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Article abstract

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# “A Greater Compass of Voice”: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Mary Ann Shadd Cary Navigate Black Performance

KRISTIN MORIAH<sup>1</sup>

The work of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Mary Ann Shadd Cary demonstrate how racial solidarity between Black Canadians and African Americans was created through performance and surpassed national boundaries during the nineteenth century. Taylor Greenfield's connection to Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the prominent feminist abolitionist, and the first Black woman to publish a newspaper in North America, reveals the centrality of peripatetic Black performance, and Black feminism, to the formation of Black Canada's burgeoning community. Her reception in the Black press and her performance work shows how Taylor Greenfield's performances knit together various ideas about race, gender, and nationhood of mid-nineteenth century Black North Americans. Although Taylor Greenfield has rarely been recognized for her role in discourses around race and citizenship in Canada during the mid-nineteenth century, she was an immensely influential figure for both abolitionists in the United States and Blacks in Canada. Taylor Greenfield's performance at an event for Mary Ann Shadd Cary's benefit testifies to the longstanding porosity of the Canadian/ US border for nineteenth century Black North Americans and their politicized use of Black women's voices.

*L'exemple d'Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield et de Mary Ann Shadd Cary montre que la solidarité raciale entre les Noirs du Canada et les Afro-Américains au XIXe siècle était transfrontalière et a été créée par le truchement de la performance. Le lien entre Taylor Greenfield et Mary Ann Shadd Cary, célèbre féministe abolitionniste et première femme noire à diriger un journal en Amérique du Nord, lève le voile sur le rôle central de la performance itinérante et du féminisme chez les Noirs dans la formation d'une communauté noire au Canada. La réception dans la presse noire des performances de Taylor Greenfield montre que cette dernière tissait des liens entre diverses idées qui circulaient parmi les Noirs en Amérique du Nord au milieu du XIXe siècle sur la race, le genre et la nation. Taylor Greenfield a été peu reconnue pour le rôle qu'elle a joué dans l'évolution des discours sur la race et la citoyenneté au Canada; pourtant, il s'agissait d'une personnalité très importante tant auprès des abolitionnistes aux États-Unis que chez les Noirs au Canada. Le fait qu'elle se soit produite en spectacle au bénéfice de Mary Ann Shadd Cary témoigne de la porosité de la frontière entre le Canada et les États-Unis au XIXe siècle aux yeux des Nord-Américains de race noire et montre à quel point ils se servaient des voix de femmes noires à des fins politiques.*



First, there is the fact of the ambrotype,<sup>2</sup> not just the form of early photography itself, but the fact of the object's existence. The delicate portrait, probably taken between 1854 and 1865,<sup>3</sup> represented the female subject's singularity and was meant to be treasured. Technically, perhaps poetically, it is a pane glass negative whose image is only fully visible when put into relief against a dark background, like the reverse of a Glenn Ligon stencil.<sup>4</sup> Enclosed in a small black wooden case lined with flocked red velvet, the ambrotype fits in the palm of one's hand. The interior edges of the case are gilded and the image itself is nestled in a gold mat. The subject's left arm rests crooked upon a table covered with delicate pink-tinged lace. Her left hand meets her cheek. Even more delicate lace extends from the sleeves of her dress and stark white lace is gathered around the fashionable but not too revealing neckline of her gown. Her hair is neatly braided and tastefully adorned with black ribbon.<sup>5</sup> An ornately carved dark wooden chair peeks out from behind her. The gold brooch at the subject's neckline, her gold bracelet, gold pocket watch, and the attached gold chain were all painstakingly hand painted on the surface of the glass negative at an additional cost. This is a portrait that speaks to the subject's upward and outward mobility, a remarkable feat of self-fashioning<sup>6</sup> for a formerly enslaved Black woman who was a celebrity and a very real object of curiosity before the Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

The ambrotype is the only extant photograph of antebellum African American concert singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. It is just one of a number of material clues which demonstrate the importance of Black feminist performance along the US-Canadian border, testifying to the unexpected and unhailed presence of Black diasporic performance in Canada. Today, the ambrotype is part of the Frederick H.J. Lambart fonds at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) in Ottawa, Ontario. It is one of the oldest photographs of a Black woman there. Lambart is an unlikely collector of this material. A white settler born in



**The Black Swan: a portrait of Concert Singer Elizabeth T. Greenfield, circa 1850s. Photo provided by Library and Archives Canada.**

Ottawa in 1880, Lambart was a surveyor for the Canadian government and noted for his “extensive experience of the Northern wilderness” and his love of photography (Scott 99). His daughter, Evelyn Lambart, was the first woman to work as an animator for the National Film Board of Canada. Mary Margaret Johnston Miller, Art Archivist at LAC, believes the ambrotype likely came into Lambart’s possession through the family’s connection to Hiram Edward Howard, a wealthy Buffalo banker, president of the Buffalo Music Association, and early Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield supporter. Taylor Greenfield provided childcare for Hiram E. Howard’s family when she lived in Buffalo in the early 1850s (Chybowski 141) and maintained close connections with them until at least the late 1860s (“Amusements”). The Howards were related to and intermarried with Canadian families, including the Lambarts. The criss-crossing of these family ties and objects reveals both the ephemerality of the US-Canadian border and the ubiquity of Black popular culture in the antebellum period. Thus, the Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield ambrotype is a launching point for my investigation into the forms of Black feminist performance that accrued along the Canadian border in the nineteenth century.

Rarely, if ever, recognized as such, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was almost certainly the first Black woman to sing art music professionally on stage in Canada. Born into slavery in Natchez, Mississippi, around 1819, Elizabeth Taylor’s family was once owned by Elizabeth Halliday Greenfield, a white Philadelphian with Welsh roots who had married into the planocracy. Shortly after she was born, Elizabeth Taylor was legally emancipated and emigrated to Philadelphia with her mistress, who joined the Friends’ Society. Some of the Black laborers formerly enslaved by Halliday Greenfield migrated to Liberia, including Elizabeth Taylor’s parents.<sup>8</sup> Encouraged by Mrs. H. Greenfield, young Elizabeth Taylor began to develop her musical talent and was educated by Pennsylvania Quakers. She also adopted her mistress’s last name. Eventually, by means of her own proficiency, the aid of white benefactors and promoters, and the support of the Black community in the North, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield became a professional concert singer hailed as the “Black Swan.” Her 1853 tour of England propelled her to international fame and continues to be the focus of much study. But England was not her first international sojourn. Her work frequently brought her to US-Canadian border cities and into Canada; she concertized in Toronto, Ontario, and towns near Black settlements like Chatham, Ontario.

Nina Sun Eidsheim insists that along with later Black concert singer Sissieretta Jones, Taylor Greenfield’s “performance practices and reception by audiences—where listeners based their opinions on related artists’ work and on the work of white artists in blackface ... influenced the later reception of African American classical singers” (70). Her work follows Eric Lott’s assertion that Taylor Greenfield provided the inspiration for the stock minstrel character Lucy Neal (235). But like Julia Chybowski, whose detailed research sheds much needed light on the granular details of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’s education and early life, scholars often make little distinction between the singer’s impact in Canadian or American contexts. This is not always the rule; Jennifer Stoeber examines Mary Ann Shadd Cary’s interest in Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and “how free black people in the North constructed and understood listening as a political and potentially self-defining act” (124). I maintain that Taylor Greenfield’s early performances in Canada West testify to the longstanding porosity of the US-Canadian border for Black North Americans, particularly women.

What follows is a case study in the way Black feminist performance in Canada relied on the crossing of national boundaries. Black North American women in the 1850s seized on performance as a site of shared concern and early Black performance in Canada owed much to the crossing of national boundaries. Mary Ann Shadd Cary wrote about Taylor Greenfield's offers to perform in Europe in the very first issue of the *Provincial Freeman*, immediately before a longer item about Black thespian Ira Aldridge who was travelling abroad ("Miscellany"). These news items highlight the social and political importance of travel and mobility for Black North Americans. Taylor Greenfield's performances in Canada West, or what is now Southern Ontario, and her coverage in the *Provincial Freeman* demonstrate how solidarity between Black North American women was sustained through performance and surpassed national boundaries. Furthermore, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's connection to Mary Ann Shadd Cary reveals the centrality of Black performance, and Black feminism, to the formation of Black Canada's burgeoning community. These women were acutely sensitive to the radical potential embedded in Black feminist performance along the border between Canada West and the United States. They pushed racial, gender, and national boundaries together. In fact, a consideration of Black women's transnational performances can effectively change our understanding of borders.



**Mary Ann Shadd  
Cary, c. 1855-1860.  
Photo provided by  
Library and Archives  
Canada.**

## **“A Place Where Things Can Both Come Together and Apart”**

The US-Canadian border is a 5,525-mile-long figurative line that has meant very real freedom for some; for the fugitives who fled slavery before the Civil War and the refugees seeking asylum there today. Theorizing the US-Mexico border, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (3). But the US-Canadian border often fails at that task. The dominant white cultures represented on either side of the dividing line are like fraternal twins. They are Western nations founded on settler colonialism and white supremacy, built by exploited labor, and share similar languages and customs. Inhabitants of these borderlands often have a pragmatic approach to citizenship and nationhood. In cities like Detroit and Windsor, it is not uncommon for citizens of one nation to commute daily across the border for work and to have family on either side of the dividing line. In summer, border cities like Buffalo and Niagara Falls celebrate an annual Friendship Festival emphasizing “good relations between Canada and the United States of America since the end of the War of 1812.”<sup>9</sup> While Canada continuously struggles to establish its autonomy and moral distance from its powerful neighbor, at the border there is an overwhelming acknowledgement of similarity and shared interests between relatively homogenous groups of North Americans. The cultural work of the US-Canadian border is often more about affirming a Eurocentric *us* than defining a *them*.

At the same time, Katherine McKittrick has shown that for Black Canadians, such “nation-borders are called into question because they do not sufficiently speak to the ways in which Black geographies in Canada are made and upheld” (103). During the nineteenth



century, Black North Americans were mobile in the face of openly hostile nation states and frequently traversed the US-Canadian border. Early Black communities on the border occupied a precarious place on the edges of citizenship and nationhood. Black radical abolitionist and journalist Martin R. Delany was wary of the dangers inherent in the British territory's proximity to America.<sup>10</sup> Rinaldo Walcott has argued that the peripatetic movements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African Americans and Black Canadians "demonstrate that for Black North Americans, the border between Canada and the United States was permeable" (144). Some of the first African Americans who crossed the border to the British colony of Canada came as a result of the American Revolutionary War, either as the chattel of white American Loyalists or as soldiers who were granted freedom by the British. The War of 1812 and the Underground Railroad also resulted in the cross-border migration of Blacks who had been enslaved in America. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 resulted in a significant increase in the number of refugees from US slavery entering Canada West. Black migration moved both ways. Winifred Siemerling reminds us that beginning in the eighteenth century, and before slavery had been abolished there, enslaved people from Upper Canada fled to Vermont, New York, Ohio, and other free territories (68). During the Civil War hundreds of Black Canadians from Canada West crossed the US-Canadian border to fight for the Union Army (Prince 12). After the Civil War, many Black Americans who had settled along the US-Canadian border returned to America to be reunited with their kin. Clearly for Black North Americans in the United States and Canada, nationhood and belonging remained fraught throughout the century, and the US-Canadian border often represented a site of recognition and coalescence rather than separation.

In the midst of this back-and-forth, while provinces like Quebec and Nova Scotia became vital hubs of Black life, Ontario and its border cities emerged as prime locations for Black North Americans who chose to live in Canada. The places in Canada West where Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield performed in the 1850s and 1860s were part of British colonial territory in a state of violent erasure and becoming. Like their American counterparts, early Black communities in this region saw performance as political. Theatre historian Robin Breon has identified the 1840s as a pivotal moment in theatrical engagement for Black Torontonians, who recognized the danger of racist entertainment imported from America and the importance of representation on the popular stage. From 1840 to 1843, "members of the Black community petitioned the mayor's office to restrict the presentation of traveling minstrel shows which came up from the US and toured widely in Canada" (2). Breon also notes that in 1849 The Toronto Coloured Young Men's Amateur Theatrical Society advertised in the *Toronto-Mirror* for a three-night engagement in which they presented *Venice Preserved* by Thomas Otway and selected scenes from Shakespeare (Breon 1). These performances seem calculated to counteract the racist tropes of blackface minstrelsy. In the next decade, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield would sing art music in cities like Toronto, Hamilton, and Chatham, a further cross-border rejoinder to such racist depictions.

Boundary-defying notions of race, space, and place characterized descriptions of Taylor Greenfield's voice during the height of her career. *A Brief Memoir of the "Black Swan"* (1853) opens with the assertion that "genius belongs especially to no country, nation, race, or colour. The gift of Providence—it is scattered over the world" (Orr 2), connecting genius to diaspora. Both *A Brief Memoir* and *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad* (1855), biographical sketches

available for purchase at her concerts, contain numerous reviews using the term “compass” to describe the singer’s extraordinary vocal range, the latter explaining that “her compass of voice is probably greater than that of Parodi, Catherine Hayes, or Jenny Lind” (20), a line frequently repeated.<sup>11</sup> In a practical sense, the term “compass of voice” refers to the wide range of musical notes available to a singer. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield performed in traditionally masculine and feminine registers as both a soprano and a tenor, ranging from an upper extension to E6 down to a G2 in the bass clef (Eidsheim 73). The term compass was often used as a point of comparison between Taylor Greenfield and a set of white European vocalists with whom Greenfield was frequently classed. Daphne Brooks explains that the singer “both entered into the realm of classical singing uninvited as an African American woman and bastardized the sphere by vocally traveling outside the boundaries of vocal categories” (312). As Jennifer Stoeber notes, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’s unusual voice was “a threat to the sonic color line” (111). But this geographic terminology also hints at the way Taylor Greenfield’s cultural reach exceeded that of white artists. To the shock and horror of some, her vocal compass allowed her to navigate and breach both Black and white cultural spaces. It guided her towards figurative and physical borders.

Black geographies were then, as now, manifest across a wide range of cultural sites. Judith Madera has demonstrated the importance of navigation as a recurring motif in African American literature during this period, claiming that “nineteenth-century African American literature is starkly geographic” (8). I contend that this stark geography extends to antebellum Black performance, too. The descriptor “compass of voice” was applied to Elizabeth Greenfield’s voice shortly after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, when Black refugees from the United States were fleeing North in higher numbers. “Compass” was a multivalent term in the nineteenth century. But compasses were invaluable tools for these refugees, and in the antebellum era, the recurring motif of the compass, alongside that of an abolitionist figure like Taylor Greenfield, would have conjured discourses of freedom.

With this geographic imperative in mind, the US-Canadian borderlands are a prime location to theorize Black feminist performance. Farah Jasmine Griffin has shown that representations of African American women’s voices are “like a hinge, a place where things can both come together and apart” (104) and that “the black woman’s voice can be called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as to provoke one” (104). Griffin’s work suggests that as a medium, Black women’s vocals can encapsulate the border’s potentiality. In this framework, Black women’s vocality offers an important way to transcend geographic boundaries. Griffin also reminds us that “voices create an aural space where listeners can momentarily experience themselves as outside of themselves, as ‘home’ or ‘free.’ This space can be simultaneously political, spiritual, and sensual” (110-11). In nineteenth-century North America, Black women’s hinge-like voices could both delineate and destabilize national boundaries. Analysis of coverage in the first Black Canadian newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, and other abolitionist newspapers reveals the significance of Taylor Greenfield and Shadd Cary’s vocals within the Black Diaspora and their contributions to dialogues about Black (trans)national identity in Canada and the United States, particularly among Black women.

## The Voices of Feminists, Fugitives, and Free(wo)men

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield spent her early career working in US-Canadian border cities with abolitionist leanings like Buffalo and Rochester. The singer was raised and educated in Philadelphia, but after her wealthy benefactor died she was shut out of a generous inheritance. Taylor Greenfield “found herself compelled to look about for some addition to her diminished means. Having some relatives and friends in the city of Buffalo<sup>12</sup> ... she resolved to visit them, and at the same time to seek her fortune in some other way” (Orr 6). In Buffalo she gained the attention of local elites and was invited to give a series of (segregated) public concerts at venues including the Buffalo Musical Association starting in early 1852. Following those performances, Taylor Greenfield travelled up and down the East Coast, from “Canada and most of the New England States,” to the slave state of Maryland (Orr 8). The extreme danger of such travels for Black performers is readily apparent to readers of narratives like Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853). But her early biographers are strangely silent about those perils. They were similarly unconcerned with the boundary represented by the US-Canadian border. Instead, they focused on Taylor Greenfield’s trip to England when considering the international extent of her cultural reach. In both James Monroe Trotter’s (1878) and Monroe Major’s (1893) influential biographies, Taylor Greenfield’s Canadian appearances are treated with little fanfare or distinction. Both sources follow a similar format and a review of her 1852 Toronto performance from the Toronto *Globe* is sandwiched between reviews from Rochester, New York and Brattleboro, Vermont. Occurring only a few months after her Buffalo debut, the Toronto performance was technically her first international appearance. But Canada may have been too culturally similar (read: conversant in anti-Black practices) for some critics, as per Martin R. Delany. In fact, Trotter’s work shows that some Canadian theatres at the time were just as racially segregated as American theatres.<sup>13</sup>

For some critics, in the early phases of her career Taylor Greenfield did not so much trespass or cross racial boundaries as she was co-opted or consumed. Her triumphant early concerts were followed by a controversial 1853 New York City debut. Black patrons were barred from Metropolitan Hall and there were rumors that the New York concert would be subject to white supremacist riots. Frederick Douglass’s newspaper published a stinging rebuke of white audience members whose racial prejudices remained unchallenged, nay, even bolstered by Taylor Greenfield’s performances (“Conduct”). Martin R. Delany, who had previously exposed the racist practices of her manager J.H. Wood, fuelled further criticism of Taylor Greenfield in the *Frederick Douglass Paper*. Delany’s 1853 exposé of the singer’s living conditions was fiery. Criticizing her white American manager, Delany reported that Taylor Greenfield was

the merest creature of a slave, in the hands of this fellow Wood, and his associates, and does not know what she is getting for her services; as she does not handle her own money, but the person whom Wood appointed, one of his own troupe [sic], being her treasurer, and holding, as they pretend, the money for her!



Delany also claimed that Wood censored Taylor Greenfield's correspondence and barred her from receiving Black visitors. The alleged state of near slavery and isolation in which Greenfield was kept, or even worse, perhaps consented to, was clearly at odds with the radical political work the Black community sought, and needed, from her concerts. The use of the Black female voice in public lay at the core of much of the anger expressed by Delany, Douglass, and others. To them, Taylor Greenfield lacked awareness of the social importance of her newfound role. Southern newspapers had long seized on Taylor Greenfield as an object of ridicule. Taken together, depictions which appear in a broad spectrum of media foreclose readings of the radical nature of Taylor Greenfield's work and her ability to navigate the public sphere and interracial spaces.

And yet, Juanita Karpf avers that "when Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield crossed race and gender divides in the 1850s by pursuing a career in the white male world of concert performance, music in the cultivated tradition—whether composed, performed, taught, or written about—became activist and feminist discourse" (Karpf 625). The significance of this boundary-defying work was not lost on all her contemporaries. Jennifer Lynn Stoeve asserts that "only the *Provincial Freeman* reported consistently on [Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's] career" (125). Here, we might take consistently to mean positively. Through her editorial choices, Mary Ann Shadd Cary would steadfastly attempt to resuscitate Taylor Greenfield's reputation on the pages of the *Provincial Freeman*, reaffirming the singer's exceptional role in nineteenth-century African American culture and the importance of Black feminist performance to Black diasporic communities across both sides of the US-Canadian border.

Frequently commented upon in Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield historiography and scholarship, the Metropolitan Hall controversy also resulted in one of the earliest discussions of Black feminist performance in Canadian print. In an 1854 editorial Shadd Cary addressed the brouhaha and dismissed the complaints against Taylor Greenfield. Noting that Greenfield had been charged in the *Providence Daily Journal* with "being direlect [sic] to her duty, and the cause of humanity, by not singing substantial songs, such as would interest the masses" and "not associating with colored people," Shadd Cary parsed the artist's choices and affirmed her artistic freedom:

about what Miss Greenfield does, or what she does not, we know but little; neither do we know whether she professes to be a reformer or not; nor are we going to presume that she does, merely because she has a black skin and may have been a slave ... ("The Black Swan")

Shadd Cary challenged the racial reductivism that defined the singer's career and demanded that Taylor Greenfield be afforded the same wide berth as white artists, writing, "The majority of popular singers the world over ... are not often noted as champions of human rights." This comment can be read as a backhanded compliment, given the great personal sacrifices Shadd Cary made as a lifelong activist and a reminder that her contemporary Jenny Lind was, in fact, known for her philanthropy. But it is clear that Shadd Cary's focus on Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield in the *Provincial Freeman* was more nuanced, if not altogether forgiving than coverage found in outlets like *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. In her editorial Shadd Cary framed Black performance as a means of reconsidering the limits of Black identity and collective

responsibility. Her pragmatism is especially striking given her own notoriety and the importance of Black performance<sup>14</sup> to the abolitionist movement.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary was born free into a free Black family in Wilmington, Delaware in 1823. The Shadds were well-known abolitionists and active conductors on the Underground Railroad, even while living in the slave state of Delaware. Shadd Cary attended the first North American Convention of Coloured Freemen held in Toronto, at St. Lawrence Hall in 1851. Soon after, she published *A Plea for Emigration* (1852). Shadd Cary and her brother eventually immigrated to Windsor, Ontario. As a journalist and political activist, Shadd wrote enthusiastically about the benefits of migration for African Americans. She founded the *Provincial Freeman* in 1853, becoming the first Black woman publisher in North America. She then migrated back to the US during the Civil War to recruit Union Soldiers, the only Black woman from Canada to do so. After the Civil War, she went on to become one of the first Black women in the United States to earn a law degree, after graduating from Howard University. Since 1994, she has been officially recognized as a person of historical significance in Canada and continues to represent the both the Black diaspora and displacement in Canada's cityscapes. In Chatham, Ontario, a commemorative bust of Shadd Cary stands only a few blocks away from the site of her former home and one of the offices of the *Provincial Freeman*, both of which have been torn down (Smith). In Malvern, Scarborough, a working-class neighborhood comprised predominately of Caribbean and South Asian immigrants, an elementary school has been named for her.



Mary Ann Shadd Cary Lane, Toronto.  
Photo provided by the author.

But Shadd Cary's personal investment in Black performance and the power of the Black voice remains critically neglected. As one of the few Black feminist speakers in antebellum Black political life, Shadd Cary was in all practical senses a skilled performer. She frequently crossed the US-Canadian border to give lectures. Colored Convention attendee A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne describes hearing Mary Ann Shadd Cary lecture on Blacks in Canada as a "pleasure" due to "her familiarity with facts, her knowledge of men, and her fine power of discrimination" (127). Her listeners were not equally pleased. Carla Peterson notes that "Shadd Cary's speeches were [...] often perceived not only as pertinent, but impertinent" (100) and her "'unfeminine' speaking style led even those who appreciated the substance of her lectures to admit her lack of eloquence, to label her delivery as 'nervous, hurried'" (103). Her insistence on the right to be heard in public courted controversy. Jane Rhodes explains that while "black Americans seemed to encourage—and even require—women's participation in the public sphere as necessary for racial progress" during the antebellum period, "black women were expected to adhere to the cult of domesticity" (53). Speaking out on stage and in the pages of her newspaper, Shadd Cary was no angel of the house.<sup>15</sup> She consistently ran afoul of gendered expectations which insisted upon Black women's silence, subservience, and respectability.<sup>16</sup>

Shadd Cary's foray into the world of publishing was as iconoclastic and controversial as Taylor Greenfield's operatic performance. I consider the *Provincial Freeman* to be an extension of Mary Ann Shadd Cary's voice and its pages a space of Black vocal experimentation. As Alex Black claims, "When we read an abolitionist text we perceive a material process in which sound is realized as an image that has the force of a statement" (619). This was no less true of Black Canadian print culture. For her readers, the vocal qualities of Mary Ann Shadd Cary's literary activism solicited response. She challenged the circumscribed limits of antebellum gender norms linked to sound and speech through her editorial choices. In contrast to the rampant sexism of North American public discourse, "The early issues of the *Freeman* established the paper as a forum for Shadd's growing interest in women's rights, especially within the context of anti-slavery and other reform movements" (Rhodes 91). In the *Provincial Freeman*, Shadd Cary frequently reprinted material by feminist abolitionists, including a speech by Harriet Beecher Stowe, "An Appeal to the Women of the Free States of America on the Present Crisis of Our Country" (Rhodes 91). Unlike her *Plea for Immigration*, Shadd Cary's newspaper contained an early assemblage of Black feminist discourse that was intersectional and drew few cultural distinctions between Canada and the United States. Like Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, vocal performance was a key element of her feminist practice.

## "Desiring to Do Her Full Share"

The most relevant example of how boundary-defying vocal performance united the careers of these two women is an 1855 Philadelphia benefit held for Shadd Cary. Shadd Cary made several public appearances in Philadelphia while attending the city's mid-October Colored National Convention that year. Travelling from Ontario, she challenged gender conventions and successfully lobbied to be recognized as the delegate from Canada. The convention minutes note that the question of whether she should be admitted to the floor resulted in

“spirited discussion” (“Proceedings”). The *National Antislavery Standard* reported that her suit was aided by Frederick Douglass, who “exposed, in a masterly manner, the fallacy of the objections to Miss Shadd’s admission” (“Our Philadelphia Correspondence”). Shadd Cary reportedly gave “one of the best speeches” about emigration at the convention despite strong resistance against admitting female speakers to the floor (Peterson 100). Still, criticism dogged her. Writing about the convention, a reporter for the *British Banner* claimed that “had ‘Miss Shadd’ not had in her bosom more the male than that of the female heart, she would have felt ashamed of her position, and hastened to hide herself amid the soft obscurities of her own sex” (qtd. in Peterson 100).

Recognizing that the young activist typically engaged in activist work for free and needed financial support for her travel, women from Philadelphia’s Shiloh Baptist Church “voted to organize a fund-raising gala ‘in view of her faithful services in the cause of Reform’” (“Correspondence”). The event was held at Sansom Street Hall on Saturday, November 9, 1855. The Philadelphia venue, which served as a public bathhouse, lyceum and event hall in the 1850s, had also housed the 1854 National Women’s Rights Convention. The “brilliant affair” was initially advertised as an Anti-Slavery meeting featuring the speeches of abolitionist Passmore Williamson (“Anti-Slavery”). Instead, attendees were treated to a surprise performance by Elizabeth Greenfield and speeches by J.M. McKim and Mary Ann Shadd Cary. The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* reported that “the room was packed as full as it could hold: aisles, platform, every place was filled.” Taylor Greenfield had previously sung at a fundraising benefit for Shiloh Baptist Church in 1853 (Chybowski 141), raising the possibility that she had ties to the congregation. McKim “spoke to the character and labours of Miss Mary Ann Shadd among the fugitive slaves in Canada, and strongly recommended her to the good will of the audience” (“Anti-Slavery”). For her part, Shadd Cary gave a speech in which she extolled the virtues of Canada and “complimented” Taylor Greenfield as the “Jenny Lind of America” (“Correspondence”). Shadd Cary’s play on Greenfield’s traditional moniker, the “Black Jenny Lind,” emphasized the unifying power of Taylor Greenfield’s incredible voice. In Shadd Cary’s formulation, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield embodied the operatic talent of a nation.

The *Freeman* report depicts Greenfield as a genteel hostess and philanthropist deeply engaged in the world of Philadelphia’s Black middle class. The presence of refreshments like ice-cream and refined entertainment transformed the public concert hall into an intimate domestic parlor-like space. Arthur La Brew explains that vocal and instrumental music were practiced almost universally among Black Philadelphians and frequently performed for friends and guests at home (17). Sarah Lampert suggests that the singer “surely maintained ties with members of Philadelphia’s large black middle class whom she met through her schooling” (82), and thus would have been keenly aware of the role music played in their domestic lives. The impact of Taylor Greenfield’s social world and Black musicians on her musical practice was often overlooked by nineteenth-century journalists and biographers who conceived of the singer as a product of racial exceptionalism. But in this instance, we can see Taylor Greenfield signifying on tropes of Black respectability, domesticity and femininity in order to intervene in the public sphere in socially acceptable ways. Music, particularly “the singing of songs” (Peterson 100), was one of the only acceptable forms of women’s participation at antebellum Colored Conventions. Singing at the Shiloh Baptist Church ladies benefit afforded Elizabeth

Taylor Greenfield a nonconfrontational means of participation in discourses around Black immigration and Black feminist political participation.

*Provincial Freeman* readers also learned that “the Sansom Street Hall was literally packed to overflowing, with a mixed audience of white and colored, all waiting impatiently for the exercises to commence” (“Correspondence”). Mention of the interracial composition of the audience was undoubtedly directed towards Taylor Greenfield and Shadd Cary’s critics. For Taylor Greenfield, the event symbolized a break with her controversial past and affirmed her commitment to racial progress. This opportunity to hear “Miss Greenfield’s liberality and charming melodies” in person was unusual for Black North Americans who were not part of the singer’s inner circle, and, incidentally, for white Northerners who had not flocked to, or could not afford admission to, Taylor Greenfield’s earlier US concerts. In her work as a school teacher in Windsor and her *Plea for Emigration* (1852), Shadd Cary had demonstrated an abiding, if controversial, interest in the integration of public spaces like schools and churches. Attendees at the Sansom Street Hall benefit heard Taylor Greenfield’s voice in a space comparatively free from racial and class boundaries, experiencing that voice as constitutive of free space in the way Farrah Jasmine Griffin has confirmed and which mirrored the Canada West Shadd Cary imagined and promoted. That interracialism captured the essence of much of the singer and the journalist’s work.

The *Freeman*’s anonymous “Philadelphia correspondent,” who may well have been Shadd Cary,<sup>17</sup> noted that “too much praise cannot be expressed” for Taylor Greenfield’s performance of Anti-Slavery songs and:

To her credit be it said, instead of singing only “too [sic] ballads,” for which a handsome sum was offered, when first invited, she very magnanimously sung more than she is accustomed to do at her ordinary Concerts, evidently desiring to do her full share, not only in making the occasion interesting, but likewise, in making it as beneficial to Miss S. as possible, refusing to receive anything for her services.

The Anti-Slavery songs Taylor Greenfield sang for the Shadd Cary benefit concert would have been disappointing to her first public audiences, who were often attracted to her because of the promise of racial spectacle.<sup>18</sup> But the Anti-Slavery songs she sung revealed Taylor Greenfield’s politicization. It would not be the first or the last such revelation. Neither the *Provincial Freeman* or the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, two contemporary sources which reported the concert, list the songs Taylor Greenfield performed at the benefit. However, *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad* (1855) includes a list of songs from the concert she gave at the Queen’s Concert Rooms in England in 1853 under the patronage of Harriet Beecher Stowe and famed British Abolitionist the Duchess of Sutherland. That programme includes a song entitled “The Vision of the Negro Slave” which is strikingly similar to the scene of Tom’s death in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In 1859, the Anti-Slavery Society would report that Greenfield “sung, with thrilling effect, the song ‘Pity the Slave’” at the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society’s annual meeting (“Twenty-Third”). The absence of qualitative descriptions of Taylor Greenfield’s voice at the Sansom Hall concert can perhaps be attributed to the rhetorical power of the abolitionist sentiment of her performance and the ability of her apparent politicization to eclipse other considerations, and complaints, within the Black community.



The Shiloh Baptist Church women who organized the activities of the 1855 Philadelphia Colored Convention used the concert hall and Black feminist performance as a site of resistance and critique. Their organizing efforts provide an alternative way of understanding how Black women used speech and voice to intervene in Black political discourse around immigration and border crossing at a time when openly doing so resulted in censure. Unlike the 1855 Philadelphia Colored Convention, Taylor Greenfield and Shadd Cary's voices provided the main attraction at the Sansom Street Hall concert and were well received there. Instead of being marginalized for their work, their boundary-defying talents provided an opportunity to reframe public opinion about Black women's public activism and emigration. The nameless women who organized the Sansom Street Hall concert worked to affirm the relevance of Black women's voices in the public sphere and demonstrated a deep interest in questions around Black migration to Canada.

## Conclusion

The Sansom Street Hall benefit was a pivotal event, but it would not be a singular one. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield would go on to accompany Black political figures like Frederick Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper at their speaking events, too.<sup>19</sup> Through her work as an orator, activist, and editor, Mary Ann Shadd Cary paved the way for those moments and played a central role in Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's rehabilitation in the Black press. Shadd Cary did this work onsite in the United States and in the pages of her newspaper where the work of the two women was aligned, by both Shadd Cary herself and others. For some, the two would continue to be associated with one another long after the Shiloh Hall event. Writing to the *Provincial Freeman* from Philadelphia in 1856, John A. Sprraig remarked that

in pro-slavery Pennsylvania ... I take pleasure in alluding to Miss Elizabeth T. Greenfield, the "Black Swan," Miss M.A. Shadd, and other young ladies, whose genius and talent entitle them to praise and respect. The admiration and honor which has been so largely awarded to the "Black Swan," both in this country and Great Britain, by the highest classes in society, settles this fact. That humble, poor, proscribed and black, and the colored man or women may be, with such commendable zeal and resolution as is here evinced, all obstacles may be triumphantly overcome. ("To the Publisher")

The women struck a powerful chord with their listeners and readers who approved of their transnationalism and recognized their abilities to overcome racial boundaries. Following the Shadd Cary benefit, Taylor Greenfield continued to concertize in Canada and centers of Black life like Toronto and Chatham, Ontario. Those performances were reviewed positively in the *Provincial Freeman* and Toronto's *Globe*. From 1855 to the 1860s, after her return from England, performances in Toronto, Hamilton, Chatham, London, and Windsor were still enthusiastically received. In 1855 the *Globe*, like others before, remarked upon Greenfield's "wonderful compass of voice" and insisted that "her extraordinary natural powers, and their cultivation, give her a permanent power of gratifying the public" ("Miss Greenfield's Concerts"). In 1857, the *Globe* pronounced Taylor Greenfield "a singer of high order" ("The Ship"). Even further afield, that

year, the *Montreal Pilot* reported that “she was frequently *encored*, and as the assemblage broke, every face seemed to beam with satisfaction and delight, as if its owner would say, ‘I feel it was worth while [sic] coming here’” (“Miss Greenfield’s Second”). Here, the reviewer might have been obliquely commenting on the supposed contentment of Taylor Greenfield’s Black audience members and their satisfaction with the concert and their decision to emigrate.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act prompted a series of events that drew the women into the public sphere and into conversation with one another. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’s performances became common currency for Black communities north and south of the US border. They also contributed a context in which performance was imbued with increasing social and political importance for Black communities. Mary Ann Shadd Cary demonstrated can-niness about the power of gender, race, and performance in her coverage of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. Shadd Cary’s engagement with Taylor Greenfield’s work reveals the power of representation for Black communities in Canada West, and for Black women in the mid-nineteenth century. Their work created sites at which Black identity could coalesce and where legacies of US racialization could begin to be dismantled. Their work predicts the way that border crossing remains an important part of Black feminist methodology and translates to the present. Black diaspora remains predicated upon a shared set of identities and concerns that conflict with national borders. In point of fact, research for this article was completed on both sides of the US-Canadian border. As a Black feminist scholar in the present, cross-border movements are still, for me, a performative act. When I crossover into the United States, I make simultaneous promises to go away and to come back. I promise not to get too comfortable. I promise that I am who I say I am. These gestures suggest acquiescence and deference to power. But borders are actually a site of Black feminist re/invention. I am always changing. Always at home. Always clinging to something beyond the horizon. Always hoping to be heard.

## Notes

- 1 I owe many thanks to those who read early drafts of this work and provided feedback and encouragement, including Colleen Kim Daniher, Katherine Zien, Katherine McKittrick, Kate Broad, and Jesse Schwartz.
- 2 Ambrotypes were an early form of photography patented by American James Ambrose Cutting in 1854. Ambrotypes are essentially glass negatives which rely on dark backing to make the image appear positive; “in terms of image, what appeared on the glass-negative was a thin light brown-yellow transparent coating of collodion carrying the image” (Frizot 95). Ambrotypes, or collodion positives as they were known in Great Britain, “were made in the same size as daguerreotypes and were similarly treated—hand-colored, framed behind glass, and housed in a slim case” (Rosenblum 59).
- 3 The form reached the height of popularity in the mid-1850s but had begun to fall out favor by the 1860s. Indeed, “the process cost considerably less to create than daguerreotypes, they were less expensive to buy and far greater numbers of people could afford to have their photograph taken. Because of this, ambrotypes came to be known as the ‘poor man’s daguerreotype’ [...] A large number of ambrotypes were produced in a relatively short amount of time as a direct result of their affordability. Ambrotypes remained popular until the end of the American Civil War, which coincided with the rise of yet another similar and even less expensive process: the tintype” (“Ambrotype”).

- 4 One notable print in African American artist Glenn Ligon's famed *Untitled: Four Etchings* (1992) contains the repeated phrase "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." The line is taken from "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," an essay by African American writer Zora Neale Hurston.
- 5 Greenfield's sartorial choices received intense scrutiny and the singer was subject to detailed, if condescending, fashion advice from her supporters, including feminist reformer Elizabeth Smith Miller, daughter of abolitionist Gerrit Smith (LaBrew 38).
- 6 Jasmine Nichole Cobb explains that "Every aspect of the self demanded perfect execution for picture taking in the mid-nineteenth century" (1). Cobb also argues that "Black women activists were intensely aware of public perceptions of their femininity, especially since early abolitionism depended on Black women's credibility to advance the antislavery movement" (70) and that "Black women cultivated new ways of seeing themselves and seeing free Black womanhood against the backdrop of slavery's visual culture" (70). Within this context, Taylor Greenfield's photographic self-presentation can be read as a strategic deployment of what Cobb has termed the "optics of respectability," an early practice of Black feminist spectatorship which allowed Black women to subvert dominant modes of seeing and being seen within visual culture.
- 7 The portrait subtly invites yet another comparison between its sitter and Jenny Lind, whose 1854 visit to J.P. Ball's studio made American headlines thanks to a syndicated column from *Gleason's Pictorial* which was even reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. For performers like Jenny Lind and Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, images mattered. Art Historian Naomi Rosenblum has suggested that "the moderately gifted Lind" owed much of her tremendous popularity in the United States to her "promotion through *carte [de-visite]* portraits" (63).
- 8 See La Brew 9; Orr 4; and Young 3.
- 9 See <https://friendshipfestival.com/>.
- 10 In *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, Delany writes: "The Canadians are descended from the same common parentage as the Americans on this side of the Lakes—and there is a manifest tendency on the part of the Canadians generally, to Americanism. That the Americans are determined to, and will have the Canadas, to a close observer, there is not a shadow of doubt; and our brethren should know this in time."
- 11 Italian opera singer Teresa Parodi (1827-1828); Irish opera singer Catherine Hayes, aka the Swan of Erin, or Irish Swan (1818-1861); and Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, aka the Swedish Nightingale (1820-1887). Arthur R. LaBrew explains that "the names of birds" were "the mode of distinguishing one singer for another" during that era (24). Throughout her career reviewers drew racialized comparisons between Taylor Greenfield and Jenny Lind; Taylor Greenfield was sometimes referred to as the "Black Jenny Lind." In this moniker, we see race supplanting nation at the same time bird monikers were used to compare her to other white singers. Similar forms of racialized description were used for Black singers throughout the nineteenth century.
- 12 Lillian Serece Williams notes that Buffalo was an important center of commerce and industry in upstate New York in the nineteenth century (9) and while the African American population remained comparatively small, "Blacks were attracted to Buffalo because of its

- proximity to Canada and the freedom from slavery that it promised and because Buffalo offered plenty of job opportunities. Buffalo was also a site on the Underground Railroad. Despite its attractions, on the eve of the Civil War, the Black populace numbered only about 500, many of whom were fugitive slaves or their descendants” (11).
- 13 Trotter’s work reveals that when “Dr. Brown,” a Black doctor, purchased several seats for himself and his friends to see Black pianist Thomas J. Bowers perform in Hamilton, Ontario, Bowers was informed that “colored people were not admitted to first-class seats in Canada” (Trotter 135). Bowers protested and this noble stand against discrimination resulted in granting to Dr. Brown the seats he had purchased; after this time, no attempt was made to exclude colored persons from the troupe’s concerts (Trotter 135). This is an example of how discriminatory seating practices usually ascribed to the United States were also present in Canada.
  - 14 Here, I am particularly attuned to the recent scholarship which examines the impact of performance and music on Frederick Douglass’s abolitionism, most notably David Blight’s biography *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (2018).
  - 15 Shadd Cary’s feud with Henry Bibb “over philosophical differences over what was the best direction for building and sustaining Canada’s black communities” (Rhodes 53) spilled onto the pages of his Ontario newspaper *Voice of the Fugitive* (1851-1853), where Shadd Cary “was made to embody the most despised characteristics of Victorian womanhood: the temptress, the contaminator, the evil yet shrewd manipulator who could not be trusted” (Rhodes 72).
  - 16 See Black 621-22 and Glass 67.
  - 17 Jim Casey situates the editor within a broader schema of pseudonymous Black editorship within the nineteenth century (115). Jane Rhodes (in her chapter “We Have Broken Editorial Ice” in *Mary Ann Shadd Cary*) and James Casey conclude that Shadd Cary often used asterisks to both indicate and shield her authorship.
  - 18 Daphne Brooks explains that the artist typically “negotiated a mixed repertoire of classical standards by Handel and Bellini with the minstrel folk songs of Stephen Foster and weathered an elixir of gushing praise of her ‘genuine art’ with the race-based aspersions of critics who dismissed her act as burnt-cork aberration and ‘untaught’ ‘imitation’” (Brooks 312).
  - 19 Evidence to this effect is contained in the Leon Gardiner Collection’s American Negro Historical Society papers at the Pennsylvania Historical Society.

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