

Intro To WGSS Spring 2020

Feminist Actions: Feminist Movements

To begin, I want to briefly review the concept of “separate spheres” that we talked about during our session on Family. Since at least the eighteenth century, the domestic sphere has been imagined as the “proper” place of women. Understanding the history of separate spheres – and the relegation of (white, middle and upper class) women to the “domestic sphere” is, as we discussed in March, integral to understanding feminist approaches to home and family. Since at least the eighteenth century, the domestic sphere has been imagined as the “proper” place of women. So-called “separate spheres” ideology has long asserted limitations on women’s public life while presuming the privacy of the home as the appropriate domain of their caregiving and other domestic duties.¹ Reacting against the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, feminism can be seen as a movement to liberate (bourgeois, white) women from their homes and unpaid household labors.

While separate spheres ideology is persistent as an organizing principle of gender stratification and purportedly “natural” gender-based divisions of labor, it has nonetheless been contested throughout the course of US history, even from its very inception. Working class women of all races and ethnicities, for example, have necessarily contributed to household economies by taking paid work into their homes or outside the home. Further, in the United States, the histories of indigenous genocide, slavery, internment, and racialized restrictions on immigration have limited non-white women’s *access* to private homes, however apparently confining for their white, affluent counterparts.² As our textbook notes, the so-called “cult of true

¹ In *Bodies and Their Spaces: System, Crisis and Transformation in Early Modern Theatre* Russell West-Pavlov notes that the eighteenth century is commonly given as the beginning of separate spheres ideology. He suggests, however, that the transition toward the ideology and enactment (however partial) of gender specific separate spheres in England can be traced back even further to the seventeenth century. See Russell West-Pavlov, *Bodies and Their Spaces: System, Crisis and Transformation in Early Modern Theatre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 1-11.

² The Page Act of 1875 prohibited the immigration of Chinese women to the United States in advance of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. These immigration restrictions remained in effect for nearly a century. While the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, emigration to the United States from China did not dramatically increase until the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. Current US immigration policies including the

womanhood” on which white women’s supremacy and idolization – their very *access* to the security of a domestic sphere – was based has negative implications for women of color, regardless of whether or not they longed to create a home space, to access public citizenship, or some combination of both. Though our textbook notes the somewhat unreliable provenance of what we understand to be Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech, the words and theme of the speech still resonate as we work to complicate overly simplified narratives of the domestic sphere, suffragism, and feminist movements across this nation’s history.

Re-tracing the ideological history of the domestic sphere, and feminist reactions to it, it quickly becomes clear that the easily digestible history of distinct feminist “waves” is a narrative construction that seeks to temporally constrain, simplify, and make sense of the diverse histories of women’s activism. Reality is not so clear cut. The “first wave” of feminism purports to center on the struggle for women’s suffrage, spanning the years from the Seneca Falls Women’s Convention in 1848 to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Yet the full history of women’s suffrage is far more complicated.

Although women’s enfranchisement was not enshrined in the U.S. Constitution until 1920, Lydia Taft was in fact the first woman to vote in Massachusetts colony in 1756 as her late husband’s proxy.³ Beginning in 1776 white women could vote in New Jersey if they were unmarried (widowed or never married) and independently owned property.⁴ Indeed, women’s

separation of refugee families at the US/Mexico border and the current ban on immigration from various Muslim majority countries reinforce racial disparities in the United States with regard to accessing the shelter and security of “home” for people of all genders.

³ Taft voted as her husband’s proxy upon his death. See Mary Chapman and Angela Mills, eds. *Treacherous Texts: U.S. Suffrage Literature, 1846-1946* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 10.

⁴ Property, in this case, was the equivalent wealth of fifty pounds, and not necessarily land ownership. For a history of women’s enfranchisement and disenfranchisement during this period, see Judith Apter Klinghoffer and Lois Elkis, “The Petticoat Electors’: Women’s Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776-1807,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1992): 159-193.

votes were explicitly courted in New Jersey until their right to vote was rescinded in 1807 as part of a concerted movement away from universal suffrage and the enfranchisement of black men.⁵

At the now famed Seneca Falls Convention, the only provision (of eleven resolutions) contained in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments that did *not* pass unanimously was the demand for equal suffrage.⁶ There were many women for whom suffrage was simply not as important a concern as access to education, paid work, property ownership, and divorce. Further, only Frederick Douglass's influence swayed the minds of women abolitionists who felt that voting would amount to collaboration with an unjust government.⁷

Nor was the achievement of the Nineteenth Amendment the end of the struggle for women's enfranchisement. From 1907 until 1931 (even after the passage of the Cable Act), American women who married men racially ineligible for naturalization (ie Asian men) could lose their U.S. Citizenship.⁸ It was not until 1940 that "Congress allowed all women who lost citizenship by marriage between 1907 and 1922 to repatriate [...] regardless of their marital status."⁹ Despite the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, many states deemed indigenous Americans ineligible for voting rights until 1947, with Arizona and New Mexico resisting indigenous voting rights until they were compelled by the courts to comply with indigenous enfranchisement in 1948.¹⁰ Black women who sought the vote, especially in the American South, continued to be

⁵ Klinghoffer and Elkis, "The Petticoat Electors."

⁶ For a full accounting of the gestation of the narrative myth-making around the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 as the origin of the women's suffrage movement in the US, see Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014). The full text of the Declaration of Sentiments can be found in Mary Chapman and Angela Mills, eds, *Treacherous Texts: An Anthology of U.S. Suffrage Literature, 1846-1946* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 20-23.

⁷ Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, 13.

⁸ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-2.html>. See note 11.

⁹ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-2.html>

¹⁰ Wikipedia. Look up Bruyneel, Kevin (2004). "Challenging American Boundaries: Indigenous People and the 'Gift' of U.S. Citizenship". *Studies in American Political Development*. **18** (1): 30–43.

subject to the same violence and indignities as their black male peers until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

1965 was also the year in which the Immigration Act rescinding restrictions on Asian immigration to the United States was passed, paving the way for a new population of Asian-American women voters. To this day, women whose children are torn from their breast at our southern border and placed in detention camps have no access to voting out the politicians who are oppressing them, because as non-citizens they are still barred from the vote. It is worth noting, as well, that the 2016 presidential election was the first national election since the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court in 2013 (concurrent with the court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage). In other words, if we think of the "first wave" of women's rights activism as centering on the right to vote, then that "wave" doesn't have a simple starting point at the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848, and it has no simple end point either, as the fight for equal access to the full rights of citizenship, including the ballot box and equal political representation, are still ongoing in the United States.

By the time the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, however, the so-called "second wave" of US/American feminism had already begun. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the apparent spark that ignited the "second wave," was published in 1963. Hot on the heels of the Voting Rights Act, the National Organization for Women was founded in 1966, and the iconic "bra burning" Miss America protest took place in 1968. The lesbian homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis had been established back in 1955.

As with feminist activism in the nineteenth century, late twentieth century feminist agitation was comprised of a wide range of women with a diverse set of complaints. Like earlier "waves" of feminist activism, the women's movement of the late twentieth century further

intersected with a variety of other social movements including the Anti-Vietnam War, Civil Rights, Gay Liberation, Environmental, and Worker's Rights movements. Much scholarship on "second wave" feminism in the United States focuses on the shift in legal strategy from women's enfranchisement to women's bodily autonomy: access to birth control and the right to abortion which was juridically enshrined in US law through the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. The focus on women's bodily autonomy in the late twentieth century also led to the creation of domestic violence shelters and activism against rape like the Take Back the Night marches that still take place in various cities and on many college campuses every year. Yet women's feminist activism in the late twentieth century was not limited to bodily autonomy. Women's groups also created childcare collectives, and the International Wages for Housework movement that began in Italy in 1972 spread quickly to the United States, with the first US Wages for Housework groups established the same year as *Roe v. Wade*. Furthermore, feminist activists had begun agitating for women's bodily autonomy long before the so-called "second wave." Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in 1916, and dancer/choreographer Isadora Duncan wrote that nations should pay women for their childbearing and child rearing services at the turn of the twentieth century. As our textbook notes, in fact, it is possible to see the "first wave" of US/American feminism as a movement toward bodily autonomy, as well. The abolition activism that many early suffragists had been affiliated with sought to return control over their own bodies and self-hoods to enslaved people, including women, including the rights to their labor but also to freedom of movement, freedom from sexual assault by white owners, and freedom to bear and raise their own children on their own terms. Suffrage sought to liberate white women from the domestic sphere and its associated bodily expectations, especially normative (stay-at-home) motherhood. So, while the suffrage and citizenship "wave" of feminist

activism remains ongoing, feminist movements for bodily autonomy likewise long predate the particular “second wave” context of mid to late 20th century “women’s lib” and Roe v.

Wade/abortion access.

To be clear: the movements for women’s suffrage (and daycare centers, equal pay, and the ERA) interrupt naturalized separate spheres ideologies by agitating for women’s access to full citizenship and the public sphere. Relatedly, agitation for women’s bodily autonomy (birth control, abortion, domestic violence shelters, agitation against rape and sexual assault) deconstructs the same separate spheres ideology, instead by working to *release* women from traditional domestic labors. While the historiography (writing of history) around so-called “third wave” feminism is more recent and ongoing – and therefore less ossified into an easily digestible narrative – the complementary (or competing, depending on how you look at it) impulses of feminism to agitate for women’s access to public citizenship while better valuing their participation in and/or releasing them from domestic labors are perpetual negotiations in feminist organizing.

Our textbook cites “third wave” feminism as incorporating more hybridity and a broader coalition of concerns for feminist activism and organizing. Often notions of a “third wave” cite Kimberlé Crenshaw’s legal theory of intersectionality (wherein black women are unable to be seen by the legal system as uniquely oppressed by virtue of their simultaneous circumstances as *black* and as *women*) as kickstarting a new mode of intersectional, coalitional feminist activism. Another common example is the queer activism of ACT/UP in the face of the early AIDS crisis. As our textbook also notes, “third wave” feminism is often associated with a more global or transnational purview. This perspective, however, is complicated by its implicit western hegemony and US/American supremacy. After all, it is not as if women in Latin America,

Africa, the Middle East, or elsewhere were simply waiting for American women to “discover” them in the 1990s and early 2000s and to “bring” them western feminism. Indeed, many of the feminist issues and concerns faced by women of the global south are predicated on the economic inequities perpetuated by our own government. And since, as we know, women experience all kinds of harms in the wake of war, using feminist talking points to justify war and invasion (for example in the Middle East against the repressive Taliban regime) obscures the many anti-feminist and deeply harmful outcomes of war itself.

Anita Hill’s testimony against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas for sexual harassment is another highly visible flashpoint that is often used in mainstream historiography and discourse to demonstrate this purported shift toward intersectionality in the so-called “third wave,” as Hill’s struggled to be heard as a black woman testifying against her black male boss, and as sexual harassment and workplace sexual violence became mainstream, televised issues for perhaps the first time (decades prior to the contemporary #metoo movement). Yet focusing on “third wave” feminism as the beginning of intersectional feminism obscures the very important labor of earlier queer, black, and brown feminist thinkers and activists like Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Dolores Huerta, and Audre Lorde – all of whom were active in the so-called second wave, let alone Sojourner Truth or the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) elder women who helped shape the “first wave” of US/American feminism.¹¹

Furthermore, suggesting that “third wave” feminism has finally fully incorporated intersectionality belies the reality that intersectional feminism is a perpetually aspirational goal.

Women with more privilege and access to public stages continue to prioritize their own

¹¹ Apparently Haudenosaunee men were invited to the First Continental Congress when the United States was in its earliest formations. They asked “where are your women,” and declined to further help the Founding Fathers shape United States democracy in their nation’s image when they realized that American women would not be integral to the process despite their encouragement and example.

perspectives and concerns, intentionally or not. We see this in images like those from the 2016 Women's March at which some white women held signs saying "if Hillary were president we'd be at brunch right now," for example, or in the disjuncture between advocates for sex worker's rights who say that criminalization of sex work only makes already precarious women more unsafe, while women in Congress pass restrictive laws like SESTA and FOSTA that purport to help sex workers while negatively impacting their safety and livelihoods. We see this in agitation for Marriage Equality as *the* keystone issue of LGBTQ+ politics in the 21st century United States, while trans women of color continue to die in our streets and are misgendered in news reports about the violence against their bodies. The reality is that undocumented trans women are more likely to engage in sex work because they have no other means of supporting themselves, and that they are less likely to report domestic violence for fear of deportation. Yet feminist movements struggle to take up the issues that intimately affect these most precarious and oppressed trans women because they are not seen as "viable" enough politically, and the relatively privileged women in feminist leadership roles tend not to have intimate personal experience with these particular feminist issues. Indeed, calling "third wave" feminism "intersectional feminism" can become what Sara Ahmed has called a "non-performative."¹²

I might suggest, then, that rather than being a "third wave" that crests in simple succession after the purported end of the first and second waves, intersectional feminism is, like

¹² If a performative utterance is a word or action that, through repetition, brings a new reality into being (see J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* and Judith Butler's oeuvre, beginning with *Gender Trouble* but also including *Bodies That Matter* and *Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*), then Ahmed's notion of the non-performative is language (written or uttered) that makes a new reality *less possible*. She develops this theory in her book *On Being Included*, where she says that, for example, university diversity statements function as non-performatives because by saying that the university does not discriminate, it makes it harder to address actual discrimination and inequity within the university. When confronted with its own discriminatory and inequitable practices, the university may feel confident to assert that such discrimination is impossible, as the diversity statement demonstrates that we don't discriminate here. Ahmed then compares efforts to intervene in these circular discourses to banging one's head against a brick wall. See: Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

José Muñoz theorized about queerness itself, always on the horizon.¹³ We must always be working toward better, more intersectional organizing and activism in our feminist movements. Likewise, we can recognize that all feminist movements agitate in various ways for both public recognition and access to the public sphere (suffrage, citizenship, the ERA, Roe v. Wade, etc.) *and* for bodily autonomy (abolition, access to birth control and abortion, freedom from domestic violence, the right to freedom of movement and safe, unfettered association for queer women and women of color, etc.). What, then, might the future of feminist movements look like? What kinds of feminist activism and organizing might we aspire to? How will we achieve those aims? Can we build better, more ethical coalitions across difference? If, as Audre Lorde reminds us, we cannot break down the master's house with the master's tools, then what tools can/should we utilize to make significant and lasting change through our feminist movements?

¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.