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Re-Rooting American Women's Activism

Global Perspectives on 1848*

For many American women's historians trained in the 1960s and 1970s, interest in the field was inspired by their engagement with women's liberation. They were compelled by their politics to recover the roots of modern feminism. Many radical feminists initially found foremothers in the likes of Louise Michel, Emma Goldman, Crystal Eastman and other turn-of-the-century socialist and anarchist women. Though women's historians of this generation were driven by competing visions of feminism and thus embraced different foremothers, many sought to understand the present through a genealogical excavation of the past. This was particularly true for those studying women's political activism, who moved from contemporary debates about sex equity back through suffrage – socialism too quickly fell by the wayside in the U.S. – and then Seneca Falls. This paper explores the implications of reaching Seneca Falls through this reverse chronological trajectory, and then suggests how we might rethink the history of women's activism by re-embedding Seneca Falls in the world of 1848.

What a world it was – revolutions erupted across Europe; Irish peasants and later defeated German revolutionaries migrated to the US en masse; the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War, adding new territories and peoples to the United States; *The Communist Manifesto* was published; the Seneca Nation embraced a written constitution for the first time; John Humphrey

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Noyes established a utopian community at Onedia, New York; New York State granted property rights to married women; slavery was abolished in the French West Indies; U.S. slaves fled North to find freedom; the first Chinese immigrants to North America arrived in San Francisco; the Gold Rush began; the Free Soil Party and spiritualism were founded and both attracted thousands of devotees. This remarkable array of events shaped the meaning of Seneca Falls and the trajectories of women's activism in the mid-nineteenth century U.S.

Yet rarely is the 1848 woman's rights convention conceived as part of these revolutionary developments. Instead, it is most often defined as foremother to the federal suffrage amendment passed in 1920. Disentangling Seneca Falls from suffrage is no easy task. These two events were identified as the touchstones of American women's history long before the field was created. Until quite recently, Betsy Ross stitching the American flag and the Salem Witch Trials were the only other widely-known "women's" events in American History. In 1959, Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle* reinvigorated the narrative that carried women's activism from Seneca Falls to suffrage, but the original story line was crafted by pioneer feminists themselves. In their six-volume *History of Woman Suffrage* published between 1881 and 1922, editors Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage claimed Seneca Falls as the birthplace of the women's movement and the Nineteenth Amendment mandating women's suffrage as that movement's greatest achievement.¹

In recent years, scholars studying African American, immigrant, and working-class women have challenged certain aspects of the story.² Focusing on the post-

1 Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle. The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1959; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, Eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. The original two-volume history covered 1848-1880 and was published in New York by Fowler & Wells in 1881. Succeeding volumes were published between then and 1922, the last volume being completed by Gage alone following the deaths of Stanton and Anthony.

2 Some of those most important works in this area are Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African Americans in the Struggle for Woman Suffrage*, Ph. D. Dissertation, Howard University 1977; *Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830-1920*, in: Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Sharon Harley, Eds., *The Afro-American Woman. Struggles and Images*, Port Washington, NY 1978, 17-27; *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, Bloomington, Indiana 1998; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter. The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, New York 1984; Yamile Azize, *Puerto Rican Women and the Vote*, in: Ellen DuBois and Vicki Ruiz, Eds., *Unequal Sisters. A Multicultural History of Women in the United States*, New York 1994; Joan Jensen, *Disfranchisement is a Disgrace. Women and Politics in New Mexico, 1900-1940*, in: Joan M. Jensen and Darlis Miller, Eds., *New Mexico Women. Intercultural Perspectives*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1990; Ellen Carol DuBois, *Working Wo-*

Civil War suffrage campaign rather than its antebellum antecedents, historians have detailed the racist, nativist, and elitist tendencies of many white women activists and highlighted the exclusion of poor, black, and immigrant women from the political organizations and agendas of more well-to-do white suffragists. These challenges have tarnished the image of several pioneer figures and added a few women of color and working women to the pantheon of feminist foremothers, but the dominant story of women's political activism as the struggle for enfranchisement has been left largely intact.³

By focusing the analysis synchronically – that is, on events occurring concurrently with the emergence of woman's rights in 1848 – we leave aside the question of how women moved from Seneca Falls to suffrage. We can then ask, instead, how women of various racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds and of diverse religious, regional, and ideological perspectives defined women's rights in the 1840s? How were these views shaped by the Mexican-American War, mass immigration, European revolutions, debates over slavery, race and Native American rights? And to what extent did the agenda crafted at Seneca Falls and later woman's rights conventions speak to the concerns expressed by female radicals in Europe and by other communities of women in the U.S.? The answers offered here are speculative, the intention being merely to open up the landscape of 1848, to relocate Seneca Falls within a more panoramic frame, and to suggest how this might help us write new histories of American women's activism by reclaiming alternative narratives of woman's rights.

First, the legend of the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention – a legend well-entrenched in historical texts and popular memory – must be challenged. The classic version of the story was penned by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her 1898 autobiography.⁴ In 1840, Stanton found herself, twenty-six years old and newly

men, Class Relations, and Suffrage Militance. Harriet Stanton Blatch and the New York Woman Suffrage Movement, 1894-1909, in: *Journal of American History* 74 (1987), 34-58.

3 See, for instance, the treatment of woman's rights and suffrage in Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty. A History of Women in America*, New York 1989, which is widely used as a text in American Women's History courses across the country, and which is particularly sensitive to race and class differences among women.

4 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More. Reminiscences 1815-1897*, New York 1898. The version sketched below, based on Stanton's autobiography and the *History of Woman Suffrage*, comes from Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies. Women's Associations in American History*, Urbana, Illinois 1992, 54-55. This version parallels that found in most women's history and American History texts. For two articles that suggest a more complex origin for the Seneca Falls Convention, and woman's rights more generally, see Judith Wellman, *The Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention. A Study of Social Networks*, in: *Journal of Women's History* 3 (1991), 9-37;

married, "seated behind a curtain at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London in company with the forty-two year old Lucretia Mott (a well-known Quaker abolitionist). The unwillingness of the convention to seat women delegates led the two to an animated discussion about the discrimination they were experiencing" and to the decision to call a woman's rights convention on their return to the States.

"Eight years and several children later, Stanton, restless and yearning for intellectual stimulation in the isolated town of Seneca Falls, New York, met Mott again." Joined by three friends of Mott, they drew up a Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, listing women's grievances. They then sent out a call inviting "interested men and women to discuss the subject of women's rights" at the local Wesleyan Chapel. Much to the organizer's surprise, some three hundred women and men showed up. The result of the Seneca Falls convention "was a surge of interest in the 'woman question' and the launching of a vigorous debate that was destined to increase in scope and volume through the next seventy-two years," culminating in the achievement of women suffrage.

Most current accounts of this event accept Stanton's narrative and focus on her leadership and the demand for political equality. The history is thus written as one woman's struggle to craft a public role for herself and to inspire a political movement in support of suffrage. The main actors are nearly all native-born white women, assisted by a few good men – such as Lucretia Mott's husband James, who chaired the Seneca Falls convention, and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass, the lone African American participant, who argued vigorously for women's right to vote.

Many other versions of this story could be told, however, highlighting other organizers, other participants and other agendas. Judith Wellman, for instance, has traced three distinct political networks – Free Soilers, legal reformers, and Quaker abolitionists – who converged at the 1848 convention. Nancy Isenberg has just completed a book that places Seneca Falls in the context of contemporary struggles over church politics, property rights, and moral reform. More than a decade ago, I too tried to recast the history of woman's rights, by placing radical Quakers at center stage.⁵ Led by Lucretia Mott, these feminist friends dominated

and Nancy A. Hewitt, *Feminist Friends*, as in fn. 4. *Agrarian Quakers and the Emergence of Woman's Rights in America*, in: *Feminist Studies* 12 (1986), 27–49.

5 Wellman, *The Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention*, as in fn. 4; Nancy Isenberg, *Co-Equality of the Sexes. Citizenship and Political Authority in Antebellum America*, New York, forthcoming; and Hewitt, *Feminist Friends*, as in fn. 4.

the Seneca Falls organizing committee (Stanton was the sole non-Quaker) and provided somewhere between a quarter and a third of the 100 individuals who signed the convention's Declaration of Sentiments. A more complete challenge must also examine the links between women activists in the U.S. and their counterparts in Europe as well as between the agendas of Anglo-American women's rights advocates and the concerns of African American, Native American, Mexican/American, immigrant, and working-class women.

A new history of woman's rights might begin by replacing Elizabeth Cady Stanton with Lucretia Mott as the central figure at the Seneca Falls Convention. Mott was, after all, the magnet that attracted such a large Quaker contingent to the meeting. Unfortunately for feminist scholars, she did not produce her own histories and autobiographies; and in Stanton's various memoirs, Mott appears only as an inspiring guide, not as an active co-worker. At the time, however, Mott's leadership was widely recognized.⁶ The preface to the published report of the 1852 National Women's Rights Convention, held at Syracuse, New York, argued for the significance of the Declaration of Sentiments, signed by participants at the Seneca Falls and Rochester conventions of 1848: "at the head of the list," it noted, "stood the name of Lucretia Mott."⁷ Mott had spoken at abolitionist meetings in Rochester in late June 1848, and Amy Post, that city's leading anti-slavery and woman's rights advocate, highlighted the Quaker spokeswoman in her account of the Seneca Falls and Rochester conventions. In correspondence with relatives on Long Island, she referred to Mott as "my model of a perfect woman," while she mentioned Stanton only in passing.⁸

The path that Mott and Post took to Seneca Falls was traversed by many women who shared the faith and politics of these radical Quakers; it is a path that links woman's rights to decidedly different historical connections and contexts than those claimed by Stanton. Unlike Stanton, Mott had not spent the years from 1840 to 1848 in domestic isolation. An avid abolitionist, she was active since the mid-1830s in one of the country's most dynamic interracial organizations, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Like her Quaker co-workers, she was

6 Beverly Wilson Palmer of Pomona College in California is currently working on a collection of Mott letters, sermons and speeches. For biographical information on Mott, see Anna B. Hallowell, Ed., *Life and Letters of James and Lucretia Mott*, Boston 1884; Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism. The Story of Quaker Women in America*, San Francisco 1986.

7 *Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention*, held at Syracuse, New York, September 8, 9, and 10, 1852, Syracuse 1852, 1.

8 See Mary Robbins Post to Isaac and Amy Post, Sept. 12, 1848, in which she cites an earlier letter from Amy Post, Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

immersed in efforts to end slavery, advance the rights of free blacks and Indians, protest the U.S. war with Mexico, and secure property reform. Mott travelled to western New York in the summer of 1848 to attend the Genesee Yearly Meeting of Hicksite Friends, assist Quaker abolitionists in the area, and visit Seneca Indian leaders on the Cattaragus reservation near Buffalo.⁹ At the same time, Amy Post and her Quaker coworkers in the area organized a half-dozen anti-slavery fairs and conventions, broke with the Society of Friends over their stance on women and abolition, founded a new interracial and sex-integrated religious/reform organization called the Friends of Human Progress, formed a Working Women's Protective Union, and followed the efforts of their radical counterparts in France, Germany, and Hungary.

Events in Europe were widely covered that summer in the anti-slavery as well as the mainstream press.¹⁰ Several American women who later embraced woman's rights had forged bonds with their abolitionist sisters in England during the 1830s and 1840s. Now they reached out to like-minded women in France, Germany and other parts of Europe, creating a set of international alliances among pioneer feminists.¹¹ Evidence of these connections appears in the reports of the early women's rights conventions. In the Syracuse proceedings noted above, a letter appeared from French revolutionaries Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin, sent to the "Convention of American Women" from their Parisian prison cell in June 1851. In it, they applauded the courage of the American women and reminded them that the chains of the throne and the scaffold, the church and the patriarch, the slave, the worker and the woman must all be broken simultaneously if "the kingdom of Equality and Justice shall be realized on Earth."¹²

Deroin was a seamstress, a committed Saint Simonian socialist, and a revolutionary. In June 1848, she demanded that her male counterparts recognize women's political and social rights. She claimed the right to vote, ran for the legislative assembly, organized workers, and wrote for *La Voix des Femmes*, an early French feminist newspaper.¹³ The events that enveloped Deroin were closely followed by

9 On Mott's travels in western New York, see Lucretia Mott to Edmund Quincy, published in: *The Liberator*, October 6, 1848.

10 See especially Frederick Douglass's *North Star*, which had just begun publication in early 1848 in Rochester, New York, and covered events in Europe extensively during that spring and summer.

11 See Bonnie Anderson, *Joyous Greetings. The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860*, New York, forthcoming, for a pathbreaking analysis of these early international connections.

12 Proceedings, as in fn. 6, quote 35; letter 32-35.

13 On the life of Jeanne Deroin, see Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth*

abolitionists and women's rights advocates in the U.S. The abolition of slavery in the French West Indies, for instance, was applauded by Lucretia Mott, who urged her American compatriots to "take courage" from such advances abroad. "We cannot separate our own freedom from that of the slave"; they are "inseparably connected (...) in France," she noted, and are "beginning to be so in other countries."¹⁴ In Rochester, emancipation in the French West Indies was marked by a citywide celebration on August 1st, just one day before woman's rights advocates gathered at the city's Unitarian church to complete the deliberations begun at Seneca Falls.¹⁵

After a July visit to the Seneca (Indian) Nation, Mott claimed that Native Americans, too, were learning "from the political agitations abroad (...) imitating the movements of France and all Europe and seeking a larger liberty..."¹⁶ This concept of a "larger liberty" was central to important segments of revolutionary movements in France and Germany and of radical abolition and woman's rights movements in England and the U.S. These segments were comprised largely of women and men who emerged from utopian socialist societies and radical separatist congregations – followers of Charles Fourier, French Saint Simonians, German religious dissidents, and Quakers who rejected the Society of Friends' restrictions on worldly activity and complete sexual and racial equality.¹⁷ These were revolutionaries who believed that to truly transform society meant rooting out oppression in all its forms – in the family, the church, the community, the economy, the polity – simultaneously. To them, emancipation of any group – slaves, for instance – was inextricably intertwined with emancipation for all groups – workers, women, prisoners, and other subjugated peoples. Ultimately, a cooperative commonwealth based on shared labor and shared resources must replace older forms of rule – monarchies, autocracies, even bourgeois democracies. These radical activists ad-

Century, Albany, New York 1984; Moses and Leslie Wahl Rabine, Eds., *The Word and the Act. French Feminism in the Age of Romanticism*, Bloomington, Indiana 1992.

14 Lucretia Mott, *Law of Progress*, in: Dana Greene, Ed., *Lucretia Mott. Her Complete Speeches and Sermons*, New York 1980, 75. Thanks to Bonnie Anderson for bringing this speech to my attention.

15 The *North Star* provided lengthy coverage of the upcoming Emancipation Day celebration in its July 14, 1848 issue, the same issue in which the announcement of the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention appeared.

16 Mott to Quincy, *The Liberator*, October 6, 1848.

17 See Moses, *French Feminism*, as in fn. 13; Catherine M. Prelinger, *Religious Dissent, Women's Rights, and the Hamburger Hochschule fuer das weibliche Geschlecht in mid-nineteenth-century Germany*, in: *Church History* 45 (1984), 42–55; Hewitt, *Feminist Friends*, as in fn. 4.

vocated individual rights, but only in so far as they complemented rather than competed with communitarian ideals.

Thus revolutionaries like Deroin and woman's rights advocates like Mott and Post supported voting rights for those currently excluded from the body politic, viewing suffrage as a necessary but not a sufficient means for achieving change. The question was complicated in the U.S. by Quaker women's and men's refusal to participate in a government that tolerated violence against slaves and employed military might in the conquest of Mexico. Members of the Friends of Human Progress, a radical Quaker association founded in summer 1848, argued that women should have the same right to refuse to vote as men, but suffrage was not high on their political agenda. Instead, for them, the woman's rights movement provided one more building block in a multifaceted campaign to achieve racial, economic, and gender justice in America.¹⁸

Radical Quaker analyses of European revolutionaries turned on the inclusivity of their vision. They applauded Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland in this regard, but their enthusiasm for Hungarian freedom fighter Louis Kossuth waned during his visit to the U.S in the early 1850s, when he failed to speak out against slavery.¹⁹ For Mott, Post, and like-minded co-workers, rights for women remained tied to rights for slaves, free blacks, landless laborers, industrial workers, Native Americans, and Mexicans. When radical Quakers organized the second U.S. woman's rights convention in Rochester two weeks after the Seneca Falls meeting, a woman presided, two local seamstresses were invited to discuss women's economic oppression, and two black abolitionist leaders fresh from the Emancipation Day celebration – Frederick Douglass and William C. Nell – were listed as featured speakers. The convention participants called for equal property rights, pay, access to education and occupation, authority in the church and home, and voting rights, for all women regardless of “complexion,” that is race. A month later, a gathering of the Friends of Human Progress added to this list land reform, Native American rights, and the abolition of capital punishment.²⁰

Two weeks after the Rochester convention, Frederick Douglass carried the

18 On the political vision of the Friends of Human Progress (also known as the Congregational Friends and the Progressive Friends), see *Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, Proceedings of the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, Held at Waterloo, N. Y., from the Fourth to the Sixth of the Sixth Month, Inclusive, with an Appendix, 1849, Auburn, New York 1849; Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, Proceedings...*, 1850, Auburn, New York 1850.

19 See, for instance, Mary Robbins Post to Dear All [Isaac and Amy Post], May 5, 185[1], Post Family Papers.

20 On Rochester Convention, see Report, Rochester Woman's Rights Convention, August 2,

woman's rights message into a new arena – the National Convention of Colored Freemen, held in Cleveland, Ohio. He introduced a resolution providing for the full and equal participation of women and men. William Nell, who three years earlier had successfully advocated women's rights in the militant New England Freedom Association (a group that aided fugitive slaves), spoke on behalf of the resolution.²¹ By the mid-1850s, most major free black organizations in the North granted voting rights to women and a few included women among their officers.

Though the record among predominantly white anti-slavery organizations was more uneven, those societies that counted a large number of Quakers and some number of free blacks in their membership – such as the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society – were in the vanguard. They consistently sought and recognized the support of their African American colleagues; and, as a result, a small circle of black women and men periodically joined woman's rights conventions as speakers, delegates, and officers. More often these activists joined forces to attack segregation, for instance to abolish segregated schooling. Frederick Douglass and Amy Post took the initiative in Rochester, New York; Betsy Mix Cowles, a radical Quaker woman's rights advocate, led the fight in Ohio; the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society made the stand in Pennsylvania; and other Quaker co-workers made the case in Massachusetts.²²

Free blacks recognized the potential power of these interracial alliances for achieving their primary goals – access to education and jobs, abolition, and aid to fugitive slaves. During 1848, free black women in several cities also demonstrated their own brand of women's rights, one inextricably entwined with racial justice. Charlotte Forten, a member of an affluent free black family of Philadelphia, pursued her work for education, fugitive slaves, abolition, and women's rights quietly and with the support of Lucretia Mott and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Her counterparts across the North – many from less wealthy backgrounds – organized fund-raising fairs, challenged school segregation, and refused to consume slave-produced goods. Some embraced more dramatic strategies. In Cincinnati, for

1848, Phoebe Post Willis Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Room, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York; Hewitt, *Feminist Friends*, as in fn. 4.

21 Material in this paragraph is taken from Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote*, chapter 1; Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass and the Woman's Rights Movement*, History 2000 Occasional Papers Series, No. 1–1993, Baltimore, Maryland 1993.

22 These campaigns to end segregated schooling in the North have not been widely covered in the secondary literature. Information on them can be found in the *North Star*, the *History of Woman Suffrage*, as in fn. 1, vol. 1, and *The Liberator* during the late 1840s and early 1850s.

instance, in the summer of 1848, freed women used washboards and shovels to fend off slave-catchers harassing blacks in the city.²³ Other free women armed themselves with even more deadly weapons to protect fugitive slaves.

In the South, more drastic measures were required if black women were going to participate in these larger freedom struggles. One particularly daring escape was planned in fall 1848 by Ellen Craft, a slave woman from Macon, Georgia. Married to William Craft, a free black cabinetmaker, the light-skinned Ellen dressed herself as a young gentleman, swathed her jaw in bandages to make it appear she was ill, and boarded a train and then a steamer to Philadelphia, with William posing as her/his manservant. They arrived safely in port on Christmas morning, and became noted abolitionist speakers in the U.S. and England.²⁴ Ellen literally embodied the meaning of women's rights for slaves – the right to control over one's person and one's family. These were property rights, but of a different sort than those envisioned by most white women.

Like many fugitive slaves and many abolitionists, the Crafts found in England a safe haven and a receptive audience. But they missed immersion in African American society. Though we are just beginning to understand women's roles in the internal workings of antebellum free black communities, fragmentary evidence suggests that here, too, individual rights were lauded only as long as they advanced communal interests. Elsa Barkley Brown, studying Richmond, Virginia, has demonstrated that in the immediate post-Civil War period voting was viewed as a community event, whoever cast the ballot.²⁵ It seems likely that similar views prevailed in northern black communities before the Civil War.

We do know that free black women and men founded churches and mutual aid societies, established political organizations, ran successful businesses, and demanded access to education, jobs, and voting. As a consequence, they were often castigated for asserting citizenship rights that most whites – North and South – still sought to deny them. Woman's rights advocates were likewise defamed, chastized, even arrested for claiming equal status with white men. In Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1853, a woman who wanted to cast a ballot in a local election dressed herself in

23 On black women's anti-slavery activity, see Dorothy Sterling, Ed., *We Are Your Sisters. Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 1984, Part II.

24 Described in Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, as in fn. XX, 62–64.

25 Elsa Barkley Brown, *Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere. African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom*, in: *Public Culture* 7 (Summer 1994), 107–146.

male attire. When her true sex was discovered, she was arrested and sentenced to twenty days in jail for impersonating a man and thereby a citizen.²⁶

As early as 1848, the rejection of feminine fashion and the embrace of more liberated, and more masculine, dress had become one sign of revolutionary commitment for women radicals in Europe and the U.S. Believing that clothes made the man while corsets confined the woman, a number of radical women sought to free themselves and their sisters from restrictive clothing. Replacing bone stays, cinch waists, and long skirts with turkish trousers, loose blouses and knee-length jackets, dress reformers assumed that ease of movement would aid in women's public as well as private labors. In her bid for freedom, Ellen Craft readily exchanged women's skirts for men's pants. In the case of slaves, however, and others who regularly performed extensive manual labor – Native American farmers, Mexican artisans, and Irish factory workers – women already wore less restrictive clothing than their white middle-class counterparts. Yet the freer clothing donned by these women was not usually linked to emancipation. Rather, the failure of poor and working women or any woman from another culture to wear middle-class white American fashions was viewed by those with wealth and power as a reflection of loose morals and a cry for patriarchal control.

Between 1846 and 1848, the issues of women's dress and men's control intersected with the path of western conquest as the Mexican-American War brought vast new territories under U.S. authority. The cause of widespread protest by abolitionist women and men, the war opened vast new lands in northern Mexico/the southwestern U.S. to Anglo-American planters, traders and settlers. Led by radical abolitionists who abhorred war and the spread of slavery, massive demonstrations protesting "manifest destiny" and war with Mexico were staged in cities across the Northeast. Though some anti-war meetings were invaded by angry mobs and threats of "brute force", radical women abolitionists, supported by their counterparts in England, continued to speak out. Lucretia Mott addressed one such meeting in June 1846, presided over by her Quaker co-worker Sarah Pugh. Petitions and protests from women abolitionists and woman's rights advocates circulated in Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania throughout the war. Some drew parallels with the outrages perpetrated by masters against female slaves and noted the dangers that military men posed to Mexican women.²⁷

Of course, not all Anglo-American women had developed such clear political

26 See Isenberg, *Co-Equality of the Sexes*, as in fn. 5. The incident was noted on page 78 of the manuscript version of this work, in the author's possession.

27 Isenberg discusses these protests in *Co-Equality of the Sexes*, as in fn. 5, manuscript pages

perspectives on the war or the women who were its victims. In 1846, for instance, Mrs. Susan Magoffin, the first US-born white woman to travel in the "New" Mexico territory, carried eastern ideals of true womanhood with her. She noted with shock that Mexican women wore loose blouses, flowing skirts and no corsets. She appreciated the personal warmth and hospitality provided her, but was astonished by her hostesses' freedom of movement and what she interpreted as their loose sexual mores. Yet she also noted the extensive legal rights accorded Mexican women.²⁸

Under Spanish law and, after 1821, Mexican law, women retained rights to property after marriage; they could inherit, loan, convey, or pawn property whether single or married; they shared custody of children; and they could sue in court without a male relative's approval.²⁹ These rights were almost uniformly denied under Anglo-American law. In the areas that came under U.S. control, women's rights had been expanded further during the 1830s and 1840s by residents' distance from the district courts of Mexico. They may also have been influenced by their proximity to Pueblo villages, in which women had traditionally held rights to property and a public voice though such rights had been severely curtailed after the Spanish conquest. In Mexican communities, extended kin groups, communal farming patterns, and collective decision-making as well as more egalitarian legal codes defined notions of women's rights and responsibilities.

Northern Mexico was no feminist utopia, however, as the number and range of court cases against abusive husbands, adultery, assault, property disputes, and debts make clear. Nonetheless, conditions worsened with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As the region came under U.S. control, government officials, Protestant missionaries, and white settlers used portrayals of local women as sexually promiscuous and culturally inferior to justify the imposition of Anglo-American authority. At the very same time, then, as participants at the Seneca Falls Convention were demanding rights to property, inheritance, and custody, "New" Mexican women were losing precisely those rights as they came under U.S. jurisdiction. Mexican women were not only losing rights, but also claims to respectability by virtue of their dark skin and now "foreign" ways. All but the most affluent were compared, as were their Native American counterparts in the

227-232. Her analysis should encourage additional work on the scope and language of these protests.

28 Magoffin quoted in Janet Lecompte, *The Independent Women of Hispanic New Mexico*, in: *Western Historical Quarterly* 22 (1981), 17-35.

29 *Ibid.*

Southwest and California, to southern slaves. Indeed, any group of women in the U.S. considered non-white might be defined as morally and socially inferior.

In the northeastern U.S. non-white women had long been affected by the influx of Euro-Americans. Prior to and for more than a century after contact with Europeans, the Seneca – like other Iroquois groups and like the Pueblo – passed names and property through the mother's line, husbands moved into their wives' households upon marriage, and women controlled agricultural production. Seneca women also held positions of religious and political authority, though chiefs and sachems were almost always men. Over the course of two centuries of trade, warfare, disease, missionary efforts, and governmental pressure, however, the Seneca had lost most of their tribal lands, moved to reservations, and converted to patrilineal descent and men's control of agriculture. In July 1848, they also adopted a new "republican" form of government and a written constitution. Women, who once held veto power over a range of decisions – from the appointment of chiefs to the signing of treaties – were divested of some of their authority, but retained the right to vote. And though Seneca men and women would now elect judges and legislators by majority vote, 3/4 of all voters and 3/4 of all mothers had to ratify legislative decisions.³⁰

Several Quaker woman's rights advocates were in correspondence with Seneca resident on the Cattaraugus reservation, and Quaker missionary women described in detail the specific voting privileges accorded women, and mothers, there.³¹ Lucretia Mott visited the reservation just before travelling to Seneca Falls; and just after the Declaration of Sentiments was published, the Seneca women produced a remarkably similar document. For the next seventy years, white suffragists would point, with some ambivalence, to the Iroquois as emblems of politically empowered women, recognizing the ways that communal ownership of property, matrilineal descent, and shared political and religious authority established foundations for female equality.³² Yet Iroquois women themselves, like their Mexican and Pueblo counterparts, would slowly lose both rights and respectability as they were forced

30 For an overview of Seneca women's status, see Joan M. Jensen, *Native American Women and Agriculture*, in Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, Ed., *Women and Power in American History*, vol. 1, Englewood Cliffs and New Jersey 1991, 8–23. See also, Sally Roesch Wagner, *The Untold Story of The Iroquois Influence on Early Feminists*, Aberdeen, South Dakota, 1996; and Harriet S. Clarke Caswell, *Our Life Among the Iroquois Indians*, Boston and Chicago, 1892, esp. 79–80 on the new 1848 constitution; and Mott to Quincy, *The Liberator*, Oct. 6, 1848.

31 For a detailed account by a Quaker missionary of Seneca Indian life, see Caswell, *Our Life Among the Iroquois*, as in fn. XX, 79–80.

32 For a discussion of this interest and ambivalence about Indian women in the women's movement, see Dolores Janeiowski, *Giving Women a Future*. Alice Fletcher, the 'Woman Question' and

to embrace Anglo-American laws and customs. And in the post-Civil War period, most woman's rights advocates, having accepted the individual right of suffrage as their primary goal, no longer embraced the communitarian vision of equality and justice that allowed their antebellum foremothers to see the Seneca as a model rather than a problem.

There are other threads to follow as we contextualize woman's rights and women's activism in the 1840s: exiled revolutionaries (whose radical politics led to the support of woman's and workers' rights in the German-language press); Irish immigrants (812 of whom arrived in New York harbor while the Seneca Falls convention was in session); the Gold Rush and western migration (which pulled apart but also extended the radical Quaker network with new circles of activity forming in Michigan, Indiana, and California). Yet the examples above are sufficient to suggest the potential richness of a synchronic analysis.

In rethinking Seneca Falls, it is important to remember that the movement Elizabeth Cady Stanton championed – a movement based on liberal conceptions of self-ownership, individual rights and suffrage – was born there. But it was not alone, nor was it yet triumphant. Rather, the vision held by the largest and most active contingent of feminist foremothers was rooted in communitarian values and organic conceptions of both oppression and liberation. Linked to agendas promoted by utopian socialists and religious radicals in Europe's revolutionary circles, the ideas advanced by feminist Friends also echoed – if sometimes unintentionally – the experiences of women in those African American, Mexican, and Native American communities founded on extended kinship networks, communal labor and collective rights. Self-consciously engaged in campaigns against slavery, war, and western conquest, and for religious freedom, economic justice and political equality, radical Quakers connected the woman's rights agenda to a broader program of social transformation and more diverse networks of activists. Even with all the limitations and shortcomings of such utopian endeavors and knowing that a more liberal, rights-based vision would ultimately dominate, the legacy of woman's rights radicals is worth reclaiming. For it provides an alternative foundation for modern feminism, one that incorporates race and class issues, critiques of colonialism, socialist foremothers, and an internationalist perspective.

'Indian Reform,' in: Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock, Eds., *Visible Women. New Essays on American Activism*, Urbana, Illinois 1993, 325–344.