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# The Role of Mail in the First Women's Rights Movement: A Project of Resistance and Knowledge Formation

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that mail correspondence among 19<sup>th</sup> century suffragists functions as a practice of creating space for cultivating a political feminist consciousness and sustaining the first women's rights movement. Using Michel de Certeau's theory of space and Nancy Fraser's work on feminist counterpublics, letters from a variety of suffragists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, were analyzed. Through a close reading of these letters, this paper identifies alternative discursive patterns as they circulate within those epistolary spaces. The early suffragists used letters to reaffirm their identity as white, middle-class, educated, Protestant women at the same time as they subverted the meaning of "woman."

## **Executive Summary**

The American women's suffrage movement broadly spanned the 1840s to 1920. When the 19th Amendment finally passed, an eighty-year-old movement had fostered a rich feminist history. This capstone project analyzes a selection of letters between suffragists during this period. Letters were read in order to find patterns of what the women talked about, and clues telling us how their movement was born. In analyzing letters, I am combining feminist studies and communications theories, and engaging in critical thinking at the intersection of various fields.

The starting point for this project was the two most famous figures in the women's suffrage movement: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Having read excerpts from their letters before, I knew their written words to one another were revealing, insightful, and inspiring. Using the relationship between these two as a springboard, I explore their social networks. As these women were so well-connected and wrote thousands of letters, I chose a small portion of their correspondence for my analysis. The thesis of this project posits that these women turned the function of "women's letters" upside down by rendering the letter into a space where radical ideas could be exchanged and where they contested the meaning of "woman." To complicate this thesis, I also consider that certain ideas and people, such as women of color, were excluded from this space that the suffragists created as a means of upholding racial hierarchy. In order to address various injustices today, it is imperative to acknowledge and trace the legacies of various -isms in social movements throughout history.

To complete this project, I worked closely with my advisor, Professor Pedro DiPietro, to analyze letters from suffragists. We began this research by closely examining the definitions of "space" and "consciousness." Inspired by Michel de Certeau's work on space as practiced place,

we applied his concepts to the letter as a medium. We found that letters became a feminist space when occupied by the writing practices of early suffragists redefining their sphere of influence and consciousness. To make sense of this communicative labor, we looked at Nancy Fraser's work on feminist counterpublics. I use this work to extend the meaning of created space and its impact on the public sphere. The feminist counterpublic that suffragists create in their letters is a significant feature of the suffrage movement, sustained throughout its duration.

Next, I give a brief background of education in the United States, and how, as it is today, education was a privilege based on the intersections of gender, race and class. I also engage the ideology of the first women's rights movement; giving insight into where figures such as Stanton and Anthony got their feminist ideas and how these values transferred over into a larger movement. I follow that with a brief overview of the first women's rights movement, its accomplishments and legacy.

I then go on to discuss the significance of letters as cultural artifacts. As such, I further demonstrate how women bridge the private/public boundary using letters as a radical tool. I organize the letters' functions into four categories, analyzing excerpts where the letters carry out those functions.

This capstone is significant because it blends feminist studies with communications theory, as well as history and textual analysis. Instead of looking at letters as extensions of an already existing political view or position, I underscore the methods by which early suffragists bring about a counterpublic domain of feminist identification, political strategies, and theorizing. In doing this research, I find that suffragists created a space that both upheld and disrupted white femininity.

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*Figure 1. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, photograph (ca. 1891)*

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This project analyzes letters between and among suffragists. Particularly, it engages the correspondence between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. As the most well-known of their suffragist peers, I also examine their network of relations. By broadly looking at the suffragists' social networks, I study how they represent and form a larger feminist counterpublic, or an alternative discursive arena parallel to the mainstream (Fraser 67). Letters read spanned from the 1840s to the 1900s. Looking at the language that the letter writers used, I identify how their words function to encourage and critique one another. I assess their exchange of ideas and the development of a form of feminist theory, and taking into account their historical context, I interpret the risks involved in writing down radical or unpopular opinions about the status and role of women in America leading to the 19th Amendment.

By analyzing these letters, I explore the function of written correspondence, as well as its power to foster feminist networks and grassroots organizing during this period. My project applies a feminist intersectional approach to the study of the positionality of these feminist activists. Feminist thinking also allows me to explore the ways in which they interacted with one another and understood their relations to power. While doing this work, I pay careful attention to the social location of these early suffragists, as almost all were white, well-off and Protestant (Bosch 3). This supports the idea that only some women, those who were white and educated,

were included in the movement, and practiced making space to tell their own stories. More importantly, reading these letters conveys the feminist ways in which women come into their own voices. This capstone contends that for women suffragists in the 1800s, correspondence is a cultural site where feminist consciousness is formed and becomes tangible.

Near the end of my junior year in high school, I was selected to win a college book award from my English teacher; the prize for this was a beautifully bound copy of *The Norton Book of Women's Lives*. Although my interest in women's lives and stories did not start there, that book, an anthology of excerpts from women's autobiographies, illustrates the variety of ways in which women write about their lives and their experiences. Reading this anthology introduced me to the idea of embodied identity, how one's socially constructed identity will influence how they interact with society. A reading that stood out among all of them was an excerpt from Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Lorde's semi-autobiographical account of her childhood explores the boundaries of race and the life-long process of coming to articulate one's own positionality. This feminist consciousness was an awakening to naming and analyzing lived experiences in relation to power structures, as a way of pushing the boundaries of public discourse. A feminist analysis of such lived experience presents an alternative realm of meaning; a critical lens that allows one to engage with life in a deeper sense that is often contradictory to the mainstream. In reading the letters of suffragists to one another, I was struck by how they also pushed boundaries and came to find their own voices through writing in their own era.

At the intersection of Public Communications and Women's and Gender Studies, I pursue interdisciplinary work, seeking to analyze power relations through cultural artifacts and social practices. Cultural artifacts are objects that give us insights into a society and its culture. In this capstone, letters are examined as cultural artifacts, while written correspondence is analyzed

as a social practice. Communications studies help me to think about the ways in which messages are spread and create meaning, while women's and gender studies courses critically examine the ways that women have historically figured out how to craft their own spaces and communities to confront inequalities in power distribution and representation. The interdisciplinary nature of this topic easily accommodates my passion for hearing women tell their own stories.

The scholarly work of analyzing women's letters is political at its core. As scholar Ellen Carol DuBois writes, "studying history, especially that of civil rights movements, [is] a way of both uncovering, recording and validating a past of oppression, and creating pathways into a different future" (211). By contextualizing the women's suffrage movement, and getting to know the individuals involved, I understand more deeply the legacy of the first women's rights movement, while I contribute to the project of recording a variety of historical women's voices and emphasizing their significance.

## Chapter 2

### Methodology

In this project, I gather letters from several books containing documents by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, as well as some other well-known suffragists, including Carrie Chapman Catt, Lucy Stone and the Grimké sisters. Four of the six volumes of *Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* were used, as well as the book *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902 - 1942*. Feminist critical thinking and close reading strategies provide the tools to identify patterns and themes within these letters and to partially reconstruct the extended networks where this correspondence emerges.

This project analyzes letters as cultural artifacts, a medium through which feminist spaces were created. Carolyn Senft defines “cultural artifacts” as those objects that have a use value or esthetic value and that are “created or modified by human artisanry, [reflecting] the social, political, and economic conditions of a specific group of people joined together by common values or beliefs” (153). I argue that the act of women writing among suffragists is a learned practice of feminist space-making, a way of producing space in which to develop a political consciousness. The first American suffragists were radical in subverting the purpose of women’s

letter-writing to create a space for themselves. As such, these letters may mobilize the early suffragists' own critical reflection on their journey to create shared anti-sexist values.

Building upon Michel de Certeau's work, this project defines and analyzes place and the feminist practice of space-making. In addition to de Certeau's scholarship, I engage Nancy Fraser's work to evaluate suffragists' letters as a counterpublic. The significance of a counterpublic is that it is a space parallel to the public sphere where mainstream ideas can be challenged and subverted (Fraser 67; Warner 113). In the following pages, I review de Certeau's and Fraser's work and their relevance to suffragists' letter-writing. I then contextualize the first women's rights movement in the United States as well as its connection to women's suffrage movements in Europe. I seek to show that letters were not only a medium for staying in touch, but a strategic tool used to create and sustain an effective movement. Ultimately, this ongoing process of self-affirmation and network building had an interesting performative effect as it simultaneously transformed the suffragists into feminists and built the space they were occupying.

### Chapter 3

#### Defining “Consciousness” and “Space”

In order to support the thesis of this paper and assess the importance of letters in the first women’s rights movement, I must first define “space” and “consciousness.” When talking about minorities and political organization, making room for the historically marginalized becomes an important task, as it allows for these groups to network, form friendships and do political theorizing. The concept of “making space” refers to creating new areas or spheres where different, alternative, or taboo ideas can be discussed, and where those who are oppressed and ostracized can express themselves in their own terms.

Teresa de Lauretis defines consciousness raising as “the collective articulation of one’s experience of sexuality and gender... [it] is the original critical instrument that women have developed towards radically new modes of understanding, the analysis of social reality, and its critical revision” (185). To come to consciousness means having a deeper sense of one’s position in society, as well as to acknowledge and challenge the power systems that shape our lives. As suffragists exchange letters in the second half of the 19th century, they cultivate a new space and give rise to a critical consciousness. As they grow what I consider a counterpublic into a feminist network, they challenge the roles assigned to women at that time.

Scholars such as Lisa M. Gring-Pemble have already theorized that letters exchanged by early suffragists are a way of forming “feminist consciousness” (42). By consciousness, I mean an awareness and a new way of thinking. Marked as “feminist,” consciousness can be defined as radical thinking, anti-sexist at its core, and a critique of power relations. Gring-Pemble argues that suffragists’ correspondence was a “pre-genesis” of the women’s rights movement. She analyzes letters from the 1840s between Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Lucy Stone, emphasizing the friendship between the women, and the way that letters created an “alternative space to exchange ideas” for them, since they could not access other public spaces and platforms.

In hindsight, feminism has yielded a diverse set of feminist traditions. I interpret “feminist consciousness” in the broadest sense, which includes suffragists’ work and allows for a critique of their movement and its limitations. I try to make visible the suffragists’ revolutionary coming to voice, developed in the epistolary form, while also pointing to the people and issues that were discarded from their movement. Chicana feminist scholar, Chela Sandoval, theorizes various methods of resistance within social movements (43). Women of color, such as Sandoval, have contributed greatly by fighting against hegemonic feminism, as their lived experiences testify to the dangers of a “gender-first” power analysis. That is, an analysis that is not intersectional or that it does not consider the intersections of an individual’s identity (Combahee River Collective; Crenshaw 1243). Using Sandoval’s work, we can put the American suffragists’ movement into context and within a larger timeline of feminist theory and activism throughout the last two centuries.

Sandoval identifies “five principal categories around which oppositional consciousness is organized; equality, revolutionary, separatist, supremacist and differential” (43). With respect to the equality mode, Sandoval writes, “These oppositional actors argue for civil rights based on the



philosophy that all humans are created equally. Practitioners of this particular ideological tactic demand that their humanity be legitimized, recognized as the same under the law, and assimilated into the most favored form of the human-in-power” (55). American suffragists did exactly that, working to be recognized within the confines of the law, and aspiring to be seen as equals to men. Feminists who believe in and actively fight for equality, such as the suffragists, address what others consider only the surface of oppression against women.

In developing this feminist consciousness, as it will be explained later, suffragists had to develop a space that was not previously there. In their everyday life, pre-Civil War educated women spent time in the most private areas of the household, away from the public eye, in what was deemed the “women’s sphere.” In order to cultivate a feminist consciousness, these women subverted what was supposed to happen within that designated sphere.

Michel de Certeau defines space as “practiced place,” where “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements” (117). In his theory, de Certeau describes a square where people gather and walk. The square, a physical place, written by urban planners, only becomes a space when it is occupied. Within this space, people can reject the norms of society, or the grammar of everyday life by subverting the use of the space. By doing this, they subvert the square and write their own place into the city-scape. I apply this idea to the social practice of feminist written correspondence. As women write to one another, the medium of the letter is transformed into a space, occupied with the thoughts of the writers seeking equality and relying on the existence of a larger critical mass of sympathizers. In claiming letters as space, letters operate as mobile elements, transformed when read, understood and replied to. Creating space is always intentional, and can be a form of resistance, a production against domination. For

suffragists, letters become a space where women could deviate from societal norms. They contest those that told them that they were property or that they had no place in politics.

In feminist theory, the practice of making space where there is none is *learned*. This practice was not available to women either ideologically or pragmatically. Specifically, feminists must often transgress boundaries, the grammar or rules of society, in order to make space for critiques of power systems that affect their embodied experiences. The practice of making space or transgressing boundaries is learned as one observes the ways in which others challenge rules, and then must work on different methods of doing so themselves. Transgressing boundaries often happens in the abstract, however, the action of doing this can interrupt power systems in material ways. Also, letter writing might have provided a hidden stage for women's interaction. During the 1800s and early 1900s, letter writing was a practice that resulted in women reinforcing white and upper-class femininity. However, suffragists repurpose this practice by turning the letter into a space that questions the roles assigned to women. Letter-writing allows suffragists to form solidarity and develop a political consciousness. Through this process, letter-writing, as a way of theorizing and feminist space-making, becomes part of doing feminist work.

The act of making space through writing is both physical and metaphorical. At a material level, it is a daily practice, where one must gather supplies, think through what they are permitted to say, perform the act of putting pen to paper, and decide what to include and scratch out. Although the letters that these women sent to one another resulted in action and the formation of a movement, here I also focus on letter writing as a radical action in itself. In writing letters to one another as a symbolic act, suffragists transgressed the meaning and function of the letter. If women's correspondence was supposed to be an extension of the "women's sphere" (Cook 6), where women talked about trivial things and performed white femininity,

suffragists brought the public/politics, or what was un-feminine, into this sphere. In doing this, they transgress the meaning and function given to “women.” They use their correspondence to challenge their subjugation, and to realize their agency. As I discuss later, letter-writing, as an ongoing practice, allows the early feminists to create a counterpublic, and circulate accounts of identity and women’s action that challenge the white, middle-class femininity ascribed to them.

Suffragists letters were groundbreaking. However, they were also limited in their views. de Certeau theorizes about writing as “‘operations of marking out boundaries’ [...] they shed light on the formation of myths, since they also have the function of founding and articulating spaces” (122-123). It is significant that the ability to write entails the articulation of spaces. For women such as Stanton and Anthony, this articulation happened from within a white, middle-class, Protestant background. This was a space that Black women could not access as they have historically been denied educational opportunities (Collins 4). The suffragists’ actions and radical work of letter writing further marginalized Black women from this new site of belonging that white, middle-class women were cultivating. de Certeau’s theory of space tells us that while engaging with the practice of writing, one does not only articulate space by what they include, but also what they exclude. This goes into the process of making space. Part of the action of making space is outlining what is there and what is not. What is not there is still present but as an absence. When we look at the suffragists’ project through their letters and correspondence, the ideas that they emphasized and developed also reveal the ideas they dismissed.

As elite and educated white women, suffragists were kept from the public domain and, most often than not, they were outside the realm of decision-making with respect to the common good. Pre-Civil War American society granted them a certain kind of agency as daughters,

mothers and wives. While residing within this sphere gave white women some freedom and autonomy, this privilege was not afforded to women of color.

The idea of the “women’s sphere,” or “private vs. public spheres,” DuBois writes, is a relatively recent social construction. Many early suffragettes did not have critical views of this division, as they believed that women and men were truly different biologically. Some, like Antoinette Blackwell, also found empowerment in the idea of getting work done within this women’s sphere, as she once referred to it as a “sphere which men cannot enter” (33). Whether or not early suffragettes had an articulate critical view on the matter, they transgressed the public and private distinction with their determination to name themselves as subjects of struggle. Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook writes about how “The epistolary genre was central to the construction and definition of the categories of public and private that we have inherited from Enlightenment social and political traditions, and to the construction and definition of the bodies held properly to inhabit these categories” (7-8). Cook critiques Habermas’s work on the public sphere, writing that as theorized by the German philosopher the public sphere remains inaccessible to those who are not white males (10). Cook’s contribution closely follows Nancy Fraser’s reformulation of what counts as discursive work outside the mainstream channels available to dominant groups in capitalist societies. It is worth noting that Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser are not the only scholars who have theorized about counterpublics, however, their works are the most helpful in my analysis of suffragists’ letters.

As white, middle-class, American women began to theorize about their lack of equality and humanity in society, they shared these thoughts and legitimized these experiences in their letters to one another. This was their coming to consciousness. From recognizing their shared issues, they could then start to speak out in public via the lecture circuit, find other women (and

men) who shared their views, and organize public actions, such as petitions and demonstrations. Their actions in the public sphere were limited, however, as they constantly faced pushback from anti-suffragist women, men, the government, etc. This is why the letter, bringing the public to the private, was so significant. All of these practices of subverting the rules were learned and brought to the fore intentional ways of creating space, and performing that space, where there were previously none.

In writing letters to one another, suffragists formed an effective counterpublic. Nancy Fraser's theory of counterpublics consists of four elements, which I find in these historical letters (67). First, counterpublics entail the communicative, meaning-making, action of subordinated social groups. Clearly, in the 1800s, women such as Stanton and Anthony were given second-class citizen status, treated as property, and not allowed to participate (directly) in matters of politics or business. Second, positioned at the margins of the public sphere, these groups shape alternative publics, which serve as parallel discursive arenas. Among white Protestant women such as Stanton and Anthony, letter writing became an initial springboard for shaping these alternative publics. Third, they invent and circulate counterdiscourse. For suffragists, this counterdiscourse was the collective awareness of being a part of this movement, devising new ways of thinking about the station and subordinated statuses of the members of these alternative arenas. Finally, they formulated oppositional interpretations of mainstream society and cultural values. In theorizing about their place in society and their beliefs, suffragists used and subverted documents such as the Bible and the American Constitution to justify their humanity.

The space that suffragists created was quite impressive. Women such as Stanton and Anthony not only wrote letters, they published speeches, gave lectures, wrote newspaper and magazine articles, spoke to politicians and eventually published a lengthy book. All of these

mediums make up the counterpublic. They entail learned practices which, in turn, allowed them to furnish and tell the history of their own movement. Analyzing the space and consciousness of the American suffragists includes looking at the trajectory of their theory, activism focus, and limits. As will be discussed in more depth later, many suffragists got their start in the abolitionist movement. However, as their movement evolved, some parts of their theory were eliminated, such as their abolitionist roots.

Both creating space and raising consciousness are examples of work that feminists have done and continue to do. Although not usually thought of as work, producing knowledge is a way that people can resist patriarchy and change society (Collins 31). Across all ambits of social life (Quijano 1), labor regulates the value of humans. Historically, women's labor has been devalued and rendered invisible (Adams 156). Therefore, it is important to recognize that the theorizing that women do is labor, and to recognize women as involved in different areas as value producers. For suffragists, recognizing that labor meant their acceptance in society as enfranchised members. It is important that the many ways in which feminist consciousness has been raised throughout history, by a variety of women and men, are recorded and analyzed, so that the creation of knowledge and truth as a social practice becomes more plural than what it has been in the history of Western knowledge.



Figure 2. "Ye May session of ye women's rights convention," wood engraving (1859)

## Chapter 4

### Historical Context of the First Women's Rights Movement

#### A Gendered, Raced and Classed History of Education and Writing in the U.S.

A telling of the suffragists' story is not complete without recognizing the gendered, raced and classed nature of access to education in the United States, which continues to this day. Although there were women and men on both sides of the racial line who supported women's suffrage, the women who led the movement were noticeably white, educated, Protestant and relatively well-off. All of the letters that I have found were from white suffragists. Susan Goodier, author of several books on the history of the women's suffrage movement has never found any letters from women of color in her research (Goodier, keynote address). This does not mean that letters regarding suffrage were not exchanged between or with women of color, but it does mean that they were not deemed important enough to be saved or anthologized. Well-known suffragists such as Stanton, Anthony and the Grimké sisters had their thinking recorded in history because of their position in society as white women. As a dimension of classed education, religion was also a determining factor in the lives of the individuals who were taught to read and write during this time. The mentioned women were a part of Protestant denominations, which emphasized equality between all people, and the importance of being able to read the Bible. As such, the development of feminist consciousness becomes focused on the creation of space. Those women who, as Virginia Woolf wrote in 1929, must acquire "a room of



one's own" in order to cultivate their own consciousness, are extremely privileged. Such privilege excludes women of the working class and women of color.

Writing about southern women's education and introduction to authorship in the 1700s, Katherine Kerrison states, "surrounded on all sides and in every way (physically, legally, and economically) by a form of patriarchy that depended for its survival on keeping the distinctions between male and female, Black and white, uniformly rigid," these women had to find their own way to claim femininity in writing (25). Certain types of writing, like correspondence, were appropriate for women because they were seen as private, non-threatening and acceptable ways of socializing. This paved the way for individual voices to be cultivated, and then used in ultimately rebellious ways.

Letters from suffragists such as Anthony and Stanton frequently reveal the women's race and class privilege. Both women were well-traveled, and had financial support from their families that they employed to speak publicly for a living. In one letter, discussed later in this paper, Stanton refers to Anthony's consulting with a lawyer in reviewing the women's strategy for legislative change (Gordon vol. 4 501). Then, as today, lawyers were a pricey service, and law was considered an area only accessible to the upper class. As this evidence shows, while writing letters they not only created space but also confirmed a position of white privilege. In this way, the suffragists were occupying space, but not necessarily dismantling all sources of injustice!

In the first half of the 1800s, the education of women reinforced their roles as wife and mother (Cott 118). This idea had not changed since Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for women's education towards the end of the eighteenth century. Having access to education, social networks and meeting with peers was a sign of class and privilege. As mentioned in the previous

paragraph, as early feminists relied on essentialist ideas to validate their womanhood and the “goodness” of their ideas, they re-inscribed white femininity on their movement. All wives and mothers were expected to be educated for the purpose of raising a family and adhering to republican motherhood (Duke 22).

As “knowledge is power,” only certain groups of people have been afforded this privilege throughout history into the modern day. Acknowledging the oppressive institution of education and the search for “Truth” comes into play when analyzing women’s history. We acknowledge that, for the most part, women can only use the language given to them, designed mostly by men to describe their experiences and to theorize. The trajectory of early women’s rights concerns, for instance, co-opted language and tactics from the abolitionists and relied heavily on the Christian Bible (interpreted and taught by educated and property-owning men), to form their arguments. We also know that women’s voices have often been erased and invalidated as lacking the legitimacy of dominant notions of history and truth. Confined to the private domain, their thinking was dismissed as irrational or only concerned with the feminine, such as matters of the home or the heart. In order to undo this hegemony and start to restore epistemic justice (Fricker 145), we must seek out and validate women’s voices, as well as question our assumptions about what “knowledge” is, and what purposes and groups “education” serves.

### **Ideology of the First Women’s Rights Movement**

“Starting in the 1820s and 1830s, American women began to express what might be called a caste consciousness in a wide range of contexts. They evidenced a critical awareness of the importance of their female-ness in determining their experiences, began to think of themselves as united by the fact of their sex, and, most important, exhibited considerable discontent with their womanly lot.” (DuBois 55)

There are several women who have been identified as key players in the first women's rights movement in the United States. Most famous are Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, alongside the Grimké sisters, Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone. As described above, their social standing might have led them to adopt questionable morals and ethics at times. On the other hand, it served as an empowering platform to write and speak somewhat freely about these beliefs. Writing worked as a privilege in itself, one that was not afforded to most African Americans. Unfortunately, the women researched in this paper did not consistently support the rights of African Americans and women of color, something which haunts the feminist movement to this day.

The American abolitionist movement was the movement to abolish slavery within the United States, as well as the slave trade abroad. Activists recognized that slavery was wrong, and that (male) African and African-American slaves were people who deserved the rights granted to "all men" in the Constitution. Women were, for the most part, kept on the fringes of this movement, as they were still not seen as possessing rational thought, or being able to contribute to political arguments. This doesn't mean that some suffragists might have been abolitionists first but that for the majority of the abolitionist movement, women lacked credibility and political standing. Indeed, some suffragists began their activism by becoming involved with the abolitionist movement. As a part of this group, they developed certain skills that would transfer over to their own movement (DuBois 251). Many of these women were already fighting sexism in religion and education. In fact, many of their arguments revolved around women's roles in the Church and school. Radical at the time, these two areas of life were what eventually allowed women to participate in public life, but where they were also further delegated to the "women's

sphere.” Working within the abolitionist movement gave women access to a new network of socially conscious peers.

Another way in which women became politically active was through the temperance movement. Starting in the 1820s, the temperance movement organized to ban alcohol, as it was seen as a key factor in domestic violence. Through involvement in the temperance movement, women saw themselves enacting the regulation of private life through public debate. They came to see themselves as moral subjects. The premise of their involvement was a form of essentialism, as it were, since they seemed to have claimed that they, as women, were more moral than the rest of society. Regardless, they understood themselves as social actors, and as people who could have an important role in presenting their evidence to change policy. This also contributed to the counterpublic orientation of their activity. Throughout the years, the temperance movement and the suffrage movement clashed a little, as they had different strategies, and different takes on the proper function of women in society. However, it is also true that when strategic, temperance organizations supported suffrage organizations (DuBois 39). Initially, suffragists believed that winning the vote would allow them to have more say on a variety of political issues, which is why several social justice campaigns led by women joined together to support suffrage (DuBois 35).

The significance of Protestant religion is noted when studying the background of the earliest American feminists. “Feminists recognized that breaking with orthodox religious tradition was an essential step toward the development of a feminist consciousness... Radical sectarianism provided an avenue of dissent from orthodox religion that stressed women’s ability, indeed duty, to think and act according to the dictates of their own moral authority. It supported women’s moral autonomy and equality” (Grimké and Bartlett Ann 11). Religion, as another

defining factor of the first American feminists, allowed them to think in a certain way, and to reject, in some forms, male dominance. In other words, adherence to certain religions gave some women the agency to become educated and to pursue public action.

DuBois argues that the suffrage movement was in fact radical because “[s]uffragists’ demand for a permanent, public role for all women allowed them to project a vision of female experience and action that went beyond the family and the subordination of women which the family upheld” (34). DuBois gives a context to make sense of the ways that social locations determined the critical thinking of suffragists, when compared to the condition of women of color, white suffragists subscribed to essentialist ideas about sex and race, relying on man-made religions to support their arguments, and held the end goal of being included in the established government.

One major figure of feminist philosophy who greatly inspired the suffragists, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), was a British advocate for women’s rights. In her view, society’s grammar kept women from becoming individuals. The lack of opportunities to be educated in the virtues of moral life, rationality and autonomy, set women on the path to weakness, anger, and self-centeredness. While Wollstonecraft’s views belong to a form of radical thinking regarding the station of women within patriarchal societies, she remains far from the type of feminist thinking that DuBois attributes to suffragists. According to Rosemarie Tong, Wollstonecraft argues that, provided educational parity, rational and independent women would become, out of their own choosing, “observant daughters” and “affectionate sisters” (14). It is after all within the nuclear family, a basis of middle and upper class femininity, that educated women would exercise autonomy. In a way, DuBois contends that one hundred years later, across the Atlantic, Stanton and Anthony have advanced the feminist imagination. They had escalated autonomy, at

least in their counterpublic visions, into a fuller sense of women's autonomy beyond the bourgeois household.

### **The First Women's Rights Movement**

“Given the notoriety of the suffrage movement, it is surprising that we do not have more histories of it.” (Tetrault 9-10)

Women, many from the abolitionist movement, began to converse and organize as they became more aware of their oppression as non-citizens. Typically, we are told that when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 in London, they were told to sit up in the gallery (Anthony 117), which provoked them to organize around this experience once they returned to the United States. Well-educated women who were predisposed to political action, such as Stanton and Anthony, started to form suffragists groups, and began to make public lectures. These lectures were actually in high demand around the 1840s, as “the woman question” gained traction (DuBois 86). Having experienced marginalization when they rallied behind the abolitionist cause might have provided fertile ground for Anthony, and others such as Mott, to redirect their discursive energies from abolitionism and the temperance movement towards a more emphatic though not unrelated counterpublic struggle on behalf of women. Devices such as lectures and conventions expand the domain of letter-writing while they simultaneously provide a platform for them. For educated women in particular, these devices serve as proxy for political activity.

The infamous starting point for this movement was the convention at Seneca Falls, in the state of New York not far from our Syracuse campus. The Convention that took place in 1848 resulted in the Declaration of Sentiments. Famously, African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass attended. The Declaration of Sentiments asserted that American women were equal to

men, and therefore should have equal rights. The document demands that women also have the right to vote, own property and divorce their husbands, among other things.

More importantly, the Declaration of Sentiments seems to align with two philosophical tenets woven into the United States Constitution, a libertarian account of freedom and a utilitarian horizon to be pursued by free individuals (Tong 12). It was libertarian inasmuch as it claims that no human laws are superior than the Natural law by which “man shall pursue his own truth.” It was utilitarian inasmuch as this negative definition of freedom - man shall pursue his own truth to the extent that he doesn’t interfere with another man’s pursuit of their own truth - conflates the greater good in a man’s life with greater happiness or “substantial happiness.” Finally, the Declaration unequivocally states not only that the status of women is equal to that of men but also that the unequal station of women is the result of unequal treatment and antithetical to the libertarian principle explained above.

As they organized, women started to hold public events such as parades and protests to grow awareness about their cause. In 1852, shortly after they had met, Stanton wrote an encouraging note to Anthony, saying, “Come and stay with me and I will write the best lecture I can for you. I have no doubt a little practice will make you an admirable speaker” (Lerner 54). The two were scheming and working together early on to build the strongest movement as possible. The action came to halt during the Civil War, and suffragists were forced to put their efforts on hold. However, the reasoning for women’s suffrage changed during the second half of the 1800s, as the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War made apparent that women were needed to work and make important decisions (Tetrault 47). The 1870 Census listed Women Engaged in Each Occupation for the first time ever. This was a symptom of the change of times. Once they had been acknowledged as financially autonomous, women took advantage of that

degree of participation in public affairs and the fate of the nation. It has been hard for them to negotiate their demotion or return to being homemakers after the Civil War.

In 1869, Stanton and Anthony formed the National Women's Suffrage Association, and in the same year, Lucy Stone formed the more conservative American Woman's Suffrage Association. Years later in 1890, after decades of disagreements and false attempts to merge, both groups joined and became the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and kept the outlook of Stone's group (Gluck 5-6). Quite clearly, suffragist efforts intensified in the post-Civil War years.

In 1878 Senator Aaron A. Sargent, who had befriended Anthony on a train ride, was the first to introduce the text what would become the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Senate. It wasn't until 1886, however, that the amendment made it to the Senate floor where it was defeated. In 1920, long after the death of significant figures such as Anthony and Stanton, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed, allowing women in the United States to vote. Before their deaths, these women had put significant effort into recording the entire history of their movement in an 800-page book entitled *History of Women's Suffrage*. The full six volumes, which were later completed by others, add up to over 5,700 pages.

In her book *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898*, historian Lisa Tetrault claims that the story of Seneca Falls has been focused as the starting point of the suffrage movement through the work of Anthony and Stanton themselves. She explores the idea that, in order to unify future feminists and create a common history of the movement, they "invented" a history. She does not accuse them of fabricating events, but acknowledges and starts to problematize the evidence that shows that in their recounts of their lives, they highlighted what was convenient in building a movement. The writing of their book



especially puts this in perspective, as it becomes clear that they created much of the knowledge about their legacy. Somewhat contrary to Tetrault, this capstone employs a more flexible analytics of feminist discourse. As explained before, this project's main concern lies with identifying the initial springs of a feminist counterpublic rather than with the coherence or incoherence of the ideology and history of women's suffrage. It is the learned practice of feminist space-making, a consciousness of subordination as non-men, and disenfranchised, that moves and mobilizes many different practices, such as reading, writing, lecturing, petitioning, door-to-door canvassing, etc., on behalf of women's political emancipation.



*Figure 3. "Now all at once as I sat there before my desk," drawing (ca. 1921)*

## Chapter 5

### Letters

#### The Significance of Letters

Letters were the primary form of communicating over distances at this time. To this day, letters represent an intimate form of communication, and back then, this was one that was an appropriate space for (certain) women to occupy. Originally, writing had been considered a “male job-related skill,” that only later became appropriate for educated women (Kerber 236; Cook 7). Scholars study the significance of epistolary works, and theorize about the meaning of letters. Writing about the symbolism of letters in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, a book that would have been relevant in this period, Diane Cousineau writes that the postal system worked as “the perfect representative [...] [to] affirm[...] the possibility of communication, continuity, tradition, and truth [...]”(35). Cousineau connects the respectability of the letter to society’s values of that time, as well as a legitimate way of reaffirming social reality. Not unlike Cook’s position on epistolary traditions (7), I follow the initial point of Cousineau by stating that the domain of letter-writing performs, within an available grammar of gender inequality, the division between public and private, between feminine and masculine identities, and their respective means of communication. However, unlike Cousineau and in tandem with Cook, I see that Anthony and Stanton reclaimed letter-writing to build an alternative sphere of communication, breaking with the domesticating tradition of feminine correspondence.

In the sections that follow, this project undertakes the examination of the linkages between one of the earliest feminist counterpublics in American history and a specific set of letters between Anthony and Cady Stanton. As suffragists, their style and sentiment against gender subordination performs a unifying work. Interestingly enough, belonging meant to identify with one another within disenfranchising arenas. Traditionally, the letter has served as not only a way of communication but also a physical expression of one's personality and values. One's handwriting, stationery, prose, etc., help to form an image of the writer's identity and may convey a sentiment that the author intends to be picked up, acknowledged, or noticed by a recipient. In the case of the letters at hand, this includes asserting one's identity as an educated woman. Writing letters was a gendered, raced, and classed action, that helped to maintain certain hierarchies in Western society. One doesn't have to go far to realize how different the struggle for emancipation might have been for formerly enslaved women such as Sojourner Truth (nee Isabella Baumfree) who did not know how to write or read.

History enthusiasts and scholars underscore the value in women's letters, so much so that there are anthologies that aim to tell history through these collections of women's letters. In the introduction to their book, *Women's Letters: America from the Revolutionary War to the Present*, Lisa Grunwald and Stephan Adler wrote, "For most of America's history, women simply had no public forum in which to express the way they saw their own country. Letters (and diaries, but that's another book) were among their only outlets for recording what they saw of, how they felt about, and even how they helped to shape the world around them" (2). The authors identify, just as I have, that women's letters went beyond the mundane and trivial – they were their own force in the making of history.

In 1998, Lisa M. Gring-Pemble examined the letters exchanged between Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Lucy Stone. She found that, “Moreover, since the women's movement did not yet have an institutionalized vehicle for organizing women, letters sometimes functioned as a site for the exchange of ideas and the figurative uniting of women into a public space to discuss matters of collective concern” (45). As shown next when I consider the suffragists’ invention of counterdiscourse specific to the barriers that they faced, I identify what Gring-Pemble calls figurative uniting in the emergence of names that suffragists invented to claim a collective identity. “International Alliance” is one such name as I explain later.

Blanche Wiesen Cook posits that the move to study women’s letters is an embodiment of the 1970s-feminist phrase, “the personal is political” (Bosch and Kloosterman, 22). This phrase came out of a variety of feminist thinkers, but can be traced to Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of the same name. Considering that letters were part of the constructed “women’s sphere,” letters as artifacts materialize the connections between their individual writers and a larger and yet anonymous sphere. In addition, the act of studying these letters and taking them seriously was and continues to be political for scholars. Through the study of these letters, this project draws connections between past and the present and critically looks at how voices and experiences are evaluated and considered when mainstream history is challenged by counterpublic action. We now recognize that women transform politics and play instrumental roles across histories and across the world.

The concept of feminist sisterhood arose out of the connections built through these letters and provided a platform for “women to play with concepts of love and friendship in order to carry out a certain policy or to cover up less attractive dealings” (Bosch and Kloosterman 28). This proves that along with creating a space where sisterhood was formed, letters were also used

as a space where women could negotiate and scheme. This space was reserved for them, and kept from others; particularly from men. This is not atypical among counterpublics that direct their energies inward rather than outward to face an unfriendly public sphere.

Feminist letters from suffragists also offer a hint of eroticism. Playful and sensual undertones to letters are significant as a subversion within the “women’s sphere,” continuing the idea of women as challenging the function and meaning of letters and women. The erotics of suffragists’ letters show the depth of trust and connection in the friendships between various women. The women’s actual sexuality is not relevant; as friendship is also intimate and can be an alternative source of love and kinship. For example, in September of 1857, Anthony wrote to Stanton, “... I well remember how good a word it [your last letter] brought to me and how it cheered me onward – Mrs. Stanton, I have very weak moments – and long to lay my weary head somewhere and nestle my full soul close to that of another in full sympathy – I sometimes fear that, I too shall faint by the wayside – and drop out the ranks of the faithful few...” (Gordon, vol. 1 353). Anthony anticipates a counterpublic response in Stanton, relying on a shared history of political friendship and comradeship. If correspondence among middle and upper-class women was supposed to follow the grammar of a feminine place, de Certeau’s insights allow us to tap into this counterpublic sentiment among Anthony and Stanton. They write themselves into an alternative arena that *sympathetic souls* populate. Against the background of feminine politeness, they reach out to one another to break the mold for women of the time.

However, not all women took the ideas conveyed in their letters out into the public. As an irony of the use of this approved “women’s space,” it was mostly used to talk about “women’s things.” DuBois writes, “As suffragists efforts at outreach intensified, the family-bound realities of most women’s lives forced more and more domestic imagery into their rhetoric and

arguments” (38). Even so, letters also held significance as they allowed women to communicate with one another without leaving the home, as they would have had to be accompanied by a male chaperone. This is especially true of women who lived long distances away from their friends, or who did not have the financial means to hire transportation. As such, they were an important tool that allowed these women to form a network, a counterpublic, even if they were not geographically near one another, or did not know one another well. Slowly but steadily, the concrete existence of interpersonal correspondence and relations relied on the anonymous and ongoing circulation of an extended and feminist counterpublic network (Warner 90).

### **Transnational Letters**

“To show the Parliamentary Bodies that there is an International Alliance composed of the women of many countries, who are fighting for their political freedom, is one of the strongest arguments we can use, and although the United States is supposed to be a very progressive land in reference to all things which concern women, we have found it of benefit even here, and I am perfectly positive you will find it of great benefit in Hungary.” – Carrie Chapman Catt to Rosika Schwimmer, March 4, 1905 (Bosch and Kloosterman 60)

The American suffragist movement would not have happened without extensive support from women and men around the world. Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Women Suffrage Association traveled as far as China and Australia with her fellow suffragettes to talk to feminists (Bosch and Kloosterman 95). Women in America exchanged millions of letters with their friends and relatives overseas throughout the 1800s and 1900s. Bonnie S. Anderson writes extensively about the international feminist movement from the 1830s to 1860s, saying “Between 1830 and 1860, early feminists relied upon each other’s support, took comfort from each other’s struggles, and helped those in France and the German states who were forced into exile after the 1848 revolutions failed” (2). Again, the

correspondence between these women internationally was a learned practice of feminist space-making.

In the pulled excerpt above, Catt refers to the newly formed International Alliance, which is the suffragists acknowledging one another as part of an extensive counterpublic. The fact that these women were in communication with one another shows the circulation of their insurgent ideas, and the collective effort to affect political change. As mentioned before, International Alliance stands for a sense of belonging that reaches far beyond local or national boundaries. Perhaps de Certeau's framework also illuminates the material aspect of this learned writing practice among educated women. The women physically named themselves in writing, outside of the identities that had been ascribed to them. When Catt relates strategies that American women have used to the movement in Hungary, she is showing the breadth of the women's support for one another and their recognition of the issues transgressing national borders.

Through this ongoing citation of each other's struggles across the oceans, I begin to recognize a feminist sphere of influence and belonging. Women in the Western world, such as Catt and Schwimmer, saw themselves and their oppressions as connected to one another. In 1852, Ernestine Rose attended the Third National Women's Convention in Syracuse, New York. Although Rose had lived in various European countries, she declared, "It is of very little importance in what geographical position a person is born... Yes, I am an example of the universality of our claims; for not American women only, but a daughter of poor, crushed Poland, and the down-trodden and persecuted people called the Jews, 'a child of Israel,' pleads for the rights of her sex" (Anderson 20). Rose's emphasis of the "universality" of the suffragists' claims show how they found strength in relating to the farthest ends of this expanding network.



## Chapter 6

### Analysis of Letters

#### **Theorizing Feminism**

The letters in this section mostly illustrate the political nature of friendships among suffragists. Letters present a space where women correspond, arrange meetings and support one another, as well as discuss the important developments and relationships between suffrage groups. Stanton and Anthony got their ideas from the earlier European feminist thinkers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1799), as mentioned earlier, who advocated for women's liberation via education. Wollstonecraft argued that by educating women, they would become rational like men, and therefore, be more fit to contribute to society as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers (Tong 12-13). As explained before, they followed libertarian and utilitarian principles while their politics seems to have developed with a pragmatic approach, informed by abolitionist struggles and their temperance activism.

Upon starting correspondence after meeting in 1851 through a mutual friend, Stanton and Anthony crafted an immediate bond over similar experiences and upcoming activist events (DuBois 16). They also critiqued one another's approaches to other social causes, such as temperance and abolition, and compared reactions from their peers surrounding their activism. These letters enabled them to develop their own voices, even differing from their public images. Gerda Lerner points out that the two of them appeared to be in sync all the time. Their letters

reveal, however, that they argued a lot (ix). This arguing was not a negative thing, in fact, they were pushing one another to be better critical thinkers and social activists. This feature of their relationship will be discussed later in this chapter.

Through their exchange of ideas, they debate the core of a feminist architecture - that is, those notions that lie at the heart of a vision of equality and enfranchisement. Undoubtedly, these excerpts offer some of the most revealing notes about a feminist counterdiscourse.

In the spring of 1852, Stanton wrote to Anthony about women and marriage:

“I do not know that the world is quite willing or ready to discuss the question of marriage. I feel in my innermost that the thoughts I sent your convention are true. It is in vain to look for the elevation of woman, so long as she is degraded in marriage. I say it is a sin, an outrage on our holiest feelings to pretend that anything but deep, fervent love & sympathy constitutes marriage. The right idea of marriage is at the foundation of all reforms. How strange is it, man will apply all the improvements in the arts & sciences to everything about him animate & inanimate, but himself” (Gordon, vol. 1 194).

Stanton declares her belief that marriage is a fundamentally hierarchical institution at the root of women’s subordination. Claiming that womanhood was the great fact in life while “wifehood and motherhood [were] but incidental relations” (DuBois 35), she sees marriage as an imperfect contract. In her view, the parties do not enter into the marriage contract on equal standing. Thus, it is flawed. She compares the progress in science with progress in morality and moral authority, poking fun at men who seek the betterment of everything in society but themselves. Stanton in the 1850s already understands some of the crucial claims of contemporary feminist theory. As Peggy McIntosh argued in 1988, gender privilege, along with other forms of privilege, bear on the reach and limits of knowledge. Not unlike McIntosh, Stanton questioned men for their disposition to remain oblivious to the fact that justice, including equality between husband and wife, is a project of self-growth, a mandate to break out of the ranks of those gendered as men.

Despite her insight about women's oppression within the nuclear family, Stanton was unable to escape some of the most glaring Darwinism of her time. She was a fierce temperance advocate, insisting on the idea that women who marry and have children with drunks are ruining humanity. She says that these women should know better, and should have the sense and autonomy to refuse these men (194). Stanton's conviction was that women should be morally higher than men, as well as decision makers in their own fate. This belief allowed her to simultaneously assert her own humanity, as an educated, white woman, and deny that humanity to others; particularly to many whom the state saw as unfit for a civilized and booming economy such as working class and poor, uneducated, "feeble minded," and racialized men and women.

When looking at letters from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it seemed that even as early as the 1840s, her feminist views were already formed, however, she would recall what inspired her call to devote her time to women's rights. This is the case in one of the many exchanges that they had to share frustrations, something that they probably wouldn't do in the company of their families or other close friends. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1855, Stanton wrote to Anthony:

"... I passed through a terrible scourging when last at my father's. I cannot tell you how deep the iron entered my soul. I never felt more keenly the degradation of my sex. To think that all in me of which my father would have felt a proper pride had I been a man, is deeply mortifying to him because I am a woman" (DuBois 58).

Stanton expresses the hurt and disappointment that she felt following an interaction with her father, who had made it clear that she would have been more valuable if born a man. As a radical thinker of her time, Stanton identified sexism and its effects on her life and relationships, which reinforced the need she saw for women to gain the vote. She takes issue with the *double standard* that permeates, even today, women's lives across many domains of social life. It was automatically assumed that women were not able to contribute to society in the way that men were, for no reason other than their sex. Stanton's sharing this experience with Anthony shows

that she trusted her friend to sympathize with her and to understand the need for change, and the letter provided the space for these sentiments to be expressed.

In the earliest stages of the movement, letters were used as spaces for those such as the Grimké sisters to share radical ideas and fully develop their speeches. Sarah and Angelina Grimké are two well-known abolitionists and suffragists. For a while, both remained unmarried, seen as an act of defiance (Grunwald and Adler 152). Sarah Grimké frequently sent letters to various people and organizations in order to spread her views on the *equality of the sexes*. Her greatest influence in arguing for women's rights came from the Bible. Grimké believed that lessons in the Bible had been skewed over centuries, and that women allowed men to dominate them (Grimké 31, 39). She wanted to spread the message that "He spares her body; but the war he has waged against her mind, her heart, and her soul, has been no less destructive to her as a *moral being*. How monstrous, how anti-Christian, is the doctrine that woman is to be dependent on man!" (Grimké 39). This intertextuality, of borrowing and citing counterdiscursive strategies, was instrumental to strengthen a feminist counterpublic among suffragists. Other counterpublics such as the abolitionists employed biblical passages to posit that women were not different than men with respect to liberties and the gift of freedom.

Lucy Stone was another significant figure working for suffrage. Born in 1818, in Massachusetts, Stone was deeply influenced by the knowledge that women were at the mercy of the men in their lives. In contrast to Grimké, Stone cast doubt upon the use of scripture to advance women's cause. As such, she took great issue with the Bible, and spent her early adult life teaching and unmarried. She was involved in both the abolitionist and women's suffrage movement, and became a prolific public speaker. Stone was also very close with Stanton and

Anthony, despite some conflicting views on the strategy of the suffrage movement. In 1853, Stone wrote to Stanton:

“I know that scripture & customs and ‘husbands rights’ are all pleaded to cover the existing wrong – One noble woman told me how she fled from her husband, to the Shakers, because he gave her no peace either during menstruation, pregnancy, or nursing, and on the application of such a brute to our legislature, the law of divorce was so modified, that the man, and others like him, might sooner be enabled, under cover of a legal marriage, to claim ‘a husband’s rights.’ I know many similar cases. Shall we keep silence when such curses are inflicted through woman upon the race? There is, I confess, much force in your reasoning upon the subject” (Gordon vol. 1 224).

Here, Stone expresses her disdain for the Bible which places women under men’s rules, and then gives a real-life example of how women are taken advantage of under the law of the Bible. She is challenging dominant discourse by pointing out flaws in the Bible itself. Putting her argument into written form in this letter to Stanton, Stone circulates more ammunition for the suffragists to move forward with their cause. As Chela Sandoval reminds us, subordinate groups devise many different methods of opposition to dominant powers. In the statements above, we see suffragists advancing an equality-based mode of resistance by engaging scriptures with a different purpose, sometimes aligning suffrage efforts with the Bible and sometimes not.

### **Inspiring Correspondence**

“I realize that there is much more in the world to be done, and that I must not shirk from my duties because my heart aches. So I have adopted a motto and it must be yours too:

To the wrong that needs resistance  
 To the right that needs assistance  
 To the future in the distance  
 Give yourself!”

- Carrie Chapman Catt to Aletta Jacobs, after the death of Jacobs’ husband, Carel Victor Gerritsen (Bosch and Kloosterman 63)

Many, many letters exchanged between suffragettes, contained sentiments such as the ones above. They are evidence of the close and supportive friendships that these women held

across states, and even oceans. While motivating comrades, it is necessary that participants reach out to each other to continue working, and reassure themselves that what they are doing matters.

Grimké signed some of her letters: “Thine in the bonds of womanhood,” evoking a sense of sisterhood and loyalty to fellow women, and calling her addressee to action. This signature, which was reportedly a favorite saying of hers, put out a call to action in a private, women-only space, goading her friend to take the next step, as well assuring that Grimké would offer support. These are the ruses, or tactics, that de Certeau assigns to the weak (37). In the crevices of correspondence, they insinuate the possibility of womanhood not as a sign of sharing an inferior status but rather as an aspiration to be recognized as full subjects. It is interesting to note, in contrast, that some French feminists signed their letters, “Salut fraternel,” insisting that women be included in the idea of fraternity, rather than creating their own separate sense of sorority (Anderson 162).

On February 20, 1859, Lucy Stone wished her sister-in-law and close friend, Antoinette Blackwell, who she affectionately addressed as “Nettie,” good luck in giving a lecture. Stone encouraged Blackwell, saying, “Fred Douglas had a very large audience paying twenty-five cents, & you would draw as well as he did” (Grunwald and Adler 250). After encouraging her friend, she describes how although inspired by a lecture from E.P. Whipple on Joan d’Arc, she must now focus on her young daughter; “I shrank like a snail into its shell, & saw that for these years I can be only a mother – no trivial thing either” (Grunwald and Adler 250). Stone effectively supports and encourages Blackwell, asserting that she is as good as any male orator. Later in the letter, when talking about her own life, she also acknowledges her importance as a mother, and legitimizes the labor (which is trivial in the eyes of patriarchy) involved in that. She recognizes that this contributes to the economy. Although she claims that she must put her

feminist activism on hold to do her motherly duties, she is actually still contributing to the movement by continuing to network and produce knowledge. It is within the space created by writing and by sending this letter that Stone acknowledges motherhood as labor, and demonstrates her critical thinking. In crafting a new vocabulary to render visible women's labor, these letters bring together the critical aspect of letter-writing as feminist space-making and the counterpublic orientation of suffragists' counterdiscourse.

The editors of the anthology also note that Stone's last words to Blackwell were, "Make the world better" (Grunwald and Adler 249). In saying this, Stone implies a legacy of her life's work, one that her friend will need to carry on. Again, this shows the strong sense of duty and pride that these women had in the suffragist work they were doing. They constantly encouraged one another by asserting that what they were doing was morally right.

Aletta Jacobs was a Dutch physician and feminist activist. She had a wide network of suffragist friends, and was fully supported by her husband, politician, Carel Victor Gerritsen. In fact, Gerritsen spoke about women's suffrage in his own lectures, and Jacobs knew that it might appear that she somehow forced him to do so, but she defended herself in a letter, saying that "we would never been a couple if poor Gerritsen had not been a feminist from the start" (Bosch and Kloosterman 54).

On November 18, 1903, Jacobs wrote to Rosika Schwimmer, a younger feminist from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, who would later work closely with Catt:

"My husband and I have read your article with great interest and were astonished that the head of a young girl should produce such logical, radical ideas. You are destined for something better and higher, dear Rosika, than for the work you are now doing. This is no flattery, I mean it" (Bosch and Kloosterman 54).

In this letter, Jacobs is encouraging Schwimmer, and validating her work for suffrage. From this exchange, I highlight that women took the time to read and review their peers work,

and were willing to reach out to one another to share thoughts, encouragement and criticisms. The fact that her husband also supported women's suffrage acted as a way of further validating their praise of Rosika's writing. To convey this praise and encouragement, Jacobs used the intimate and comforting space of the letter.

On May 15, 1907, Jacobs wrote again to Schwimmer;

"I'm sitting here surrounded by four large bunches of roses. Each day my dear friends send them together with lovely letters as a reminder of how many good friends and loyal colleagues I have. This is the pleasant side to these public attacks. I never used to be aware of how many good friends I had. Nor of how strong our association is, which is what has helped us through the winter, strengthened yet further by the battle" (Bosch and Kloosterman 73).

This letter was written during the time when the Dutch suffrage league was splitting over ideology. In the space of her letters, Jacobs vents to her friend, and describe how although the conflict is stressful, having fellow suffragettes send her letters acts as a source of comfort, and reminds her that her work is important. This paragraph really illustrates the value of the women's association, and the material, bodily, effects of receiving letters. Being able to send and receive letters from one another helped women to build community and feel accompanied by references to an extended public, a counterpublic, whose members they knew were out there but they would probably never meet in person. The counterpublic comes to life when Jacobs is reassured that other women support the work that she does, and gives her the sense that others are also working against the grain.

In October 1902, Anthony sent what would be her last letter to Stanton who died just days later. In it, she reflects on their half a century of friendship and collaboration, writing: "It is fifty-one years since we first met and we have been busy through every one of them, stirring up the world to recognize the rights of women" (Grunwald and Adler 432). She then reassures Stanton that although they have not reached their goal of suffrage, they have still won women's



rights, and that “strong, courageous, capable young women will take our place and complete our work” (Grunwald and Adler 432). They entrust their legacy to both the learned practice of feminist letter writing and the counterpublic orientation of a wide network of feminist advocates and sympathizers.

### **Organizing Matters**

As a main means of communicating with friends from a distance, suffragists frequently used letters to organize meetings. In many letters, women would arrange to stay at one another’s houses, or recommend other places to stay. Women would introduce new friends through letters, and exchange information about people’s whereabouts and goings-on. In the case of the suffragists, who were subverting the use of the letters, arranging such meetings and maintaining relationships ensured the counterpublic was healthy. Suffragists met in-person with those who also identified as part of an alternative public discourse.

One of Stanton’s earliest letters to Anthony shows how the two exchanged thoughts about the movements’ strategies and how they formed a close relationship in doing so. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1852, Stanton wrote, “I do think you are doing up the temperance business just right. But do not let the conservative element control. For instance, you must take Mrs. Bloomer’s suggestions with great caution, for she has not the spirit of a true reformer” (Lerner 54). Stanton, who was the older of the two, did not hesitate to give advice. She warns Anthony, whom she had only recently met, not to compromise on the issue of temperance. Stanton differentiates herself and Anthony from Mrs. Bloomer, who “has not the spirit of a true reformer.” Stanton believes that Anthony has something more than their other peers have and encourages this potential she sees

within her new friend. In doing so, she asserts that both are members of an alternative discourse around the role of women in society.

Anna Howard Shaw (1847-1919) was yet another prominent figure in the women's suffrage movement. As an adult, she was both a physician and minister, something as unusual in her day as it would be now. Born in Britain, Shaw had strong ties to Europe, and closely watched the British women's suffrage movement, disagreeing with their strategy for its militancy. From 1904 to 1915, Shaw served as president of the NAWSA, but eventually resigned due to disagreements over strategy and was replaced by Carrie Chapman Catt. In 1909, after five years as president of NAWSA, Shaw wrote to Jacobs:

“It is so easy to sit and dictate letters, and to attend meetings and go to banquets when you have an organization back of you to settle the bills and look after all the expenses; but when you have to get the money and be responsible for it is not so easy; - but you know how that is, because you have had to do the same thing in Holland, with the same attitude confronting you” (Bosch and Kloosterman 103).

In this letter to Jacobs, Shaw recognizes the difficulties of keeping consistent motivation without consistent financial support from other organizations. She offers moral support, telling her friend that she understands the struggle of running a successful organization. She also warns against the allure of superficial social networks under the guise of feminist organizations, a damaging culture that feminists continue to decry today.

Carrie Chapman Catt was known as an excellent leader, one who, according to Rosa Manus, Dutch suffragist, “always managed to say the right thing just on the moment it was needed” (Bosch and Kloosterman 83). Her leadership skills were evident in her roles as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and founder of both the League of Women Voters and International Alliance.

On March 17, 1907 Catt writes to Aletta Jacobs, over the split in the Dutch Woman Suffrage League: “It is irritating to have it come just now, when suffragists should maintain a united front... but it cannot be helped. I prophesy that it will soon die and leave you in peace. Do not waste any hours of worry over it, but be assured that when you are right yourselves, no harm can come to you” (Bosch and Kloosterman 70).

Catt often dealt with the politics in and between different suffrage groups, and in this letter, she is advising her friend Jacobs. Catt acknowledges that there are issues within the suffrage movement, and that some problems are extremely divisive. However, she assures her friend that she is doing the right thing, and should have faith in her morals and work. It is also significant that in this letter, the writing takes the form of prophecy, or the foretelling of what is coming next in a near future. At the same time, they acknowledge that it is a reality for counterpublics to have to contend with differences within them.

### **Criticisms and Conflict Preserved in Writing**

In this last section, I discuss perhaps the most interesting function of the suffragists’ correspondence. The suffragists used letters to critique one another, sometimes very harshly. Excluding gossip and hearsay, which was shared quite often, the women would sometimes directly or indirectly disagree with and challenge one another, leading to heated arguments preserved in writing. Criticism within the space and counterpublic created by the letter furthered the development and circulation of the women’s search for equality.

In August of 1843, after attending the second World Anti-Slavery Convention, three years after she had attended the first, suffragist Elizabeth Reid wrote to American abolitionists, Anne and Wendell Phillips, to express her disappointment in the lack of women and feminists

there: “Oh! what a lifeless meeting this Convention proved, how different from the one that I remember – when shall I see the like again? I went to Freemason’s Hall several times with Lady Byron, and the sisters, but felt flat and dull – I was so disappointed to find no friends there” (Anderson 133). In this letter, Reid is criticizing politically active women that she knew for not being active in the abolitionist movement, as she believes they should be. She is also commenting on the lack of excitement and organization of the abolitionist movement/conference. Within the counterpublic, the intended effect of criticism is its circulation, eventually leading to change. By making these comments, Reid is trying to elicit a response, by which the movement will become more than it already is.

As mentioned previously, Stanton and Anthony’s relationship was not solely based on laughter and joy. In the spring of 1886, Stanton wrote a scathing letter to Anthony, after they had a disagreement regarding hierarchy of power of the branches of government while writing their book, *History of Woman Suffrage*:

“Dear Susan, - You have not made me take your position. I repudiate it from the bottom of my soul. It is conservative, autocratic, to the last degree. I accept no authority of either bibles or constitutions which tolerate the slavery of women. My rights were born with me and are the same over the whole globe... Of the three branches of government, the legislative, representing the people, is the primal source of power. I perceive that one of the lawyers you have consulted admits one of my points - that the legislature is above the courts... How do you amend the Constitution? The legislature, directly representing the people, decides that the Constitution needs amending, frames the amendment and submits it to the people, the majority say yea or nay. Now where is the primary source of power? In the majority of the people. All this seems so plain to me that I wonder you halt so long over it. Think of you accepting the man-made constitution, the man-interpretation thereof, the man-amendment submitted by the convention of aristocrats, and the old secession reverence for a constitution... Ah, beware, Susan, lest you become ‘respectable,’ you become conservative” (Gordon vol. 4 501-503).

In the space of the letter, Stanton and Anthony show the sharp differences in their interpretation of the Constitution. By arguing, they further circulate this alternative discourse and their interpretations, something that women were supposed to be incapable of doing. After

receiving this letter, Anthony wrote a letter to Matilda Joslyn Gage, urging her friend to take her side of the argument. The tone of the letter from Stanton to Anthony clearly comes off as exasperated, as she says, “All this seems so plain to me...” That these women had such heated conversations, for the sake of their revolutionary work, illustrates the deep friendship and trust between them.

The two also received criticism from other suffragist peers. When Stanton, Anthony and Gage were calling on suffragists to submit information for their *History of Woman Suffrage* project, Lucy Stone refused to provide any information, signing her letter with the sentiment: “Yours with ceaseless regret that any ‘wing’ of suffragists should attempt to write the history of the other” (Tetrault 116). Here Stone explicitly resisted the efforts by Stanton, Anthony and Gage to make this history “legitimate,” although, it would seem, not providing any information would allow the three greater creative license. Again, letters were a created space where Stone could make this criticism and directly challenge the feminist counterpublic to expand its own limits.

The function of criticism within the counterpublic the suffragists created was significant. In calling one another out, they could further circulate and develop a counterdiscourse, and reflect on the movement they were building. In later years, criticism allowed suffragists to look ahead to the problems that might arise from the leadership and structure of the movement. These exchanges further illustrate the strong and intimate bonds between the women, as well as the kind of space and feminist consciousness that was fostered within their letters.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

Researching written correspondence from suffragists provides partial answers to the questions behind this project. Through the suffragists' letter-writing, I track the formation of a feminist counterpublic, where women mapped themselves in relation to power and began to come to voice.

Correspondence performs a feminist, equalizing, function. It follows a counterpublic orientation inasmuch as it works from the inside out, from the margins to the center or mainstream. It blurs the boundary between private and public by the way of intimately political friendships. I note that letter-writing, as a learned practice, continues to function as the transgressed boundary between public and private, masculine and feminine.

Revolutionary women in this era subscribed to an egalitarian mode of resistance. They believed proving their rationality would secure their humanity and enfranchisement. As followers of Wollstonecraft's ideas, they also supported the libertarian view that as full humans they had the right to education. Through this process of enlightenment, they would be empowered to make choices about their lives. In their reasoning, they argued that women should be equal to men; they aspired to be on par with the group that oppressed them. In comparing their beliefs to later feminist theory, we can see the limitations of the women's suffrage movement.

In this project, I acknowledge the privilege of white suffragists. In order to be educated and to have the time and financial resources to tell their stories, these women occupied a specific place in 19th century Western society. The practice of writing, in fact reaffirmed their privilege and white femininity. Finally, I acknowledge that with the study of correspondence among early suffragists, Black women's political agency at this time remains in the background. They are left out from the telling of the women's suffrage movement. As a result of their emphasis on gender difference, Stanton and Anthony did not include women of color in their counterpublic.

Suffragists' correspondence transforms a traditional place into a revolutionary space. By engaging in non-traditional writing practices - those that were not available to white, Protestant, and educated women elsewhere - suffragists bring about an alternative site of identification for educated women who seek to be seen and treated as equal to men. They invent a feminist practice of space-making through which they attain equal standing with respect to moral authority and freedom. In so doing, they come to recognize each other, away from the mainstream, as having a shared history of disempowerment and disenfranchisement. For some of them, this form of recognition as subordinates channels their lives, and/or prior activism, into new directions. They take a counterpublic orientation, defining themselves against a background of oppression and exclusion. Building upon a feminist space-making practice, such as letter writing, and a counterpublic orientation, they developed a language that they did not have before by engaging in counterdiscourses. In this language, they make visible their oppression, how their labor is devalued, their reason misrecognized and their autonomy denied. They also offer a new vision for a more just society where they will be full members of the political arena.

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### Image Citations

Figure 1:

Edmonston, Washington, D.C. *Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Two great pioneers in the Equal Rights cause. Without them, American women would not have progressed as far as they have in their fight for freedom.* Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000330/>>.

Figure 2:

*Ye May session of ye woman's rights convention - ye orator of ye day denouncing ye lords of creation / JM'N.* June. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2005685868/>>.

Figure 3:

Fuhr, Ernest, Artist. *Now all at once as I sat there before my desk.* [?] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010716054/>>.