Exchanges and Correspondence
Exchanges and Correspondence:
The Construction of Feminism

Edited by

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CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1
Claudette Fillard and Françoise Orazi

Part 1: Transnational Exchanges and Correspondence

From Letters to a Movement: The Creation of Early International Feminism, 1830 to 1860........................................................................................................ 8
Bonnie S. Anderson

Feminist Gender Debates in France and Germany: (De)constructing Feminism and the Productivity of Misunderstandings ........................... 23
Cornelia Möser

Trans-national Feminism: American Influences of German Feminist Alice Schwarzer........................................................................................................... 41
Claire Greslé-Favier

When East met West: Feminine/Feminist Correspondences between the USA and the USSR at the Turn of the 20th Century .............. 52
Marie Fauvrelle

Transnational Feminism in the Making: The Case of Post-communist Eastern Europe................................................................................................. 64
Ioana Cîrstocea

Harriet Martineau’s American Feminism (and other correspondences) .... 84
Françoise Orazi

“Forward, sisters, forward!”: Community as Family in the British and American Suffrage Movements ................................................................. 97
Béatrice Bijon and Claire Delahaye
Dangerous Tendencies: Slavery, Sex, and Authority in the Transatlantic Correspondence of Lucretia Mott................................................................. 115
Carol Faulkner

Part 2: Exchanges and Written Correspondence

Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Cady Stanton:
From Correspondence to Freedom .......................................................... 130
Nathalie Zimpfer

Margaret Fuller and Other Literary Midwives................................. 146
Claude Cohen-Safir

Emerson, Fuller and the Cause of Women: Reviewing an Intellectual Friendship ................................................................. 159
Marc Bellot

“Wendell [Phillips], don’t make a fool of yourself”:
Feminist Consciousness as Dialogue and Process in the American Antebellum Society....................................................... 172
Hélène Quanquin

Letter Exchange in the Life of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon:
The First Female Suffrage Committee in Britain Seen through her Correspondence......................................................... 188
Meritxell Simon-Martin

Angeline Durand-Vallot

Part 3: Exchanges and Correspondence between Feminism and Other Ideologies

‘An unusually cosmopolitan outlook:’ Margaret Oliphant Revisits Domesticity................................................................. 236
Zsuzsanna Varga

From Southern Lady to Southern Activist: Integrationist White Women in the American South (1920-1970)........................................... 250
Anne Stefani
Exchanges and Correspondence: The Construction of Feminism

Writing the Black Woman, Voicing Black Feminism: 1969 – 1977 ....... 264
Hélène Charléry

Feminism and Islam: A Post-colonial and Transnational Reading .......... 278
Simona Tersigni and Zahra Alí

Contributors .................................................................................................................. 299
INTRODUCTION

CLAUDETTE FILLARD AND FRANÇOISE ORAIZ

This book emerged out of a selection of papers read at an international conference in Lyon (France) in October 2008. As a whole, and as intimated by the title of the conference - namely “The Building of Feminism: Exchanges and Correspondences” - it can be said to proffer a survey of “feminism-in-the-making”, from its early stages in the late 18th and early 19th century, to some of its more contemporary forms, mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries but also far beyond in more improbable areas. Covering such a wide gamut of times and places led to an at times anachronistic use of the word “feminism”- as remarked by several authors- for periods when one would only refer to the “woman’s rights movement” or the “woman question”. Thanks to the awareness of such a “linguistic licence”, the book not only traces the historical construction of feminism as an ideology, but also calls forth a careful perusal of the meaning of the word itself.

Over the years and centuries, the development of means of communication, improving travelling facilities and transatlantic voyages, opened new channels through which women managed to build a reticulated gendered identity. Through the give-and-take process generated by new, variegated, intertwining forms of exchanges, the circulation of ideas between feminists, be they women, men or organizations, was invigorated. Hence the notion of correspondence viewed here in every sense of the word. One of its acceptations accounts for the attention paid by the authors to the writing of notes, of letters (sometimes chain-letters, letters-to-the-editor…) which the development of the penny post system in Britain made easier than ever before. This approach implies a reliance on documentary sources long overlooked by historians, and is part and parcel of a drastic revision of the male dominated “lopsided” History deprecated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*. Besides, the word “correspondence” is suggestive of the similarities, now deliberate, now coincidental, between some of the main architects of the building of feminism. Following this second trend of interpretation, the authors in this book eventually unearth a whole web of converging or conflicting views.
and influences now openly acknowledged, now to be traced only by their perceptive scholarly eyes.

For the sake of convenience and clarity this volume has been divided into three parts attempting to gather together some essays connected by some common aims or features. The first part is made up of eight articles characterized by their transnational dimension, showing that the response to women’s rights was not restricted to a few in a particular place and time. They bear evidence of an internationalization of concerns long before the emergence of the global feminism advocated in the 20th century by the so-called third wave feminists. This broader view of the history of feminism belongs to the rejuvenating line of research spearheaded by (among others) Margaret McFadden and Bonnie Anderson, the author of our opening article, which fittingly describes the wide-ranging international collaboration between early feminists. Bonnie Anderson’s remarkable research has enabled the mapping of a movement that was multilingual, cross-border and self-aware. She has established that early feminists depended on their counterparts abroad for inspiration and courage. Unsurprisingly the international dimension remains a seminal influence today; ideas and theories produced elsewhere are imported and, more importantly, adapted to the national culture as Cornelia Möser shows in her comparative study of the introduction of gender theory in France and Germany. The same dialectics of rejection and inclusion of foreign influences can be found at the heart of Claire Greslé-Favier’s essay on contemporary German feminist Alice Schwartzter. Marie Fauvrelle then takes us back in time as she unveils the lesser-known correspondences between early 20th century American and Soviet feminists, when communism appealed to many social reformers and shaped the thoughts of prominent feminist thinkers. The encounter between the western and the (former) communist spheres is also the object of Ioana Cîrtocea’s article. Her analysis of the exchange between western and east European feminists tackles the question of a possible cultural imperialism on the part of western feminism, thus echoing the main theme of the third part of this book.

The three essays that conclude the first part all concentrate on the exchanges that took place between American and British feminists during the development of first wave feminism. In the case of the transatlantic “special relationship”, each country seems to have been the source of inspiration for the other. Thus Françoise Orazi’s paper explores the influence of early American feminism on British author Harriet Martineau, as channeled through abolitionist groups, while Beatrice Bijon and Claire Delahaye show how American Suffragists turned to their British sisters for
lessons in activism. As for Lucretia Mott, whom McFadden has described as “the Mother of the Matrix”, she can be seen as the embodiment of the web of intricate influences that were to give birth to an organized women’s movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Carol Faulekner’s illuminating essay provides an account of the complex relation between Mott’s feminism and Quakerism, and sheds new light on the famous episode of the London Anti-Slavery convention in 1840.

The second part includes six essays devoted to more direct influences between feminists, mostly within the same country, and a reflection on the several means used to exert them. However instrumental transnational phenomena may have been in the construction of feminism, they don’t preclude the close attention paid to the intranational exchanges and correspondences tackled in this part. Nathalie Zimpfer’s essay which opens it may seem to be an odd contribution with its comparative analysis of the writings and pronouncements of a British and an American feminist. But it acts as an illuminating introduction to the necessary reflection on the elusive concept of influence between authors and thinkers. Laying the foundations of the essays that follow, Claude Safir’s article assesses the many forms influence can be exerted through, with its close perusal of Margaret Fuller’s Socratic Method and “mother tongue” which enabled her Conversations to reach women beyond the limited circle of the Boston elite, thereby creating among them a sense of collective identity in its snowballing effects. That it did not prevent Fuller from convincing the Boston elite as well is shown by Marc Bellot’s study of the crucial part she played in Emerson’s gradual awareness of the iniquitous conditions endured by women. Even though the “Sage of Concord” never completely rid himself of his “essentialist” views on women, the slow development of his commitment to their cause is carefully delineated in this essay. More theoretical than practical, due to his intellectual stature, Emerson’s role, short of militancy, was never short of ascendancy. Even men, therefore, could respond to the nascent feminist discourse of the age and even spread it, as shown by Helen Quanquin through her compelling study of Wendell Phillips. Indeed, this particular case proves that “feminist consciousness” could grope its way through a man’s mind, and even make him a true woman’s rights advocate, identifying with women’s humiliations and grievances.

The last two essays in this part throw further light on some of the several channels of influence. Meritxell Simon-Martín provides a thorough assessment of the tradition of letter-writing. Through the example of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, she shows how a seemingly innocuous lady-like activity, theoretically developing away from the public eye
effectively paved the way for the ensuing exposure of views which proved to be momentous in the struggle against sexual discrimination, the subversion of patriarchal authority, and the advocacy of female suffrage. With Bodichon some forms of exchanges like chain-letters or letters-to-the editor were inaugurated, which endure in such mass media as Ms. Magazine, the topic broached by Angeline Durand’s article. Long after the major gains of the first wave of feminism, much remained to be done, and even re-done after the regressive post-world II period. As the first feminist mass circulation publication Ms. purported to act as an antidote to the distorted views conveyed by the mainstream media, addressing “all women, everywhere, and in every occupation” and cutting across the lines of class, race or nation. As evinced by Angeline Durand’s essay, through its articles and letters-to-the editor it became and still is a valuable consciousness-raising instrument, keeping the flame of feminism alive.

The four essays in the third part bring the dialectics of progress and reaction to the forefront of analysis. Wondering how feminism could or can reach highly reluctant groups, they analyze various strategies of resistance to its major tenets, for better or for worse. The part therefore provides an inkling of the “cutting edge” of feminism when confronted with theoretically insuperable obstacles. Its focus on the problematic exchange between feminism and what may be seen—or has indeed been interpreted— as conservatism postulates that feminism taken on its own can only be a challenge to the established order and thus be described in terms reflecting the binary opposition between emancipation and subjection or simply feminism and patriarchy. But when feminism is voiced or claimed by groups that are typically seen as reactionary, a definitional problem inevitably emerges. Was Margaret Oliphant the ‘prudish feminist’ she is often described to be notably because of her traditionalist vision of marriage or was her exploration of family structures actually avant-gardist? In other terms, can one conceive of alternative forms of feminism that might offer a—partial—reconciliation of the aforementioned binary opposition or is the feminist struggle simply impossible if it does not confront other manifestations of social oppression? This vexed issue is as old as feminism itself and cannot be solved, at least here. However it can be further illustrated by the study of the interaction of feminists and highly conservative forces. In the second essay, this interaction takes on the form of an association in the case of the struggle of white women in the American South within a cultural environment that was historically marked by conservatism, “Southern Ladies” were given a traditionalist education which reflected the values of the mythical “Old South”. Rebellion against patriarchal oppression could not be accomplished
without addressing its local corollary i.e. the segregationist organization of society. The “intertwining of race and gender” (as Anne Stephani puts it) was such that the undermining of racist ideologies was the necessary first step towards the emancipation of women. But advocates of gender and racial emancipation were not always unambiguous allies, as Hélène Charlery’s account of the emergence of a black feminist voice makes clear. In the 1970s, some African-American women became aware that theirs was a double oppression and that the terms of one emancipatory struggle could be almost antithetical to another’s. Indeed black revolutionary discourses advocated a strong patriarchal structure of the black community, expecting women to support this social organization that reinforced their subjection. Yet to join the dominant feminist movements implied a denial of their racial identity. This critical exchange between western white feminism and its challengers is also at the heart of the last essay of our book as Simona Tersigni and Zahra Ali take us one step further in this reflection by looking at the relationship between feminism and Islam, including Islamic fundamentalism. Sociology cannot ignore existing phenomena such as the attempt to define feminism as compatible with traditional religious practices. Muslim theorists of an “other” feminism also defy the western concept of a universal feminism, which eventually must shed light on what might appear as an instrument of oppression, or at least as an accomplice to racial and cultural domination.

All the while the reader should bear in mind that such groupings are inevitably artificial, with many a case of interacting and overlapping. The web aforementioned cannot easily be reconciled with the clear-cut lines drawn up by three separate parts. The bottom line and truth of the matter is that the essays here published echo one another, and are but the rhetorically isolated components of the “matrix formed in complex patterns of crossing, overlapping, and repeating” explored by Margaret McFadden in words quoted by Claude Safir.

What adds to such precautionary remarks is that the book as a whole adds up to a mosaic of contributions by scholars representing many different schools of thought and methodological approaches. Here historians, sociologists, as well as academics specializing in British and American literature or civilization, women or gender studies have joined forces -each of them adding to the overall picture, an innovative web of exchanges and correspondences which become the medium as well as the message of this book.
PART 1

TRANSPORTATIONAL EXCHANGES AND CORRESPONDENCE
My title has a double meaning. These early feminists connected internationally primarily by correspondence, but also by personal meetings, reading the same publications, and citing each other as examples. But letters – or rather, one letter in particular, is also how I began this project which eventually grew into my book, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement*.

The key document is a letter that Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland sent from a prison cell in St. Lazare, Paris in June of 1851 to their “Sisters of America” — the group of U.S. women who had met at the first National Woman’s Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts the previous October. “Dear Sisters,” the French women wrote,

> Your courageous declaration of Woman’s Rights has resounded even to our prison, and has filled our souls with inexpressible joy....The darkness of reaction has obscured the sun of 1848, which seemed to rise so radiantly. Why? Because the revolutionary tempest, in overturning at the same time the throne and the scaffold, in breaking the chain of the black slave, forgot to break the chain of the most oppressed of all the pariahs of humanity....

> Sisters of America! Your socialist sisters of France are united with you in the vindication of the rights of woman to civil and political equality. We have, moreover, the profound conviction that only by the power of association based on solidarity — by the union of the working classes of both sexes to organize labor – can be acquired, completely and pacifically, the civil and political equality of woman, and the social right for all.

> It is in this confidence that, from the depths of the jail which still imprisons our bodies without reaching our hearts, we cry to you, Faith, Love, Hope, and send to you our sisterly salutations.¹

¹ The letter is in *The Proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, Held at Worcester, October 15 and 16, 1851* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1852), pp. 32-
A shorter and more militantly socialist version of this letter went to the Female Political Association in Sheffield, England. Anne Knight, a veteran abolitionist and feminist associate of Deroin’s, had founded a Chartist group there that persuaded the radical Earl of Carlisle to present a petition to the House of Lords for the vote by “Adult Females.”

As I investigated this amazing document – itself a concrete manifestation of early international feminism – I found more connections and relationships. Deroin and Roland sent their letter to the American women because they had heard about the Worcester Convention of 1850. Unlike the 1848 local meetings at Seneca Falls and Rochester, New York, which are far better known today than they were in the nineteenth century, the Worcester meeting was both the first national women’s rights meeting in the United States and claimed far more for women than its predecessors. This convention endorsed “equality before the law without distinctions of sex or color.” The Opening Address, delivered by the president, Paulina Wright Davis, proclaimed the movement’s extent:

The reformation which we propose, in its utmost scope, is radical and universal. It is not the mere perfecting of a progress already in motion, a detail of some established plan, but it is an epochal movement — the emancipation of a class, the redemption of half the world, and a conforming re-organization of all social, political, and industrial interests and institutions.

More connections emerged. The English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, read Jeanne Deroin’s radical newspaper, La Voix des Femmes (Women’s Voice) and learned about the American convention from Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune. He then urged his future wife, Harriet Taylor, to complete her essay, “Enfranchisement of Women,” which he published in July 1851 in the prestigious Westminster Review he edited. Harriet Taylor Mill’s son delivered a copy to Lucretia Mott in Philadelphia; Mott ensured that both Taylor Mill’s essay and Deroin and Roland’s letter received wide circulation at the second Worcester convention in October, 1851. Early the next year, Deroin published a précis of “Enfranchisement of Women” in


2 The English letter was published in Northern Star, 14 June 1851, p. 1.

her Parisian *Almanach des Femmes* entitled “Convention des Femmes en Amérique.”

This web of feminist connections reached as far as Germany. Louise Otto’s feminist weekly, the *Frauen Zeitung* (Women’s Newspaper), which ran for four years, published two pieces on “Johanna” Deroin in 1851. Another German feminist, Mathilde Franziska Anneke, reprinted Deroin and Roland’s letter in her German-language American newspaper. The October issue featured an article on Ernestine Rose, who had translated their letter from French to English.

Who were these women? Harriet Taylor Mill, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are well-known today, but what of Otto, Anneke, Rose, and Knight, as well as Deroin and Roland themselves? As I investigated their lives, I came to see that this international cohort of feminists shared many similarities, beginning with their patterns of early development. They comprised a post-revolutionary generation, growing up in the shadow of the French Revolution of 1789 and the American War of Independence. Only Deroin came from the working class; the rest had middle-class families. If they had brothers, they smarted under the unequal education they received, but many came from families of all girls, or were the only child. Often, their fathers treated them as “surrogate sons.” The full force of the separate spheres ideology, which advocated and idealized female domesticity, shaped their upbringing and early years. All became extremely isolated because of their feminist beliefs, which eventually led them to reach out to each other, forming the international connections which developed into an early radical women’s movement.

Their first rebellion was usually against the religion they had been raised in. By rejecting traditional religion, they also discarded both women’s confinement to the household and their mother’s conventional lives. After the Swedish novelist Fredrika Bremer heard a sermon on “Women’s Noble and Humble Mission,” where the minister preached that a woman must defer to a man even if he were wrong, she wrote the following bitter dialogue:

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Man, with head erect, striking his breast proudly with his hand: “I!”
Woman: “Thou!”
Man: “I will!”
Woman: “Oh, very well!”
Man: “Go.”
Woman goes.
Man: “Come back.”
She comes back.
Man: “Be merry.”
Woman dies.6

Becoming free thinkers, atheists, Unitarians, and agnostics, these women went on to join with like-minded others in radical groups which challenged basic precepts of their societies. These varied from nation to nation.

In France, Britain, and the United States, some became socialists, following the ideas and movements originated by the Comte de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen. A few joined the idealistic socialist communities formed to put cooperative economics into action. In America and Britain, anti-slavery movements attracted dissident women. In Britain, abolitionism focused on amassing signatures to petition for ending slavery in the British West Indies. In the United States, abolitionists risked bodily harm. Fierce opposition to anti-slavery led to threats and physical attacks: in 1838 the Philadelphia hall where the interracial American Association of Anti-Slavery Women met was burned down during their meeting as the police stood by and did nothing. In the Germanies, where extreme governmental control and censorship prevailed, the cause which attracted radical women was that of the Free Congregations. These non-denominational groups, which rejected the severe religious segregation of their day and sometimes included Jews as well as Protestants and Catholics, focused on progress and education. They invented the kindergarten, which was seen as a radical innovation, opposed to the strict control of German early childhood education by clergymen.

Initially welcomed into these dissident movements, women soon found themselves relegated to secondary status. Ernestine Rose recalled that she had been allowed to speak at Owenite meetings, but only after she had washed and put away all the dishes used to serve tea to the audience. Anne Knight complained of collecting signatures for British anti-slavery petitions, only to be excluded from policy meetings. Women in socialist

communes did all the household work yet received lower pay than their male counterparts.\(^7\)

Restricted by men they considered their “brothers,” these women rebelled against the limits imposed upon them. “At bottom male Saint-Simonians are more male than they are Saint-Simonian,” complained an early female French socialist.\(^8\) Breaking from the male-dominated group, scores of these self-named “New Women” formed their own feminist movement. Publishing their own journal, they developed radical positions, from discarding last names which they considered the hallmark of patriarchy, to insisting on equality in both pay and parenting. Deroin, Roland, and others began as Saint-Simoniennes and evolved into early feminists, usually in opposition to their male counterparts. In 1849, when Deroin ran for the French legislature (women had been forbidden to vote, but not to run for office), the socialist P.J. Proudhon wrote that “Just as men cannot be wet nurses, so women cannot be legislators.” “Now, monsieur, we know what organ is needed to be a legislator.” Deroin retorted in her feminist monthly.\(^9\)

In the anti-slavery movement, American women forced the issue by speaking in public, holding conventions, and insisting that women be allowed to participate in previously all-male groups. “We Abolition women are turning the world upside-down,” one boasted in the 1830s.\(^10\) In 1840, the U.S. abolitionist movement split over the issue of female delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Led by Lucretia Mott, seven women crossed the Atlantic to take their seats, only to be confined to a balcony, forbidden to debate the issue, and to have their credentials rejected by the all-male assembly. Anne Knight and other British activists and writers joined the Americans and created friendships sustained for decades by correspondence and further visits. Present at the


convention where her husband was a delegate, the honeymooning Elizabeth Cady Stanton later dated her embrace of women’s rights from that defeat. “These were the first women I had ever met who believed in the equality of the sexes and who did not believe in the popular and orthodox religion,” she wrote in her memoirs,

Judging from my own feelings, the women on both sides of the Atlantic must have been humiliated and chagrined, except as these feelings were outweighed by contempt for the shallow reasoning of their opponents and their comical pose and gestures ...\(^{11}\)

The pattern was identical in the German states. Active participation in the Free Congregations encouraged some female members to claim more, both for themselves and for other women. “For three years we vigorously sought to further the cause of religious reform,” the Hamburg Women’s Club wrote in their 1847 report, “We cannot, however, struggle for freedom of conscience without becoming free ourselves….We felt called upon to work with joy and commitment for the intellectual and material well-being of our sex.” Faced with opposition by men in the movement to women becoming kindergarten teachers, they formed the Hamburg College for the Female Sex to train female teachers, the first women’s college in Germany.\(^ {12}\)

These exclusions led feminist pioneers to reach out to their associates in other lands. In the 1830s, for instance, Anna Wheeler, an Anglo-Irish socialist who had co-authored a feminist text, hosted the Saint-Simonienne Désirée Veret in London, translated the New Women’s “Call to Women” and published it in Owen’s journal, and later met Flora Tristan. Throughout the 1840s, Anne Knight corresponded with American, English, and French feminists, pasting brightly-colored feminist stickers on her envelopes. “Never will the nations of the earth be well governed until both sexes are fairly represented, and have an influence, a voice, a


hand in the enactment and administration of the laws,” read one she often used.\footnote{The most complete collection of her labels, including some in French, is pasted into Knight’s copy of Marion Reid’s A \textit{Plea for Women}, Anne Knight Papers, Library of the Society of Friends, Friends House, London.}

These international connections strengthened in 1848, the year of revolutions in Europe. Generations of U.S. historians have denied any impact from the European revolutions on the first women’s rights meeting at Seneca Falls that year and yet the evidence of their influence is clear. In that revolutionary spring, Lucretia Mott praised the new French government for freeing slaves in the West Indies at a meeting in New York City. She then travelled to Seneca Falls in upstate New York to assess the condition of the Seneca Indians, whom she described as having learned “from the political agitations abroad…imitating the movements of France and all Europe in seeking a larger liberty, more independence.”\footnote{Dana Greene, ed., \textit{Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons} (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1980), p. 75; Lucretia Mott to Edmund Quincy, 24 August 1848 in Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., \textit{Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 166.}

Mott’s visit prompted the Seneca Falls Convention that July, where Stanton delivered a speech declaring that man takes from woman “all those rights which are dearer to him than life itself — rights which have been baptized in blood — and the maintenance of which is even now rocking to their foundations the kingdoms of the Old World.”\footnote{Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Speech at the Seneca Falls Convention, 1848, in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, \textit{Man Can Not Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Feminist Rhetoric with Texts} (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), vol. II, pp. 56-57.} Hostile newspapers, like the \textit{New-York Herald}, connected and condemned the actions of women on both sides of the Atlantic.

This is the age of revolutions […] but the work of revolution is no longer confined to the Old World, nor to the masculine gender […]. Though we have the most perfect confidence in the courage and daring […] of our lady acquaintances, we confess it would go to our hearts to see them putting on the panoply of war, and mixing in scenes like those at which, it is said, the fair sex in Paris lately took a prominent part.\footnote{Cited in Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, \textit{History of Woman Suffrage}, vol. I, p. 805.}

1848 initiated the heyday of this early international women’s movement. Feminist newspapers and journals appeared in France, Germany, and the United States. (Great Britain remained the exception in these years as neither a revolution nor sympathy for the 1848 revolutions,
which seems to have been essential for international feminism then, existed there.) In France, *La Voix des femmes* appeared weekly from March to June, 1848. The next month, Deroin published *La Politique des femmes*, but in December, the revolutionary French government excluded women from politics and its name had to be changed to *L’Opinion des femmes* until it ceased publication in August, 1849. After her prison term, Deroin published three issues of her yearly *Almanach des femmes*, 1852 in Paris, 1853 at Victor Hugo’s press in exile on Jersey, and 1854 from London.

In Germany, a spate of newspapers sprang up. Anneke edited three issues of a *Frauen Zeitung* (Women’s Newspaper), but this was mostly a cover for the socialist paper she and her husband had printed before he was sent to prison. The feminist writer Louise Aston produced *Die Freischärler* (The Volunteer) for a few months in 1848, when *Die Barrikade* (Barricades) and *Frauen-Spiegel* (Women’s Mirror) also appeared briefly. Louise Dittmar edited *Soziale Reform* for a few months in 1849 and later republished its contents as *The Essence of Marriage, Along with Some Essays about Women’s Social Reform*. The longest-lived was Louise Otto’s *Frauen Zeitung*, which lasted from 1849 until 1852, when the Prussian government promulgated the “Lex Otto” to prevent women from editing newspapers.

In the United States, Anneke produced her *Deutsche Frauen Zeitung* in German and English from 1852 to ’54. Paulina Wright Davis’s *The Una*, which published a number of letters from England and influenced feminists there, lasted from 1853 to ’55. The longest lived was Amelia Bloomer’s *The Lily*, which despite its bland name became increasingly feminist during its seven-year run from 1849 to 1856. Best-known for its advocacy of the reformed female dress which came to be called “bloomers,” the journal actually recommended that women wear a knee-length skirt over ankle-length trousers. Adopted by Stanton, Anthony, and a few other American women, the costume also had international influence. “New York — London — Paris — the issue which was only comical at the start has become serious and it is now time that we in Germany also have our say,” Otto wrote in her women’s newspaper.  

Each journal required the efforts of scores of women to produce and represented an amazing outpouring of female energy. Publishing even a single issue required the labor of volunteers, most of them female, working as editors, reporters, writers, printers, publishers, saleswomen, and distributors. A four-page daily like *La Voix des femmes* or a fifty-page monthly like *The Lily* demanded reams of material on a regular basis. To

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fill their pages, journals printed feminist writings from the 1830s and 1840s as well as contemporary reportage, drawing on a wide range of international as well as national sources. Most issues of La Voix des femmes carried a review of recent events from foreign journals; the first contained reports from Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, England, Ireland, Poland, and Italy. The second number began publishing a French translation of Bettina von Arnim’s 1843 treatise, This Book Belongs to the King, under the title On Poverty in Germany. The third reproduced an internationalist label Anne Knight had printed for her letters in the early 1840s.

Young women of the Gauls had the right to make the laws, they were legislators.
In some tribes, African women have the right to vote.
Anglo-Saxon women participated in England in the legislature.
The women of the Hurons, one of the strongest tribes of North America, made up a council, the elders followed their advice.
We struggle for liberty!

Louise Otto’s Frauen Zeitung regularly carried a section called “A Look Around,” which published news of interest to feminists from Europe and America. Amelia Bloomer’s Lily often printed letters and articles from “abroad,” relying on European news, especially from England, to round out its American offerings. “The interests of the whole human family are so linked together that whatever is done for the elevation of one class affects all,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in December. “Every revolution of the moral world brings for woman a brighter and happier day.”

Feminists’ newspapers and periodicals also publicized women’s actions throughout the Western world in these years. News of Elizabeth Blackwell being awarded an M.D. degree from New York’s Geneva Medical College in 1849 spread rapidly and emboldened others to extend their demands. L’Opinion des femmes argued that “the example of Miss Blackwell gives us the opportunity to return to the question of women doctors in France,” which had arisen the previous year. Then Suzanne Voilquin (who had complained about men in the Saint-Simonian movement) led the United Midwives to demand state funding, a radical act even in the revolutionary spring of 1848. A year later, Blackwell’s achievement made Voilquin’s demand seem weak — they should have

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18 La Voix des femmes, 20 March 1848, pp. 3-4; 22 March 1848, pp. 1-2; 23 March 1848, p. 3. The text is in French both in La Voix des femmes and on Knight’s label.
19 Sunflower [Stanton’s pseudonym], The Lily, 1 December 1849, p. 1.
pushed for full medical training argued Deroin’s paper: “We salute in [Blackwell] the emancipator, who opens the breach through which others may follow…[in] this noble cause which is at the same time the cause of all women and of humanity.” In Britain, where satirical magazines had a field day caricaturing and mocking the idea of a woman doctor, the young feminists Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon) befriended Blackwell and raised money for her New York clinic. In America, where Geneva and other medical schools instantly closed their doors to other women, feminists founded all-female medical colleges. Louise Otto publicized two of these in her German women’s newspaper.20

In addition to medical colleges, these early feminists founded other institutions of higher education for women, who were blocked in this period from attending any male college or university. Elizabeth Reid, an Englishwoman who had welcomed the American female anti-slavery delegates to London in 1840, helped create Bedford College for Women, which opened in 1849. Designed in opposition to the conservative Queen’s College, which was run by men and aimed at educating governesses, Bedford had an all-female board of governors and a nondenominational policy. Barbara Leigh Smith attended classes there, and its example contributed to her later founding of Girton College, the first college for women at Cambridge University.21 Lucretia and James Mott raised funds for the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1850, and in 1864 for the co-ed Swarthmore College.

In Germany, feminists created the Hamburg College for the Female Sex in 1850. With an all-male faculty, the institution offered standard academic subjects as well as teacher’s training for kindergarten and elementary school education. Two-thirds of the Board of Directors were women. Although the college closed after two years in part because of charges that it was “a hotbed of demagoguery in which revolutionary plans were formed under cover of education,” its example continued to inspire. “We did not doubt that many of those who had seen its first incarnation in

our school would see its complete triumph, if not in Europe, then certainly in the New World.” wrote one of its students.22

The Germans’ most important contribution to women’s education was the kindergarten. Developed by Friedrich and Karl Froebel in the Free Congregation movement in the late 1840s, kindergartens sought to educate children to cooperate across both class and denominational lines in the hopes of creating a progressive, democratic-socialist future. Often staffed by single young women, kindergartens challenged traditional German primary education, which was monopolized by male clergy who segregated children along religious and class lines. After the revolution went under, the repressive Prussian government outlawed kindergartens as “a part of Froebel’s socialist system, which is calculated on training children for atheism,” and in 1854 it reimposed religious control in the schools and banned single women from teaching.23

The severity of German state repression after the 1848-49 Revolutions led to the wide-scale emigration of revolutionaries, like Mathilda and Fritz Anneke, to Great Britain and the United States. Many brought the concept of kindergartens with them and established new ones in their new nations. Two sisters involved in the Free Congregations and the Hamburger Hochschule did this: Bertha Meyer Traun Ronge in England and Margrethe Meyer Schurz in the United States.24 Rapidly successful in America and Britain, kindergartens and an increased role for women educators and administrators transformed nursery school education.

In addition to founding kindergartens, schools, and colleges to put their ideas into reality, early radical feminists attempted to build larger groups and associations. The reason Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland served a prison term was for attending a meeting of the Union of Workers’ Associations, which they had organized, after the revolutionary French government declared politics out of bounds for women. An umbrella organization of 108 unions, a number of them, like the United Midwives, all-female or mixed, the Union of Workers Associations collapsed under government repression. The same fate met Louise Otto’s attempt to create a Federation of German Women, linking activists from the free

23 Paletschek, Frauen und Dissens, p. 216.
congregations, labor unions, and feminist groups. In France, Germany, and Austria politics remained off limits for women until the late nineteenth century.

The lack of reactionary state control in the United States allowed a women’s rights movement to grow. Between 1850 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, numerous conventions assembled. Meeting nationally every year but one in the 1850s, American feminists took hope from Victor Hugo’s recent pronouncement that “the eighteenth century proclaimed the rights of man; the nineteenth century will proclaim the rights of woman.”

Thousands of spectators thronged these meetings, where women publicly voiced their demands. “Conventions are good,” Fredrika Bremer affirmed in her 1853 account of her travels in America, “I rejoice at the nobility and prudence with which many female speakers stand forth […] at the depth of woman’s experience of life, her sufferings and yearnings, which through them come to light.” The example of U.S. feminists led Bremer to speak “before large assemblies” and actively work to expand women’s rights in Sweden. “After her return from America, her predominating thought was how she might be able to secure liberty and an unrestricted sphere of activity for Swedish women,” her sister wrote. In part through Bremer’s influence, Sweden repealed guardianship laws for women and allowed those who paid taxes to vote in municipal elections.

In return, American feminists frequently spoke about women’s efforts abroad and sent what help and support they could. In 1853, Paulina Wright Davis moved that a committee be established “to prepare an address…to the women of Great Britain and the continent of Europe, setting forth our objects and inviting their co-operation in the same,” since “this great movement is intended to meet the wants, not of America only, but of the

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25 For one example, see Proceedings of the National Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Cleveland, Ohio on Oct. 5th, 6th, & 7th, 1853 (Cleveland: Gray, Beardsley, Spear, & Co., 1854), pp. 57-58. It was the French novelist Hugo who went into exile following Napoleon III’s coup d’état and published Deroin’s L’ Almanach des femmes.

whole world.”

The committee included Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Mathilda Anneke, as well as Paulina Davis, Dr. Harriot Hunt, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, and Ernestine Rose. “Our movement is cosmopolitan,” Rose declared a few years later, “It claims the rights of woman wherever woman exists, and this claim makes itself felt wherever woman is wronged.”

Some early feminists like Rose embodied the internationalism of this early radical movement. Introduced at the 1852 U.S. National Women’s Rights Convention as “a Polish lady and educated in the Jewish faith,” Rose, who had lived in Germany, France, and England before coming to America, repudiated those labels. “It is of very little importance in what geographical position a person is born,” she declared. “Yes, I am an example of the universality of our claims for not American women only, but a daughter of poor, crushed Poland, and the down-trodden and persecuted people called the Jews, ‘a child of Israel,’ pleads for the rights of her sex.”

Traveling widely in the United States to speak for women’s rights, Rose voyaged to Europe in 1856, where she contacted continental feminists like Jenny d’Héricourt. She remained nationally unclassifiable. A few weeks before she and her husband returned to Britain to live in 1869, Rose became a U.S. citizen. Returning to the States for a visit in 1874, she continued to link Americans and Europeans until her death in 1892.

Jenny d’Héricourt, a former Saint-Simonienne, influenced the Russian feminist M.L. Mikhailov (who translated Harriet Taylor Mill’s *Enfranchisement of Women* into Russian). Her 1860 feminist text, *La Femme Affranchie*, was published in an abridged American version in 1864, the year after d’Héricourt emigrated to Chicago. “To you all, my friends, both French women and foreigners, I dedicate this work,” she wrote,

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29 *Proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Syracuse, Sept. 8th, 9th, and 10th, 1852* (Syracuse: J.E. Masters, 1852), p. 63.
May it be useful everywhere in the triumph of the liberty of women, and of the equality of all before the law; this is the sole wish that a Frenchwoman can make who believes in the unity of the human family.  

Anne Knight, the English Quaker abolitionist, actively pursued feminism both in England and France, where she lived until her death in 1862. Lucretia Mott in Philadelphia corresponded with Knight and other British feminists for decades after her 1840 visit in London. Throughout her long life, she remained one of those famous Americans that foreign visitors sought out, Harriet Martineau, Fredrika Bremer, and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon among them.

These women and their coworkers created the world’s first international women’s movement. They knew and learned from each other, they wrote and visited, they read the same books. Reaching out to their counterparts in other nations, they sent “joyous greetings to the distant lands,” as Emma Goldman later wrote of Mary Wollstonecraft. In the middle of the nineteenth century, they demanded full equality in the economy, religion, and culture, as well as in law and government. In politics, they claimed not only the vote, but the right to hold office, to govern, to serve on juries, to conduct the same public lives as men. They fought in revolutions, voted illegally, and refused to pay taxes. They consistently spoke in public for “a cause which is still in its rotten-egg stage (I mean its advocates are apt to have rotten eggs and dirtier words thrown at them),” as Bodichon wrote after visiting Mott in 1858.

At the height of the Victorian era, these feminists dared to speak out in public about prostitution, forced marriage, the right to have sex or to refuse it. They demanded that child custody be awarded to mothers instead of automatically going to fathers. They defined a new kind of marriage based on companionship and claimed the right to divorce if it failed. They saw prostitution not as a moral failing, but as the direct result of an unjust economic system that forced women into a handful of degraded and poorly paid jobs.

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Holding prostitutes relatively blameless, they considered many “respectable” marriages to be legalized prostitution, arrangements in which a woman with no other options sold herself to a single man. To remedy that situation, they worked to open new, better paid jobs for women, so that all could secure the independence that feminists believed came only with the ability to support oneself. These early feminists insisted that women could do almost any job men did, and they founded the institutions necessary to realize their dreams. Inspired by the great scientific breakthroughs of their day — the telegraph, railroads, industrial production — they believed they could create a peaceful, harmonious world without poverty for women and men of all races and classes.

And of course, they did not succeed. Stifled by repression in Europe, ignored by an America riven by the U.S. Civil War, early international feminism faded away. Remembered largely in hostile caricatures, it remained ignored by history. Yet the achievements of this movement should not be underestimated. It challenged the male dominance of Western culture and society in a way that would not be repeated until the late 1960s. It created a coherent and convincing ideology that made wide-ranging claims for women’s rights and equality, without surrendering a keen sense of women’s differences from men.

These early international feminists looked to the future to validate them. In two hundred years, Louise Otto wrote, German women would “smile good humoredly” at the problems of the current age. “The very truths you are now contending for, will, in fifty years, be so embedded in public opinion that no one need say one word in their defense,” a feminist friend optimistically assured Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In the 1860s, Bodichon told her ally Emily Davies, “You will go up and vote upon crutches, and I shall come out of my grave and vote in my winding sheet.” In 1919, when British women over thirty finally gained the suffrage, Bodichon had been dead for almost thirty years, but the eighty-eight-year-old Davies walked to the polls to cast her ballot. Believing they had been born “too soon,” they thought the world would come to see that they were right. To a large degree, it has.

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