

Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates

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In keeping with the panel theme of “New Scholarship in Women’s History: Women’s Voices in the Public Sphere,” I will share with you some of the things I have discovered recently about women’s voices in the public sphere in the United States, and some of the things I conclude about these voices in my book, *Their Right to Speak: Women’s Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates*. My plan for this talk is to sketch several issues and cases – to share with you some new scholarship and hopefully to pique your interest.

The scholarship in *Their Right to Speak* was inspired by a collection of petitions I recovered at the National Archives. It is a collection of petitions submitted to the U.S. Congress by nearly 1500 women, predominantly white Christian women of privilege who lived in

characterized the issue as one of law, morality, and piety. Catharine Beecher characterized the issue as one of piety and benevolence. All three public figures used the same facts, but Beecher's interpretation, supported in myriad ways by (male) community and religious leaders and presaged by Evarts's descriptions of the case, not only invited but required some women's political intervention on behalf of "the oppressed."

Beecher started – anonymously – a petition campaign, and, crucially, interpreted the crisis ("what should we do with the Indians?") as urgent, moral, and religious as well as political. According to Beecher, women could situate themselves inside the national debate without claiming political rights – in fact, by declaring themselves apolitical. For Beecher, that move – giving up political power – enabled women's political influence. Beecher cast woman's role in this extraordinary case in Biblical terms. Using Queen Esther as her model, she characterized woman's understanding of the case in terms of their natural concerns as (unit), ne(1)-1(te)5(r)(4m)9(s. Usi)4

new homes in a distant and dreary wilderness.” Defining or maintaining a nation’s or a people’s home was a masculine, political act. But defining or maintaining a family’s home was a feminine, domestic act. The ambiguity of “home” here rendered the boundary of the removal debate itself ambiguous.

among families and friends, distinctions like this one – quoting from the Bible versus quoting

appropriate topic of women's advocacy.

In the 1830s it would have been impossible to isolate one's opinions about Native Americans from one's opinions about African Americans. In 1831 South Carolina representative Starling Tucker sarcastically taunted his opponents on the House floor by asking, "What was the difference between cruelty to the slave, and cruelty to the poor Indians?" In an 1833 letter to the *National Intelligencer*, one of the nation's most popular daily newspapers, it was argued that, unfair though it was, the federal government could not side with the Cherokees in the Indian removal debates because slavery had become such a divisive issue: the federal government had to stand with Georgia and other southern states against Native Americans to show solidarity, given the sectional tensions prompted by slavery. And yet most of our histories of the era treat Native and African Americans in isolation. We have to reweave these histories together to understand women's earliest national political activism, since that activism engaged the Indian removal as well as the slavery debates.

In the 1820s and 1830s, the ways northern white women imagined Native and African Americans, especially as the objects of their advocacy, would have been very important. When Catharine Beecher asked women to support Native Americans, there were no longer any large, stable communities of Native Americans with which northern whites regularly engaged. Women were petitioning on behalf of Indians they did not know and with whom they had no first-hand experience. The same was true when Angelina and Sarah Grimké asked women to advocate on behalf of slaves; slavery in the northern states had been illegal for more than a decade, and few northern whites had regular contact even with free African Americans. To understand women's political advocacy during the Indian and slave debates, we have to consider what imaginings were available to these women at the time of their petition

campaigns.

I worked with four sources to do this work: six of the best-selling books of the period, a decade of mainstream and religious newspapers, and three of the most influential abolitionist books written in the 1830s. Here, too, what I found was first, that popular books included many admirable Indian characters and no – really, none – no admirable black characters to imagine as readers turned the pages. In religious and mainstream newspapers, people read cultural reports about Indians and, quite literally side-by-side, advertisements from people who wanted to buy, sell, or recapture slaves; people learned about treaties between the U.S. and Indian nations from articles that buttressed letters demanding that slave owners refrain from freeing their slaves unless they provided for their immediate passage to Africa; they read stories about Christianized Indians living peacefully among whites as they bemoaned the fate of blacks always to be degraded if they remained among whites. The comparisons quite simply are stunning. For most of people in this particular discourse community – white, privileged, seemingly benevolent northern Christians who disapproved of slavery, colonization – facilitating the removal of blacks from the United States by moving them to Africa – was a much more logical solution to slavery than immediate abolition. Colonization was very popular at the time, widely supported by individuals as well as religious organizations and local and state governments. For most anti-removalists, men as well as women, given the ways they imagined the objects of their advocacy – Native and African Americans – colonization, rather abolition, was the most benevolent, appropriate, and legal solution to slavery. Abolitionist rhetoric could not be sustained by this group, and so because of their racial, religious, and national ideologies, more than their gender ideologies, most female anti-removalists refused the appropriateness of antislavery petitioning for women – and also for men – in the late 1830s.

4. “Coming from One Who Has a Right to Speak”: Debating Colonization and Abolition

So Catharine Beecher advocated colonization, Angelina Grimké advocated immediate abolition, and they engaged in a public debate about antislavery activism in 1836 and 1837. Catharine Beecher attacked abolitionists including Angelina Grimké; in response, Angelina Grimké attacked colonizationists including Catharine Beecher. Both women imagined themselves as antislavery activists, but they embraced dramatically different antislavery programs. In addition, they offered competing ideals for democratic processes and participation: Beecher’s model followed from a tradition of Christian democracy that she inherited from her father and other theocrats – a tradition in which people could debate but they had to debate nicely and respectfully; Grimké’s model followed from a tradition not of Christian democracy, but of democratic Christianity – a tradition in which people should fight as vehemently and as radically as necessary to ensure that everyone had equal access to

antebellum gender ideologies and as marginal were in fact central to antislavery debates in the late 1830s.

Native and African American rights, as they occurred in the 1820s and the 1830s.

These points lead to one of my favorite conclusions of this project: women's history is not value-added; it is not an addition to U.S. history, something we add on top or on the sides to fill out "History." When we put women at the center, where sometimes *they really do belong*, that move changes, even corrects, what we think we know about U.S. history.