Comment on Alisse Portnoy's "Their Right to Speak"

Nancy Isenberg

One of the important developments in gender analysis is the focus on language. People may use the same words, but mean very different things. We have only to consider for a moment the diverse interpretations of the Bible to appreciate how slippery language can be. But to understand American democracy, or what Washington Irving's witty older brother William called a "logocracy," there is no solution but to parse carefully what people mean when they talk and write, trying their best to persuade, provoke, and engage in deliberation. As Alisse Portnoy argues, language does not simply reflect human experience, but language and discourse can constitute an imagined situation. It does not tell the whole story to acknowledge that women signed petitions, or joined antislavery societies; it is just as crucial to closely scrutinize the words in those petitions, and where that language came from.

Portnoy is an English professor, so her interest in language makes perfect sense. Her book attempts to unravel one of the classic debates in women's history: the war by letter between Catharine Beecher and Angelina Grimké in 1837. As she correctly points out, this battle is usually simplified into a contest between conservatism and liberalism – and it is narrowly seen as a debate over women's public, political role. One purpose of Portnoy's book is to explain the broader political context of this debate, pointing out the influence that Indian Removal and colonization had on the arguments of these two women. It is just as clear that Portnoy is writing her own treatise in defense of Catharine Beecher, who is generally dismissed as the voice of conservative womanhood. No two-dimensional caricature can do justice to Beecher. American historians – and women's

historians – often fall prey to transforming historical figures into heroines or villains. The larger issue is simple: Do we really learn anything about the past when we rely on heroic narratives, or do such stories merely make us feel warm and fuzzy about great women in the past? The truth is often messier than tales of heroines convey. Historical figures looked at the world quite differently than we do, and recreating that alien world of the past requires a sensitive ear. We must pay attention to the literary resonances and rhetorical strategies of Grimké and Beecher – and decode their specific meanings – while remaining sensitive to the context they knew.

A missing piece to the story of their debate is the petition campaign against Indian Removal. In 1829, Beecher assumed a pivotal role as the initiator and organizer of the women's antiremoval campaign. Beecher was also a leading defender of the colonization movement, which called for free blacks to migrate to Liberia as a solution to the slavery problem.

Offering a careful reading, Portnoy sees Beecher's rationale for opposing Indian Removal as novel, but not radical or protofeminist. Beecher frames the language of her petition circular as a Christian appeal: women had a moral duty to express their "wishes and feelings" to save the Indians from being forcibly expelled from their native lands in the southern states. Beecher avoided the language of demanding rights, and she believed that women had greater power when they used affection to sway their human heart. I was struck by how much Beecher echoed the words of Thomas Jefferson, in his famous 1786 "Head and Heart" letter to Maria Cosway.[1] Beecher's words here had an eighteenth-century tone, in which sentiment, sympathy, and feeling can cause people to engage in

[1] Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, Sept. 1, 1786. A copy of the original is available at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:12:./temp/~ammem_k7ZK:: . The printed text is available at http://www.juntosociety.com/i_documents/tjheadheartltr.html .

acts of benevolence. Women were perceived as more responsive, their moral fibers more sensitive, and Beecher reaffirms this classic understanding of feeling as the basis for human society – as found in the Scottish Enlightenment and moral philosophy. If women bound society together through affection and feeling, then they had a duty to protect those feelings by taking action, even petitioning, to avert the nation from some calamity.

This is a consistent theme for Beecher. Women had a special role in preserving order and averting chaos. As she said in her Indian Removal circular, women had a duty to intervene. Borrowing from the biblical model of Esther, Beecher imagines American women taking on the role of supplicant. Like her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe (who had four portraits on the Virgin Mary on her walls), Catherine, too, borrowed from Catholic religion the feminine force of the Virgin as intermediary.

But if Beecher opposed Indian Removal, how did she justify colonization? How could she argue that the distressed Indians were deprived of their homes, and not see that free blacks were being expelled from the United States? Colonization, despite what seems bizarrely racist and twisted, had a large following in the 1820s. Beecher's father was a leading evangelical, and colonization in Africa went hand-in-hand with his vision for sending Christian democracy overseas. For those in the colonization movement, Africa was the native homeland of free blacks, and there they could be free citizens. It was also a reform method that preserved order in the fractious nation, for it required the peaceful cooperation of slave masters. Immediate abolition was the antithesis of colonization, in Catharine Beecher's mind, and it was the fear of chaos that motivated her to criticize Angelina Grimké's call for women to petition the government against slavery.

Portnoy shows how Beecher defended her version of Christian democracy. Gentle persuasion was the only means of real reform, she contended, while the violent ultraism of abolitionism shut down all rational debate, making southern slaveholders angry and intransigent. The act of women sending petitions to Congress only underscored the fear of disorder. Beecher saw herself as a moderate; she believed that change must be gradual, southerners must take the lead, and above all, northern white women had to avoid supporting abolition – for they could only make matters worse by furthering dissension between white northerners and white southerners.

Grimké, of course, looked at the problem differently. Instead of defending order, she valued equality, looking to the primitive Christian church (before priests and hierarchies perverted Christ's message) as a model of moral behavior. Wrongs could not be smoothed over or concealed; feelings need to be pricked, and the suffering of the slave must be felt. The hardened hearts of the cruel slave master (or the indifferent hearts of northern white women) should not be sheltered from the harsh reality of slavery. Grimké used Esther, too, to make her case, portraying her as a female champion of an oppressed minority. Beecher was irked by this, calling this biblical allusion inappropriate. Yet it revealed how both women tried to trump the other's arguments, and lay claim to the moral authority that they needed to defend their positions.

What can we conclude about this great debate? It comes down to the fact that Beecher and Grimké saw women's place in the nation state quite differently. Beecher imagined that women were powerful as missionaries, spreading the gospel and preventing anarchy; they were healers – agents of unity – not dividers. Women could voice their appeals for the distressed, just as long as they did not endanger the nation; they could

petition, just as long as they did not sue their right to speak to foment factions, divisions, and inflict deadly wounds on the body politic.

My feeling here is that Beecher drew on two metaphors: women were either positive vessels of Christian benevolence and persuasion, or dangerous harridans akin to the fiery dames of French Revolution – it was the French Revolution that best conjured Beecher's image of violent disunion and it appears in her writings. There is a class-based elitism in Beecher's vision of womanhood, and she had no interest in equality. To her, equality was a ridiculous idea when applied to free blacks, Indians, or women.

Interestingly, however, Beecher viewed abolitionists as promoters of factionalism, in a significant way echoing what James Madison wrote in Federalist #10.[2] Equality had to be sacrificed for unity, which meant that factions striving for greater equality had to be quelled if they threatened national unity. Beecher was less of a mere conservative than a Federalist. On the other hand, Grimké captured a more modern sense of democracy, in which rights were natural, and wrongs must be rebuked. Grimké wanted women to be part of the masses, clamoring for rights, while Beecher wished for women to stand apart from the cacophony. Beecher believed women must do all they could to encourage harmony, what I see as a female choir singing a few tender chords, whenever the noise of the masses momentarily died down.

So, in the end, we might conclude that the Grimké and Beecher debate operated on at least two levels: first, it addressed the problem of speech, petitioning, and the racial geography of citizenship provoked by Indian Removal, colonization, and abolition; and second, it replayed, on a subtler way, a much older debate between the Federalist order and Jeffersonian democracy.

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[2] available at http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed10.htm .