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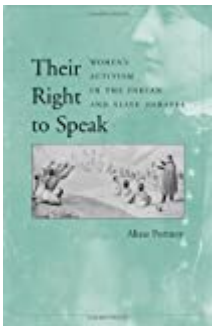

Alisse Portnoy. *Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xii + 290 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01922-5.

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Catharine Beecher on Indian Removal and Anti-Slavery

When Angelina and Sarah GrimkÃ© began their 1836-37 tour as paid agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS), they provoked a national debate over the propriety of female lecturers. Many historians view the subsequent published exchange between Angelina GrimkÃ© and her critic Catharine Beecher as a crucial moment in the emergence of the women's rights movement. But Alisse Portnoy, an associate professor of English and rhetoric at the University of Michigan, believes that gender provides only a partial explanation for the vehemence of Beecher's opposition. In this engaging book, Portnoy convincingly argues that the abolitionist movement, and the debate over women's proper place in that movement, should not be studied in isolation from the broader political and discursive context of Cherokee Removal and colonization.

Portnoy begins with the movement against Indian removal, which included "the first national women's petition campaign in United States history" (p. 1). Jeremiah Evarts, who orchestrated the anti-removal campaign for the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions, personally invited Catharine Beecher to recruit American women on behalf of the Cherokee. Evarts defined the issue of Cherokee removal as a moral one, enabling women to take public action. And in their petitions, women emphasized their right to speak on questions of religion only. As a result of this emphasis, the 1,500 northern women who petitioned against Cherokee removal received overwhelming support from their male relatives and communities. And, as Portnoy points out, only one politician decried their petitioning (p. 229). The communal and familial support for women's petitions against removal offers a striking contrast to the response to female antislavery petitions. While women who petitioned against removal seemed to fulfill their natural, benevolent roles, one Senator argued that antislavery petitioners "unsexed themselves" (p. 83).

The dramatically different public perception of anti-removal and abolition, Portnoy argues, had to do with the portrayal of Native Americans and African Americans in popular culture. While Lydia Maria Child, James Fenimore Cooper, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick offered the public admirable Native American characters, none of the bestselling books of the 1820s contained positive

African American figures. Even more striking, Portnoy analyzes the dichotomous portrayal of both groups in the pages of the *National Intelligencer*, the leading newspaper in the nation's capital. The newspaper included Native Americans as members of a foreign nation, property owners, and political actors. African Americans, by contrast, most often appeared in the newspaper's pages as stateless persons, pieces of property, or passive victims. Portnoy persuasively links the proponents of anti-removal and colonization through their portrayal of the objects of their benevolence. The Evangelicals and Whigs who opposed Indian removal saw Native Americans as Christian citizens of other nations with legitimate claims (in the form of treaties) on the U.S. government. But these same reformers could not imagine the disappearance of "prejudices of color, prejudices of habit" and thus urged the removal of African Americans as the most expedient, constitutional method of ending slavery and improving the condition of former slaves (p. 127).

In her final two chapters, Portnoy analyzes the public exchange as published in Beecher's *Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (1837) and Angelina GrimkÃ©'s *Letters to Cath[a]rine E. Beecher, in Reply to An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, Addressed to A. E. GrimkÃ©* (1838). Though traditionally seen as a debate about appropriate gender roles, Portnoy presents the dialogue as "the only sustained conversation between adherents of intensely competitive, antagonistic rival organizations" (p. 205), the American Colonization Society (ACS) and the American Anti-Slavery Society. As Portnoy reminds her readers, in the 1830s, the ACS was far more respectable and widely subscribed than the radical egalitarian AAS. Though conservatives like Lyman Beecher believed they could be both abolitionists and colonizationists, members of the AAS disagreed. Ultimately forced to choose a side, Lyman Beecher chose colonization, believing that the aggressive and integrationist tactics of immediatists made emancipation more difficult. For Beecher and his eldest daughter, abolition depended on enlisting slaveholders rather than alienating them.

Having offered this context, Portnoy argues that Catherine Beecher's abhorrence of women's antislavery petitioning was not, as many scholars have contended, a rejection of her earlier activism against Cherokee removal. Critiquing both male and female abolitionists, Beecher's opposition to GrimkÃ©'s lectures flowed from more than her conservative assumptions regarding women's role. Like her father, Catharine Beecher consistently advocated the creation of a "Christian democracy," a society where the government and leading men used their power to create a virtuous nation (p. 188). Only in times of crisis, Beecher believed, should women use their mediating influence on the side of morality. Though Beecher judged Indian removal to be an urgent matter, she saw slavery as a long-term problem to be solved through "peaceful and Christian" methods (p. 222). Beecher offered the example of the British abolition movement, which "was conducted by some of the wisest and most talented statesmen, as well as the most pious men, in the British nation" (p. 220).

The strength of Portnoy's book lies in her compelling rereading of Beecher's arguments, but the monograph is not, nor is it intended to be, a social or political history of anti-removal, colonization, and abolitionism. She portrays Beecher as a representative of colonization, but she admits that Beecher "did not explicitly endorse the ACS in her monograph" (p. 220). While Portnoy explains that Beecher believed female moral authority flowed from political neutrality, she might have extended her analysis to Beecher's (and other women's) relationship to the male hierarchy of the ACS. Besides Beecher's implicit support, what role did white women have in the colonization movement? Did they wield the religious influence that Beecher suggested?

I hope scholars will heed Portnoy's call for investigation into the relationship between anti-removal and antislavery. Portnoy associates proponents of anti-removal and colonization, but many immediate abolitionists also engaged simultaneously in Indian and antislavery reform. Similarly, Portnoy dismisses the argument that women's anti-removal petitioning was radical or "protofeminist" (p. 60), but given the continued overlap between Indian reform and women's rights, this connection deserves further exploration.[1]

Note

[1]. For example, Lucretia Mott to Edmund Quincy, August 24, 1848 in Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 165-167; and Lori D. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 91-92.

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