Contextualizing *The Woman's Bible:* Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Approach to "Individualism" and its Applications for a Contemporary Feminist Agenda

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Abstract

The Woman's Bible is one of the first examples of feminist interpretation of Christian Scripture. Compiled by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a prominent suffragist in nineteenth century America, this document has been controversial within the women's movement since its first publication in 1895. Contemporary feminist scholarship maintains an ambivalent relationship to *The Woman's Bible,* recognizing the importance of this text in Western feminism's historical narrative, while largely dismissing it as incompatible with a modern feminist agenda. *The Woman's Bible* is rejected because of its gender essentialism, which ignores the multiplicity and interrelatedness of all forms of oppression, including race, class, ethnicity and others. In representing oppression as the same for all women, *The Woman's Bible* is criticized as reinforcing racist and classist power structures that current Western feminist theory seeks to deconstruct. I argue that to dismiss *The Woman's Bible* for its gender essentialism is a reductive reading of the text, which fails to acknowledge the unique representation of *individualism* also present in the *Bible*. *The Woman's Bible* cannot be read accurately without contextualizing the document within Elizabeth Cady Stanton's understanding of *individualism,* as best delineated in her speech "Solitude of Self" of 1892. I locate *The Woman's Bible* within this framework of *individualism*, and demonstrate that this more comprehensive reading of the text confirms the continued relevance of *The Woman's Bible* toward nurturing contemporary feminist theory. It is the relationship between the *individualism* represented in this text, combined with the essentialism*,* that contributes significant insights into such ongoing feminist debates as the negotiation of the relationship between the universal and the particular: this amalgamation can nuance the navigation of the individual woman and her unique experiences of oppression, with the universal claims for women's rights. As such, *The Woman's Bible* must be brought back into the current Western feminist discussion.

Résumé

The Woman's Bible est l'un des premiers exemples d'une interprétation féministe des écritures chrétiennes. Compilé par Elizabeth Cady Stanton, une importante suffragette américaine du dix-neuvième siècle, cet ouvrage continue de soulever la controverse dans le mouvement de la libération des femmes depuis sa première publication en 1895. La littérature féministe contemporaine maintient une relation ambivalente envers *The Woman's Bible*, d'une part reconnaissant l'importance de ce texte dans l'histoire du féminisme occidental tout en le rejetant comme étant incompatible avec l'agenda féministe actuel. *The Woman's Bible* est écarté en raison de son essentialisme du genre, lequel ignore la multiplicité et l'interconnectivité de toutes les formes d'oppression, incluant la race, la classe, l'ethnicité et plusieurs autres. En représentant l'oppression comme étant la même pour toutes les femmes, *The Woman's Bible* est critiqué comme servant à renforcer un agenda raciste et classiste que la théorie féministe occidentale contemporaine cherche à démanteler. J'argumente que de rejeter *The Woman's Bible* pour son essentialisme du genre démontre une lecture réductive du texte, qui ne réussit pas à reconnaître la représentation unique de l'individualisme présente dans la Bible. Il est impossible de lire *The Woman's Bible* avec précision sans avoir d'abord contextualiser le texte à travers la conception de l'individualisme spécifique à la pensée d'Elizabeth Cady Stanton, laquelle est mise à l'évidence dans son discours 'Solitude of Self' publié en 1892. C'est dans ce cadre d'individualisme que je situe *The Woman's Bible* et démontre qu'une lecture plus approfondie du texte confirme que *The Woman's Bible* demeure d'une grande importance à la théorie féministe contemporaine. La relation entre l'individualisme tel que représenté dans le texte, combiné à la notion d'essentialisme, offre d'importantes pistes de réflexions pour les débats féministes actuels, par example la négociation de la relation entre l'universel et le particulier: cet amalgame peut nuancer comment la femme en tant qu'individu vit son expérience unique de l'oppression en contraste avec les revendications universelles pour les droits des femmes. En tant que tel, *The Woman's Bible* se doit d'être ramener à l'avant-plan dans la conversation féministe occidentale contemporaine.

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Introduction

> When, in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, women began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. (Stanton *Bible* 6)

At least one of the legacies of Elizabeth Cady Stanton was her recognition of just how deeply influential the traditional interpretation of Christian Scripture was in establishing and reinforcing women's subordinate status in nineteenth century North American society. Frustrated by the tendency to use the Bible as a tool to silence the emerging conversations about women's subordination, Elizabeth Cady Stanton undertook a project to decipher for herself exactly "what the status of woman really was under the Jewish and Christian religion" (Stanton *Eighty* 390*)*. *The Woman's Bible* is a commentary on the passages of the Christian Bible that pertain to women either by referencing them directly, or explicitly excluding them, thereby making them "prominent by exclusion" (Stanton *Bible* 5). Consequently, the document is only one-tenth the size of the Christian Bible (Ibid). Organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, this project is a compilation of social commentaries and interpretations of the Christian Scripture, written dominantly by Cady Stanton, with supplementary comments from her all-woman Revision Committee. *The Woman's Bible* was published in two volumes, the first issued in 1895, covering commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, or the Pentateuch (Griffith 211). In 1898 the remainder of the Old Testament and the entirety of the New Testament was released.

Cady Stanton understood women's subjugated position in society to be intertwined with her role in the family, society, politics, and religion (Pellauer 23). As an esteemed pioneer of the women's movement, and particularly instrumental in the struggle for women's enfranchisement,

Cady Stanton would thus not leave the religious sphere untouched. She adamantly believed that Christianity was one of the fundamental causes of women's subordinate status in society, [1] and *The Woman's Bible* sought to remedy this misrepresentation of women's "divinely ordained sphere" (Stanton *Bible* 6).

Revolutionary and controversial in nature, *The Woman's Bible* was a contentious document, for the women's movement particularly, from its inception. Immediately following its publication in 1895, the greater suffragist movement disassociated themselves from the document, lest it impede their struggle for the vote (Pellauer 22). In contemporary feminist discourse *The Woman's Bible* remains a controversial text, though now for reasons centering on its perceived inability to contribute to a modern feminist agenda. Cady Stanton's *Bible,* while acknowledged for its innovative nature, and its general importance in the historical narrative of both contemporary feminist theology and academia, is largely dismissed under the criticism of *gender essentialism*. Perceived as unable to address modern discourses surrounding multiple and intersectional forms of oppression, such as class, ethnicity, and race, the *essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* is seen as reinforcing the power structures that modern Western feminist theory seeks to trouble (Fiorenza 12). I argue, however, that when read accurately through the lens of Cady Stanton's unique understanding of *individualism*, [2] *The Woman's Bible* contributes new and valuable insights into modern feminist theorizing. The combination of *individualism* and

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[1] Cady Stanton felt that all religions ultimately allowed for the same subordinate position of women in society, stating in the Preface to the second volume of *The Woman's Bible*, "…the position of woman in all religions is the same…"

[2] The word "individualism" will be italicized throughout this thesis to emphasize the customized representation of the term that Elizabeth Cady Stanton creates and employs throughout "Solitude of women in society, stating in the Preface to the second volume of *The Woman's Bible*, "…the position of woman in all religions is the same…"

[2] The word "individualism" will be italicized throughout this thesis to emphasize the customized representation of the term that Elizabeth Cady Stanton creates and employs throughout "Solitude of Self."

essentialism represented in *The Woman's Bible* contributes to modern feminist theory by providing nuance to postmodern, poststructuralist feminist discourses; specifically the relationship between the individual woman, and universal claims regarding women's equality, while navigating multiply located subjects facing various forms of oppression. Considered "one of the hotly contested issues among contemporary (U.S.) feminists," such ongoing 'third wave'[3] discourses, also labeled *anti-essentialism* discourses, the "equality versus difference" binary, the sameness-versus-difference debate, or multicultural feminism, all address the relationship between the particular and the universal, and remain unresolved (Scott 34).

Methodology and Outline

The *individualism* represented in *The Woman's Bible* has been largely overlooked in modern discussions of the text, though it is fundamental to her worldview. This is perhaps due to its more subtle representation in *The Woman's Bible.* Therefore I will read *The Woman's Bible* through the lens of the *individualism* best delineated in Cady Stanton's 1892 speech "Solitude of Self." I show that the same undercurrent of self-sovereignty is present in her *Bible*, and argue that when situated accurately within Cady Stanton's unique framework of *individualism,* the *gender essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* works in tandem to provide new and significant insights for contemporary feminist theory. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* has yet to be exhausted for its potential contributions towards contemporary feminist theory, and to

[3] The wave metaphor is not universally accepted among contemporary feminist academics, nor is it uncontested that were we to adhere to this model, would we still be in the third wave. Although I will be utilizing this classification in my thesis for the sake of simplicity, I will be placing the 'waves' in scare quotes throughout to acknowledge this existent discourse. For an introductory reading on the troubling of this metaphor see "Feminism in waves: Re-imagining a Watery Metaphor" by Kim Sawchuk in *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader,* 2009 pp. 58-64.

reject the text on the basis of its *gender essentialism* would be not only reductive, but a great loss towards the development of feminist scholarship today.

My thesis begins with a biographical chapter on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, which describes her personal relationship with Christianity, leading her to propose and undertake such a controversial project as *The Woman's Bible.* This chapter will also elucidate the major events in her life which incited her immensely important role in North America's nineteenth century women's movement. This biographical chapter provides important insight into the foundations of Cady Stanton's development of the ideologies of *individualism* and *essentialism* that are reflected in her later texts the "Solitude of Self" and *The Woman's Bible.* Following this introduction, I trace the historical relationship between feminism and *The Woman's Bible,* from the first reactions within the nineteenth century women's movement, up to the present day. This chapter demonstrates the historically vacillating interactions between feminism and *The Woman's Bible*, which has culminated in its current status: revered as a pillar of contemporary feminist scholarship, yet rejected as a dead text, unable to propagate a modern feminist worldview. The third chapter delineates Elizabeth Cady Stanton's personalized philosophical conception of *individualism*. As this concept is most succinctly represented in "Solitude of Self," this chapter examines this speech as representative of her unique understanding and development of this philosophy. I demonstrate Cady Stanton's *individualism* as bringing nuance to modern feminist discourses by placing the *individualism* represented in "Solitude of Self" in dialogue with contemporary understandings of *individualism* within feminist epistemology. This demonstrates the continued relevance of this unique philosophical concept, which is also a foundational ideology within *The Woman's Bible.* The fourth chapter establishes this same *individualism* as present in *The Woman's Bible*, which validates my reading of the text within

this paradigm. However, the *individualism* in *The Woman's Bible* alone is not the reason that this text is beneficial for poststructuralist feminist discourse. Rather it is the combination of this *individualism* with its *gender essentialism* that provides nuance to modern discussions. Therefore, I begin this last section of my thesis with an introduction to contemporary poststructuralist feminist discourses on *essentialism*, the recognition of the multiplicities of oppressions, and the relationship between the universal and the particular. I then demonstrate that *gender essentialism* is present in *The Woman's Bible,* and more importantly, how this unique representation of *individualism* and *essentialism* benefits ongoing feminist discourses.

My thesis asserts the continual relevancy of these ideas reflected in *The Woman's Bible* to contribute to modern feminist theory, which can be utilized as a tool to engage with current feminist theory. However, it is also important to acknowledge that *The Woman's Bible* does contain anti-Jewish rhetoric, and the racism and classism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton is well documented in other of her public works. I do not wish to disregard these problematic discourses within the text, and in relation to the author of the text. Nevertheless, this should not prevent a critical feminist reading of this text, nor hinder the discovery of the positive elements which remain to be found in *The Woman's Bible*. I propose that we read *The Woman's Bible* as Cady Stanton suggests we read the Christian Bible: "as we do all other books, accepting the good and rejecting the evil it teaches" (Stanton 120). Beyond this, I propose that we read it accurately, informed by the interaction of *individualism* and *essentialism* in this document that can be made to counter current racist and classist ideologies of contemporary Western feminist scholarship.

Chapter 1

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Relationship with Christianity and The Women's Movement

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's relationship with religion was not always as cynical as is reflected in *The Woman's Bible*. Her lifelong engagement with Christianity was complex and dynamic, with her skepticism towards the Christian tradition becoming more pronounced over the course of her life. This chapter presents a brief biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton to examine the personal, social and political influences that contributed to her enduring struggle with Christianity. Cady Stanton's relationship to religion would become her impetus for developing the project of *The Woman's Bible,* and the controversial ideologies within this text.

Clear transitions are evident within Cady Stanton's relationship to Christianity, and for the sake of simplicity this chapter classifies these transformations of thought into four broad categories corresponding to decades of Cady Stanton's life. Beginning with "Fear" in her childhood, leading to a "Rebellion" in her adolescence, preceding a shift into a "Revisionist Approach" to Christianity, and finally a full "Rejection" of not only Christianity, but all designated religions as an impediment to achieving woman's political and social equality. This chapter examines how Cady Stanton reached this final stage of her relationship to traditional Christianity, where she rejected it as detrimental for her political goals. It was at this stage in her life that she was provoked to write *The Woman's Bible,* representing these ideas that help elucidate Cady Stanton's understanding of women and women's position in the society in which she lives, her humanity and her individuality. These ideologies continue to provide nuance to contemporary feminist discourse.

Fear: From Childhood until 1830

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born in 1815 into a strict Scotch Presbyterian family (Stanton *Eighty* 41), with a father who was deeply concerned with salvation (Griffith 5). In her autobiography, Cady Stanton remembers always being troubled by her relationship with Christianity, and reflects upon her "gloomy Calvinist training" as owing, in part, to later "mental anguish" (*Eighty* 41-3). In her childhood Cady Stanton felt distress because all of the positive activities and desires in her life were perceived as sinful. She understood God to be a mean-spirited figure who easily reprimanded people, denying all forms of pleasure in this world, and would likely do so in the next as well (11). Cady Stanton remembers feelings of "despair" (11) and "suffering" (26) in her young years when considering her position in the world within a Christian framework. The foreboding presence of the devil caused ceaseless anxiety for a young Elizabeth, as she states, "I early believed myself a veritable child of the Evil One, and suffered endless fears lest he should come some night and claim me as his own" (25). The Christianity of Cady Stanton's childhood, upon her own reflection in her later years, consisted of "depressing influences" which needed to be overcome by her "reasoning powers and common sense" (26). She later termed her relationship with Christianity as a "'pageantry of woe' which haunted [her] midnight dreams and shadowed the sunshine of [her] days" (Stanton "Religion" 436). This relationship of dread, gloom, and fear reached its pinnacle when Cady Stanton was away at school at Emma Willard's Troy Seminary, causing her to come to the brink of an emotional breakdown.

At the age of fifteen Cady Stanton came into direct contact with the Second Great Awakening, specifically the charismatic preaching of Charles Grandison Finney (Griffith 20). Finney was an evangelical preacher who was "the preeminent revivalist of the nineteenth

century, a pivotal figure in the history of American Protestantism" (19). Finney's theological perspective asserted that an individual could control his or her own role in attaining salvation, through a process of public confession, conversion and redemption (Griffith 20). Cady Stanton's perception of Finney's sermons, however, was that they focused on "the total depravity of human nature and the sinner's awful danger of everlasting punishment" (*Eighty* 41). In her autobiography she describes Finney as "a terrifier of human souls" (Ibid). Cady Stanton, along with the other young women at the seminary, attended Finney's services for six consecutive weeks while at Troy. These encounters caused her anxiety and fear about her own relationship with sin and the devil to grow enormously. At this time Cady Stanton did undergo Finney's prescribed evangelical conversion for salvation, however this only worsened her depression. Cady Stanton explains her relationship with Christianity at this stage in her life as extremely negative: "[f]ear of the judgment seized my soul. Visions of the lost haunted my dreams. Mental anguish prostrated my health" (Stanton *Eighty* 43).

Rebellion: the 1830s

When Cady Stanton returned home from the seminary immediately following this conversion, her family noticed that the young woman was emotionally disturbed. They decided to take a vacation to Niagara Falls to ease the young Elizabeth's mind, where the discussion of religion was explicitly forbidden by her father (Stanton *Eighty* 43). Her brother-in-law, Edward Bayard, assigned to her readings during the trip, to help distract her from her theological obsessions. These texts included George Combe's "Constitution of Man," and "Moral Philosophy" (*Eighty* 43), and some works by Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and James Fenimore Cooper (Griffith 21). These readings were extremely influential for Cady Stanton, as she notes, "I found my way out of the darkness into the clear sunlight of Truth. My religious

superstitions gave place to rational ideas based on scientific facts, and in proportion, as I looked at everything from a new standpoint, I grew more and more happy" (*Eighty* 44). Cady Stanton biographer Elisabeth Griffith suggests that reading these books and discussing them with Bayard showed Cady Stanton that Christianity could be questioned, emboldening her to be critical of the preaching of Finney, and opening for her the idea of looking at Christianity with some suspicion (Griffith 21). Cady Stanton's trip to Niagara has been described by Kathi Kern as another kind of conversion, following her evangelical experience, where she began to explore such Enlightenment ideologies as rationalism and individualism, which would become so fundamental to her later political agenda (Kern 97).

This critical approach to Christianity was fueled further for Cady Stanton through an encounter with a member of the clergy just after her graduation from the seminary in 1833. As Stevenson-Moessner explains, Cady Stanton was a member of the Presbyterian Girls' Club, a church group that performed charity work in order to sponsor the education of a minister at Auburn Theological Seminary. After this minister's graduation, the Girls' Club obtained, on behalf of their congregation, an invitation to have him preach at their church. The sermon that he chose for the occasion was, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority of the man, but to be in silence." Cady Stanton, and the other girls who had financed this individual's education, left the church "[i]n silence and in shock" (Stevenson-Moessner 673). This experience, which reflected "the patronizing treatment of female parishioners by male ministers" (Griffith 22), angered Cady Stanton and established a precedent for her future criticisms of members of the clergy throughout her life and career.

Also formative in Cady Stanton's analytical relationship with Christianity was a visit she took to her cousin Gerrit Smith's at Peterboro N.Y. in the 1830s. Smith was a well-known

abolitionist who had recently been forced to disassociate himself from the Presbyterian church because of its refusal to declare slaveholding a sin (Griffith 25). Cady Stanton remembers this visit fondly as an introduction to many prominent reformers, and as opening her mind to abolitionist politics, the ideologies of individualism, and criticisms of Christian doctrine to replace a formal and dogmatic religion with a more cheerful, liberal and unorthodox belief system (Stanton *Eighty* 51-5). It was also at Peterboro that Cady Stanton met her future husband, Henry B. Stanton, whose acquaintance would lead Cady Stanton to another very significant friend who encouraged her to think critically about Christianity: Lucretia Mott.

Cady Stanton has said of her first encounter with Mott that it was like "meeting a being from some larger planet," because "to find a woman who dared to question the opinions of Popes, Kings, Synods, Parliaments, with the same freedom that she would criticize an editorial in the *London times*" was extremely shocking to Cady Stanton (qtd. in Pellauer 110). Mott taught Cady Stanton that she "had the same right to think…that Luther, Calvin and John Knox had," and inspired her to trust in her own opinions (Ibid). Cady Stanton described this meeting also as a kind of conversion experience, as creating "at once a newborn sense of dignity and freedom; It was like suddenly coming into the rays of the noonday sun, after wandering with a rushlight in the caves of the earth" (Ibid).

All of these experiences in Cady Stanton's seminal years provided her with confidence in her own ability to approach Christianity from an analytical perspective. However at this early stage in her adulthood, Cady Stanton did not entirely remove herself from the framework of Christianity, still finding the tradition to be ultimately compatible with her personal and political goals. Instead, she utilized these newly acquired intellectual tools, and innovative companions, to critically engage with theological ideas and to question the authority of the Christian church, the

clergy, and the Scriptures, in their misrepresentation of Christianity to perpetuate a message of female inferiority.

Revisionist Approach: 1848 – 1878

The earliest record of Cady Stanton's religious beliefs were presented during her first public appearance, at Seneca Falls in 1848 (Pellauer 26). In the address she delivered at this first Woman's Rights Convention, Cady Stanton took it upon herself to modify the typical interpretation of the story of original sin, and the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Cady Stanton transformed this story from one of woman's accountability for humanity's expulsion from paradise, and innate inferiority due to a lack of reasoning, to a story that demonstrated Eve's rational and logical actions by consuming the forbidden fruit in an attempt to acquire knowledge. For Cady Stanton, it was Adam who acted out of emotion in sharing Eve's fruit, acting solely out of his love for Eve. Cady Stanton therefore demanded of her audience, "Which, I ask you, was the creature of the affections?" (qtd. in Pellauer 27). In this speech Cady Stanton demonstrates her self-assurance in criticizing traditional understandings of Christian Scripture, yet remains firmly within the tradition itself ultimately concluding that "the best of Books is ever on the side of freedom," and that these ideologies surrounding woman's inferior position were simply misinterpretations (qtd. in Pellauer 28). At this stage in her life, Cady Stanton's relationship with theology and the Bible was what today can be understood as a revisionist feminist approach to Christianity: a position that seeks to align Biblical interpretations with a feminist worldview. This understanding of Christianity implies that a truth, which promotes complete equality of the sexes, exists within the Christian message, but is being misconstrued or misunderstood. For Cady Stanton, the true essence of Christianity was equality, which she believed was the core element of Jesus' teachings, and "the cornerstone of the

Christian religion" (qtd. in Pellauer 41). Cady Stanton suggested that this message was not being properly deciphered because of a one-sided male perspective in biblical interpretation (Pellauer 33). She therefore felt not only entitled, but compelled to use her new found public voice for the purpose of contributing a female voice to the interpretation of Christian Scripture.

Cady Stanton declared in numerous lectures that when correctly read, the Bible proclaims the equality of the sexes, and serves to empower women. She frequently provided examples of biblical passages that favoured the role of women, and affirmed the actions of strong female role models present in the Scripture (Pellauer 34-5). During this revisionist period in her life, Cady Stanton argued that the essential message of equality as "uttered on Calvary" (qtd. in Pellauer 38), should be utilized for social reforms such as temperance, to abolish capital punishment, and to liberate disempowered groups like slaves, the poor, and women within nineteenth century North America (Pellauer 40-1). Cady Stanton challenged Christian churches "to give some thought to these practical everyday questions," which emphasized her this-worldly theology that sought to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, as opposed to an other-worldly understanding that focuses on the hereafter (Pellauer 42). This reformist ideology can be seen in Cady Stanton's writings and personal correspondences from her speech at Seneca Falls until she was in her sixties, even prevailing through her affiliation with the Free Thought Movement. Despite this movement's general anti-religious attitude which "extolled reason, science, and secular values" (Roe "Free Thought"), Pellauer notes that Cady Stanton "continued to maintain that the great principle(s) of Christianity and of feminist reform were the same…[such as] [f]reedom of individual judgment and equality in creation" (32). Most significantly for Cady Stanton, this belief empowered her struggle for female enfranchisement, because she saw the ballot box as symbolic of equality, and as such "voting was a religious duty" (Ibid 39). The

female suffrage movement took on a sacred dimension, and any attempt to utilize religious doctrine to prohibit enfranchisement was understood as a perversion of the true essence of Christianity for Cady Stanton.

Rejectionist Approach: 1878 – 1898

By Cady Stanton's own admission, the Convention for Woman's Rights in 1878 marked a shift in her revisionist relationship with Christianity. It was in the Resolutions presented at this conference where she "sedulously labored to rouse women to a realization of their degraded position in the Church" (Stanton *Eighty* 382). It was during this period in her life when Cady Stanton ceased arguing for a purification of the Christian tradition to uncover a message of equality, and instead became what we would presently describe as a "feminist rejectionist." Cady Stanton now suggested that Christian Scripture must be discarded as irreconcilable for promoting a feminist agenda. This transformation in her perception of Christianity seems to originate from a series of factors. Firstly, Cady Stanton's personal interactions with the church and clergy left her feeling animosity and a lack of support in her political and personal reform goals. In an 1885 article entitled "Has Christianity Benefitted Women?" Cady Stanton condemned the church for falling behind the progression of the state in respect to the position of women, stating that "[t]he discourses of clergymen, when they enlarge on the condition of woman, read more like canons in the fifth century than sermons in the nineteenth" reproaching the attitudes of the clergy for remaining unchanged from "bygone centuries" (398). In this article Cady Stanton identified individual Christian denominations' specific insults to women, and admonished the leading theological institutions for refusing to allow women to study theology, or from becoming ordained into the ministry (389). Cady Stanton's continued reading of such rationalist thinkers as Spencer, Comte, Matthew Arnold, and historians such as Lecky, had strengthened her belief in

individual human rights, and women's shared role in these rights as equal members of the human race (Pellauer 45). Secondly, there had arisen at this time, particularly through the rival suffragist association to Cady Stanton's, the A.W.S.A., a popular discourse that Christianity served to benefit women more so than any other religion in the world (Pellauer 44). Cady Stanton adamantly refuted this claim, suggesting that not just Christianity, but all existing religions teach that woman is inferior to man and ought to be subjugated in society. For Cady Stanton, then, all religious "brought to woman but another form of humiliation" ("Benefitted" 389). One of Cady Stanton's most vocal frustrations in "Has Christianity Benefitted Women?" is the fact that "women are the chief supporters of the church to-day" (399). In 1890, in an article titled "What Woman Suffrage Means" Cady Stanton further reiterates that "[i]t is a singular fact that we have never been able to enlist any large number of women to labor with enthusiasm for their own emancipation." Cady Stanton admits that it is difficult to defend the rights of a group that does not assert this need for themselves, arguing that "all that remains to secure our complete emancipation is to arouse women themselves from their apathy and indifference" (Stanton "Woman"). By 1894 however, Cady Stanton presents a hypothesis explaining why women are not fighting for their own rights to enfranchisement, in a document entitled "Women Do Not Wish To Vote." In this article she suggests that women have been "trained for centuries to obedience to the powers that be, submission to established usages" and cannot reject these social identities and roles that have been so deeply internalized into the human psyche, governing the female mind for so long. In *The Woman's Bible* Cady Stanton restates this problem, claiming that "[s]o perverted is the religious element in her nature, that with faith and works [the woman] is the chief support of the church and clergy; the very powers that make her emancipation impossible" (Stanton 6). At this stage Cady Stanton has reached the conclusion that "to no form

of religion was woman indebted for one impulse of freedom, as all alike have taught her inferiority and subjection…Whatever heights of dignity and purity women have individually attained can in no way be attributed to the dogmas of their religion" (Stanton *Eighty* 357). No longer able to discern the essence of equality as the central message in the Bible, in her introduction to *The Woman's Bible* Cady Stanton writes,

> The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced…[I]n silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up. (6)

While Cady Stanton claims that the objective of *The Woman's Bible* was "to ascertain what the status of woman really was under the Jewish and Christian religion" (*Eighty* 390), the events leading up to this publication provide a clearer understanding of her prejudice against the Christian Scripture, due to her inability to reconcile her political and social justice agenda with the Christian institutions on nineteenth century North America.

It is important to note here, that Cady Stanton's rejection of religion was largely in response to the representation of religion through the institutions in place, and the authority claimed by these institutions. As Clark notes, Cady Stanton "never entirely erased the idea of God from her mind:" it was the infrastructure and institutions represented in the current society which were inadequate (910). This complicated relationship with God is also evident in *The Woman's Bible.* Cady Stanton takes issue with the claim that the Christian Bible is the Word of God, declaring that "I do not believe that any man ever saw or talked with God, I do not believe that God inspired the Mosaic code, or told the historians what they say he did about woman, for all the religions on the face of the earth degrade her, and so long as woman accepts the position that they assign her, her emancipation is impossible" (Stanton 8). In grappling with the text in

this way, Cady Stanton makes clear that she still engages with God outside of the Scripture, and suggests there is a truth that exists, which is the cosmic equality of all human beings, yet is not reflected sufficiently in the Scripture. Most poignantly at this time in her life, her opinion of Christianity is brought sharply into focus through her proposal of what religion ought to be. Cady Stanton saw religion as meant to progress towards human dignity, which "will inspire its worshippers with self-respect, with noble aspirations to attain diviner heights…[the new religion] will teach individual honesty and honor in word and deed, in all the relations of life. It will teach the solidarity of the race, that all must rise or fall as one. Its creed will be Justice, Liberty, Equality for all the children of earth" (Stanton "Worship").

Elizabeth Cady Stanton struggled with the ideas that Christianity represented both in her personal life and publicly in her battle for women's social and political equality. Born into a fearful tradition, Cady Stanton rebelled against the emotional anguish she incurred and found a place of happiness in a critical regard for Christianity. In looking through this analytical lens at Christianity, Cady Stanton found that the true essence of the religion was being misrepresented, and she sought a purification of the message of equality through her fight for woman's rights. When this approach to the tradition failed to help her reach her political and social reform goals, Cady Stanton went to the extreme, rejecting the official Christianity of her day as futile towards perpetuating her objective of women's enfranchisement, or for advocating for woman's equality in the wider social and political milieu. These different interactions with Christianity led Cady Stanton to undertake the compilation of *The Woman's Bible,* and gave her the confidence to initiate such a controversial and revolutionary project.

Chapter 2

Historical Feminist Engagement with *The Woman's Bible,* 1888 – Present

The first suffragists in North America were wary of *The Woman's Bible* even while the project was little more than a thought in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's mind. In 1882, when she first proposed this project to close friends and colleagues, Cady Stanton received immediate warnings as to its controversial and supererogatory nature (Stanton *Eighty* 392). While these admonitions did put a temporary halt to the project for a period of several years (*Eighty* 393), they ultimately did not stop Cady Stanton from pursuing the document that many scholars argue is the culminating text of her political and social reform career, best "summarizing her ideology" (Griffith 165). *The Woman's Bible* would be taken up more seriously again in 1895, however while working towards the first publication of the project the criticism and discouraging remarks continued (*Eighty* 467). Originally intending to have several Greek and Hebrew scholars involved in the exegesis of the passages from the Christian Scripture to translate the Old and New Testaments from the primary source texts that the Revised (English) Version would have also utilized (Stanton *Bible* 5), Cady Stanton was not able to acquire the academic support she desired from these scholars, who feared "that their high reputation and scholarly attainments might be compromised" by their participation in the controversial project (*Bible* 7). This did not impede Cady Stanton from following through with the project, it simply shifted the focus of the document from that of the contemporary mode of higher criticism of the Bible, to a social commentary that was "deliberately informal and irreverent" (Dubois 228). Cady Stanton defended her document against the assumption that it was meant to be a theological study of the Christian Scripture, "it does not need a knowledge of either Greek, Hebrew or the works of

scholars to show that the Bible degrades the Mothers of the Race" (Stanton *Bible* 119). Despite these claims of being a social commentary, the potentially dangerous theological implications of this project were not lost on other nineteenth century suffragists. Immediately following its publication, the North American Woman Suffrage Association officially disassociated themselves from the document, which they feared would detract from their fight for enfranchisement (Gifford 58).

Periodically in and out of print since this time, the 1970s saw a renewed interest in *The Woman's Bible* with 'second wave' feminist scholars reissuing the text, and such prominent thinkers as Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow tracing their own feminist theology back to Cady Stanton's *Bible* (Mace 6). Cady Stanton's *Bible* also became important for 'second wave' feminist rejectionists, with Mary Daly citing Cady Stanton in her "classic" work *Beyond God the Father*[4] of 1973 (Mace 12), and Naomi Goldenberg referencing *The Woman's Bible* in her 1979 book *Changing of the Gods*.[5] Today however, the relationship between feminism and *The Woman's Bible* remains complex, and has grown tense once again within modern feminist discourse. Lisa S. Strange notes that among Cady Stanton's biographers "few have counted the *Woman's Bible* among her greatest works," citing Elisabeth Griffith's biography on Cady Stanton, which provides only four pages out of 225 to discuss this document (Strange 16). Moreover, a general disregard for the *The Woman's Bible* is prevalent among 'third wave' Cady Stanton scholars, both when contemplating the value of the text within its own historical context, and when negotiating its present relevance. For example, Kathi Kern (1991) suggests that the text "backfired" upon its inception, doing "more to offend than persuade its potential audiences;" Lois Banner (1997) calls the text "a failure" within its historical milieu; and Jeanne Stevenson-

[4]See for example page 47.
[5]See for example pages 10-12.

Moessner (1994) states that the *Bible* "is of value primarily as an historical piece" (qtd. in Strange 16-7). I have included the dates of these criticisms to show that many of these most recent critiques of the *Bible* are from the 1990s, because there has been little engagement with the text since this time. This is perhaps due to the dismissal of the text as *essentializing,* which occurred during the 1995 revival of *The Woman's Bible* for the centennial anniversary commemorating its first publication. One significant voice on this subject is Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, editor of the *Searching the Scriptures* volumes. These volumes engage deeply with *The Woman's Bible,* with the second volume being dedicated to Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Fiorenza's main criticism of *The Woman's Bible* as declared in these books, is that *The Woman's Bible* is *gender essentialist* (18). Consequently, Fiorenza warns against overlooking Cady Stanton's inability to "overcome the limitations set by her privileges of race and class" (4). While Fiorenza asserts that Cady Stanton "deserves our respect and honour" as a foremother in feminist theology and biblical criticism (Ibid), acknowledging the revolutionary nature of the *Bible* and its undeniably important role in the historical development of the feminist movement, she ultimately rejects the text as unable to perpetuate a contemporary feminist worldview.

Fiorenza's criticism of this text, though asserted twenty years ago, remains relevant within the current feminist relationship to *The Woman's Bible*, as we persist within a poststructuralist era that considers *essentialism* a very troubling concept. Modern feminist scholarship continues to debate the value of *essentialist* and *anti-essentialist* discourses as "arguably the central problem facing third wave feminist theory" (Stone 26). Therefore, many contemporary feminist scholars only engage with *The Woman's Bible* so far as to maintain a connection with the historical narrative of the Western feminist movement. However, this recognition is mainly done to combat with Schussler Fiorenza labels "patriarchally induced 'forgetfulness'" which causes

every new generation of women to reexamine previous issues, to "reinvent the wheel" resulting from an absence of ties from one generation of feminists to the next (1). This anxiety of a lost history continues to shape the feminist movement, as Casselman's 2008 book *Talking the Walk* asserts that "we must put an end to having to relearn and reinvent [women's history, principles and advancement] in every generation of women" (53-4). Therefore contemporary engagement with *The Woman's Bible,* is to acknowledge the text an important part of the historical narrative, that ought to, however, remain in its feminist historical context, unable to contribute to the feminist future. I argue, however, that *The Woman's Bible* has yet to be exhausted for its benefits for informing ongoing debates that proliferate throughout contemporary feminist discourse. It is the unique combination of *individualism* and *essentialism* represented in this text that provide valuable insights into contemporary theory, and as such, I now elucidate Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *individualism*.

Chapter 3

Individualism in "Solitude of Self"

The speech "Solitude of Self," written in 1892 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, is the most succinct and decisive representation of what has come to be known as the "philosophical underpinnings" of her entire feminist ideology (Pellauer 118). The *individualism* presented in this speech evokes ideas Cady Stanton had been promoting since her speaking engagements began at Seneca Falls in 1848, however it is most clearly and memorably delineated at this late stage in her life. "Solitude of Self" proposes women's intrinsic inclusion in the status of "individual" in late nineteenth century America, by consequence of her spiritual equality with all other human beings in a personal relationship with God. As such, Cady Stanton requests that women be granted all of the rights and benefits that have been falsely denied them, as a group, in this erroneous exclusion from *individualism*. For Cady Stanton this means that women must be provided equal opportunity for participation in the public sphere, equal education, political equality, a voice in the government, rights over her own person, and participation in the marketplace. In attempting to persuade her audience of the accuracy of her argument, Cady Stanton weaves a complex web of Protestant *individualism* with political *individualism*, often using overlapping and even contradictory ideas to her advantage. Sue Davis, in her exploration of Cady Stanton's political thought, notes Cady Stanton's frequent inconsistencies in her political self-representation, showing how she often maneuvers between complicated and sometimes contrary philosophies, in order to achieve her goal of women's equality (206). This particular speech is no different, as can be seen through Karlyn Kohr Campbell's analysis of Cady Stanton's use of rhetoric within this text (Campbell "Solitude" 307). Campbell defines

rhetoric as "the means by which symbols can be used to appeal to others, to persuade" (Campbell *Man I* 2). The "Solitude of Self" speech was certainly written with the intent to persuade, as it was read to the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage in an attempt to convince Congress to pass an amendment for nationwide female suffrage (Campbell "Solitude" 304). Considering that Elizabeth Cady Stanton composed "Solitude of Self" with this political agenda in mind, the *individualism* presented in this speech must be understood as one of the tools, or symbols, she is using to achieve her specific objective: women's equality in the nineteenth century Western world. However, the complexity of her argument in this speech, and particularly her representation of *individualism,* makes "Solitude of Self" more than just an impressive literary "masterpiece" (Campbell "Solitude" 305), or a valuable reflection of women's position at this time in America. Her philosophy transgresses her individual social position, and creates a framework that not only engages with contemporary feminist theory, but provides new ways of looking at ongoing feminist debates. This chapter first examines the socio-political environment in which Cady Stanton was writing both "Solitude of Self" and *The Woman's Bible.* This analysis will demonstrate the prevalent nineteenth century worldview and perception of *individualism* in America that Cady Stanton was responding to (as inadequate) for her social justice agenda. Both political and Protestant ideologies of *individualism* will be analyzed, since Cady Stanton claims adherence to both philosophies in the opening statement of her speech (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 372). Within both contexts I will examine the unique *individualism* presented in "Solitude of Self," in dialogue with the wider social milieu. Finally, a brief analysis of the contemporary feminist debates regarding *individualism* will be presented, to demonstrate the continued relevance of Cady Stanton's *individualism* for current feminist theorizing. This chapter argues that Cady Stanton's *individualism* contributes new insights into ongoing feminist

discussions on such contentious issues as the value of *individualism* as a useful paradigm within feminism, or even as a tool to promote a feminist agenda, as well as discourses on the universal versus the particular, which remain prevalent in modern day feminist scholarship. All of these themes are present in *The Woman's Bible* as well, written just three years after "Solitude of Self," which will be discussed in the following chapter.

American Political *Individualism*

Political *individualism* is "a political philosophy that takes the individual as the essential unit of the polity, and the polity as existing in large measure to serve and protect the individual" ("Individualism" *Oxford*). This ideology prioritizes the individual in personal, economic and political life, and demands minimal government involvement in an individual's life, only interfering to protect the individual from harm (Ibid). *Individualism* prescribes such liberal values as the idea that every person ought to be able to live a life according to their own definition of "the good" (Schwartzman 4). This conceptualization of the individual as autonomous and self-determining marks a shift from a belief in such ideologies as ascription, whereby individuals are born into preexisting castes and classes, which are deemed "natural," and determine a person's life path (Brown *Politics* 44). The emergence of *individualism* as an ideology is often attributed to such western European social restructurings as the Renaissance, when people began "revolting against the restraints of old institutions," and the Protestant Reformation, which further shifted the social imagination from trust in an external authority, to an internal one, as people began to recognize the self as sovereign and independent (Miller *Individualism* 85-6). This shift in thinking also prioritized rational thought and "the power of the human mind to discover and order knowledge" in a way previously not conceptualized, thereby causing great changes in the development of the Western world (Fox-Genovese 122).

Although American *individualism* has its roots in these European socially disruptive movements, due to America's unique history its *individualism* developed a distinct identity by the late nineteenth century that only vaguely recalls this heritage. David Miller argues that American *individualism* put into practice what had previously been only social and political theory in England (97). Miller understands American *individualism* to begin with the Colonial Era, where he suggests that the first European settlers approached the "New World"[6] as a sort of blank slate, with the opportunity to make the fantasies of European philosophers like Milton, Locke and Rousseau a reality (98). Inevitably the first European settlers brought to the "New World" prevalent European ideas about social organization, such as the importance of group identification, specifically in the family, household, town or community, however these ideals were eventually dismissed in favour of a new social structure centered on the primacy of the individual (Fox-Genovese 59). This political structure was codified with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution which emphasize, and legally secure, the supremacy of the individual, and each individual's rights to self-determination, independence and the freedom to pursue happiness (Ibid).

The physical landscape of the "New World" itself, specifically the vast expanse of land westward on the continent further characterized the development of American *individualism* (Miller *Individualism* 102). Prevalent attitudes like "manifest destiny" encouraged a relationship of dominance and conquest between man to his natural environment, giving him "the opportunity to employ the Lockean principle that man should mix his labor with nature and thereby increase

[6] I refer to America as the "New World" because I am presenting the European settler's understanding of the continent at this time, however this terminology remains in quotations throughout the paper to acknowledge that this world was not empty upon "discovery" by the Europeans, and had been the home to many Indigenous populations for thousands of years prior to this first encounter.

his control over matter" (Ibid). Centered on the laborious task of the Westward Movement, and this ongoing battle with the land, the traits that came to be valued within this cultural mindset were centered around physical ability, determination and self-discipline (103). These traits not only came to define success in this social and political setting, but more importantly, they came to define who counts as an "individual" in this environment.

The most notable difference between American *individualism* and that of other variants developing in Europe, was the celebrated status of this ideology in America. In Europe the term "individualism" was sometimes used disapprovingly in an acknowledgement of its ability to disrupt a public agenda. However in American ideology, the term was "a sacrosanct concept" valued above all else ("Individualism" *Oxford*). Lukes claims that in the United States *individualism* was an integral symbol, representing "the American Dream," because of its perpetuation of liberal democracy and capitalism (26). The importance of this terminology as part of the American national identity can be seen as early as 1839, when an article in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* used *individualism* to positively depict American culture. By the end of the Civil War, this identity is completely solidified in the American social imagination (Lukes 27-8). The unique characteristics and high status afforded to American *individualism* is summarized quite succinctly in this except from Herbert Hoover:

> *that while we build our society upon the attainment of the individual, we shall safeguard to every individual an equality of opportunity to take that position in the community to which his intelligence, character, ability, and ambition entitle him; that we keep the social solution free from frozen strata of classes; that we shall stimulate effort of each individual to achievement; that through an enlarging sense of responsibility and understanding we shall assist him to this attainment; while he in turn must stand up to the emery wheel of competition.* (9-10 italics in original)

As the thirty-first president of the United States writing in the early twentieth century, Hoover provides a valuable glimpse into the American psyche at this time. In this text he confidently

proclaims, “I am an American individualist” (8). However, this depiction of American *individualism* is to some extent idealized, and therefore does not represent the complete social and political environment of nineteenth century America.

For example, slavery was legal in the United States until 1865, which seems quite contradictory to the ideals of self-sovereignty and the supremacy of individual rights and freedoms as codified in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Fox-Genovese explains these contradictions by labeling the American conception of *individualism* as a “sleight of hand,” which does not include all persons in the political status of “individual” (59). Instead, being an “individual” was contingent upon the social position of “free, propertied men” (Ibid). Friedman notes this as a more general pattern not unique to America, where “cultures that idealize autonomy do not always extend this ideal to all social groups. Sometimes certain sorts of people, white men for example, receive the lion's share of the social protections and rewards for being autonomous” (107). This particular conceptualization of *individualism* in nineteenth century America excluded children, slaves, and men who were not property owners, as well as women (Fox-Genovese 122). Therefore, while the above understanding of political *individualism* represents a part of the social and political context from which Elizabeth Cady Stanton is writing, an even larger part of her interaction with this ideology is her exclusion from actively participating in it, from receiving its benefits or affirming it as an identity. This exclusion was because of her sex. Thus, this chapter will now specifically focus on the position of women within this cultural milieu.

Individualism and the Position of Women in Nineteenth Century America

“Solitude of Self” makes clear that women were not currently able to participate in the political *individualism* of the American social imagination. This is, in part, what Cady Stanton

hoped to remedy with her appeal to Congress in this speech; not only female enfranchisement, but equal rights to education (Campbell *Man II* 373), political equality (376), participation in the marketplace, and a voice in the government for women (Ibid). The exclusion of women from the status of "individual" was permissible because, although the Declaration of Independence declares all men as created equal, and therefore entitled to equal rights and freedom, the term "men" referred not to *all humans* simply based on one's membership in the species, but to designated, and socially constructed "individuals" only (Fox-Genovese 58). Fox-Genovese notes "[b]y the end of the French Revolution, women in France, Britain and the United States found themselves, if anything, more firmly and universally excluded from the political realm than they had been before it" (124). By this Fox-Genovese means that the identity of the "individual" was solidified in this revolution as male, and representative of typically masculine traits, such as reason and logic. Marilyn Friedman also writes about the construction of the "individual" as male in her essay "Of Autonomy and Men." Friedman acknowledges that common discourse among contemporary feminist philosophers argues that the idea of autonomy has been historically incompatible with a feminist agenda, because it reflects a "masculine-style preoccupation with self- sufficiency and self-realization" (98).

These sex-based traits affiliated with women and men separately reveal another of the major structures in place in nineteenth century America to prohibit women from being considered individuals: the segregation of the public from the private sphere. The social identity of an individual is defined by the characteristics outlined in the above section of this chapter, such as acting in the political realm, conquering the natural environment, and developing the world in which he lives, which are all part of the public sphere. An individual then, is among other things, a "public man and accountable citizen" (Fox-Genovese 115). Women, being

relegated to the private sphere, are immediately excluded from participation in *individualism*, because they are "barred from those public roles and identities" (Fox-Genovese 115). This division of society into spheres based on sex did not just serve to exclude women from competing in such public realms as politics or the economy, it also segregated values between the sexes, stemming from, and reinforcing, the spheres themselves. Consequently women came to value (and be valued *for*) such traits as nurturance, motherhood, and an ethics of care, whereas men were to value independence, autonomy and competition (Fox-Genovese 57). Further reinforcing this social order of separate spheres, women in the nineteenth century also contended with the "cult of true womanhood," which defined a "good" woman by four major and ideal qualities: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152). This dichotomy of societal roles, tasks, and even personal values positioned women as mothers in the home, who were not to be considered individuals in themselves, but instead were given the supreme task of "nurtur[ing] the individual" (Fox-Genovese 125). This status further perpetuated their exclusion from *individualism* because it ensured that any possibility of a crossover into the public realm for women would threaten the family and, more importantly, the entire social order (123-4).

Cady Stanton identifies this separation of the public and private spheres, and women's relegation to the private sphere, as one of the reasons women are excluded from individual status. Cady Stanton notes that "in regard to woman's sphere…men…uniformly subordinate her rights and duties as an individual, as a citizen, as a woman, to the necessities of [her] incidental relations [of mother, wife, sister, daughter]" (Campbell *Man II* 372-3). Cady Stanton goes on to argue that an equivalent qualification of human value as contingent upon a social position, and relative to one's personal relationships, is not imposed on men, who are defined only by their individuality (373). In the text Cady Stanton is recognizing the socially constructed nature of the

segregation of these spheres. Furthermore, the speech in itself troubles the boundaries between the public and the private, because public speaking and her political agenda were associated with the public space. Therefore in the very act of writing and performing this speech, Elizabeth Cady Stanton becomes a living example of the socially constructed, and therefore malleable, social roles between women and men.

This division of the society into spheres, argues Fox-Genovese, is necessary for the maintenance of *individualism* (57). Fox-Genovese suggests that the specific traits that *individualism* demanded, which were associated with masculinity, require the unquestioned support of women to sustain it within both the cultural and individual male psyche (124). She argues that, "[f]or men to be fully self-realizing individuals, women must be self-denying" (129). Friedman also points out that "atomistic self-sufficiency" as a masculine identity required "men to repudiate the feminine in order to consolidate their own masculine gender identity" (102). The creation of the individual, or subject, also created the "other" as an implied support for this position; both roles were dependent on one another. Within this cultural setting, men and women were understood to have separate and biologically different natures: males were "violent, lustful, and competitive" whereas women were "pure, pious, submissive, and domestic" (Campbell *Man II* xii-xiii). Carole Pateman argues in *The Sexual Contract* that this ideology of woman as "other" is reflected most succinctly in the legal doctrine of coverture, whereby a woman who enters into a marriage contract is subsumed under the legal status of her husband, quite factually becoming the "other," because "the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage,…consolidated into that of the husband" (Blackstone qtd. in Pateman 90-1). This law, developed in the late Middle Ages and unaltered until the nineteenth century, forbid women from owning their own property,

controlling their own earnings, or even signing contracts in their own name, because their legal rights were forfeit in marriage (Chance 3-4). McElroy demonstrates that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, women also could not legally control their own children, and they lacked legal defense in case of imprisonment or kidnapping of themselves or of their children, by husbands or male relatives (4-5). Women existed only as "appendages of individual men" (Fox-Genovese 114). These laws, enshrining the relative status of women to that of their husbands, led Linda Kerber to poignantly inquire, "Can a woman be an individual? (qtd. in Heider 15).

Trapped within this social paradigm, women did not even consider *themselves* agents, as they were also socialized into this cultural understanding of "natural" roles, with no alternatives available (Fox-Genovese 117). In this social context it would have been practically inconceivable to think of women as individuals in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Western world (Fox-Genovese 129). Yet in "Solitude of Self" Elizabeth Cady Stanton is demanding that women be included in the definition of an individual. This understanding of women's relative role as "other" did in fact begin to change in a social and legal context. A series of consecutive legal transformations occurred throughout the nineteenth century in America. For example, married women were allotted more control over their own property in North America in the 1870s, and by 1882 women were given equal property ownership rights (Chance 4). Fox-Genovese attributes this transformation of the social imagination, which allowed for a woman to be considered an "individual" who should have her own rights, to the emergence of capitalism and industrialization (117). She argues that these economic changes contributed to a sociological environment that "opened the way for at least some women to begin to think systematically about women as individuals and hence as possibly similar and equal to men" (Ibid). González also credits the Industrial Revolution with this shift, stating that "[i]ts

impact went far beyond economic matters, extending to the whole of life… more people came to see their lives as their private responsibility, and therefore individualism and preoccupation with the 'I' became a common theme in both philosophy and literature" (282-3). Another possible explanation for this transformation of women's position, that first allowed women to see themselves as included in the definition of an individual, was the bourgeoning anti-slavery movement (Fox-Genovese 129-130). This expanded the definition of an "individual" from white males to include black males, and this expansion titillated the imaginations for women who then understood that this could potentially include *all* humans.

For Cady Stanton, the premise of her demand for women's inclusion in political *individualism* "when all artificial trammels are removed, and women are recognized as individuals" (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 381), is contingent on her understanding of the divinely ordained spiritual equality of all persons. Active in the abolitionist movement early in her career, Elizabeth Cady Stanton seemingly understood that it was unjust to exclude any person from the rights outlined in the Declaration of Independence, whether based on sex or race. This is represented by the Protestant *individualism* also present in "Solitude of Self," which will be discussed in the following section (Campbell *Man II* 372).

Protestant *Individualism*

An integral part of the American social milieu in which Cady Stanton was writing was the Protestant influence. Many of the first colonists were of Protestant affiliation, specifically Quakers and Puritans, fleeing to America because of persecution from Catholic Europe (Cohen). Although more settlers, and increasing religious pluralism altered the religious setting of the colony dramatically by the eighteenth century, the Puritans and Quakers had been particularly formative in creating the cultural dynamic of early America, and American *individualism* (Ibid).

Protestant *individualism* emerged out the changing theology of the Protestant Reformation in seventeenth century Europe (Turner *Cambridge*). Prior to this conceptualization of religious *individualism* was the prevalence of the Catholic dependency upon the institution of the Church, and the sacraments for salvation (Weber 61-2). Max Weber identifies this shift towards a new religious individual who is more independent, more alone: "No one could help him. No priest…No sacraments…No Church…" (61). This previously unrecognized responsibility of each person in their own relationship with the divine marks a "decisive difference from Catholicism" and represents Protestant *individualism* (Ibid). Protestant *individualism* then, is "a way of thinking about and speaking about the self that emphasizes how each person is first and foremost an individual before God" (Chance 2). Protestant *individualism* marked "a critical turning point because it made salvation potentially available to everybody, regardless of his or her social standing" (Turner *Cambridge*). Particularly useful for disempowered groups, Protestant *individualism* defined equality as inborn and spiritual, which "made it difficult to exclude anyone, male or female, rich or poor" (Chance 84). Whereas political *individualism*, as previously explained, was a social category that served to reinforce the patriarchal structure and exclude many people from participating, Protestant *individualism* describes the individual much more universally (Chance 2). This *individualism* created a spiritual equality between men and women because, as a member of the human species, a woman is by nature included in the definition of an individual: "her soul was as immortal as his" (Frykstedt qtd. in Chance 84). Based on each individual's ultimate responsibility to God, each person is believed to be capable of acting and thinking for themselves, and ought to be able to live an appropriate life reflecting her or his answerability to the divine (Chance 111).

This is the most important element of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Solitude of Self," and certainly is the crux which her entire argument for inclusion of women in individual status is based upon. In "Solitude of Self" Cady Stanton opens with not just her assumption of political *individualism*, but Protestant *individualism* as well: "The point I wish plainly to bring before you on this occasion is the individuality of each human soul; our Protestant idea" (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 372). This assumption is listed first in the speech because her argument to political *individualism* as inclusive to women is contingent upon the acceptance of the Protestant ideology, which necessarily includes women as human beings. Cady Stanton asserts the universal equality of Protestant theology in such inclusive statements as "[r]ich and poor, intelligent and ignorant, wise and foolish, virtuous and vicious, man and woman; it is ever the same, each soul must depend wholly on itself" (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 380). It is this inclusive ideal that Cady Stanton appeals to when she asserts each woman's "birthright to self-sovereignty" (374).

Cady Stanton declares her adherence to Protestant *individualism* most explicitly in the speech's frequent discussions of death. For example, Cady Stanton notes that "[w]e come into the world alone…we leave it alone…" (374), "[a]lone she goes to the gates of death…alone she passes beyond the gates into the vast unknown" (380), and "[t]he Angel of Death even makes no royal pathway for [woman]. Man's love and sympathy enter only into the sunshine of our lives. In that solemn solitude of self, that links us with the immeasurable and the eternal, each soul lives alone forever" (383). This understanding of individual mortality and the solitary experience of facing this human reality is a Protestant idea, which is further enumerated by her reference to "the immeasurable and the eternal," presumably indicating God's judgment. Cady Stanton emphasizes the socially constructed inequality of the organization of the current society in

contrast to the divinely ordained equality of each person. She writes, "[h]ow the little courtesies of life on the surface of society, deemed so important from man towards woman, fade into utter insignificance in view of the deeper tragedies in which she must play her part alone, where no human aid is possible" (377). This statement reinforces the malleable and artificial structures that exclude women in this-world, which become inconsequential by divine standards of the natural human condition of self-sovereignty and loneliness.

Furthermore, Cady Stanton proclaims that "[t]o throw obstacles in the way of a complete education is like putting out the eyes; to deny the rights of property, like cutting off the hands. To deny political equality is to rob the ostracized of all self-respect" (376). This statement is based on the assumption that these denials are wrongly imposed, because those being excluded are in fact deserving of these rights. Cady Stanton is arguing for a change in the political, social, legal structure to reflect the divinely ordained spiritual equality of all persons. It is clear that any distinction between individuals as currently reflected in the socio-political milieu is deemed socially constructed by Cady Stanton, as she dubs "inheritance, wealth, family and position" as "artificial" (380). Beyond this manmade human hierarchy, Cady Stanton asserts the innate equality of women and men in such natural abilities as "the whole realm of thought, in art, science, literature and government" (382). Cady Stanton uses this logic throughout "Solitude of Self" to explicate her understanding that the natural human condition is of innate loneliness, which is paradoxically, a fate that is shared by all of humanity. Therefore, while Cady Stanton's ideology of self-sovereignty does not allow for an institutionalization of religion, or the Church as a mediator between the self and the divine (Clark 915), the message of this speech perpetuates a sort of camaraderie in this shared (though individually experienced) human condition of solitude. Therefore, although "scholars have typically associated Protestant individualism with

an asocial fixation on one's individual soul" (Chance 8), for Cady Stanton there is an element of solidarity in the recognition of this universal human experience.

This idea is shared by other scholars who suggest that calling Protestant *individualism* "asocial" is an inaccurate and incomplete evaluation. Protestant *individualism* is developed from such theological ideas as those proposed by Paul in his first documented letter to the Corinthians:

> Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. (1 Cor 12:12-14)[7]

This *individualism* is not to be confused with the "shallow…and unhappy" *individualism* of an existence in resistance and denial of society and human relationships (Ames 8). Instead, this propagates the idea that each individual is unique and alone, yet still fits into a greater whole in relation to the divine. It is therefore necessarily social.

This social aspect of Protestant *individualism* is pragmatically represented in the example of the founder of the Quaker tradition George Fox, who understood that an "emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit would lead to excessive individualism" which could then lead "to the dissolution of the group," which would be detrimental to Protestant organizations (González 200). George Fox avoided this "by underscoring the importance of community and love" (Ibid)**.**

David Miller also emphasizes the necessary social elements of *individualism*, arguing that the practice of *individualism* is only relevant, or indeed existent, within its social context (80). For Miller, *individualism* is often incorrectly interpreted as a person who is the "absolute master of his destiny in isolation from other members of society" (81). This is problematic because human beings are always already socially located, and as such, the juxtaposition of the individual with the social is necessary for the manifestation of the individual itself. Miller uses Robinson

[7]For the complete quotation, see 1 Cor 12:12-17.

Crusoe as the typical prototype representing *individualism* in its most pure expression, but suggests that Crusoe could not have observed *individualism* for "he had no one to whom he could express himself" (Ibid).

Robinson Crusoe is a fictional narrative by Daniel Defoe, first published in April 1719 under the original title *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (Keymer vii). Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist, becomes a traveler of the sea, despite his parents' discouragement, and one day gets marooned on an island with very meager supplies (importantly, he has access to a Bible). Crusoe is an important figure in this discussion of *individualism* because he is frequently cited as a hero representing either a Protestant *individualism* or a political *individualism*. Crusoe becomes completely self-reliant through his desertion on the island, learning to exist successfully in complete solitude. This portion of the story was most important for Rousseau, who dismissed the remainder of the novel (that did not take place on the island) as "redundant" (qtd. in Keymer viii). As Keymer notes, the narrative of self-sufficiency was the key selling point of the text from 1774 to 1830 (Ibid). Chance, focusing on Crusoe's relationship with the Bible in this story, proclaims "the Robinson Crusoesque Protestant ethic of emotional self-sufficiency" as paradigmatic for Protestant *individualism* (111). Chance understands Crusoe as representing the ideal that "the sufficiently Protestant Christian should be able to survive all alone—accompanied only by God and his Bible" (111-2). However, demonstrating the interrelatedness of all variants of *individualism*, this story has also been used as representative of the *political* model of *individualism* with the character of Robinson Crusoe interpreted as "the quintessential hero of individualistic capitalism" ("Individualism" *Cambridge*).

Cady Stanton makes explicit reference to Crusoe in her opening lines, "[i]n discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny, an imaginary Robinson Crusoe, with her woman Friday on a solitary island" (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 372). Cady Stanton is certainly aware of the possible multiple meanings of this character as a hero for both Protestant and political *individualism,* because this is the only reference she makes to a role model in the text. Cady Stanton constantly incorporates overlapping religious and political ideals throughout the speech, indicating that this one character can occupy both realms as an exemplary figure. Cady Stanton, in using Crusoe, recognizes the fact that none of these philosophies can exist in a vacuum, and instead are constantly influencing one another. Protestant and political *individualism* interact with one another in the social milieu to create a unique social imagination in nineteenth century America. Cady Stanton uses the interplay of these two ideologies in a unique way to persuade her audience of the truth of her arguments in the "Solitude of Self." She establishes the woman as an individual through Protestant *individualism*, as a human being with the same opportunity for salvation as all other human beings, and uses this fact to point out the ridiculousness of woman's exclusion from political *individualism*.

Contemporary Feminist Engagement with *Individualism*

The struggle for equal rights for women has always necessarily been entangled with, and in response to, wider cultural values, thus *individualism* has been an intrinsic element of feminism since the emergence of the nineteenth century women's movement in North America (McElroy 4). Fox-Genovese argues that "the political and theoretical concerns of contemporary feminism derive directly from this history" and therefore feminism cannot be understood without *individualism* (138). Due to the entanglement of the feminist narrative with the development of

individualism, there is a complex and vast scholarship on this subject. Yet the term itself has an ambivalent and often negative connotation within contemporary feminist discourse. Some feminists argue that *individualism* as an ideology is not beneficial to a feminist agenda, because feminism must represent and reflect the needs of women as a group. For example, Lisa H. Schwartzman expresses concerns about *individualism's* compatibility with a feminist worldview in her book *Challenging Liberalism: Feminism as Political Critique*. Schwartzman's main concern is that oppression is a social phenomenon, "based on one's membership in a social group," and *individualism* has a tendency to disregard, or undervalue, the individual as socially situated, and therefore discredits this most significant component of the nature of oppression (7). Schwartzman challenges *individualism* for not acknowledging "the collective nature of women's oppression and…the concrete experiences of women's lives under sexist social structures" (6). This discourse deliberates the effectiveness of feminist engagement with an argument for women's inclusion in *individualism*, because being viewed as an individual cannot accurately address the inherently social circumstance of oppression.

Another contemporary feminist theoretical concern with *individualism* is its tendency to set the status quo as the ideal standard, thereby simply reinforcing existing power structures and the systematic oppression of women in a patriarchal society. In this dialogue, the male standard becomes conflated with the human standard, encouraging women to become "honorary men" in order to actively participate in society (Fox-Genovese 65). This is problematic because women who succeed, despite their gender, within the current patriarchal structure tend to identify with their social class instead of their gender, and lose sight of "the disadvantages that all women as women share" as a subjugated class (Ibid). This ideal of equality as simply raising women up to the level of men in the existing structure assumes that "women and men may and should be

functionally interchangeable" (Fox-Genovese 80). L. Susan Brown faults such feminist theorists as Betty Friedan for perpetuating this idea of equality, which seeks to remedy the problems of women by making them the same as men in societies like ours. For example, Brown problematizes Friedan's attempts to utilize the State "as a means by which to achieve women's equality" (80). For Brown, this is inadequate because a free individual must also necessarily be "free of the reins of State power" in order to be fully removed from the paradigm of subordinate versus dominant (Ibid). In Brown's book *The Politics of Individualism* she differentiates between *instrumental* and *existential individualism*, the former asserts that freedom works for the attainment of personal interests, the latter understands freedom as "an inherently valuable end in itself" (32). As such, existential *individualism* does not allow for any structure of governance that could impose its wills upon the freedoms of individuals (52), whereas instrumental requires government interference "to counter the competitive domination of the marketplace" (83). For Brown, the theorists who wish to provide equal rights for women within the existent socio-political order are instrumental individualists, who do not value freedom in and of itself and are therefore not perpetuating a true feminist worldview. Brown proclaims that any participation in current structures will inevitably "perpetuate a hierarchical system of power and domination" (102), and as such the only way to promote a feminist agenda is to turn to anarchy (106). Other theorists suggest that the biological differences of men and women must be celebrated, making women not interchangeable with men, but unique. This type of feminist theory acknowledges the separate history that women have experienced, and their own "palpable needs" (Fox-Genovese 80).

All of these feminist anti-individualists argue that to simply include women in the definition of an individual is inadequate for the promotion of a feminist worldview. Instead of

adjusting the current structure to incorporate women into the status quo, these feminists argue for a disruption of the entire paradigm, in order to better understand oppression as a necessarily social problem, and to acknowledge the importance of humans as always already existing and interacting within a social structure. These trepidations within contemporary feminist theory regarding the usefulness of *individualism* can be summarized by the ongoing and inaugural struggle of feminism: "whether women should be struggling for women's rights as individuals or women's rights as women – whether women need equality with men or protection for their differences from men" (Fox-Genovese 55). This problem of the individual in relation to the group is fundamentally connected to the central idea of poststructuralist feminist theory, and of the *essentialism* versus *anti-essentialism* discourse. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in "Solitude of Self," and later in *The Woman's Bible,* would nuance this dilemma by arguing for *both*.

"Solitude of Self" in Dialogue with Modern Feminist Critiques of *Individualism*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's unique amalgamation of *individualism* present in "Solitude of Self" provides interesting insights into this contemporary discourse. Despite Cady Stanton's political agenda to incorporate women under the definition of "individual," thereby granting them equal rights and legal status in her socio-political situation, Cady Stanton is not simply attempting to raise women up to the male standard, nor is she necessarily reinforcing the patriarchal power structures. Due to her primary adherence to a Protestant *individualism* that makes political equality necessary, Cady Stanton's *individualism* is inherently inclusive to all persons by way of their membership within the human species. Therefore she is not attempting to raise women up to fit with the predefined "individual," but she is seeking instead to trouble the current understanding of an individual as a man. She is perpetuating a fundamental change in this definition, to reflect its true essence: that an individual is defined by her or his biological status

as a human being. Although Cady Stanton is arguing for the specific goal of woman's equality in her nineteenth century American context in this speech, the premise of this argument can apply to any place and time, and can be used to trouble the entire patriarchal system. By reconceptualizing *individualism* itself, and asserting its previously understood meaning as false, Cady Stanton provides new possibilities for feminist discourses on *individualism*.

Furthermore, Cady Stanton's Protestant *individualism* acknowledges the fact that all humans are socially located, as everyone experiences the natural human condition of solitude. Further than just asserting the social nature of *individualism* for all people, Cady Stanton also proclaims the particular social position of women in this debate. Cady Stanton recognizes "women" as a category simply based on their preexisting exclusion from social and political rights through their exclusion from *individualism*. McElroy demonstrates that this categorization is inevitable, because "[w]omen become a political class not due to their sexual characteristics but because the government directs laws against them as a group" (22). Due to Cady Stanton's political motivation to enfranchise women, and establish their equality in all elements of society, she frequently makes reference to the subordination of women *as a group* within the patriarchal structure of nineteenth century American society. In this way, Cady Stanton's combination of secular and religious *individualism* can contend with contemporary feminist criticisms, such as the tendency for *individualism* to disregard the social nature of oppression. Cady Stanton asserts a kind of sexual caste that can unite women in challenging oppressions imposed upon them within a patriarchal society. In so doing, she is effectively representing a communal struggle for women by "creat[ing] a sharp contrast between the condition of all humans and the special nature of woman's place" (Campbell "Solitude" 307). However, grouping all women together into one category tends to erase any outliers and marginal voices, thereby representing only the

problems of the dominant majority. This *gender essentialist* criticism suggests that the grouping of women into a specific category, based on gender, essentially works to reinforce social and political hierarchies by expunging interstices of oppression, such as race, class or ethnicity. This is problematic because "when differences between women are eclipsed, it is usually the most privileged women who define the meaning of the larger category women" (Schwartzman 107-8). Therefore, Cady Stanton's grouping of women as a sexual caste would only represent the plight of white, Protestant, middle- to upper-class women. This reading, however, does not take into account Cady Stanton's consideration of the uniqueness of each human being's relationship with the divine: her Protestant *individualism*. Cady Stanton's immense skill as a rhetorician enables her to both succinctly present an understanding of the collective oppression of women, while maintaining her thesis that ultimately each person is alone, and therefore must be permitted responsibility for herself in the society in which she lives. She is using these two interrelated aspects of a women's positionality, as both a member of a subjugated group and as an individual with natural rights, to help persuade her audience of women's entitlement to equality. This unique combination can work to ensure an individual's specific intersections of oppressions are not overlooked or erased. This interaction of women as a political class based on their exclusion from political *individualism*, and the unique ideology of Protestant *individualism* that affirms every person's accountability to the divine, is a complex argument that deserves more attention in contemporary feminist thinking. Therefore, although Cady Stanton is undeniably using this argument specifically for women's enfranchisement, which certainly reflects her own social position and therefore her own perception of social injustice, other individuals can employ this rhetorical framework to attain their own goals. Any feminist can assert her or his role in a group based on exclusion from a certain ideology, and yet be sure to not erase the particularities of each

fellow group member's oppressions by asserting the importance of each individual *sine qua non*. The group is understood as a social category, a response to particular social conditions, which is therefore malleable and can change. The individual as valuable in and of itself is however unchangeable, and a "natural" category. It is this framework that contributes to the particular versus universal debates that continue to trouble feminist theory today. This unique relationship between Protestant and political *individualism* is also represented in *The Woman's Bible,* though not as noticeably as in "Solitude of Self." I now demonstrate the presence of *individualism* in this text, and show how this ideology, when combined with *gender essentialism,* benefits poststructuralist feminist debates.

Chapter 4

Individualism in *The Woman's Bible*

This unique blend of Protestant and political *individualism,* though more subtle in *The Woman's Bible,* is the driving force behind the text. On the very first page of the document Elizabeth Cady Stanton introduces *The Woman's Bible* with a quotation: "In every soul there is bound up some truth and some error, and each gives to the world of thought what no other one possesses" (Stanton 1). This opening sentiment situates Cady Stanton's project in the realm of *individualism*, both religiously and politically. The language of "soul" used as a literary devise to represent a human being links this text to the Protestant *individualism* outlined in "Solitude of Self," where Cady Stanton emphasizes "the individuality of each human soul" (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 372). This terminology reflects the divinely ordained equality of all human beings beyond this-worldly hierarchical structures, as reflected by each person's relationship with the divine. This quote therefore emphasizes Cady Stanton's Protestant ideology that every human being is inherently and objectively equal. This religious understanding of *individualism* is then brought into dialogue with the political realm, asserting that each soul contributes "to the world of thought" in a unique way. The "world of thought" can be understood as encompassing the entire realm of human existence; all aspects of life, including social, cultural and political elements. In Cady Stanton's political *individualism* she argues that the risk of excluding some individuals from certain aspects of political life is not only unjust to that particular group, but is also detrimental for the progression of the society as a whole suggesting that the loss of the valuable contributions of this excluded group, of their potential skills and talents inevitably impedes a society's growth (qtd. in Campbell *Man II* 375). This opening quotation therefore

enforces Cady Stanton's philosophy of *individualism* that suggests that each soul can contribute to the socio-political milieu, and ought to be given the opportunity to do so. Finally with this opening sentiment, Elizabeth Cady Stanton is defending her own ability to undertake such a controversial project as *The Woman's Bible*. She is establishing her credibility to comment on Christian Scripture based on her possession of a soul and her belief that her contribution will benefit the society in which she lives. This responds to the criticisms that Cady Stanton faced since the first edition of *The Woman's Bible* was a mere idea in her mind. It is therefore her adherence to *individualism* that provides Cady Stanton with her unwavering faith in her own ability to comment on the Scripture, even in the face of such adversity.

Cady Stanton's unique *individualism* is also reflected in her methodological approach to this project. *The Woman's Bible*'s objective is to critique the perceived "divinely ordained sphere" of women in nineteenth century America, as a social commentary on Christian Scripture (6). This approach to biblical interpretation was very different from the traditional method of the late nineteenth century, which was higher criticism (Stanton *Bible* 8). Cady Stanton's relationship with the text was self-admittedly much less "scientific" than this traditional view of Scripture from its beginnings (45). *The Woman's Bible* commenced with Cady Stanton, her daughter Mrs. Stanton Blatch, and her friend Mrs. Frances Lord cutting any passages pertaining to women out of an inexpensive Bible, pasting them onto a page, and writing out the commentaries underneath (Stanton *Eighty* 390-1). This methodological approach of *The Woman's Bible*, while criticized at the time as unacademic, was a legitimate means for Cady Stanton to achieve her goal, which was not to make a theological translation of the text, but instead to write a social commentary. She states, "'The Woman's Bible' is intended for readers who do not care for, and would not be convinced by, a learned, technical work of so-called

'higher criticism'" (Stanton *Bible* 119). Cady Stanton wanted to reach a broader audience with her exploration of the position of women as represented in the Christian Scripture, demonstrating how the portrayal of women in the Scriptures impacts all other elements of society, to ultimately *correct* woman's subordinate status through this subversive reading. This critical approach to the text reflects Cady Stanton's belief in her own authority to interpret Christian Scripture, and works to trouble the prevalent ideology that women are inferior in societies like hers. The confidence to undertake this project, and the understanding of the integral role that religion played in the greater society, reflects Cady Stanton's adherence to her unique blend of *individualism.*

While in "Solitude of Self" it is the human's relationship with the divine specifically in the face of human mortality that is central to her Protestant *individualism,* in *The Woman's Bible* this *individualism* begins with first creation, as all humans are created in the image of God. Therefore, an examination of Cady Stanton's interaction with the Christian Scripture can provide interesting insights into the foundational underpinnings of her *individualism.* It is through the interpretation of the two creation myths in Genesis that we are provided with Cady Stanton's foundation for her persistent proposition that women are entitled to social and political equality. Cady Stanton opens the first chapter of *The Woman's Bible* with an an analytical commentary of Genesis 1:26-28, and the creation of humankind on earth. Cady Stanton emphasizes Genesis 1:27 and the decree that "in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." The use of the plural pronoun "them" to describe the first creation of humanity is significant for Cady Stanton because it suggests that both of the sexes were created simultaneously, with "the masculine and feminine elements…equally represented" (Stanton 10). Importantly, this also acknowledges that the Christian God is composed of feminine aspects as well, as Cady Stanton

exclaims, “the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead [is] equal in power and glory with the masculine. The Heavenly Mother and Father!” (Ibid). It is from her interpretation of this passage, and the primacy she assigns it as the first occurrence of a creation story chronologically in the Bible, that Cady Stanton reiterates her political agenda towards women’s social and political equality. The declaration that male and female were created at the same time, equally representing the image of the divine, demonstrates for Cady Stanton that women’s claims to equal treatment in society are not only justified, but reflect “the elevation of woman to her true position” (Ibid). Therefore Cady Stanton founds the validity of her Protestant *individualism* on this initial creation, which illustrates each person’s representation of the divine, and ultimate accountability to God. As such, it follows that subordination based on sex is socially constructed and externally imposed, and must be remedied.

Women’s current degraded position in society is not her natural position, but is in fact the result of the elevation of the significance of the second recorded story of creation by male interpreters (Stanton 214). This second myth is found in Genesis 2, verses 21-25. In this story, Eve, the first woman, is created after Adam, the first man. She is made from him and for him; out of his rib, for the reason that “[i]t is not good that the man should be alone” (NRSV Gen 2:18). This narrative is problematic for Cady Stanton, and she suggests that the overemphasis of this second account in traditional representations of the creation myth permits the subjection of woman in society. Cady Stanton demonstrates how this second account shows woman as a “mere afterthought,” which serves to “prove her inferiority” (Stanton 13). This emphasis on the creation of one sex before the other, and the establishment of a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority as a consequence, is deemed a misconstrual of the Christian message for Cady Stanton and her team of collaborators. Cady Stanton suggests that this second creation story is an allegory, shaped by a

"wily writer," who sought to conceal the innate equality of the sexes, to order society in a way that makes woman subordinate to man (13).

The truth to the message of equality of the sexes is evident for the authors of *The Woman's Bible* because it is also reflected throughout the remainder of the New Testament. Cady Stanton writes, "the New Testament echoes back through the centuries the individual sovereignty of woman growing out of [the equality of the sexes]," citing both Paul's writings and perceived representations of the feminine elements of the Godhead as examples (13). This divinely ordained equality is also understood to be part of Jesus' message, and necessarily implies *individualism* for the team of collaborators. Lucinda B. Chandler writes in her commentary on First Timothy, "Jesus is not recorded as having uttered any…claim that woman should be subject to man…The dominion…of man over woman makes no part of the sayings of the Nazarene. He spoke to the individual soul, not recognizing sex as a quality of spiritual life, or as determining the sphere of action of either man or woman" (qtd. in Stanton 226). Therefore the equality of every individual soul is supreme for Cady Stanton and her team, who represent women and men as equal at the most essential level: from the very moment of their creation. The current falsification of this natural human condition of cosmic equality must be acknowledged and amended, which translates this firstly religious philosophy into a political message. In the "Solitude of Self" Cady Stanton's Protestant *individualism* suggests that each person is accountable for her own actions before God. In *The Woman's Bible* Cady Stanton demonstrates where this objective human equality originates. From this understanding, Cady Stanton reasons that all humans, regardless of their biological sex, must be given equal opportunity to live a life of one's choosing in the social, political, and cultural environment which one finds oneself in

this world. It is her Protestant *individualism* that provokes her understanding of political *individualism.*

This Protestant and political *individualism* is represented throughout the remainder of the Pentateuch as well. In subsequent chapters of Genesis, the traditional representation of Aholibamah, one of Esau's wives, as only significant because of her familial ties is critiqued. Cady Stanton notes, "the historian tells us nothing of the virtues or idiosyncrasies of character… what she thought, said and did, her theories of life in general" (Stanton 45). Cady Stanton uses Aholibamah as exemplary of all the women in Genesis who are lost to the reader through a lack of information regarding their personal traits and characteristics. Moreover, this representation of Aholibamah is in distinct contrast to Esau, who is a fully developed character from his birth story in Genesis 25:25, through to his marriage, the birth of his descendants and the creation of his clans in Genesis 36. Cady Stanton identifies the absence of information about Aholibamah as a consequence of her being a woman, and as part of a systematic scarcity in Christian Scripture. Cady Stanton states, "One longs all through Genesis to know what the women thought of a strictly masculine dynasty," yet their voices are never heard (45). This lack of development of many female characters is a common criticism of Christian Scripture throughout *The Woman's Bible.* In her commentary on Exodus, for example, Cady Stanton notes, "If we go through this chapter carefully we will find mention of about a dozen women, but with the exception of one given to Moses, all are nameless… names for women and slaves are of no importance; they have no individual life" (Stanton 53). Cady Stanton is consistently searching for the particularities of these female characters, their personalities, thoughts, reactions and feelings; their individuality. She attempts to give these women agency by centralizing their narratives and developing their roles in the progression of the storylines more completely. She also hypothesizes the discourses

among these women that she assumes must have been present, but were excluded by the male authors of the text (253). Therefore, Cady Stanton identifies women as a group within this text, by the underdevelopment of their narratives, yet seeks to establish the individuality of each and every one of them, which reflects the same *individualism* delineated in "Solitude of Self."

Further evidence of Cady Stanton's *individualism* is represented throughout the New Testament commentary. In Matthew 25, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, ten women take lamps out to await the bridegroom. Five women are wise and bring oil with them to fill their lamps should they run low (Mt 25:4), the other five women do not bring along any extra oil (25:3). The bridegroom is a long time in coming, and the women who did not bring any extra oil soon exhaust their supply. In the time it takes these forgetful women to go and buy more oil to dress their lamps the bridegroom arrives, and by the time they return, they have missed their opportunity to meet him (25:10-13). Cady Stanton sees this parable as a paradigmatic representation of the essentially individualistic message found within Christian Scripture, as the "wise" virgins as representative of how all human beings ought to act. She states "we have the duty of self-development impressively and repeatedly urged in the form of parables, addressed alike to man and to woman. The sin of neglecting and of burying one's talents, capacities and powers, and the penalties which such a course involve, are here strikingly portrayed" (Stanton 197). Cady Stanton suggests that the fatal flaw of the "foolish" virgins is that they are ignorant of their "first important duty of cultivating their own individual powers, using the talents given to them, and keeping their own lamps trimmed and burning" (Ibid). This passage is particularly representative of the *individualism* first represented in "Solitude of Self," because Cady Stanton argues that the natural state of human existence is solitude, and therefore the allowance for each person to live her own life to the best of her own abilities reigns supreme: "No chivalrous

gentleman is there to run for oil and to trim [the virgin's] lamps. They must depend on themselves, unsupported, and pay the penalty of their own improvidence and unwisdom" (Stanton 198). This idea is also found in "Solitude of Self," when Cady Stanton states, "No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency they must know something of the laws of navigation" (qtd. in Campbell 374). Furthering this discourse of solitude in the face of human danger and mortality Cady Stanton also states in *The Woman's Bible*, "Alone they must meet the terrible emergencies of life, to be sustained and protected amid danger and death by their own courage, skill and self-reliance, or perish" (198). Cady Stanton is using the Parable of the Ten Virgins to further her argument regarding the importance of self-sovereignty over and above self-sacrifice because of every person's mortality, and ultimate accountability to the divine at the end of one's life. Based on her adherence to *individualism,* this applies to all human beings and cannot be partitioned along biological sex lines.

This idea of self-sovereignty as more important than self-sacrifice is also reflected in *The Woman's Bible* commentary on the Parable of The Widow's Offering in Mark 12. In this parable, a poor widow gives a small donation to the treasury of the temple, which, though small in amount, is a significant contribution relative to her own financial circumstance. Jesus recognizes this and praises the poor widow for her gracious donation (Mark 12:41-44). Cady Stanton uses this story to show that the desire to sacrifice oneself for the good of others is a learned trait, specifically inflicted upon lower class women (Stanton 202). For Cady Stanton, this act of selflessness ought to be considered lower than the "duty of self-development," and the goal that women ought to strive for is the cultivation of "her own natural gifts, to make the most

of herself as an individual in the scale of being, a responsible soul whose place no other can fill" (Ibid). Cady Stanton is asserting the importance of *individualism,* instead of sacrificing one's own self in the service of others, because she proposes that in the name of self-cultivation, one is best able to serve others. Cady Stanton cites Paul to validate her claim: "a husband who does not provide for his own household is worse than an infidel" (Ibid). She holds this to be true for women as well as men, in their ability to help others through their ability to first help themselves. For Cady Stanton, one cannot provide for others if one has not developed any skills, which is why *individualism* must be recognized and reflected in the society as inclusive to every human being, regardless of sex. *Individualism* for Cady Stanton is acknowledged for its social implications: for its potential to better the entire socio-political climate. This commentary on Mark 12 also recalls Cady Stanton's problematizing of the overemphasis of the second creation myth in the prevalent theology of her day, stating that "[t]he idea of being a helpmeet to somebody else has been so sedulously drilled into most women that an individual life, aim, purpose and ambition are never taken into consideration" (Ibid). Cady Stanton is asserting here that the misrepresentation of the creation stories has made women themselves believe that they were in fact created to help men achieve their personal goals, instead of having their own goals and working towards accomplishing them.[8]

These examples of *individualism* throughout *The Woman's Bible* are intended to serve as a comprehensive sample to demonstrate that the same *individualism* in "Solitude of Self" is also present in *The Woman's Bible*. This *individualism,* moreover, is the objective of *The Woman's Bible*, and the fulcrum upon which Cady Stanton's argument rests. It is in this text that she is able to trace the origin of the inherent equality of women and men in relation with the divine.

[8] For a further discussion on women's internalized sexism as perceived by Cady Stanton, see above, page 14.

Since every individual life is objectively valuable and created equal, this recognition must be reflected in the social and political structures of this-world, to allow each individual a fair opportunity to live according to "the good," as answerable to God. The next task of my thesis is to demonstrate how this *individualism* in *The Woman's Bible* engages with contemporary feminist discourse such that it furthers the current conversation. I argue that this is done through the *individualism's* interaction with the very *gender essentialism* that has been used to reject the text by modern scholars. I will show how the criticisms of *gender essentialism,* while well-justified, should not be the last word on the text's current standing in feminist theory, and in fact can provide important insights into modern feminist discussions. Before engaging with the *essentialism* of the text however, I will briefly outline poststructuralist feminist thinking, and the prominent debates within this modern discourse, specifically regarding the relationship between the universal and particular in contemporary feminist theory.

Chapter 5

Contemporary Poststructuralist Feminist Discourses: *Essentialism* and the Relationship between the Particular and the Universal

A main criticism of *The Woman's Bible* in contemporary feminist discourse, as previously noted, is that it promotes *gender essentialism*. Originally a philosophical concept, *essentialism* declares "the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (Fuss xi). The "essence" of an object is "eternal" and "immutable" (Ibid), remaining unchanged regardless of cultural, historical, or experiential circumstances ("Essentialism"). The philosophical ideology of *essentialism* is developed most comprehensively within contemporary feminist scholarship (Fuss 2), translating the implied universalism of this concept into a feminist paradigm that asserts the perceived existence of characteristics, traits or properties which can be identified as common to all women (Stone 18). Prevalent in mainstream 'second wave' Western feminist discourse, this ideology concentrates on the differences between males and females, assuming that all women experience the same, or similar, subordination under a patriarchal system. As such, gender distinctions are viewed as "innate and transcultural and historical" (Pilcher 41). *Gender essentialism* implies the supremacy of gendered oppression as the most important focus for a feminist agenda (Crow 11). Therefore, 'second wave' discourses promote the belief in a "common sisterhood among all women, both politically and intellectually" in a united struggle against a patriarchal power structure (Alexander 20).

These predominant assumptions about the nature of women, as declared by the 'second wave' feminist movement, began to be challenged in the 1980s and 1990s with an emerging

"anti-essentialist feminist critique" (Crow 12). This discourse recognized that the *essentialist* proclamation that all women could be unified under a singular feminist agenda proved useful for middle- and upper-class white women only (Pilcher 42). Universalizing the oppression of women was found to be less than ideal for women of various class, racial and ethnic backgrounds, because when gender is deemed as separable from, and superior to, various other oppressions, this assumes a subject who is "not subject to any other form of oppression than sexism, that is, women who are white and middle-class" (Spelman 165). In the Western context, the "unmarked" woman is the white middle-class woman. To suggest that gendered oppression is the central concern of the feminist movement, and can be extracted from all other instances of oppression, permits the belief that race, class, sexual orientation and other intersections of oppressions can be "added on" to this primary foundation of oppression. This essentially asserts that all non-white non-middle-class women are also an *addition* within the dialogue, further reinforcing their marginality (Spelman 167). As Spelman points out, "[t]he 'problem of difference' is really a problem of privilege" because it is not white middle-class women who are different from other women, it is every other woman who is considered different from this dominant group (162). This presumption of a homogenous group of "women" then, subsumed all women within the category of white middle-class women, representing these particular struggles as normative and reflective of all women. The types of problems that arise from this postulation are articulated in a poignant statement by Chakraborty regarding the question of "universal" daycare, as she encourages her readers to question "for whom the service caters and who the service providers are" (105). This demonstrates how the 'second wave' fight for "universal" rights for women erases marginal voices by blurring the power structures in place between women themselves, who are also differently located within the society, thereby holding various

degrees of power and privilege. Therefore, this prototypical "woman" of the 'second wave' movement was identified as inadequate and problematic by what has come to be labeled a 'third wave' feminist discourse. Questioning assumed truths and knowledge, the value and very existence of this previously asserted "sisterhood" was troubled. For example, in 1984 Audre Lorde writes, "[t]here is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116). Thus, the emerging 'third wave' discourse identified this "universal" woman as not only a fallacy, but more significantly, as a racist and classist construct, which serves to reinforce systematic oppression through the erasure of the voices of women of heterogeneous classes, races, sexual orientations and ethnicities (Alexander 19). The "universal" woman further "othered" women who did not fit into this prototype of white and middle-class. In defining and understanding the problems that result from this classification of women as a group, feminist theorists began to question whether "'woman' was no more constant and unchanging across time and place than were gender roles, which vary widely from society to society," and as such, began to question the benefits of using this category as representative of modern feminist struggles at all (Haulman 5).

This emerging feminist discourse reflects a postmodern, post-structuralist way of thinking. Postmodernism is an ideology that developed largely as a reaction to modernism, troubling such Enlightenment ideologies as rationality, reason, science, and the definition of "progress" (Curtler 28). Fluid and indefinable as a "unified 'theory,'" some common features of this shift in understanding entail "blurring the boundaries of texts, genres, and media and drawing attention to…processes of construction" (Chandler), as well an "emphasis on intuition, everyday life, local knowledge, specifics, the contingent, personal testimony, and direct experience rather than theory and abstractions" (Curtler 29). Therefore, postmodernism involves

self-reflectivity, and a level of criticism that questions previously accepted epistemologies, truths and ways of knowing. Michel Foucault, a prominent thinker in this field whose work is often utilized by contemporary feminist theorists, states "that what has emerged…is a sense of the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence - even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid, and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behaviour" (Foucault 19). Foucault therefore emphasizes a focus on the everyday and the local, and a skepticism of meta narratives and previously asserted capital "T" truths about the world. Postmodernism asserts a critical approach to past, present and future ways of knowing and understanding. This ideology is further exemplified by Jacques Derrida's notion of "deconstructionism," which is closely linked with this worldview as "one of [its] major components" (Curtler 28). Derrida defines "deconstruction," in part, as revealing the unnatural as unnatural, as opposed to representing it falsely as "natural." This includes such concepts as history, various institutions, and society itself, which Derrida declares are, in fact, social constructions (Derrida). Deconstruction is not something that is applied to an idea, institution, or person externally, or that follows from its observation, but is instead "always already" present within the idea itself, and simply needs to be accessed (Ibid). For Derrida, this approach to thinking about current definitions, ways of knowing, and language is meant to be a "disruptive force" (Ibid).

These postmodern, post-structuralist ideologies are expanded upon by 'third wave' feminist thinkers, and conceptualized within a specifically feminist framework through self-reflexivity, deconstruction, and the promulgation of an uncertainty that troubles the paradigm of previous feminist epistemology, identity politics, activism and theory. This can perhaps be best

demonstrated through Wendy Brown's well-known and controversial essay, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies" published in 2005. In this essay Brown asks, "to what extent is women's studies still tenable as an institutionalized domain of academic study?" (116). Drawing upon her own experience as a professor in the field of women's studies at the University of California, Brown reflects upon the entire discipline itself. She questions the process of attempting to define the curriculum for a degree in women's studies (118), the criteria for identifying which faculty members ought to "count as an affiliated member of a women's studies faculty" (121), and the paradoxical division between teaching students about the methods, theories and epistemologies that are required in an academic, institutional setting, and which feminist scholarship utilizes, yet which feminist theory also, contradictorily, seeks to trouble as problematic (117). This paradox creates a chasm within the discipline, and often means that the "first project in [women's studies] courses [is] to undo the very distinctions we had given ourselves, thus repeating our founding rebellion against disciplinary distinctions, this time in our own house" (117). This review of women's studies and ultimate rejection of its value as a discipline for the future of feminist scholarship (133), is self-reflective, critical and exemplary of postmodernist thinking. Furthermore, continuing in the postmodernist vein, Brown does not propose any options to serve as a replacement for the discipline of women's studies, which would simply remain within the current structure, therefore inevitably reinforcing it. Instead, Brown's essay concludes with a suggestion that our focus now, in contemporary feminist thought, ought to be on "thinking" (135).

Wendy Brown also discusses the 'third wave' notion of *gender essentialism*, and the construction of the problematic category of "women" as the main purpose of study within women's studies. She states, "[w]omen's studies as contemporary institution…may be politically

and theoretically incoherent…because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable 'women' as an object of study, and conservative because it must resist all objections to such circumscription if it is to sustain that object of study as its raison d'être" (120). Brown asserts that although women's studies was established as a critical discipline to push boundaries and revolutionize existing power dynamics, it actually strengthens the current structures by reinforcing them, when it becomes threatened by its own propensity for self-criticism and reflexivity. Women's studies, and feminist theory more broadly, inevitably ends up working to contest and silence any "theory that destabilizes the category of women, racial formations that disrupt the unity or primacy of the category, and sexualities that similarly blur the solidarity of the category" (120). This is done in an attempt to maintain a unified front against the larger patriarchal power structure, and emerges out of a fear of the loss of perceived coherence, respect, or a political voice. Through her essay, Brown troubles the validity of criticizing a structure that one is inherently a part of. This methodological approach to the discipline remains relevant within contemporary postmodern feminist discourse, which has as its objective a reflection upon previous feminist ideologies to identify their potential for reinforcing the very power structures they seek to change, thereby attempting to remedy past misconceptions through awareness and dialogue.

Therefore, questioning the value of *essentialism* is part of a poststructuralist shift in feminist thinking, which reflects "the role of language and the authority of experience, as well as of identity politics, inclusive of sexuality, gender, race, class and other similar category descriptors" (Tierney 866). Poststructuralist feminist theory decenters the assumption that gender is the primary and uncontested oppression facing all women, instead acknowledging the intertwined and inseparable components of identity, such as race, class, ethnicity, and others, that

influence each woman's experience of oppression differently. This is elucidated by Butler's claim: "If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, …because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (6). Therefore, 'third wave' feminist theory troubles *gender essentialism* as not relevant or beneficial to its proposed understandings of multiple voices and localities as integral to a feminist agenda (Pinterics 66). Further than this critical, self-reflexive approach to the past and present categorizations utilized in feminist theory, contemporary feminist scholarship is also about impacting change. Barker notes, it is about "advancing demands for more egalitarian social, economic, and political conditions in particular regional, national or local sites" (614). This understanding of the interrelatedness of oppression and social location and identity is intended to bring marginal voices to the forefront by acknowledging the many and various forms of oppression as inseparable and interrelated.

Yet this current feminist conversation remains very contentious, promoting ambivalence in modern feminist scholarship. This can be seen by Nancy Hartsock's suggestion that postmodern, poststructuralist discourses are in fact dangerous for the marginalized voices that they propose to protect. She asks, "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subject-hood becomes problematic?" (qtd. in Tung 661). Furthermore, Tung notes that the problematizing of the identity of "woman" poses new complications for feminism in that it "served to destabilize feminism by calling into question the very category on which feminism relies, that is, the category of *woman* itself" (660).

Some feminist theorists maintain that the category of woman, though problematic, remains necessary for promoting a feminist agenda. Specifically regarding a political agenda, Alcoff asserts that feminism requires a "positive conception of women," in order to "make demands in their names and…oppose sexism" (Tung 660). Milkman acknowledges the political consequences of abolishing the category of "women," which could "be put to uses other than those for which they were originally developed" (qtd. in Scott 39). Milkman argues for more awareness of the potential of this discourse to be used against a feminist agenda, and leans towards the assertion of "equality" or sameness among women, without demolishing the value of asserting difference altogether (Scott 39). One of these possible dangers includes, among other threats, the potential for a paralysis of the entire movement, for lack of any social solidarity or political unity.

A useful analogy that articulates the problems arising from these new conversations is found in Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman.* Spelman speaks hypothetically as if she were studying pebbles: "I want to focus on what can be said about any and all pebbles, not just about some…On the other hand, if I am interested in knowing about all the pebbles, how can I disregard those features of each pebble that may distinguish it from others?" (3). She goes on to call this "the paradox at the heart of feminism" demonstrating that "[a]ny attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about the differences among us, and vice versa" (Ibid). Thus this shift in thinking instigated new ideas regarding the relationship between the particular and the universal which remain unresolved in current feminist discourse (Tong 201-2), though not for lack of engagement by feminist theorists. Various resolutions that have been proposed include the possibility that women can be

categorized as a a genealogy,[9] or as a series[10] (Stone 20), but no theory thus far has been widely accepted. Also known as the "equality versus difference" binary, sameness-versus-difference, or multicultural feminism, these postmodern discussions demand the navigation of the individual woman's intersectional forms of oppression, with her social location and possible collective identity. It is in this space of ongoing debate and negotiation surrounding the relationship between the universal and the particular that *The Woman's Bible* can engage with the dialogue. It is the combination of *individualism* and *essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* that can inform these debates.

Essentialism in *The Woman's Bible*

Gender essentialism, as suggested by Fiorenza, certainly is present in *The Woman's Bible.* Implicit in the very title of this project, Cady Stanton's methodological approach to interpret Christian Scripture from a woman's perspective, with the goal of amending women's social location, situates this text squarely in the realm of *essentialism.* Within the body of the text as well, from the very first sentence in the Introduction to the last sentence in the Appendix of the second edition, *The Woman's Bible* speaks unflinchingly about women as a category.

"Woman" is a clearly defined category for Cady Stanton in *The Woman's Bible*. She groups women together by consequence of their inferior status in relation to men through interpretations of Scripture. The rationale behind this group identification is delineated in Cady

[9]Alison Stone suggests we employ the Nietzchean principle of genealogy to unite women. She proposes that "any reinterpretation of femininity must overlap in content with the interpretation that it modifies, shedding some elements of that pre-existing interpretation while preserving others. Consequently, each woman finds herself in a series of gradually diminishing connections with women of previous generations…Although women do not form a unitary group, united in possession of shared characteristics, they remain a social group in that they constitute a genealogy" (25).

[10]Iris Marion Young proposes the idea of "series" to group women together. She defines this group identity as "vast, multifaceted, layered, complex and overlapping" (qtd. in Stone 21).

Stanton's response to initial censures that the first edition had received. In the Preface to the second edition of 1898, Cady Stanton addresses one particular criticism from Reverend T. DeWitt Talmage, who suggests that because the Christian Scripture applies equally to both women and men, to segregate the text for women only is as ridiculous as it would be to create a 'Shoemakers' Bible' (Stanton 119). Cady Stanton responds to this remark by stating that "the Bible treats women as of a different class, inferior to man or in subjection to him, which is not the case with shoemakers, [so this] criticism has no significance" (Ibid). Cady Stanton suggests that the Christian Bible is not applicable for both women and men in the same way, because women are segregated in society due to their perceived inferiority. For Cady Stanton, women are the members of the human race who have been denied the freedom of self-sovereignty, excluded from participation in a political and public voice, because of their apparent participation in the fall of man due to of Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden (253). Women are the members of the human race who have been forbidden from critically reading and interpreting the Christian Scriptures, and who exist in relation to the category of "man" who are the human beings in the position of power, who have made multiple revisions to the Bible without choosing to improve the position of women (Ibid). For Cady Stanton, whatever a woman is, it is not what she is made out to be through the restrictions and limitations of her social experience; these categorizations are externally imposed and socially constructed. Thus for Cady Stanton the group identity of "women" is political, defined by exclusion from participation in the public sphere.

This method of categorizing women based on exclusion due to their sexual characteristics is reiterated historically throughout feminist discourses, for example Ruth Salvaggio states, "the very idea of woman became a metaphor and figure of the essence of exclusion- of not being, of absence" (qtd. in Fox-Genovese 124). In contemporary feminist theory, Wendy McElroy notes

this conceptualization of women as a political category based on exclusion is part of a libertarian view of justice within feminism which establishes the feminist movement as "a response to the legal discrimination women have suffered from the state" (22). However, identifying women as a political category in this way is not an uncontroversial assertion in contemporary feminist discourse. Barker notes, "faith in political reform and historical progress is doomed to offer nothing better than new forms of exclusion" (609). Barker means that identifying women as "the excluded" does not diminish the hierarchy of women themselves within this structure with more or less privilege, and thereby cannot trouble the system at a level to make real change. Instead, it will inevitably reinforce the power dynamics, just in different ways. Other prominent thinkers agree with this apprehension about the political categorization of "women." Judith Butler, for example, suggests that the very classification of political subjects not only remains within the system, but is defined and constructed by the system, and therefore inevitably reinforces it (5). One feminist critique of *individualism* is that woman becomes an individual only by becoming an "honorary man," which normalizes typically masculine traits, and male identity, as prototypically "human," and asserts the status quo as the *objective.* Expanding upon this logic, situating women as a political category based upon their current exclusion from certain legal, social, and juridical opportunities, is asserting that this typically male identity is the goal. This does not deconstruct the systemic power structures, instead strengthening them by fighting for inclusion within them. Moreover, the new exclusions that will be created, as *essentialism* dictates, will be the erasure of the more marginalized subgroups within this political group.

Contrarily, other contemporary theorists argue for the necessity of political solidarity for feminist activism, for a place from which to locate a united struggle against an oppressive system (Tung 660). For Cady Stanton, this political identity has roots in the position of women

represented in the Bible: "The Old Testament makes a woman a mere after-thought in creation, the author of evil; cursed in her maternity, a subject in marriage; and all female life, animal and human, unclean" (Stanton 119). It is from this assumption that Cady Stanton's representation of women can engage with this dialogue in modern feminist thought because this *cosmic exclusion* that women experience can transgress political boundaries. "Woman" is not just a political category; it is not just her exclusion from the public sphere that Cady Stanton is contesting, although this is one element of her argument. Rather, women are excluded from full participation in the human race, they are denied their fundamental human right of self-sovereignty, as is recognized by her *individualism*. Although this exclusion has taken the form of prohibition from certain social and political roles, it does not have to end at this juncture, because the identity of women is beyond a this-worldly construction. Judith Butler articulates, "Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women'…is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (5). By questioning the cosmic exclusion of women, based on a misrepresentation of her inherently equal status in the human race, *The Woman's Bible* can trouble the preexisting social structures at their very foundation. Cady Stanton identifies women as a political category, as has been defined through their exclusion from social and political participation. This exclusion is shown to be socially constructed and externally imposed, thereby a disjuncture for her natural condition. Cady Stanton utilizes the preexisting political categories that currently divide her social and cultural world by gender lines, to assert power. She identifies "women" as a sexual caste that is created already by the patriarchal society in which she lives, and is defined by exclusion from full participation in personhood. She finds this intrinsically problematic and unreflective of the natural human condition, thereby choosing to trouble the entire power structure by using this categorization to

her advantage, despite the fact that it was meant to ensure her subordination. Cady Stanton embraces her socially enforced location as a woman, based on exclusion, to help perpetuate her political agenda. This representation of women in *The Woman's Bible* promotes a modern feminist agenda, which "represents a revolution. It is not in essence a demand that women should be allowed to join the male world on equal terms. It is a different view of the world" (Hampson 1). Cady Stanton represents a transgressive new paradigm in *The Woman's Bible,* which identifies women as a category as defined by their social structure, challenging the entire structure by rejecting this classification as unnatural and thereby fundamentally inaccurate, yet utilizing this social position to enact political and social justice. Her belief in *individualism* ensures, moreover, that this group identification will not erase the voices of the marginal members, because of their inherent and objective value.

In the first volume of Fiorenza's *Searching the Scriptures,* Gifford notes that the all-female Revising Committee of *The Woman's Bible* consisted solely of "white Anglo-Saxon Protestants," which she suggests, limits the scope of this text to reflect only this particular group of women's struggles (60). This gynocentric methodological approach to *The Woman's Bible* is therefore identified as *gender essentialist*, and potentially harmful to a contemporary feminist worldview. For Fiorenza, by assuming a universal "woman" who exists in opposition to the universal man, this methodological approach to writing threatens to reinforce patriarchal ideologies regarding what it means to be a woman, and prescribed definitions of femininity (16). Furthermore, it is not just the limits of the authors in terms of their racialized and classist standpoint that Fiorenza takes issue with, it is also the assumption that because the text is authored by women it will necessarily be a feminist project. Fiorenza notes that "one cannot assume that texts are liberating just because they are articulated by women" (14). Fiorenza

asserts that many women "have internalized cultural-religious feminine values and…they consequently tend to reproduce uncritically the patriarchal 'politics of submission and otherness' in their speaking and writing" (15). This assumption of *essentialism* present in the authorship of the text is also reflected in Cady Stanton's selection of the passages in the Christian Scriptures to interpret. *The Woman's Bible* chose only to focus on the passages of the Christian Bible that Cady Stanton's team of collaborators deemed important for women's lives, either because they reference women directly, or explicitly exclude them (Stanton 5). For Fiorenza, this selection is problematic because it remains within a dichotomous structure that serves to other "women" in relation to "men" (15). Moreover, this universal "woman" erases women's voices who do not identify with the same struggles as the privileged group of white middle-class women. Therefore, for Fiorenza *The Woman's Bible* is not able to trouble the patriarchal and kyriocentric[11] structures that serve to oppress, because it remains within it, ultimately strengthening it. Therefore, the text is dismissed as unable to contribute to contemporary poststructuralist debates. A valuable case study to examine *essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* can be found in its representation of the story of Hagar. Hagar is an enslaved and racialized woman, and therefore this narrative can provide insight into whether the *essentialism* present in this text erases marginal, disempowered voices, or if it can be utilized for a poststructuralist agenda.

The story of Hagar, Sarah and Abraham is found in Genesis, chapters 16 and 21. Hagar is an Egyptian slave-girl who belongs to Sarah (NRSV Gen 16:3). Upon discovering her own sterility, Sarah gives Hagar to her husband Abraham, to bear him a son. Hagar conceives, and

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[11] *Kyriocentric*: "master-centered." Fiorenza defines this term as an indication that "not all men dominate and exploit all women but that elite Western educated propertied Euro-American men have articulated and benefitted from women's and other 'nonpersons' exploitation." This definition is found in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Beacon Press: 1993. p.241 n.37

gives birth to a son who is named Ishmael (Gen 16:1-16). However, later in the story God promises Sarah a son of her own by Abraham, despite her age of ninety years. Once Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac, Sarah tells Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, "for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (Gen 21:10). Abraham is sad to lose his first born son, but obeys Sarah's wish with the support and encouragement of God (Gen 21: 11-13).

In *The Woman's Bible* Cady Stanton and her team engage with the events of Genesis chapter 21 only, shortening Hagar's already brief narrative in the Scripture. In speaking about Sarah's laughing and exuberant motherhood, Cady Stanton recognizes the mistreatment of Hagar by Sarah, remarking that her happiness "does not seem to have softened Sarah's heart towards her unfortunate slave Hagar" (Stanton 28). However, more so than rebuking Sarah's actions, Cady Stanton focuses in greater detail on Abraham's role in the maltreatment of Hagar, under the approving and watchful eye of God:

> In this scene Abraham does not appear in a very attractive light, rising early in the morning, and sending his child and its mother forth into the wilderness, with a breakfast of bread and water, to care for themselves…Common humanity demanded [more] attention to his own son and the woman who bore him. But the worst feature in this drama is that it seems to have been done with Jehovah's approval. (Stanton 28)

Instead of focusing on the relationship between Hagar and Sarah, problematizing the power structures at work between these two women, Cady Stanton is placing the male against the female, reducing this event to a gendered oppression. Cady Stanton articulates the mistreatment of Hagar *the woman* by Abraham *the man.* This reading does not engage with the power dynamic at work between Sarah and Hagar, as owner and slave. This lack of acknowledgement thereby erases the uniquely oppressed position of Hagar, not just as a woman in relation to the men of the story, but further as a racialized and enslaved woman facing oppression from all other figures in

the narrative, regardless of gender. However, later in *The Woman's Bible,* in the commentary on Genesis chapter 23, the relationship between the two women of this story is addressed. In cautioning the reader against idolizing Sarah as a female role model, Cady Stanton recognizes Sarah as "undignified, untruthful, and unkind to Hagar" (29). With this recognition however, Cady Stanton excuses Sarah's actions as a consequence of the confines of her socio-historical context, given the morality and education provided her: "Sarah probably lived up to the light that was in her" (Ibid).

As previously noted, one of the main concerns of *essentialist* discourse is that the voices of the privileged usurp and erase those who are speaking from the margins. Cady Stanton's engagement with the story of Hagar is a prime example of this problem: she sees Hagar as a woman only, her racial identity is never addressed and is therefore eclipsed, which neglects to represent the multiple levels of oppression that Hagar faces. Cady Stanton does suggest that the terrible sequence of events that happen to Hagar do not properly recognize her individuality, and therefore contradict correct human action. Yet, her story is not expanded much beyond this. Hagar is rarely presented as the central figure of this story in *The Woman's Bible*, instead she is an object facing the consequences of Sarah's unfair decisions, or the victim in God and Abraham's narrative; the poor slave girl who is mistreated by all other agents in the story. In this particular passage, which would have been an opportune moment to discuss such issues as race, ethnicity, and variously socially positioned women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton makes no mention of these other elements of oppression reflected in this narrative. This neglect in acknowledging Hagar's marginality as a result of these such multiple oppressions as race, enslavement, and gender is a fundamentally *gender essentialist* problem, and if one were to take this story's interpretation as representative of the entire *Woman's Bible,* it would certainly merit dismissal in

contemporary discourse for its inability to engage with contemporary discussions of power dynamics and oppression. However, this *essentialism* must not be the final comment on *The Woman's Bible* because it is not the prescriptive reading proposed by the text. In fact, it is just the opposite: Cady Stanton's representation of *individualism* allows for a dialogue regarding these differently socially positioned individuals to emerge within the text, by its very methodology. Thus while Cady Stanton certainly does not engage with a discourse that explicitly promotes Hagar as a subject and as a multiply located figure, other scholars can find the space within the text to do so, and notably, contemporary feminist scholars have.

In modern feminist discourse, Hagar's story has been taken up by women largely outside of white, mainstream feminism, as a symbol both of oppression and liberation (Thompson 20). Hagar has been utilized by women of colour as exemplary of intersectional oppressions regarding race, class, and sex and has been an important figure for African-American women and Latina women particularly (Pui-Lan 105). Through engagement with the story, modern feminist scholars have centralized Hagar's role in this biblical narrative. For example, Phyllis Trible notes the reasons why Hagar must be understood as a heroine in this story: "she was the first person in the Bible to be visited by an angel,…the first to receive an annunciation,…the only woman in all of Scripture ever to receive a promise of innumerable descendants, [and Hagar] boldly bestow[s] a name on God—'a power attributed to no one else in all the Bible'" (qtd. in Thompson 18). With this shift in the traditional understanding of this narrative, Hagar becomes the central figure in the story, the protagonist, instead of a marginal character whose particular and unique life circumstances are ignored and thereby erased from history.

Cady Stanton and her collaborators do not provide the same agency or individuality to Hagar that these later feminist scholars have. However this subversive reading of a biblical

narrative is in fact present in Cady Stanton's representation of Eve's role in the story of the fall in Genesis. Cady Stanton proposes a reading of the narrative of Adam and Eve that demonstrates Eve as an empowered subject, the protagonist of the cosmic event that led to the fall of humankind from paradise. Cady Stanton imagines Eve as a physical and tangible woman, conjecturing as to her personality, unique characteristics, and thought processes. She places Eve at the centre of the narrative, not for her role as the temptress who convinces Adam to partake of the forbidden fruit, but instead for her "courage…dignity, and…lofty ambition" in her conscious decision to eat the fruit herself (Stanton *Bible* 16). Cady Stanton commends Eve for her desire to better herself through gaining wisdom, noting that the serpent "did not try to tempt her from the path of duty by brilliant jewels, rich dresses, worldly luxuries or pleasure, but with the promise of knowledge" (Ibid). She suggests that Eve should be respected because her desire was for higher wisdom and self improvement, instead of superficial or mundane pleasures (17). This interpretation of the the fall of humanity from divine grace was extremely subversive during the nineteenth century in North America, especially when compared to the prevalent discourses at that time. One such popular interpretation from this time period is Augustine's *The City of God,* where he explains Eve as the conduit who transmits sin between the Devil and Adam (14.11). The serpent approached Eve in the garden because she was "the weaker of the human couple" and as such, was going to be easier to persuade than Adam, whom the serpent predicted would only "succumb to the error of another" (Ibid). This reading suggests that Eve is the weaker vessel, her only role being in relation to Adam, as the temptress in his eviction from paradise, which led to all of humankind's subsequent expulsion from Eden. This conventional reading of the narrative is unsatisfactory for Cady Stanton because it denies Eve's agency, and detracts from her participation as an individual agent acting in the story. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's

subversive reinterpretation of these events troubles the more traditional narrative by centering Eve as the subject, complete with her own desires, goals and curiosities. Cady Stanton has removed Eve from the margins, from the position of the other. This reading reflects Cady Stanton's religious and political *individualism*. Cady Stanton first identifies that Eve and Adam, as the first humans, were created equally in the image of God, and are therefore equally accountable to the divine in this-world, in preparation for the next. She then demonstrates how Eve can act in a thoughtful and independent way to affect change in her social circumstances. Eve's story also represents an *essentialist* dilemma however, because Eve is often represented as *the* universal woman.

The reading of Eve as the universal woman, and mother to all existent women, is explicitly present in Augustine's theology through his statement: "What difference does it make whether it is a wife or a mother, when a man has to guard against Eve in every woman?" (qtd. in Power 85). This interpretation has palpable consequences for a contemporary feminist agenda, as Mary Daly warns that the Christian story of the fall and the doctrine of original sin continue to have a pervasive impact upon our current socio-political existence, because the myth, which represents the true "nature" of woman, is "still deeply imbedded in the modern psyche" (Daly 45). Kim Power also shows how "[t]he universal Eve reduces women to one category of being…she tempts men to place the personal above the communal, the private ahead of the public, the temporal ahead of the eternal" (85). Modern feminist scholars argue that the treatment of Eve as a symbol of inferiority reflective of *all* women has been understood as "an intrinsic part of God's divine, harmonious order, an inferiority found even in paradise" which therefore justifies this positioning of the female in contemporary and historical societies (Miller "Remember" 252). Indeed, feminist scholars affirm that even secular laws serve to regulate and

mediate this dangerous "universal" female nature, that Eve has perpetuated (Daly 45). Therefore, West suggests that it is "part of the feminist project to rescue Eve from the framing of male accusers" (208) because the implications of this perception of the innate feminine nature as manipulative and seductive serve to relegate women to a necessarily controlled position, as a menace to patriarchal society, both within Christianity and in the larger society.

Cady Stanton recognizes this problematic association of Eve with all women, noting, "out of this allegory grows the doctrines of original sin, the fall of man, and woman the author of all our woes" (*Bible* 16). However, in her rebellious reading of the text, Cady Stanton flips this ideology on its head. She uses Eve as representative of all women, as does Augustine, however her reading subverts this depiction of women as temptresses, who are passive and exist only in relation to men. Using this tendency towards universalizing in a positive manner, Cady Stanton represents Eve, the cosmic first woman, as possessing admirable human qualities such as self-sovereignty and curiosity, which can therefore be transported onto contemporary women by the same argument as the negatively portrayed qualities currently are. Furthermore, by hypothesizing about Eve's own thoughts and personality, Eve still remains a particular woman with an individual identity. This prevents a reading of Eve as the "unmarked" woman who is the racist and classist construct of 'second wave' feminism, and allows for marginal voices to enter the discussion through an acknowledgement of her *individualism* first and foremost. Cady Stanton is using two interrelated aspects of a women's positionality, as a member of a subordinate group based on her affiliation with Eve, and as an individual with her own thoughts and goals, to help persuade her audience of women's entitlement to social and political equality. This unique combination can work to ensure an individual's specific intersections of oppressions are not

ignored or erased. This reading affirms Cady Stanton's nuanced belief in the condition of all women, as both particular beings and as part of a universal group identity.

This subversive and disruptive reading of the traditional interpretation is consistent with the modern feminist approach to Hagar's story. By making Hagar the central character in the narrative, whose personality, individual goals and life events must be focused on, Hagar's agency can be retrieved. She becomes an individual through her unique relationship with God, whose opinions and perspectives are sought out and hypothesized: she is given her voice back. Therefore, while Cady Stanton is *essentializing* in her reading of Hagar in *The Woman's Bible*, her methodological approach to the text, as demonstrated in the story of the fall, provides an inroad to a modern feminist reading and to the discovery of the subjectivity of Hagar. It is Cady Stanton's continued propagation of *individualism* which allows for this subversive reading by seeking out the voices of those previously forgotten or eroded. Therefore, others who come to the text today can use the guidelines provided through the narrative of Eve as an example of how to approach stories that they find more representative of their own individual struggles.

The framework for moving a marginalized figure from the position of other to the centre, as represented in her interpretation of the role of Eve in the story of the fall, creates a space for modern readers to transgress Cady Stanton's own limitations, using her methodology to approach the text in a new way. This reading, admittedly, places the onus on the oppressed individual to find their own voice and subjectivity in the text. In *Sister Outsider* Audre Lorde asserts that it is typical of American society to require "the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes" (114). However, this fact is not necessarily negative. As Spelman discusses in *Inessential Woman*, the informative suggestions for transformation by the oppressed must happen in order for the oppressors to understand and acknowledge the unique experiences of

other socially located individuals. This information sharing is indispensable for the alteration of current power structures, which create and perpetuate these oppressions. Spelman suggests that the more privileged members within a group must take on the role of apprentice in order to learn of the oppressions of others, promoting awareness and tolerance of variously located individuals to avoid the silencing of marginal voices (180-5). The interaction between *individualism* and *essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* provides a space of openness where the dominant voices can be encouraged to listen to the voices speaking from the margins, out of respect for their unique individuality, yet still as members of unified group. Lorde suggests that the best option for resolving the tensions of *essentialism* is to embrace human difference and, rather than being bewildered by it, "develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change" (115-6). *The Woman's Bible* provides tools for creating a dialogue across differences, by acknowledging the particularity of each individual, while also allowing for a space of solidarity and a shared social circumstance of women under a patriarchal structure.

The Amalgamation of *Individualism* and *Essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible*

The reading of Hagar as reflective of both an *essentialist* and *individualistic* ideology is available only through a critical examination of Cady Stanton's underlying philosophical approach toward reading Christian Scripture. However, explicit examples of the interaction between *individualism* and *essentialism* are also prevalent throughout *The Woman's Bible*. For example, in the exegesis on Judges 11, Cady Stanton states "A woman's vow…could be disallowed at the pleasure of any male relative; but a man's was considered sacred even though it involved the violation of the sixth commandment, the violation of the individual rights of another human being" (Stanton 129). In this passage Cady Stanton is grouping all women together as a collection of individuals who are under the control of male relatives. This is an *essentialist*

argument, that could usurp the voices of the less privileged under those of the more privileged members of this group. However, in the latter part of this quotation, Cady Stanton reminds her readers that the woman is a human being, and as such is entitled to individual rights, which makes the attempted control of her will unethical, unjustified, and immoral. The text therefore nuances this social position of all women, with the assertion of the individuality of each woman as a human being. This reading provides the tools to counter the *essentialism* argument by creating the space to recognize the infinitely diverse oppressions and privileges of each unique individual woman. Spelman suggests this as as a viable solution to the *essentialist* debate in *Inessential Woman*: namely that we must acknowledge that "though all women are women, no woman is only a woman" (187). Spelman asserts that although women can be categorized as women, this classification has no meaning when taken as a single identifier that represents her complete social and political location. Race, class, ethnicity, and other intersections of identity cannot be teased out from a woman's individuality, to leave just a gendered being. Therefore, one must always acknowledge these other aspects of her positionality in relation to her society and culture, when speaking about her "womanness." Cady Stanton's combination of "women" as a group, and woman as an "individual" allows for this discourse to take place. It is this recognition of her individuality that can prevent this unification of all women from erasing the marginalized voices within this grouping. Moreover, this combination transgresses the gender boundaries of *essentialism* by establishing women as both women and as individuals, a non-gendered identity for Cady Stanton, who believes this to be the quintessential identity and condition for humankind.

Another example of this more explicit combination of *essentialism* and *individualism* can be found in *The Woman's Bible's* interpretation of Vashti's role in the Book of Esther. In this

narrative, Queen Vashti is summoned to appear before her husband and his guests at his banquet, "in order to show the people and the officials her beauty" (NRSV Esther 1:11). In a courageous decision, Vashti refuses her husband's request to present herself in this way. She is consequently punished by being replaced as queen (1:19), and made an example of, "So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike (NRSV Esther 1:11-20). In commenting on this passage, Lucinda B. Chandler acknowledges Vashti's position as representative of all women as a group, however not just because her husband is attempting to set her as a precedent. For Chandler this representation of all women ought to be acknowledged as the "prototype" of a change in all women, because Vashti "stands for the point in human development when womanliness asserts itself and begins to revolt and to throw off the yoke of sensualism and of tyranny" (qtd. in Stanton 172). In this depiction of Vashti, all women are grouped together in following a designated path in development, out of the confines of their socially constructed sphere: a proposed progress narrative out of their typically feminine (and externally imposed) traits, into a more self-assertive position that asserts their inherent *individualism*. This is reflected in Vashti's denial of the request of her husband, the king (Stanton 170). Chandler goes on to state that in Vashti's refusal to obey her husband, she "was merely exercising her own judgment as to her own proceeding" noting further that "[t]he growth of self-respect and of individual sovereignty in woman has been slow" (172). Therefore, while Vashti is being said to represent an entire movement among women, she is also praised for thinking for herself, for her assertion of her independence and individual will. She is both a woman and an individual, and as representative of all women, one can deduce that all women are also both women and individuals. Therefore if Vashti's struggles do not, in fact, represent those of all other women, she can still be lauded as a

role model for her ability to assert her individuality, and present a framework for others to do so too, within their own oppressive structures.

The potential dangers of the presence of *essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* cannot be ignored or disregarded. However, the tools for a critical reading of the text are provided within the text itself, because of the presence of Cady Stanton's ideology of *individualism*. The unique amalgamation of *individualism* and *essentialism* found in *The Woman's Bible* has the ability to nuance current feminist discourses regarding the navigation of individual oppressions and the arguable need for a group identity from which to enact social justice and systematic changes. *The Woman's Bible* asserts that women are inherently included in the status of "individual" based on their essential equality through their membership in the human race. However, Cady Stanton still groups women together as a political category, which is externally imposed through a patriarchal society. As articulated by Stephen Whitehead, this categorization is inevitable for both men and women based on the fact that humans "do not exist in some neutral, benign context" but in relation to one another, always already socially situated. "As such, their existence, somewhat inevitably, has political implications" (59). For Whitehead, classifying men and women by political categories, or "classes," can be valuable because "it unambiguously posits women and men in a political arena, with potentially quite contrasting opportunities to access power and privilege and, thus, material well-being" (Ibid). It is from this location that social justice movements can be instigated, and this-world changes can be proposed. This idea of a political identity for women remains important in contemporary feminist discourse because the importance of "a feeling of solidarity" is noted as necessary to achieve political goals or create social change on behalf of a group. "Solidarity is required if people are to feel concerned about each other's fortunes and to be willing to make sacrifices for other people" (Joseph Raz qtd. in

Tong 204). This necessity of political solidarity is challenged among such scholars as Butler and Barker, as noted above, however this contestation is largely due to the inevitability of any political movement working within the system it is responding to, and therefore reinforcing it. This would counter the deconstructive goals of poststructuralist feminism. As Lorde states however, "The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity" (119). In *The Woman's Bible* unity need not be equated with homogeneity, because the *individualism* underscoring the text prevents the erasure of multiple and diverse voices within the larger category. Therefore it is this unique combination of the ideologies of *individualism* and *essentialism* in the text that interact with one another and provide an interesting framework from which to engage in contemporary feminist debates. This unique relationship between the particular and the universal allows for a space of unity for women to situate themselves against various oppressions and forms of subordination within the current power structure, without eclipsing the distinctive experiences of individual women.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde writes that the major problem that plagues contemporary feminist discourse is that "we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals" (115). I propose that one pattern to bridge this gap in understanding is represented in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's combination of *individualism* and *essentialism* present in *The Woman's Bible*. Cady Stanton ascertains a unity among women as those who are excluded from natural rights and full personhood under an oppressive system, without silencing the marginal voices within this process of group identification. The relationship she asserts between the particular and the universal is achieved through the representation of the objective value of each individual person through her or his relationship to the divine, in correspondence with her or his social location as a member of society, and the human race.

Cady Stanton's relationship with Christianity shifted dramatically over the course of her life, culminating in a rejection of the tradition and its institutions as incompatible with her argument for the equality of women in a social and political context. This rejection is represented in *The Woman's Bible,* which serves as a social commentary, conducted by women, critiquing the perceived "divinely ordained" inferior position of women in society. *The Woman's Bible* was extremely controversial and revolutionary for its time period, yet Cady Stanton's adherence to *individualism* gave her the confidence to undertake this project. The larger suffragist movement in nineteenth century America, however, had an ambivalent response to this text, and eventually disassociated themselves from it as potentially harmful towards their objective of female enfranchisement. This relationship to the text remains prevalent in modern feminist scholarship, most commonly acknowledging *The Woman's Bible* as important to Western feminist history,

but dismissing the text as no longer able to nurture the current conversation. I argue that this dismissal is an unfair reading of the text, because it fails to acknowledge Cady Stanton's skillful incorporation of *individualist* and *essentialist* ideologies both reflected in the document, and which are pertinent for ongoing poststructuralist feminist debates.

A major philosophical undercurrent throughout her public life, Cady Stanton's understanding of *individualism* is best represented in her speech "Solitude of Self." In this speech Cady Stanton delineates a unique combination of political and Protestant *individualism*, which establishes the inherent value of every person based on her or his relationship to the divine. From this assertion, Cady Stanton proposes a restructuring of the socially defined category of an "individual," which typically excludes women based on their biological sex. The inborn and essential equality of all humans stands in stark contradiction to the artificial, socially constructed impositions of human hierarchy, that rank women as non-citizens, and most importantly non-individuals, in a political context. Cady Stanton's *individualism* is inclusive to all humans, as the natural human condition shared by every person, and is therefore not asocial. It originates from a place of cosmic self-sovereignty that is then rhetorically translated into a proposal of social justice reform in this world. Since no human exists in a vacuum and is thus always already socially situated, Cady Stanton feels comfortable addressing the group identity of women, even while acknowledging the natural predisposition of self-sovereignty for each person. It is from the foundation of Protestant *individualism* that Cady Stanton argues for a change in political understandings of *individualism* that must be redefined to include all humans within its boundaries, because of the *essentialist* constructs already existing within the socio-political environment, which establish women as a political category by exclusion.

This same representation of *individualism* is present in *The Woman's Bible,* although more subtly, and is often neglected in contemporary interactions with this text. Indeed, *The Woman's Bible* is generally dismissed in modern feminist theory due to its propensity towards *gender essentialism. Gender essentialism* is the assumption that all women share some qualities and characteristics in common, and can therefore be represented as a group, which can be spoken on behalf of by feminism itself. This ideology tends to erase differences and marginal voices, subsuming all women under the discourse of the most privileged, which is the white middle-class woman. As such, *gender essentialist* discourse shows that the tendency to assert the primacy of gender as the first and most important oppression that all women share, creates a feminism that is "not a feminism for all women" (Tong 202).

Gender essentialism is certainly present in *The Woman's Bible,* and this is a justified criticism. However, to relegate *The Woman's Bible* to feminist history, as a dead text that can no longer contribute to contemporary debates because of this criticism is reductive. This dismissal of the text would prove a loss for ongoing Western feminist conversations, particularly because these *anti-essentialism* versus *essentialist* discourses remain unresolved and contested in present feminist theory. The threat that *gender essentialism* poses to a contemporary feminist agenda, which is mainly the potential loss of the marginalized voices, is countered by Cady Stanton's *individualism* which entails the recognition of each and every human being as objectively valuable. This unique amalgamation of universalism with the particular works to trouble current power structures of oppression against women, while still acknowledging multiple and various forms of oppression and personal experience. I suggest that when countered with her *individualism*, Cady Stanton's *essentialism* in *The Woman's Bible* benefits current discourses regarding the navigation of individual experiences of oppression, while still providing the

framework for uniting against a common cause, asserting a solidarity from which to ground one's social and political objectives, which is in itself a major criticism of *anti-essentialist* theorizing: the potential pitfalls that could occur from the loss of the category of "woman" from which to locate feminist goals and activism.

My intention with this thesis is to advocate for a reinvigoration of *The Woman's Bible* in contemporary feminist theory. I argue that this text is beneficial for modern feminist scholarship, because it can provide nuance to ongoing debates. However, I do not claim my analysis to be exhaustive. Due to spatial and time restrictions, I have only been able to provide a comprehensive sample of *The Woman's Bible,* to reflect the presence of both *individualism* and *essentialism* and their relationship with one another. I have brought these ideologies into dialogue with contemporary feminist theory to provide examples of how they can trouble current debates, and contribute to the prevalent ongoing conversations in current feminist scholarship. Nevertheless, there is much more to be discovered within *The Woman's Bible,* and I hope that my thesis will be a jumping-off point for other scholars' further engagement with this text.

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