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Alison M. Parker. *Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-Century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. 302 pp. $38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-416-3.

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Political Thinkers, Political Actors: African American and White Female Reformers on Race, Gender, and Government

Women's involvement in politics and activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has long been a dynamic subfield within the history of women in the United States. Many scholars have analyzed women's development of political ideologies and their participation in such movements as suffrage, temperance, abolitionism, and anti-lynching. In recent years, numerous significant works have made valuable new contributions to this field, encouraging us to think about the complex interactions between political thought and action, the ways in which race and class shaped women's experiences as political thinkers and public activists, and how women have reshaped conceptions of gender, citizenship, and the state through their political and activist work.[1] Alison M. Parker's new monograph makes a useful, insightful contribution to this rich literature.

In her previous work, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (1997), Parker skillfully grappled with several significant issues that also permeate *Articulating Rights*, including how female thinkers felt the power of the state should (and should not) be used as an instrument for moral transformation and the public good, and how ideas about gender difference shaped women's rhetoric and activism. In *Articulating Rights*, Parker examines how six influential thinkers (Frances Wright, Sarah Grimké, Angelina Grimké Weld, Frances Watkins Harper, Frances Willard, and Mary Church Terrell) explored these and other issues in their writing, speechmaking, and activism in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States.

Among the key themes that Parker considers in these thinkers' works are their reflections about the role that the state generally, and the federal government specifically, ought to play in the implementation of their activist goals. Of the thinkers whom Parker profiles, only Wright was a fierce resister of using federal power to create social change–the other five were firm believers in the necessity of the federal government's involvement in activist initiatives. Willard was a staunch supporter of using the federal government to enact morally based legislation (such as prohibition, anti-prostitution, and age-of-consent laws) designed to protect the sanctity of white families and the sexual purity of white women. (As Parker explores in her monograph, Willard was far less interested in using the power of the federal government to protect the rights of African American women and families.)

After brief flirtations with Garrisonian nonresistance and abstinence from partisan political activity, abolitionists Grimké, Grimké Weld, and Watkins Harper all came to believe that the federal government would be necessary to both secure the end of slavery and ensure the civil rights of freedpeople in the wake of emancipation. After the collapse of Reconstruction, during the nadir of race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Watkins Harper and Church Terrell came to the grim realization that, as Parker notes "this was not a government that black Americans could trust" (p. 109). But even as the federal government failed to support the civil rights of freedpeople and willfully turned a blind eye to crimes such as lynching, Watkins Harper and Church Terrell continued to insist that the federal government could use its considerable power to end the racial inequalities and injustices that it both implicitly and explicitly endorsed. Parker compellingly argues that through their activism and speechmaking, Watkins Harper and Church Terrell "made a significant contribution to the shift towards an activist central state by strongly supporting a federal government with expanded authority to protect and enforce civil rights" (p. 22). Given the current political climate (with Tea Party members' insistence on the need to curb the power of the

federal government), these questions about how much authority ought to be concentrated within the government (and what kind of work it ought to do) certainly have considerable contemporary resonance.

In her monograph, Parker also ably tackles the complex ways in which these thinkers deployed rhetoric about gender difference in their writings and speeches. Parker notes that to some degree, all of these activists "pointed to women's moral and physical differences as a way to justify expanding their rights" (p. 94). Insisting on women's ostensibly innate moral superiority to men, these thinkers contended that giving women more access to political authority generally (and to the voting booth specifically) would inevitably benefit the entire American nation by ensuring the passage of more "moral" laws. However, as Parker demonstrates, the racial dimensions of using this rhetoric of gender difference was most certainly not lost on these activists. Although she used the language of gender difference in her own activist work, Watkins Harper, for example, recognized that such rhetoric often had a very racially specific meaning, with white women being upheld as the rightful moral arbiters of American society. Parker skillfully traces out the ways in which African American female intellectuals such as Watkins Harper and Church Terrell claimed the mantle of female moral superiority for African American women even as they remained uneasily aware of the ongoing cultural conflation of femininity, morality, and whiteness.

In one of the richest veins in Parker's work, she deconstructs the ways in which ideas about race shaped these six thinkers' ideologies and activist practices. Grimké and Grimké Weld insisted throughout their lives that the personal was political and made interracial socializing and friendships a core part of their broader commitment to promoting racial equality. Wright and Willard, by contrast, combined their often radical commitment to securing increased rights for white women with a distinct disregard for the rights of African American women. Wright's radical utopian community, Nashoba, for example, firmly rejected the rights of husbands over their wives but relatively uncritically accepted the rights of slaveowners over their slaves. And while Willard lobbied fiercely for laws to protect white girls and women from sexual exploitation, she largely disregarded African American colleagues' calls for her organization, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), to speak out against lynching and sexual violence against African American women. Much like Wright did not trust freedpeople to govern themselves without white supervision and control at Nashoba, within the WCTU, Willard "rarely included black women in her vision of politically active citizens" (p. 176).

Operating within this decidedly hostile climate, in which even white female allies often manifested a distinct lack of concern for civil rights, African American thinkers such as Watkins Harper and Church Terrell adopted fluid, multifaceted approaches to addressing racial and gender inequality. These thinkers were instrumental in founding and running some of the first nationwide African American women's organizations in the United States, such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which supported women's grassroots activism in African American communities (endorsing the establishment of such programs as mothers' meetings and kindergartens) and launched systematic campaigns lobbying the federal government to enact legislation against "lynching, peonage, and Jim Crow segregation," among other issues (p. 199). Recognizing the need for such community-based activism, and organizations run by and advocating for African American women, these activists also sought (often unsuccessfully) to bring their concerns before powerful white-led female organizations. Church Terrell defined herself as an ambassador to white-dominated institutions such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and as a missionary who sought to "convert" white southerners from their flagrant violations of both moral and federal law to the "gospel" of civil rights advocacy. Watkins Harper similarly made herself a resident thorn-in-the-side of Willard's WCTU, consistently (and, from Willard's perspective, very inconveniently) insisting that the organization needed to speak out and act systematically against racial injustice and violence.

Given the profound interconnections between Watkins Harper's activism and Willard's work and thought, and the frequent clashes between these two women on issues of racial justice, civil rights, and organizational strategy, it might have been interesting to see the two separate chapters on them merged into one. Placing these authors directly in dialogue with one another may have offered more scope for analysis about the points of both convergence and divergence between these two women, as well as the numerous points at which they debated the best way forward for American women (however they defined the category of "women") and the American government.

Among the many contributions of Parker's project is to put all of her six thinkers' works and ideas alongside one another and to incorporate both African American and white thinkers within the same study. As Parker notes in her introduction, it is an unfortunate reality

that studies such as hers are still relatively rare, and that American women's activist work and political writings are all too often studied in racial isolation from one another. "White and black women," Parker contends, "must be included in the same analysis" (p. 5). Hopefully Parker's work will provide both a template and an inspiration for scholars continuing to work on breaking down such divisions within existing scholarship.

Articulating Rights also helps break down divisions along national lines, as Parker ably situates the thinkers whom she analyzes in "a transatlantic network of reform and exchange" (p. 212). Throughout her narrative, she considers how her six activists engaged with fellow reformers and thinkers in the United Kingdom and continental Europe, and how these interactions shaped their thought and work. This aspect of Parker's project comes through particularly vividly in her chapters on Wright (in which Parker deconstructs how Wright both reinterpreted and reacted against British political theorists such as Edmund Burke in the development of her radical ideologies) and Church Terrell (in which she offers a sharp, concise discussion of how Church Terrell's experiences living in a more racially progressive Europe shaped her subsequent struggles against American racism).

It is, of course, no bad thing to close a book and wish that it were longer. Though surely the subject for another study, the brief analyses that Parker provides of contemporary photographs of her thinkers provide tantalizing glimpses into the ways in which these women chose to present themselves as public intellectuals. Parker's brief notes about the choices that several of these activists made about how to represent themselves visually (by posing with their hands firmly resting on impressive-looking tomes, while all the while ensuring that their appearance was meticulously feminine) raise interesting questions. How did these women's political thought intersect with their claim to public space for themselves as "lady" activists? How did they maneuver in the American public arena, which was both a gendered and racialized space?

The book's brief conclusion also left me wanting to know more about what Parker sees as the lasting legacy of these six authors' thought and work. While Parker notes that these women were instrumental in laying the groundwork for subsequent generations (including the Progressives of the early twentieth century and the maternalists of the New Deal), she might have traced out with more specificity how future generations of reformers (both female and male, African American and white) looked back to these women as ideological foremothers. These women's speeches, writings, and activist work were surely precedents with which subsequent generations of reformers were familiar. What specific elements of their thought did later activists latch onto in their own work? What parts did they reject or refine?

Finally, *Articulating Rights* also points the way to new studies of other significant and understudied female thinkers. Much as Parker's work has analyzed in depth women whose work as political thinkers has been ignored or misunderstood, so does it suggest the viability of similar studies of equally undervalued women, such as antebellum abolitionist Sarah Mapps Douglass.

With *Articulating Rights*, Parker has offered a fresh discussion of how six inspirational thinkers tackled thorny questions about race, gender, and the state in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With a lucid, compelling writing style, a flair for narrative, and a clear-eyed ability to deconstruct political rhetoric, Parker has written an excellent work for undergraduate and graduate classrooms and a welcome addition to the shelves of historians of women, activism, and politics.

Note

[1]. For recent significant examples of such scholarship, see Jacqueline Bacon, *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008); Alisse Portnoy, *Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, eds., *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2007).

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