

Taking the Stage: Rhetorics of Public Propriety and the Post-bellum Lyceum

Introduction

Even the most superficial review of United States history reveals an extraordinary national predilection toward conflict, whether spiritual, physical, ideological, social or otherwise. The nineteenth century was a particularly turbulent time, marked by a number of large-scale military campaigns, not least among them the American Civil War (1861-1865). Not surprisingly, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are also known for a profusion of political and social reform activity, with women's rights, temperance, abolitionism, anti-lynching, civil rights, and suffrage among the many reforms actively pursued in public forums. In times of intense social, cultural and physical anxiety, some of the more prominent and career reformers tapped into the traditional language of jeremiadic forms, exploiting familiar tropes and ideals in order to first establish an individual right to appear and to speak before public audiences, and second, to gain support from those who would willingly listen.

Even so, the language or forms used matters little if the speaking body is not first effectively positioned in a space that facilitates communication. Yet in order to position the body, one must first use language to convince the upholders of governing legal and social codes to allow, or perhaps even to tolerate, her presence. Here the exploitation of crisis and chaos provided unusual opportunities for some nineteenth-century women. In response to war, to economic crisis, and to rapidly changing technologies, women who had long been working as producers of individual and family necessities recognized a real need for their contributions. In response, many women brought their extensive skills and capabilities outside of the home, joining the armies of women already working for wages, to address wrongs, answer calls for help, to provide national or military or even political support, and to begin the process of

educating and providing a richer, more hopeful future not just for their own families, but for newly freed persons, on behalf of heavily oppressed persons, and for the children of the rising generation. In her book *America's Women*, Gail Collins traces an intriguing pattern in the relationship between public opinion and the “proper” public role of women in the (his)story of what is now the United States. For Collins, this pattern is hardly concealed throughout the four hundred years for which she accounts, but it is particularly pronounced through the period that witnessed the American Civil War: “As in every other period of crisis,” she argues, “the rules of sexual decorum were suspended due to emergency... That pattern repeats itself throughout this story” (xv). Thus uniquely situated in chaotic times, many nineteenth-century women, perhaps already familiar with this pattern, were poised and ready to seize each new opportunity as it appeared, taking up tasks that desperately needed doing and, by doing so, slowly silencing diverse objections to the presence of their gendered bodies in what patriarchy imagined as a man’s sphere.

After the Civil War, the new occupation of choice for educated, upper-class white women seeking socio-political reform was *lecturer*. Catering to audiences wearied by war, loss and grief, lecturers provided not only elegance and educational opportunities in venues across the country, but a form of respectable entertainment as well. A few of the women actively seeking socio-political reforms prior to the war suddenly discovered that their talents were in high demand, talents that brought not only unprecedented notoriety and prestige, but sometimes large sums of money as well. Lecturers such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton quickly became national celebrities, promoted by booking agencies that negotiated both large audiences and large rewards for their efforts. As stars on the “postbellum lyceum” circuit, Anthony and other wealthy, upper-class white women from the northeastern United States called for socio-political

reform by tapping into a rising national rhetoric of restoration and renewal, which overtly aimed to re-instate familiar norms and gender and familial roles. Although such an approach has often been described as paradoxical and perhaps even counter-productive, women like Anthony managed to accomplish what many women had struggled to realize for hundreds of years before—the right to stand and speak, as a woman worthy of respect and veneration, before a public audience of both sexes.

Due largely to these kinds of achievements, much of the feminist scholarship produced in the past thirty years displays a consistent looking back to the formative years of the United States for points of reference. Vital to ongoing feminist movement are new understandings of the history of the struggle for equality, whether equality of race, class, gender, and more. Although the scholarship that has been done to date has made significant contributions to this goal, the unfortunate fact is that it remains a largely elitist re-mapping, with wealthy or middle-class white women most often the primary center of study. Although I recognize that the availability of textual and material historical records governs this trajectory, still, due to my own “working-class” background I would very much like to see the work and efforts of working-class and non-white women equally represented in feminist scholarship. There are yet many unexplored possibilities for scholars to introduce ourselves to the vast majority of women who worked and struggled on behalf of others, women who currently remain unacknowledged and uncelebrated.

Review of Literature

In her 2006 article “What Hath She Wrought? Woman’s Rights and the Nineteenth-Century Lyceum” Angela G. Ray observes that researching lyceum activity in the nineteenth century is no easy task because

lyceum records are widely scattered and often unpublished... There was no central clearinghouse for information about lyceums even in the nineteenth century, so comparative records are virtually nonexistent. Further, as Lisa S. Strange observes, few scholars have comprehended women's roles in the lyceum 'as an important chapter in the history of women's rights,' so such investigations proceed in little-charted terrain (185-86).

Indeed, in attempting to answer my own research questions about lyceum activities, particularly the increased female participation in the lyceum immediately after the American Civil War, I have often felt like someone haring off on my own across a wilderness landscape, uncertain whether my explorations would prove valuable and worried that I might never re-emerge into a more populated, familiar locale.

Fortunately, the few bodies of work that focus specifically upon the lyceum, the popular lecture circuit, public speaking and oral literacies of nineteenth-century women have provided essential trail markers from which I intend to stage my own foray into the field. I first look to the most recent scholarship in these areas for insight and context. Additionally, other still-new and groundbreaking studies intent on recovering women's histories and the erasure of their rhetorical contributions are essential to the continuation of work in this area and so are examined briefly in relation to the ongoing recovery project to which my own work proposes to contribute. Due to the unique nature of my particular questions, however, I have also turned to political, social and historical accounts of the public activities of women in the nineteenth century, including research conducted on contemporary responses to such goings-on. More specifically, I have attempted to locate instances imbedded in such scholarship illustrative of leadership or public speaking

opportunities among working-class and/or black women in addition to research projects specifically centered on nineteenth-century women engaged in popular lecturing.

Recent Scholarship and Recovery Project(s)

Trying to determine what qualifies as “recent scholarship” in a field as young as women’s (or gender) rhetorics is an oddly perspectival exercise. To date, the individual efforts of scholars like Jacqueline Jones Royster, Cheryl Glenn, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Shirley Wilson Logan, Nan Johnson, Angela Ray and Lisa Tetrault mark somewhat solitary sorties into a dark landscape requiring extensive re-illumination. Yet together, their efforts have begun to reveal fascinating patterns that undergird the entire structure of nineteenth-century sociopolitical life.

I begin with Jacqueline Jones Royster’s book, *Traces of a Stream* (2000), not because it represents a chronological first among rhetorical reclamation projects, but because the theoretical framework Jones Royster developed for her study instructs my own approach to nineteenth-century rhetorical activity. In her focus on “how early generations of African American women incorporated literacy into their lives and how they used literacy systematically as a variable tool,” Jones Royster “begins with the notion that a community’s material conditions greatly define the range of what this group does with the written word and, to a significant degree, even how they do it” (*Traces* 5). For my purposes, the “material conditions” of a community signify what is more commonly included under the concept of class, which itself incorporates criteria like economic status as well as expectations of appearance, behavior and self-expression. As the telescopic nature of my definition shows, determining one’s social or economic class may not be as simple as it initially appears. For Jones Royster, the women included in her analysis were

grouped under the community (or class) of African American woman, usually considered a group separate from Euro-American class stratification and thus facilitating her discussion.

While Jones Royster speaks specifically of literacy, her broadly defined use of the concept—that of “sociocognitive ability...to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences” (*Traces* 45)—leads her to single out an exemplary African American orator of the nineteenth century, Sojourner Truth, a woman who could neither read nor write but was clearly a successful and articulate (i.e. literate) speaker, operating “with power and authority within the context of the communities in which she spoke” (*Traces* 46).

It is important to note, however, that Jones Royster describes the subject(s) of her research as

elite African American women, focusing particularly on elites of the nineteenth century, an era during which the shift in educational opportunity after the Civil War gave rise for the first time to the development of a cadre of well-educated women. I assigned *eliteness* to this group based, not just of class privilege (though economic status is indeed one marker of eliteness), but more on the positions of status they occupied within their own communities. I chose to look at women who laid claim through their families and through their own actions to the label *well respected*. (*Traces* 6)

While Jones Royster’s definition of *eliteness* allows her to group together her selected examples in a convenient way, I must question this move in light of the greater context of nineteenth-century Euro-American culture. Going back to her example of Sojourner Truth, Jones Royster neglects to explain whether this former slave, however respected among her community, achieved an economic status sufficient enough to consider her “elite.” She also does not attempt

to look at her economic or sociopolitical classification outside of Truth's immediate community, despite the fact that Truth, as an orator who delivered lectures before a variety of audiences, potentially belonged to a number of different "communities" whether explicitly recognized (by Truth or others) or not.

Despite such oversights, Jones Royster is herself clearly a member of a growing community of scholars determined to re-introduce women into nineteenth-century rhetorical history. In her article, "Disciplinary Landscaping" (2003), Jones Royster confronts historically accepted accounts of rhetorical history, calling for a shift in the "elite, male, western" (150) version of classical rhetoric. Although the overarching goal is a shift toward inclusiveness, Jones Royster pinpoints the necessity of several other kinds of shifts that are necessary to accomplish this. She describes the vital necessity of shifting "where we stand" (150) (establishing a "less Western" point of view (152)), shifting "rhetorical subjects" (152), which Jones Royster envisions as the recovery of women rhetors, shifting the "circle of practice" (157), which Jones Royster defines as "a re-consideration of what constitutes rhetorical action or participation" (157), and shifting "the rhetorical frame" (160) by re-envisioning traditional views on knowledge-making, communication, and rhetorical process.

In a similar way, Cheryl Glenn demonstrates what it might take to work toward Jones Royster's inclusiveness in her book, *Rhetoric Retold*. Chapter One lays out the Glenn's ambitious goal to "remap rhetorical territory" (3) by studying the presence and influence of female rhetors on a classical rhetorical history that, historically, has entirely excluded them. Glenn seeks to "write women into the tradition" of rhetoric (6) by looking "at all the unquestioned rhetorical scholarship that has come before" (15) and by, specifically, researching and revising previously held opinions about intelligent, powerful women rhetors systematically

sidelined by a hostile, exclusive public tradition. Following her carefully explained plan, Chapter Two marks where Glenn begins to draw known female rhetors out of the shadows and emphasizing the place they should hold among the (all-male) cast of philosophers, rhetors and writers that eventually became “classical rhetoric.”

One striking feature in the first chapters of Glenn’s book that is also evidenced in Jones Royster’s conclusions is the constant referral by both authors to previous widespread efforts to either deify or marginalize classical women rhetors. Jones Royster describes disciplinary practices within the field of rhetoric, “habitual systems” of thought and scholarship that “filter out aberrations...deviations from normed understanding [that] are...alien, distracting, unproductive and likely the result of insanity, that is, non-rationality” (150). Although cast in a more positive light, Glenn stitches together accounts of prominent historical figures that include Sappho, Aspasia of Miletus and Diotima, each of whom bear signifiers like “Muse” and “marvel” (21), “stranger” (37), “extraordinary” (38), “divine” (47). What all of these terms share is an exteriority, an otherness that places the figure outside of the norm, sometimes in powerfully metaphysical or mystical ways.

The problem, as both Glenn and Jones Royster point out, is the strength of a rhetorical tradition that is exclusionary by definition. And, unfortunately, these trends—even in feminist scholarship—toward a focus upon Euro-American eliteness obscure the lived experiences of the vast majority of women living in the United States who worked and struggled, not only for survival, but for legal and political recognition of the contributions they made to their communities as well. As the focus shifts away from the highly artificial “woman’s sphere” of the Euro-American elite, associated public/private dichotomies begin to break down and reveal a far more complicated rhetorical situation than was previously theorized. In her Introduction to

Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender and Culture (2005), Jones Royster articulates the complexity inherent to “the ongoing evolution of resistance and struggle” against which research like her own, like Glenn’s and others, join “to recognize, not only the artificiality of public-private dichotomies...but also to recognize that dualities (two-ness, double-consciousness, margin-center relationships) are more often than not multiplicities” (3). For this reason, it is impossible to approach a research question or questions without necessarily suspending, at least temporarily, elements of “our sociocultural environment [that are] endowed by the impacts and consequences of complex histories, including the implications of race, gender, culture, sexuality, etc.” (3). Thus my focus on “class,” while heavily influenced by factors such as race, gender, culture, etc., still requires a narrowing of focus that will inevitably leave tangential tributaries largely unexplored.

Despite the potential disadvantages of such circumstances, historians continue to make compelling arguments “regarding the significance of traditions of oratory practiced by nineteenth-century black woman orators” by focusing on individual examples of exemplary women (Simpkins 229). In her 1999 book *We Are Coming*, Shirley Wilson Logan explores historical figures such as Maria Stewart, Ellen Watkins Harper and Victoria Earle Matthews to illustrate the successful rhetorical practices of Afro-American women that blended classical Western rhetorical tradition with what Ann Simpkins terms “distinctly Afrocentric rhetorical strategies” (229).

Although Logan’s work, like Jones Royster’s, focuses on the unique circumstances of nineteenth-century black women, Logan adopts her “descriptive analysis” approach from Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, author of *Man Cannot Speak for Her*. Like Campbell, Logan sets out to “consider the purpose, audience, persona, tone, structure, supporting materials, and strategies”

employed by African American women as they worked to gain access to public speaking forums (47). Even a cursory examination of Campbell's conclusions supports Logan's decision to ground her own study among them. According to Campbell, "early women's rights activists were constrained to be particularly creative because they faced barriers unknown to men" (9). This particular creativity often manifested in surprisingly divergent ways, as Campbell explains:

On the one hand, a woman had to meet all the usual requirements of speakers, demonstrating expertise, authority, and rationality in order to show her competence and make herself credible to audiences. However, if that was all she did, she was likely to be judged masculine, unwomanly, aggressive, and cold. As a result, women speakers sometimes searched for ways to legitimate such "unwomanly" behavior and for ways to incorporate evidence of femininity into ordinary rhetorical action. In other instances, their own defiance and outrage overwhelmed their efforts at adaptation. In still other cases, rhetors found womanly ways of persuasion that were self-contradictory, and hence ultimately damaging to their cause. (12)

Meeting the requirements for both competent public speaker and respectable nineteenth-century woman proved no easy task, as both Campbell and Logan point out. Due to longstanding sociocultural biases, it was (is?) widely believed that "in nineteenth-century America, femininity and rhetorical action were seen as mutually exclusive. No 'true woman' could be a public persuader" (9-10). This view led to the development of what Campbell terms a "feminine style" of public speaking (12), one that is distinctive from traditional masculine approaches in that it invites audience participation, addressing audience members as peers in order "to create identification with the experiences of the audience and those described by the speaker" (13). According to Campbell, "the goal of such rhetoric is empowerment" (13).

Although facing infinitely greater challenges when seeking credible public voices than, say, Euro-American women, in her book Logan argues that “nineteenth-century African American women were full participants in the verbal warfare for human dignity” (1). Overcoming slavery, racism, sexism, and a slew of other “isms,” at the first opportunity for education (particularly after the Civil War and during Reconstruction, when education was extended to all former slaves by law) African American women actively sought to gain access to communities of eliteness by acquiring and perfecting a variety of rhetorical skills. According to Logan,

Black women addressed women’s organizations, church groups, antislavery associations, and temperance unions. They spoke in all sections of the United States, in Canada, and in the British Isles. They spoke to black audiences, white audiences, and mixed audiences on the panoply of issues challenging peoples of African descent throughout America at the time. In addition to the oppressive defining issue of slavery, these concerns included employment, civil rights, women’s rights, emigration, and self-improvement. After the Civil War, mob violence, racial uplift, and support for the Southern black woman were added to the list. (1-2)

Additionally, Logan posits that one of the major aims of both education and social reform advocacy was to encourage “black women to assume the traditional roles defined by the cult of true womanhood,” an Euro-American elitist ideal that “proclaimed ‘homemaker’ the true vocation for woman,” a vocation that fulfilled “her true, feminine spiritual nature” (155). However, the realities of life for black women (and working-class women of differing ethnicities, as well) resulted in urgent demands for improved working conditions in public spaces. Quoting Elizabeth Fiorenza: “This praise of femininity conveniently overlooks that poor

and unmarried women cannot afford to stay ‘at home’; it overlooks the violence done to women and children in the home, and it totally mistakes patriarchal dependency for Christian family” (155).

As nineteenth-century Afro-American women were seeking out education and blurring the lines of public/private discourse, so too were other “classes” of women searching for new ways to acquire and utilize rhetorical skills. Because my project proposes to focus primarily upon working-class and non-white women’s rhetorics, it is important to outline which potential avenues for acquiring the required rhetorical skills existed—and for whom—in order to differentiate between class and/or status-based access to education and any resultant public activity.

Among what scholars typically label the Euro-American “middle-class,” Nan Johnson has identified a distinct shift in rhetorical practice after the Civil War. Her book, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life*, focuses on, in the author’s words, “nonacademic pedagogies of rhetoric and popular constructions of rhetorical propriety,” specifically where it concerns “the *woman’s sphere* issue” (3) as evidenced by what she calls “*parlor* traditions of rhetoric” (2). In this study, Johnson focuses on texts that traditional rhetorical canon may exclude, texts such as self-study oratory and elocution manuals, conduct and advice books, letter-writing guides, biographies, speech collections and others. In so doing, Johnson illustrates a significant, nineteenth-century shift away from formal rhetorical training and toward self-study manuals that were intended to be used as reference materials for appropriate modes of speech and behavior. Due to her attention to the strictly gendered nature of most of these texts, Johnson’s work carefully tracks a persistent and pervasive site of re-inscription for gendered social norms during postbellum America. Johnson’s goal is not to simply reclaim women rhetors within rhetorical

history, but to investigate the circumstances leading to their exclusion, “to ask what those circumstances tell us about how exclusionary maps are drawn and why” (10).

Although Johnson’s case studies focus once again on examples of elite women, it is vital to review scholarship like hers because the elite cases tend to be well-documented, well-researched, or both, a boon rarely available in the majority of instances. In order to effectively examine how non-white or working class women might have created the requisite rhetorical veneer of respectability for public speaking, it is necessary to first understand how it was done by those with comparatively easier access than they. Additionally, Johnson’s book focuses on white, Protestant middle-class society and culture in postbellum United States, a narrow section of American culture but largely recognized as the most representative of the controlling ideology for the time period. Although rhetorical training and performance had long been a staple of American leisure and educational activity, after the Civil War certain developments in what Johnson terms “nonacademic pedagogies of rhetoric and popular constructions of rhetorical propriety” (2) presented opportunities for public speaking that were non-existent in years past.

One of these opportunities arose in the post-Civil War lecture circuit, or popular lyceum. In her book, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2005), Ray approaches the nineteenth-century lyceum from a broad perspective, insisting upon a dual educational and entertainment function in order to gather a diverse range of “lyceum” activities under a single overarching theme. In reality, the lyceum took many shapes and forms, and thus the exclusive, all-white-male debate club in one city bore no resemblance to the bookings of multi-ethnic post-Civil War “performers,” yet both are considered in Ray’s book under a dubiously generalized heading of “lyceum.” Despite this problematic grouping, Ray does a good

job of meticulously describing and discussing the various types, giving readers a solid background in the conventions and opportunities available in nineteenth-century public culture.

Admittedly, the postbellum lyceum was not dominated by female speakers. As Ray documents, only a small percentage of lyceum “performers” were women, and of those, fewer still gave lectures on reform topics in their own words. However, in a later essay titled “What Hath She Wrought?” Ray urges scholars not to discount the potential impact a single lecture could have had upon an eager, intelligent female audience: “therefore, although woman’s rights was only an incidental theme on many lyceum platforms, the lyceum’s potentials for producing financial profit and for reaching large numbers of people over a broad geographic area made it noteworthy as a form of movement activity” (186). Female involvement in the lyceum mimicked increasing female activism in a number of public arenas, including woman’s suffrage, labor unions, and continuing social reform movements. The period after the Civil War was particularly conducive to “popular political and reform speeches, and in the North, the immediate postwar period saw a brief flowering of reformist discourse in the lyceum,” aided no doubt by the newly commercialized nature of the lyceum itself (186).

However, increased opportunities for national celebrity on the lecture circuit did not necessarily extend to all. As Ray notes: “although many African American public speakers were active during the midcentury period—including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charles Lenox Remond, Sarah P. Remond, James Sweat Rock, James McCune Smith, and Sojourner Truth—Frederick Douglass was the only African American to lecture regularly under the auspices of lecture-sponsoring associations run by whites, the only African American to become a national lyceum celebrity” (*Lyceum* 119).

Shedding more light onto the financial and status-enhancing opportunities the lyceum held out, the most recent scholarship on nineteenth-century public lecturing by women comes from a strongly econo-centric direction. Building upon the work of Johnson, Glenn, Logan and others, Lisa Tetrault delves more deeply into the commercialized aspect of the postbellum lyceum in her essay “The Incorporation of American Feminism: Suffragists and the Postbellum Lyceum” (2010). In her study, Tetrault forwards the view that despite the fact that some nineteenth-century women were able to demand incredible sums for their “performances,” such monetary transactions were kept hidden beneath a “rhetorical veneer of self-sacrifice” (1052). Tetrault also discusses how women could achieve or maintain middle-class status through their earnings from the postwar lecture circuit, but the selected examples she uses were typically women who married into the means to launch (if not support) a middle-class lifestyle.

Tetrault’s work led directly to the formulation of my own research project. Seizing upon the unprecedented opportunities offered to women through the postbellum lyceum Tetrault described, I wondered if any instances of working-class or non-white women could be uncovered in which they managed to increase their economic or social status by speaking in public, a route to status that I would have assumed improbable within the patriarchal culture of the late nineteenth century.

I decided to look first at historical accounts of women engaging in various forms of public activity in order to determine just how possible it might have been for a nineteenth-century working-class woman and an African American woman to make her voice heard in public. In order to begin to define the concept of class and status in nineteenth-century America, I turned to studies of women fulfilling a variety of public roles in order to fill in the sociopolitical landscape and gain a rudimentary context from which to forward my own research.

Historical Accounts of Women in Public

The mid-1990s saw a proliferation of scholarly attention focused on the woman's suffrage movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Robert J. Dinkin's 1995 account, *Before Equal Suffrage: Women in Partisan Politics from Colonial Times to 1920*, is a comprehensive examination of female involvement in partisan politics before 1920, unearthing a wealth and depth of activity that strongly validates the importance of ongoing recovery projects. So, as Dinkin asks, "Who were the women active in partisan politics at this time?" The answer is surprisingly diverse. "Those involved in organizing events and attending meetings [in the Northeast, that is] were mainly urban women of the middle and upper classes, who had at least some education" (76). On the other hand, (and in claims that have subsequently been challenged by Kim Donehower in her book *Rural Literacies*) Dinkin insists that "rural women, especially farm women, were usually too burdened with domestic responsibilities to have time for politics in any form" (77). Because rural women were, in Dinkin's view, "limited by inadequate transportation, a lack of education, and a tradition of male-dominated politics that was stronger than in the cities" (77), they had far less "free time," a component that Dinkin considers vital for public, political participation.

Despite Dinkin's tendency to describe female public participation in a rather dismissive way, he nonetheless describes women participating in public organizations, even in small towns and villages (77), as well as noting an increasing demand throughout the young country (but particularly in the Midwest and Far West) for "campaign speakers" (78). According to Dinkin, "not only were women attending meetings and other party-sponsored events, but also by the 1880s quite a few of them were being employed as regular campaign speakers. They generally

appeared before mixed audiences, and they almost always received widespread approval” (78). Particularly after the Civil-War, Dinkin’s evidence shows that women were active in public life, many of whom “wrote articles, a few ran for office, and a considerable number did canvassing or received low-level appointive posts” (83). But, again, because the “vast majority...simply attended party meetings or marched in parades,” they are classified as mere “supporting players” in nineteenth-century public life (83). No mention is made of the vast majority of men who, much like the women of this time period, would have had minimal input in the political machinations of the nation.

In her own examination of female political involvement, Suzanne Marilley implicates participation in male-run political groups and organizations as the source of woman’s rights activism. While *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920* (1996) provides valuable insight into the interconnectedness of male and female political activism during the nineteenth century, her focus is far narrower than Dinkin’s and thus fails to account for the wide range of public activity that he documents.

Additionally, through her biographical investigation of popular public speakers like Frances Willard and Carrie Chapman Catt, Marilley traces sociopolitical changes for woman’s rights performers that seem to mirror the increased opportunities for reformers to advocate for their particular causes in front of popular audiences. That being said, Marilley’s overall depictions of life for women during the nineteenth century are rather unfortunately oversimplified, even inaccurate. For example, Marilley describes how “during the war [Civil War] women had executed far more responsibilities for earning. They willingly relinquished this extra work after the war and instead became primarily concerned with reconstituting domestic routines and assuring that men would put a high priority on familial obligations” (100). While

this may be true for a certain percentage of women, other researchers have convincingly shown that by 1880 there were large numbers of women working both in and outside of the home. While familial obligations were likely still a priority, for many women the reality of nineteenth-century life required far more varied public and professional activity than most historical accounts seem to give them credit for.

Ever part of unacknowledged labor contributions, African American women reign as perhaps the group that, historically, overcame incredible disadvantage to offer their own unique contributions to social and political reform. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, in her 1998 book *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, describes how “black women, in their struggle for the right to vote, fought racism and sexism simultaneously” (2). Organized into chapters that loosely follow the chronological progression of the involvement of African American women in suffrage activities, Terborg-Penn’s book “focuses on why African American women in the woman suffrage movement supported the ‘votes for women’ campaign, and on the obstacles they met along the way to enfranchisement” (1).

One of these obstacles was socioeconomic status. Long thought to have disadvantaged black women to the point of political apathy, Terborg-Penn challenges such misconceptions by detailing the contributions of several remarkable female public activists. Yet Terborg-Penn’s approach trends toward rather contradictory views of the status of African American women, echoing other historians who avoid the question altogether by lumping all female public speakers under the classification of “middle class.” Early in her book, Terborg-Penn posits that “elite and middle-class white women did not normally work outside of the home. They did not have to contend with the realities of poverty, illiteracy, or menial employment, as did most Black women. Even the more fortunate Black women who were living in a quasi-free status outside of

slavery [antebellum], often had to work for wages or services” (13). Yet she also claims, rather confusingly, that “the majority of Black women who were suffragists appear to have enjoyed higher status than the masses of women of their race...it is difficult to obtain statistics to ascertain that more middle-class Black women than working-class Black women were suffragists. Nonetheless, it seems likely that most of the Black woman suffragist leaders were among the educated” (2). Thus education, rather than material conditions, appears to be prominent among Terborg-Penn’s criteria for determining status. Whether African American activists were considered middle-class by the Euro-American population, however, remains a mystery.

Lest we err and assume that efforts to recover historical female participation in public and political life started in the 1990s, it is important to trace valuable contributions upon which such work was itself constructed. Among these, Barbara Wertheimer’s 1977 book *We Were There* documents the lives and contributions of the nineteenth-century working woman, a class of the United States population that, like black women, have been consistently and actively overlooked.

The first of its kind, Wertheimer’s book chronicles the contributions of women at work both inside and outside of the home, women at work in America from the first European colonists to set foot on the continent to those who labored in the early twentieth century. In this compelling account, Wertheimer depicts women that are as different from the weak, infantile creatures of the elite ideal as could be: armies of women (and men) upon whose sweat and toil the leisurely lifestyles of the wealthy were perched. Then as now, the vast majority of women worked long hours and endless days to produce the goods their families required, whether by their own skill or through paid labor working for others.

What quickly becomes clear through Wertheimer's account are the opportunities available for women who needed to support themselves or their families, and the vast disparities nineteenth-century women faced under such circumstances. Faced with dismal working conditions and back-breaking hours, it is little wonder that intelligent, ambitious women strove to first gain as much education as possible, second to secure respectable paid positions that kept them out of the factories, sweatshops and fields.

The middle nineteenth century saw a horrific war, which itself led to a period of Reconstruction that gave sudden rise to unusual opportunities for economic advancement for women. Due to legal mandate, teachers were in high demand throughout the North and, more importantly, throughout the devastated Southern states. Moreover, due to Southern communities determined to resist the assimilation of newly freed African American people, black teachers were needed to accommodate the large numbers of children (and adults, who often accompanied them) suddenly in need of education.

Such "white collar" positions, along with office workers, nurses, salesclerks, and government employees were available to adequately educated, single white women (Wertheimer 233-48). And women with such backgrounds often found their way onto the public platform, advocating ardently for a number of social and political causes.

Based on evidence offered in other histories, I would tentatively conclude that a number of female orators in the nineteenth century hailed from this classification of "working women." Noteworthy is the absence of what most label "middle-class" status: the term itself is confusing and misleading, as most educated women of the time are assumed to be middle class when this may not have been the case. While class stratification may not have been clearly delineated, this just adds further support to the idea that there was a great deal of middle ground between social

and economic status that does not quite qualify as middle or upper class, as well as a large degree of fluctuation over the course of a lifetime.

Activism of Working Women

Building upon Wetheimer's body of work, scholars such as Ellen Carol Dubois continued to work to document the activism of working women in the United States. In her article "Working Women, Class Relations, and Suffrage Militance: Harriot Stanton Blatch and the New York Woman Suffrage Movement, 1894-1909" (1987), DuBois argues that "woman suffrage was a mass movement, and that fact is rarely noticed" (35). In her focus on the Progressive Era, DuBois tends to focus on women's roles in social reform somewhat to the detriment of female political contributions to the woman suffrage movement. However, by focusing on woman suffrage leaders who organized and motivated previously ignored working women in the Northeast, DuBois also prefaces her discussion with an investigation on the question of class that I have found instructive. According to DuBois,

many historians have treated the theme of class by labeling the organized women's reform movement in the early twentieth century 'middle-class'...Characterizing the early twentieth-century suffrage movement as 'middle-class' obscures its most striking element, the new interest in the vote among women at both ends of the class structure. Furthermore, it tends to homogenize the movement. The very term 'middle-class' is contradictory, alternatively characterized as people who are not poor, and people who work for a living. (35)

Due to the inherent contradictions in prior definitions of "middle-class" status, like DuBois I will attempt to trend away from such oversimplifications. The question, she argues, "is not just one of

social stratification, but of the place of women in a whole system of class relations. For these new style suffragettes...the complex relationship between paid labor, marital status, and women's place in the class structure was a fundamental puzzle" (36).

One piece of this puzzle, as other scholars have noted, appears to be education. For DuBois, education alone was the determining factor between what she terms "industrial women" versus "educated working women" (50). African American women, in their prioritization of education, recognized this distinction immediately upon their release from slavery, and education appears to have been a major determining factor in both socioeconomic status as well as sociopolitical influence.

Yet the public presence of women, apparently regardless of race or class, was far from a settled question throughout the nineteenth century and decades into the twentieth. Nancy Cott, in her essay titled "Marriage and Women's Citizenship in the United States, 1830-1934," examines the impact that marital status had on the status of women during this period. Despite the increasing numbers of working and publicly active women, "marriage made women into dependents. There was no middle ground here: either one was independent and had the capacity to have dependents or one was dependent on someone else" (1452). Additionally, because "marriage removed from her and transferred to her husband her property and income, the very items that indicated free will," a wife as subject "owed her labor to her husband" (1453). In the curiously public/private nature of the institution of marriage, women were not only required to battle for the right to participate in public activities, they were also forced to argue to retain the property, wages, even wardrobes that were contracted out of their possession upon marriage.

Thus, in relation to questions of class and status, women without political or legal status could, by extension, be described as lacking an economic status as well, except for sharing in

whatever status achieved by her husband. Unmarried working women, by contrast, were a problem under this system. Legally, they could not participate in many of the formal rituals of politics, law, or other aspects of sociopolitical policy-making, yet they were self-sustaining and, in many cases, expected to pay taxes to a government that refused to recognize them as citizens yet demanded of them standards of moral behavior that, hypocritically, were not expected of fully enfranchised male citizens.

Speaking in Public

As I've just shown, contradictory expectations are so common as to have become something of a trope among scholars of nineteenth-century feminisms. Another highly contradictory aspect of sociopolitical limitations governed women public speakers by attempting to control potential audiences to which they might speak. In this vein, Susan Zaeske notes that an important part of the work done by rhetorical scholars "has been to explore barriers that confronted women who sought to speak in public during the early nineteenth century. Of those barriers, as Karlyn Campbell has noted, none was more formidable than the charge that it was improper for women to speak from the public platform" (191). Public propriety, as the focus of Zaeske's article "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Woman's Rights Movement," forced ardent woman's rights and social reform activists to develop a oratorical approach that "employed a rhetoric of gendered morality that emphasized the special nature of female benevolence and the social utility of exercising that benevolence through the spoken word" (192).

Yet the danger of losing status, even under cover of a moral and benevolent rhetorical approach, was a real and constant threat to female lecturers. Women speaking in public were

vulnerable to attacks from all sides and were frequently accused of transgressions of moral impropriety. For Zaeske, “to accuse a white middle-class [married] woman of such transgressions during the early nineteenth century was to question her social identity, which was based on sexual purity, religious piety, and submission to her husband” (198). The resulting loss of status and loss of virtue were real and significant for a nineteenth-century woman of the upper or even middle classes, for “promiscuity and lack of virtue were considered characteristics of working women, of prostitutes, and of black women regardless of class” (198).

As previously discussed, however, not all scholars agree that “working women” was a classification automatically grouped with the lowest strata of society, and numerous examples abound of black women who were models of both virtue and respectability. However, stereotypical assumptions about the morality of certain groups appears to have been a widely accepted norm of nineteenth-century cultural belief, both a threat and a warning to women who wanted to avoid smearing their own carefully constructed social personas.

Constructing public personas was an essential element for any woman desiring a spot on the lyceum platform. During the nineteenth century, public speaking and speeches were not only a popular form of education and entertainment, but also a means to gather news and—especially for lecturing forums outside of the Northeast—to stay current on popular debates and sociopolitical activity.

Although it is one of the older texts included in this review, Lillian O’Conner’s 1952 book *Pioneer Woman Orators: Rhetoric in the Ante-bellum Reform Movement* remains a valuable resource for any study of nineteenth-century women’s rhetorics. O’Conner’s project focused on extant texts of speeches only—eliminating a large number of known reform activists, in the process—and an analysis of how these texts modeled the Aristotelian Ideal, scrutinizing

them for “their authenticity and accuracy” (125). Despite reflecting a largely outmoded idea of rhetoric, O’Conner’s work nonetheless provides documented biographical and professional data for a list of women orators active in public speaking prior to the American Civil War. Many of these names are familiar, as they represent women whose lectures continued during and after the war, while others are unfamiliar. With my multi-categorical interest in women speakers, I paid particular attention to biographical mentions that might indicate not only the sex of the speaker, but also perceived gender, class, and any socio-political racial labeling. Out of the twenty-seven orators examined in O’Conner’s book, three were listed as “Negroes” (Frances Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper) and several others were described as “farmer’s wives,” an ambiguous classification that is tantalizingly vague: it gives no clue as to how their economic standing might have been perceived at the time.

Although O’Conner’s project extends up to the Civil War, and mine aims to examine the immediate post-war era, her book is a model for the kind of historiographical research such a project will require. Additionally, while O’Conner and those building from her work have significantly aided in the recovery of female rhetors, they often do not move beyond historical accounts toward the kind of rhetorical analysis gender and feminist researchers have come to expect.

With an enthusiasm that is refreshingly naïve when compared to post-modern thought, O’Conner points to marriage as the ultimate goal and purpose of female life: “failure to marry was synonymous with failure in life for the women of the period” (8). Depicting the young bride “disappear[ing] into her husband’s home,” to emerge only in the event of “her own funeral,” (8), O’Conner’s oversimplified depiction of nineteenth-century life not only ignores the large numbers of women who worked outside of the home at the time, it also chooses not to

acknowledge the very women that she herself has chosen to investigate, many of whom were also actively employed outside of the domestic sphere.

From this perspective, the women identified by O’Conner and others seem less to be violating absolute cultural codes of conduct as engaging in a logical outgrowth of typical female behavior during the period—at least typical for women who were not economically secure enough to eschew the necessity of manual labor.

Although “lecturer” or “public speaker” was likely not considered employment by historians researching the nineteenth century in decades past, historians like Doris Yoakum in her 1943 anthology chapter “Women’s Introduction to the American Platform” do not hesitate to illuminate, in admiring detail, the “small minority of women...who possessed courage, ambition, and curiosity to investigate existing conditions (as have individual and representative women throughout history), [who] continued to chafe under the legal, economic, and social restrictions imposed by a society formed and controlled by men” (154). In this chapter, Yoakum lays the groundwork for historiographical work of every decade following the 1940s by recovering the valuable contributions of female orators to nineteenth-century public platforms.

At meetings attended by “farmers and their wives” (155), women often heard specific calls to social and public action—and responded:

the women learned that there was a world to be done for mankind and that there were many directions in which they might spread their work. As advocates of the antislavery movement, destined from the first to overshadow all other reforms of the Middle Period, they could contribute money and prayers to the cause. They could get signatures to petitions and ‘engage men to write poetry and short pieces in prose, to be printed on fire boards, on cards, on silk, and on ivory for parlor ornaments’ to keep the subject

constantly before the attention of all observers. They could daily diffuse information by conversing on the subject at home and in social circles. With enthusiastic support of those who were ‘in the front of the battle,’ the ladies could hold benefit bazaars and fairs and could form themselves into auxiliary female antislavery societies. And last, but not least, they could induce reticent husbands to open prejudices ears by themselves attending the antislavery meetings. (156)

Amidst all that women could do, some still sought a public voice to bring about the kinds of societal reforms for which they felt uniquely obliged to advocate. The single best way to reach a wide audience during the nineteenth century was the popular lecture circuit. Yoakum explains: “Oratory, at this time, was enjoying its heyday of glory, its supreme authority as instructor and propagandist among a curious people who had limited facilities for acquiring news and knowledge” (154-5). Widely attended and, at least for some, strongly influential, a single lecture could have long-lasting impact upon the women who, “in the escort of benevolent husbands...indulged their intellectual cravings with lectures” (154).

Although Yoakum documents some of the most popular lecturers during each decade of the century, she laments the fact that the few mentioned “are but representatives of a large group of pioneer women orators. To record adequately the history of women’s oratory even of this early period would require several volumes” (184). Of course, this was 1943, before the current project of reclaiming female rhetors was even conceived or begun, adding immeasurably to the amount of scholarly work that remains, still, undone.

Although I do not wish to conclude on a negative note, with so much referential material discussion, but not specifically documenting, popular reactions to women public speakers in the nineteenth century, it would be negligent not to include a sampling of studies examining this

alternative thread of public discourse. In 1991, Anne Benjamin noted a marked “ambivalence” expressed by women “anti-suffragists toward public speaking” in her book, *A History of the Anti-Suffrage Movement in the United States from 1895 to 1920*. Woman suffrage was a century-long undertaking, despite the fact that “petitions for suffrage measures were introduced yearly” (7). Like many other historians, Benjamin is clearly baffled that “the visibility and the frequency of these requests were not enough to effect the passage” of woman suffrage, even in the face of the “hundreds of woman suffragists” who “attended the various hearings” (7). In a testament to the power of resistance woman’s rights activists faced, “mere handfuls” of anti-suffrage advocates successfully shouted down each and every motion to be heard (7).

In an equally compelling project, Michael Kimmel studies the responses of men to feminist movement in his article “Men’s Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century.” Identifying three “ideological categories,” Kimmel describes the one most often cited by scholars of nineteenth-century women, the “antifeminist response” (262). As others have noted, this response “relied on natural law and religious theories to demand women’s return to the private sphere of hearth and home; the authors yearned nostalgically for the mythical separation of spheres that has served to keep women from explicitly challenging men in the public realm” (262). Alternative responses included the masculinist response, which sought to oppose “the perceived feminization of American culture” by forming hyper-masculine organizations like the Boy Scouts of America (271). Lastly, the “profeminist response provided support for women’s public participation in general, especially suffrage, and supported demands for sexual autonomy for women and men” (262). Although a vocal minority, profeminist advocates are often pointed to by feminist scholars in support of the validity of feminist movement throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and beyond.

In the midst of this debate, it is certain that a small number of women nevertheless found their way to the public podium. Perhaps they simply ignored the opposition; perhaps they gathered enough supporters to justify their presence. Or perhaps they somehow managed to talk their way into a new form of public respectability, one in which public speech was no longer condemned as immoral or un-feminine. For now, the questions vastly outnumber the answers, questions that tantalize with the potential for both promising revelations and frustrating obscurity.

Research Questions

My project aims to seek out and provide recognition for women who, taking advantage of new opportunities in a rapidly changing world, aimed to achieve Anthony's kind of success and celebrity while advocating for those that could not yet speak for themselves. By the postbellum period, education for women was widespread and aided immeasurably in the larger numbers of women who made strong gains in a variety of occupational and political objectives. Armed with knowledge and the opportunity for respectable career as a teacher, clerk or lecturer, there appears a real possibility that even a working class or non-white woman—those situated in the lowest strata of American class hierarchies—could make her way to the public podium and speak.

My questions focus on the process of fabrication required for a woman to first create a rhetorical persona that enhances her performance of social respectability, and second, to employ that embodied rhetoric in a way that facilitated her access to the postbellum lyceum and, by extension, to public audiences. In order to fully understand how a woman might accomplish this feat, I feel it necessary to turn first to examples like Anthony, as others before me have done, in an attempt to (re)construct the rhetorical strategies of these “star performers” as a point of

reference for comparison. I intend to then compare the rhetorical strategies of more ambiguously classed women to those of the elite, in the hopes of gaining an understanding and appreciation of the challenges both groups were required to overcome.

Methodology

Through my review of literature, I have uncovered names and biographical information of women actively lecturing during the postbellum period that, although often lumped together under a label of “middle-class” status, in reality represented incredible diversity in socio-economic standing. My project aims to select and research a small number of individuals whose biographical information indicates a great degree of rhetorical and social kinesis, individuals of reportedly humble beginnings who, through education and self-determination achieved status and success in a respectable public career via the lyceum. Through historical and archival research, I hope to build a body of inquiry from which to stage the second aspect of my project, a comparison between my upwardly mobile examples and other, previously known and (presumably) well-documented lyceum participants.

In order to carry out such a study, I turn first to known archival sources and information previously identified and reported by other scholars and historians researching various aspects of mid-to-late nineteenth-century life. Through careful review and documentation, I will analyze existing research for pertinent references to female postbellum participants. I will also trace such references back to their original sources per each publication’s bibliographic information and seek to gain access to these same documents, searching known sources first for additional information about previously undocumented lyceum participants, and second for leads to additional sources about such individuals. My description of my approach here is left

intentionally vague, as the existence and availability of biographical and historical information will necessarily circumscribe the bounds of this project.

A second vital avenue of research will emphasize published accounts of lyceum activities, largely in nineteenth-century newspapers. Such research will require access to and extensive work within local newspaper archives. Although other scholars researching female orators have also mined this resource, my search will differ slightly in that I am looking both for verification and documentation of particular postbellum lyceum participants as well as contemporary public discourse influencing and/or contributing to the rhetorics of female lecturers. I theorize that female lecturers would not only have been aware of published opinions and opposition to their presence on the stage, but that their own correspondence, journals, and speeches can be positioned as pieces of a larger contextual conversation taking place concerning the proprieties of public female bodies and voices.

Once a sufficient number of lyceum participants have been identified and researched, participants that represent both well-known celebrity performers and the previously unknown women I seek to re-introduce to history, I will attempt to construct individual case studies from the biographical and historical documentation that can then be placed into conversation with one another and with the complex socio-political context in which the postbellum lyceum was situated. Using an analytical methodology informed by the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, I will trace the rhetorical positioning as employed by celebrity lyceum performers. I will then analyze the rhetorical moves of lesser-known popular lecturers as they worked to position themselves before the public. Finally, I will compare the individual rhetorical pathways constructed by each woman for similarities and differences in an attempt to increase

understanding and appreciation for the challenges faced by diverse women aiming for very similar goals.

Limitations

Due to the absence of a central database about lyceum speakers in the nineteenth century, my ability to locate substantial biographical or professional documentation for each participant may be severely limited. The individuals upon which my study will focus may not have the wealth of archival records that often accompany celebrity historical figures, as is often the case with nineteenth-century working-class women. If such documentation does exist, I assume that it would more likely be found in familial records and/or private collections as opposed to public archives. Thus, the existence of documents, limited access to private collections, etc. may limit the amount of materials available for study. Time, expense and distance are also factors, as travel may be prohibitive despite being required to adequately search out necessary archival documents.

Schedule

December 2012	Begin search for biographical documents via existing bodies of research, documenting archival sources with contact information
January 2013	Identify archives most likely to yield desired documentation and research access options
February 2013	Contact archive sources and arrange for document access
March-June 2013	Perform archival research
July 2013	Draft research findings

August 2013	Revise draft of methodology, as needed
October 2013	Complete draft
November 2013	Revised draft due
December 2013	Final draft due

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