

## *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 Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, protesting the forced removal of Native Americans from their southern lands. The women petitioned against Indian removal in 1830 and 1831, which means that this anti-removal petition campaign predates the antislavery petition campaign and is the first instance of collective, national, political activism by women in U.S. history.

In these rich, thoughtful petitions, women argued not only against the forced removal of Native Americans, but also for what they called their “right to speak on the subject,” to “interfere” in unprecedented ways into this debate about national policy. The recovery of this collection of petitions, then, and the knowledge that the anti-removal campaign was an immediate antecedent to the antislavery petition campaign, provides us with a great opportunity to compare the ways a group (here, women) acquires the authority to speak about a topic for which they usually have no authority (national policy) in a community from which they typically

are excluded (the national legislature). How did some U.S. women transgress prohibitions to engage discourses of power in the early nineteenth century?

My book is organized around four issues that reflect the complexity and urgency of the 1830s, a decade whose technological advances enabled debates about Indians, slaves, and ladies on a national scale unimaginable even a few years earlier. Today I will talk briefly about each of these four issues and then summarize some of the conclusions I drew from my research.

### **1. “Causes of Alarm to Our Whole Country”: Articulating the Crisis of Indian Removal**

The Indian removal debates exploded when Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828. Jackson, the first U.S. president who was not from Massachusetts or Virginia, was elected with strong support, and strong mandates, from the southern states. The six previous U.S. presidents believed that Indians should move west, but none wanted to force removal as did Andrew Jackson. This push toward forced removal caused quite a stir, especially among theocrats and politicians who would go on to form the Whig party –particularly people who supported religious missions and also who feared the wrath of God. So organizations such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) sent lobbyists including Jeremiah Evarts to Washington, D.C., to advocate on behalf of Native Americans. Henry Clay suggested that Jeremiah Evarts involve women. Evarts already had: he inspired Catharine Beecher, a close friend’s daughter, to advocate on behalf of Native Americans. That may seem a big surprise to those of you who know about the antislavery activism debates between Catharine Beecher and Angelina Grimké. But in 1829, Beecher urged women to petition the federal government about an issue of national concern.

On what basis did Beecher advocate women’s participation in an Indian removal petition campaign? Andrew Jackson characterized the issue as one of law and politics. Jeremiah Evarts

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 and talents; and so she legitimized petitioning the U.S. federal government in this particular case, or crisis, as within women's lawful province, according to Christian and natural laws. With the support of male religious, community, and political leaders, nearly 1500 women responded to Beecher's call.

## **2. "A Right to Speak on the Subject": Petitioning the Federal Government against Indian Removal**

The women who responded to Beecher's call were white, Christian, middle- and upper-middle-class, and they often belonged to leading families in their social and religious circles. Many of them supported the Christian missions located among Native Americans in the south financially, and in religious newspapers they or women like them often were listed as donors to the cause or as participants in local fundraising groups. Henry Clay and Jeremiah Evarts

specifically targeted these women, believing that they could sway Americans using moral and religious arguments to save these “dying,” recently converted Christians.

In their petitions, female anti-removalists argued that this case was extraordinary. Women from Hallowell, Maine, explained that “we would not normally interfere in the affairs of government,” and women from Steubenville, Ohio, went so far as to remind congressmen that “your memorialists would sincerely deprecate any presumptuous interference on the part of their own sex, with the ordinary affairs of the country, as wholly unbecoming the character of American females.” If Indian removal was an isolated, unique case, women could assure congressmen – and other men and women – that their “interference” here was not the beginning of a widespread challenge by women to an ideology of separate spheres for men and women.

In their petitions, female anti-removalists also recast the issue of U.S. Indian policy by using concepts such as “virtue” and “home” that were integral to and yet ambiguous in contemporary republican ideology. Hallowell women, for example, closed their petition with a short final paragraph: “We do therefore repeat our prayer, that they may be permitted to abide by the graves of their Fathers, and enjoy the sweets and endearments of *home*.” So the last word of the last paragraph of the first petition regarding a national issue submitted to the U.S. federal government by a group of women was “home.” “Home” in this petition signified both domestic and national spaces. “Home” represented the domestic space in which one’s family resided, a space clearly gendered as feminine during this period in U.S. history. Petitioners also linked “home” to nationhood, one’s civic genealogy: women privileged the patriarchal concepts of fathers serving as critical links between generations. Women from Steubenville invoked both meanings of home as well, when they lamented that Native Americans would be forced “to seek

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.

In their petitions, female anti-removalists also infused the debate with more than merely political implications. Indian removal was about faith and honor, misery, Christianity, benevolence, domesticity; as women from Hallowell declared, the treatment of Native Americans by the United States “affects *our* honor, *our* virtue, and *our* faith.” That is a remarkable reframing of this question, a question that President Andrew Jackson adamantly believed was one only of sovereignty and polity.

Just how much female anti-removalists recast the debate is evident when we compare these wonderful women’s petitions to petitions submitted by their male relatives, neighbors, and friends. For example, several weeks after women from Farmington, Maine, submitted an anti-removal petition to Congress, Congress received an anti-removal petition from their townsmen. At least half of the female petitioners shared surnames with men who signed the second petition, and yet the petitions of family members and neighbors differed in striking ways. I will share just one example with you. Women made a religious argument, one not echoed in the petition from Farmington men: women quoted the Bible when they asked the government to protect Native Americans because of “the moral obligation we are under to ‘do unto others’ . . . by the vengeance of Heaven which we would not incur, and by all that is Christian.” Farmington men, on the other hand, quoted the Supreme Court chief justice’s pronouncement that Native Americans had “a legal and just claim” to their lands, a topic of argument completely absent from the women’s petition. When we remind ourselves that these petitions were circulated nearly simultaneously

among families and friends, distinctions like this one – quoting from the Bible versus quoting from the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court – really stand out. Why the differences?

Appropriately, women selected topics consistent with popular, conventional ideologies about or easily available to women. Women's petitions effectively combined essentializing beliefs about womanhood with strategically selected topics of debate, and so the political intrusion of female anti-removal petitioners seemed a natural extension of their female roles and responsibilities. Yes, political participation on this scale by women was incredibly novel – but it did not look radical. These female anti-removal petitioners creatively enabled their collective participation in national debates for the first time in U.S. history, and they wrote about it as a natural, even an obligatory, duty given their roles as women and the nature of this extraordinary case, the crisis of Indian removal.

### **3. “The Difference between Cruelty to the Slave, and Cruelty to the Indian”: Imagining Native and African Americans as Objects of Advocacy**

I mentioned earlier the surprise of Catharine Beecher's role in the women's anti-removal petition campaign in 1829, given her adamant and public position in 1836 and 1837 that women should not petition the federal government against slavery, even though Beecher and her family opposed slavery. Again, why the difference? It wasn't just that one was an anonymous position and the other was public, and to blame it on violations of gender conventions – Angelina and Sarah Grimké and other female abolitionists were moving too far out of women's sphere for Beecher – to blame it on violations of gender conventions so oversimplifies the case that we might as well just call that assessment wrong. Actually, the ways many European Americans imagined Native Americans and African Americans precluded immediate abolition as an

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 Christian ways of being and living.

There are two key points I want to make here: first, the very heated debates – personally and ideologically insulting at times – between Catharine Beecher and Angelina Grimké were about much more than appropriate womanly behavior even though most historians categorize these debates as debates about women’s roles and responsibilities. Second, male colonizationists and abolitionists recognized the Catharine Beecher/Angelina Grimké debates as integral to the rivalry between advocates of their competing antislavery programs. In fact, James Birney, a leading abolitionist newspaper editor, reported that he had planned to take on the colonizationists in print but no longer felt a need because Grimké was doing such a great job. The fiery exchange between Beecher and Grimké that historians now typically read as being primarily about

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

### **Some brief conclusions**

First, women's political protests against Indian removal predated women's protests against slavery. Led by Catharine Beecher, northern, white, Christian women of privilege interpreted the crisis of Indian removal and their own responsibilities in ways that not only excused but that invited and warranted their intrusion into this national debate. Female anti-removal activism, though political, was novel but not radical – an important distinction between anti-removalism and abolitionism.

Second, dramatically distinct and widely circulating imaginings of Native and African Americans as objects of advocacy – within a context of popular religious and national ideologies – more than gender conventions led most northern white Christians, men and women, to advocate colonization (the pretty much forced removal of blacks to Africa) rather than abolition, despite their staunch anti-removalist position in the Indian removal debates. To look only to gender conventions as an explanation for Beecher's refusal to petition against slavery is, quite frankly, to make decontextualized, ahistorical claims.

Third, the slave debates were not just between pro and antislavery advocates. Antislavery advocates divided into two distinct camps, colonizationists and abolitionists, and competing solutions – as well as competing ideas about religious and democratic process and participation – disrupt any sort of linear progression between, say, antislavery and women's rights activism. We must reweave Indian removal, colonization, and abolition in our histories of this period, and we must study woman's rights debates concomitant with debates about

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.