The Future of Civil War Era Studies:

Northern Women

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Readers and scholars interested in northern women's Civil War experiences can find no shortage of sophisticated and lively books published since Thavolia Glymph's essay.[1] A new crop of biographies of activists is a case in point. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, both long neglected, now have fresh biographies that offer substantively new interpretations. Those of us who teach women's history will no longer feel compelled to defend Stanton's abolitionist credentials, now that Lori Ginzberg has shown that Stanton always pursued women's rights from a position of privilege.[2] She did not so much turn to racism during Reconstruction as give it full vent. Lucretia Mott, on the other hand, has suffered the opposite historiographic fate. Carol Faulkner seeks to give Mott, having languished long enough under the benign title "the gentle Quaker," dimensionality. Although Mott's character at times remains frustratingly elusive, Faulkner gives us a more complex woman who lived her egalitarian ideals and became increasingly impatient with those who did not. Despite Mott's lifelong commitment to women's rights, Faulkner implies that the racism and infighting among postwar feminists was too much for the widowed octogenarian, who refused to be part of it.[3] Where historians used to be trapped in Stanton's assessment of how the Civil War served as a springboard for women's rights, these new biographies of feminist icons show conclusively that, even at the top, there was no consensus about what group of northern women stood to benefit from the war's rights bonanza.

Beyond the influential group of middle-class white women who stood at the epicenter of rights activism, the last ten years have yielded biographies of women who straddled the line between home front and battlefield, starting with Harriet Tubman. Biographies by Jean Humez and Catherine Clinton fill out the details of Tubman's work during the war—including spying, training freedwomen, and leading a combat mission—that should have earned her a regular army pension, money that she might have used to support her postwar humanitarian efforts and that would have helped alleviate her poverty.[4] Both of these works move beyond the image of Tubman as an icon to recover something of her real experience of war.[5] Like Lucretia Mott and Anna Dickinson, about whom Matt Gallman has written, Tubman was a fierce critic of Lincoln; indeed, who wouldn't have wanted to be a fly on the wall watching her debate the merits of the president with Sojourner Truth, when the two met in Boston in summer 1864?[6] Among other things, Dickinson took aim at Lincoln for failing to consider the status of the freedpeople, and Tubman's tragic postwar struggle to support herself and the growing number of refugees who found their way to her home in Auburn, New York, is a testament to the limitations of Stanton's claim that women embraced the independence the war foisted on them. Even Mary Todd Lincoln resorted to begging—or rather, she deposed Elizabeth Keckley to beg for her in New York's African American community.[7]

The addition of Tubman has complicated scholars' tendency to focus on what Glymph called the "woman's war," work that seeks to document the extent of white women's participation in and measure the Civil War's impact on "white women's rights and white gender relations."[8] This trend began with celebratory works on northern women in 1865 and as a genre focused on exceptional women or at least those who left a substantive paper trail—biography tends toward this trend. For its limitations, interest in woman's war pushed scholars to take a

closer look at the home front, even as they have struggled to define the term. Sectional ideologies and wartime nationalisms imagined women (and children) at the center of stable and protected home fronts, even as the exigencies of war demanded that women—and not men—become the home fronts' principal defenders. Shining new light on the Civil War's home fronts has had the unexpected consequence of making them slip out of sight, as conditions at home become more connected to or at least reflective of conditions on the battlefield. This has been particularly the case in Stephanie McCurry's and Gregory Downs's excellent work on the Confederacy, but my own work on working-class white and African American women has revealed a northern home front far less stable than we thought.[9] As we dig deeper into the lives of the Civil War's civilians, discovering the many ways they fought the war in their everyday lives, we might reach a moment when we will begin to rethink the usefulness of the category.

In the meantime, scholarship has gone a long way toward complicating both the geographic and temporal boundaries of the war. As Margaret Creighton observed in her study of Gettysburg, women's war has a "longer chronology and a bigger field of engagement."[10] Lea VanderVelde's work on Harriet Scott, or *Mrs. Dred Scott,* beautifully illustrates Creighton's point. Likely born a slave in Pennsylvania and freed upon her marriage to Dred Scott in Minnesota, Harriet filed her own freedom suit in 1846, one for which she might have made a stronger claim for freedom.[11] The couple's two young daughters were technically free by birth—one having been born in free territory and the other to a free mother—but it was a tenuous freedom as long as their father was enslaved. VanderVelde shows convincingly that it was likely out of concern for Harriet's future and that of their two young daughters—Eliza and Lizzie—that the couple filed their suits, for by the time of the trial Dred was infirm and advanced in age (at fifty-one), while Harriet, at twenty-eight, and her two young children were potentially valuable

to Dred's owner.[12] But because the couple's lawyers focused on Dred's claim to have resided briefly in a free territory, they made Roger Taney's job easier. When we take Harriet's story into account, *Dred Scott v. Sandford* becomes the story of "a black family negotiating the difficult channels of passage to freedom to preserve the family's integrity against the ravages of slavery."[13] Accompanying her master, Lawrence Taliaferro, an Indian agent in the upper Mississippi Valley, Harriet built a family in a series of military forts. She traveled a circuitous road to freedom, one that wove back and forth across the legal boundaries of slavery, crossing at odd points with her marriage. Women of color like Scott, who sued for her freedom, or the many more who escaped enjoyed a fragile freedom in the North, one contingent on local conditions and a rapidly shifting legal terrain.

As a number of scholars have recently pointed out, freedwomen and men traveled separate paths to freedom during the Civil War. Once enlisted in the Union army—as they began to in 1862—male slaves were free men, but the status of slave women who made their way across Union lines remained an open legal question for the duration of the war. Languishing as contraband, women and children faced an uncertain fate in the Union.[14] In a graceful new essay, Amy Dru Stanley explores the surprising congressional debates surrounding the passage of a March 1865 act to encourage enlistments that freed the wives and children of men serving in the U.S. Colored Troops. Stanley estimates that the act—coming two months after Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment and nine months before the amendment became law—freed between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand slaves, the wives and children of men serving in the Union army, many of them in the "loyal" slave states. A humanitarian measure, the act was consistent with other federal policy that charted a course to freedom for slave women that went through marriage, the slave wife's freedom offered as "the soldier's quid pro quo."[15] While

Harriet Scott's marriage did not expedite her claim to freedom, marriage to a black soldier did for many women.

Many women of color—married and unmarried—wound up in Washington, D.C., which, as Kate Masur shows, became a great contraband camp, as women and children in particular made their way to freedom. Here, women were introduced to the free labor ideology through the auspices of the Freedmen's Bureau and entered schools staffed by black and white teachers and funded by northern relief societies. Masur's excellent work on this border city serves as a prime example of how historians are overcoming the "regional segregation" and "racial gendering" that, ten years ago, had stalled out scholarship on women. In Masur's Washington, freedwomen negotiated with missionaries and bureau agents about the legitimacy of marriages made in slavery, prioritizing care for their children over the waged work the bureau required of them, and for federal help rescuing their children from involuntary apprenticeship. And women of color pushed their way onto streetcars and into the Senate gallery, where they not only witnessed the passage of momentous civil rights legislation but lobbied for it.[16] Here, as free women of color—many of them hailing from elite northern families—and large numbers of freedwomen came in contact with an extended federal bureaucracy, they played a not inconsequential role in setting the political agenda.

Fitting neatly in neither the historiography of the North nor the South—and hardly a "home front," though perhaps not literally a battlefield—Washington, D.C., serves as an example of how, if we continue to dig deeply, we can find and follow women of color in the North as they weather the war years and work to shape postwar politics. The 180,000 "free women of color" identified by census takers were joined by thousands more each year for the next five years as women made their way to freedom through marriage or by escape, and, with each passing year,

raised new questions about black family life after slavery, the relationship between the prewar black elite and the freedmen, and the shape of postwar black politics.[17] Of those counted in 1860, we already know something of their experience as teachers in elite black schools in the North and among the freedpeople.[18] I suspect that there is more to learn about the experiences of this generation of black educators; willing scholars might begin by looking at schools such as Oberlin College and Philadelphia's Institute for Colored Youth (the ICY), which trained a generation of black teachers and seem to have served as field schools for civil rights activism. [19] Indeed, Fanny Jackson Coppin was principal of the ICY at a time when black Philadelphians were in the midst of a fierce civil rights battle and when ICY graduates were teaching at schools throughout the South.[20] Beyond the schools, black churches served as centers of black cultural and political life throughout the Civil War era, helped recruit and sustain troops, and pushed for political change, yet we have not as yet explored their potential as sources for understanding the home front.[21] As Elsa Barkley Brown showed for postwar Richmond, people of color nurtured an inclusive and highly participatory democracy in churches that doubled as meeting houses.[22] Because of Brown and Steven Hahn, we know far more about what went on in black churches in the wartime and postwar South than the North.[23] Ella Forbes's collection remains the best single source of information about women of color in the North—involved in churches, schools, and other activism—though it is now fourteen years old and nearly impossible to find.[24]

In our effort to highlight black autonomy and agency, we should not forget how disruptive war was for northern civilians, white and black, and how emancipation also played out as a human tragedy. Freedwomen and men one step removed from slavery likely found the wartime and postwar North a confusing array of contradictions. "The wartime conflict over black mobility," Leslie Schwalm argues, in her highly original work on the Midwest, set the

groundwork for a century-long "debate over race and space," as northern communities at some times welcomed freedwomen and men and at others tried to run them out.[25] To get inside this human story, we need more work on the many institutions that served the needs of the war's displaced peoples, like Philadelphia's Home for Aged and Infirm Colored Persons, founded in 1864, and Boston's Home for Aged Colored Women, founded in 1861.[26] In their fourth annual report, published in 1864, the managers of Boston's Home put their finger on a key contradiction when they described the home as "a border-land between earth and heaven." With slavery on the wane, the white managers sought to claim slavery's "best thing—its care of the aged." Recognizing the lack of social support for the aged and infirm poor in the antebellum and wartime North, the women looked South for inspiration.[27] And, indeed, the admission records confirm that the wartime North was a bewildering and at times alienating place, perhaps even more so in places with small black populations. In the records, we find brief snapshots of life on the Civil War's northern home front—like Mrs. Henderson, born a slave in Georgia, who "went with the crowds of fugitives through Union lines." Henderson "came north to find employment, worked to the end of her strength" when the managers found her "wandering around homeless and hopeless."[28] Henderson died a short time after she was admitted to the home. With no Freedmen's Bureau at work in the North, women like her were folded into the piecemeal and woefully inadequate private charities that sought to remedy the most visible signs of suffering. Surely Mrs. Henderson had hoped for more out of freedom than a warm bed to die in.

Emilie Davis, a young African American girl living in Philadelphia, found the movement of large numbers of people in and out of the city exciting and looked forward to how emancipation might transform the city's large and active black community. In late June 1863, Davis recorded in her diary the arrival of "refugees . . . in from all the towns this Side of Harrisburg" lining the

streets of Philadelphia. Black Pennsylvanians and other civilian residents of south-central Pennsylvania fled upon site of the first Confederate cavalry. “The greatest excitement prevails,” Davis noted, reflecting the heady anticipation the young girl shared with the larger black community.[29] Between Davis’s experience of war and Henderson’s, there are all sorts of things yet to be learned about the Civil War’s northern home front, one that is not as “racially gendered” as it was a decade ago.

Notes

1. Thavolia Glymph, “The Civil War Era,” *A Companion to American Women’s History*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New York: Blackwell, 2002), 171. I counted thirty-two publications focused on the northern home front. Once document collections and Charlotte Forten’s published memoir were eliminated, the works that remained that dealt substantively with women of color were Alice Fahs’s, Jacqueline Jones’s, and Lyde Cullen Sizer’s. By contrast, Glymph’s bibliography included at least twelve recently published monographs and essays explicitly devoted to women of color in the South. These included essays or monographs by Elsa Barkley Brown, Catherine Clinton, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Noralee Frankel, Thavolia Glymph, Leslie Schwalm, Brenda Stevenson, Marli Weiner, and Debra Gray White. Jacqueline Jones is included in this number, too. Michelle Krowl’s dissertation was not included in this total.

2. Lori D. Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 162.

3. Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott’s Heresy: Abolition and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 204.

4. Jean Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Boston: Back Bay, 2005).

5. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 193–206, 211–14.

6. Ibid., 180–84. J. Matthew Gallman, *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

7. Catherine Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln: A Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 277, 276.

8. Glymph, "Civil War Era," 172.

9. Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). Gregory Downs, *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861–1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

10. Margaret Creighton, "Gettysburg out of Bounds: Women and Soldiers in the Embattled Borough, 1863," in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War,* ed. Leeann Whites and Alecia Long (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 67.

11. Lea VanderVelde and Sandhya Subramanian, "Mrs. Dred Scott," *Yale Law Journal* 106, no. 4 (January 1997): 1040. This essay formed the basis for VanderVelde's *Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010).

VanderVelde speculates that the lawyers' decision to subsume Harriet Robinson Scott's case within Dred's "may well have threatened the cause of freedom unwittingly setting the stage for imminent battles over the spread of slavery into free territory." VanderVelde and Subramanian, "Mrs. Dred Scott," 1090.

12. Ibid., 1076. Harriet was legally free in Pennsylvania, the sometime residence of her peripatetic owner.

13. Ibid., 1035–36.

14. Jim Downs, "The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and Their Children during and after the Civil War," in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 78-103.

15. Because Missouri and Maryland abolished slavery in the war's final months, estimating the number of slaves affected by the act proved difficult. Amy Dru Stanley, "Instead of Waiting for the Thirteenth Amendment: The War Power, Slave Marriage, and Inviolate Human Rights," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 3 (June 2010): 732, 762,760.

16. Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 59–76. According to Mary Kaiser-Farmer, freedwomen found both an ally and an enemy in the bureau, Mary Kaiser Farmer, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 13, 91–100, 120.

17. According to the census data for 1860, 177,660 "free colored females" lived in the states that remained in the Union. The total in the seceding states was 69,792. "Census Data for 1860," Historical Census Browser, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/start.php?year=V1860.

18. In *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), Ronald Butchart

shows that the majority of teachers in freedmen's schools were African American—and nearly a third of them were men.

19. For more on the ICY, see Murray Dubin and Daniel Biddle, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

20. Coppin easily compares to the twentieth century's Ella Forbes and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Linda Marie Perkins, "Fanny Jackson Coppin and the Institute for Colored Youth: A Model of Nineteenth-Century Black Female Educational and Community Leadership, 1837–1902" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978), 85–86. Fanny Jackson Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life and Hints on Teaching* (Philadelphia: L. J. Coppin, 1913), online at http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jacksonc/jackson.html.

21. Martha Jones shows that the "woman question" was alive and well within the African Methodist Episcopal church, as women active in war work demanded access not only to the ballot but, surprisingly, to the priesthood. Martha S. Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 119–49.

22. Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1984): 107–46.

23. Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

24. Ella Forbes, *African American Women during the Civil War* (New York: Garland, 1998).

25. Leslie A. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 105–7.

26. Forbes, *African American Women during the Civil War,* 81.

27. Board of Managers, "Fourth Annual Report of the Home for Aged Colored Women, 1863," (Boston: Prentiss & Deland, 1864), 5–6, available in the Home for Aged Colored Women archives, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (HACW).

28. Mrs. Henderson, October 9, 1869, Applications and Admissions, HACW, 27.

29. Emilie Davis Diary, June 28–July 1, 1863, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Penn State Digital Collections, http://collection1.1ibraries.psu.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/digitalbks2&CISOPTR=89521&REC=2