

A Fragile Unity: Quiet Activism across the Fissures in Nineteenth-Century Women's Labor Politics

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Abstract: Drawing on two mid-nineteenth-century “quiet” labor activists—Virginia Penny and Lucie Stanton Day—this article explores the phenomenon of quiet activism: modest acts in everyday contexts with modest intents. Drawing on Penny’s encyclopedia of women’s work options and Stanton Day’s letter-writing campaign to secure a teaching position, it argues that these two women marshaled quiet activism in distinctly different ways to mitigate gendered and racial labor inequalities. In so doing, they crafted small, fragile unities within the gaps of the woman’s movement. Through quotidian forms of bonding, these two women, unknown to each other, not only worked toward labor equity but did so in ways that affected partial and contingent connections within and across those gaps. Frequently elided in the historical record, quiet activism serves to sustain feminist social movements by binding stakeholders in invisible and conditional ways, contributing to the survival of that movement in moments of division.

Tags: [quiet activism](#), [woman’s movement](#), [women’s labor](#), [nineteenth century](#), [Lucie Stanton Day](#), [Virginia Penny](#)

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In May 1866, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper spoke at the eleventh National Women’s Rights Convention (NWRC) in New York City. Reflecting the fractures dividing the country—and the woman’s movement—Harper identifies in her speech the contrary threads of unity and disunity characterizing nineteenth-century women’s collective activism from Seneca Falls to this final meeting of the NWRC. Harper opens with consensus, underscoring the need for gender parity as a necessary foundation for women’s economic survival. Drawing on her own experiences as a widow deprived of property and livelihood through administrative fraud, Harper underscores fellowship among all women rendered powerful in the face of shared gender oppression: “I say, then, that justice is not fulfilled so long a woman is unequal before the law” (458). She follows that truth with a bold reminder that gender parity, especially economic parity, can only be obtained through the collective action—the unification—of all women: “We are all bound up together in one

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great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul” (458). However, after establishing and fortifying this point of adherence, Harper, then, shifts to dissensus: “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs” (459). Then she demonstrates the verity of her stark assertion by describing the fissures in the woman’s movement, pointing to insults suffered by Black women—such as their humiliating ejection from public transportation—that white women do not experience or even acknowledge. Thus, the exigent need for Black women is not gender equity alone, but gender *plus* racial equity. Harper underscores this double exigence and double division in a searing warning: the unity of women is only a chimera, and the movement’s ability to secure the equal rights it so ardently seeks will be undermined until women, movement, and nation become “color-blind” (459).

We open with this account of Harper’s speech to underscore the two-fold dynamic of unity and division that haunts the woman’s movement from its first years to its current incarnation. Harper lays out in stark terms, first, the necessity of unity, and, second, the fault lines in that unity, insisting throughout that securing the former requires redressing the latter. However, while Harper outlines the nature of the problem and its solution, she does not provide any specifics by which activists—individually and jointly—might make common cause *across* the chasms of race, class, and labor even as they struggle within those fissures. Instead, she leaves for her audience, positioned within their own unique contexts, to determine what fissures to address and how.

Heeding Harper’s call for unity within disunity—a call that continues to resonate into the twenty-first century—we explore in this essay the on-the-ground methods of two women, who, through their labor advocacy in the 1860s, sought, in concrete ways, to craft unexpected coalitions in the midst of divisions; first, Virginia Penny, who, through her creation of a labor encyclopedia designed to increase wage-earning opportunities for white middle-class women, sought to knit together the widening divide between classes of women and labor; and, second, Lucie Stanton Day¹, who, in the face of the “co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence” of misogynoir (Bailey 1), shaped targeted collaborations joining racial and gendered fault lines to secure a teaching position denied her by the American Missionary Association (AMA). While both women devised novel strategies to rectify women’s labor inequities congruent with their different situations and challenges, each did so through the same method: quiet activism. A low-volume, everyday form of bonding, quiet activism creates a contingent, fragile ad hoc unity anchored in respectful caring, organized by partially shared purposes, and motivated by shared pain. Furthermore, Penny and Stanton Day operationalized and executed quiet activism even as each was caught within and oppressed by the aporia of the fissures she sought to rectify. What results from Penny’s and Stanton Day’s quiet activism is not unity writ large; instead, it is multiple intersecting unities writ small, evoked through moments of quotidian and conditional affinities that yield humble acts with humble intent. Such quiet activism constitutes a flexible, survivalist economy for individuals and for social movements, sustaining them—binding them up all to-

1 While Oberlin College and Conservatory’s historical documents—and much subsequent scholarship—refer to *Lucy Stanton* (Day Sessions), Stanton Day used her preferred spelling—Lucie—in letters and publications. Thus, we default to her choice.

gether—in unrecognized and interdependent ways.

Echoing Sara Ahmed’s contention that “survival” is a feminist act (236) and guided by Harper, we demonstrate through Penny’s and Stanton Day’s work of quiet activism the persistence of hope within nineteenth-century feminist labor politics² an area central to women’s—white and Black—existence and to the flourishing, or floundering, of the woman’s movement. We begin by introducing quiet activism, a mode of acting not through fanfare but through low-key activities, aligning its key characteristics with feminist rhetorics and situating it within the fraught relationship between labor, gender, class, and race, central to the low-volume advocacy of both Penny and Stanton Day. Against this backdrop, we move, in turn, to Penny and Stanton Day who each, driven by persistent hope in ameliorating exigent circumstances, work for a moment of unity, a moment of survival for self, other, and the woman’s movement in ways typically unrecognized.

Quiet Activism and Labor: The Work of Unity

Standing on the dais in New York before an audience of men and women, Harper in her 1866 speech powerfully spotlights labor as it intersects with gender and race. For her, this fractured and fracturing intersection constitutes an existential issue, one at the foundation of survival for both individual women and social movements aimed at ameliorating their intersectional oppression. She makes her point and delivers her call for action through “direct and agonistic forms of action” (Balazard et al. 783). As a result, Harper’s speech conforms to traditional notions of activism that “champion and romanticize antagonistic, vocal, and demonstrative forms of protest” (Pottinger 215). She embodies one of Cheryl Glenn’s “Sister Rhetors”: women “who speak, write, listen, and contemplate their way into the public sphere, where they inaugurate politics, practices, and shared understandings” (6). However, by this rubric, unlike Harper, neither Penny nor Stanton Day ostensibly fits within the activist-feminist rhetorics or rhetorical feminist camp. But fit they do, as Glenn would agree. They and other quiet advocates “demonstrate the ways that public *and* private language use can be a means to create a different world” through small and virtually invisible actions (5; our emphasis). Rather than a public display, women like Penny and Stanton Day work within the divides, making micromoves that, perhaps only incrementally, contribute to “the greatest good for all human beings” (5). Claiming quiet activism, especially in the context of struggles for labor rights, enables rhetorical feminists to “recognize quiet disruptions as meaningful to projects of social change” through a fragile and time-stamped unity (Gumbonzvanda et al. 170).

While we assert that both Penny and Stanton Day engage in quiet activism to weave their different versions of a fragile unity, as a named praxis, quiet activism only emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century through interdisciplinary scholarship, research methods, and pedagogy. Various called *gentle*, *implicit*, *slow*, *slow cook*, *embedded*, and, most frequently, *quiet*, this low-key approach is tightly tied to

2 By labor politics in the 1860s, we mean not only equitable working conditions and remuneration for women’s labor tied to gender and race, but also women’s opportunities for a range of paid labor positions mostly closed to women. For gendered labor, see Kessler-Harris; for class labor, see Bolt; for racialized labor see Dabel; for 1860s collective labor, see Gamber; and for various forms of labor as quiet activism, see Martin et al.

emotions, daily—even banal—actions, material situations, and local interconnections. Despite its scope and reach, ranging from knitting hats for preemies to planting community gardens, from creating safe spaces to cross-stitching resistance, quiet activism is a phenomenon without a definition (Pottinger 215). However, enactments, including those in the nineteenth century, do share a kinship relationship. While each performance of quiet activism differs from every other performance, in frequently radical ways, all jointly resemble each other, manifested in the assemblage rather than in the isolated individual performances, particularly evident through Penny and Stanton Day. The small and elusive constellation of shared features characterizing quiet activism as a whole includes four elements: material situations, everyday matters, affective bonds, and variegated rhetorics. These four elements are integral to all quiet activism and to its ability to unify—if only partially and provisionally—within and across fissures, bearing their own familial resemblance to feminist rhetorics.

The first element—material situation—highlights the salience of lived experiences and lived practices within the materiality of one’s immediate circumstances, reflecting the importance of such elements as Penny’s white middle-class upbringing and Stanton Day’s Black abolitionist background to the performance of quiet activism. “[Quiet] activism needs to be conceptualized and understood as an activity that emerges from the everyday lived context (place) in which people are embedded,” for it is within such embedded contexts that quiet activism arises (Martin et al. 80). The actions of Major Alexis Casdagli, a British prisoner of war in Germany during World War II, demonstrate this: he cross-stitched and circulated samplers that included, in Morse code, such subversive commands as “God Save the Queen” and “Fuck Hitler” (qtd. in Hackney 172). His quiet activism arose from his embeddedness in a specific time, place, and situation. This privileging of material situations—spaces, lived experience, practices, objects—is no stranger to feminist rhetorics. Elizabeth Fleitz sees the “[m]aterial conditions of women’s lives, from their bodies to their living situations” as a crucial part of understanding “their ability to be literate and produce rhetoric,” and thus a crucial part of the future of feminist rhetorical studies (36). Illustrating the importance of material situations, Ronisha Browdy notes that an integral theme of *Black Women’s Rhetoric(s)* consists of the sustaining and sustained emphasis on Black women’s lived experiences—as realities and as “valid points of inquiry”—underscoring the depth of the connection between quiet activism and feminist rhetorics.

Inseparable from material situations is the second quality of quiet activism: everyday matters, an element intrinsic to the economic suffering and labor restrictions Penny and Stanton Day lived daily. Our play on *matters* is deliberate, both as a noun, evoking ostensibly inconsequential details of daily life, and as a verb, illuminating the significance of the everyday. Combined, the two versions underscore the formative power of the mundane facets of everyday life, especially a life lived in precarious circumstances. Such mundanities initiate and propel quiet activism when political advocacy features “the ‘private’ negotiations of the household, the ‘personal’ coalitions of the neighborhood, and the ‘informal’ networks within the community” (Staeheli and Cope qtd. in Martin et al. 79). Nor do feminists in rhetorical studies ignore the everyday. For example, Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster not only point to the value of “looking seriously at a web of performances that manifest themselves. . . in everyday activities” (663) but also provide a methodol-

ogy for doing so. In a similar spirit, Jessica Enoch advocates a focus on the everyday, specifying close examinations of the “everyday rhetorical processes that create difference and grant privilege,” emphasizing, again, the importance of what “women and men encounter in their daily lives” (115), a dynamic also apparent in Penny’s and Stanton Day’s circumstances. Thus, the quiet activism emerging from everyday matters becomes a site of inquiry for rhetorical feminists now and in the past.

The third element central to quiet activism and its operationalization by Penny and Stanton Day is affinity building. Complementing material situations and everyday matters is “the importance of emotional connection and relational aspects of activism” (McMellon et al. 6). The interconnections that people forge in their “small-scale spaces” (Martin et al. 81) provide the matrix from which quiet activism arises, an emphasis akin to work in feminist rhetorical theory. Adela C. Licona and Karma R. Chávez’s concept of relational literacies elucidates that relationship. Like quiet activism’s affective interconnections, relational literacies maximize the generative power of affinities, which are “ripe with coalitional possibilities” because they “imply the labor of making meaning, of shared knowledges, or of producing and developing new knowledges together” (96). Within a shared “space of convening,” relational literacies “enable spaces for new kinds of understanding, interaction, and politics” (97), exactly the dynamic unfolding in the quiet activism of Penny and Stanton Day. The complementarity between quiet activism and relational literacies extends to emotion, as well. Reversing the traditional focus on big emotions, particularly anger, unfolding in a linear manner from rage to a collective and highly public action, quiet activism features more subtle arrays of emotions, especially care (Horton and Kraftl). Relational literacies similarly invite “us to imagine how dispersals of generational wisdom, lived histories, love, light, and life might interact in the world and to what effects” (Licona and Chávez 99), encouraging further examination of the overlap between quiet activism and feminist rhetorics, as embodied, for example, by Penny and Stanton Day.

Finally, variegated rhetoric, which we define capaciously, itself takes on nuance and multiple roles in quiet activism, a trait particularly evident in the distinctly different advocacy rhetorics forged by Penny and Stanton Day. First, rhetoric encompasses the myriad symbol systems people use in material situations, everyday matters, and affinity building. While all quiet activism relies on some kind of symbol system for dialogue and conversation—for the requisite listening, speaking, reflecting, and learning—the options are expansive, from oral language to textiles, from flowers to sticky notes, from written to visual texts, from still to animated images. The rhetorics circulating in quiet activism materialize in fluid, shifting, and layered flows, an insight that resonates with the work of rhetorical feminists who are expanding what counts as both the medium of rhetorical action and the rhetorical action itself.

Consonant in so many ways with feminist rhetorics, quiet activism encompasses a means by which people like Penny and Stanton Day can act quietly to unify divisions even as they struggle within those divisions; it keeps alive hope for a different, less perilous future for *all* women. Nowhere is the need for such activism more evident than in the divisive and divided site of nineteenth-century labor politics, which both binds and separates activists within the woman’s movement. Harper signals as much in her 1866 speech

through a narrative of her own destitution following her husband's death. Such precarity offers a rich site for the deployment of quiet activism, especially given the tensions already evident within the nascent labor movement itself, marred as it was by the inclusion and exclusion of wage-earning women since its colonial beginnings. The 1860s, within which Penny and Stanton Day engage in their quiet activism, capture the labor fissures motivating their subtle feminist rhetorics.

The first schism develops through the gradual shift in focus in the woman's movement itself from labor to suffrage. The "Declaration of Sentiments," drafted and signed at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, explicitly emphasizes a platform embracing labor as a major issue, arguing to relieve the narrow strictures of women as wage earners: "He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns. . . . He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration" (Stanton 70-71). However, by the 1860s, while working-class women's labor unions and organizations continued to form and expand from their 1820s beginnings, the issue of women's labor rights stalled in the woman's movement. More specifically, in 1863, with the US already deep in the Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony established the short-lived Women's National Loyal League. As an offshoot of the woman's movement, its goal was to promote a national amendment to abolish slavery beyond the parameters of the Emancipation Proclamation ("Women's"). By the postbellum era, as Harper alludes to in her speech, the focus shifted again, not back to labor, but to the ballot box. Even Anthony's efforts, along with those of other women, to establish the Working Women's Association in 1868 for "the amelioration of working conditions and elevation of those who worked for a living" (Kessler-Harris 95) floundered on the shoals of suffrage as Anthony featured the vote as an agenda item for every meeting. As a result, working women—and women needing work—walked out, leaving an association that did not focus on their immediate material concerns (96-97).

The second schism—labor and class—branches from the first, a disunity especially important to Penny whose quiet activism focused on the dilemma of middle-class white women and labor. According to Alice Kessler-Harris, "suffragists, middle-class non-wage-earners for the most part believed that the ballot was essential to this end [equal rights]," but women in paid jobs maintained "that there were other causes beside lack of the vote for the degradation of female wage earners" (95). This discord grew over time and escalated during the Civil War into a clearly demarcated difference between middle- and working-class women. Christine Bolt confirms the class privileging: "[A]ctivists were generally careful to recognize the attractions for many of their sisters" of the traditional domestic and social roles of women as well as the social advances they had made that expanded their "role[s] in religion, benevolence, and reform" (89). During the Civil War, more and more women—whether single, widowed with or without children, or married with derelict husbands and children—found themselves totally reliant on their individual ability to make a living through paid labor. These women—who were working many hours a day to feed, house, and clothe themselves, and often children—had neither the time, energy, nor interest to seek the vote. This fissure in the woman's movement escalated with more and more working women in industry forming unions, mostly by type of trade, and actively

pursuing equitable labor conditions as collectives, highlighting not only the existence of labor activism but also the highly visible practices of that activism. Thus, Penny's advocacy explicitly operated within these gaps between middle-class white women, labor, and the woman's movement to cobble a conditional unity within and across those divisions. But that advocacy created its own chasm: that between class and race, a chasm within which Stanton Day lived.

The third schism—born of labor, suffrage, and class divides—concerns race. If class, as implicated by labor, constituted a key fracture in the woman's movement, then the intense competition with women across classes for economic survival was compounded by race and immigration, thus adding stress to the united front of the woman's movement. Here Stanton Day found the exigence for her own quiet activism as she struggled with misogynoir's inter- and intra-racial oppression. As German and Irish immigrants streamed into the country, an estimated 300,000 new women moved into the workforce (Kessler-Harris 76). While this immigrant population competed with white middle-class women for jobs, this influx of women into the workforce of the northeastern states limited the possibilities for Black freewomen as well. According to Jane E. Dabel, Black freewomen before the 1860s were employed professionally outside the home and in various positions (72). However, during and after the Civil War, the range of positions for freewomen narrowed to domestic service as cooks, seamstresses, and washerwomen, and these women were in direct competition with the "native-born and Irish" women who also teemed into the large northern cities (68-69). These types of jobs were the lowest paid and longest hours. Thus, these growing concerns, issues, and attitudes tied to woman's suffrage, labor, class, and race tore the woman's movement into two competing organizations by 1869. Living within these schisms and embracing hope, Penny and Stanton Day employed their rhetorics of quiet activism, operationalizing the four constellated traits of material situations, everyday matters, affective bonds, and variegated rhetorics in ways responsive to the divides they sought to narrow.

Working for Women: Penny's Inquiry into Gendered and Class Labor Divides

When Harper spoke at the NWRC, the divisions she articulates were already affecting the woman's movement. The exigency of women's needs for job opportunities and financial parity with men during the 1860s stemmed from the social and cultural view of women's paid labor, as well as the collective activism concerning it. One fissure Harper identified was gender equality with women having the same opportunities and working conditions as men. What she did not identify was another labor fissure already in place: a class fissure. The ongoing and ever-growing fissure within the woman's movement between fair working conditions and suffrage, both tied to gender and class, escalated in the 1840s with the advancement and adoption of labor technologies such as the sewing machine. As such, more and more white and free Black working women and white middle-class women found themselves not just competing for positions but also adapting to piece work assembled into a product by someone else. Speed, long hours, and quantity became the new norm for women's low wages.

Virginia Penny understood all too well the class and gender labor politics in the woman's movement

and in society, especially the ever-escalating financial needs of single, widowed, and married women with children whether working or middle class. Even as the educated daughter of a Kentucky slave-owning family, she spent most of her adult life impoverished; thus, she lived that woman's movement schism between the educated middle class and labor. By the late-1850s, after holding various teaching positions, Penny asked why society limited educated white middle-class single and widowed women to the suitable material spaces of the "school room, sewing table, and kitchen" (*Employments* vii). This social attitude toward *employment suitability* as focused on job type rather than women's abilities kept many white middle-class women restricted to a narrow range of paid employments. Moreover, when hired into the same positions or comparable ones, women received a lower wage than men and often were expected to do more (Kessler-Harris 77-81).

Articulating her distress at the lack of job options and offering a book of possible employments for white middle-class women, Penny aligns herself with white women needing work in the socially constrained labor market and, throughout her encyclopedia entries, offers options and hope for better economic survival. Her longitudinal investigation and documentation of these two fissures of gender inequity and class restrictions in remunerated work environments—issues that the woman's movement and American society dismissed—operate as a quiet and steady activism for women's paid labor. Through Penny's lived life of gentility and poverty, she finds the impetus for her research and writing: through her data-gathering methodology, she builds affinities across gender and class; through her types of possible employments and analysis, she focuses on the everyday matters of women making a living, thus bridging the class divide in pragmatic ways; and through her efforts to publish the encyclopedia, she displays her variegated rhetorics arguing for a broader understanding of white middle-class women's employment suitability and addressing a wider audience including men. Each aspect of her process—life experiences, research methodology, content details, and publication—contributes to building a fragile coalition across gender and class labor politics.

Quiet activism's foundation—material situations—is evident in the circumstances compelling Penny to span the gap between white middle-class women and their working-class counterparts. The disjuncture between Penny's upbringing and her adult life and livelihood, a radical shift from ease to struggle, began with her early life of privilege in and near Louisville and with her education at Steubenville (Ohio) Female Seminary between 1843-1845, which exemplifies the white middle-class Protestant teachings of womanhood and dependency. But once she was a working adult, her life was precarious, always rife with poverty and illness. Out of necessity, she left several teaching positions that broke her health due to overwork and meager payment, an experience which taught her the impossibility of a single woman earning a living as a teacher. With the support of a \$6,000 inheritance, Penny set out between 1859 and 1862 to answer the question: What can women do to earn a living? ("Woman's Sacrifice"). In her research and writing of the encyclopedia, Penny's quest encompassed both self-understanding and a quiet activism supporting white middle-class women needing a livelihood. The purpose of her research and writing was threefold: to generate a living wage for herself, to enable like-minded white middle-class women to find living-wage positions,

and to shift societal employment attitudes and practices by expanding opportunities for women in compensated positions. Thus, even in her intention, Penny builds a fragile unity between her own labor history and that of other financially distressed white middle-class women in need of strategies for gaining compensated employment: “What destitute but industrious woman would not . . . enjoy the independence of competency, earned by remunerative and well-applied labor?” (*Employments* ix).

While quiet activism is apparent in Penny’s material situation and her motives to investigate employment suitability for white middle-class women, it is further underscored by the affinity building intrinsic to its power, particularly in her research process, which connected the fissure between classes and labor: “At no time in our country’s history have so many women been thrown upon their own exertions” (*Employments* v). To support women by connecting with women through ad hoc affinities, Penny sought out working class, professional, and entrepreneurial women for the 533 encyclopedia entries about women’s current and potential remunerated positions. She relied on informal and transitory interactions with women workers and male employers; thus, the information was provided from those “with whom I talked in a casual way, they not knowing I had any object in view” (viii). Her brief situational experiences of data-gathering engage in partial ties through her mailed surveys, newspaper articles, and chance encounters and conversations as well as her visits to “factories, workshops, offices, and stores” to witness women at their jobs and to interview them and their employers (viii). As a strategy of affinity building between classes and labor, but not races, this extended research and investigation operate as an illustration of quiet activism through which these brief but highly valuable relationships—with others over information, numbers, and embodied experiences—generate a continual and fluid reconfiguration of data “through successive waves of engagement to create collective . . . identities or assemblages” (Niccolini et al. 326). Systematically for each entry, Penny detailed types of training needed, remuneration for hours worked or products made, and the pros and cons of each type of labor involved, including the discrepancies in wages between women and men in the same positions, crafting a subtle network of ad hoc relationships that narrow the labor gaps.

While affinity building constituted a prominent part of Penny’s quiet activism, her encyclopedia entry contents focused on everyday matters to moderate the fissures among gender, class, and labor. Penny offers a form of coalition building through her validation of those working lives as both essential and valuable—as suitable. About these everyday experiences of paid workers, she contends “[n]o reproach should be cast upon any honest employment” (*Employments* ix). By incorporating all types of scantily compensated labor that working-class women and immigrants were already doing—such as types of domestic service, textile and clothing manufacturing, basket weaving, used clothing sales, rag gatherers and cutters, and so forth—Penny spans the class and gender labor fissures by valuing women’s industry and by highlighting possible employments for destitute white women. Her extensive research provided the means for her to document the everyday work lives of women and men in positions that white middle-class women might engage, either with their current background or through various forms of training. Doing so enabled these women to see themselves in those positions, to recognize the details of their lives as resources for labor, and to appreciate their labor in their lives, a crucial connection between class and employment suitability. Furthermore,

Penny provides warnings about and commentary on the suitability of many employments, as she does in her extensive and detailed encyclopedia entry on women's teaching lives: "There is no employment more uncertain than that of teacher" (37). She continues with the competition for limited positions between men and women, the low wages, and the difficult work with long hours. Across the content of the encyclopedia, Penny marshaled the details of women's work lives—and potential work lives—to validate all working lives and the spirit of coalition in her research and writing practices as a "labor of making meaning" and in the "shared knowledges" of her interviewees (Licona and Chávez 96).

This analysis of Penny's research and content documentation of her three-year study focuses mostly on the class-labor divide of a woman's suitability for different occupations, yet her rhetorical strategies of critique in the encyclopedia entries and her response to the male-dominated publishing industry demonstrate the variegated rhetorical strategies that Penny employs to traverse the gender-labor divide. This bridging performs her aim to change social attitudes as to employment suitability for all women by expanding her audience from women like herself to all white middle- and upper-class women as well as male employers. Consistently highlighting these obstructions and limitations to women's gainful employment, Penny offers her readers alternative "kinds of understanding, interaction, and politics" (Licona and Chávez 97) by which to shift societal employment practices and expand opportunities for women in compensated positions. Penny uses the rhetorical strategies of question and critique in her encyclopedia entries and paratext—preface, introduction, and appendix—to address the limiting social and economic attitudes about educated white middle-class women for numerous paid employments that she learned from her research engagements. With these rhetorical strategies, she makes visible the limitations of women's labor options, wages, and working hours, thus endeavoring "to ameliorate the problem" that quiet activism addresses (Martin et al. 79-80). For this expanded audience, she consistently notes that dominant social attitudes bar many capable women from "the editor's and author's table, from the store, the manufactory, the workshop, the telegraph office, the printing case, and every other place" beyond domestic service and teaching (*Employments* vii). Penny enlightens her audience as to the plight of "destitute single women and widows" excluded from employment by asking, "Why may they not have free access to callings that will insure them a support?" (vi-vii). Her criticisms point directly to social gender bias: "It is surprising how many objections . . . can be presented by selfish men, who do not wish women to engage in their occupations" (457). That social gender bias is realized through pay inequity, even in positions that both men and women are capable of doing. When speaking of librarians, she notes the discrepancy in pay: "Lady librarians receive from one third to one half as much as men," for which Penny sees no logical reason (19). Her commentary works within the entries and the paratext to expose the social attitudes that create these limitations and to narrow the division between gender and class.

Finally, in her act of self-publishing the copious encyclopedia entitled, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work*, Penny again takes on the labor restrictions for white middle-class women needing remunerated work. Through her own material and discursive acts, both aspects of quiet activism, she independently publishes her encyclopedia, as an embodied variegated rhetorical move to respond to

the rejection of the male publishing industry. After circulating her book manuscript with many publishers in 1862 with no success, she copyrighted it under her name, contracted for its composition and plates, and had it printed and bound. Only after this personal expense did the publishers at Walker, Wise & Co. agree in 1863 to use their imprint and promote it with modest advertising, but the firm merely bought the copies they had orders for (“Woman’s Sacrifice”). Along with her calculated, comprehensive, and detailed arrangement of women’s possible employments, Penny’s agency in self-publishing generates a fragile unity across the fissure of social attitudes by demonstrating that—while women and men underestimated what a woman could do, each blaming destitute women for their own misjudgment—change was possible.

Penny’s research methodology, entry writing, and publishing of her encyclopedia “imply, create, gesture toward, engender, and enable coalitional possibilities and also re-imaginings” of American societies and the Woman’s movement labor politics of the 1860s (Licona and Chávez 104). While Penny’s endeavors primarily focus on the discursive realm of rhetoric, combined they illustrate the fluidity and layering of multiple opportune moments of the material situations, brief affinities, everyday lived experiences, and the variegated rhetorics involved in quiet activism, thus generating, even briefly, a fragile unity across the fissure of gender and class in labor politics.

Working for Accord: Stanton Day’s Epistolary Quiet Activism

If the gender-labor divide resulted in suffering for middle-class women because of their restricted employment opportunities, then Black middle-class women endured even harsher indignities as they confronted the double prejudice of race and gender. Harper’s speech illustrates exactly this dilemma for Black women, who are all rich in wrongs but poor in rights (459). However, what Harper fails to reveal is the degree of complicity between the white *and* the free Black communities in that impoverishment, especially by thwarting Black women’s wage-earning work. For example, Frederick Douglass, an ardent supporter of women’s rights, scolded Black women who complained about “inadequate wages,” labeling such complaints unseemly in comparison to the “wrongs perpetrated upon the defenseless slave woman” (qtd. in Sealander 163). But he did not scold Black men with similar complaints. What unfolds within this fractured site of gender-labor is the further fracturing power of misogynoir, a neologism coined by Moya Bailey in 2008 referring to “historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intra-racial gender dynamic” (Bailey and Trudy 262). As this schism traps Stanton Day—decimating her married life and sabotaging her employment efforts with the AMA—she turns to an epistolary rhetoric of quiet activism, seeking to promote a “dialogue of coalition” and hoping to transform misogynoir’s divisive discord into accord.

Literally and figuratively bleeding into Stanton Day’s life, misogynoir constitutes a pernicious gender-racial rift that operates historically to reduce Black women’s agency and options for action in “interpersonal, social, and institutional ways,” a reduction ranging from labor issues to domestic violence (Bailey and Trudy 763). Intersectional in orientation and injury, the concept exposes the ways in which Black women’s “vulnerability is exploited” and their “strength weaponized” against them (766), Nowhere are the existence

and the impact of misogynoir more evident than in Stanton Day's attempt to secure a teaching position with the AMA, an organization with both white and Black leadership whose primary goals included mission work, education, abolition, and legal racial equality (*History 3*). However, Stanton Day's interactions with the AMA reflected anything *but* equality.

While Stanton Day's early life as the daughter of a prosperous Black family in Cleveland yielded repeated examples of misogynoir—such as her exclusion from local schools (Lawson and Merrill 190) and white resistance to her presidency of the Ladies Literary Society while at Oberlin Collegiate Institute (192)—the impact of this pernicious form of inter- and intra-racial discrimination became particularly devastating when Stanton Day found herself and her daughter in perilous financial circumstances occasioned by her husband's desertion. Twelve years after her marriage to lauded abolitionist activist William Howard Day and five years after her famed husband left in 1859 for a speaking tour in the United Kingdom (UK), Stanton Day eked out a living in Cleveland as a seamstress without spousal support (198). In a brutal act of misogynoir, Day had returned from the UK in 1863 only to pursue life as a single, unencumbered male in New York (Kinealy 202) where, after a half-decade of familial financial and emotional delinquency, he carved out a highly successful career as an acclaimed abolitionist-Black rights lecturer, activist, and, eventually, minister (220). Stanton Day's entanglements within the double fissure of misogynoir only intensified when she sought to rectify her precarious situation by obtaining a teaching position serving the newly freed African Americans under the auspices of the AMA. However, despite her exemplary education, activist background, and teaching experience, Stanton Day met with preemptive rejection. Because she lived alone with daughter—an anomalous marital situation—the AMA's bi-racial leadership refused to consider her potential candidacy. Stanton Day took this denial not as an end but as a beginning, initiating an epistolary rhetoric of quiet activism.

Through the letters she writes, solicits, and authorizes, Stanton Day marshals the constellated elements of variegated rhetoric, everyday matters, material situation, and affinity building to open up a common space by which AMA board members and she could engage in a dialogue of coalition (Davis 81), thereby ameliorating, if only partially, the inequity of misogynoir's discord. Foundational to that dialogic approach was her choice of variegated rhetoric: the epistolary art. Given the impetus of misogynoir, Stanton Day's use of letters constitutes an especially provocative choice for quiet activism. First, the epistolary genre blurs the private and public, privileging content that includes material situations and everyday matters. As it evolved in the mid-nineteenth century, letter-writing destabilized the supposedly sacrosanct boundary between parlor and public, subtly positioning sender and recipients in a blend of the two. While, initially, letter writing belonged to the purview of (middle-class white) women and the private world of family (Mahoney 411), reduced postage rates and the increased affordability of paper transformed letter writing in the 1850s, expanding its parameters beyond family to achieve a “democratic diversity” (Hewitt). That shift enabled Stanton Day to transform “the ‘ordinariness of daily life’”—her material situation and everyday matters—into a “rhetoric of survival” (Davis 81) by undermining the multi-scalar nature of misogynoir, which itself flows across private, public, and institutional spaces. Sec-

ond, letter-writing complements quiet activism by emphasizing affinity bonds. As Elizabeth Hewitt explains, letters in the mid-nineteenth century evoked multiple affinities, materialized through the letter's subtext: its references to absent people, its allusions to others, and its assumptions about shared knowledge of others. Letters no longer involved just two people but, rather, a network of absent people, creating a palimpsest of relationships. Quiet activism relies on affirmative affective bonds—caring relationships—just as misogynoir relies on negative affective bonds—damaging relationships of discrimination. What results, then, from the combination of letter writing and quiet activism is a form of soft communication that layers everyday matters and affinities to effect coalition building, an especially apt rhetoric for unifying misogynoiristic fissures. Stanton Day taps into that power in her letter to George Whipple.

Addressed to the powerful secretary of the AMA (Leonard 41) after her preemptive rejection, Stanton Day's official application letter signals the effort to create a common space of shared respect, a necessary prelude to any reconsideration of the board's informal rebuff. That rhetorical move required Stanton Day to grapple with and undermine a critical facet of misogynoir: its rootedness in the visual and discursive ways that popular culture historically "pathologized" and "malign[ed]" Black women (Bailey and Trudy 763). In Stanton Day's case, the malignancy stemmed from representations in the white and Black public spheres that cast single women outside of male control as a threat to social stability (Dabel; Sealander). By this rubric, the only good woman was a domestic woman, one supporting and supported by a male-dominated household. Enabled by the public-private blurring of the epistolary art, Stanton Day strategized the everyday matters of her private life and the exigencies of her material situation to undermine the binary of threat/helpmeet by recategorizing domesticity.

Through allusions to the "ordinariness of daily life" (Davis 81), Stanton Day subtly erodes the damage of the misogynoir's either/or divide by emphasizing her respectable *single* identity as wife and mother. She does so by praising the domesticity of her daughter, not herself. Although only seven, Florence "can sew, knit, sweep, dust and do thoroughly many little services that children are *not* expected to perform" (our emphasis), she writes (Letter to George Whipple). This litany of daily "little services," underscores the child's domestic virtues. However, at the same time, by implication, those virtues accrue to Stanton Day as the single mother who raised and trained Florence in those arts. As the source of the inculcated virtues, Stanton Day recategorizes domesticity as within her purview even as a single mother, shifting her status from dishonorable to honorable. Stanton Day effects a similar transformation in her suspect material situation, shifting her single state from moral failing to moral victory. Her struggle to survive in the face of her husband's desertion endowed her with an inner womanly strength, one worthy of the AMA's esteem. As she explains to Whipple, in the absence of "props" upon which she "can lean," she has learned economy, earning her small family's "daily bread with my needle." Her material survival thus attests to her hard work and self-sufficiency in the face of adversity, qualities that will "fit" her "to *succeed* in any good work." More specifically, she claims her ability to weather challenges lends her a "peculiar discipline" qualifying her to teach in the dangerous and war-torn south. Thus, by maximizing everyday matters and material situations, Stanton Day resists the pathologizing of Black women and realigns herself with AMA values, thereby establishing the groundwork

for an alliance across misogynoir's binary. Stanton Day, then, reinforces her invitation to craft an accord by forging affective ties.

Stanton Day demonstrates two kinds of affinity bonds within two sets of letters: direct bonds in the letters she solicits and indirect bonds in those solicited on her behalf. Each set expands the parameters of coalitional dialogue by highlighting respectful caring relationships between a Black woman and white men of stature, thus contesting a foundational aspect of misogynoir: the polarization of men—white and Black—and Black women across a chasm of inequitably distributed power. Stanton Day's quiet activism calls such polarization into question, demonstrating that a misogynoiristic gender-race division is a choice to be challenged rather than a reality to be embraced. First, Stanton Day spotlights direct affective ties in her letter to Whipple when she lists her white male recommenders by name and their connection to her. For example, Rev. T. H. Hawkes, the minister of Cleveland's Second Presbyterian Church, Stanton Day's devotional home, builds accord between Stanton Day and the AMA board by emphasizing her religious devotion and service, an embodiment of the AMA's Christian values. While the contents of the endorsements offer grounds for coalition building, the identities of the white male recommenders reinforce that invitation because they too are bound to AMA leadership beyond Stanton Day, underscoring the layering of relationships. Whipple, as well as other AMA members, would be familiar with the men and their stature, even sharing reciprocal affective bonds themselves, such as the tight connections between James A. Thome—prelate, AMA agent, former Oberlin professor—and Whipple. Such palimpsestic direct affective ties traverse misogynoir's schism and forge fragile connections between stakeholders in a network of mutual respect that includes Stanton Day. She then buttresses direct affinities with indirect affinities through the letters she authorizes Thome to solicit in an AMA-approved investigation of her marriage.

Second, extending her network of relationships to indirect affective ties with those outside her immediate circle, Stanton Day redresses a key injury of misogynoir—“the disparate treatment that Black women negotiate in society” (Bailey 2)—a dynamic obstructing her efforts to engage in a dialogue of coalition and secure employment. The board's refusal to even consider Stanton Day's application arose out of such “disparate treatment”: their condemnation of her marital situation and their admiration for her estranged husband's abolitionist activism. To counter this affective (mis)judgment, Stanton Day gives permission for Thome to research her marriage. The information uncovered through a series of national and international letters to white men familiar with the Day family exposed and challenged Stanton Day's “disparate treatment,” supporting a reversal of the dis/approbation gendered dynamic. For example, Hawkes devastates Day's moral superiority by highlighting his failure to honor “the claims of his child upon him,” an obdurate negation Hawkes condemns as unchristian (Stanton Day, Letter to Strieby). In addition, Rev. William King, whom Day initially joined in the fund-raising tour, shares a pattern of Day's fiscal improprieties in the UK, thus sapping Day's ethical superiority (Kinealy 219). Further letters provided additional weight exposing and challenging Stanton Day's disparate treatment by the board. In this moment of vindication, Stanton Day and her affinity networks stand as peers—equal in dignity and honor—with the AMA board members, a beginning of accord.

Despite Stanton Day's epistolary efforts to create a fruitful dialogue, the AMA remained adamant in its rejection. By the board's—and misogynoir's—calculus, a man's reputation, even a suspect one, held greater value than a woman's. In her final letter addressed to Michael Strieby, AMA's recording secretary, Stanton Day notes that her greater regret ensues not from the snub but from the board's refusal to engage in any kind of dialogue. However, rather than end her letter in justifiable anger or despair, she, instead, concludes her correspondence with her faith in quiet activism by requesting Strieby to return “the testimonials that I have forwarded to you,” thereby signaling her resolution to persevere. Two years later, with the support of the Cleveland Freedman's Association, Stanton Day fulfilled her dream to teach in the newly established Black schools (Lawson and Merrill 200). “With little fanfare and few ripples, her sustained quiet activism worked modestly to achieve a small moment of accord by which she changed lives (Horton and Kraft 20).

Working Forward: Unity and Hope through Quiet Activism

Harper's “We Are All Bound Up Together” clearly and accurately pointed to a double division: first, the gendered similarities in women's issues versus the dissimilarities tied to race and class; second, the conflict between white middle-class women's focus on the vote versus the working-class women's—Black and white—commitment to labor reform as necessary for survival. Harper's vocal and direct activism is valuable to understanding the fraught and ever-changing rhetorical situations in the 1860s United States, especially within the context of the woman's movement. Yet, within all of those fissures and fractures, are moments of unity secured through small acts of quiet activism performed by women who, if only temporarily and conditionally, diminish divides. Emerging from their quite different material situations and inspired by a distinctly different sense of what fissures require unifying, Penny and Stanton Day engaged in quiet activism congruent with both situations and visions. In both cases, the acts themselves, regardless of success or failure, created an instant of fragile unity. Both women, in all their differences and because of their differences, highlight that quiet activism, as a feminist rhetoric performed within a fissure's aporia, is one means of “contend[ing] with the forces troubling us all” in working “to articulate a vision of hope and expectation” for change (Glenn 212). As a counter to the long trajectory of division within the woman's movement, Penny and Stanton Day highlight an equally long trajectory of quiet activism, foregrounding its potential as a rhetorical coalitional strategy operating across time and providing a rich understanding of the ways activism and feminist rhetorics operate in tandem for change.

As an undertaking of hope and contingent unity, quiet activism invites feminist rhetoricians to search past and present for moments of fragile unity however brief, moments when *feminist* and *not feminist enough* are irrelevant designations. It underscores that feminist rhetorics—and rhetorical feminists—can be modest, mundane, narrowly situated, and unnamed. It underscores that they can be valuable because they are quiet, for, in their semi-invisibility and low volume, such rhetorics and feminists keep unity and hope alive amidst the mundanities of daily lives. Equally important, quiet activism suggests that we recalibrate success not as a measure of goal(s) achieved but as a measure of affective bonds built, of fissures temporarily joined. In other words, the invisible, quotidian performances of quiet activism invite us to revisit the woman's movement,

past and present, to identify other fissures where traces of hope and unity can be found so that we can honor and nurture the feminist rhetorics working in the shadows now.

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