

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

History Faculty Works

History

---

Spring 2020

### Review Of "Amy Kirby Post And Her Activist Worlds" By N. A. Hewitt

Bruce Dorsey  
Swarthmore College, bdorsey1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bruce Dorsey. (2020). "Review Of "Amy Kirby Post And Her Activist Worlds" By N. A. Hewitt". *Journal Of The Early Republic*. Volume 40, Issue 1. 168-170. DOI: 10.1353/jer.2020.0020  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/537>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

as Doyle shows in her adroit reading of abolitionist images and poetry, depictions of battered enslaved women and their exposed bodies further distinguished the female slave from the sentimental mother. The embodied, anguished, and frantic slave mother was anything but tranquil, pious, and disembodied.

The spellbinding details, elegant prose, and insightful revelations into the tension between cultural prescriptions and the physical demands of motherhood make *Maternal Bodies* a timely, essential, and rewarding read.

SASHA TURNER is associate professor of history at Quinnipiac University. She is the author of *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia, 2017), and is currently working on a new project on slavery, emotions, and gender.

***Radical Friend: Amy Kirby Post and Her Activist Worlds.*** By Nancy A. Hewitt. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. 440. Cloth, \$39.95.)

*Reviewed by Bruce Dorsey*

Histories of antebellum reform keep rolling off the presses with no signs of exhausting our interest or the range of possible interpretations. There are just too many profound and resonant issues and too many colorful characters to take our eyes off these reformers. Typically these histories fall into two groups: either monographs about specific social movements or biographies of eminent reformers. Nancy Hewitt's eagerly awaited biography of Amy Kirby Post illustrates that focusing on a single individual's life committed to social justice, when well rendered, is a method that still offers us great insights into the worlds of reform and beyond.

Unlike the acclaimed reformers who have been the subjects of previous biographies, Amy Post was not known for being a public speaker, although she did give an occasional speech and hold her own in public debates. She was, instead, the kind of dedicated, behind-the-scenes activist who proved crucial to the success and longevity of any social movement. Hewitt employs the metaphor of a *conductor* to illustrate Post's rich and layered activism, exploiting both meanings of the term to reveal a radical's life work of "orchestrating movements of people and

resources and transmitting ideas and tactics from one campaign to another” (5). Post facilitated the movement of people necessary to abolish slavery and assist slaves in their journeys to freedom (Amy and her husband, Isaac, were principal conductors in the Underground Railroad alongside former slaves like Frederick Douglass), and she also arranged and orchestrated intimate ties among networks of radical reformers through friendships, letter-writing, organizing, and offering her home, in Rochester, New York, as a base of operations.

In Hewitt’s deft hand, Amy Post’s significance emerges neither from her presence at great historical events (though she was an important figure at the first woman’s rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848), nor from her famous publications (though she played a key role helping Harriet Jacobs publish her important narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in 1861). Rather, Post’s story matters for its illustration of what a lifetime intertwined with reform looks like, and for the vital personal healing, support, and friendship that bound together a circle of the most important voices of progressive reform in the mid-nineteenth century. Post’s reform work extended from abolition to free produce (a movement to boycott goods produced by enslaved labor) to assisting fugitive slaves before, during, and after the Civil War, to movements for American Indian rights, women’s rights, spiritualism, alternative medicines, temperance, religious liberty, abolition of capital punishment, and universal (male and female) suffrage. The totality of these labors reflects not a gadfly but Post’s powerful “universalist vision” of reform, a vision that simultaneously sought to achieve racial and gender equality, spiritual and physical health, and nothing less than peace and social justice.

Perhaps most important, Post stood out among her peers for forging deep, long-lasting, and supportive collaborations with the most important African American activists of her day. Frederick Douglass, William Nell, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Jacobs (and their families) all counted Post as a friend, confidante, and trusted advisor, residing in her home for months or years at a time during their most productive periods. At the core of Post’s vision of progressive reform was her active pursuit of what Hewitt calls “an interracial movement for social justice” (91). Few reformers even came close to the kind of racial egalitarianism and disdain for white privilege that the Posts displayed—a rarity that became glaringly evident as the women’s rights and women’s suffrage camps splintered over the racial and gendered meaning of citizenship after the Civil War.

Hewitt's narrative comes alive as these principal reformers converge in the penultimate chapter on the Civil War and postwar years. Entitled "Coming Together," this chapter easily could have been named "Pulling Apart." The peace that marked the end of the war ushered in intense battles and infighting among reformers as it did for the nation as a whole. Post straddled the divisions among women's rights and women's suffrage activists, favoring universal suffrage of both African American men and all women but also joining contingents of Rochester women who tried unsuccessfully to register and vote in the 1872 presidential election. Ultimately, Post always saw women's rights as a broader movement than suffrage alone, envisioning reform as full equality, spiritual progress, and the universal pursuit of justice.

Scholars and general readers alike will benefit from Hewitt's deep dive into the inner workings of liberal religion in nineteenth-century American culture. Her portrayal of Post's life takes us inside the thought and politics of Hicksite Quakers, Progressive Friends, Spiritualists, Unitarians, and Free Thinkers, as Post made her way from one circle to the next while seemingly never losing her close connection to, or the profound influence of, each of these religious movements. Hewitt's careful attention to Post's relationship with Progressive Friends (or the Friends of Human Progress, as they later became known) exposes a much-neglected conception of *progress* in American culture, as well as a radical, non-hierarchical vision of religious community and authority. This serves as an important corrective to the ample attention given to evangelical Protestantism and reform, pointing instead toward a vision of social justice, peace, and civil rights in the United States that is rooted in a faith tradition still in need of further investigation.

Amy Post was an extraordinary, radical woman, and Nancy Hewitt has, in this excellent biography, elevated her story to the place that it rightfully deserves.

BRUCE DORSEY is professor of history at Swarthmore College. He is currently completing a history of an 1833 murder trial of a Methodist preacher in New England.