ON THE PATH TO CITIZENSHIP. A CONCEPTUAL HISTORICIST READING OF ANTEBELLUM WOMEN'S PROTEST LITERATURE

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This essay[1] introduces a new approach to the history of protest literature, and to literary history writing in general. My case studies investigate antebellum American works by women that express discontent with women's condition. A text like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is a classic of antebellum protest literature but does not protest women's condition, is therefore outside the scope of this analysis. The three texts are the "Declaration of Sentiments" of the Seneca Falls Convention (1848), Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (published in 1861, but written probably between 1852 and 1857). Although they raise consciousness about women's social and political oppression, these non-fictional texts belong to different literary genres and combine aesthetics with ideology and social protest in different ways. They are, however, fortuitously connected by a common thread, with the Seneca Falls Declaration occupying the central position: its main author, Elisabeth Cady Stanton, had attended Fuller's "Conversationals" which inspired her to initiate her own conversation series in upstate New York (Kolodny 1994, 377); sometime between 1849 and 1852, Amy Post, an anti-slavery

[1]I am grateful to Marshall Brown for his generous advice on an earlier version of this essay.

feminist who had attended the Seneca Falls Convention and signed the Declaration of Sentiments, urged her friend Harriet Jacobs to contribute to the abolitionist cause by writing the story of her life in slavery and her arduous but ultimately victorious struggle against her oppressors (Yellin 2002, xix). Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's theory and practice of conceptual history, this essay will analyze the semantic field of citizenship in these works with an aim to explore the textual politics of their protest within the conceptual and ideological context of antebellum America.

To give an account of literary texts and their contexts attuned both to the alterity of the past and to the historian's situation, the literary *historian* must acknowledge the incongruity between history and the language employed to represent historical events and structures, then and subsequently. Furthermore, to avoid the disappearance of the text from her account, the *literary* historian needs to attend to the language of the literary sources (or some linguistic aspect thereof) and account for their aesthetic dimension. *Begriffsgeschichte,* the method of conceptual history developed by Koselleck for German and European historiography, promises to help achieve this aim through its reliance on lexical and semantic analysis. By eliminating confusion between historically different understandings of the same concept, it also counteracts the tendency to read the present into a past text. It is then up to the literary historian to decide which concepts can become stable topical criteria alongside or above other criteria such as genre, period, thematic content, authorial intent, or cultural politics.

While all concepts are words, according to Koselleck, "a word becomes a concept only when the entirety of meaning and experience within a sociopolitical context within which and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word" (2004, 85). Concepts are ambiguous and have multiple meanings that are not as readily disambiguated as polysemous words can be. The meaning of citizenship has long been contested in law courts, political assemblies, civil society, and political philosophy, and the struggle to define it continues in debates on

nationality, immigration, and the return of ISIS terrorists and their families to their countries of origin. Citizenship is a fundamental historical concept, that is, one of those concepts derived from Greek or Latin that are still unavoidable and necessary to make sense of the social and political reality at a certain time. In its oldest sense, it designates the status of a citizen, typically conferring rights and privileges such as the right to vote and be elected, enabling individuals to participate in the political life of their self-governing community. In a more modern sense, it denotes membership in a sovereign nation state and largely overlaps with "nationality". And thirdly, citizenship can denote a standard of civic conduct, a sense identified by *OED* as "engagement in the duties and responsibilities of a member of society" ("citizenship, n."); true or good citizenship is thus virtually synonymous with active or participatory citizenship. For the conceptual historian this last meaning is especially interesting because it signals a semantic shift toward normativity and universality that most likely started with the establishment of a republican model of citizenship in parts of Europe and North America at the end of the eighteenth century, an assumption that the chronology of *OED*'s illustrating quotations seems to confirm.

Concepts need to be analyzed both synchronically, in terms of the semantic fields and their interactions with related concepts at a given moment, and diachronically, as new meanings emerge in relation to persisting, overlapping, or extinct usages. Complementary to the three major senses above, the semantic field of citizenship in antebellum America included elements of meaning directly assigned by various contemporary discourses (legal, political, economic, technological, historical, artistic, and so on), and others derived from adjacent concepts and relevant ideologies. For example, the heavily racialized conception of US citizenship articulated in the Naturalization Acts of 1790 and 1795, which granted citizenship through naturalization only to "free white persons", survived well into the nineteenth century, as demonstrated by the Supreme Court rulings in *Cherokee Nations v. Georgia* (1831) and especially *Dred Scott v.*

Sandford (1857). At the same time, the influence of the concept of class on the semantic field of citizenship declined because of the systematic removal of property qualifications for voting from state laws and constitutions throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The republican view of voting as a privilege, rather than a right, similarly faded, allowing voting rights to assume a central role in the meaning of citizenship. However, other aspects of the republican ethos, such as virtue and the obligation to defend the state and pay taxes in return for protection and full enjoyment of citizenship rights and privileges, continued to inform the antebellum concept (Isenberg 1998, 7; Carroll 2015, 427).

The most divisive, yet semantically very productive, characteristic of antebellum citizenship was its restrictiveness. In conceptual-historicist terms, citizenship formed asymmetrical pairs with counter-concepts that collectively designated non-citizen groups, such as women (*womanhood)*, African Americans (*blackness*), and Native Americans (*Indianness*). To identify and analyze the semantic constituents of citizenship that the three texts of antebellum women's protest literature recognized, challenged, or proposed, I pay special attention to the citizenship-womanhood conceptual pair. Because the documents I have chosen belong to the species of protest literature, the aesthetic dimension of the text, which is rarely a problem for conceptual historians, is attended to in addition to semantics and social history. In his foreword to *American Protest Literature*, alongside empathy and shock value, John Stauffer identifies "symbolic action" as one of the three rhetorical strategies that protest literature writers employ to persuade and mobilize readers. The concept, borrowed from Kenneth Burke's aesthetic theory, stands for "indeterminacy of meaning, rich ambiguity and open-endedness in the text, which goes beyond the author's intent" (Stauffer 2006, xiii). Although these New Critical categories are certainly not the only aesthetic criteria to measure and demonstrate the

literariness of protest literature[2], I have found them particularly useful for the conceptual historicist approach illustrated here.

Expanding *citizenship* to encompass *womanhood*

The "Declaration of Sentiments" is primarily a political document, but its most interesting quality is its form and language. It recasts and parodies the language of the Declaration of Independence. The audacity of this move gives the text its shock value: the despotic King, the Tyrant, the Usurper, and the perpetrator of the long list of instances of oppression and injustice is now designated as "man", and the victim is "woman". Above all, this rhetorical strategy endows the Seneca Falls Declaration with the kind of Burkean symbolic action mentioned above. The parodistic elements draw attention to the deficiency of the Declaration of Independence for omitting women from its commitment to human rights and liberty. By adopting the language of the nation's most revered foundational document, the "Declaration of Sentiments" aligns women's protest with the American tradition of republicanism and implies that it was no less revolutionary than that of the colonists at the time of their separation from Britain. Whether the Declaration of Independence was used as the template for the Seneca Falls document for satirical or celebratory purposes, it is clear that the "Declaration of Sentiments", written and adopted in the spectacular year of the international revolution, is as symbolic as it is radical.

The word "citizen" appears only in the "Declaration of Sentiments" proper (i.e., not in the resolutions): first, in protesting woman's deprivation of the elective franchise, her "first right as a citizen", which left her without representation in the legislatures (28); and second, in the proposed solution for the redress of women's grievances: "we insist that [women] have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the

[2] For a discussion of the aesthetic dimension in protest literature, without recourse to New Criticism, see Kimberly Drake's "On the Literature of Protest: Words as Weapons" (1-23).

United States" (29). The first instance echoes Jefferson's complaint about the King's usurpation of the people's "inestimable" right of representation in the legislature and identifies citizenship and the right to vote as essential for exercising the constitutional right of representation. In its second occurrence, the concept pertains more generally to the entirety of constitutional rights and may even allude to the "privileges and immunities" clause of Section 2, Article IV of the US Constitution, the clause that primarily regulated state and national citizenship before the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The findings of this initial stage of semantic inquiry can now be considered in relation to other conceptualizations of citizenship in the antebellum women's rights movement and in contemporary political and constitutional debates around that concept. As Nancy Isenberg (1998, xiv) observes in her study of antebellum feminism, the supporters of the movement could not claim full citizenship for women "without first changing the rules, beliefs, and biases derived from republicanism". One of those rules was the quid pro quo of rights and protection in exchange for allegiance, which implied economic and, potentially, physical sacrifice (Isenberg 1998, 6-7). There were hardly any constitutional rights women could claim for themselves under such circumstances. Seen in this light, the decision to borrow the language of the Declaration of Independence along with its ritual of affixing the participants' signatures at the Seneca Falls Convention must have been mordantly ironic.

Challenging the conventional approach to the history of American feminism, which gives primacy to the struggle for women's suffrage, Isenberg (1998, 33-35) critiques the "Declaration of Sentiments" for its understanding of citizenship and the elective franchise as natural, or, in the wording of the document, "inalienable" and "sacred", rights. This approach, she argues, allowed Stanton and her colleagues to condemn women's disenfranchisement as unnatural and, therefore, unconstitutional, which, in practice, did not leave them much space to advance an agenda for full entitlement. She then contrasts this natural rights argument with

Paulina Wright Davies's presidential address to the 1850 National Convention in Worcester, which challenged citizenship on the grounds of contemporary state and national constitutional debates involving due process and equal protection. This approach, Isenberg contends, attempted to entitle women as a class (37) rather than restrict the franchise to a relation between the state and the individual citizen.

For all its acumen and vast array of evidence, Isenberg's argument is vulnerable to an important objection: by bringing the due process clause together with the principle of equal protection (based on a phrase used by Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in *Roberts v. The City of Boston*, 1849), it anticipates the Fourteenth Amendment. There was, in fact, no equal protection provision in the sense that would have justified women's attention to the due process clause, no matter how much Isenberg tries to conflate it with the issues of educational discrimination and equal taxation rights raised by Harriot Hunt, another speaker at the Worcester Convention (36). Moreover, antebellum feminists could just as well consider the privileges and immunities clause of Article IV as quite suitable to advance a more inclusive definition of citizenship, which is what the incipient analysis of the concept in the Seneca Falls Declaration has already shown. Indeed, in the landmark federal circuit court case *Corfield v. Coryell* (1823), Justice Bushrod Washington had formulated the classic explanation of the clause and even added "the elective franchise" to the natural rights enumerated as privileges and immunities of citizenship ("Article 4").

To avoid the risk of reducing the meaning of citizenship to voting rights, which does not do justice to the text under scrutiny, I propose a more extensive reading of the conceptualizations or units of meaning that contribute to its semantic field. This is consistent with Koselleck's model of synchronic conceptual analysis, as complemented by Michael Freeden's more recent work in conceptual history and ideology studies. According to Freeden (2017, 124), the synchronic analysis of a concept involves paying special attention to its

morphology: internally, to the variable components or related concepts that constitute it (a micro-analysis), and externally, to its relations with neighboring concepts, its position in and contribution to a "cluster of concepts" (a macro- or ideological analysis). Furthermore, in addition to tracing concept-designating words in the texts, or what Koselleck calls the semasiological approach, I read those texts onomasiologically, that is, paying attention to "the variety of names for (identical?) materialities in order to be able to show how concepts are formed" (2004, 86). Although Koselleck's historical studies rarely approach concepts onomasiologically[3] (a notable exception is his study of asymmetrical conceptual pairs, like Hellenes and Barbarians), conceptual analyses of literary texts may benefit by starting not from the word but from the idea, which is often expressed by other concepts or counter-concepts.

Rights are a ubiquitous constituent of the meaning of citizenship in the "Declaration of Sentiments". In addition to the right to vote, the "Declaration" points out that women had been denied the right to property in marriage and access to education and to jobs that offer more than "scanty remuneration" (28). The demand that women be granted "all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States" (29) effectively encapsulates rights within citizenship, and further connects both with the concept of nation.

Equality, liberty, representation, and virtue are individually connected with the notion of rights, but they are also concepts that contribute to the semantic field of citizenship. Equality figures in the original equality proposition of the Declaration for Independence adapted to gender difference, but it can also be inferred from the long list of grievances. Liberty is a mere abstraction for most women because, in marriage, man has become the woman's "master" with "power to deprive her of liberty and administer chastisement" (28). Representation appears in connection with woman's deprivation of her right to vote and her expected submission to laws on which she had no say. Finally, the concept of virtue leaves its mark on citizenship in the last

[3] Due to a growing interest in transnational and multilingual projects, Steinmetz and Freeden (2017, 22-24) have called for more focus on "onomasiological comparisons".

Resolution, which asserts woman's equal right and duty to promote righteous causes and change society (30).

From our early twenty-first century perspective, one of the most peculiar characteristics of antebellum women's protest is its staunch essentialism. These early American feminists saw it as part of woman's "nature" to protest injustice, to side with the oppressed, and to reform society. Approaching nineteenth-century women's protest literature through the much later concept of gender, as studies of women's history like Isenberg's often do, risks ignoring or misinterpreting a key component of those women's politics. This is why the term I investigate here as a counter-concept of citizenship is not *gender*, but *womanhood*, a word that, to paraphrase Koselleck, condensed the entire experience of being a woman in the sociopolitical context of antebellum America. In antebellum America, the semantic fields of womanhood and citizenship were ostensibly external to each other, since the former was defined in terms of the domestic sphere quite at odds with the domain of citizenship[4]. Yet those who protested women's condition sought to destabilize the asymmetrical conceptual pair through an array of rhetorical strategies, such as highlighting the contradictions within its logic, offering counterarguments, appealing to emotions, and identifying commonalities in the meanings of both concepts in order to build semantic bridges between them.

In the "Declaration of Sentiments", the idea of separate spheres is the main target of protest. Echoing Sarah Grimke's argument from *Letters on the Equality of Sexes, and the*

[4] Since the 1990s, the concept of "separate spheres" has been criticized for enforcing and perpetuating a simplistic binary logic of gender difference in the study of nineteenth-century women's politics and literature. In her influential essay, "No More Separate Spheres!", Cathy Davidson argues that "the binaric version of nineteenth-century American history is ultimately unsatisfactory because it is simply too crude an instrument – too rigid and totalizing – for understanding the different, complicated ways that nineteenth-century American society or literary production functioned" (445). This is certainly true when "separate spheres" is conceived as an analytical concept or "an instrument" of historiography. However, one can deny neither the trope's concrete referentiality nor its pervasiveness in antebellum America. As Amy Dunham Strand (2009, 22) writes: "In the early 19th century, the domestic sphere (with its attendant roles of wife and mother) was women's socially sanctioned area of activity". Throughout this essay, the notion of "woman's sphere", which frequently appears in antebellum women's protest literature, is not employed as an analytical concept but as a historical constitutive element of the semantic field of womanhood.

Condition of Woman, women's confinement to a "sphere of action" is described as a usurpation of the "prerogative of Jehovah himself" because a woman's sphere properly belongs only to God and her conscience (29). Marriage is satirized as a form of slavery: deprived of liberty, women are consequently deprived of citizenship. Hence the largest share of the section on resolutions is assigned to women's access to the public sphere, so as to counteract the ubiquity of the trope of "separate spheres" in contemporary discourses. All of the "civic" concepts: equality, citizenship, liberty, and rights (to vote and to speak in public) pertain to the idea of making women's sphere coextensive with the public one, "the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her" (30).

While men claim intellectual superiority, the "Declaration" attributes moral superiority to women, who should be allowed to exert their moral superiority in public by teaching, speaking, participating in and promoting every righteous cause in the sphere of morals and religion. Virtue is therefore a component of both womanhood and citizenship, and its semantic field straddles both concepts. But the Declaration of Sentiments appears to gloss over an incongruity between the civic-rational type of virtue and the moral-sentimental one. Half a century earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft (2014, 47) had subsumed Rousseau's thesis about virtue in men to her argument for women's education: "it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason"; but the idea of virtue in antebellum America may have relied on more than eighteenth-century republicanism.

In the Seneca Falls document, the semantic field of citizenship communicates externally with other concepts, networks of concepts, and ideologies. These external connections constitute much of the "context" of the concept and hence of the text in which it appears. The preamble to the Resolutions indicates the precept from which the upcoming resolutions derive: the authors cite William Blackstone, according to whom the greatest law of nature, "coeval with mankind" and above any other law, is that "man shall pursue his own true and substantial

happiness" (29). Swiftly changing referent, but consistent with the strategy of making a point by creatively appropriating the language of the source document, the first resolution is therefore to declare invalid all laws that conflict with "the true and substantial happiness of woman". Like the Declaration of Independence, the Seneca Falls document and the notion of citizenship it espouses are firmly anchored in classical liberal thought. Virtually inseparable from liberalism, echoes of the arch-concepts and Enlightenment doctrines of progress and development are discernible in all the grievances and resolutions pertaining to women's rights. When man is indicted for endeavoring to destroy woman's self-respect and confidence and for making her "willing to live a dependent and abject life" (29), another faithful companion to liberalism, the concept of individualism, is also manifest. However, the Founders' republican ideology, which is alluded to in the form of the protest, is less present in the text's representations of citizenship. Except for the ambivalent ideal of Republican Motherhood that consigned women to the home but at least contributed to the expansion of female education and the realization that women can have a political function, however humble and indirect (Kerber 2000, 118-119), republicanism had little to contribute to a suitable model of citizenship for antebellum women's rights supporters. Consequently, the authors of the Seneca Falls Declaration adopted a new notion of virtue, in lieu of the "virile" classical republican concept, as a constitutive semantic element of their reformed conception of citizenship. That type of virtue, which I have called moral-sentimental, was more attuned to the reformist ethos brought forth by the Second Great Awakening. These concepts and their ideological networks point toward a future in which the semantic field of citizenship incorporates womanhood.

A transcendental-civic model of American *womanhood*

While still revered as the first feminist treatise in American literature, Fuller's essay seems to be more concerned with rhetorical prowess than with social change. Annette Kolodny

(1994) attempts to correct this view and to revive interest in Fuller's early contribution to feminism; she demonstrates that Fuller's rhetorical style is "suggestive" rather than "persuasive", based on Fuller's choice of advice and tips from Richard Whately's 1832 handbook of rhetoric, which Fuller had used both in her conversations and in her brief teaching career at a school for girls in Providence, Rhode Island. According to Kolodny, Fuller heeded all of Whately's advice on how to instruct readers and make them understand the problem (e.g. by imitating the polyphonic and panoptical form of the conversation, making analogies, relocating the burden of proof, etc.). She resisted, however, his insistence on the importance of closure and, more importantly, rejected as coercive the appeals to passion that Whately saw as essential strategies for persuasion (Kolodny 1994, 376). Thereby, Kolodny argues, Fuller invented a feminist discourse that other nineteenth-century activists were not ready to adopt because they were still indebted to the masculine forms of public advocacy they had been taught in coeducational academies and women's seminaries (378). But in her attempt to recover the protest value of Fuller's essay, Kolodny may have overly disambiguated it by focusing exclusively on its rhetorical strategy for social change. Fuller's contradictions, her ambiguous position on women's rights, and her adherence to the transcendentalist ideal of individual progress into oneness do not go well with Kolodny's argument. Furthermore, Fuller's tract is not entirely free from appeals to passion and exhortations to adopt a certain conduct. With respect to persuading and mobilizing readers, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* might have more in common with the symbolic action strategy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than with the radical politics of the "Seneca Falls Declaration". The approach I illustrate here is more alert to the ambiguities of the text and its often muffled or aestheticized protest. Like Kolodny, I believe that paying special attention to language is crucial for investigating the text's engagement with the world at the historical moment of its production; but instead of rhetorical strategies, my focus is on concepts and their representations in Fuller's text.

Citizenship makes an early appearance in Fuller's treatise, but it is not as central to her argument as equality, liberty, and representation are. Fuller inscribes her work in the ampler protest for women's rights, generated by a better understanding and nobler interpretation of liberty and equality in the republican ethos of the French Revolution. That revolution created the titles of "citoyen" and "citoyenne", and, Fuller concedes, "it was not unimportant to woman that even this species of equality was awarded her. Before, she could be condemned to perish on the scaffold for treason, not as a citizen, but as a subject" (1999, 8). Fuller suggests there is a better kind of equality than the title of citizen. It remains to be seen if this is a critique of citizenship in general or only of its imperfect realization during the French Revolution.

The next reference to citizenship further qualifies this species of equality as a "calm equality" enjoyed by Spartan women and French citoyennes alike, because those women shared their men's patriotic and civic ideals (26). Much later, the word "citizen" is used sarcastically to rebuke the men who argue that working-class women's deplorable condition is a necessary accompaniment of civilization (71). This suggests that Fuller entertains a high notion of citizenship. The idea is confirmed by the last mention of citizenship, which touches on the concepts of motherhood and nation and ties it to republican principles: women are proud when they give birth to boys because sons become citizens and defenders of their country (87).

Like the authors of the Seneca Falls Declaration, Fuller protests against family and marriage laws that do not grant women equal rights to property and guardianship. Because of its reliance on rights, Fuller's conception of equality here can be regarded as internal to the semantic field of citizenship, and it is omnipresent in her elaborate refutation of the conventional view of marriage as the unequal partnership between man and woman. Thus, in fulfilling their parental duties, the spouses' relation must be based on "a religious recognition of equality" (36). Equality between man and woman is also a criterion in Fuller's appraisal of the representation of women in works by Swedenborg, Fourier, and Goethe. Her favorite is

Goethe because, in addition to granting political equality to his female characters, he also portrays them as harmonious "units", complete beings and souls. Fuller gestures here beyond the civic notion of equality and toward an absolute, transcendentalist ideal based on individualism and on continual efforts at self-culture, the realization of a preordained equality, as it were. In the end of her tract, Fuller returns to the civic conception of equality, which she links with the idea of nation. Upon restating her argument that the equality of sexes "in function, duty and hope" was a reality in all ages, she expresses her belief that "this hope would receive an ampler fruition, than ever before", in her homeland, if the nation remains true to its foundational principles (94). Overtones of US exceptionalism can be detected here: a more complete equality between men and women can only be envisaged within the nation whose life had sprung from democratic ideals.

Liberty also transcends the semantic field of citizenship and the realms of politics so that, according to Fuller, what women need is "freedom to use the means of the universe" (31). This is a highly qualified notion of liberty: the liberty to achieve one's potential. Freedom takes the transcendentalist form of self-reliance, and in the section on women's education, Fuller calls for education for "self-dependence" and bravely defends the class of "old maids" as self-reliant women because, free from relations, they tend to a "closer communion with the one" (52).

The concept of representation is discussed as part of the debate between reformers' calls for women's enfranchisement and conservatives' protest that women naturally belong to the private sphere or "the inner circle" (14). Fuller patiently demolishes the latter argument, exposing it as hypocritical (women are supposed to be physically unfit for politics, but slave and working-class women are not spared drudgery and physical exhaustion) and giving contemporaneous examples of women's participation in the public sphere. Fuller also expresses her mistrust of men's good will in representing women because not one in a hundred million can rise above the "belief that woman was made for man" (15). Yet she prudently concludes

that rather than attach importance in themselves to the changes proposed by "the champions of woman", she prefers to greet them as "signs of the times" (15). This is a typical illustration of Fuller's rhetorical strategy of dealing with political radicalism; after playing with it for a while, at the last moment, she retreats to the cold regions of calm and distant philosophical reflection.

As in the case of the "Declaration of Sentiments", a few external concepts and ideologies pull the semantic field of citizenship in various directions. Individualism (as "self-dependence") and progress (inward, as perfection of the soul) are also present in the Seneca Falls document. Christianity, which provides much of the imagery for Fuller's argument for the spiritual equality between man and woman, and exceptionalism play a much bigger part in her understanding of citizenship than they do in the 1848 Declaration. While in that text the republican model of citizenship was held in abeyance, Fuller acknowledges its influence on women when she mentions their pride at giving birth to boys (and their sadness at the birth of their daughters). Moreover, she even attempts to adapt it to womanhood when she urges American women to defend the honor of the Republic, which men, through the annexation of Texas and the impending war with Mexico, were ready to sell for economic profit and political power (91).

Fuller's conception of womanhood is crucial for understanding the full measure of her protest. At its foundation lies a transcendentalist theory of femininity centered on the concept of sympathy, which permeates all the other semantic components of womanhood in her text. Fuller introduces her theory in the middle of the essay, where she presents the double ideal of woman as Muse and Minerva; as Minerva, the woman's energy and sympathies are directed outwards, as in the case of her embracing the abolitionist cause and her own struggle for political representation, equality, and liberty. As Muse, the woman is characterized by the predominance of the "electrical", or "magnetic element", women being more receptive than men to "the atmospheric changes, the fine invisible links which connect the forms of life around them" (55). Fuller even mentions mesmerism or magnetism, a phenomenon associated with

sympathy in antebellum literature[5], as a manifestation of feminine nature, which is poorly understood because of the wrong belief that the trance is the result of one person influencing another when, in fact, it issues forth from the spirit (56). Woman's intuitive powers and her outward sympathies, which underlie the Minerva ideal of strategizing and acting in the world, thus originate in her Muse-like spirit. Although aware of her own contribution to the debate, Fuller distances herself from the more radical contemporaneous women's rights discourses, which she sees as temporary expressions of the Minerva model; in the future, the Muse must check the unfeminine tendencies of a Minerva-like approach to the woman question (63). If, as Kolodny argues, Fuller invented a feminist discourse, it was an essentially "feminine" one.

The Muse-Minerva ideal also informs Fuller's conception of woman's sphere. She accepts the notion as long as it denotes an immutable condition sanctioned by divine law, not by "man's tradition" (41). Yet nature and history demonstrate that the two sides of the male-female dichotomy, constantly share in each other so that there is no pure woman and no pure man: "Man partakes of the feminine in the Apollo, woman of the masculine as Minerva" (62). However, thanks to their Muse-like capacity for sympathy and intuition, women are best equipped for the faculty of sight (63). Although she argues against confining women to a sphere, Fuller does not protest the existence of that sphere, but hopes for a better future, when the two sides of femininity operate in harmony and men and women live in "the same community of life and consciousness of mind" (63).

Fuller regards women's condition and the debates around it as expressions of a pervasive disharmony at odds with her transcendentalist ideals. She criticizes Republican Motherhood for its goal of women's education, which is to make them better mothers and companions for citizens, and contends that its goal should be the perfection of the woman's soul and not

[5] Mesmerism is portrayed as the abuse of sympathy perpetrated by men against women, for example, in Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845) and Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852).

conceived narrowly for any one relation (51). Her conception of motherhood leaves more room for progressive agency, as demonstrated by her appeal to middle- and upper-class women to help their fallen sisters, the prostitutes in jail or in the street, to act as mothers to those "degraded women" (80). Clearly, sympathy also contributes to this important semantic element of womanhood, because it is in the name of maternal sympathy that women act for the moral improvement of their "sisters". But sympathy also works inwardly and produces, within mothers, a bleak awareness of all women's pitiful condition; while they welcome sons, they develop a "deep sympathy" with new-born daughters because they know the sorrows that lie ahead (87).

In the Seneca Falls Declaration, slavery overlaps with womanhood through the metonymic relation it establishes with marriage, but Fuller links women's condition to slavery in a more elaborately political way, involving the concepts of representation and sympathy. In her exposé of the arguments for and against the issue of women's representation, she compares men's attitudes toward women with the feelings toward slaves. Like slaves, women are perceived as deficient in the gift of reason, inferior creatures, who "must be kept from mischief and melancholy by being constantly engaged in active labor, which is to be furnished and directed by those better able to think" (14). According to Fuller, this view justifies the reformers' conviction that women's condition cannot be improved unless women themselves publicly represent their own interests. In the same discussion, she emphasizes the analogy between women's cause and abolitionism, which are more than merely convergent political goals. For, as the essay later says, women's voluntary contribution to abolitionism should be matched by an inward drive toward self-interest in making the world a better place for women (61).

As in the Seneca Falls Declaration, Fuller's conception of virtue relies on the assumption that women are morally superior creatures. Fuller encourages young American women to hope

and believe that men are essentially no different from women in terms of their possibilities for self-achievement and living a pure virtuous life (74). But she also sees women's virtue as threatened by lack of education, isolation from the world, and confinement to the domestic sphere. Middle-class women are exposed to this danger if they remain ignorant about the true nature of vice or the social reality of fallen men and women. Fuller also sees the popular novels of English fashionable life as threats to American women's moral education (92).

There is, however, in contrast with the Declaration of Sentiments, a much clearer republican conception of women's virtue, which appears in the climax of Fuller's essay, when she relates virtue to US national identity. At this point, abandoning her dispassionate tone, she appeals to the moral power of women to save the country from the disgrace of slavery, which was expected to spread after the annexation of Texas. In a memorable outburst of patriotic lyricism, she writes:

> Ah! if this should take place, who will dare again to feel the throb of heavenly hope, as to the destiny of this country? The noble thought that gave unity to all our knowledge, harmony to all our designs; - the thought that the progress of history had brought on the era, the tissue of prophecies pointed out the spot, where humanity was, at last, to have a fair chance to know itself, and all men be born free and equal for the eagle's flight, flutters as if about the leave the breast, which, deprived of it, will have no more a nation, no more a home on earth. (Fuller 1999, 91)

Manifest Destiny, nation, progress, and democracy are brilliantly interwoven in this ecstatic appeal to American women. Its rich figuration and conceptual density make the passage exemplary of the symbolic action quality of protest literature, and align Fuller's entire protest with the ideology of US exceptionalism. Like the authors of the "Declaration of Sentiments", Fuller shifts womanhood into the semantic field of citizenship and out of the confines of the woman's sphere. Unlike them, however, she projects a conception of citizenship that is not only

more nationalist and republican, but also, because of her transcendentalism, more universalist and gender-free.

The paradox of antebellum slave womanhood

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written under the pseudonym "Linda Brent", belongs to a classic genre of protest literature. Apart from being authored by a woman (a wondrous occurrence in itself), Jacobs's autobiography stands out from other slave narratives not least because it relates her experience of a seven-year long self-imposed confinement in a tiny garret in her grandmother's house to escape a diabolical and obscene master. That experience, narrated in a manner that is simultaneously literal and highly figurative, has fascinated literary historians ever since the rediscovery of Jacobs's work in the 1980s. Jacobs's narration of her life in the "loophole of retreat", as she calls her hideout, invites metaphoric reading. For Jonathan Arac (1995, 749), her story "forms a real-life, yet grotesque, perfection of the woman's role, within her own separate sphere"; to Eric J. Sundquist (1995, 301), the oppressing space resembles "the excruciating middle passage of the slave trade". More recently, Miranda Green-Barteet (2013, 55) reads it as an interstitial space between more visible spaces and argues that Jacobs even devised her entire narrative as interstitial, so that she could "argue against slavery and challenge the nineteenth-century domestic ideologies … without offending her audience". Closer to Arac's interpretation, but from a conceptual-historicist perspective, Jacobs's "loophole of retreat" can be read as a trope for women's sphere because it figuratively expresses certain conceptualizations of that notion that are not articulated in white women's protest literature. Rather than the negative of public sphere, for Jacobs, women's sphere means oppression, suffocation, numbness, pain, disease, injustice, danger, sacrifice, but also endurance, empowerment, agency, and hope. We may not know how Jacobs and her contemporary audience actually interpreted the story of her confinement and its space, but this is a perfect

illustration of the subtle, often involuntary, and diachronic intervention of literature in the semantic fields of social and political concepts. Jacobs's text communicates a representation of antebellum (slave) womanhood that we nowadays recognize as a historical component of our own concept of gender. A conceptual history of gender in American literature may reveal confluences of textual aesthetics, reception, and social history that have hitherto remained unavailable to literary historians.

That Jacobs does not represent the woman's sphere as the negative of the public one does not render citizenship irrelevant to her narrative, although it partially obscures the asymmetrical conceptual pair that womanhood typically forms with citizenship in antebellum women's protest literature. Jacobs (2002, 63) mentions "citizens" for the first time in the chapter "Fear of Insurrection": the muster gathered all white men and "the citizens and the so-called country gentlemen wore military uniforms". Poor whites wore their every-day rags and unleashed their hatred of well-to-do blacks without "reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation" (64). She distinguishes here between the upper-class "citizens" and the "rabble". In none of the previous texts is class so clearly inscribed within the semantic field of citizenship. Inasmuch as the slave narrative also purports to document Southern society, it exposes citizenship as an even more restricted concept in antebellum America than the one predicated on exclusion by gender and race. However, the conception changes by the end of Jacobs's narrative, where the last reference to citizenship is made in a scene that takes place years after her successful removal to the Free states. There she quotes her uncle's obituary in a North Carolina newspaper: "a good man and a useful citizen" (201). Jacobs knows that free blacks were not granted citizenship in North Carolina, which is why she exclaims: "Strange words to be uttered in that region!" (201). But the exclamation might also indicate her hope for a racially blind conception of citizenship, an ideal that seemed more distant than ever in the aftermath of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*.

Two other concepts related to citizenship emerge, in addition to class and race. The first is liberty, which figures in the republican motto Jacobs adopts after running away: "Give me liberty, or give me death" (99). Like Frederick Douglass, who also cites Patrick Henry in his narrative, she anchors her struggle and determination to be free in the nation's civic ethos. The other constituent of citizenship, rights, appears when recounting an incident involving white racism in New York. Jacobs refuses to submit herself to racial segregation, is "resolved to stand up for [her] rights", and advises others to do the same: "Let every colored man and woman do this, and eventually we shall cease to be trampled underfoot by our oppressors" (177). However, class bias can also be detected in the story of that incident, when she describes the other black servants' negative reaction to her protest.

Like Fuller, Jacobs dedicates significantly more space to womanhood than to citizenship. Although the notion of woman's sphere is at the center of the aesthetics of protest in Jacobs's *Incidents*, its textual presence extends beyond the metaphor of the "loophole of retreat". As a domestic servant, Jacobs quite literally belongs to the white upper-class woman's sphere (both in the South and in the North). She understands the oppressed condition of Southern white women, and even if she recounts some of the injustices of the patriarchal family, such as men's guardianship of children and total control of their wives' property, she does not protest explicitly against the woman's sphere but blames slavery for the white mistresses' main plight. That plight is jealousy, and it is due to their husbands' practice of siring slaves in the household (36). A happier alternative domesticity is constituted by the many references to her grandmother's home, pastry business, and friendship with black and white women. There is no male authority in this matriarchal ideal of domesticity.

While the relationship between womanhood and slavery in the other two texts is figuratively represented as one of contiguity (metonymy) or analogy (simile), Jacobs's representation of the womanhood of slave women needs no figuration. The two concepts are

fused into a distinct conceptualization of slave women and their experience that is central to the narrative. From a very young age, fear and dissoluteness dominate the slave woman's life: "The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers" (51). But slavery is a curse to whites no less than to the slaves. It makes fathers "cruel and sensual", the wives wretched, the sons, like the fathers, if not more violent, and the daughters morally corrupt by being very early on exposed to vile talk (52). Furthermore, Jacobs points out the problem of gender difference in the slave South: white men may father as many black children as they wish, and even use them for economic profit because they follow the condition of the mothers. By contrast, children of white women by slave men are undesirable and taboo, so they are usually smothered or sent away (52). This highlights the inequality between white men and white women in the South and elsewhere in antebellum America.

Virtue is the antebellum concept that Jacobs turns on its head in her narrative of slave womanhood. In "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life" she describes her "plunge into the abyss" (53), that is, her "immoral" solution to escape her master's advances. With "sorrow and shame" at the remembrance, Jacobs tells the story of her affair with Mr. Sands with all due decorum of nineteenth-century American womanhood, but her pride and self-respect are barely contained in this chapter; it is part confession, part triumphant self-assertion. She supplicates the "virtuous reader" to pity and pardon her (55), and she blames herself for having betrayed the "pure principles" inculcated by her grandmother and first mistress. At the same time, it is hard to miss the triumphant tone of her confession: "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (54). Notably, she uses the word "triumph" twice when narrating the moment she disclosed her pregnancy to Dr. Flint (56). Self-reliance and agency, two important constitutive elements of the antebellum semantic field of citizenship, can be detected here.

While appearing to acquiesce to prescriptive womanhood, Jacobs challenges it on three levels. First, she challenges it at the level of knowledge, since young women are supposed to

be spared this kind of knowledge of the world. Second, she challenges the norms of antebellum womanhood at the level of judgement and action, since women are supposed to be passive. Third, there is even a veiled allusion to the self-empowerment of the freedom of choosing one's sexual partner while being a woman and a slave. She gives herself to a man of her choice, not to her master; that the man is white and socially not below her master, and that he is unmarried, are mentioned as mitigating circumstances for her moral forfeiture, but she concludes that "the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (55). Finally, she memorably states the dilemma of slave womanhood: "I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave" (56). Once this aspect has been pried open, the alleged conceptual unity of virtue and womanhood begins to break down. By lodging virtue into the semantic field of slave womanhood, she exposes the racialized antebellum fiction of woman's purity and superior moral power. There is also a civic dimension in her conceptualization of virtue when she breaks the law by teaching an older slave how to read and write, and when she pens her narrative as part of her duty to raise awareness about the condition of her sisters in bondage (1).

Motherhood is omnipresent in Jacobs's text and virtually inseparable from her conception of womanhood. A beneficial force throughout the narrative, it is also her greatest incentive to survive and run away: her children are referred to as her "links to life" (102). Motherhood often emerges in her sentimental appeals to readers' sympathy: for example, as a mother, she knows immediately that her daughter is not happy at Mrs. Hobbs's, and her heart is like a tiger's when the hunter tries to seize her young (199). Yet there is no connection with citizenship here. Jacobs's bitter confession that her life's dream of sitting with her children in a home of her own, "however humble", had not been realized (201) demonstrates how far removed the ideal of citizenship was to a free African American mother as long as even the modest claims to a domestic sphere of her own were denied her.

It can be concluded that Jacobs's conceptions of citizenship and womanhood, while fundamental to her protest, do not enter the same kind of relation we have seen at work in the other two texts discussed in this essay. As the conceptual analysis of *Incidents* has shown, women had at least to be recognized the right to their own sphere before they could lay any claims to the public sphere of citizenship. In antebellum America, white middle-class women could conceive of their sphere as the negative of the public sphere in their protest, but black women did not have that luxury. Race preceded womanhood.

Concluding remarks

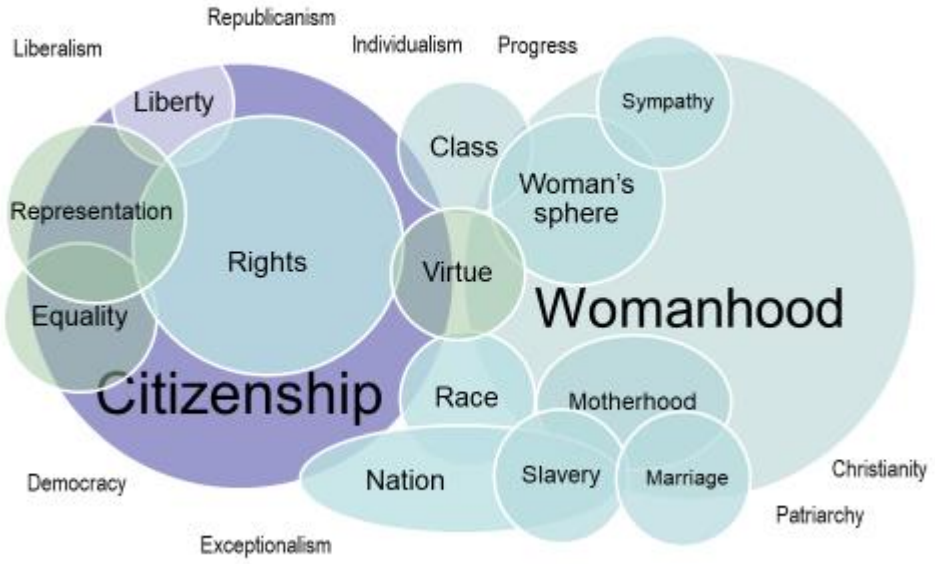

Figure 1. *Citizenship* and *womanhood* in three antebellum texts of women's protest literature

Approaching citizenship both semasiologically and onomasiologically and investigating its relationship with womanhood within the larger conceptual and ideological context of antebellum America in three texts of women's protest literature, this study has mapped the semantic field of the concept in cross-section, as it were, over a relatively short period of fifteen

years before the Civil War. Figure 1 above is a graphic representation of the citizenship-womanhood conceptual pair emerging from this investigation. The concept of rights is an internal constituent of citizenship, while motherhood and woman's sphere are enclosed within womanhood. These and some other concepts whose semantic fields extend beyond that of the "core" concept are out of reach for the counter-concept, and vice versa. As long as there is no overlapping with citizenship, the concepts of liberty, rights, and equality, remain outside of the semantic field of womanhood and virtually inaccessible to women. There are, however, some constituent concepts that appear to straddle both semantic fields: race (which gestures toward interracial solidarity in Jacobs's *Incidents*, but is conspicuously absent from the other two texts), class (both in Fuller's essay and Jacobs's narrative featuring both restrictively as bias, and inclusively, as solidarity across social classes), nation (present in all, but more prominently in the first two texts) and, above all, virtue, which is given equal importance in these literary texts of protest on their conceptual path to citizenship. Obviously, these conceptual knots and clusters do not exist in a vacuum but intermesh with contemporaneous ideological networks. For example, through the concept of nation, which informs the conception of citizenship in all three texts, citizenship is represented as contiguous with republican ideology. Echoes of the doctrines of progress and individualism are also discernible in the authors' conceptions of citizenship.

To illustrate the conceptual-historicist approach, three of the most canonical texts of antebellum literature have been discussed within the limited space of this essay. A larger body of women's protest literature published in the same period would have included texts by Lydia Maria Child, Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, and Harriet Wilson among others. A different study in the same vein may diachronically investigate women protest writers' conceptualization of citizenship throughout the long nineteenth century, from a variety of genres. Whenever possible, the aesthetic dimension of the works of protest literature has been accounted for in the conceptual analyses. This approach can be used with literary texts that are less obviously

concerned with societal change but are subject to ideology and historical time (Cananau 2017, 249). The method can also be used in studies of transnational connections. This direction, which parallels the comparatist turn in conceptual history, has not been outlined in the essay but is worth pursuing in the future. As long as the aesthetic elements are kept in sight, concepts can be employed as the building blocks of a comparative literary history, with the advantage of restoring the centrality of the literary text, which often disappears when probing the confluences of language and history.

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