Victoria Woodhull, Phoenix Rising
Dangerous Voices: Issues that Run Counter to Social Etiquette and Mores

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CINDY SAFRONOFF. Her 2015 dual biography *Crossing Swords: Mary Baker Eddy vs. Victoria Claflin Woodhull and the Battle for the Soul of Marriage* juxtaposes the personal lives, careers, and statements of two women's rights advocates on opposite sides of an American marriage debate in the early 1870s. Safronoff was featured in the *Sunday Boston Globe* and won 10 book awards for *Crossing Swords* in categories ranging from U.S. History to Nonfiction Drama, including a silver "Ippy" in Women's Issues. She presented her most recent historical research on Mary Baker Eddy's influence at the 2018 Center for Study of New Religions (CESNUR) academic conference in Taiwan. Safronoff shared her own experience of female empowerment in her 2011 e-book short story, *Climbing Mt. Rainier with the Chicks*.

CARI M. CARPENTER is a Professor of English at West Virginia University, where she is also Interim Director of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies and a core member of the Native American Studies Committee. She has published three books: *The Newspaper Warrior: Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins's Campaign for American Indian Rights, 1864-1891*, which won the 2016 Susan Koppelman Award for the Best Edited Book in Feminist Studies in Popular and American Culture from the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. She also edited *Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull: Suffrage, Free Love, and Eugenics* (2010) and wrote *Seeing Red: Anger, Sentimentality, and American Indian* (2008), which won Honorable Mention in the Gloria E. Anzaldúa Book Prize.

LINDA SCHLOSSBERG received her Ph.D. in English Literature from Harvard, where she now serves as Assistant Director of Studies for the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program and teaches courses in gender, literature, and creative writing. She has published essays on various aspects of nineteenth-century literature and culture and is the co-editor of *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (NYU Press). Linda is the past recipient of a Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellowship in the Humanities (Haverford College) and was twice selected by Harvard's graduating classes as one of their "Favorite Professors." Her novel *Life in Miniature* was published in winter 2010 and her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *McSweeney's*, *Conduit*, and *Post Road*. Linda was the recipient of the Writer's Center 2016 Emerging Writer Fellowship and is currently completing a feminist dystopian novel.

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Cindy Safronoff

I'm Cindy Safronoff. I spent more than three years immersed in Victoria Woodhull's life and the issues she raised while I was writing my book *Crossing Swords*. I really came to realize what a significant historical figure she is, the extent of her influence, and also her history was virtually invisible to me prior to my project and I did not start out to write a Victoria Woodhull biography. I started out writing a biography about Mary Baker Eddy, and I wanted to set her statements about marriage and womanhood these things – and women's rights – these things we call women's issues which really relate to everyone, there are everyone's issues, but we call them women's issues. I was trying to set them in historic context I wanted to understand how people would have perceived her statements at the time she said them. Really, this was going to be a whole lengthy history involving her whole life but at one point I discovered Victoria Woodhull and how Woodhull came into play in Mary Baker Eddy's life and I started to think well, gosh, I'm going to have to have a chapter that was going to include Victoria Woodhull, but she wasn't even going to be the focus. But the more I kept coming back to Victoria Woodhull I kept seeing more and more her significance, her influence, and eventually that one chapter became the focus of the book and eventually it became a dual biography where I gave the two women equal time and I tried to treat them with equal fairness. Just in case anybody doesn't know, Mary Baker Eddy was a leader, a Christian leader, a religious leader, who lived a very similar lifespan as Victoria Woodhull, so primarily 19th century.

So this, what I was saying about Victoria Woodhull's history being invisible, I found that Victoria Woodhull's issues were embedded within certain statements that Mary Baker Eddy made, so I found that Mary Baker Eddy was responding to these issues that Woodhull was raising, just not using her name, and not referencing her. But the reason I gave them equal standing in my book was I found that I couldn't really do justice to the issue without really including Woodhull as a significant figure.

And I have really come to appreciate, too, the extent of Woodhull's fame. I really believe – what I tell people is that at certain points in time Victoria Woodhull was probably THE most famous woman in America. She was, in the same way as Hilary Clinton was a few years ago were she was on everybody's mind, everybody knew who she was, she was in the news, people talked about her. What launched my journey with Victoria Woodhull was one statement that Mary Baker Eddy made on the topic of wedlock, where she referred to "crossing swords" and "free love" and the year 1875. She said it was about the year 1875 that she crossed swords with free love. And that's what launched my research. What did she mean crossing swords? What was free love exactly in 1875? And what happened? I think in America at that time, anyone who lived during that time would have known that Mary Baker Eddy was talking about Victoria Woodhull, she didn't have to say it, in the same way that if for our generation I said "Apollo Mission," "giant leap," "1969," who am I talking about? Neil Armstrong. Right? You just know it. That's how Victoria Woodhull was. If you said "1875 and free love" people would say "ooo, Woodhull." And another famous statement by Mary Baker Eddy where she says "This is woman's hour," and she defends woman's right to hold the highest office in the land; well, she is talking about the presidency. Well, again, at the time she said that, if you put those words together, the audience would have immediately thought "Victoria Woodhull" because she was the one running for president not just in 1872 but

she did again a couple more times. So during that time period she was tightly associated with the idea of a woman running for president. And so it makes me wonder, well, what other significant historic figures were addressing Woodhull's issues but without using her name? So it takes kind of an in depth study; it took me years to get to this point. Where and now where a lot of the things I read of Mary Baker Eddy I can see I can see "oh! There's another place where she is addressing Victoria Woodhull's issues'' and that were previously invisible to me, now I can see them. This is an area where I plan to continue doing research on, I'm hoping to write a sequel, but it takes years to do these kind of things.

And I would like to say, too, for Mary Baker Eddy to defend woman's right to run for president at that time was a dangerous, risky thing to say because there was this provocativeness that surrounded Victoria Woodhull and so many people were distancing themselves from her publicly. And that is part of why she is so invisible today because she's more or less got written out of history.

So, in my study because I was comparing and contrasting the lives, the careers and public statements of these two most famous women in America figures, the way I frame these issues that these dangerous issues that run counter to social etiquette and mores, I frame the issue as this was an American marriage debate, very similar to the one that America went through several years ago. In fact, I was doing my research during that American marriage debate, so I was seeing a lot of similarities, "Hey, this was what was going on in America when Victoria Woodhull was the most famous woman in America," and that is why I call it the "great American marriage debate of the early 1870s" when women's rights was the new thing. So that is how I introduce the topic to people, and it helps people resonate with this. And at that time the term "women's rights", just that term, was very provocative and controversial. Not all women supported women's rights. And even within the women's rights movement it was very divisive within where you had two camps of Victoria Woodhull and the New York faction of the women's rights movement had different ideas than the Boston faction in terms of how women's rights was going to impact the institution of marriage.

I guess am going to conclude my spot by saying that I really see a need for deeper scholarship on Victoria Woodhull and I was really excited to hear what the Robbins Hunter Museum is doing with primary source material and that is so needed. Because Victoria Woodhull is a very difficult biographical topic. She really is, there is not a lot of information to go on, and there is a lot of ambiguity and confusion and different takes on what just the most basic facts are just not clear in a lot of things, so I am really excited by what you guys are doing and I am looking forward to hopefully taking advantage of it in the future.

Cari Carpenter

I'm Cari Carpenter coming from West Virginia University, so not too terribly far away. I did want to just thank first of all Judith and Ann and Christina and everyone else who brought us here. This is so exciting because I'm not used to being places where people are aware of who Victoria Woodhull was, so it's quite exciting to see her in statue form and Victorian underwear and the whole thing, so it's been really exciting.

I just wanted to show you, speaking of Tennie, her sister Tennessee, I have a chapter in here which is a book [holding up *Monserrate Revisited: The Cook Collection in Portugal*]. It's a beautiful book about the commemoration of the estate where Tennie and her husband lived in Portugal. So if you're interested in this you are welcome to look at it; I wanted to share it with you.

To the extent that anyone's life reflects the time in which she lives, Victoria Claflin Woodhull embodies hers, born a year after Morse's development of the electric telegraph in the United States, she died not long after promising $5000 to the first person to fly across the Atlantic. Like the inventions her life witnessed, she crossed what others seemed uncrossable. First and foremost a performer, her extravagant crossovers occurred on stage as she delivered speeches perhaps even more shocking by today's standards; speeches that espoused free love, a more equal distribution of wealth, and women's rights. In Amanda Frisken's words, Victoria Woodhull was one of the most powerful speakers of the time; her contribution was to act out the period's most extreme positions on a public stage.

I have chosen to focus today on two speeches of Woodhull's that have not received much attention, but which I would argue are crucial to understanding the convergence of what seems like contradictory beliefs: feminism, sexual science, religion, and eugenics. While scholars tend to divide her life into two distinct phases, her early progressive commitment to free love and her later conservative eugenics, I will show that the two are more connected than previously imagined and that they need to be refigured in order to understand both her and her context. Such analysis of speeches like *The Elixir of Life*, written in 1873 and *The Garden of Eden* [1875] reveal that Woodhull at once more and less progressive than our historical memory has allowed.

At first glance, Woodhull seems to be a woman of great contradictions. She was the first to print Marx's manifesto in the United States, even as she and her sister Tennessee—Tennie—using Cornelius Vanderbilt's money, were the first known female stockbrokers in New York City. She condemned masturbation at the same time that she called for what we would now deem sex education; she described herself as a spiritualist and once spoke of the limits of a church creed while infusing many of her later speeches with biblical scripture. It is our 21st century lens, however, that makes these seem like contradictions. Many of her ostensibly paradoxical beliefs were consistent with those of the time. In blasting solitary vice, for example, she borrowed from the 19th century hygiene movement that deemed masturbation as dangerous in part because it wasted critical bodily resources. Considering a lecture to young men by Alexander[1] Graham – who is now known most famously as the inventor of the graham cracker. ([Laughing] I know you'll never look at graham crackers the same way!) "Therefore that the emission of semen enfeebles the body more than the loss of 20 times of the same quantity of blood, more than violent cathartics and emetics, the frequent excessive loss of it cannot fail to produce the most extreme debility and disorder and wretchedness of both body and mind." Woodhull's –([laughter] Who knew?) – Woodhull's *The Elixir of Life* expresses a similar sentiment, "with this knowledge of masturbation added to the stifled but still growing passion, the decline into a morbid sexual condition which running into years carries them beyond the possibility of a return to natural and healthy action to maturity, utterly ruined sexually and physically." While Graham and Woodhull would ultimately

[1] *Sic:* It was Sylvester Graham (1795-1851).

reach different conclusions both were preoccupied by what they saw as improper sexuality.

Marshalling various medical and religious literature Woodhull, not unlike hygienists, sketched a vision of sexual health that seems rather Draconian today. It is not difficult to draw a connection between such writing and a later eugenic preoccupation with the so-called fit and unfit. Given these ~~p~~arameters on sexuality, free love becomes something else indeed. Woodhull's preoccupation with sexuality was accompanied by an increasing use of Christianity. *The Garden of Eden* from 1876 is a sublime tour-de-force which figures the human body as Eden and if you read it, I re-read it last night and I was struck by how actually she is reading the body as Eden and vice versa. It is really amazing text. Despite the fact that it has gained little attention in studies of Woodhull, I would argue that it embodies her profound, seemingly contradictory devotion to feminism, sexual science, spiritualism, and eugenics. It allowed her to talk about the body- something she did earlier quite frankly- through a more acceptable Christian lens. In this sense, the body becomes a place of purity, of "the highest and divinest functions." Each body part and function corresponds to a divine geography; as she writes, "how is the body watered and fed? Is it not by a stream which is the extension of the mouth? As it changes constantly as it encircles the system. Does not the support of the body enter it by the mouth and by the river which is the extension of the mouth where it enters the stomach?" She notes that as the river Pison branches, so does the body branch into the heart and lungs, and, these are her words, "A river to water the land of pleasure and delight enters by the mouth and extending by way of the stomach, intestines, heart, lungs, arteries and veins, waters the whole land that suffers pain and brings forth." The process of excretion becomes a process of grace, of natural and involuntary purification, thus one of the most vulgar aspects of the human body, and one of the time was one of great concern to urban dwellers, is sanctified. She does not shirk from explicit images remarking that the description of the swift current of the river had echoed the precise sound of urination.

The second to last paragraph is cluttered with exclamation marks to give the piece a sense of religious exaltation that would be appropriate given her mother's experiences with the revivals of the Great Awakening, as she said "Welcome! Thrice Welcome! Thou messenger of God" and this goes on for several lines – it is pretty amazing – so indeed biblical scripture becomes a compelling way for Woodhull, increasingly dependent on public approval, to discuss sexuality.

As Altina Waller[2] has argued in her analysis of Elizabeth Tilton, *Beecher's Gospel of Love* held that women were of a higher sense of nature that made them closer to God and at the same time more vulnerable to victimization. In these terms, religious aspect is akin to and perhaps a safer vehicle for sexual passion. As Joanne Passet[3] notes, Woodhull began to infuse her speeches with biblical scripture in 1874 using her Bible and her daughter, who often read a religious piece as props. The Christian ethos was adopted even before this, however. An article from the *Detroit Union* of 1873 notes her regret that her words might be construed into a lack of veneration for Christ. She was a

[2] Altina L. Waller, *Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton: Sex and Class in Victorian America*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.
[3] Joanne E. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, p. 103.

religious woman; she revered Him and His doctrines. And as Mary Gabriel notes,[4] beginning in 1875 the *Weekly* ran stories endorsing Catholicism, a trend that irked some Spiritualists. In some sense, however, the Christian thread had been there all along. [Turning to Cindy Safronoff, "I found it was interesting what you were saying about her connection to Mary Eddy given of course Mary Eddy's Christianity. So, definite connection there."] In some sense the Christian thread had been there all along, but while her critics condemned her decision to embrace Christianity as hollow and opportunistic, it was not, in fact, a radical departure for her.

Much of the theory of social freedom she had previously preached was founded in the polished socialism of the 1850s. Woodhull mined Christian rhetoric throughout her life whether speaking of sexual science, eugenics, or free love. The bridge between Woodhull's free love ideology and her commitment to sexual science and eugenics is also evident in her earlier speeches like *The Elixir of Life* which she gave to the American Association of Spiritualists in 1873. At first glance, the speech seems consistent with many feminist beliefs today. Woodhull defines free love in contrast to the brutal lust which married women are [were] frequently subjected [to] by their husbands, women's stifled sexual desire and the hypocrisy of men who preach of purity and yet pursued extramarital affairs. As Woodhull declares, "Is it not foolish then—aye, is it not more than this, is it not criminal, longer to attempt to place limits upon this heaven ordained passion?"

Although it may be difficult for us to admit some of Woodhull's eugenic rhetoric was matched to feminist beliefs for example, using her own experience, she argued that unsatisfying marriages made for unfit offspring. Thus, it was for the good of the children the more egalitarian relationships were pursued. I think that was one way she was able to use what was obviously very eugenic language that should make us uncomfortable, but she is showing views in a feminist way. So that may be something to think more about. It was for the good of the children that more egalitarian relationships were pursued. In her endorsement of consensual sexual relations based on love even in and especially outside of the despotism of marriage she raises astonishingly modern questions about whether sexuality might exist outside of patriarchal oppression. Yet embedded within *The Elixir of Life* is a rhetoric that depends on a conservative moral and immoral binary. And she states, "I indeed thank heaven for giving me the moral strength to utter the plain, unvarnished truth." In describing this as a heaven ordained passion, Woodhull imbues it with a sense of Christian morality implicitly challenging those who call her ideas obscene.

She also uses shame which inevitably invokes authority. "Are we indeed so impure that to us all sexual things are impure?" This suggests that people are ashamed only if they have reason to be. She gets braver as she goes along, at one point describing a mirror held up to the audience to show its imperfections. "You are afraid that I may hold up a glass in which you will see your deformities and you scarcely dare to look upon them." In Woodhull's speech, she has the authority to hold the mirror and show others' deformities which were consistent with the eugenics discourse of the time.

Woodhull's attachment to eugenics grew stronger once she moved to Great Britain, the birthplace of the ideology. Her legacy as a eugenicist was sealed in her daughter's final will. Zulu Maud, her daughter, left her fortune to a eugenics society with

[4] Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull*, Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1998.

which Margaret Sanger was also affiliated. This gesture helped ensure that the complicated relationship between eugenics and the women's movement, and Woodhull in particular, would continue. So even as we celebrate Woodhull for her dangerous ideas, we should remember that some of her ideas were in fact dangerous to an inclusive women's movement. Such insight does not invalidate Woodhull's importance to the struggle as an early feminist, but it does give us a sense of how much feminism has evolved and how much it continues to need to do so. Thank you.

Linda Schlossberg

Hi everybody, my name is Linda Schlossberg, I'm so happy to be here, thank you for this generous invitation and I must apologize for reading from a lap top I am the least technologically adept person you will ever meet and I am appalled by this version of myself right now.

So, I want to take up some of the ideas that Cari was just touching on about this concept of maternal eugenics, which to us sounds kind of nutty, but in the cultural context of the 19th century and early 20th century was really part and parcel of mainstream feminist thought. So feminists such as Margaret Sanger, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*, you may know that story, did not see eugenics as being ~~a~~ in contradiction to feminist ideals but instead of being PART of those ideals. The idea here was that women, by virtue of their reproductive capacities, had a special responsibility – a special ability – to positively shape the future of the nation by actively choosing to reproduce with men who were morally and physically fit. The idea of who was fit was obviously a very fraught one. In discussion we might talk about that a little bit, but part of the anxiety about fitness at this time was linked to various discourses around immigration and the idea that the United States was becoming what some writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman put it, "too hospitable to foreigners" and that these people from other countries were diluting the purity of the American body. All sorts of interesting sexual and physical anxieties that are at play there.

What's fascinating for us is that we think of the 19th century – even if our knowledge of 19th century America is only limited to something like *Little Women* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we know it is a period that really idealizes motherhood. So we think, gosh, how can this be a feminist ideal at the time? Doesn't this just relegate women to their reproductive capacities? Isn't it part of that same framework? But in the cultural context of the nineteenth century, when even white women who were wealthy held very little political power, this concept becomes extremely seductive. Because what could be more powerful than this ability to literally breed a better race of Americans? The terminology that was often used around this – and it wasn't necessarily explicitly said to be about whiteness – the discourse would be "we are the mothers of the 'new race;' we are creating a new race of Americans." Again, it was this whole kind of idea of physical strength and well-being.

For Woodhull, along with the quite astonishing things she said about free love and sexuality, part of the idea of this doctrine of free love was the opportunity to select only the best and most capable partners in reproduction. The idea was not to be stuck with this pathetic guy who you ended up married to (oh, no! [laughter]) but instead to have this privilege to create this better race. For Woodhull, she often analogized traditional marriage to a kind of sexual slavery. Part of the idea was that women would be

limited in this regard. She had all sorts of other really fascinating claims about motherhood; one which I find intriguing is the idea that the child at times should not be conceived of as property of an individual set of parents but rather in a sense of a being 'of society' that the mother is helping to grow and raise this future member of society and that we are mistaken in thinking of children as being part of a privatized – what we would now call – nuclear family structure.

Another thing she was interested in was providing more sanitary conditions for women who were pregnant, and we see all sorts of ways in which these ideas reverberate in our own current moment. There is this real increasing pressure on pregnant women to effectively police their own behavior in order to assure healthy fetal development and optimal birth outcomes. Obviously, we all want to promote maternal health, that is obviously a good idea, we can talk about what the current political administration thinks later, but whatever our beliefs around all that are, many people have argued that we are in this cultural moment when there is this increased cultural obsession or almost hysteria around this idea of maternal wellness. Pregnant women in addition to being asked, obviously, not to smoke, or take drugs, or drink, are told 'don't eat sushi,' 'don't eat brie cheese,' 'don't dye your hair,' 'don't use nail polish,' 'don't put on sunscreen' – I always tell my students my parents drank and smoked their way through my mom's pregnancy. We see this big generational shift, and I think that we see these recommendations often being defined as a part of a kind of feminist health movement, so the way people often frame their interest in natural beauty products, or when they eat organic food, when they are pregnant is that it is a way of taking control and power over their bodies and their reproductive outcomes and it is often framed as being in keeping with environmentalist ideals and being anti-corporate and all this, there is obviously this whole marketplace for these sorts of products.

The scary side of all of this, of course, is what we might think of as current policing of women's bodies and the way in which these discourses around maternal health and wellness align very neatly with conservative ideas about controlling women's bodies and the surveillance of appropriate ways of being pregnant or being a mother.

We've seen in recent years the ways in which pregnant women, especially women of color, have been subject to varying degrees of criminal prosecution and civil intervention under various "fetal endangerment" or "fetal abuse" statutes. A few months ago Montana prosecutor Gerald Harris called for an "immediate crackdown" on women who use alcohol or drugs while pregnant. The idea was to call on relatives, friends, and even strangers to report instances of "women abusing their innocent unborn children." If there are provable violations the state will seek to imprison and "incapacitate" the women. The press release around this says, "if an expecting mother chooses to abort an unborn child instead of refraining from drug or alcohol use we trust the attorney general to make the right decision on behalf of all Montanans and continue this fight to the extent necessary to ensure justice is afforded to the most vulnerable of our society." So again, [we see] this real surveillance around what constitutes appropriate maternal behavior.

You might remember that a couple of years ago the CDC issued this very controversial recommendation that all women and adolescent girls of reproductive age just refrain from drinking altogether just in case they happen to get pregnant and happen to damage a hypothetical fetus. So whether or not you were currently sexually active, just in case, you should not drink anything because you might end up damaging this

hypothetical child and – we can laugh about it – but what is interesting is this concept that women are always conceived of as being pre-pregnant: these kinds of walking wombs who must be ever vigilant in preparation for a possible baby.

What we are witness to here, then, is this kind of historical moment in which pregnant women are being conceptualized as incubators or hosts for a future child. Some of you might remember Oklahoma representative Justin Humphrey said this thing in an interview where he referred to pregnant women as "hosts". The idea was to propose a bill that would require women to get written consent from their male reproductive partners if they wanted to get an abortion. The idea was that, he said, well, "I know women think of this as their body but I actually think" – he stumbled over the words – "I think you are a host". As if we are an Airbnb or something and the fetus is just kind of a visitor.

Basically, we are in this interesting moment. Some people call it a kind of "Handmaid's Tale" moment, where we see the maternal body and the fetus as being sort of locked in a kind of. . .almost competing claims. There are competing civil rights claims that are being discussed and we can see that the interests as it were of the unborn child or the future fetal citizen are being pitted against those of the mother whose civil liberties are increasingly under attack. One minute you are the female "ok, so I shouldn't eat sushi," and the next moment your civil rights are being taken away. Just keeping all of this in mind, thinking again of how we might be drawn to a discourse of the kind that Woodhull and her contemporaries proposed around ideals of maternal agency and maternal power, but we always want to be attentive to the ways in which these kind of ideas can slip into other kinds of more nefarious discourses that can be bad for women.

Phyllis Thompson

I'm Phyllis Thompson, I am a 19th century cultural historian but I routinely teach 21st century feminism, so following from Linda I am going to bring this to that place.

"My brothers and sisters, I'm going to tell you some plain truth tonight, I know I shall not please all your ears. I value the good opinion of you all, but I value the truth more. And if to gain the former I must withhold one iota of the latter, I shall fail in securing it."

That is of course, Victoria Woodhull, from a piece called *The Scarecrows of Sexual Slavery*. I vote we let her write all the titles. What does it mean to fully speak truth? And at what risk are we, when we raise our voices loudly, what does it mean to speak truth ABOUT someone who has done something braver than we will ever do?

It is complicated to choose heroes. My students consistently want simple heroes, actors from the past who have spotless intersectional politics. And it is not just that the past is a foreign country where they do things differently, but that we all contain, as Whitman put it, multitudes, some of them quite contradictory.

It is especially complicated to find female heroes, it seems. Look at the 2016 Republican primary debate in which the candidates were asked which woman should appear on a ten dollar bill. There were two calls for Rosa Parks, which is fine and well, Jeb Bush wanted Margaret Thatcher, Kasich came up with Mother Theresa – this is American money – Mike Huckabee called for his wife and Ben Carson for his mom, and who do you think our president wanted? Ivanka. So these men literally could not think of a woman from American history worthy of public honor. And then Carly Fiorina doing ~~it~~ no better calling an empty chest, you're not worth it, making "we ought to recognize that

women are not a special interest group," unlike conventionally empowered white men who should be represented on the money? Why is it so difficult to fixate on a woman worth remembering? What about a feminist hero? Forget it! We feminists hold each other to impossibly high standards. It is a very difficult thing.

Cindy reminded us that Woodhull was invisible to history, to memory, for her imperfections, really, she has a moment of being the most famous woman in America and she disappears. Why? For these ideas as Cari pointed out, can be dangerous to an inclusive woman's movement, right?, it's easier to let go than to grapple with those. So Woodhull is really no use to an aetiological feminist progress narrative. She's both ahead and behind.

Philosopher Marilyn Frye has argued that oppression involves the requirement that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself. As she put it, "It is often a requirement of oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signify our docility and acquiescence in our situation." Shall we agree that Victoria Woodhull quite splendidly did not comply? She did something quite distinct. She brings to mind for me the words of theorist Sarah Ahmed: "To be recognized as a feminist is to be assigned to a difficult category, and a category of difficulty."

Woodhull's own life choices did make her a difficult heroine. She was arguably brought down by her insistence on making her own moral choices. Exiled from drawing rooms and from histories of feminism. Susan B. Anthony, something of a fair weather friend, noted she would seem as lewd and indecent.

My own research is about discourses of pleasure in private life. And in the 19th century hegemonic discourses, women were encouraged to take pleasure in doing their duty, that is, pleasure was to be had second-hand. Woodhull, of course, was having none of this, she didn't fit. She wasn't interested in a supporting actor role. But her bombastic claim to power, the radical nature of her proffered solutions, made her more difficult to hear over time. For example, here she is going all Lysistrata, "Let women issue a declaration of independence sexually and absolutely refuse to cohabit with men until they are acknowledged as equals in everything. And the victory will be won in a single week," she wrote. Probable. [Laughter.] But not practical. Or, "I have an inalienable constitutional and natural right to love whom I may, to love as long or short a period as I can, to change that love every day if I please." This likely caused some kid-gloved hands to be raised to ears.

Yet this woman who was so insistent upon her freedoms could equivocate in a way that makes a modern feminist want to reach for the noise blocking headphones. To wit: she tells us that every woman was a daughter or sister, "No man who respects his mother or loves his sister can speak disparagingly of any woman however low she may seem to have sunk, she is still a woman. I want every man to remember this, every woman is or at some time has been a sister or a daughter." That statement, the Woodhull admiring part of me wants to believe, is a convenient one. Woodhull in contrast behaves as an actor in her own right. When she insists on her relationship to love or pleasure or to power, she insists that those relationships not be contingent. And in that she is bucking her culture, but here in this statement she is baring (bearing?) the voice of her culture, one, which women argued for the vote on the basis of being mothers. When there was a contingency to female citizenship, a special status, but that statement also sounds eerily familiar. Right? Every single liberal man quoted in *The New York Times* in the wake of

the Trump pussy-grabbing tape? They repeatedly framed women's dignity in relation to men's. A man sees an insult as problematic when he imagines how he would feel had it been levied against a woman to whom he is intimately tied. And a commitment to equality requires shifting this mind-set, so that men can imagine themselves in the role of target, that is, to empathize with women, not as potential sisters or wives, but as potential selves.

I want to pivot here to think about this political moment in which we live, this moment for feminism, one which found its fullest formation subsequent to the formation of this Dangerous Voices: Women Who Dare to Speak Up panel. How can the conundrum of Victoria Woodhull's life help us to understand the #MeToo moment? In the #MeToo era we pay too much attention to who is speaking; we interrogate the victims, their moral stature, their histories. This pattern, of course, has a long history. Early reports of Harvey Weinstein's behavior came, as has been much discussed, from famous women. Women with less to lose. But even they were slow to realize that their raised voices could deliver, and not just expose the bearers *to* danger. Lupita Nong'o noted her rage when she realized she was part of a pattern not an isolated incident. And her voice came only when she realized "there were ears to hear me." She hadn't thought anyone would listen. Or, Molly Ringwald: "I never talked about these things publicly because as a woman it always felt to me like I may as well have been talking about the weather." In recognition of this Judge Rose Maria Aquilina brought 160 women to testify to their pain, their stories, to create a space in which we all had to open our ears; in which that weather system raged. In which Larry Nasser, over his objections, had to listen.

So what stories do our master narratives of feminism accommodate or NOT accommodate over time? The courtroom had had no space to accommodate those stories in full so the fact that it was open to them was in itself news.

How might we split open the world further, make sense of more narratives, messier narratives? How might we welcome the multiplicity of truths? This is what I ask my students to do, to imagine more complicated futures. Not clearer pasts. To force the road to turn in more than one direction. For example, back to #MeToo. What can we do with Asia Argento? Initially a great heroine, white, beautiful, backed by a powerful man. But she loses all credibility in her suffering for having CAUSED suffering. She is a failed heroine. Here's another example. Having been unexpectedly alone in a room with a man who wielded direct professional power, and later called to account for not having changed the course of the evening's events, one victim of a harassment power play commented "Maybe if I were stronger, I would have. . .I was so stunned by the turn that it took, maybe other people would be stronger under that circumstance, but it is just how I conducted myself. I hope I'll never have another opportunity. Maybe if I did it again, I would do it better." So that was James Comey, the boss of the boss of every blue-jacketed team that ever spread in a hostage-filled cabin.

As in any movie, the lone hero is a myth. None of us are perfectly strong alone. There is no one person who can save us, now or in the past or ~~in~~ the future. How do we build a feminist narrative supple enough to accommodate surprising forms of power and harm? The Avitel Ronell story has been catastrophic in this spectacle of academic feminists closing ranks. How were they – we – to digest the bitterness of abuse being generated at the hands of one of our own? It undermined a narrative that had ~~in~~ itself been so costly and risky in the building. How are we to listen to make space for more

complicated stories if we keep yearning for heroes and sheroes? How do we allow everyone NOT contingent or relational citizenship, but central, fully manifested, citizenship? Woodhull wanted a simple story in certain ways. Money. The power of executive office. But she, like most of us, was forced to settle.

But when we thousand Victorias rise, phoenix-like from her ashes, can we find ways to honor the good without forgetting the regrettable? Can forgiveness and accountability be fellow travelers? Can we seek to understand rather than to recuperate? What can you do, the next time you hear a story, to complicate it? For understanding history is fundamentally about understanding stories and their worth, political, discursive, effective, ethical, epistemological. And when we insist on a progress narrative, or upon the creation of heroes and villains, we flatten the past. And this move is critical to our own sense that we are doing better, that we are finally recognizing the right people, but it is the boost to our imperfect selves, to our blind-nesses, can we listen more carefully to the past and can we find a way to live with the discomfort of imperfect stories without apology but with hope?