “a slave plantation where Northern members act under the lash, the bowie-knife, and the pistol.” For the Rev. O. B. Frothingham of Jersey city the assault revealed the logic of slavery, “If it is right to beat and brutalize a black man, why is it not right to beat and brutalize the white man?” For his part, Sumner was uncomfortable with the comparison. He wrote that “the suffering” he had “undergone” was “not small” but “How small is it compared with that tale of woe which is perpetually coming to us from the house of bondage!” As one abolitionist also pointed out, “I would not love him [Sumner] the less; but I think we would all do well to love Brooks’s slaves a little more . . . and not forget altogether the millions of victims, who, unlike Mr. Sumner, are not loaded with sympathy and honors.”²⁵

Speculation on how the slaves themselves had reacted to the event was rife. In the aftermath of the caning, South Carolinian slaveholders were eager to represent the feelings of their slaves. According to one report, the slaves of Columbia, the capital of the state, had taken out a “handsome subscription” to present a “token of their regard” to Brooks for he had protected “*their rights and enjoyments as the happiest laborers on the face of the globe.*” The authenticity of this report is certainly suspect. One Charlestonian, who clearly approved of the caning, went so far as to send

²⁴ Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South* (Salem, MA, 1898), 29; George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, CT, 1972), 59 (quotation); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slave Made* (New York, 1974), 63-69; *Charleston Daily Courier*, June 27, July 19, 1856. On the “playing possum” charge, also see J. H. Means to Brooks, May 28, 1856, Preston Smith Brooks Papers; *Charleston Mercury*, Jan. 21, 1857; and Laura A. White, “Was Charles Sumner Shamming, 1856-1859?” *New England Quarterly*, 33 (Sept. 1960), 291-324.

²⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., 1403, 1580; the *New York Tribune* is quoted by Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism*, 231; Rev. O. B. Frothingham is quoted by SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 111; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3: 510; *The Liberator*, July 18, 1856.

a letter to Sumner under the pseudonym “Cuffy.” The letter, which sought to satirize the slaves’ dialect and supposed regard for Sumner, was clearly written by a person who approved of Brooks’s actions. On his sudden death in 1857, the South Carolina press described the “affecting scenes” in which his slaves, including his nurse, came to pay their last respects to Brooks. Slaves themselves have narrated the latter ritual somewhat differently. For example, Stroyer describing the death of his master and of the slaves who went to express their condolences wrote almost as an afterthought: “Of course most of them were glad he was dead.” And as historians have reminded us, slaves’ grief at the death of a master was probably more due to the dread of being sold away from loved ones. Many years later, Joseph Rainey, one of the first African-American representatives from South Carolina during Reconstruction, claimed that “the unexpressed sympathy that was felt for him [Sumner] among the slaves of the South, when they heard of this unwarranted attack, was only known to those whose situations at the time made them confidantes.” Interestingly, one of Sumner’s first biographers was Archibald Grimké, the son of a South Carolina slave and advocate of black rights after the Civil War.²⁶

Although commentators used their views of slavery and slaves to describe the caning, a gendered reading of the event was also evident. Historians like John Hope Franklin have long reminded us that extralegal violence and militant notions of manliness were some of the defining characteristics of southern slave society. Premodern notions of male honor encompassed a common resort to physical force. Southern defenders of Brooks praised his “manly spirit” and “manliness.” On the other hand, they castigated Sumner for his “unmanly submission,” his failure to defend his “virility” and for acting like a woman. The Charleston *Mercury* argued that Sumner’s name would become a “perfect synonym for cowardice and baseness.” According to the Richmond *Enquirer*, “wretches” like Sumner, “runaway negroes and masculine women” comprised the abolitionist movement. Southern proslavery writers had long lampooned abolitionists

²⁶ New York *Times*, June 3, 1856; “Cuffy” to Sumner, May 26, 1856, Charles Sumner Papers; Charleston *Daily Courier*, Feb. 23, 1857; Stroyer, *My Life in the South*, 29; Rainey is quoted from *Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Charles Sumner (A Senator of Massachusetts) Delivered in the Senate and House of Representatives, Forty-Third Congress, First Session, April 27, 1874 With Other Congressional Tributes of Respect* (Washington, DC, 1874), 77. On Rainey, see Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (1993; rep., Baton Rouge, 1996), 174-75; Cyril O. Packwood, *Detour-Bermuda, Destination-U. S. House of Representatives: The Life of Joseph Hayne Rainey* (Hamilton, Bermuda, 1977); and Grimké, *Charles Sumner*. On Grimké, see Dickson D. Bruce, *Archibald Grimké: Portrait of a Black Independent* (Baton Rouge, 1993).

as hoydenish, “unsexed” women, uppity “negroes” and effeminate, intellectual white men given to “sickly sentimentality”—all traitors to their supposedly natural racial and gender traits. Sumner’s alleged failure to defend himself conformed to this caricature and made his behavior also seem slavish.²⁷

But according to emerging northern bourgeois notions of masculinity, true manliness lay in self-control and obedience to laws rather than a resort to force. Far from showing male bravery, by attacking a defenseless man “Bully Brooks” had behaved like a coward. His action was indefensible, “barbaric,” “foul,” and “unmanly.” Brooks was no better than a “ruffian,” “a dastard of dastards,” or “assassin.” Northerners viewed Sumner as the restrained, manly intellectual and Brooks as an uncontrolled brute, who violated rather than upheld true notions of manhood. Reverend Henry Ward Beecher thus immortalized the encounter between Sumner and Brooks: “The Symbol of the North is the Pen: The Symbol of the South is the Bludgeon.” In contrast to the proslavery claim that slavery gave the master the leisure to cultivate his mind, one “A. B.” wrote in his satirical ode to Brooks, “Arguments are for the slave: Ours the bludgeon and the knife!” Paradoxically, Brooks’s image in the North resembled slavery apologist Daniel R. Hundley’s picture of the “southern bully,” who feels “able and prepared . . . to flog the entire North” and desires to “cane” and “cowskin” abolitionists. Although a majority of northerners felt that Brooks had only shown the brutal nature of the South’s much vaunted slaveholding chivalry rather than displayed the characteristics of Hundley’s drunken lout.²⁸

²⁷ John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge, MA, 1956); Alexander Dimitry to Brooks, July 22, 1856, Preston Smith Brooks Papers; New York *Times*, June 3, 1856; Charleston *Mercury* is quoted by *The Liberator*, Aug. 8, 1856; the Richmond *Enquirer* is quoted in Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:278; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 34-35; Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979), 76. On proslavery criticisms of abolitionists as race and gender traitors, see Manisha Sinha, “Louisa Susanna McCord: Spokeswoman of the Master Class in Antebellum South Carolina,” in Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner, eds., *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood* (New York, 1994), 62-87. For a gendered analysis of the caning, see Catherine Clinton, “Sex and the Sectional Conflict” in Michelle Gillespie and Catherine Clinton, eds., *Taking Off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians* (Columbia, MO, 1998), 53-56.

²⁸ C. F. Adams to Sumner, May 23, 1856, Charles Sumner Papers; *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 656; *The Liberator*, June 27, July 18, Aug. 8, 1856; New York *Times*, June 3, 1856; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:305, 309, 310, 314, 318, 319, 321, 323; Bernard F. Reilly Jr., “The Art of the Antislavery Movement,” in Donald M. Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), 69-70; D. R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*

For some, Brooks's assault was not only emblematic of slavery and slaveholders, it also revealed the threat slavery posed to democracy and republican government. For those who had lived with racist complacency amidst the anomaly of slavery in a republic based on the ideal of human equality, the public caning of a white man, a United States senator no less, by a slaveholder was an eye-opener. The enactment of a plantation ritual in the highest halls of Congress shocked the northern public into a realization of the implications of slavery for white man's democracy and of the notion that the enslavement of some threatened the freedom of all. The early controversies over the abolitionist movement, mob attacks on abolitionists in the North, the gag rule in Congress for antislavery petitions, interference with the mail to stop the flow of abolitionist literature, and the restriction on the freedom of speech and press on the subject of slavery throughout the South had already proved to many that the existence of slavery imperiled civil liberties and the principles of republicanism.²⁹

The attack on Sumner seemed to reveal the incompatibility between slavery and republicanism in a far more dramatic and direct fashion. Massachusetts issued resolutions charging that the caning of its senator was actually a blow against representative government. The state of Rhode Island also passed resolutions demanding Congressional action to vindicate the freedom of speech. The relatively conservative *New York Times* voiced the northern reaction well: "The great body of people, without distinction of party, feel that *their* rights have been assailed in a vital point,—that the blow struck at SUMNER takes effect upon the Freedom of Speech in that spot where, without freedom of speech, there can be no freedom of any kind,—and that the liberties of the Republic may well be regarded as in peril when such an act can be perpetrated with impunity." Brooks's assault, the editorial further argued, showed that the "BRUTE FORCE" of slavery

(New York, 1860), 224. For northern notions of masculinity, see Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role in 19th Century America," in John and Elizabeth Pleck, eds., *The American Man* (Prentice Hall, NJ, 1980), 219-54; J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (New York, 1989); for a different argument on bourgeois ideals of masculinity, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993), 227-32.

²⁹ Leonard Richards, "*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*": *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York, 1990), Part V; Russel Nye, *Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy, 1830-1860* (East Lansing, MI, 1949); Eaton, *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle*; George C. Rable, "Slavery, Politics and the South: The Gag Rule as a Case Study," *Capitol Studies*, 3 (Fall 1975), 69-87; William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York, 1996).

threatened to overturn the principles of free society. The many letters of sympathy that inundated Sumner expressed similar apprehensions. During the Congressional debates on the caning, Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio, a Radical Republican and postwar champion of black rights, vowed to “vindicate the right and liberty of debate and freedom of discussion upon this floor.” For most northern Congressmen the “great rights” that “underlie and are essential to all representative government” would be violated unless Brooks was punished for his actions. The New England Anti-Slavery Convention detected a slaveholders’ conspiracy to “‘crush out’ freedom of speech on the floor of Congress as it has done on the slave plantation.”³⁰

Questions about race and racial equality as much as allusions to slavery and democracy dominated the debate over the caning. In Congress, southerners and their allies never failed to denigrate Sumner’s relationship with free black people and abolitionists. Race-baiting of “Black Republicans” and abolitionists was a tactic perfected by southern and northern Democrats. For example, Butler had accused Sumner of a “philanthropy that is heated into a *flame* more to hate the *white race* than to preserve the black,” and Senator R. M. T. Hunter of Virginia called him “an enemy of his race.” In his rejoinder to Sumner’s position on the fugitive law, Senator James Mason had referred pointedly to the “vulgarity” of his “associations at home.” In his resignation speech, after his censure by the House of Representatives for his role in the assault, Keitt alluded to “American legislators dressed up in the cast-off garments of Fred Douglass” and accused Massachusetts of “hypocritically nestling the rank and sensuous African to her bosom.” In the debates over the assault, Representative T. S. Boccock of Virginia outdid all others in assailing free African Americans by repeating Calhoun’s argument based on spurious census data that they suffered from “more madness and idiocy” than southern slaves. And Thomas Clingman argued, “the negro, who complains

³⁰ *The Sumner Outrage: A Full Report of the Speeches at the Meeting of Citizens in Cambridge, June 2, 1856, In Reference to the Assault on Senator Sumner, In the Senate Chamber at Washington* (Cambridge, MA, 1856); *New York Times*, May 24, 28, June 3, 1856; *The Liberator*, June 20, July 11, Aug. 8, 1856; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:305, 310, 313, 314-15, 318, 32. See also William Tyler to Sumner and enclosed Pawtucket resolutions, May 26, 1856, Thos. Chubbuck to Sumner and enclosed Springfield resolutions, May 26, 1856, Moses Wood to Sumner and enclosed Fitchburg resolutions, Undated, Printed resolutions from Manchester, New Hampshire, May 29, 1856, Printed resolutions from Millbury, Massachusetts, May 29, 1856, Chauncey Clark to Sumner, May 24, 1856, I. J. Hudson to Sumner, May 23, 1856, Henry I. Bowditch to Sumner, May 23, 1856, E. R. Hoar to Sumner, May 23, 1856, Charles Cleveland to Sumner, May 23, 1856, Geo. Grinnell to Sumner, May 26, 1856, all in Charles Sumner Papers; and *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., 1341-43, 1347-79, 1414-18, 1577-81, 1597-99, 1612-13, Appendix, 653-56, 732-40, 815-18, 825-31, 872-75, 885-97, 914-23.

of the distinctions of color, would blacken everybody, so as to put all upon a level." Stephen Douglas claimed that Sumner practiced and memorized his speech "with a negro boy to hold the candle and watch the gestures." According to the New Orleans *Courier*, Sumner deserved to be punished because of "the loathsome spectacle of a man who claims the name of an American Senator, and yet who acts as well as speaks the sentiments of a negro, is now for the first time inflicted on this nation." In the face of these attacks, Wilson felt compelled to defend his state's free black community, calling them "men whom I am proud here to call my constituents, and some of whom I recognize as my friends."³¹

Free African Americans, not surprisingly then, concluded that the blow against Sumner was inextricably bound up with their fight against slavery and racism. And they perceptively equated that struggle with the vindication of American republicanism and democracy. Massachusetts' free black community, which had a tradition of political activism dating back to the revolutionary era and had played an important role in the rise of unconditional, immediate abolition, led in condemning the assault on Sumner. Boston's antebellum reputation as a leader in "the Negro's cause" was the hard-fought result of decades of black and white antislavery activism of which Sumner had very much been a part. Moreover, Sumner had strong personal connections to the state's black community. As Robert Morris wrote to Sumner, "no persons felt more keenly and sympathized with you more deeply and sincerely, than your colored constituents in Boston." Black abolitionists like Morris, Nell, John S. Rock, and Reverend Leonard Grimes organized a public meeting in Boston's Twelfth Baptist Church to voice their support of "our Senator" in these words, "that in this dastardly attempt to crush out free speech, we painfully recognize the abiding prevalence of that Spirit of Injustice which has for two centuries upon this continent, ground our progenitors and ourselves under the iron hoof of Slavery . . . that we hereby express to Mr. Sumner our entire confidence in him as a faithful friend of the slave." The colored boards of Banneker House, Cape Island, commended Sumner for his services on behalf of "humanity . . . universal Brotherhood of Equal Rights of all Mankind" and for the rights of their "downtrodden brethren." In an editorial for the *Provincial Freeman* of Chatham, Canada, Mary Ann Shadd Cary argued that the violence inherent in slavery had spread "from the black man to the white" in this show of "Ruffianism in the Halls of

³¹ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., 237; *ibid.*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., 1401, Appendix, 657, 738, 818, 833, 837; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:380; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:250; the New Orleans *Courier* is quoted by *The Liberator*, July 18, 1856.

Legislature.” William P. Wellington, a “colored” poet from Philadelphia, wrote, “Then Sumner live, we praise thy stand of might, And may thy Sun advance in glorious light.” It was Sumner’s long record of antislavery and antiracist advocacy that evoked such moving reactions to his assault on black people. An anonymous black writer had this to say, “They fell upon the head of our beloved Sumner—aye ours—for having stood for us, having suffered for giving voice to the thoughts & feelings that were ours, as yours, shall we not call you ours . . . Soldier of Truth—there who hath . . . sealed thy testimony with thy blood—”³²

The caning strengthened Sumner’s relationship with black and white abolitionists and further radicalized his position on slavery and racial equality. While recuperating from the assault, his vacant chair in the Senate became a powerful symbol for the antislavery cause in the North. After returning to the Senate in 1860, he delivered an overtly abolitionist speech, “The Barbarism of Slavery,” intended as a reply to proslavery arguments that had grown in theoretical sophistication and scope in the late 1850s. In response to proslavery assertions of the historical ubiquity of human bondage, Sumner argued that slavery was a relic of “ancient barbarism” that must recede with the advance of civilization. And he rigorously critiqued the “pretension” of “the alleged inferiority of the African race.” Polish aristocrats, he reminded the Senate, used the same myth to justify the serfdom of their peasants. In reply, South Carolina’s new senator, James Chesnut, who had made a name for himself in proslavery circles by criticizing the Declaration of Independence, called Sumner “the incarnation of malice, mendacity, and cowardice.” Sumner retorted that he would include Chesnut’s remarks with his speech as yet another illustration of the barbarism of slavery. New threats of violence that had never abated reached the Senator and three men actually attempted to assault him again.³³

³² Robert Morris to Sumner, June 11, 1856, J. S. Rock to Sumner and enclosed resolutions of the Colored Citizens of Boston, June, 6, 1856, Reverend Stephen Smith, V.N. Depu and Gio. McGaines to Sumner, July 24, 1856, “Complimentary Verses to The Honorable Charles Sumner . . . By Wm. P. Wellington (A Coloured Man),” Aug. 16, 1856, Anonymous to Sumner, July 9, 1856, all in Charles Sumner Papers; C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (5 vols., Chapel Hill, NC, 1985-92), 5:350 (Canada, 1830-1865); Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 180, 245-47. While Sumner had corresponded with prominent African-American abolitionists such as Douglass before the caning, during and after the caning ordinary African Americans from all parts of the country wrote to him.

³³ Sumner, *The Works of Charles Sumner*, 4:60, 108-10; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:605-13; Grimké, *Charles Sumner*, 317-18. For threatening letters to Sumner, see “A Friend Indee’d” to Sumner, May 22, 1856, “Cato” to Sumner, June 11, 1856, “A SC Plug Uglie” to Sumner, Nov. 23, 1857, “Southern Mazzini or Plug Ugly” to Sumner, Apr. 19, 1860, all in Charles Sumner Papers; and Donald, *Charles Sumner and the*

For abolitionists, especially black abolitionists, Sumner's speech only affirmed and strengthened the ties he had forged with them. More than any other national politician, he had developed a sustained critique of racial slavery and racism in antebellum America. *Frederick Douglass' Paper* pronounced, "At last the right word has been spoken in the Chamber of the American Senate. Long and sadly have we waited for an utterance like this, and were beginning to despair of getting anything of the sort from the present generation of Republican statesmen; but Senator Sumner has exceeded our hopes, and filled up the measure of all that we have long desired in the Senatorial discussions of Slavery." Letters of praise from Robert Purvis, William Still, Ebenezer Bassett, Joshua B. Smith, John S. Rock, and H. O. Wagoner came pouring in. And Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the black abolitionist poet, composed an ode to Sumner,

Thank God that thou hast spoken
 Words earnest, true and brave;
 The lightning of thy lips has smote
 The fetters of the slave.
 Thy words were not soft echoes,
 Thy tones no siren song;
 They fell as battle-axes
 Upon our giant wrong.

The black citizens of Worcester presented a testimonial to Sumner "for his unsurpassed defense of the rights of humanity." On behalf of the "colored young men" of Boston, Morris applauded his denunciation of that "fallacy," the "inferiority of the colored race." Later that year, Sumner protested the refusal of the Senate to hear "a petition of citizens of Massachusetts, of African descent," foreshadowing his later career as a champion of black rights. With the coming of the Civil War, Douglass wrote to him, "You have lived to strike down in Washington the power that lifted the bludgeon against your own free voice. . . . The slaveholder and the slave look to you as the best embodiment of the Anti-Slavery idea now in the councils of the nation." During Reconstruction, Sumner, along with other abolitionists and Radical Republicans, would become an insistent spokesman for African-American suffrage and civil rights.³⁴

Coming of the Civil War, 349.

³⁴ David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man* (New York, 1970); Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner*, 5:139-41, 143-53, 155-57, 170-72, 176-87; Joshua B. Smith to Sumner, June 7, 1860, John S. Rock to Sumner, June 16, 19, 1860, Frederick Douglass to Sumner, June 9, 1860, Apr. 8, 1862, W. M. Davis to Sumner, May 15, 26, June 11, 26, 1860, Robert Morris to Sumner, June 11, 1860, Frances Ellen Watkins to Sumner, June 26

Upon Sumner's death in 1874, African-American leaders again gave voice to the special relationship they had forged with the late senator from Massachusetts, now cemented by his unflagging devotion to the cause of black rights in the post-Civil War years. Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, veteran black abolitionist, noted that "there was one class of American citizens who had written his name in the living monuments of their hearts . . . that class for whose welfare he labored, suffered, and died." In Boston, led by Douglass, approximately two thousand "colored citizens" representing the city's black community marched in the funeral procession and presented a large heart shaped bouquet with the inscription, "Charles Sumner, you gave us your life, we give you our [hearts]." J. B. Smith, a black state legislator from Massachusetts and a long-time Sumner confidante, noted that Sumner had fought for black rights with only "simple justice" and "the prayers of the poor" to back him. Professor Theodore Greener one of the first black faculty members in South Carolina College, recalled Sumner's long struggle against slavery and the "snobocracy" of racial caste. Rainey noted in his speech in Congress, "The cause of my race was always foremost in his mind. . . . He was a friend who in many instances stuck closer than a brother." At a memorial service of over four thousand people in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Savannah, Georgia, presided over by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, resolutions commemorated "the champion of our race" and expressed sadness at "the loss of so great and dear a friend, whose place it will be hard to fill, but his name shall live forever and remain sanctified in our memories." Turner in his speech not only recalled the battles against slavery and racism fought by Sumner starting with his work against school segregation in Massachusetts, but also emotionally recounted how Sumner would lock arms with him and walk "through the streets and buildings as unconcernedly as if he had been in company with his senatorial colleagues, he thought no more of asking a black man to dine at his table, than he did the whitest man on earth." Nearly eighteen years after a representative from South Carolina assaulted him, another representative from that state, Robert Elliot, delivered a brilliant eulogy on the dead senator: "I do not seek to appropriate him to my race; but I do feel to-day that my race might almost bid the race to which by blood he belonged, to stand aside while we to whose welfare his life was so completely given, advance to do grateful

[1860], all in Charles Sumner Papers; Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:605-13; Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 245-47; Hogue, ed., *Charles Sumner: An Essay by Carl Schurz*, 73; Chaplin, *Life of Charles Sumner*, 386; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge, 1989), 54; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988).



Summer's coffin guarded by Massachusetts' Shaw Guard. Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

honor to him . . . for the measure of unselfish devotion, which he gave to us." In later years, when Sumner was demonized as a radical fanatic in mainstream American historiography, his historical reputation lay safe in the hands of African-American writers and historians. As Douglass had written to him, "During twenty years you have been to us the leading statesman of the Republic. . . . Your devotion to our cause, has been the main cause of the nation's coldness toward you. The nation will cease to hate us, as it learns to love you."³⁵

If the caning helped create a special relationship between Sumner and black Americans, it transformed Brooks into a fire-eating secessionist. Brooks emerged relatively unscathed from the assault. A federal court in Washington fined him three hundred dollars but his many new admirers in the South paid the fine. The House Committee investigating the caning recommended the expulsion of Brooks and the censuring of Keitt, who had assisted Brooks, and Representative Henry A. Edmundson of Virginia, who by his own admission had prior knowledge of the attack. The two southern members of the committee issued a lengthy dissenting minority report using arcane historical and constitutional precedents to challenge the clause on legislative privilege. In the end, a majority in the House, though not the required two thirds, voted for Brooks's expulsion. Keitt was censured and the resolution for censuring Edmundson failed. The voting was sectional with an overwhelming majority of southern representatives voting against

³⁵ On Sumner's death, see "Recollections of Charles Sumner," *Scribner's Monthly*, 8 (Aug. 1874), 488; George F. Hoar, "Some Political Reminiscences," *ibid.*, 25 (May 1899), 555-64; Garnet is quoted by Lester, *Life and Services of Charles Sumner*, 551-52; *A Memorial of Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1874), 57-60, 86, 267-87; *Charles Sumner The Idealist, Statesman and Scholar An Address Delivered on Public Day, June 29, 1874. At the Request of the Faculty of the University of South Carolina By Richard Theodore Greener, Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at the University* (Columbia, SC, 1874), 36; *Memorial Services. Tribute to the Hon. Charles Sumner Held in St. Phillip's A.M.E. Church, Savannah, Georgia, March 18th, 1874* (Savannah, GA, 1874), 3, 5, 8-18 (I am grateful to Shawn Alexander for bringing this document to my attention); *Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Charles Sumner*, 74. On Elliot, see Peggy Lamson, *The Glorious Failure: Black Congressman Robert Brown Elliot and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York, 1973); and Foner, ed., *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 69-70. Also see Stephen W. Angell, "A Black Minister Befriends the 'Unquestioned Father of Civil Rights': Henry McNeal Turner, Charles Sumner, and the African-American Quest for Freedom," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 85 (Spring 2001), 27-58; Louis Ruchames, "Charles Sumner and American Historiography," *Journal of Negro History*, 38 (Apr. 1953), 139-60; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 723; and Frederick Douglass to Sumner, Apr. 29, 1869, Charles Sumner Papers.

expulsion and censure. After their resignation from Congress, Brooks and Keitt were re-elected unopposed from their Congressional districts in South Carolina. Abandoning his earlier national Democratic position, Brooks became a militant spokesman for southern nationhood. At a public dinner held to honor him, he called on South Carolinians to “tear the Constitution of the United States, trample it under foot, and form a Southern Confederacy, every State of which will be a slaveholding State.”

But in early 1857 after confessing to be tired of his “new role,” he died suddenly. Butler would die a few months later and Keitt, a rabid secessionist, would be killed fighting for the southern nation he had done so much to help create. Diehard southern separatists to this day give away the “Preston Brooks Award” in honor of the “Southerner who gave Charles Sumner of Massachusetts a well-deserved thrashing” to those who still advocate the cause of southern secession. Brooks’s southern eulogists called him the “standard bearer” of the slave south and the South Carolina College, forgetting past foibles, bears a plaque commending his actions “in the Council Chambers of the Nation.” James Henry Hammond, the well-known proslavery ideologue and South Carolinian planter politician, wrote, “The North will call it *judgment*. To me, looking all around, it is clearly a reward, for an act approved of God. Am I deluded[?]” Indeed, many northerners could not help but see Brooks’s premature death as divine retribution for the caning. As Wilson wrote to Sumner, “God has avenged the blows of May last; and I could not help but feel that he will yet avenge the wrongs of the bondsman and the insults we endure.” Sumner apparently said much later that he thought of Brooks “as a brick that should fall upon my head from a chimney. He was the unconscious agent of a malign power.”³⁶

The caning of Charles Sumner furthered the dialog on slavery, race, and democracy that would distinguish the age of the Civil War. Like some

³⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., 1341-43, 1348-52, 1418-19, 1575-81, 1597-99, 1612-13, 1627-30, 1638-43; *ibid.*, Appendix, 653-56, 732-40, 805-39, 872-97, 912-23; *ibid.*, 34th Cong., 3rd sess., 499-502; *Charleston Mercury*, June 2, July 17, 18, 19, 23, 25, 26, Oct. 6, 7, 1856, Feb. 2, 1857; *Charleston Daily Courier*, June 27, Oct. 7, 1856, Jan. 21, Feb. 2, 5, 13, 19, 23, 1857; *New York Times*, May 28, Oct. 8, 1856, Jan. 29, Mar. 30, 1857; *The Liberator*, Aug. 1, Sept. 12, Oct. 24, 1856; Grimké, *Charles Sumner*, 291; Stamp, *America in 1857*, 17-18; “Hon Preston S. Brooks,” 348; “A Tribute of Tender Love to the memory of Preston S. Brooks,” Plaque in the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia; “Preston Brooks Award,” *Southern Partisan*, 10 (Fall 1988), 10 (I am grateful to Eric Foner for bringing this to my attention); Hammond to W. G. Simms, Jan. 31, 1857, James Henry Hammond Papers (South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina); Wilson is quoted by Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 3:523; Sumner is quoted by George H. Hayne, *Charles Sumner* (Philadelphia, 1909), 202.

other sectional conflicts over slavery, it presented an opening for African Americans and abolitionists to intervene in national politics and make their voices heard and matter. The caning gives us a good glimpse into the political cultures of slavery and antislavery and differing sectional views on slavery and race in the 1850s. The broad-based and far reaching discussion of the event also revealed the ideological significance of the conflict over slavery and the antebellum contestation over the meanings of freedom, democracy, and citizenship. The assault on Sumner cannot be reduced to a matter of personal vituperation or political vendetta divorced from the pressing issues of the day. Rather, the discourse on slavery, race, and democracy that it gave rise to reveals a time when ideology seemed to rule politics. The story of black slavery and freedom is also the narrative of the reconstruction of American democracy. In the end, the nation could only rely on the efforts of its disfranchised and their allies to redeem and redefine its values of democratic republicanism, which the political culture of slavery threatened to eclipse.