

Introduction

Saving Shoshana

On March 23, 2003, a convoy of the 507th Maintenance Company was attacked four days after U.S. troops entered Iraq. Unbeknownst to the participants, the event was a prologue to a classic American story about young female victims and racial politics. Nine members of the unit died and six became prisoners of war, but only one, a female POW named Jessica Lynch, was widely publicized as the face of American heroism (Fig. 1).¹ Two other women might have been singled out for such attention but were not: both, unlike Private Lynch, were women of color and received slightly more attention than the men. Lori Piestewa was the first woman to die in the conflict and the first American Indian woman to be killed in action as

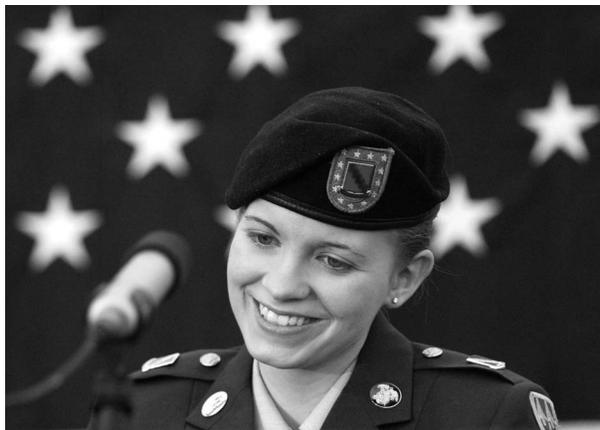


Figure 1. Jessica Lynch speaking after returning home. *Courtesy of AP Images.*

a U.S. soldier, and Shoshana Johnson became the first black female POW in U.S. military history. Yet it was Lynch, a blonde, petite, nineteen-year-old woman from Palestine, West Virginia, who became a star. A military-media coalition produced a movie-worthy narrative of a future kindergarten teacher who fearlessly fired her gun until it was emptied of bullets and struggled with gun and knife wounds until her daring rescue by a military strike force.² The “most famous soldier of the Iraq War,” she appeared in more news broadcasts than the general running the war, the vice president, or the deputy defense secretary.³ She was on the cover of *Time* magazine and a book and television movie recounting her ordeal quickly followed her return.⁴ Alas, the “true story” subtitle eventually had to give way to “inspired by” disclaimers, as subsequent research showed that early reports of her abduction and rescue were highly exaggerated; her gun jammed, she was not shot, and her “rescue” was facilitated by Iraqis from a hospital that had been emptied of oppositional forces.⁵ Despite public revelations and critiques—even from Lynch herself—about the embellished, romantic narrative that initially circulated, stories fostered in a U.S. imaginary about plucky damsels rescued by American warriors served to divert attention for a brief time from more complex questions about the war.⁶

Critics from a variety of political perspectives condemned this story for diverting attention from controversy about whether the nation should have gone to war, and it appears to be a perfect example of political misdirection. However, the politically suspect nature of what the story was used for is a less important issue in the context of my argument than why the media and military coalition deemed Lynch such an appropriate object of sympathy. An obvious question, which ostensibly may seem to have obvious answers, is this: why did Jessica Lynch become the face of the conflict? Why not any of the men? Why not the dead or more seriously wounded? Why not Lori Piestewa or Shoshana Johnson? Answering these questions requires attentiveness to the complicated calculus that results in some victims being privileged and others overlooked in U.S. culture.

In *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, I argue that some stories of African American women’s suffering in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are widely circulated and others dwell in obscurity. African American women are frequently illegible as sympathetic objects for media and political concern, and unpacking the difference between the widely disseminated suffering stories and

the invisible ones demonstrates why some stories of suffering gain prominence and others never gain a national stage. African American women have struggled to gain political currency against narratives that often exclude them from stories about proper victims, and when they are visible, it is often because they powerfully illustrate one or more of the conventions in sentimental political storytelling. In the United States, the logic that determines who counts as proper victims has historically been shaped by sentimental politics—the practice of telling stories about suffering bodies as a means for inciting political change. Sentimental political storytelling describes the narrativization of sympathy for purposes of political mobilization. It is key if people want to mobilize sympathy and have what I call affective agency—the ability of a subject to have her political and social circumstances move a populace and produce institutional effects.

Thus an easy and not inaccurate analysis of the Lynch story is that affect could be mobilized for her because she is a white, photogenic female whose origins from a small town in West Virginia conformed to a familiar narrative about hardworking Americans uplifting themselves through work and service.⁷ This simple answer, however, does not fully explain the relationship between race, gender, and stories of suffering. There are clearly gendered and racial politics at work. Gendered politics ensure the erasure of the dead and wounded bodies of boys and men because manly sacrifice is expected in armed conflict. While an excess of dead male bodies can provoke outrage, it can take a great deal for the country to mobilize around an individual lost male soldier. While there have been high-profile male heroes,⁸ individual male citizens are so frequently killed that their assaulted bodies are rarely sensationalized. Indeed, some of the male soldiers who received the most attention in the second conflict in Iraq were represented by (white) mothers mourning their loss.⁹ Their invisibility here—other than as a part of the larger entity of “our troops” who should be supported—gestures to the intricate logic shaping when masculinity is utilized in the hero/victim dichotomy.

Racial and gender politics demonstrate that in the logic of mobilizing affect—the motivation of emotion that is a necessary prerequisite to social and political action—citizens often negotiate an economy that privileges white female bodies, but even privileging white femininity has an elaborate history. Jessica Lynch’s story was not only about an innocent, patriotic young “girl” (a youthful designation frequently used to describe her), it was also about the

faceless, heroic soldiers who saved her. White female bodies have historically mobilized affect as subjected bodies in need of rescue or as moral voices who generate sympathy; women and their advocates have utilized this problematic privileging of white womanhood as has the state. These bodies can also be the means by which national rhetoric about victims, villains, and heroes are constructed. This is a problematic mechanism for political action—subjects are seen as in need of rescue in relation to how close they are to white female bodies. Citizens often warrant sympathy because they are white female victims, close to the hearts of white women, needing to be protected like white women, or working in the service of the white nuclear family. As Saidiya Hartman has argued, “it is the white or near-white body” that can make “suffering visible and discernible.”¹⁰ Such privileging makes it difficult for women of color to become idealized victims in the U.S. imaginary and limits the possibility that citizens like Lori Piestewa and Shoshana Johnson could be taken up as national heroes.

Regardless of whether or not one thinks Lynch should have been made a national heroine, the incident pushes us to interrogate the possibility of mobilizing affect for other kinds of bodies. Can this privileging of whiteness be circumvented? Under what conditions can a body of color become iconographic? In this case, the military needed a living body that could bolster the support of the country for war. Part of what made Lynch’s story significant is that her capture gave the military and media a contained story that could narrativize a triumph with a clear end. Such romantic closure was important in what already appeared would become a longer conflict than the president’s administration had initially suggested. Lori Piestewa was killed and could no longer function in an uplifting story, and the men’s value—as I have explained—was limited. If we are left with the option of the other woman, what could have made Shoshana Johnson’s terrified, captive visage an iconographic image in the early days of the war (Fig. 2)? Was it because, as some suggested, she did not look like a supermodel and was not read as “cute”?¹¹ Without conceding to subjective aesthetic evaluations about either woman’s appearance, can we believe that being a captured black girl read as “pretty” is all it takes to become the most famous soldier of the war? Would the film on NBC have been entitled *Saving Shoshana* instead of *Saving Jessica Lynch*? If we were to market a story about Johnson—African American, outside of traditional Western paradigms of

US MILITARY IRAQ WAR POW



Figure 2. Shoshawna Johnson, the first African American female POW, was initially discussed in relationship to the other soldiers in her unit. *Courtesy of AP Images.*

beauty, with a biography as a black single mother that automatically triggers criticism—how would we tell the tale so that she could be an object of sympathy and receive state and media attention?

This book explores how African American women negotiate the privileging of whiteness, but reveals that their subversion of the status quo requires more than adherence to Western standards of beauty; it has entailed an assertive utilization of historical sentimental narratives about suffering in the United States. It requires producing a story about uplift and transformation, negotiating the history of representations of proper victims and black suffering. Shoshawna Johnson and other African American women have difficulty rallying citizens around a cause or issue; however “dead Native American women” and “heroic men” also lacked rhetorical value in the story told about the March attack. Framing sentimental political storytelling in the context of this story illustrates how many kinds of citizens are vulnerable to erasure in the logic of sentimental political storytelling. Activists for issues affecting African American women often struggle to get the media and legislators to see black female citizens as representative of their audience and voters, or to address their specific needs, but their struggle is not unique, as African American women are obviously not alone in their lack of political currency. Like many other identity groups, they struggle to gain a rhetorical foothold in a crowded field of competing interests, sometimes in coalition with segments of their racial, gendered, or class identities.

I could easily write a book about the political disregard of African American men, the poor, indigenous people, particular immigrant populations, the disabled, or some other identity group. Even groups that ostensibly do consistently mobilize affect, such as “children,” are vulnerable to a complicated logic, cultivated over the course of centuries (Which children count? Under which circumstances do they deserve sympathy and state concern? When do they receive it?). As the example of the 507th Maintenance Company suggests, there is a problematic economy of value determining who gets to mobilize affect; this book rejects that economy of value. I am not making the case that Johnson should have been *the* national symbol, or arguing that black women’s suffering in the United States is greater than that of all other groups jockeying for attention. Therein lies an unwinnable and unproductive battle, filled with the sorts of fallacious claims about suffering hierarchies that I will critique in this book. However, I am interested in interrogating why Johnson was not, and in our current culture, could not function as an iconographic victim/hero of the war. Johnson and other African American women serve as case studies for national struggles to mobilize affect against both specific rhetorical obstacles (the history of representations about black women) and the sentimental logic that determines which citizens deserves sympathy.

African American women’s rhetorical negotiations highlight more general struggles facing U.S. claims-makers. “Claims-makers,” as Joel Best argues, “must compete in a social problems marketplace.”¹² The narratives they produce in order to gain recognition and attention from the state, from the media, and from other communities such as the inhabitants of their city, workplace, or an institution from which they need aid, are essential to political projects. Narratives are important to social movements—both, as Joseph E. Davis argues, the “preexisting cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power they convey” and the stories that “engage our moral imagination” and encourage audiences to change themselves and the world.¹³ Yet even sentimental stories have stories, genealogies that began with archetypal figures and romances about America. By telling these tales, working backward from the counterstories that black women must tell for their suffering to “sell” in the “social problems marketplace,” I am tracing the sentimental strand that governs rhetoric about victimization and suffering in U.S. politics.

Why Sentimentality?

Many scholars are drawn to the tradition of U.S. sentimentality because sentimental rhetoric has been a useful political practice for many activists. From political campaign ads to patriotic discourse produced by the state, a sentimental frame has been useful in gaining the attention of the public; thus frequent objects of sympathy—such as children and families holding each other in joy or pain—have been politically generative. Much of the research on the powerful use of emotion in politics focuses on people’s tendency to allot more attention to evocations of negative affect than positive—perhaps best exemplified by the terror evoked by the black male criminal—but those emotions would not function as well as they do without the positive affect of sympathy.¹⁴ How can a villain be envisioned without the accompanying visage of the victim? In short, the sentimental is successful in inciting responses that impact voting and legislation.

But why does it work? What problems accompany its successes? And what is it? The words “sentimentality” and “sentimental” are frequently used as accusations in the popular press, and those terms are supposed to be understood in the same way Justice Potter says he understands obscenity in a ruling about whether or not a film could be considered pornographic: you know the sentimental when you see it.¹⁵ Pornography is an appropriate cultural comparison because it shares with the sentimental a reputation for providing politically suspect entertainment. A *New York Times* film critic describes *Eight Below*, a film about dogs left behind and lost in Antarctica as “Grade A pooch porn,” because of the “orgy of canine cuteness” and tears evoked by the film; as is often the case with populist readings of pornography, he was recognizing the pleasures but dubious societal value of the sentimental text.¹⁶ The idea that *Eight Below* is sentimental is mostly likely inoffensive to the filmmakers who decided to make a film about cute dogs, but the word “sentimental” is routinely applied to an extensive set of things with less nuance than used by this movie reviewer. When writers of various articles claim that *Big Bird* is “a triumph of sentimentality,” suggest that “pro-life” activists are read as sentimental, or occasionally place *some* works about death, children, and romance in an analytically suspicious category of praiseworthy texts that “escape” or “resist” sentimentality, I find that I basically understand what these writers mean even as I am conscious of the fact that an extended argument depends on the term

“sentimental” doing substantial critical work.¹⁷ Potter’s legal adage is a notoriously bad rule of thumb, but I suspect that his method of understanding the visual and visceral as a rapid means of identifying genre is a fairly common one.

Signs of the sentimental are repeated representations of the sweet, innocent, or cute; provoked tears in response to a melodramatic or tortuous turn in a story; repetitive and nostalgic renderings of either a sorrowful event or happy times so that the audience is reminded of how painful or joyous a recent occurrence is; long testimonies about a person’s emotions or feelings; and seemingly excessive emotion in response to an event. Perhaps most importantly, detractors understand sentimentality as marked by an excessive or simplistic expression of angst or happiness in response to traumatic or other transformative events that are allegedly difficult to represent through tear-inducing texts. In other words, sentimentality supposedly represents something other than “real” emotion. The expansive, contemporary, and commonsense meaning of sentimentality can be summarized as texts that represent history, events, people, and/or conflicts in simplistic emotional binaries, are designed to produce tears or joyful wistfulness in the consumer, and represent emotion in a way that is far from the complexity of how affect works in “reality.” Patriotism or nostalgia for family and community are forms of sentimentality that may be valued by political strategists, as the frequent intersection of these two often fuels successful nationalist rhetoric, but the explicit use of the term “sentimental” is typically negative. In his famous criticism of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, James Baldwin denounced these texts as poorly calling attention to racial injustice through sentimentality, describing the “s” word as “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion” and the opposite of “real” feeling.¹⁸

Literary scholars who discuss how sentimentality is represented in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature have produced the most nuanced and historicized understandings of the sentimental. Yet as June Howard notes, “scholarly usages of ‘sentimentality’ are more closely intertwined with everyday meanings of the term than we usually recognize” and these broad assumptions about the substance of sentimentality permit “slides into condemnation or celebration,” which “undermine” the value of political work done by sentimental rhetoric.¹⁹ The commonsense definition of sentimentalism can lie

fairly close to many scholarly definitions because of skepticism about the ways in which feeling has been central to politics in sentimental texts. This scholarship presents critiques of “false feeling” by exploring how the depiction of feeling is often about sympathetic identification and fantasies of national cohesion.²⁰

While scholars of sentimentality have been invested in exploring the progressive championing of women and people of color in the sentimental text, they recognize that the flip side of U.S. sentimental authors’ patronage of the oppressed is that their texts often fall short of challenging power relations and can treat feelings and intimacy as substitutes for critiques of power structures and political change. As Ann Douglas argues in her foundational and influential critique of sentimentality, “sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated. It is a form of dragging one’s heels.”²¹ Historically, critics have been very interested in attempts to address politics through feeling but are troubled by many sentimental texts’ ultimate conservatism.

However, sentimentality *cannot* easily be understood as progressive or conservative. When theorists criticize producers of sentimentality for conservative politics, they sometimes attack a rhetoric that is reactionary or designed to serve the status quo. At other times, such critics express disappointment at a text’s possibly radical revolutionary or otherwise progressive potential having been short-circuited in favor of feel-good closure offered by the sentimental narrative. *World Trade Center* provoked exactly this response from movie critic David Edelstein, who wanted the film about the event of 9/11 to be “more political,” because the “heartwarming conclusion” to the film is “unrepresentative—to the point where it almost seems like a denial of the deeper and more enduring horror.”²² Sentimental texts present themselves frequently as progressive about social justice issues while they eventually preserve the status quo. Indeed, that is an overlying tendency of most sentimental texts. However, the binaries of good and bad, Left and Right are insufficient to categorize sentimentality as it does, by its nature, have a progressive political thrust. It addresses the suffering of the politically disadvantaged but utilizes conventional narratives and practices that will not fundamentally disrupt power. Rather than characterizing U.S. sentimentality as “good” or “bad” politics, a more precise characterization—albeit more of a mouthful and less dramatic—is to call it a politically effective but insufficient means of political change.

Therefore I choose to talk about the “sentimental” instead of employing the terminology and perspectives found in scholarship on emotions and politics in political science, the psychology of the emotions, sociological discussions of sympathy, or philosophical elaborations on the meanings of pity, compassion, and sympathy.²³ All of this research informs my discussion of how sentimentality works, but no body of work better describes the narrativization of sympathy in the United States than literary scholarship on the sentimental tradition. Scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature have built a rigorous body of scholarship that has shown how important sentimentality has been to U.S. culture, but my work contributes to a discussion of sentimentality’s influence in contemporary culture. Ann Cvetkovich and Lauren Berlant have done the most work to discuss sentimentality beyond the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, but neither of them focuses on texts by or about African American women.²⁴ While philosophers since Aristotle have explored the role that emotion plays in judgment and Martha Nussbaum and a few others have explored the role that literature can play in building ethical reasoning, race is not prominent in their analyses.²⁵ Theorists of emotions and politics, particularly those focusing on storytelling, social movement theory, and/or race, have done some important work on the role compassion plays in African American citizenship and political mobilization, but they do not address sentimentality specifically as a political practice. These theorists also have not framed their arguments around specific recurring sentimental narrative conventions.

This book provides a schematic account of sentimental conventions, giving a name to the specific building blocks of the U.S. sentimental tradition. When people tell stories about suffering and want to garner sympathy from a broader community, they must negotiate one or more of these conventions: progress narratives that either offer more sympathy for people who are successful enough that they have moved beyond requesting state and institutional interventions, or place historical injustices firmly in the past; suffering hierarchies that privilege some bodies, stories, and histories over others; homogenization of suffering, despite the aforementioned suffering hierarchies, which result in conflating different suffering experiences; stories that suggest that the best response to structural inequities is often therapeutic (self-transformation) or emotional intimacy with someone more powerful; and the idea that some people who claim to be suffering “real” pain are only suffering hysterical or phantom pain.

Once I had identified these conventions through a study of nineteenth-century scholarship and an analysis of contemporary cultural productions, I began to see sentimentality everywhere. And not only is it omnipresent, it is continuously touched by the history of black subjection. But although sentimental scholars have noted how important women and slaves are to sentimental discursive history, no one has looked at how the Civil Rights Movement then became a building block of sentimental history in contemporary culture. I explore the evolution of sentimentality in chapter 1, “A Genealogy of Sentimental Political Storytelling,” in which I examine how black subjection has played a foundational role in sentimental discourse from the early republic to the twenty-first century. After looking at the history of the discourse, I focus on one sentimental convention in each chapter. Chapter 2, “Incidents in the Life of a (Volunteer) Slave Girl: The Specter of Slavery and Escapes from History,” illustrates how some successful African American women have negotiated sentimental conventions—most particularly progress narratives—in the construction of their life stories. In a discussion of memoirs by Jill Nelson, Star Parker, and Oprah Winfrey, I explore how the slave narrative has set a standard, both metaphorical and rhetorical, for telling stories about personal suffering as a path to citizenship in the United States. Of course, some citizens have taken up the conventional sentimental citizenship narratives and made them their own, and talk show host Oprah Winfrey’s ability to posit herself as an ideal sentimental citizen is the subject of my third chapter. Chapter 3, “The Reading Cure: Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison, and Sentimental Politics,” explores how Winfrey shapes herself as a sentimental citizen and teaches her audience sentimental reading practices—most particularly conflating differences between suffering citizens and transforming self through sympathy and consumption.

Winfrey’s focus on homogenization of suffering is an effort to build intimacy between people, and I continue an examination of sentimental intimacy in Chapter 4 “Salvation in His Arms? Rape, Race, and Intimacy’s Salve.” This chapter examines sentimental narratives on film and television that treat therapeutic intimacy as the solution to the failures of the law. In each of these texts, a black woman or girl is sexually assaulted by white men. Rather than addressing how the characters in these stories might change the law or construct other institutional responses, these narratives suggest that the best response to the failure of an African American woman’s testimony under the law is an “unburdening” of the heart to a sympathizer

representing the state. The broader lesson to be learned from examining these texts is that the privileging of intimacy over institutional change functions as a problematic salve for oppression.

While the stories in the first three chapters could offer any number of progressive political possibilities, most of these stories model personal transformation as a solution to oppression as opposed to advocating political or structural transformation. In the final two chapters, I shift to examining how a sentimental framework can be politically productive. I move from a discussion of sexual violence to medical violence in Chapter 5, “In the Shadow of Anarcha: Race, Pain, and Medical Storytelling,” and I explore how some African American women are modeling sentimental intimacy with a more political thrust. In an analysis of two theatrical productions and one patient’s story about pain, I explore how people are producing counternarratives to stories about black women and pain, encouraging their audiences to understand both history and individual contexts in stories about race and medicine, and to work toward affective agency in their own care. This chapter takes a bit of a different approach than the others, as it treats exchanges in institutional settings and medical research as sites of storytelling, and demonstrates how we routinely use sentimental conventions in our own interpersonal interactions.

I continue to look at the political possibilities for sentimental storytelling in my final chapter. Recognizing Oprah Winfrey’s sentimental investment in the therapeutic was the impetus for this project, presenting an endless archive of examples of sentimentality at work. However, early-twenty-first-century news media has propelled the completion of this book. As I have worked, the news has been filled with stories of missing girls, and the ones that appear on nightly news broadcasts and are memorialized in legislation all look white. While the abduction, rape, and murder of children must be contextualized in relationship to larger issues of violence against women, the ways in which narratives of vulnerable white innocence have propelled policy away from other harms confronting citizens demonstrates the sentimental hierarchies present in public policy formation, and in this specific example, of child protection. Chapter 6, “The Abduction Will Not Be Televised,” historicizes inequities in the treatment and coverage of child abductions and examines fiction and nonfiction commentary in response to various abduction cases. Given the media attention and policy initiatives generated in response to the issue of child abduction, the examples place in stark relief the problem of

inequitable attention to some people's suffering. These stories show how the meting out of such attentions is overdetermined by identity, and they demonstrate how the crafting and public reception of sentimental political storytelling has evolved in U.S. history.

Sentimental political storytelling is essential to contemporary discourse about suffering in the United States. African American women are by turns hypervisible and illegible in an era in which their major suffering is alleged to have passed, given the iconographic representations of black suffering, such as the tortured slave and bodies subjected in a Jim Crow South, that linger in the consciousness of present-day African Americans and the audiences who hear and see stories about black suffering in a variety of media. Sentimentality circulates through representations and narratives that become reference points for how people communicate their suffering, and I demonstrate here that the slave body and the successful citizens who have benefited from the Civil Rights Movement are very important rhetorical touchstones in contemporary culture. The cost of this for contemporary African Americans is that they then always stand in contrast to these representations. Thus suffering hierarchies, one of the most prominent sentimental conventions, are created not only between citizens deemed more and less valuable in the present, such as stay-at-home moms and welfare mothers or abducted white girls and missing poor women. Citizens must also contend with hierarchical comparisons between their status and the status of ghosts of the past.

But we ignore, to our peril, sentimentality's embedded presence in the public imagination. Sentimentality is an imperfect and often dangerous discourse that has nevertheless been useful to various activists throughout history when they make political claims. Read through a priori rubrics of progress, suffering hierarchies, homogenization, self-help, and hysteria, the claims maker must transform self and story to be a proper sentimental citizen. Sentimental political storytelling—for better and often for worse—has shaped much of what lies beneath many U.S. policies, and understanding U.S. political discourse requires a knowledge of how sentimentality makes citizens legible and illegible in stories about pain.