The Rise of Avant-Garde Feminsm:

A look into the key players & rhetoric in the women’s movement of the mid-late 19th century

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Public exposure to the women's movement was lackluster and uninspired prior to women like Fannie Barrier Williams and Susan B. Anthony's historical contributions of intellectual ideas and rhetoric. Both forward thinking women explored diverse approaches to the topic of injustice but used a broad plea to other oppressed populations to go about gaining social and political equality. To illustrate the importance of their efforts and to analyze their individual approaches, I will be examining "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation," a speech by Williams from 1893, as well as "Women's Right to Vote," a speech given by Anthony in 1873; in addition to looking into the role they played in the gradual evolution of the women movement from the mid to late nineteenth century.

The roots of the women's movement truly began around the late 1700's. In 1777, states began passing laws revoking women's right to vote. Prior to this, the American Colonies based their laws on English common law, which stated, in essence, that by marriage the husband and wife are one person in the eyes of the law, and the being and legal existence of the woman is suspended or is incorporated into that of her husbands during the marriage ("Living"). Most women who had found political or social influence did so individualistically and often without much success. For example, eighteenth century Europe saw women like the illustrious Madame Geoffrin begin holding gatherings of both sexes in their homes to discuss social and philosophical ideals and discourse. These became known as salons. Soon after, during the French Revolution, many French women found themselves engaging in one of the initial sprouts of a semi-organized struggle for gender equality (Clark 1075). However the trend was stigmatized as a product of radical revolutionary politics not long after it began.

The turn of the nineteenth century introduced a new way for women to go about seeking egalitarianism as they found strength in numbers via organizations and groups. Banding together in an organized fashion became one of the most successful methods to obtaining equality. “The creation of permanent women's organizations made possible the post-revolutionary reverberation of feminine voices speaking on policy matters and the clatter of female feet traversing city sidewalks as the almoners of public charity” (Boylan 135-136). As women’s roles outside of the traditional housewife were becoming few and far between and their voices quieted, this group-oriented mentality led to more options opening up for women without those options being met with outrage.

In 1836, the Women’s Property Act was introduced to the New York State Legislator for the first time in an effort to expand the property rights of married women. Although a petition was circulated in support of the Act, only 6 signatures ended up on the sheet. However, despite the act’s poor performance, women remained undeterred. The following year, Lucretia Mott helped organize the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, and the first convention was held in New York City (Dupont 34).

However, it wasn’t until the summer of 1848 that the world’s first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. Lucretia Mott, with the help of female progressives like Mary Ann McClintock and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, introduced The Declaration of Sentiments to the convention, a document based on the Declaration of Independence, which was greeted with signatures from 68 women and 32 men. As the first of her many revolutionary contributions, Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted the document which played a critical role in setting the agenda for the women’s rights campaign, and demanded the

equality of women through 18 resolutions, including specific appeals for equal voting rights (Dupont 79).

The same year as the Seneca Falls Convention, the Married Women's Property Act was passed in New York State, twelve years after it was originally introduced. It was only two years later, in 1850, that the first National Women's Rights Convention was held in Massachusetts. The women involved in the Seneca Falls Convention played a crucial role in integrating the campaign for the equality of women- which had been primarily dominated by white, Protestant, bourgeois women by incorporating their abolitionist efforts with their desire to advance the rights of women (Boylan 135).

It was around this same time that Amelia Bloomer published the first edition of *The Lily*, a monthly magazine emphasizing temperance which Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote for under a pseudonym (Dupont 83). Temperance also struck a chord with Susan B. Anthony, who became involved in the movement in 1852 by joining the Rochester Daughters of Temperance. Her life as a public figure representing the principles feminism began shortly thereafter as she was appointed representative almost immediately (Dupont 96). It was in 1851 that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton arranged their first meeting, and by 1869 Stanton partnered with Anthony to form the National Women's Suffrage Association.

On the African American Front, it was the mid eighteenth century that became an instrumental time period for black women to build a more solid foundation of education and support. 1849 marked the year that Harriet Tubman became an active figure in the Underground Railroad and the women's suffrage movement after she escaped slavery by fleeing to Philadelphia. And only a couple years later the first school to educate African-American girls on becoming teachers opened its doors in Washington, D.C. This helped pave the way for

Catharine Beecher to establish The American Woman's Educational Association, which introduced schools in Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois (Dupont 100).

The education and empowerment of both white and African American women was becoming a prominent theme on the road to suffrage. “Many Afro-American women were involved in efforts for woman suffrage, because they saw the vote as a means to fight for their own causes, particularly against segregationist legislation that denied Afro-Americans continued participation in or entry into American life” (Campbell 145-146). The union that had begun developing between African American and white women played an important role in both groups’ eventual successes. Women like Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell were among the many who embraced the alliance.

Fannie Barrier Williams’ approach to women’s rights was actually rooted in the African American crusade for equality. A valiant advocator of education and reform, Williams, like a growing number of prominent African American women of her time, broadened her race-oriented focus on equality to encompass all women, in a resourceful attempt for more wide-range appeal. Women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton embraced the idea of a novel partner in the struggle for equal opportunity, and reciprocated by broadening their rhetoric to entail all disenfranchised groups, instead of women, alone. This invaluable combination had great utility in appealing to larger, more comprehensive, audiences and uniting two fronts fighting for similar causes into one integrated movement.

Just a few years before the Civil War began, in 1858, leaders of the National Women’s Right’s Convention organized their eighth convention to coincide with an annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York City (Dupont 130). Three years later, after the convention of 1861, the organization was forced to put their yearly meetings on hold until the

Civil War ended. On September 22, 1862, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Two and a half years later, the House of Representatives passed the thirteenth amendment, outlawing slavery in all states. Just four months went by before the Civil War ended. The following year, the National Woman's Rights Convention resolved itself into the American Equal Rights Association (143-178).

The critical Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was originally proposed in 1866, but wasn't ratified until 1868, after twenty-eight states had passed the amendment. The amendment broadened the definition of national citizenship and overturned the well-known Dred Scott case, which had excluded African Americans from this definition. As the government began to offer citizenship to disenfranchised populations, women began getting anxious about their own role in the constitution.

It was during that same year that Susan B. Anthony was appointed delegate to the Democratic Presidential Convention. In an interesting turn of events, Anthony went to the polls and voted, herself, during the election of 1872. Not long after, she was arrested and indicted. What followed was a case nearly as famous as the Dred Scott case, itself.

> In the Fourteenth Amendment a citizen was described as any person born or naturalized in the United States, which seems fairly comprehensive. Persons of both sexes were counted citizens in all their responsibilities to the States, and the amendment was passed especially to confer the vote on one class previously not counted as persons, i.e., Negroes. The trial of Susan B. Anthony as a fraudulent voter was, therefore, a crucial test of the amendment... (Dorr 256-257)

In Susan B. Anthony's 1873 speech she concisely outlined her desired intentions in the first paragraph: "It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that in thus voting, I not only

committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's rights, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any state to deny" (¶1). Her statements in front of the court that May afternoon prepared her audience for her political plea to embrace the law of the land while also allowing women the right to vote. Anthony's speech was a powerful attempt to persuade the federal courts that her actions were not only lawful, but would have been embraced were she of the other sex.

Anthony employed persuasive documentation as evidence for her statements, introducing her first argument by referencing well-known statements from the United States Constitution. This evidence was difficult to dispute, as it was a straightforward and relevant interpretation of the words of the law, making her argument all the more powerful. Anthony used the words of the constitution to argue that the 'we' in "We, the people of the United States" referred not only to white male citizens, but "the whole people, who formed the union" (1), women included. Anthony also referenced several dictionaries to support her argument: "Webster, Worcester, and Bouvier all define a citizen to be a person in the United States, entitled to vote and hold office" (2). She was attempting to turn the tables on the court and put the United States on trial rather than herself.

The primary claims Anthony endorsed in her speech were both concrete and compelling. She began by delineating the necessity of women's political and social inclusion as an overt aspect of constitutionality. She made the case that any further disenfranchisement of women, "is to pass a bill of attainder, or, an ex post facto law, and is therefore a violation of the supreme law of the land" (¶4). Anthony's closing argument entailed examining the definition of citizenship as "a person in the United States entitled to vote and hold office" (2). She proposed the

inevitability of women being considered persons and claimed that because of this there was an inability to argue against women's right to vote.

To many at the time, Anthony's arguments were both sound and effective manipulations of debated constructs and ideas. Today, her statements would go undisputed; however, the world of 1873 was a different place. Anthony's testimony was brought to an abrupt halt following her mention of "Negroes" (2), as the trial judge quickly interrupted her, and ordered her to take a seat. The trial judge already seemed to have had his mind made up by that point, reflected at the completion of the trial when he refused to poll the jury and instead instructed them to render a guilty verdict. However ineffective Anthony's arguments may have been to the judge, they were conceived as incredibly powerful by many of the women's movement's supporters of the day and they remain powerful statements even now. She simply was not "preaching to the choir" when she spoke her words to the court.

In Anthony's second argument, she referred to the government's actions as indicative of an "odious aristocracy; a hateful oligarchy of sex; the most hateful aristocracy ever established on the face of the globe; an oligarchy of wealth, where the rich govern the poor" (1). While her line of reasoning reflected her intense passion for the issue at hand, this likely was the argument that lost Anthony some of her supporters. This was the only argument in which Anthony noticeably integrated emotional appeals into her political fervor. In this argument, she momentarily strayed from facts and instead advocated her feelings of disgust in regard to the situation she was faced with. This also seemed to work against Anthony's bond with her audience, as her most powerful arguments were those free from emotion and instead surrounded by facts and evidence.

Anthony's organization of arguments, however, was a vital contribution to the effectiveness of her speech. Her introduction opened with a frank tone: "Friends and fellow citizens: I stand before you tonight under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote" (¶1). Anthony openly disclosed the details of her situation without shame or regret for her behavior. She then delved into a justification of her innocence, supporting her actions during the election by offering accepted sources of evidence contradictory to the court's argument that her actions were unlawful. Anthony probably could have managed to continue had she saved her pathos appeals for the end of her speech; however, the ordering of arguments was valuable in that it enabled Anthony to stir up emotion. Although she did not receive the opportunity to outline a suggested plan of action in her concluding statements, her introductory statements implied a plan of action (finding her innocent), which also speaks to the utility of her organization.

Anthony's personal style of weaving broad emotional appeals into set in stone facts was one of the most influential elements of her speech. She employed political discourse intertwined with emotional appeals and calls for justice. "But this oligarchy of sex, which makes father, brothers, husband, sons, the oligarchs over the mother and sisters, the wife and daughters, of every household - which ordains all men sovereigns, all women subjects, carries dissension, discord, and rebellion into every home of the nation" (¶5). While her more sentimental use of language was not well received by the court, this language was not necessarily meant to be used to plead her case, but more so as a tool to introduce the governmental corruption that existed at the time hostile to women.

Despite these sentiments, Anthony's language remained primarily politically oriented throughout her speech. This was a clever manipulation of Anthony's audience, in that the more

factual and 'by the book' Anthony spoke, the more receptive her audience was bound to become (or the more they were inclined to at least listen to her). The court system implemented in that time was quite plastic, and, as demonstrated by the actions of the judge, more subject to manipulation by dominant parties. Anthony's primarily fact-based testimony allowed her to shrewdly get the court to work in her favor.

It can be assumed that Anthony's speech was prepared by examining her pragmatic sequencing and evidentiary appeals. At the time, Anthony had been active in the women's movement for over twenty years and had made a name for herself as a women's rights and suffragist pioneer. Her speech at the opening of her trial no doubt furthered these conceptions, as she boldly introduced and encouraged the idea that women could and should be allowed to vote, simply by their very existence. Her speech remains valuable today, not just because of the legend Susan B. Anthony has become, but also due to her adamancy so early on in the women's rights movement to go about seeking the privileges to which she felt women were entitled. Even though Anthony was never able to see the full results of her work, her speech still reflects some of the most basic ideas regarding effective rhetoric. Anthony recognized that getting her point across involved maintaining a well planned, passionate appeal supported by widely accepted evidence; and though she did not win her court case, she served as an inspiration to many women both in her time and after.

Numerous events after the Civil War led to a noticeably more defined divide between the African American movement and the women's movement. Leaders of the women's rights movement struggled in the "Negro's Hour" (Kolmer 8). In June 1982, Helen Cook established the Colored Women's League. About a decade later the World's Congress of Representative

Women was held in Chicago, IL, in an effort to empower the role of the woman by depicting the accomplishments they had made thus far.

It was at this event that Fannie Barrier Williams and Anna Julia Cooper addressed the largely white female audience on the progress of black women since the Emancipation of Slavery. Both women's previous speeches and essays had consistently concentrated on the role of black women in society. "They occupied a precarious position between many of the audiences they addressed and the women they represented. In order to gain the support they felt was needed from white women, they had to represent themselves as the models of "true womanhood" they claimed all black women had the potential to become" (Logan 98-102).

Fannie Barrier Williams speech on the progress of black women since the Emancipation Proclamation, encompassed the accomplishments and objectives of progress and opportunity in store for women of color. Williams began her speech with a motivational look at the meaning of progress and the evolution of its application to black women over the thirty preceding years. "Less than thirty years ago the term progress as applied to colored women of African descent in the United States would have been an anomaly. The recognition of that term today as appropriate is a fact full of interesting significance" (1). She described the implications of achievement for African American women signified simply by her presence that day at the Congress of World's Representative Women. "Though there is much that is sorrowful, much that is wonderfully heroic, and much that is romantic in a peculiar way in their history, none of it has as yet been told as evidence of what is possible for these women" (1). Her rich descriptions and adjective laced syntax painted a bold picture and strikes a chord of intrigue as to what will follow.

Williams' central arguments were blended in rich descriptions and embellished with information, making them more powerful. After discussing the insinuations of progress and the presence of opportunity, Williams went back thirty years to the circumstances blacks were initially faced with immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation: "How few of the happy, prosperous, and eager living Americans can appreciate what it all means to be suddenly changed from irresponsible bondage to the responsibility of freedom and citizenship" (1)! After acknowledging their initial struggles, Williams addressed the increasing necessity of documenting the accomplishments of black women, which were exceedingly lacking at the time:

> "Among the white women of the country independence, progressive intelligence, and definite interests have done so much that nearly every fact and item illustrative of their progress and status is classified and easily accessible. Our women, on the contrary, have had no advantage of interests peculiar and distinct and separable from those of men that have yet excited public attention and kindly recognition." (2)

She primarily discussed the progression and influence of religious ideals in African American culture and the role of education in the overall evolution of black women. In her conclusion, she brought her appeals together with a discussion on the increasing integration of these elements and the constructive future in store for black women in society.

Williams' sequence of arguments read almost as a narrative, defining the struggles and setbacks black women had endured, were currently tolerating and would eventually overcome. Her message became more optimistic as her narrative progressed, concluding with a tone of accomplishment and endurance, an ode to the resilience of black women. "In short, our women are ambitious to be contributors to all the great moral and intellectual forces that make for the greater weal of our common country" (4). Her method effectively framed her persuasive

message by gradually appealing to her audience's ideas of togetherness and supportive emotions. While remaining neither abrupt nor overt, her message was tailored to her audience and continually increased in magnitude as it progressed.

With an audience of primarily white women, Williams customized her speech to appropriately fit the context of her delivery. In her gripping closing words, for example, she was careful not to come across as overbearing or to instill ill will, yet she was firm in her words and unwavering in her determination: "If this hope seems too extravagant to those of you who know these women only in their humbler capacities, I would remind you that all that we hope for and will certainly achieve in authorship and practical intelligence is more than prophesied by what has already been done, and more" (4). Her word choice portrayed the African American women's movement as a force inevitable and worthy force in motion. Williams also used language similar to that in the first wave of the women's movement. Although after the Emancipation Proclamation the African American women's movement and white women's movement were correlated less, she implied a mutual respect remained between the two and referenced the role of "those saintly women of the white race who for thirty years have been consecrated to the uplifting of a whole race of women from a long-enforced degradation" (1). Her words served further unification purposes as she praised her white counterparts for their mutual role in advancing women's overall progress.

Williams' method of argument selection and combination reflected an idealism that was held by all members of society; one that focused on social upbringing via religion, family and education. In doing so, Williams created an atmosphere of acceptance from her white peers, and managed to persuade her audience by shaping the context of these issues as parallel to those their ancestors faced, and those that women in general faced in the time of her address. Williams

introduced the struggles of black women by describing the foundational principles blacks lacked exposure to in a life of slavery: “In the mean vocabulary of slavery there was no definition of any of the virtues of life. The meaning of such precious terms- as marriage, wife, family, and home could not be learned in a school-house” (1). Williams discussed the obstacles African Americans faced in terms of inexperience, enabling her to argue the progression of black women was an inevitable function of time- a powerful argument in and of itself.

Williams developed credibility by citing evidence of her arguments in several ways. Her references to the prominent Transcendentalist leader, Emerson, not only supported her argument, but presented Williams in a more educated and philosophical standpoint. In addition to this, Williams embraced Christianity and Christian organizations like the Christian Endeavor and the Helping Hand Societies (3). Her appeal to Christian women was enticing and likely gave Williams even more support. Also referencing a quote from the President of Howard University regarding education (3), Williams was able to successfully integrate strong black leaders and their ideals with those of strong white leaders, creating a feeling of togetherness and unification. Williams’s method of establishing ethos in her speech was both diverse and influential, and further reinforced the underlying themes of integrating and harmony.

Although Williams speech is not very well known today, her words contained lasting value and remain important in the study of rhetoric. The speech identified the initial progress that black women had accomplished in their first thirty years free from bondage while also outlining the struggles and difficulties they faced along the way. As Williams noted in her address, the documentation of these achievements was lacking up to that point, and her words are now an example of the importance of recording historical achievements, due to the necessity of retrospect to evaluate direction and observe progress. Williams’s speech offered much needed

support for the progression of black women, while creating interest surrounding the advancement of black women by capturing its audience via an unfinished, or ongoing, narrative.

Thanks to women like Williams and Anthony, the turn of the century led to women obtaining equality in many areas of life that had not been possible just fifty years earlier. Educational opportunities had increased, the Married Women's Property Act had been amended to become even more expansive, and female employment aspirations as well as control of their earnings were gradually becoming realized (Dupont 267-268). It was around this time that the united front which had existed between African American and white women's movements was becoming clearly redistributed into two separate fronts, as new leaders headed campaigns and black women became a more organized faction of their own. "In general the black woman had to be much more concerned about such immediate goals as betterment of her race, before she could think seriously of working toward suffrage or even agitation in other areas of reform." (Kolmer 8)

In January of 1918, President Wilson declared himself in support of the federal women's suffrage amendment; however, the Senate was unable to pass the amendment until 1919. After many excruciating years of struggle and oppression, women of the United States finally became enfranchised August 26, 1920. Although the right to vote was not the end of the struggle for the social equality of women, it did mark a fundamental political obstacle that had been successfully tackled, and signified a distinct end to the first wave of the women's movement.

The twentieth century brought about new controversies for women including gender equality in the workplace, the sexual revolution, and the evolution of the family. Barbara Epstein discusses the dwindling women's movement in her article published in the Monthly

Review. Epstein claims the 1980's were followed by a decline in the women's movement and a shift from the concept of feminism as a movement, to feminism as an idea.

> Like first wave feminism, contemporary feminism has over time tended to absorb the perspective of the middle class from which it is largely drawn. Meanwhile the perspective of that class has changed. Over the last several decades, under the impact of increasing economic insecurity and widening inequalities, the pursuit of individual advancement has become an increasingly important focus within the middle class. Community engagement has weakened for many, perhaps most, middle class people. ("What happened to the Women's Movement")

Today scholars find similar parallels between the initial women's rights movement and various contemporary progressive movements, such as that of self-determination and disability rights, as Mathew Wappett points out in the Journal of Disability Policy Studies:

> Both women and persons with disabilities have to deal with tremendous population heterogeneity. Unlike most racial groups, the populations of women and individuals with disabilities cut across racial and cultural boundaries… Women and persons with disabilities face biological discrimination… in the case of women, gender, and in the case of individuals with disabilities, evident physical or mental differences… A third reason for using the women's rights movement as a lens for inquiry is its history… Beginning with the Suffragettes in the middle of the 19th century, the women's movement has withstood significant political, legal, and cultural attacks throughout its lengthy history. Adapting to these challenges and reinventing their movement time and again has served women well in gaining political and social power. (119)

The women's movement of the mid to late 1800's may be debatable in relation to how it impacts the world today; however, its contemporary applications are undeniable. In a society of ever-changing values, with new forms of marriage and colliding gender roles, we are the living product of the women's movement, and the civil rights movements overall. As the United States faces the first ever opportunity to vote a woman into office, it seems clear that the woman's role in politics and society has far from realized its ultimate potential.

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