



Black Feminism: Theory, Method, Practice

Summer 1 - OLLI 2021

©Preston Taylor Stone





Agenda

week 2

***Women, Race & Class* (1981)**
Emancipation to the turn of the century

Theory
Lorde, Collins

Ch 3 - Women Race & Class

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton's life exhibited all the basic elements, in their most contradictory form, of the middle-class woman's dilemma. Her diligent efforts to achieve excellence in her studies, the knowledge she had gained as a law student, and all the other ways she had cultivated her intellectual powers—all this had come to naught. Marriage and motherhood precluded the achievement of the goals she had set for herself as a single woman. Moreover, her involvement in the abolitionist movement during the years following the London convention had taught her that it was possible to organize a political challenge to oppression. Many of the women who would answer the call to attend the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls were becoming conscious of similar contradictions in their lives and had likewise seen, from the example of the anti-slavery struggle, that it was possible to fight for equality.
- As the Seneca Falls Convention was being planned, Elizabeth Cady Stanton proposed a resolution which appeared too radical even to her co-conventioner Lucretia Mott. Although Mrs. Mott's experiences in the anti-slavery movement had certainly persuaded her that women urgently needed to exercise political power, she opposed the introduction of a resolution on woman suffrage. Such a move would be interpreted as absurd and outrageous, she thought, and would consequently undermine the importance of the meeting. Stanton's husband also opposed the raising of the suffrage issue—and kept his promise to leave town if she insisted on presenting the resolution. Frederick Douglass was the only prominent figure who agreed that the convention should call for women's right to vote.



The Seneca Falls Convention, *Declaration of Sentiments*

- "We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed—to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support, to have such disgraceful laws as give man the power to chastise and imprison his wife, to take the wages which she earns, the property which she inherits, and, in case of separation, the children of her love." (Elizabeth Cady Stanton)
- "When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men - both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead..."

The Seneca Falls Convention (1848)

- "Woman knows and feels her wrongs as man cannot know and feel them, and she also knows as well as he can know, what measures are needed to redress them. I grant all the claims at this point. She is her own best representative. We can neither speak for her, nor vote for her, nor act for her, nor be responsible for her; and the thing for men to do in the premises is just to get out of her way and give her the fullest opportunity to exercise all the powers inherent in her individual personality, and allow her to do it as she herself shall elect to exercise them. Her right to be and to do is as full, complete and perfect as the right of any man on earth. I say of her, as I say of the colored people, 'Give her fair play, and hands off.' ...All good causes are mutually helpful. The benefits accruing from this movement for the equal rights of woman are not confined or limited to woman only. They will be shared by every effort to promote the progress and welfare of mankind every where and in all ages. It was an example and a prophecy of what can be accomplished against strongly opposing forces, against time-hallowed abuses, against deeply entrenched error, against worldwide usage, and against the settled judgment of mankind, by a few earnest women, clad only in the panoply of truth, and determined to live and die in what they considered a righteous cause."
(Frederick Douglass)
- "When a sincere republican is asked to say in sober earnest what adequate reason he can give, for refusing the demand of women to an equal participation with men in political rights, he must answer, None at all. However unwise and mistaken the demand, it is but the assertion of a natural right, and such must be conceded." (Horace Greely, *New York Tribune*)
- "as a rigorous consummation of the consciousness of white middle-class women's dilemma, the Declaration all but ignored the predicament of white working-class women, as it ignored the condition of Black women in the South and North alike. In other words, the Seneca Falls Declaration proposed an analysis of the female condition which disregarded the circumstances of women outside the social class of the document's framers. But what about those women who worked for a living—the white women, for example, who operated the textile mills in the Northeast?" (Davis)

The Working-Class Women



"We women work secretly in the seclusion of our bed chambers because all society was built on the theory that men, not women, earned money and that men alone supported the family ... I do not believe that there was any community in which the souls of some women were not beating their wings in rebellion. For my own obscure self I can say that every fibre of my being rebelled, although silently, all the hours that I sat and sewed gloves for a miserable pittance which, as it was earned, could never be mine. I wanted to work, but I wanted to choose my task and I wanted to collect my wages. That was my form of rebellion against the life into which I was born."

(Charlotte Woodward)

The Grimké Sisters



- Sarah Grimké (1792-1873) and Angelina Grimké Weld (1805-1879) were raised in the cradle of slavery on a plantation in South Carolina. The Grimké sisters, as they were known, grew to despise slavery after witnessing its cruel effects at a young age. Sarah later recalled that her father, the wealthy Judge John Fauchereaud Grimke, held his 14 children to the highest standards of discipline and sometimes required them to work in the field shelling corn or picking cotton. She observed, "Perhaps I am indebted partially to this for my life-long detestation of slavery, as it brought me in close contact with these unpaid toilers."
- Angelina's 1830s letter to *Liberator* publisher William Lloyd Garrison read "If persecution is the means which God has ordained for the accomplishment of this great end, emancipation, then...I feel as if I could say, let it come; for it is my deep, solemn deliberate conviction, that this is a cause worth dying for...."
- In 1836 Angelina wrote her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* imploring white southern women to embrace the antislavery cause. She wrote, "I know you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do; and if you really suppose you can do nothing to overthrow slavery, you are greatly mistaken."
- "The war is not, as the South falsely pretends, a war of races, nor of sections, nor of political parties, but a war of Principles, a war upon the working classes, whether white or black ... In this war, the black man was the first victim, the workingman of whatever color the next; and now all who contend for the rights of labor, for free speech, free schools, free suffrage, and a free government ... are driven to do battle in defense of these or to fall with them, victims of the same violence that for two centuries has held the black man a prisoner of war. While the South has waged this war against human rights, the North has stood by holding the garments of those who were stoning liberty to death ... The nation is in a death-struggle. It must either become one vast slaveocracy of petty tyrants, or wholly the land of the free ..."

Maria Stewart



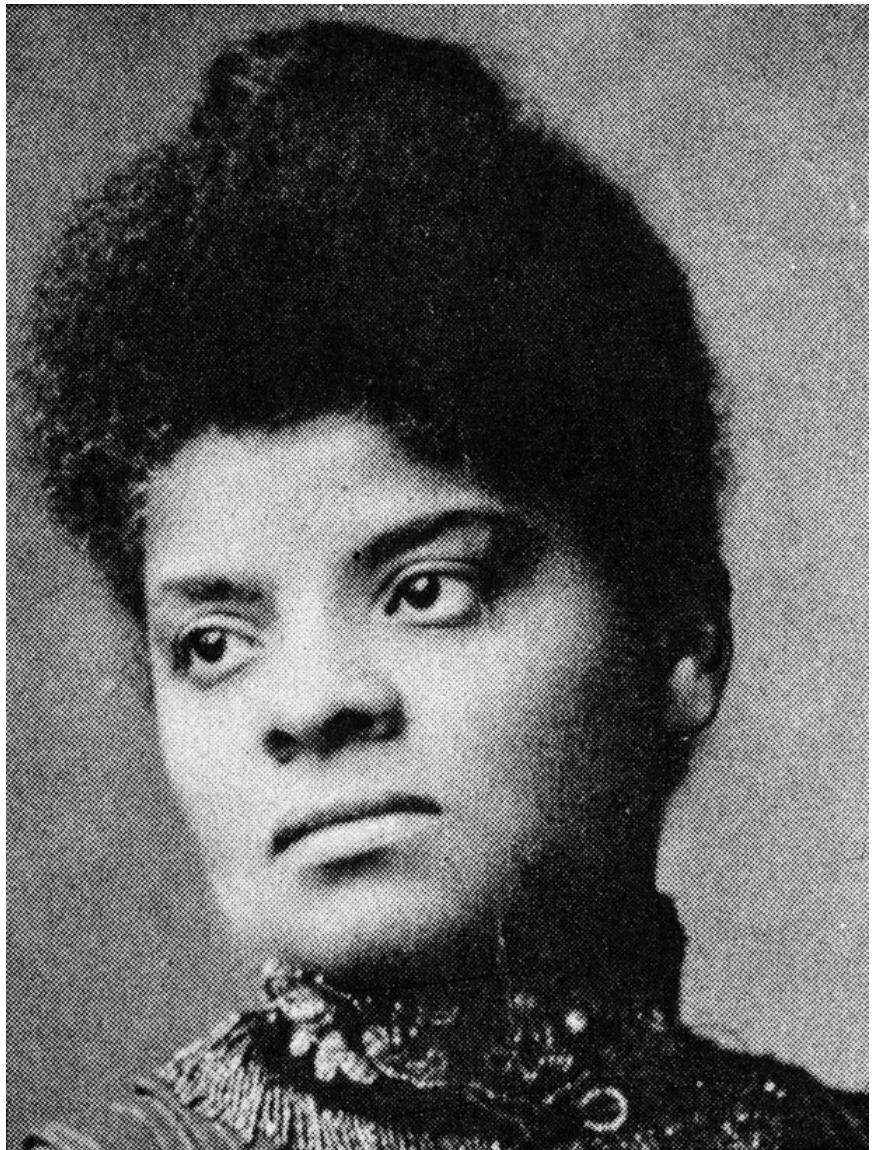
- In 1832, Maria Stewart became the first recorded American-born woman to publicly give a speech in the United States, and she dedicated her life to justice as a black, female feminist-abolitionist.
- "Few white persons of either sex, who are calculated for any thing else, are willing to spend their lives and bury their talents in performing mean, servile labor. And such is the horrible idea that I entertain respecting a life of servitude, that if I conceived of there being no possibility of my rising above the condition of a servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger. O, horrible idea, indeed! to possess noble souls aspiring after high and honorable acquirements, yet confined by the chains of ignorance and poverty to lives of continual drudgery and toil. Neither do I know of any who have enriched themselves by spending their lives as house-domestics, washing windows, shaking carpets, brushing boots, or tending upon gentlemen's tables. I can but die for expressing my sentiments; and I am as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence; for I am a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast. ...Again. It was asserted that we were "a ragged set, crying for liberty." I reply to it, the whites have so long and so loudly proclaimed the theme of equal rights and privileges, that our souls have caught the flame also, ragged as we are. As far as our merit deserves, we feel a common desire to rise above the condition of servants and drudges. I have learnt, by bitter experience, that continual hard labor deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind; the ideas become confined, the mind barren, and, like the scorching sands of Arabia, produces nothing; or, like the uncultivated soil, brings forth thorns and thistles."

A Voice from the South (1892), Anna Julia Cooper



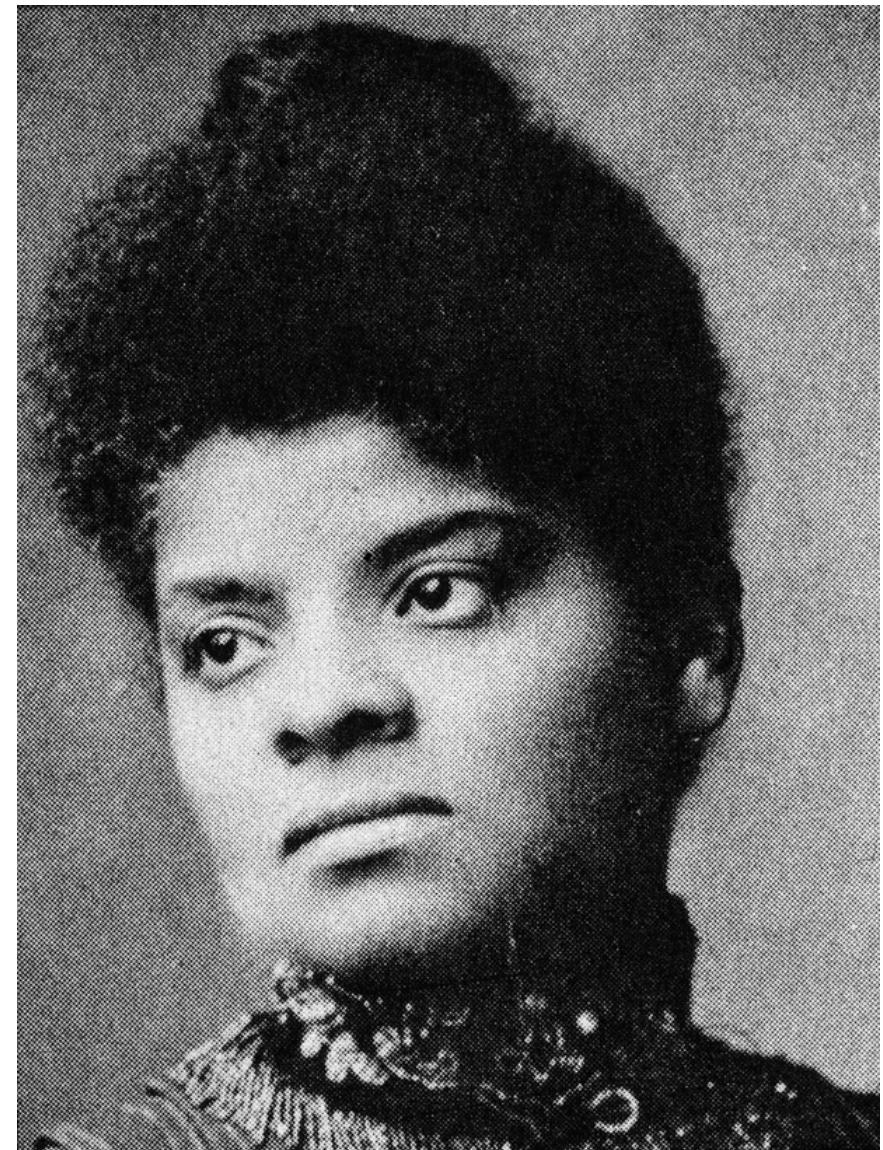
The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. While the women of the white race can with calm assurance enter upon the work they feel by nature appointed to do, while their men give loyal support and appreciative countenance to their efforts, recognizing in most avenues of usefulness the propriety and the need of woman's distinctive co-operation, the colored woman too often finds herself hampered and shamed by a less liberal sentiment and a more conservative attitude on the part of those for whose opinion she cares most. That this is not universally true I am glad to admit. There are to be found both intensely conservative white men and exceedingly liberal colored men. But as far as my experience goes the average man of our race is less frequently ready to admit the actual need among the sturdier forces of the world for woman's help or influence. That great social and economic questions await her interference, that she could throw any light on problems of national import, that her intermeddling could improve the management of school systems, or elevate the tone of public institutions, or humanize and sanctify the far reaching influence of prisons and reformatories and improve the treatment of lunatics and imbeciles,—that she has a word worth hearing on mooted questions in political economy, that she could contribute a suggestion on the relations of labor and capital, or offer a thought on honest money and honorable trade, I fear the majority of "Americans of the colored variety" are not yet prepared to concede.

Ida B. Wells



- Ida Bell Wells was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi on July 16th, 1862. She was born into slavery during the Civil War. Once the war ended Wells-Barnett's parents became politically active in Reconstruction Era politics. Her parents instilled into her the importance of education. Wells-Barnett enrolled at Rust College but was expelled when she started a dispute with the university president.
- In 1878, Wells-Barnett went to visit her grandmother. While she was there Wells-Barnett was informed that a yellow fever epidemic had hit her hometown. The disease took both of Wells-Barnett's parents and her infant brother. Left to raise her brothers and sister, she took a job as a teacher so that she could keep the family together. Eventually, Wells-Barnett moved her siblings to Memphis, Tennessee. There she continued to work as an educator.
- In 1884, Wells-Barnett filed a lawsuit against a train car company in Memphis for unfair treatment. She had been thrown off a first-class train, despite having a ticket. Although she won the case on the local level, the ruling was eventually overturned in federal court. She then turned her attention to white mob violence.
- By 1899 Wells had completed an enormous amount of research on lynchings and had published her tragically astounding results. Over the previous ten years, between one and two hundred officially recorded lynchings had occurred on an annual basis. In 1898 Wells created something of a public stir by directly demanding that President McKinley order federal intervention in the lynching case of a South Carolina postmaster.
 - In 1899, when Susan B. Anthony urged the defeat of the anti-Jim Crow resolution, Black people massively denounced President McKinley's encouragement of white supremacy.

Ida B. Wells



- She saw her work as doing historical good. She wrote
 - "The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way towards proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service. Other considerations are of minor importance."
 - "I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or rat in a trap. I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little bit."

The Turn of the Century

- Henry Blackwell, founding member of the Republican Party and American advocate of women's suffrage (husband to Lucy Stone), urged southern states after the Civil War to take on women's suffrage in order to combat the impending political power of newly emancipated Black men.
 - "Consider the result from the Southern standpoint. Your 4,000,000 of Southern white women will counterbalance your 4,000,000 of negro men and women, and thus the political supremacy of your white race will remain unchanged."
- However racist these early postures of the women's movement may seem, it was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that the woman suffrage campaign began to definitively accept the fatal embrace of white supremacy. The two factions: Stanton- Anthony and Blackwell-Stone—which had split on the issue of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—were reunited in 1890. In 1892 Elizabeth Cady Stanton had grown disillusioned about the ballot's potential power to liberate women and ceded the presidency of the National American Woman Suffrage Association to her colleague Susan B. Anthony. During the second year of Anthony's term the NAWSA passed a resolution which was a variation of Blackwell's racist and class-biased argument of more than a century earlier: "Resolved. That without expressing any opinion on the proper qualifications for voting, we call attention to the significant facts that in every State there are more women who can read and write than the whole number of illiterate male voters; more white women who can read and write than all negro voters; more American women who can read and write than all foreign voters; so that the enfranchisement of such women would settle the vexed question of rule by illiteracy, whether of home-grown or foreign-born production."

The Turn of the Century

- In 1899 the suffragists were quick to furnish evidence of their consistent loyalty to the avaricious monopoly capitalists. As the dictates of racism and chauvinism had shaped the NAWSA's policy toward the domestic working class, they accepted without question the new feats of U.S. Imperialism. At their convention that year Anna Garlin Spencer delivered an address entitled "Duty to the Women of Our New Possessions."
 - Susan B. Anthony was angered by these 'new possessions' not because of the imperialist violence but because of the 'half-barbaric' society of Hawai'i
- Ida B. Wells' uncompromising criticism of Susan B. Anthony's public indifference toward racism was certainly justified by the prevailing social conditions, but something far deeper than historical evidence was involved. Just two years before the two women's debate on suffrage and racism, Wells had suffered a traumatic firsthand encounter with racist mob violence. The three victims of Memphis' first lynching since the riots of 1866 were personal friends of hers. The horrible incident itself inspired Wells to investigate and expose the accelerating pattern of mob murders throughout the Southern states. Traveling in England in 1893, seeking support for her crusade against lynching, she vigorously decried the silence with which hundreds and thousands of mob murders had been received. "In the past ten years over a thousand black men and women and children have met this violent death at the hands of a white mob. And the rest of America has remained silent.... The pulpit and press of our country remains silent on these continued outrages and the voice of my race thus tortured and outraged is stifled or ignored wherever it is lifted in America in a demand for justice."

Thinking with Theory



- "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You [white women] fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we [black women] fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 119).
- "...Black feminist thought goes far beyond demonstrating that African-American women can be theorist. Like Black feminist practice, which it reflects and which it seeks to foster, Black feminist thought can create a collective identity among African-American women about the dimensions of a Black women's standpoint. Through the process of rearticulation, Black feminist thought can offer African-American women a different view of ourselves and our worlds...by taking the core themes of a Black women's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 36).