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An Entangled Past: Abolitionism and the Woman's Movement in the  
United States, 1839-1869

## 1.0 Introduction

The ironic beginning of the American woman's movement from the sexism of the antislavery movement has, justifiably, not gone unmentioned. However, it is just one of many contradictions to be found as feminism and abolitionism became overlapping, sometimes competing, movements in mid-nineteenth-century America. There were, of course, natural allies to be found in two groups working for a more equitable society. Even though female abolitionists had faced prejudice from some male colleagues, many women continued to speak out against slavery, adding feminist concerns to their agenda. And many male abolitionists favoured women's participation, showing their support by joining burgeoning woman's rights organizations. Nevertheless, even after the initial split was behind them, there was a wariness, sometimes antagonism, between feminists and abolitionists fighting for often very limited public sympathy: both movements feared becoming burdened by the other. And just as abolitionists had proven susceptible to prejudice, so too did feminists. Nowhere was this reflected so much as during the struggle for enfranchisement. Who deserved the vote more – black men or women – became the issue, forcing even those in favour of universal suffrage to choose sides. This paper tracks the tumultuous nature of the intertwining movements, particularly the fight for the vote, from the 1839 split in the abolition movement over the question of female participation, to the 1869 split in the woman's movement over the Fifteenth Amendment – granting black men the right to vote, but not women.

## 2.0 Background

### 2.1 Revivalism

Without the religious revivalism of the nineteenth century, many Americans may not have felt the moral imperative to speak out against injustices like slavery and women's lack of civil rights. Christian Puritan theology had taught predestination, and predestination was as good an excuse for apathy as any. However, revivalist preachers, abundant in the United States in the early 1800s, told enthusiastic crowds that, in fact, each person had human agency and could therefore sink or swim on his or her own merits – God would now withhold judgment until the end of a life. A sure-fire way to avoid damnation was by working for the moral reform of society. Charles Grandison Finney, probably the best known of the revivalist preachers of this “new Calvinism,” stated that religion was “ ‘not something to wait for, but something to do’ ” (Hardesty 40).<sup>1</sup> The poor, widows, orphans, prostitutes and prisoners were among the targets and/or beneficiaries of the new religious zeal, but more controversial issues were also on the radar of the reform-minded. In fact, with a mixture of true belief and “in order to promote revivals, Finney declared, ‘the church must take the right ground in regards to politics’ ” (105)<sup>2</sup>. For Finney, the “right ground” included the abolition of slavery. Newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison was one of those who heard the call, throwing himself into

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<sup>1</sup> A teenage Elizabeth Cady Stanton witnessed a revival session of Finney's: “Yet, Elizabeth could not achieve conversion, an essential step in finding salvation, because she was unable to follow the revivalist ritual that demanded she expunge her entire personality and feel herself ‘a monster of iniquity.’ ” (Mayer 44).

<sup>2</sup> Hardesty writes, “Some have argued that revivalism was essentially an American propaganda technique necessary in a society where religion had been disestablished and religious options were numerous” (51).

abolitionism by founding the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS) in 1833. In his introduction to escaped slave Sojourner Truth's autobiography he explained his position:

The Lord sees [slavery] and is displeased that there is no judgment; and he hath put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and is clad with zeal as cloak, - and unless we repent by immediately undoing the heavy burdens and letting the oppressed go free, according to our deeds, accordingly he will repay, fury to his adversaries, recompense to his enemies (Truth 122).

For American women especially this new theological stance proved a huge awakening:

Silenced in Christian churches since the days of Paul, women now seized sacred space. They interrupted church services to pray aloud for their own souls, and for other women – but they prayed as well for husbands, sons and male community leaders. Some women cried out, spun around, or danced. Others spoke in tongues (Smith-Rosenberg 129).

Soon women's public speaking moved beyond advocating for immortal souls, turning instead to mortal ones, the same as their male counterparts. As abolitionist activist Sarah Grimke proclaimed, "religious exercises were not enough: 'the woman who prays in sincerity for the regeneration of this guilty world will accompany her prayers by her labors' " (Hardesty 106). Nevertheless, in the early days of abolitionism, women's role in the movement was confined to speaking to small groups of other women; mixed audiences were taboo. However, in 1832, the African American Female Intelligence Society of Boston broke the taboo by hiring Maria Stewart, black abolitionist and early feminist, to speak in front of men and women. "The act was a daring one" and even *The Liberator*, mouthpiece of William Lloyd Garrison, considered a radical in his time, was against it (Giddings 49). But four years later Garrison's own movement, the AAS, hired Sarah Grimke and her sister Angelina as agents for the society. They too broke the rigid boundary between male and female antislavery activism as "their crowds soon became

too large for parlors, and they moved into churches . . . Curious about what they were saying, men began to sneak into their meetings . . .” (Hardesty 120) Further integration took place as women became even more active in the movement: they “wrote polemical essays and published magazines, put on fund-raising fairs, sold newspaper subscriptions, and went door-to-door to gather petition signatures” (Mayer 264-5). This was nothing short of revolutionary in an age where women played a very specific role in society, so was bound to cause displeasure. A clergyman who took particular issue with the public role of the Grimke sisters advised them instead to “lead[. . .] souls to pastors for instruction.” Sarah Grimke’s response was to the point: “ ‘I have suffered too keenly from the teaching of man to lead anyone to him for instruction’ ” (O’Neill).<sup>3</sup> But male clergymen were not the only ones to oppose female abolitionists. Domesticity guru Catherine Beecher, in “An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism,” decried female activism on the basis that “women’s power must never be exerted directly . . . for to do so would associate women with self-interest and deprive them of self-sacrifice” (Boydston et al. 116). The idea of female selflessness was part of a nineteenth-century belief system that held women to be too morally pure to stray outside the safety of the home where corruption was a certainty.

## 2.2 The Cult of Womanhood

Revivalism, and the interest in moral reform generated by it, coincided with another significant development in American society:

Middle-class women were in a state of transition. In the colonial and revolutionary periods, they were an important part of the community, equally valued with men as workers, skilled craftspersons, small

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<sup>3</sup> This statement is found in one of the earliest works of American feminism, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838) (O’Neill 11).

shopkeepers. In the frontiers and in a struggling new nation all hands were needed . . . (Hardesty 109).

Industrialism brought many women back into the home. Once there, they were expected to provide domestic bliss by being “homemaker, mother, housewife, and family tutor of the social and moral graces” (Giddings 47). By filling these roles, and being pious, pure, and submissive in the meanwhile, women could enter the “cult of womanhood” – or womanhood as defined in the nineteenth century. Central to the cult of womanhood was a belief in women’s inherent moral superiority, which in reality gained women very little, but curtailed them greatly. Political involvement, for instance, was out of the question as it would involve “dragging the fairer sex into the competitive and selfish ways of men” (Mayer 265). This now seems a convenient rationalization by men for a continued monopolization of power, but if so it may have backfired. As women began spending more time with one another, confined as they were to the home, they built a solidarity which proved useful (if not entirely impenetrable) when the time came to demand greater equality:

Indeed, by encouraging women to see themselves as a separate group and by providing the aegis under which women learned organization skills and assumed an enlarged role in social reform, domesticity may well have functioned as a precondition for nineteenth-century feminism (Boydston et al. 5).<sup>4</sup>

Once revivalists began preaching salvation through the moral reform of society, women – as superior moral beings – could no longer be confined to domestic responsibilities. The new-found freedom that revivalist ministers bestowed, intentionally or unintentionally, may help to explain why “women were their most zealous adherents” (Smith-Rosenberg 129). To men who were uncomfortable with women’s new role

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<sup>4</sup> “Reported Alexis de Tocqueville after his visit to America in 1831, ‘in no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes’ ” (Hardesty 38).

outside of the home, the cult of womanhood ideology provided justification. For example, “women brought to the work of uplift their special talents for compassion, generosity, and love” (Mayer 264). Or, “the female experience represented a cultural alternative to the materialism and competitive individualism of industrial capitalism” (Boydston et al. 5). However, it became more and more difficult to explain away the true situation: women were discovering a meaningful place for themselves outside of the domestic sphere, and two of the unlikely culprits were religion and the cult of womanhood.

### 3.0 Things Fall Apart (I)

#### 3.1 Conservative Abolitionists

By 1839, female abolitionists wanted the right to attend the main antislavery convention held every spring, as opposed to their own women-only event. Garrison himself was in favour, but a group of less radical abolitionists were not. Whether or not they truly opposed the participation of women is difficult to say, though not unlikely.<sup>5</sup>

But what they really feared was that Garrison

would use the women’s vote to dominate the organization and fasten his other heretical ideas upon it. . . . Garrison symbolized the possibility of a more thorough-going societal transformation than the conservative abolitionists were prepared to accept. In order to suppress or purge the socially disruptive Garrison, they realized, they would have to bar women (Mayer 266-7).

This group of abolitionists – dominated by the New-York-based executive committee of the AAS – rejected Garrison’s refusal to engage in political activity of any kind (including voting) while dominated by politicians either in favour of slavery, or willing to

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<sup>5</sup> Especially considering their appeal to the Grimke sisters, strong believers in an advocacy role for women, “to stop writing on the ‘woman question’ in order to safeguard the abolition cause from criticism” (Mayer 236).

appease the South to retain votes.<sup>6</sup> The conservative faction preferred expediency, which included political engagement and complete focus on the question of abolition, ignoring anything “ ‘foreign to our original objects, not necessary to their attainment, and in the view of the reflecting, *fatal* to our prospects of ultimate success’ ” (267). Women’s full participation in the movement would be a distraction; consequently, when this group broke away from the AAS – unable to purge Garrison from his own organization – and became the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, women members were not allowed (267-8).<sup>7</sup>

The following year saw further quarreling over the question of women. In 1840, London hosted an international antislavery convention to which the AAS sent female delegates. However:

The question of whether women should even be delegates preempted the first days of the meeting. The conservatives were in control. The women were not permitted to speak on their own behalf nor to sit on the convention floor. Instead, they were relegated to a curtained gallery at the end of the hall (Banner 25).

Alongside the female activists forced behind the curtain was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, not an active participant in abolitionism, but accompanying her new husband, a founding member of the American and Foreign Antislavery Society. Unlike her husband, Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not appreciate the sidelining of women and decided to do something about it upon return to the United States. Had Henry Stanton known the consequence of

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<sup>6</sup> “Garrisonian strategy recognized that the number of dedicated abolitionists was too small ever to be more than a pressure group and that the very nature of politics inevitably compromised their goals. The key to antislavery success lay therefore in changing public opinion and not in party action” (Banner 44-5).

<sup>7</sup> Confusingly perhaps, the political party formed by this group of abolitionists, the Liberty Party, did allow women to join (Hardesty 123).



trying to force women out of abolitionism – the founding of the American woman’s rights movement by his wife – perhaps he would have been more circumspect in 1839.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2 Seneca Falls

Elizabeth Cady Stanton fulfilled her promise – threat to some – by holding a convention on woman’s rights in her hometown of Seneca Falls, New York in July, 1848. Apart from the insult experienced at the London convention, women had ample reason to organize:

Although married women in some states had secured the right to their own property, they still had no legal right to their earnings or to their children. They could not testify against their husbands in court. . . . In all occupations women were paid much less than men. . . . With the exception of writing and school teaching the professions were closed to them (Banner 40).

Like William Lloyd Garrison’s founding document for the AAS, Cady Stanton based the women’s “Declaration of Resolutions and Sentiments” on the American Declaration of Independence. Although, Garrison’s document forms an even greater link to the past than Cady Stanton’s. He presents the fight against slavery as a continuation of the American Revolution, albeit one that “far transcends theirs” (Mayer 175). Perhaps considering the fact that “[t]he history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman”, the similarities between Cady Stanton’s Declaration and the original end at format (Martin 224). Regardless, the final document is a bold statement of intent: “Now in view of this entire disenfranchisement of one-half the people of this country . . . we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges

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<sup>8</sup> The question of whether to allow men to speak at woman’s rights conventions was never really an issue. Although, at the 1851 gathering in Akron, Ohio, one man “suggested that men should not speak, for this was a woman’s convention. Mary Ann Johnson defended men’s right to participate. This as a women’s *rights* convention, she said, and whoever supported woman’s rights was welcome to take part,” which was apparently the general consensus throughout the movement (Painter 124).

which belong to them as citizens of the United States” (Martin 225). Not all of those present felt as boldly as Cady Stanton. The resolution demanding woman’s enfranchisement did not to pass unanimously – the only one not to do so. But Cady Stanton had been told by legendary abolitionist Frederick Douglass that having the vote was the key, without it equality would remain ephemeral.<sup>9</sup> However, asking for full political equality went further than anything else towards violating the belief in women’s uniqueness. Here began a tricky, contradictory task for woman’s rights activists: arguing that woman deserved the same rights as man by virtue of her difference. In fact:

Domesticity and natural rights theory were based on logically opposed premises about the nature of women, and over the course of the nineteenth century, they appeared to vie as competing rationales among those who sought to improve women’s social, economic, legal, and political status. Yet the two approaches to women’s struggle for self-determination were seldom kept entirely distinct (Boydston et al. 5).

Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), for example, “insisted that the ‘state’ was simply an extended family and insisted that it ‘can no more afford to dispense with the vote of women in its affairs than a family’ ” (Boydston et al. 260). In this she echoed Mary Wollstonecraft’s argument that

Females, in fact, denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence, have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts, though the private duty of any member of society must be very imperfectly performed when not connected with the general good (Wollstonecraft 281-2).

But trying to simultaneously base an argument on natural rights and cult of womanhood ideology was nothing compared to the task of ridding the nation of the belief that “the husband and wife were one, and the one was the husband” (Gabriel 13).

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<sup>9</sup> Abolitionists did not begin advocating for equal suffrage for African Americans until after the Civil War.

#### 4.0 The Pre-War and War Years

Post Seneca Falls, the American woman's rights movement slowly gathered steam. In 1850, the first national convention on the issue was held in Worcester, Massachusetts. The convention also provided the first inkling that some women, like some abolitionist men, might try to stake out their own exclusive territory on rights. Jane Swisshelm, editor of Pittsburgh-based newspaper *The Saturday Visitor*, declared the woman's rights movement to be a boat that " 'may carry us into a safe harbor, but it is not strong enough to bear the additional weight of all the colored men in creation' " (Painter 123), a reversal of the argument that split the AAS in 1839.<sup>10</sup> 1850 was also an important year for abolitionists, many of whom now doubled as leading feminists (*not* Jane Swisshelm, but, for example, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone). It saw the introduction of the Fugitive Slave Law requiring Northerners to recapture and return escaped slaves, contrary to everything the abolitionists had been working towards. Rather than induce despondency, however, it galvanized the abolition movement. As did the Dred Scott decision of 1857 in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that Congress had no authority to exclude slavery from new western territories being add to the Union, and that black people had no constitutional rights of citizenship. That is not to say that there was not an increased level of anxiety within abolitionist ranks, and may explain William Lloyd Garrison's abandonment of his prohibition on political activity. It may also explain why a staunch ally of feminism began to alter his stand on woman's rights, moving towards the camp who viewed feminists as a liability. At the Tenth National Woman's Rights Convention, Garrison was

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<sup>10</sup> The group that created the split, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, petered out in the 1850s.

among those who scuttled Elizabeth Cady Stanton's resolution to lobby to change New York's divorce law to add extreme cruelty, desertion, and alcoholism to adultery as grounds for divorce (Banner 66). Not long after this, he pressured Susan B. Anthony to betray the whereabouts of the abused wife of a Massachusetts state senator who had abducted her daughter – lacking rights under custody law – then turned to the activist for help:

To Garrison . . . , the fugitive was simply in violation of the law. Her association with Anthony, who since 1857 had worked for antislavery as well as for woman's rights, threatened the abolition movement. To Anthony and Cady Stanton, the woman's case was as compelling as that of any runaway slave the abolitionists had harbored – unlawful concealment which they justified because the fugitive slave law was harsh and unjust (Banner 67).

However, the increasing gravity of the national situation – the election of Abraham Lincoln, “a moderate on slavery who might compromise with the South” (Banner 68), the mounting calls for war between the seemingly irreconcilable halves of the Union – united the two movements, for the time being, defusing rising tension.

In 1860, Anthony and Cady Stanton toured New York State speaking on the necessity of the immediate abolition of slavery. The following year, after the outbreak of civil war, woman's righters “honoured abolitionist entreaties that they suspend woman's rights agitation until the war was won and slavery ended” (Banner 91).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, preoccupied as she was with women's subjugation – “more threatening to human development than any hierarchy based on . . . color” (Banner 72) – Cady Stanton formed the Women's National Loyal League, no doubt intended as a vehicle for antislavery activity, but also

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<sup>11</sup> “With feminist organizations disbanded and their activities in abeyance, conservatives easily repealed feminist gains. In 1862, for example, the New York legislature rescinded most of the 1860 Married Women's Property Act, and there was little public outcry” (Banner 91).

intended as a vehicle for women's rights. It would create opportunities for women to make a civic contribution beyond nursing, bandage rolling, and other war-related charitable efforts and might indeed broaden the political agenda of the movement to embrace gender as well as racial equality (Mayer 557).

The League's 400,000 signature petition calling on Congress for a constitutional amendment to end slavery "proved the largest and most successful drive yet in American political history," and emboldened Cady Stanton to "serve[...] notice that in the era of reconstruction looming ahead [gender] inequality would have to be addressed" (Mayer 557-8).<sup>12</sup>

## 5.0 Things Fall Apart (II)

### 5.1 The Fourteenth Amendment

After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the cessation of war came the fight for the extension of civil rights to freed slaves. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) provided nominal freedom; however, with the failure of referenda on the removal of voting restrictions against black men in a number of Northern states, came the abolitionists' rude awakening "that the task of rallying Northern opinion in support of black suffrage would be more formidable, and take longer than anyone had thought" (Mayer 594), to say nothing of undertaking the same task in the embittered South. Indeed, Southern state governments were doing their best to ignore the outcome of the civil war by enacting "black codes" that allowed black children to be apprenticed without pay, and black men and women without employment to be arrested and forced to work to pay off fines (Goldsmith 98). President Andrew Johnson was not much better:

The president's Reconstruction plan (he preferred the term 'Restoration') for the South was to form loyal state governments under

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<sup>12</sup> The Woman's National Loyal League also collected 10,000 signatures for a petition to end gender restrictions on voting in the fall of 1865, shortly before its dissolution (Mayer 607).

provisional governors. His only demands were that government officials take a loyalty oath, repudiate Confederate debt, and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment. Johnson granted mass pardons to former Confederates (Goldsmith 98-110).

He even vetoed a civil rights act intended to grant African-Americans equality in contracts, and the right to sue, testify in court, and sit on a jury. Luckily, enough Congressmen were in favour of the legislation to override Johnson's veto.

The Fourteenth Amendment was introduced into congress in April, 1866, "intended to bolster this legislation." The proposed amendment would overturn the Dred Scott decision denying blacks citizenship "and, while not specifically mandating the vote, severely reduced the representation in Congress of any state that denied any *male* citizen this privilege" (Goldsmith 111). Rejigging congressional seat distribution now that black males counted as one whole person, as opposed to three-fifths as in pre-civil war years, placed the governing Republicans in a quandary: The South would re-enter the United States with sixteen new seats – a boon to the pro-slavery Democrats – unless Republicans could "come up with some device that could reduce the South's congressional delegation without having a corresponding effect in the North." The solution they came up with was to apportion seats based on the entire population of a state,

but mandated reduction in the size of a state's delegation in proportion to the number of adult male citizens denied suffrage. This would prevent the South from devising literary or property tests that might be covert forms of racial discrimination, for states would still be penalized for the potential voters excluded (Mayer 606).

Although in the end providing no real safeguard to southern black male voters, this section of the amendment made no pretense at all as regarded women. In fact, "the only form of suffrage discrimination that would not be penalized with a reduced

delegation in Congress was the denial of the ballot to women,” the granting of which would have been dangerous to Republicans, at least in the South, where female voters were likely to vote Democrat (Mayer 606). The Fourteenth Amendment would actually mark the entrance of the word “male” into the constitution; what had previously been implied regarding voting rights would now be made explicit, and according to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “ ‘once there it would take a century to get it out again’ ” (Mayer 607). Cady Stanton’s anger towards the proposed amendment was only compounded by her belief that abolitionists had betrayed the woman’s rights movement:

During the 1866 May Anniversary Week<sup>13</sup> in New York they transformed the National Woman’s Rights Convention, which had not met since 1860, into a new association for the equal rights of both women and blacks. They expected that the American Anti-Slavery Society, meeting concurrently would merge with their new organization. Their close friend Theodore Tilton, a religious editor and orator of note . . . suggested the merger plan to them. They thought they had secured Wendell Phillips’ approval.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, the abolitionist forces voted against the merger, and Phillips contended that Cady Stanton and Anthony had misunderstood him (Banner 95-6).

Abolitionists, including Phillips, were not necessarily pleased with the insertion of the word “male” into the constitution, but felt the urgency of enfranchising black men justified campaigning in favour of the amendment. And regardless of any personal feelings on the matter, Phillips was adamant that the demand for female suffrage had to be postponed, the question of black male suffrage being adequately controversial without any added baggage. Many feminists, especially those with a background in abolitionism, were sympathetic to this argument. However, “Cady Stanton regarded the campaign for black male suffrage as cynical and self-interested” (Banner 97). Yet, “though making an

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<sup>13</sup> It had become routine for activists of all stripes to converge on one city each May to discuss policy.

<sup>14</sup> Wendell Phillips rose to the helm of the AAS as Garrison’s popularity faded, first for his outright support of Lincoln and Republicans during the war, then for his proposal to disband the organization at the conclusion of the war rather than see through the promises of emancipation.

eloquent declaration that she ‘would not talk of Negroes or women, but of citizens,’ Stanton nonetheless fell into the single-issue fallacy by acting upon her belief that abolitionists and Republicans had chosen the wrong one” (Mayer 609).<sup>15</sup> In fact, Cady Stanton descended into utter racism in her attacks, making somewhat of a mockery of her newly renamed organization, The American Equal Rights Association (AERA) (the name that was supposed to have encompassed abolitionists and feminists under the failed merger plan). Cady Stanton’s reaction may be partly explained by the fact that:

As long as anyone could remember, black men and white women had been powerless together. Now that black men were advancing, why not women? . . . In the mid-60s, words like ‘humiliation’ and ‘degradation’ would become common in one strand of woman suffrage rhetoric” (Painter 221).

There is, perhaps, a hint of this in her shocking exhortation to women to “ ‘press in through the constitutional door the moment it is open for the admission of Sambo’ ” (Goldsmith 102). Of course, her racism may have been the same strain found throughout the country, not based on a solidarity of powerlessness, but simply pure hatred.<sup>16</sup> At the AERA meeting in May, 1867, Cady Stanton expounded on her opposition to the amendment, still winding its way through the ratification process. She said that “ ‘degraded, oppressed himself, [the black male] would be more despotic with the governing power than even our Saxon rulers are,’ ” calling the soon-to-be enfranchised men an “ ‘incoming tide of ignorance, poverty, and vice’ ” (Painter 227).

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<sup>15</sup> Cady Stanton, along with Susan B. Anthony, actually believed the constitution to be unworkable. Rather than simply amending it, they would have preferred it be annulled and started again from scratch, with a guarantee of equal rights for women (Mayer 607).

<sup>16</sup> At the risk of making an excuse of the “some of her best friends were . . .” variety, Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass were friends for a good part of their lives, even after the amendment controversy. She sent a warm congratulatory letter when Douglass married a white woman and was criticized by whites and blacks alike (McFeely 320-1).



## 5.2 Kansas

Also in 1867, Cady Stanton and Anthony turned to a controversial source of support in their bid to enfranchise the women of Kansas.<sup>17</sup> Some individual states were taking the initiative of expanding the franchise, or at least considering it. New York had established a commission to examine granting the vote to women, deciding against it. Now Kansas was putting before the voting public two proposed changes to existing state legislation: the right for women to vote, and the right for black men to vote (again, taking the initiative since the Fourteenth Amendment encouraged, but did not specifically enfranchise black men). In their campaign to secure a ‘yes’ vote for female suffrage, Cady Stanton and Anthony accepted money and vocal support from millionaire investor and *Around the World in Eighty Days* inspirer, George Francis Train. Train was a Democrat who thought educated women should be enfranchised, but not “ ‘low-down nigger men,’ ” a position that “soon alienated many woman’s rights advocates” (Goldsmith 137). To make matters worse, Anthony took one-thousand dollars of AERA money to pay the expenses Train incurred on his speaking engagements. The women justified turning to Train by the lack of support from more moderate quarters, such as Republicans and AAS members. In the end, neither Black men nor women won the vote in Kansas at this time.

## 5.3 The Fifteenth Amendment

The Fourteenth Amendment was finally passed in July, 1868. By this time there was already a call for an amendment that would truly enfranchise Black men – relying on state benevolence proving ineffective. The campaign for the Fifteenth Amendment

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<sup>17</sup> The previous year, Cady Stanton had turned to Democrats in Congress “willing to introduce the women’s suffrage petition as a purely obstructionist tactic” towards enfranchising Black men (Mayer 609).

followed the same basic course as that of the Fourteenth; Anthony and Cady Stanton continued their isolationist tack. At the 1869 AERA meeting, they were challenged by fellow members who objected to the tone and tactics of their campaign, and the very premise of their argument – that women could not allow black men to be enfranchised without them. Cady Stanton again resorted to racism in defending her position:

‘The lower orders of men . . . the slaves of yesterday are the lawmakers of today. . . . The legislation of the ignorant African . . . in whose eyes woman is simply the being of man’s lust . . . must culminate in fearful outrages on womanhood, especially in Southern states’ (Goldsmith 180-1).

A resolution seeking the resignation of Anthony and Cady Stanton was proposed, but defeated. However, a resolution supporting the Fifteenth Amendment, with a separate amendment for woman’s suffrage, passed.

In *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn summarizes the competing campaigns of the Fifteenth Amendment by citing historian Bettina Aptheker:

Bettina Aptheker has analyzed the Fifteenth Amendment controversy and believes that the effect of the amendment could have rebounded to the benefit of women. However, the self-interest of different oppressed groups prevented them from realizing how to use the AERA to support both a Fifteenth Amendment to enfranchise Black men and a Sixteenth Amendment to enfranchise all women. Needless to say, self-interests prevailed (33).

#### 5.4 Black Men v. Women

The conflict over the Fifteenth Amendment boiled down to an argument over who deserved the vote more based on degree of victimization. Former slave, abolitionist, and arguably America’s first male feminist, Frederick Douglass, sent a letter to the 1869 AERA gathering – via member Josephine Griffing – explaining why he believed in the Fifteenth Amendment:

‘I am impelled by no lack of generosity in refusing to come to Washington to speak in behalf of woman’s suffrage. The right of women to vote is as sacred in my judgment as that of man, and I am quite willing at any time to hold up both hands in favor of this right. It does not, however, follow that I can come up to Washington or go elsewhere to deliver lectures upon this special subject. I am now devoting myself to a cause [if] not more sacred, certainly more urgent, because it is one of life and death to the long enslaved people of this country, and this is negro suffrage. While the negro is mobbed, beaten, shot, stabbed, hanged, burnt and is the target of all that is malignant in the North and all that is murderous in the South, his claims may be preferred by me without exposing in anywise myself towards the cause of woman. As you very well know, woman has a thousand ways to attach herself to the governing power of the land and already exerts an honorable influence on the course of legislation. She is the victim of abuses, to be sure, but it cannot be pretended I think that her cause is as urgent as . . . ours. I never suspected you of sympathizing with Miss Anthony and Mrs Stanton in their course. Their principle is: that no negro shall be enfranchised while woman is not. Not considering that white men have been enfranchised always and colored men have not, the conduct of these white women, whose husbands, fathers and brothers are voters, does not seem generous’ (McFeely 320-1).

Three years before he wrote this letter, “a wave of terrorism swept the South. White Supremacists murdered and raped black Republicans and their supporters in Memphis and New Orleans,” with forty-six dead in Memphis, and forty-eight dead in New Orleans (Painter 222). And by this time, the KKK was active in the South, making literal Douglass’ statement that the cause of black male suffrage was “one of life and death.”

It was true that “most Americans seemed ignorant of womankind’s degraded state” (O’Neill 11). When, in 1866, Anthony and Cady Stanton approached Democratic Senators concerning the necessity of female suffrage, the senators replied that women were not oppressed (Banner 95). Since the dangers women faced were most often found in the home, they were easy to overlook.<sup>18</sup> And most abused women had no alternative

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<sup>18</sup> In 1868, the case of a woman’s life imperiled by the judicial system came to attention of woman’s rights activists. Twenty-year-old English émigré, Hester Vaughn, arrived in the United States to find her fiancé married to someone else. Vaughn became a dairy maid, was raped by her employer, and paid forty dollars

but to remain in their home, held captive by economic dependency. The cult of womanhood forbade work outside the home, and in many states, women, especially married women, were not allowed to own property. Compounding the financial dilemma was the knowledge that leaving a marriage meant leaving the children, custody laws being completely one-sided. Frederick Douglass' insinuation that “ ‘white women whose husbands, fathers and brothers are voters’ ” were virtually enfranchised already, was a reflection of the common belief of the time that women were best looked-after by men – husbands fathers and brothers, condemning them to representation by the ones most likely to cause them harm.<sup>19</sup>

In the conflict over the Fifteenth Amendment, there was one group almost completely ignored: black women. Cult of womanhood ideology resulted in “free Black women in the North being perceived as a ‘different kind of humanity’ ” (Giddings 46). For one thing, black women were more likely to be employed outside of the home, a definite contravention of cult policy. There was also the terrible fact the “black women over the centuries have been considered degraded and unclean, as oversexed Jezebels, or at least sexualized objects” (Painter 140). As slaves, black women were subject to rape by their masters. White women, instilled with the idea of purity, did not know how to handle that fact. For the above reasons, “of the more than fifty national officers and speakers at [AERA's] conventions over a three-year period, only five were Black women” (Giddings

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to go away. She gave birth alone in an attic in Philadelphia. The landlady, who did not hear the cries for help for twenty-four hours, found her only partly conscious, in a pool of blood, her new baby frozen to death. Vaughn was charged with infanticide, tried, convicted, and sentenced to the gallows – without legal representation. New York woman's righters petitioned Congress, which in turn appealed to the Governor of Pennsylvania. Vaughn was pardoned a year later (Goldsmith 175-6).

<sup>19</sup> Douglass' biographer, William McFeely, writes, “The unconscious sense that the male comprehension of a problem was the correct one pervaded Douglass' letter to Josephine Griffing. He spoke with the voice of absolute patriarchal assurance” (269).

66).<sup>20</sup> However, black women were particularly impassioned about gaining the right to vote as a means to fight sexual exploitation, and improve education standards and labour conditions (Giddings 121).

Sojourner Truth was one of the first black female suffragists. She was fearless in her advocacy on behalf of women, once claiming, “the white men will be in a fix pretty soon” (Millstein and Bodin, eds. 230). She was also unafraid to challenge prevailing notions of femininity: “She scoffed at white ideals of womanhood and challenged the patriarchal nature of American society. . . . She not only denied ‘social propriety its oppressive power to define, limit, or regulate’ but also scoffed at the ‘inventions of femininity’ ” (Washington xxxii).<sup>21</sup> Her commitment to female suffrage was unquestionable, but unlike most feminists who came down clearly on one side of the issue, she was torn over whether or not to support the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>22</sup> She was not opposed to inserting the word “male” into the Constitution, but “Truth said that she wanted to keep agitating for woman suffrage before federal policy hardened” (Painter 227). As to the Fifteenth Amendment, “she was fearful that putting more power into the hands of men would add to the oppression of Black women,” so leaned more towards opposing it (Giddings 65).

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<sup>21</sup> As an abolitionist as well as feminist speaker, Truth had encountered Douglass on numerous occasions: “Douglass was both put off and enchanted by this uneducated woman who considered herself his equal in discourse and intelligence, if not in literacy and posturing. She was, he wrote, a ‘strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm, and flint-like common sense, who seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and ridicule my efforts to speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement’ ” (Washington x-xi).

<sup>22</sup> “According to the chroniclers, Truth said that if she could write, she would publish ‘Sojourner Truth on Suffrage’ and that her great desire was to ‘sojourn once to the ballot-box before I die,’ ” which she did try to do in Black Creek, Michigan in the 1872 presidential election, the same election in which Anthony stormed a polling station in Rochester, New York (Terborg-Penn 31).

Frances Harper, activist for black and woman's rights, was unambiguous in her position on the Amendments. She lived a very different reality from Cady Stanton and Anthony and other white suffragists. Although highly educated, her first job was as a domestic "because of the limited occupational opportunities opened to Black women" (Terborg-Penn 126). Her position in the AERA debates reflected her experiences:

In the 1866 meetings, Harper sounded vexing themes – themes of race and gender that are with us still. Except on the ideal of women's enfranchisement, she disagreed up and down with Stanton and Anthony. Had formal emancipation in 1865 given black men advantage over white women? Harper said no, Stanton and Anthony said yes. Would the vote, of itself, satisfy the needs of all women? Stanton and Anthony said yes. Harper, pointing to the legacies of class discrimination, slavery, and racism in the lives of poor black women, said no (Painter 224).

As to the question of who should be enfranchised first, Harper famously "declared that when it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go" (Bacon 164).

Surprisingly, black abolitionists did not always have an easy time finding a place in that movement either. As an escaped slave, Frederick Douglass was an obvious asset to the cause as a public speaker, but he had a specific role to play: "Abolitionists, excoriating slaveholders, accused them of having made brutes of their slaves, and as if believing their own rhetoric, they required that Douglass exemplify the possibility of redemption from an animal state" (McFeely 91). Even William Lloyd Garrison was offended that Douglass had the gall to start his own antislavery newspaper – not to mention name it *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Starting a potential rival to Garrison's own *The Liberator* did not display the reverence that Garrison felt was his due from the man he practically viewed as his own creation (McFeely 169).

### 5.5 The Break-Up of the Woman's Rights Movement

After the 1869 AERA convention, Cady Stanton and Anthony decided to form their own organization to continue the fight against the Fifteenth Amendment. After the ratification of the amendment in 1870, the National Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA) focused on a Sixteenth Amendment to enfranchise women. However, NWSA's object was also to obtain "women's right to an eighteen hour workday and pay comparable to men, and to demand more rights in marriage and more lenient divorce laws so that women would not be regarded as their husbands' 'property' " (Goldsmith 186). Shortly after the creation of NWSA, Lucy Stone, a veteran abolitionist and feminist, formed the American Woman's Suffrage Association (AWSA). Stone was one of the AERA members who opposed the direction Anthony and Cady Stanton were taking the woman's rights movement; she objected to their stance on the Fifteenth Amendment, but also their position on marriage and divorce, which she interpreted as 'free love' advocacy (Banner 114). While NWSA supported federal legislation, AWSA targeted state legislatures to gain female suffrage. When the movement reunited in 1890, this was the tactic employed.<sup>23</sup> But the decision of the amalgamated National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) to endorse states' rights was "tantamount in many states to endorsing the exclusion of black women" (Schneider 127). The reason for this was the states' ability to deny the vote based on a lack of education, and to deny education based on race. In Alabama, for example, white boards determined who could vote based on literacy tests, which included interpreting – to board members' satisfaction – a section of the United States or state Constitution (Blumberg 60). Some suffragists argued in the name of expediency: allow white women to gain the vote first, an easier

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<sup>23</sup> Partly due to the fact that "western delegates . . . disliked the long journey to Washington" (Banner 143).

task than enfranchising white and black women, and the enfranchised women would fight for universal suffrage.<sup>24</sup> But black women did not buy this argument, and, led by women like the Forten sisters, Francis Harper and Ida Wells-Barnett, fought to ensure that when the constitutional door opened for the admission of white women, they would be there to press in as well.<sup>25</sup>

## 6.0 Conclusion

“Men [and women], in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than to root them out”

(Wollstonecraft 79).

It is frustrating and disheartening when two groups with a seemingly common cause cannot unite – if for no other reason than for the increased power provided by a united front. But what appear to be obvious similarities to outsiders are insurmountable obstacles to those involved in the fight. It is easy to look back in bewilderment at the failure of abolitionists and women to work for a common cause – equality with white men. And yet, the fractures displayed in the mid-1800s are still evident today. In a year where a black man and a white woman faced off for the United States Democratic Party presidential nomination, the question of who deserved to be president first replaced the question of who deserved the vote first. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Gloria Steinem echoed Elizabeth Cady Stanton when she wrote, “gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or

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<sup>24</sup> Although racist arguments were also employed, such as, white *American* women could counter the vote of immigrant men (O’Neill 72).

<sup>25</sup> In 1894, Anthony refused to help black women organize a NAWSA branch, and “Wells-Barnett told her that she may have made gains for woman suffrage, but she also confirmed white women in their attitude of segregation” (Giddings 126).



who could be in the White House”.<sup>26</sup> And although declaring, “I am not advocating a competition for who has it toughest,” she enumerates the advantages African-American men have had over women, including being “given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot.” At the end of her article, Steinem observed that “the abolition and suffrage movements progressed when united and were damaged by division, we should remember that” (Steinem). But at what point were they actually united? Really only during the Civil War when woman’s rights were put aside. The truth is, the two movements were more divided than united.

Perhaps it is true that:

Every society learns to endure a certain discrepancy between its professed aims and its real ones – ideology and actuality never correspond exactly. But every so often, for reasons no one really knows, the gap becomes too great to be papered over with pious assurances. If the chasm is wide enough it may lead to rebellion or civil war, as was the case when slavery could no longer be reconciled with republican principles; if the distance is not so great, less drastic responses become possible (O’Neill 6).

Perhaps, as concerns women, the chasm is not wide enough and can still “be papered over with pious assurances.” This could explain why, although enfranchised for eighty-eight years, women are still abysmally underrepresented in politics. Gloria Steinem believes that “sexism is still confused with nature as racism once was.” Nevertheless, the solution to demolishing “the sex barrier” cannot be to create a wider chasm between sex and race: it certainly did not work in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>26</sup> She then went on to affirm Alexis de Tocqueville’s century-and-a-half-old observation when she states, “this country is way down the list of countries electing women, and according to one study, it polarizes gender more than the average democracy.”

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