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Carrie Chapman Catt and the Evolutionary Politics of Sex and Race, 1885–1940

Kevin S. Amidon

On 12 December 1917, Carrie Chapman Catt, a long-time leader of the worldwide woman suffrage movement, wrote to Henry Fairfield Osborn, director of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Catt inquired whether Osborn would sign a petition in support of the pending suffrage amendment which was intended to include the signatures of “1000 men whose names we have chosen on account of quality and influence.”¹ Given Osborn’s standing in academic, scientific, and political circles, he was a likely enough figure for Catt to turn to in her strategy of developing and publicizing elite support for the federal amendment drive.² Osborn’s high status, however, was not Catt’s only reason for interest in his opinion.

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¹ Carrie Chapman Catt to Henry Fairfield Osborn, 12 December 1917. Henry Fairfield Osborn Collection (MSS.O34), American Museum of Natural History Archives. Quoted by permission.

² Ellen Carol DuBois, *Woman Suffrage and Women’s Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 177; Suzanne M. Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 164–65; Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 60.

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Throughout her career she had given evolutionary thought a central position in her arguments, and she thus had a particular interest in the ideas of one of the most academically distinguished and publicly recognized American thinkers about biology, evolution, and eugenics.³

Osborn sent Catt a cordial but tersely worded negative response on 28 December. Despite this minor setback, Catt must have appreciated the clarity of Osborn's words, for he emphasized the significance of evolutionary arguments in his own thinking about difference between the sexes.

In reply to your letter of December twelfth, I am very much interested in the evolution of woman. I did not support the suffrage amendment because I could not convince myself that at the present time suffrage would favor the evolution of woman. I am, of course, open to a change of mind on this point.

I trust that the very first steps taken by the National Association will be toward the spread of intelligence and of greater physical strength among women for the new burdens and responsibilities which they have to bear.⁴

Osborn thus raised the two elements of the relationship between evolutionary thought, human diversity, and social change that Catt also used as the bases of her arguments. First, Osborn read evolution as progressive change. He argued that women could undergo—and even undertake, in the eugenic sense—processes of mental and physical advancement that improved them biologically and made them more politically and socially effective. Secondly, he saw sex difference itself as an evolutionary question. He ascribed great power to evolution, for he implied that it affected even discrete individuals. Throughout her career, Catt built her advocacy upon these two lines of interpretation of political and social change: evolutionary progress and the evolutionary development of human diversity. From the time of her first exposure to evolutionary thought in the 1880s, Catt had developed these into durable intellectual grounds for her work. They allowed for a consistent approach to claims that different groups of human beings—defined most obviously through the category of sex, but always also through the category of race—might participate differently in political and

³ Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 170.

⁴ Osborn to Catt, 28 December 1917. Henry Fairfield Osborn Collection (MSS.O34), American Museum of Natural History Archives.

social progress. Evolutionary thought thus justified arguments about both inclusion and exclusion that informed the varied political views on issues Catt faced.

I. SEX, RACE, AND THE CONTINGENCY OF CATT'S EVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES

As one of the main figures in the American woman suffrage movement, Catt has captured the interest of scholars, commentators, and critics for her tireless advocacy, organizational skills, and powerful rhetoric. Catt's primary political interest before 1920 was the expansion of the participation of women in representative political processes. After 1920 she retained her interest in women's political activity, but broadened her sphere of activity into support for international peace through world government. Throughout the several phases of her career, she navigated between the two branches of evolutionary thought, focusing in certain contexts on broad claims about progressive change, and in others more closely on issues of human diversity. Claims about progress gave shape to the greatest part of the structure of her rhetoric. Catt's work and advocacy thus provide generous evidence for the power of what Michael Ruse has recently dubbed "evolutionism," the widely persuasive body of thought developed in the later nineteenth century that saw evolutionary change as the instantiation of the higher, the more developed, the more civilized, even the more perfect.⁵ Numerous scholars have emphasized the significance of this element in Catt's work, including Robert Booth Fowler in his biography and Susan Schultz Huxman in her analysis of rhetorical structures in one of Catt's major speeches. Huxman goes so far as to represent "social Darwinism" as the "master plot" of Catt's rhetoric.⁶ Catt insisted that her goals, including woman suffrage and world peace, were the coming chapters in a story of inexorable evolutionary development from primitive barbarism to developed civilization. When Catt was asked in 1914 to define "feminism," then a new and radical term, she made a statement characteristic of her narra-

⁵ Michael Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁶ Robert Booth Fowler, *Carrie Catt: Feminist Politician* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 56–60; Susan Schultz Huxman, "Perfecting the Rhetorical Vision of Woman's Rights: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anna Howard Shaw, and Carrie Chapman Catt," *Women's Studies in Communication* 23 (2000): 309, 320–21.

tives of progress: she saw feminism as “an evolution, like enlightenment and democracy. . . .”⁷ Such narratives gave shape to all of her arguments.

The second branch of evolutionary thought, which focused on the development and status of categories of human diversity, provided a more complex and troublesome kind of support for Catt’s analyses and goals. She used arguments about diversity somewhat less commonly than those about evolutionary progress, but she recognized their interdependence. In particular, she saw that arguments about inclusion and exclusion could be embedded in narratives of progress through value-laden claims about the evolution of diversity. She consistently defended the position that the evolution of sex difference was in fact evidence that supported political and social participation by women. Sex was not the only category of human diversity raised by this branch of evolutionary discourse, however. The other was race, and Catt, like many of her contemporaries, discovered that in any serious engagement with evolutionary thought, claims about sex were also claims about race. For many reasons, she dealt with racial inclusion and exclusion far more equivocally and contingently than with the inclusion of women in the political process. As scholars including Louise Michele Newman, Gail Bederman, Nancy Leys Stepan, and Bernice Hausman have demonstrated, especially through analyses of the work of Catt’s contemporary Charlotte Perkins Gilman, race difference—and often, if not always, racial exclusion—were implicated in the arguments that suffragists and proto-feminists used to defend sex inclusion. Race was continually linked to sex as an integral part of an evolutionary system of differentiation and evaluation.⁸ The roots of the American woman suffrage movement in abolitionism and in the debates about race during Reconstruction deepened this mutual dependence of sex and race in suffragist thought and practice.⁹

⁷ Quoted in: Cott, *Grounding*, 14, 289, n.3. The original source is: “Mrs. Catt on Feminism,” *Woman’s Journal* (9 January 1915), 12.

⁸ Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), x, 4–12; Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii; Nancy Leys Stepan, “Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science,” *Isis* 77 (1986), 263, n. 11; Bernice Hausman, “Sex Before Gender: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Evolutionary Paradigm of Utopia,” *Feminist Studies* 24 (1998): 489–510.

⁹ Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 43–74, 163–218; Newman, *White Women’s Rights*, 56–85; Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 159–86; Cott, *Grounding*, 294, n. 30.

For Catt, people of color could be included in, or excluded from, participation in evolutionary narratives of progress depending on a wide range of factors, from ideological standards to local political circumstances. Thus she could acknowledge and even support exclusionary racial positions without undermining her stance on progress toward justice for (white) women.¹⁰ Such exclusionary arguments can be found in many sources from the suffrage campaign in the American South during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a topic recently reanalyzed by Marjorie Spruill.¹¹ Catt's arguments about the position and concerns of women of color also provide the clearest demonstration of the contingency of race in her analyses. In a manner that Nancy Cott has identified in suffrage rhetoric generally, Catt used both the collective "woman" and the plural "women," often specifically to retain this contingent placement of women of color.¹² Women of color could potentially share the concerns and goals of white women, but they could also be subsumed under inclusionary or exclusionary claims about men of color. Thus Catt only rarely spoke directly to the concerns of women of color, because those concerns always revealed the contingency of race. When she chose to speak openly of women of color, her evolutionary claims receded into the background of her rhetoric. Despite this doubly contingent approach to women of color, her arguments never necessarily required racial exclusion. She still retained the possibility that different races of people, as well as different groups of women, could participate together in narratives of progress.

The issue of racial exclusion has complicated Catt's legacy, and has led some observers to describe her arguments as racist. Even today, these controversies continue to rage: at Catt's own college, today's Iowa State University, the naming of a restored campus building for her in 1995 erupted in recriminations about how to understand her statements about race. A successful adjudication of the qualities of Catt's approach to race requires an adequate understanding of the most significant grounds on which she developed her inclusionary and exclusionary arguments and applied them throughout her career. This essay provides a close reading a range of documents including Catt's speeches, manuscripts, and correspondence in search of the most significant of her argumentative grounds, and

¹⁰ Newman, *White Women's Rights*, 3–14.

¹¹ Marjorie Julian Spruill, "Race, Reform, and Reaction at the Turn of the Century: Southern Suffragists, the NAWSA, and the 'Southern Strategy' in Context," in *Votes for Women: The Suffrage Struggle Revisited*, ed. Jean H. Baker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 102–17.

¹² Cott, *Grounding*, 7.

finds them in the complex relationship between the two branches of progress and diversity within evolutionary thought. It thus identifies her as a major contributor to the propagation of evolutionary thought in American and international politics.

Since Catt's era, research in biology has identified patterns in the scientific understanding of phenomena that coincide with the two branches of evolutionary thought engaged by Catt. The history of scientific inquiry and argument thus provides further evidence for the structure of the evolutionary ideas that she recognized and applied, and clarifies the friction between the branches that has complicated historical understanding of her work. These scientific developments have required a terminological distinction between microevolution, which refers to the evolution of variation and diversity within species, and macroevolution, which indicates broader changes beyond the species level. Microevolution thus describes development and change in the phenomena of diversity and variation within population groups. Macroevolution investigates how new (or "higher") species and forms of life evolve. It therefore generally subsumes the phenomena described so often in Catt's time as progress. These terms were developed in part to resolve a conflict in biological understanding driven by the claims of Catt's 1917 interlocutor, Henry Fairfield Osborn. Until the 1930s, Osborn was a major supporter of the theory of orthogenesis, which claimed (in Ernst Mayr's formulation) that "until natural selection was fully understood, many evolutionists . . . postulated the existence of a nonphysical (perhaps even nonmaterial force) which drove the living world upward toward ever greater perfection. . . ."¹³ It remains controversial within evolutionary biology, of course, whether the value-laden connotations of the term "progress" make it inappropriate for use in evolutionary investigation.¹⁴ This recent controversy further highlights the historical importance of evolutionary thought—especially its progress-oriented branch—as grounds for social and political advocacy. Michael Ruse and Peter Bowler, building indirectly on the work of Cynthia Eagle Russett and Richard Hofstadter, have recently emphasized this significance.¹⁵

Scholars have also recognized that evolutionary thought was able to provide for Catt, as for many of her suffragist and proto-feminist colleagues

¹³ Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 50.

¹⁴ Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 188–90, 212–17.

¹⁵ Michael Ruse, *Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Peter J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Anna Garlin Spencer, and Eliza Burt Gamble, approaches to progress and diversity sanctioned by a range of disciplinary and cultural authorities.¹⁶ Yet these scholars have not clearly demonstrated the structure and historical links between Catt's political rhetoric and her evolutionary positions. Robert Fowler reads Catt's thought as the product of Spencerian "evolutionary optimism." His interpretation is revealing, but inadequately treats the question of Catt's understanding of human diversity, especially in relation to race. Susan Huxman closely follows this lead in her rhetorical analysis. Cynthia Eagle Russett has explored how, despite the many ideologies of inequality of the sexes, evolutionary thought could provide a differentiated set of tools for grounding arguments about sex equality through diversity.¹⁷ Nancy Cott and Louise Michele Newman also have recognized that multiple strains of evolutionary thought meant that similar arguments could be used to support widely varied goals.¹⁸ In a specific reference to Catt's suffrage rhetoric, Cott notes that: "'sameness' and 'difference' arguments, 'equal rights' and 'special contributions' arguments, 'justice' and 'expediency' arguments existed side by side."¹⁹ The works of these scholars, when combined with close attention to the nuances of Catt's thought, make an analysis of her combustible rhetorical admixture of diversity, progress, and politics possible.

An exploration of Catt's thought can further serve to reconcile two divergent interpretations of her career. The first of these, which seeks to determine whether suffragism was fundamentally racist, has its roots in Aileen Kraditor's assessment of Catt's expedient turn toward situational racism in the conflicts about (white) women's suffrage in the South.²⁰ Newman reads such judgments about expedient racism expansively, though she does not focus on Catt. She uses insights by Cott and Jean Fagan Yellin to argue that throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "suffragism and antisuffragism were fundamentally racialized and racist discourses."²¹ A recent exchange about the centrality of racism as a motiva-

¹⁶ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt and Mark R. Jorgensen, "'The irrepressible woman question': Women's Responses to Evolutionary Ideology," in *Disseminating Darwinism*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and John Stenhouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 267–93.

¹⁷ Russett, *Sexual Science*, 11–13.

¹⁸ Cott, *Grounding*, 7; Newman, *White Women's Rights*, 18.

¹⁹ Cott, *Grounding*, 30. Original source: Carrie Chapman Catt, "Why Women Want to Vote," *Woman's Journal* (9 January 1915), 11.

²⁰ Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 45, 127.

²¹ Newman, *White Women's Rights*, 18.

ting factor in Southern pro- and anti-suffrage debates between Elna C. Green and Marjorie Spruill Wheeler points to ongoing historiographical controversies. Spruill Wheeler argues that “most [suffragists] were willing to use racist arguments.” Green disagrees: “I contend they were not.”²² The second line of interpretation has emerged from greater attention to Catt’s work and career. It began with Jacqueline Van Voris’s 1987 biography, and has most recently been endorsed by Suzanne Marilley. Van Voris and Marilley argue that Catt began to shift her language away from exclusionary positions on race due to an increasing awareness of diversity gained through her travels in support of international suffrage work after 1912.²³ Thus they find an ever-more egalitarian trajectory in her thought, especially toward the end of her career. The implication is that Catt did not ground her life’s work on racist categories.

A close reading of Catt’s evolutionary arguments indicates that these two historiographical approaches are not exclusive. Both Catt’s recourse to racialist and racist language and the many kinds of egalitarian claims she made throughout her career were based upon the contingent status of race within the narratives of progress that guided her work throughout. A periodization of her career can clarify this varying focus on race. From about 1885 until 1902, Catt developed her strategies and styles as an advocate, eventually achieving the presidency of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. During this period she defined the terms of her arguments about diversity and progress broadly, drawing on a wide range of sources and authorities including Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, Ernst Haeckel, and Joseph LeConte, all of whom she had at hand in her personal library.²⁴ Between about 1903 and the success of the suffrage amendment in 1920, she turned toward more specific tactical questions regarding the politics of inclusion and exclusion. It is in this period that she addressed race most directly, and that the evolutionary basis of race as a contingent category of political and social participation came most often to the surface of her rhetoric. At the same time, she occasionally expanded her evolutionary positions to address more directly the interests of people and women of color. Statements phrased in racist tropes

²² Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 101; Elna C. Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 205, n. 1, 205, n. 4.

²³ Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 196; Jacqueline Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life* (New York: City University of New York/Feminist Press, 1987), 105, 241, n. 13.

²⁴ Department of Special Collections, Iowa State University Library.

thus coexisted with egalitarian arguments during these years. After 1920, she once again widened her focus to address questions of world peace and world government. While she did strive during this late stage of her career to speak against racialized injustices like anti-Semitism, she was never able to develop alternatives to her evolutionary language. She could therefore never overcome her contingent placement of African-Americans within that narrative.

II. 1885–1902: PROGRESS, DIFFERENCE, AND VALUE

Catt began her long career in American and international political advocacy as a journalist and itinerant speaker in the late 1880s. Her output of articles, speeches, and correspondence, both published and unpublished, was prodigious. Manuscripts of two of her earliest extant speeches “Subject and Sovereign” (ca. 1888) and “Evolution and Woman’s Suffrage” (ca. 1893), include the terms of her evolutionary argument. They demonstrate how Catt strove to establish women’s political legitimacy as part of a trajectory of progress toward greater and more inclusive democracy. At the same time, these speeches suggest that Catt was willing to engage contingently exclusionary evolutionary rhetoric through value-based concepts of individual and group traits, heredity, and fitness to demonstrate and defend white women’s adequacy in political, social, and economic spheres.

“Subject and Sovereign” was a lengthy, evening-long address. It employed a narrative of progress to attack barriers to white women’s rights and privileges. It also provided the first indications of Catt’s use of micro-evolutionary argument to build contingent hierarchical distinctions between racial groups.²⁵ Following Kraditor’s arguments, Marilley sees this speech as prime evidence for a “pragmatic” turn in suffragist rhetoric.²⁶ The speech addressed a conflict resulting from the increasing settlement of the Dakota Territory in the mid- and late-1880s. Federal authorities were concentrating the Native American tribal groups of the region, offering citizenship and voting rights for males as incentives to accept settlement on measured out, individually titled plots.

Catt used this policy as a rhetorical wedge. First, she argued that the

²⁵ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Subject and Sovereign,” manuscript speech, ca. 1888. Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Box 4, Folder 3 (hereafter: Catt Papers, New York Public Library). Quoted by permission.

²⁶ Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 165.

Native Americans must be recognized as victims of a sort: their traditional culture has been denied them by federal policies and by the expansionist practices of settlement. White women, too, especially the many who headed farming households on the other side of the Missouri river, must also be recognized as victims: “Across the waters . . . they look upon the broad lands occupied by the Sioux. Two twin prairies, alike in fertility, in resources and climate. Both are occupied by a wronged and defrauded class.”²⁷ Yet despite their parallel status as victims, the two groups were unequal. Here Catt’s code word was “savagery”: “On the East side the women just being freed from the thralldom the customs of centuries have imposed on them. On the West side the Indians just emerging from the darkness of Savagery.”²⁸ White women were victims of economic exploitation and political injustice, while the Native Americans had a more fundamental disadvantage: they were evolutionarily more primitive.

Catt then enumerated several “massacres” of settlers by the Native Americans. She did so to establish a pattern, one that she linked directly to a central mechanism of evolutionary biology: heredity. The “massacres” in Iowa during 1857 related to a later episode in Minnesota as follows: “But heredity will tell. . . . In five years more they had inaugurated a massacre more diabolic than all others in our history.”²⁹ Catt repeated the “heredity” phrase several more times, linking it to images of “Sioux” violence:

But in five years more heredity had made its impress and they were on the warpath again. The great and cruel Fetterman massacre was the result. . . . Heredity will tell and in 1876 within the memory of all, they had donned the war paint again. This is the pedigree of the Sioux.³⁰

The white women were then linked into the same biological discourse, but on the side of evolutionary advancement: “On the East side the women have their pedigree too. There is behind them a long line of American tradition. . . . They are a class of citizens who represent industry, economy, and intelligence.”³¹ For Catt, this contrast in rights flew in the face of political justice and economic logic, because evolutionary necessity—as read both in the microevolutionary language of heredity and as macroevolutionary

²⁷ Catt, “Subject and Sovereign,” 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

progress—valued the white women’s contributions but not the Native Americans’. She concluded with a peroration that hammered at her progressive evolutionary point about women’s rights: “But prejudices are swept away before the march of progress. . . . Woman Suffrage is coming, for the world moves and it moves ever onward and upward, every decade brings with it broader opportunities and more liberty.”³² Catt thus constructed a microevolutionary narrative that justified value judgments establishing white women as a constitutive part of the broader narrative of progress.

“Evolution and Woman’s Suffrage” marked the arrival of the full argumentative and rhetorical scope of Catt’s evolutionary argument about progress toward the realization of (white) women’s political goals.³³ She developed the address from an earlier speech presented to women’s clubs, and delivered it at the Congress of Representative Women at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago on 18 May 1893.³⁴ The speech developed the tropes established in “Subject and Sovereign” into Catt’s most superlative evolutionary narrative. It further dramatically demonstrated the kind of gendered representation of ‘civilization’ that Bederman sees as the foundational discourse of the 1893 exposition.³⁵ Catt began her speech with a statement of progress and perfectibility: “so through the centuries the chase has been going on, leading civilization higher and higher, nearer to the perfect and the ideal.”³⁶ Evolution gave narrative structure and meaning to all change and progress: “the past has revealed its every secret. Every thread has been picked up and woven into a chain of perfect symmetry. We know to-day that the history of men has been an Evolution.”³⁷ She then applied, almost verbatim, the same rhetorical devices found in “Subject and Sovereign”: “Evolution is not a hypothesis but an absolute proof that the ‘world does move’; that it moves ever onward and upward, that the path of men leads ever nearer and nearer the perfect and ideal.”³⁸

Here, however, in the context of her explanation of evolutionary change, Catt had recourse to the language of microevolutionary differentiation. Even at this early stage of her career she applied it in the strongest

³² *Ibid.*, 47.

³³ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Evolution and Woman’s Suffrage,” typescript speech, ca. 1893. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, Folder 5.

³⁴ Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life*, 29.

³⁵ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 31–41.

³⁶ Catt, “Evolution and Woman’s Suffrage,” 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

possible formulation, in a style reminiscent of Henry Fairfield Osborn some twenty-five years later: “Women have had their own individual evolution.”³⁹ Nonetheless such microevolutionary difference paled next to the importance of progress, in which (white) men and women participated together. Evolution, she argued, makes women’s rights, and thereby woman suffrage, inevitable. This progress, however, was limited to “advanced nations”:

Yet the finest, and the grandest, and the loftiest sentiment hovering over the heads of all the advanced nations of the earth is the advance of their women to their rightful place by the side of their husbands, and fathers and sons. It is the finest sentiment because it demands the application of the finest principles of justice; it is the grandest sentiment because it means the uplifting of the whole human race; it is the loftiest sentiment because it aims its attack at the oldest and best established prejudices of history.⁴⁰

The inevitability of evolutionary progress toward women’s equality was in fact justice itself—dependent, however, on the sexual division of labor, as Russett has described it.⁴¹ Furthermore, the contingent status of race becomes overt here: progress clearly subsumes microevolutionary sexual difference, but only potentially, and not necessarily, racial difference. In her peroration, “Evolution” even became an active, authoritative force, one able to command change: “Upon this 19th Century Evolution has laid the moral responsibility for woman’s ballot and it will come. Evolution, the greatest truth discovered in our century, is on our side. . . . Work and we shall win for evolution, the law of the universe, has decreed it.”⁴² Catt’s language here, with its confluence of evolutionary and theological concepts, evokes what Beryl Satter has called “evolutionary republicanism.”⁴³ History and evolution had become a single narrative.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Russett, *Sexual Science*, 130–54. Later sources: Carrie Chapman Catt, “Address to League of Women Voters—Munitions Meeting. Hotel Astor, Mon. Nov. 12, 1934,” 1. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 10. Catt, “An Eight Hour Day for Housewives—Why Not?,” typescript article, 1920. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 7, Folder 5. Parts published as: “Eight-hour day for the housewife, why not?,” *Pictorial Review* 30 (November 1928): 2.

⁴² Catt, “Evolution and Woman’s Suffrage,” 8–9.

⁴³ Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 181–88.

Catt nonetheless realized that she had to substantiate further her claim that microevolutionary sexual difference did not justify discrimination based on sex. For her, physiological differences were necessary parts of the evolutionary narrative, but they did not separate (white) men and women in value-based terms. At the root of her argument was an outspoken rejection of the biological idea that the male was the active part in human reproduction, while the female was passive. Catt regularly advanced this argument in her speeches, and based her claims upon the work of one of the major biologists of the nineteenth century, Karl Ernst von Baer, the discoverer of the human ovum. The earliest significant statement of this position came in her President's Annual Address to the 1902 Convention and International Conference of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).⁴⁴ The same set of arguments appears in her speeches as late as 1936.⁴⁵ After lengthy introductory comments about "sex-prejudice," Catt began her biological analysis: "sex-prejudice is the outgrowth of a theory practically universal throughout the world for many centuries past. It may be briefly stated as a belief that men were the units of the human race. They performed the real functions of the race. . . ."⁴⁶ This idea, Catt claimed, combined with religious concepts of divine authority, worked to exclude women from spheres of social, political, and economic activity in numerous cultures. The proper response, she suggested, was a look at the biology and evolution of sexual reproduction itself. She began at the microevolutionary level, with a claim that value judgments about sex based on the physiology of reproduction were fallacious:

Von Baer, a German scientist, pricked the bubble of the fallacy, that "man is the race" in 1827 when he demonstrated that father and mother contribute equally to the physical, mental, and moral characteristics of their children. . . . In the perpetuation of the race, the function of motherhood is not the negative, insignificant thing it was once thought, but equal in importance with fatherhood.⁴⁷

She then drew this microevolutionary point into her narrative of progress: "More, as the race obeys that still higher law which compels humanity to

⁴⁴ Carrie Chapman Catt, "President's Annual Address," typescript, February 1902. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, Folder 6.

⁴⁵ Carrie Chapman Catt, "The Woman's Century, 1820–1920: A Message to Sweet Briar College, June 9, 1936," 18. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 6, Folder 2.

⁴⁶ Catt, "President's Annual Address" (1902), 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

climb onward and upward to the newer ideals and nobler conceptions, the hereditary traits of each generation come equally from the father and the mother. . . .”⁴⁸ Catt thereby established her most fundamental evolutionary principle: that value judgments cannot be drawn from microevolutionary sexual difference.

Nonetheless her language about the (human) “race” leaves open the possibility that microevolutionary racial difference might limit participation in the progress narrative to white women. Indeed, this same 1902 address contains some of Catt’s most direct language linking woman suffrage and race. In it, she makes it clear that she accepts microevolutionary distinctions of value between races: “There are doubtless many reasons for the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon race, but none more important than the fact that the Anglo-Saxons have permitted to their women a larger individuality and independence than any other people.”⁴⁹ She thus directly engaged racist language within the context of progress. And so the dichotomy was set: absolute participation by (white) women in the narrative progress, but potential exclusion of other racial groups.

III. 1903–1920: THE PRAGMATICS OF DIFFERENCE

At the beginning of the twentieth century, after Catt had achieved prominence and power within the suffrage movement, she shifted her language away from issues of justice and increasingly toward tactical questions about achieving of the goal of suffrage. Racial difference became a crucial issue for her because of its varying significance in the political cultures of different American regions. Catt’s 1903 President’s Annual Address to the NAWSA demonstrated how she condensed her broader evolutionary language into a means for pragmatically addressing local issues. Claims of justice may have their place, she argued, but they did not win elections: “We are not to fight in the future against the prejudices of society. . . . [A]nd the time has now come for us to lay aside our claim of right and justice. . . .”⁵⁰ Kraditor sees the 1903 convention, and Catt’s observation, as representing a “new pact between woman suffrage and white supremacy.”⁵¹ Marilley discusses the roots of this form of “white supremacist”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁰ Carrie Chapman Catt, “President’s Annual Address,” manuscript, 1903, 20. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, Folder 6.

⁵¹ Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 200.

suffrage argument in the “statistical argument” of Henry Brown Blackwell in the 1870s and 1880s. She and Spruill also address Catt’s arguments in her exchange at the 1903 convention with the Mississippi suffragist Belle Kearney, who herself invoked “Anglo-Saxon” superiority.⁵² Kraditor, Marilley, and Spruill do not address the 1902 convention speech. All three clearly emphasize the importance of race in Catt’s thought, but do not adequately represent her engagement with its contingent evolutionary valences.

Literacy became a major marker for Catt’s contingent exclusion of non-white groups from suffrage. Borrowing from a long suffragist tradition, she often argued that white women’s literacy was on average substantially greater than that of portions of the fully enfranchised male population. Catt’s comments to the House Judiciary Committee on 16 February 1904 are indicative of this approach: “To-day there are in this country 977,000 totally illiterate negroes, and unless they happen to be in those states where their own State government has disfranchised them for various causes . . . ,” they are able to vote.⁵³ This same language surfaces when Catt again came before Congress to make a statement on woman suffrage in April of 1917.⁵⁴ As Catt saw it, the woman suffrage movement and its attendant controversy “are but the usual signs which have marked every evolution of the race. . . .”⁵⁵ This time, however, the Wilsonian rhetoric of the defense and expansion of democracy as a worthy goal of international conflict and war could be heard in the background of her claims: “The hearts of women would beat more happily could they feel that our own government had been true to the standard it now proposes to unfurl upon an international battle-field.”⁵⁶ The war, however, redoubled what Catt saw as the microevolutionary conflict between white women’s claims of equality and the greater political rights accorded to men of all groups. Her positions approached those of the eugenicists of the time, as she further invoked the evolutionary language of degeneration:

These women, hard workers thousands of them, have reported that illiterate men signing their names with a mark, ignorant men

⁵² Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 161–64, 173; Spruill, “Race, Reform, and Reaction,” 105–6, 108.

⁵³ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Woman’s Suffrage,” House Judiciary Committee Hearing, 16 February 1904, 18. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, Folder 7.

⁵⁴ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Address at Congressional Hearing, April 20, 1917,” typescript. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

without understanding, foreign men who could not speak English, drunken men with minds blurred, half-witted men, degenerate men and every other type which makes up the political underworld, were marshaled to the polls and directed to vote against women suffrage by men notorious for political dishonesty.⁵⁷

The implication, again a contingent one, was that the country might have been better off had these men been excluded from voting.

These arguments were voiced outside of the halls of Congress in a speech made at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on 7 March 1916.⁵⁸ Catt began with a strong emphasis on justice, stating that the United States was the “most inconsistent, unjust and tyrannical of all the nations,” because it purported to be a “government of the people.”⁵⁹ Manifestly it was not, unless (white) women could not be “people.” Along lines sketched out as early as “Subject and Sovereign,” she insisted that if other social and racial groups could be “people” in a political sense, so too could white women:

Everybody knows no Negro ever asked for the vote. Everybody knows that it was thrust upon him. . . . It is not necessary to repeat here the history of the time which extended the vote to the Indian. The government, the National Government, gave it to him because he was a ward of the nation.⁶⁰

She then added the macroevolutionary narrative of progress: “they [conservatives] do not know the meaning of the word ‘progress,’ they have never heard of evolution, but if they have they believe it stops with this generation.”⁶¹ Thus evolution again required movement toward woman suffrage, but in the context of a politics that differentiated the races when considering rights of democratic participation and inclusion.

As a category of value race advanced or receded from the surface of Catt’s rhetoric as her audiences varied during the first two decades of the twentieth century. She was clearly willing to apply contingent arguments about race in support of suffrage goals. She nonetheless understood that different races could make claims for equality based on narratives of prog-

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁵⁸ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Mrs. Catt’s Speech Tuesday Evening March 7th, 1916, Harrisburg, Penna.,” typescript. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, Folder 10.

⁵⁹ Catt, “Speech, Harrisburg” (1916), 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

ress toward justice that paralleled her arguments about sex. She therefore made some of her most inclusive and egalitarian statements at the same time that she was invoking exclusionary arguments in front of Congress. As if she wished to compensate for using racist arguments, her language from the late 1910s demonstrates that she could argue both sides of the question of race in microevolutionary terms. Her evolutionary understanding of race was therefore both in principle and in practice contingent: different races might, like the sexes, also participate together in the same narrative of progress.

Two of Catt's articles explicitly address the question of racial divisions in the final years of the suffrage campaign: "Applied Democracy," from the period of the First World War, and "Why the Southeastern States Refused Suffrage to Women," from approximately 1920. In both cases, Catt recognized the parallels between African-American claims to equal political participation based on constitutional law and her own claims about woman suffrage. In "Applied Democracy," which was drafted around 1915 and later revised and published in the November 1917 issue of *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Catt painted the issue of justice in democratic participation with the broadest brush she ever applied.⁶² Once again she attempted to turn the Wilsonian rhetoric of progressive democracy to the advantage of women's suffrage. At the same time, however, she was working at the most expedient political level, directly addressing in the *Crisis* version of her article the category of people most often disadvantaged by her invocation of microevolutionary racial difference: African-Americans. Thus she avoided the use of evolutionary terms—either of differentiation or of progress—in the article, which enabled her to speak to the concerns of women of color. She began with a definition of democracy: "the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government."⁶³ She then addressed women of color directly. She observed that white women and African-Americans were united in view of:

the women of the world waging their own double struggle to meet the new economic demands upon them while trying to secure a voice in their own government, and the Negro facing the selfsame

⁶² Carrie Chapman Catt, "Applied Democracy," typescript article, ca. 1915. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 7, Folder 1. Published as: Carrie Chapman Catt, "Applied Democracy," *Crisis* (November 1917), 19–21.

⁶³ Catt, "Applied Democracy," typescript, 1.

problem and often refusing to see that through the Negro women his race is as vitally involved in the woman suffrage question as race can be.⁶⁴

It is apparent here that the inclusion of women of color in the category “the women of the world” is ambiguous. Nonetheless, the rigors of the war had brought about a concert of interests between (white) women and people—and women—of color.

Catt went on to make perhaps her most ringing endorsement of egalitarian principles. Here the narrative of progress emerges, but it is truncated and forced into the immediate context of the defense of democracy in the war:

And there will never be a true democracy until every responsible and law-abiding adult in it, without regard to race, sex, color, or creed has his or her own inalienable and unpurchasable voice in the government. That is the democratic goal toward which the world is striving today.⁶⁵

She deplored at length racial violence, and condemned overt racism on the part of woman suffrage activists. Catt mentioned the East St. Louis race riot of 2 July 1917 and the racist statements of the suffragists of the National Woman’s Party who were arrested and imprisoned for displaying banners criticizing Woodrow Wilson while picketing the White House in 1917.⁶⁶ In this minimally evolutionary view of the race question, she clearly linked the interests of white women and African-American men and women in the struggle for greater democracy, and descried as hypocrisy the failure to do so. Nonetheless, her language here became so inclusionary here that it slipped toward the nativist trope of the effacement of racial and ethnic identities:

As suffragists women . . . bespeak for and from America that broad application of democracy that knows no bias on the ground of race, color, creed, or sex. To that end the Americans may stand united, not as Irish-Americans, German-Americans, Negro-Ameri-

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2–3. See Linda J. Lumsden, *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the Right of Assembly* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 118–42; Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life*, 145–46.

cans, Slav-Americans and “the women,” but, one and all, as Americans for America.⁶⁷

When expediency drove Catt to loosen temporarily the links between progress and microevolutionary sexual and racial difference, the contingency of exclusionary and inclusionary racial moments in her thought could retreat into the background. Women of color could then emerge from behind a double rhetorical veil.

Catt’s minimal use of evolutionary language in “Applied Democracy,” however, did not mean that she was abandoning evolutionary arguments. Soon thereafter, Catt looked back on the question of sectional interest that left the southeastern states as the only group to failed to ratify the women’s suffrage amendment. She addressed the problem in an unpublished article entitled “Why the Southeastern States Refused Suffrage to Women.”⁶⁸ She began with an economic assessment of racism. Since the slave trade was profitable, financial interests had trumped the democratic principle that “all men are created equal.” Near the end of the piece, Catt tried to demonstrate how Southern racism harmed the woman suffrage cause: “As one friendly legislator replied to my query as to what was really the Southern objection to woman suffrage—it is merely negrophobia.”⁶⁹ In this mode, Catt resisted racism. Nonetheless her microevolutionary distinction of the races reappeared once more in support of contingent participation of people of color in the narrative of progress, while women of color were once again effaced: “The Negro had come from an extremely primitive race in a semi tropical climate. He had made little progress in race evolution when the slave trade found him. Slavery gave him little chance to rise.”⁷⁰ Thus, like the Native Americans some thirty years before, the African-American was a victim, but still one with a potentially lower value:

[B]ut one thing stands out clearly and that is that the Negro has been the innocent victim who has been wronged at every turn. It was not his fault that his ancestors were stolen and enslaved, not his fault that he was enfranchised before he could qualify, nor was it his fault that he did not meet the expectations of Northern phil-

⁶⁷ Catt, “Applied Democracy,” typescript, 4.

⁶⁸ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Why the southeastern states refused suffrage to women,” manuscript article, ca. 1920. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 7, Folder 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

anthropists when freedom and self-government were thrust upon him with no preparation.⁷¹

African-Americans' failure to "meet expectations" might be a result of unjustified discrimination, but so too it might be a result of their evolutionary status.

IV. 1921–1940: THE EXTREMES OF EVOLUTIONARY NECESSITY

In one final address made in 1921, Catt redoubled her focus on microevolutionary difference, driving it into its most extreme form. In that year, she accepted the first honorary doctorate ever awarded by the University of Wyoming. As part of the commencement exercises, she delivered the baccalaureate address.⁷² In it, Catt extensively examined one of the most powerful, complex, celebrated, and subtly racist new ideas in American social science: intelligence testing. She did so to explain to the university's graduates that they were an evolutionarily advanced and advantaged group, and that the status conferred upon them by that advantage also entailed the responsibility to serve evolutionary progress directly. Race difference was subsumed by elitist individualism, marking the apotheosis of the microevolutionary contingency of macroevolutionary progress in the construction of individuals as agents of evolutionary change.

Catt based her comments on the work of Henry Herbert Goddard, the psychologist who presided over a sprawling attempt to "test" the "intelligence" of every inductee into the United States Army during the First World War. Stephen Jay Gould has subjected the biases and flawed methods applied in Goddard's Army intelligence testing to withering critique.⁷³ She elaborated upon Goddard's quasi-Nietzschean conception of humanity as divided into three intelligence-based groups: "ten per cent . . . supermen," "twenty per cent" capable of understanding but not analysis, and "seventy per cent" lacking independent intelligence, while noting that: "not all the college graduates are necessarily supermen, and not all supermen have ever seen the inside of a college. Nevertheless . . . [t]he nation will be what they

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁷² Carrie Chapman Catt, "Baccalaureate Address," *University of Wyoming Bulletin* 18 (Laramie, December 1921). Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 4.

⁷³ Steven Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (rev. ed., New York: Norton, 1996), 188–204.

make it.”⁷⁴ Catt also endorsed Goddard’s description of elite intelligence as hereditarily determined: “There was something in that combination which threw you into the ten per cent. You had nothing to do with it. You were born there.”⁷⁵ This differentiation of individuals on the basis of intelligence thus corresponded to Catt’s microevolutionary language of distinction, by reading individual variations as a proxy for group differences.

Catt made this microevolutionary argument, of course, in order to link it to progress. She went so far as to attribute evolutionary agency to the Wyoming graduates, dubbing them “evolvers.” Both (white) men and women were involved in the same trajectory: “There is a law of evolution—you have learned much of that during your life in college. . . . I want to tell you that evolution requires evolvers—men and women of vision who are willing to live and to die for their causes.”⁷⁶ In conclusion, Catt reiterated her most powerful, quasi-theological language of progress, harking back to positions developed 35 years before: “Do not survey politics (for progress is politics and politics is progress). . . . Be men and women of vision; be evolvers; help the great Divine law to lead us nearer the millennium.”⁷⁷ Catt thereby deepened her commitment to a model of evolutionary progress based upon on fine gradations of microevolutionary difference, here described in the new and insidiously powerful language of intelligence testing. Once again, sex was no impediment to participation in the narrative of progress. Race, however, though refigured, remained as a contingent moment of potential exclusion of human groups from such participation.

After this point in her career, Catt moved away from the pragmatically complex and fragmenting work of the suffrage debates. Once the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, she founded and managed the League of Women Voters. Her primary interest, however, shifted to another cause, world peace and world government. This change motivated her to expand her inclusive language of participation in progress. Catt spoke out extensively against racist policies, targeting the Nazi persecution of Jews. So prescient was her engagement in this area that she was awarded the American Hebrew Medal for 1933.⁷⁸ She worked against militarism, and condemned nativist rhetoric of isolationism and “preparedness” in the 1920s and 1930s. The language of evolutionary progress retained its central position

⁷⁴ Catt, “Baccalaureate Address,” 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4. Catt also mentions “evolutors” in “Evolution—Fifty Years Ago: A Reminiscence,” *The Woman Citizen* 10 (11 July 1925), 8.

⁷⁷ Catt, “Baccalaureate Address,” 8.

⁷⁸ Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life*, 214.

in these debates. So too, though, did microevolutionary difference. As late as 1940, when she wrote an essay on “The Necessity for World Government” for the Woman’s Centennial Congress in New York, she included a narrative of evolutionary progress:

Men learned early that progress, even life itself, depended on orderly conduct and cooperation between individuals. From tribal life, with its tribal council, to our present complex civilization with its innumerable governmental organizations, the attempt to bring order into human relations has undergone a slow, steady, and often painful evolution.⁷⁹

Although microevolutionary distinction were here collapsed into “tribes,” “groups,” and “men,” it remains embedded within the greater narrative of progress.

At the end of her life, the significance of Catt’s contingent approach to racial difference was finally recognized in the context of recounting the history of African-American women. In 1939, the author Earl Conrad initiated a lively correspondence with Catt. Conrad, who had written extensively on African-American issues, was preparing a biography of Harriet Tubman, and was interested in Catt’s thoughts about Tubman’s association with Susan B. Anthony.⁸⁰ He surely expected that Catt would welcome his inquiries into the status of race in the suffrage question. While their correspondence remained cordial, in her letters Catt dismissed Tubman’s importance. In fact, she first responded: “I never heard of Harriet Tubman.”⁸¹ Later, in 1940, she belittled the concerns of African-Americans, while questioning their contributions to woman suffrage in terms that reveal her contingent understanding of racial difference: “There was no leadership on the part of the colored people at that time and there is very little even now.”⁸²

Eventually Conrad lost patience with Catt’s arguments, and worked out the most insidious consequences of her exclusion of people of color

⁷⁹ Carrie Chapman Catt, “The Necessity for World Government,” typescript article, 1940, 3. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, unmarked folder.

⁸⁰ Earl Conrad, *Harriet Tubman* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1943). Conrad’s Tubman papers are at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁸¹ Carrie Chapman Catt to Earl Conrad, 1 June 1939. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 1.

⁸² Catt to Conrad, 25 January 1940. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 1.

from a narrative of progress: they could thereby be excluded from history altogether. He wrote a long, meticulously argued and yet surprisingly gracious letter to Catt on 3 February 1940 in which he excoriated the suffragists' use of racial division for politically expedient purposes. He did so, however, in recognition of the larger "progressive" cause, turning Catt's own language of progress against itself by rejecting the placement of African-Americans outside the trajectory of progress: "In the history of woman suffrage we see the classic contradiction of a progressive and humanitarian idea trying to advance itself by utilizing a reactionary idea, namely that of white chauvinism."⁸³ Conrad did not accuse Catt of racism. Rather, he pointed out that she entertained the possibility of excluding African-Americans—and African-American women—from political life and historical understanding. Catt responded only with a short note in which she acknowledged Conrad's arguments, but stressed that he should not attack the suffragists too strongly, for: "Even yet, the old suffragists are among the most liberal minded upon this question."⁸⁴ At age 80, Catt was unable or unwilling to re-examine her long-standing evolutionary mappings of sex, race, and progress, even as Conrad foreshadowed the coming Civil Rights movement.

Carrie Chapman Catt's career provides a complex range of evidence about the application of evolutionary ideas to questions of human diversity and political participation. Her thought, like that of many of her contemporaries, tacked between progressive principles of historical development and microevolutionary grounds for differentiation, distinction, and discrimination. Catt had to think about race at the same time that she thought about sex because the analytical tool she believed to be most powerful, evolutionary thought, grounded arguments for progressive change on processes of differentiation between groups. Sex and race were therefore indeed two parts of a single problem. In her view, white women always participated in evolutionary progress, but people of color might or might not. Thus women of color occupied a doubly contingent position. Despite these dissonances, Catt's evolutionary thought did help to develop processes of political change that brought sexual equality closer to political reality. Nonetheless, because of the ways in which race and sex were implicated together in her writings through the narrative of evolutionary progress, race difference retained its potential as grounds for exclusion from politics and historical

⁸³ Conrad to Catt, 3 February 1940, 3. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 1.

⁸⁴ Catt to Conrad, 17 February 1940. Catt Papers, New York Public Library, Box 1.

legitimacy to the end of her career. Her activist successors in the Civil Rights and feminist movements would seek alternative grounds for justifying the expansion of political participation and transforming historical understanding.

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