

A Recovered Past Most Usable

Documenting the History of Black Male Gender Progressivism

In the history of the struggle for women's rights in the United States during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, most often identified with the woman suffrage movement, a select group of black men actively supported ideas of female equality. They achieved a record of sustained commitment to women's rights. Without the historical vigilance of certain scholars on black male involvement in the movement for women's voting rights, that record would have been lost. Retrieving it, this chapter maps the evolution of black male gender progressivism from the mid-1840s to the rise of Frederick Douglass as a major black male voice for woman suffrage. Douglass's sustained support for women's right to vote would predate Du Bois's unyielding support for the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Beverly Guy-Sheftall underscores the notion that the black feminist struggle to end gender and racial oppression was rooted in the battle for all oppressed people: "The most enlightening aspect of the examination of [nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century] attitudes toward woman suffrage, which was seen as another vehicle for the improvement of the race, is the revelation that some black men and many black women saw as early as a century ago no contradiction in associating themselves with struggles for women's rights (despite the opposition of many whites) at the same time that they were fighting for the emancipation of the race. They saw themselves as fighting for the liberation of all people" (1990, 162).

Douglass and Du Bois produced a body of writings that denounced the subjugation of women. They wrote in multiple genres, including autobiography, speeches, editorials, and creative writing (in the case of Du Bois). These writings offer a critical entry point into the complicated familial, social, personal, and political contexts from which they emerged. On the one hand, they are full of hope and possibility with regard to the transformative power of feminism in men's lives. On the other hand, they are daunting. These texts provide deep insight into the complex relationship between the

theory and practice of feminism for men and its personal and the political implications for women, children, and men in a culture founded upon the ideology of male supremacy.

Looking Forward with Eyes Fixed on the Past

From “The Rights of Women” (1848), the first text Frederick Douglass published, to his most impassioned speech, “The Woman Suffrage Movement” (delivered before the Woman Suffrage Association convention in 1888), it is clear that he passionately supported women’s rights. These texts (and those others written/delivered between 1848 and 1888) illustrate that his passionate speeches and editorials on behalf of women’s liberation were intrinsically tied to the abolition of slavery. Douglass became the key black male figure in the nineteenth-century woman suffrage movement, arguing against the evils of sex and race oppressions strategically through a discourse of gender justice, and W. E. B Du Bois in the early twentieth century succeeded him in becoming the chief male advocate for black women’s rights. Paula Giddings in *When and Where I Enter*, her groundbreaking analysis of race and sex in the experience(s) of African American women, asserts that “W. E. B. Du Bois . . . took Frederick Douglass’ place as the leading *male feminist of his time* [emphasis added]. . . . His view reflected the consensus: Political empowerment of the race required the participation of Black women” (Giddings 1984, 121). Like Douglass, Du Bois strategically employed his journalistic skills to promote women’s rights.

Each man approached the “woman question” from a different perspective. Douglass based his pro-woman rights stance on the ideology of natural rights, believing that all women were “naturally” equal to men and, therefore, deserving of equal rights. Du Bois held that when the black woman attained her freedom, all women would be free. In the discourse on the equality of women each man wrote, however, common themes surface. For each man, personal, firsthand witness of women’s oppression acted as the primary catalyst for his feminist development; each man consciously understood the *interrelationship* between women’s liberation and black liberation; being black, male, and pro-woman(ist) posed a particular set of gender and racial issues for each man; and each man conceived women’s rights within a larger human rights framework.

While both Douglass and Du Bois employed journalistic writing as a major vehicle to promote women’s liberation, Du Bois not only represented his gender-progressive views in editorial form, but also drew from and merged autobiography with sociological observation and fiction to produce a hybrid, discursive, womanist form. It spoke personally and poignantly to the gender,

race, and class politics of black womanhood. From the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to “The Damnation of Women” (1920) and his tenure as editor of the *Crisis* (1910–35), Du Bois critiqued black female racial and class oppression in ways that set him apart from any man of his day espousing a belief in women’s rights. It is Du Bois’s particular attention to the condition of black women in the United States that distinguishes his writings on gender justice from those of Douglass. The radical critique of black female oppression Du Bois advanced locates him solidly within the history of black feminism. No other black man, before or after Du Bois, has written with such sustained passion and deep commitment to the liberation struggle of African American women.

In “The Damnation of Woman,” an essay in *Darkwater* (1920) that analyzed the status and condition of women in the United States, Du Bois laments their mistreatment. He writes, “I remember four women of my boyhood: my mother, cousin Inez, Emma, and Ide Fuller. They represented the problem of the widow, the wife, the maiden, and the outcast. . . . They existed not for themselves, but for men they were named after, the men to whom they were related and not after the fashion of their own souls. They were not beings . . .” ([1920] 1969, 163). Like those of Du Bois, Douglass’s ideas of women and womanhood were filtered through the lens of a childhood experience of female mistreatment. As a black child born into slavery, Douglass’s understanding of family was completely shaped in a world of brutal and inhuman violence against the female and male slave. Without certain knowledge of his biological father (who he came to believe was the white slave master who originally owned him and his mother), Douglass knew himself to be a product of miscegenation. I maintain that he was not nearly as disturbed by this racial origin as by having as a child witnessed the brutal/sexualized beating of the aunt who served as his surrogate mother. Neither Douglass nor Du Bois, whose father left him and his mother when he was a young boy, would ever realize the love and nurture of a biological father. I suggest that their long-standing commitment to the struggle for women’s rights and equality had its origin in the experience of childhood paternal rejection and abandonment that was replaced by a deep sense of connection to the black maternal figure. Deborah McDowell has argued as much in the case of Douglass.

Documenting the History of Womanist Forefathers, Sons, and Sons-in-Law

Out of a rising black middle class in the North during the 1830s came a number of politically active women and men from such well-known

activist families as the Remonds, Fortens, Pauls, and Purvises. Men in these families promoted female education, as well as the involvement of women in public affairs. Early nineteenth-century black men's belief in the priority of women's education exemplified progressive thinking on the equality of the sexes. Paula Giddings notes, "[M]ore affluent Blacks . . . were organized along patriarchal lines. However, their struggle for racial equality sanctioned the non-traditional political activities and education of their wives, sisters, and daughters. . . . Men like James Forten, Sr., and his son James Jr. believed that the women's role in the abolitionist struggle was too important for them to be relegated to their homes. . . . Many Black male activists believed in the fundamental equality of the sexes" (1984, 59). Many of the females in these families actively participated in the struggles for race and sex independence. From these same women's families came husbands, brothers, and sons who took up the cause of women's education and suffrage, as well as political and economic freedom for black people. Sarah Remond, the Fortens (Margaretta, Sarah, Harriet, and Charlotte), and Susan Paul were only a few of the early black female abolitionists to emerge from the black bourgeoisie (Giddings 1984, 59). In the 1850s, Sarah Remond became an international antislavery spokesperson, speaking in England, Ireland, and Scotland. And Charlotte Forten, a noted educator (A. Davis 1983, 65), and Hattie Purvis became well-known voices in the abolitionist movement (Giddings 1984, 66).

In fact, all of the children of James Forten Sr. were members of the female antislavery movement. In 1836, James Forten Jr. voiced before the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia his opposition to male abolitionists' sexism in the movement. His brother-in-law, Robert Purvis, and his wife, Harriet Forten, worked together as conductors on the Underground Railroad. They also worked with whites to bring about recognition of women's equality in the antislavery movement (Terborg-Penn 1978, 32–33). In 1837, at a meeting of the American Moral Reform Society, Purvis and William Whipper (a black pro-woman supporter from Philadelphia) sponsored a resolution maintaining the divine justice of women's right to education: "Resolved that these women who are now pleading the cause of humanity, and devoting their time, talents, and industry, to the cause of universal Freedom, deserve the blessings of Heaven and the gratitude of posterity" (Terborg-Penn 1978, 32). An early vocal advocate of female equality, Purvis believed that "[w]oman [was] not a mere dependent of man. The relation is perfectly reciprocal. God has given to both man and woman the same intellectual capacities, and made them subject to the same moral argument" (Giddings 1984, 59). As Paula Giddings remarks, "It was a stunning position for the early nineteenth century." Giddings notes that it would have been politically wrongheaded for

black men to continue to bar black women from political work, considering the racial oppression both faced (59). Producing a complex picture of black men's reactions to the idea of women's equality, Terborg-Penn shows that black men responded in a variety of ways. She states:

[Black men] tended to perceive the problems of black women primarily in terms of the struggle against racism rather than as a struggle against sexism. To some black men, however, legal and social discrimination against all women was a primary concern. . . . On the whole during the antebellum period, black male leaders were more sympathetic to woman's rights than white male leaders. . . . Black men were therefore inclined to be sensitive to the demands of other groups similarly disfavored. In reacting to the "woman question" on the basis of their own images of women in general and black women in particular, some Afro-American men perceived women as being in need of male protection, *while most perceived them as equal to men* [emphasis added]. Some sought to uplift the women of the race, while others included women and men in the uplift process. Some viewed black women as particularly vulnerable to attacks by white society, while others viewed the problems of black women in a white-dominated society as quite similar to the problems of black men. (Terborg-Penn 1978, 28–29)

Well before the "woman question" arose, Terborg-Penn argues, black men and women organized together, and while some black men displayed sexist attitudes toward black women in their organizations, such feelings were considerably milder than those of their white male counterparts. In fact, an examination of some of the predominantly black antislavery and reform societies during the antebellum period indicates that black male reformers usually included the rights of women within the struggle for human freedom. They empathized with the plight of women because much of the legal and political discrimination that black men suffered was shared by all women as well (29).

One of the earliest black antislavery organizations, the Union Society of Africans of Newport, Rhode Island, an association formed to assist fugitive slaves, in 1789 listed among its members Bess Browning and Rebecca Folger. Black women and men led the New England Freedom Association. Three women served among the thirteen officers. In 1848, William C. Nell, one of the organization's leaders, would speak before the Woman's Rights Convention at Rochester, New York, where he praised the involvement

of women in the antislavery movement and espoused his belief in the equality of women. Also, black women and men who were excluded from white societies in the temperance movement before the Civil War came together to form their own organizations. "As a result," says Terborg-Penn, "the numbers of black men and black women who cooperated together in racially separate organizations through the North was high." Though black women continued to struggle for equal recognition in black organizations, "male resistance to such participation seemed short-lived and less hostile than white male opposition" (29).

Generally speaking, the exclusion of black men in white reform organizations led them to sympathize with women's experience of sexism. In the 1840s, Martin R. Delany and Frederick Douglass advocated female education, particularly that of black women. "Although these men viewed the 'woman question' from two different perspectives, they both perceived women as equal to men in the struggle" (Terborg-Penn 1978, 31). In his writings, Delany exhorted blacks to adopt a more progressive position toward women. He thought their education was necessary for racial progress, and he called upon black men to support black women in securing education as a means to rise above the level of service workers for whites. "His pleas for adequate schools for black women and career goals above that of domestic predated the woman's rights movement" (Terborg-Penn 1978, 31). Douglass also spoke of the right of women to education in the *North Star* (first published in 1847, becoming the most well known of the abolitionist newspapers) and *Douglass' Paper* (Terborg-Penn 1978, 32). Supporting from its inception the inclusion of women in the reform movement, the *North Star* printed the "Address of the Anti-Slavery Women of Western New York" and ran a continuous column (from March 24 to August 11, 1848) on its proceedings. It also published the proceedings of the historic Woman's Rights Convention in Rochester that same year. The paper argued that a female "has a right to the same intellectual cultures as man; her sphere should be bound only by her power" (qtd. in Terborg-Penn 1978, 32).

Attending some of the organization's meetings, Douglass made known his belief that black men should be involved in women's rights agitation. He based this idea on the need for joint struggle and pointed to the similarity between black male oppression and that of women (Terborg-Penn 1978, 31-34). For Delany the plight of black women was interconnected to that of black men through the common experience of racial oppression. Douglass, however, viewed the struggle of "woman" as an issue of gender oppression. In *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People* (1852), Delany wrote about the need for black men to support black women in the efforts of the latter to seek education.

Engendering a Movement for Black (Female) Liberation

In the 1840s and 1850s, ruling-class white men of the North heavily policed white women's activism whether on behalf of themselves or on behalf of slaves. Terborg-Penn maintains that "during [this period] white males were more adamant in excluding white women from their reform societies. White males often criticized [them] when they attempted to speak publicly" (1978, 30). From the beginning of the antislavery movement, white men attempted to exclude white women's participation. White women resisted by forming the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. White men claimed their involvement betrayed the cult of true womanhood. Bettina Aptheker suggests that abolitionist societies, dominated by white males, were generally not open to women on the basis that, "[i]t violated all manner of Victorian procedure for women to assume a public stance on any issue, much less speak, petition, or organize in defense of it. More to the point, their activities undermined the patriarchal structure of a society in which woman had been rendered the property of men" (Aptheker 1982, 15). She further points out that the backlash white women experienced in the organization came from religious groups such as the Council of Congregationalist Ministers of Massachusetts, the most influential group in the state. When in 1838 white women were granted equal participation in the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, in protest a Rev. Amos A. Phelps countered by organizing an all-male group—the Massachusetts Abolition Society. It was among the first of a number of other white male organizations that barred women (Aptheker 1982, 15).

Lucretia Mott, Sarah Grimke, and Angelina Grimke, early antislavery white activists, often experienced public censorship. Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were excluded from participation in the World Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London in 1840. However, Charles Lenox Remond (one of the most celebrated black orators of the nineteenth century) with William Lloyd Garrison (president of the American Anti-Slavery Society) and Nathaniel Roger (editor of the *Herald of Freedom*) denounced the act of exclusion by not taking their seats on the floor with the larger delegation. They sat with the women delegates, who were permitted to sit in the balconies. Remond criticized the action in the *Colored American*, and the piece was later printed in the *Liberator*. Remond also acknowledged the support of the three female antislavery organizations that had funded his trip, thanking the women who defended his antislavery efforts (Terborg-Penn 1978, 30).

Just as some white men acted to silence and exclude the political agency of white women, so there were those black men who resisted the participation of black women in politics. Giddings contended that "[t]here is no question that there was greater acceptance among Black men of women in activist roles

than there was in the broader society,” but she points out that “[t]his did not mean that sexual equality always prevailed—at home or in the political arena (Giddings 1984, 59). As stated earlier, while in some of the earliest black organizations women’s participation was not an issue, there were many that did exclude women from holding office or even having input in decision-making processes. Despite the prevalence of patriarchal thinking among black men, when the National Convention of Colored Freedmen (an organization that had traditionally excluded women from its proceedings) met in Cleveland in 1848, both Douglass and Delany were integrally involved in getting women seated as delegates. Delany officially called for female inclusion. He declared before the convention: “Whereas we fully believe in the equality of the sexes, therefore, resolved that we hereby invite females hereafter to take part in our deliberations.” A number of the delegates opposed this, but Douglass reminded them that the convention had agreed to allow “all colored persons” to become delegates. He suggested that “persons” be changed to “women.” They finally agreed (Terborg-Penn 1978, 34). After 1848, women attended as convention delegates on a regular basis without contention.

By 1854, twenty-four women, including Delany’s wife, Catherine, became full participants at the National Immigration Convention. The New England Convention of Colored Citizens in 1859 elected four women to offices of importance. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a black journalist and women’s rights activist, was one of the first women to hold a seat at a Negro convention (Terborg-Penn 1978, 29). When the National Colored Labor Union was organized in 1869, headed by Isaac Mayers, black women protested the nonresponse of the convention to issues concerning their labor problems. In an effort to respond to black women’s demands, the NCLU reduced its convention dues so more females could join. Eventually, the NCLU would call for more female participation in its proceedings. Cary was the first woman to address the convention. She spoke on women’s rights. Her speech persuaded the NCLU to grant women the power to organize cooperative societies. On this issue, the NCLU proved more responsive to the concerns of women than its white counterpart (Giddings 1984, 69). From the early nineteenth century and the rise of the antislavery cause in the North to the height of the woman suffrage movement in the early twentieth century, race and gender remained contested issues in both arenas. Of those black men whose names became associated with both, one stood above the rest: Frederick Douglass.

“I am a radical woman suffrage man”:
Frederick Douglass and the Power of the Speech Act

Frederick Douglass passionately spoke the words “I am a radical woman suffrage man” in a speech given before a woman suffrage meeting in Boston,

Massachusetts, on May 28, 1888. His rise to recognition and esteem in the woman suffrage movement represents a complex interworking of race, gender, sexual politics that was filtered through his close and longtime relationship with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Julia Griffiths, and Ottilia Assing, among others. Douglass had a charisma that few people (male or female) could resist. In an 1845 review of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, William Lloyd Garrison described him as “in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy—in soul manifestly ‘created but a little lower than the angels’—yet a slave . . .” (Gates 1990, 62). When the intellectual acumen of Douglass became the topic of discussion, seldom were his physical attributes left out. And these did not go unnoticed by his women’s rights companions, according to the biographer William McFeely.¹ The combination of his keen intellect and verbal eloquence, set off by his striking physical appearance, gained him entrée into the inner circles of white male and female abolitionists, and many of the women were also staunch woman suffragists. In 1874, Celia Logan (a reporter for the *New York Daily Graphic*) wrote about her impression of Douglass after an interview with him, “The play of his fine features made a little thrill run through me. The dignity of his attitude, *the majesty of his stature made Frederick Douglass look every inch a man*” (qtd. in Franchot 1990, 145).

The first official acknowledgment of Douglass as a woman suffrage advocate came in 1848 at the Convention on Woman’s Rights at Seneca Falls, when he cast the deciding vote in favor of woman suffrage. Male support for woman suffrage in the nineteenth century was an exception rather than the rule. Antiwoman suffrage rhetoric during the time had little good to say for men who participated in the women’s rights movement. Reporting on male attendance at one of the early woman suffrage conventions, the *New York Herald* referred to men there as “long-haired men, apostles of some inexplicable emotion or sensation . . .” (S. J. Walker 1973, 26). Undoubtedly, the comment indirectly made reference to Douglass, who not only frequently attended woman suffrage meetings but in most instances was a featured speaker. For Douglass, the convention at Seneca Falls had proved a watershed moment in his early alliance. Two months after Seneca Falls, Douglass and Martin Delany sponsored a resolution expressing their commitment to female equality at the National Convention of Colored Freedmen. It passed. With this resolution the NCCF sent a definite message regarding black male support of the rights of black women. In Philadelphia the convention of blacks passed a resolution to include as delegates both black and white women. Lucretia Mott, one of the white women in attendance, wrote to Elizabeth Cady Stanton on the convention’s proceedings: “We are now in the midst of a convention of the colored people of the city. Douglass and Delany—[Charles Lenox] Remond

and [Henry Highland] Garnet are here—all taking an active part—and as they include women and *white* women too, I can do no less, with the interest I feel in the cause of the slave, as well as of woman, than be present and take a little part . . .” (A. Davis 1983, 60). Frederick Douglass and other black male advocates of the rights of women had been spurred on by the spirit and resolve of the historic Seneca Falls Convention to press for woman suffrage. Douglass’s push to break down sexist barriers for the inclusion of women in “men-only” organizations was emblematic of his future role in the movement for woman suffrage.

While early black male, pro-woman activists like Martin Delany, the Fortens, and Purvises forged a race/gender alliance articulated in more nationalist terms, Frederick Douglass moved across racial boundaries to argue for a gender coalition with white suffragists. This standpoint defined his long (and sometimes controversial) participation in the woman suffrage movement. Speaking at the 1850 Woman’s Rights Convention in Rochester, Douglass said, “In reference to the enfranchisement of women, it need not be questioned whether she would use the right or not; man should not withhold it from her.” It is important to note here that he was not the only black man who attended the predominately white female gathering. Also, in 1853, at the New York Statewide Woman’s Rights Convention at Rochester, delegates elected Jermain W. Logan and William J. Watkins (black abolitionists) vice president and secretary, respectively (S. J. Walker 1973). It was Douglass who would be credited with bridging the political aims of abolitionism in time with the cause of women’s equality. Shortly after the Seneca Falls convention, the *North Star* carried an article by Douglass entitled “The Rights of Women.” In it he declared: “In respect to political rights, we hold women to be justly entitled to all we claim for men. We go further, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for men to exercise, it is equally true of woman, and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering the law of the land” (Foner 1950, 321).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton had acknowledged Douglass for his continued support of woman suffrage in the face of much opposition at the 1848 Seneca Falls convention and at the convention in Rochester, New York, one month later. She would again recognize his commitment to the struggle for women’s equality forty years later, in 1888, at a national convention of the Woman Suffrage Association. Marking the significance of his work to unite the struggle for female equality with the battle for black liberation, Angela Davis asserts that Douglass “was . . . responsible for officially introducing the issue of women’s rights to the Black Liberation Movement, where it was enthusiastically welcomed” (A. Davis 1983, 51).