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CONCEPTIONS OF THE NEBRASKA VOTER IN 1882
PARADOXES AND COMPLEXITIES AMONG “WOMEN”

CARMEN HEIDER

Suffrage activism began in Nebraska in 1856 when Amelia Bloomer addressed the territorial house of representatives and argued that women should not be denied the right to vote. The house passed the bill, but the forty-day session ended before the council could vote on it. As Ann Wilhite states, “Had [the bill] passed, Nebraskans would have been the first in America—in the world—to enfranchise women.” Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Fig. 1), Susan B. Anthony (Fig. 2), and George Francis Train toured Nebraska promoting suffrage in 1867, the year Nebraska became a state. In 1871, Nebraska voters defeated the suffrage amendment by a four to one margin, but pro-suffrage activism continued. On 15 April 1879, eleven women organized the Thayer County Suffrage Association, the first permanent woman suffrage organization in Nebraska. According to the contemporary History of Woman Suffrage, “The Thayer County Association, as the elder sister of the numerous family now springing up, maintained its prominence as a centre of activity and intelligence” in the state of Nebraska.

Even though all of the officers of the Thayer County Suffrage Association were women, Erasmus Correll was one of the most prominent figures behind the group. Correll owned and published the Hebron Journal, one of Thayer County’s weekly newspapers, and also the monthly Western Woman’s Journal, a pro-suffrage newspaper published in Lincoln from April 1881 to September 1882, leading up to another unsuccessful Nebraska suffrage vote in November 1882. The American Woman Suffrage Association elected Correll their President in 1881. Nebraskans elected Correll to the state house of representatives in 1880, where he introduced a woman suffrage amendment that would allow the already

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enfranchised—men—to vote on whether to extend woman suffrage. The house passed the amendment, 51 to 22, as did the Senate. As the History of Woman Suffrage claims, “The Thayer County Woman Suffrage Association won a deserved triumph in being primarily connected with the origin and successful passage of the joint resolution of 1881.”4

In this essay I examine the paradoxical connotations of the concept “woman voter” in Nebraska newspapers during the months preceding the 1882 state vote on woman suffrage. Very little is known about suffrage reform in locations outside the northeast.5 As Steven Buechler points out, “the period from 1870 through 1890 is a ‘black hole’ in our knowledge of the suffrage movement.” Coverage of the period tends to be “broad and general (e.g., O’Neill, 1969 or Flexner, 1975) and fail[s] to provide a detailed and specific analysis of the suffrage movement.”6 Nebraska newspapers from 1882, however, indicate that suffragists actively pursued their cause during this time.

The newspapers used in this study are the Omaha Daily Bee, the Daily Nebraska State Journal, the Omaha Daily Republican, and the Omaha Daily Herald. The Omaha Daily Bee and the Omaha Daily Herald opposed woman suffrage, the Omaha Daily Republican supported it, and the Daily Nebraska State Journal held a neutral position. In 1882 the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) held their annual convention in Omaha 12-14 September and the rival National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) held theirs in Omaha 26-28 September. The newspapers
printed the majority of their suffrage articles in September and October, before, during, and after these two conventions and prior to the vote on woman suffrage in November. Thus the majority of the articles cited were printed during those three months.

This analysis focuses on the rhetoric of the newspapers in fashioning the concept of the woman voter. Who or what counted as a woman voter? What were the gender subtexts embedded in the ways language was used to construct the woman voter? Did the constructions of "women voters" perpetuate oppositions between men and women, masculinity and femininity? Did the constructions complicate such dichotomies? And what are the implications? Because I am concerned with public constructions of the idea of the woman voter, I have used letters, addresses, and editorial material published for the public rather than private correspondence. The first section of this essay explores in more detail those who supported and opposed the woman suffrage amendment in Nebraska; the second analyzes the newspaper's conceptions of the woman voter in relation to the ideology of separate spheres; and the final section concludes the analysis and offers implications.

My initial task is to address who the "women" in the 1882 Nebraska woman suffrage movement were. Clara Bewick Colby (Fig. 3), Orpha Dinsmore, Harriet Brooks, and Ada Bittenbender were among the most active. Bittenbender had attended colleges in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC, and was the first woman lawyer in Nebraska. Colby, a University of Wisconsin graduate, edited the Women's Tribune from 1883 to 1909, and beginning in 1881, Brooks edited a woman's column in the Omaha Republican. According to Correll,

the success of the [suffrage] measure was very largely due to the efforts of Mrs. H. S. Brooks, Mrs. Orpha G. Dinsmore, Mrs. Clara B. Colby, Mrs. Lucinda Russell, Mrs. J. F. Holmes, Rev. Mary DeLong, Mrs. B. J. Thompson, and other ladies. The first mentioned ladies worked almost incessantly to obtain favorable vote, and too much praise cannot be given for their tact, perseverance, and ability. The advocacy of the Omaha Republican especially, and other leading papers was of great benefit.7

Male suffrage proponents included former Nebraska Chief Justice O.P. Mason and John Finch, a Nebraska temperance advocate.

Those who opposed the woman suffrage bill included Nebraska Governor Albinus Nance, the majority of Nebraska legislators,8 Omaha Herald editor Dr. George Miller, and Omaha Bee editor Edward Rosewater. According to the Western Woman's Journal, "The Omaha Bee, the Omaha Herald, and the Lincoln Democrat propose to 'bust' the Woman Suffrage Amendment at the polls. The first-named journal is a buster on the basis of general principles, and the two latter are democratic papers as a matter of course."9 Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats endorsed suffrage, however, and neither party mentioned it in its 1882 platform.10

Nebraskans opposed woman suffrage for several reasons. Dennis Fus argues that legislators
opposed woman suffrage because of its ties to prohibition and "the very idea of women in politics." According to the History of Woman Suffrage, Nebraska legislators opposed the bill "principally upon the claim that in the territory where female suffrage had obtained 'for a period of two years' the experiment had been disastrous, the 'interests of the territory damaged in emigration,' and the administration of justice hindered in the courts."¹¹ The Sons of Liberty, a German organization, opposed suffrage because of the connections between temperance and suffrage.¹² According to the Western Woman's Journal,

Mr. Fred Hedde of Grand Island, organized a society which he christened the Sons of Liberty, having for its avowed object the nullifying of the new license law and the defeat of the Woman Suffrage Amendment, particularly the latter.¹³

The Western Women's Journal published the opinions of several opponents. The Crete Standard had argued that "Woman's exercise of the ballot [was] incompatible with that delicacy, dignity, and retirement that should surround the mothers of our land"; the York Tribune had claimed that "good mothers and true wives" did not want the vote because politics was corrupt; and, according to the David City Republican, political disputes between husbands and wives would lead to more divorces.¹⁴

Aileen Kraditor outlines the national anti-suffrage rationales that these arguments echo: first that women did not want the vote and, second, that society perceived women as naturally more emotional than men and not biologically suited for the vote.¹⁵ The tactics of the suffragists may also have been ineffective. As Susan B. Anthony wrote to Correll, lectures and pro-suffrage newspapers preached to the already converted. Those who opposed suffrage did not read the materials nor attend rallies so suffrage propaganda did not garner new adherents. Historian Martha Solomon, however, has argued that the suffrage periodicals did make converts.¹⁶

After Nebraska men defeated the suffrage amendment in 1882, some suffrage groups disbanded and others remained intact. The Western Woman's Journal ceased production in 1882 and forwarded subscriptions to The Women's Tribune, which debuted in 1883 in Beatrice, Nebraska, edited by Clara Bewick Colby, formerly a contributing editor for the Western Women's Journal. According to the History of Woman Suffrage, Nebraska suffragists continued to organize annual conventions drawing national leaders such as Anthony,¹⁷ but Nebraska women did not attain full suffrage until 1919, when their state ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S SPHERES

The suffrage movement in Nebraska was part of the United States woman suffrage movement, which is conventionally described as beginning in 1848 with the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Seneca Falls illustrated the move from broad principles to specific issues: as suffrage activism continued through the nineteenth-century, appeals to universal, human rights gave way to specific reform measures, such as divorce laws and legal guardianship of children. The 1850s sharpened the focus of the terms of the debate, and by the late 1870s, as Ellen Carol DuBois points out, notions of "Motherhood, purity, Christian civilization, and women's duties" which "had traditionally been posed against the demand for women's rights . . . dominate[d] woman suffrage ideology."¹⁸

It was not accidental that the solidification of the rhetoric of maternal feminism coincided with the foundation of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874. According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Although the WCTU accepted traditional concepts of womanhood, it came to argue that
woman's distinctive [pious, pure, and domestic] influence should be extended outside the home via the vote." And as DuBois states, "The demand for woman suffrage, in that it claimed the vote for women as women, permitted the cultivation of sex consciousness far more than had the equal rights and universal suffrage approach."19 Nebraska newspaper accounts of the woman suffrage movement demonstrate that DuBois's observation applies to suffrage activism on the Plains.

WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT FROM MEN

Pro-suffrage arguments in Nebraska newspapers perpetuated the notion of difference, "separate spheres," between men and women. According to the Daily Nebraska State Journal, women were not "too good to vote" or "too refined to be educated in politics and participate in the affairs of the government."20 Quite the contrary: "They believe, and everyone who takes note of the times believes, that virtue and refinement are much needed in the conduct and affairs of the government." This statement implies that women and men by nature have different character traits, and that the women who should have the vote are those more virtuous and refined than "men."

During the 1882 AWSA convention in Omaha, Governor Hoyt of Wyoming argued that women in Wyoming "took an active interest in any new political cause arising and exercised their franchise purely with a view to the general welfare of the people." According to Hoyt, the right to vote "did not interfere in the least with [women's] domestic duties." The Daily Nebraska State Journal stated that "not only is woman superior to man in the home and society, but even before the law which has been so bitterly denounced as oppressive to her." According to the Omaha Daily Bee, "If the men were denied the rights and privileges they now enjoy they would raise up a storm in this country such as has not been raised by the gentler sex, who have been trying to attain their object by peaceful means.21 This statement illustrates that "men" were also universally categorized, and that "women," unlike "men," were perceived as peaceful and gentle, characteristics that suited them for child-rearing and domestic work. To argue that the character traits that suited women so well in their private homes now justified their public political action simultaneously perpetuated and complicated the notion of separate spheres. The spheres now overlapped but remained distinct as the gender stereotypes on which they were based stayed intact.

Clara Neymann, a suffragist of German descent from New York, presented an address at the National Women's Suffrage Convention in Lincoln in which she explicated the new public dimension of "woman's sphere." "Women," she claimed, "will make the government purer and better. We will see that only such men are elected as will honor the office of this country." She further posited that "Each partner is necessary to the moral development of the other. In mental capacity, man is superior to woman. Woman's strengths lie in her feelings. She excels him in love as man excels her in force." Neymann assumed that, through the vote, women can transform the world by making government "purer and better." She reinforced the notion of separate spheres between men and women, but used these purported differences to justify woman's vote. "As long as women find no justice in the state," Neymann concluded "she will turn to the church where sympathy and recognition is always given her."22

Women's role in churches also partook of the odd conflation of the private and public aspects of "woman's sphere."23 Women used their "benevolent" influence in churches, homes, and schools, all of which were characterized by caring for others and sustained the idea of separate spheres.24 Further perpetuating the characteristics of "women" associated with the "domestic sphere," Neymann argued that women were naturally more "conscientious" and "sensitive" than men.
WOMEN ARE SIMILAR TO MEN

To complicate matters even further, however, suffrage rhetoric also suggested that "women" were similar to "men." "Women have hearts, brains, individuality and thirst for influence and power in society, as well as men," according to the Daily Nebraska State Journal. Unlike Neymann, the Journal writer conceded "brains" to women. The choice of the word "thirst" is intriguing rhetorically, as it implies a craving or strong desire for something that men already have, rather than a reconfiguration of power and influence on "women's" terms. Women who thirst for power and influence have the desire as much as men do, although it may simply not be culturally encouraged among "women." Susan B. Anthony implied that there would be a reconfiguration of character traits associated with social gender roles when she argued that "Neither man nor woman is as grand and noble as both would have been had they lived on terms of equality." Anthony demonstrates that women and men share character traits and that their equality would intensify such traits, sparking changes in society's way of evaluating the "spheres" of men and women.

Gilbert M. Hitchcock also addressed similarities between men and women in a debate with Phoebe Couzins, a nationally known suffragist and the first female marshal in the United States. Hitchcock claimed that "there is no inherent right in man or woman to vote... voting is a function of government performed by officials called electors, who have no right to the office until it is given them." On one hand, Hitchcock minimized the distinctions between men and women because he placed them both at the same initial level, but when he implicitly gave men the ability to give other men the right to vote, he created a distinction that disfranchised potential woman voters.

In short, Nebraska newspapers simultaneously constructed women as distinct from and similar to men. Although the male and female spheres overlapped, they still hinged on stereotypes of women and men that reinforced the sex hierarchy. But rhetorical constructions of women were more complicated than their relationship to the ideology of separate spheres.

WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT FROM WOMEN

Some newspaper accounts demonstrated that women differed from each other. The Daily Nebraska State Journal printed an article that admitted similarities between men and women along with differences among women. According to this anti-suffragist argument,

"Our pure, intelligent women should have the ballot to balance the votes of the vile, ignorant men, but they seem entirely to overlook the fact that where there is a vile, ignorant man there is a vile ignorant woman, and that one role has the same power as another."

This statement not only challenged the notion that women were morally superior to men but also maintained that women who were vile and ignorant identified with men who shared such characteristics. Pure, intelligent women, on the other hand, would not identify with vile, ignorant women. Such arguments complicated essentialist notions of women and men.

The arguments of the suffragists carried in the Nebraska newspapers for the most part, however, obscured differences among women. According to Governor Hoyt, women "are in multitudes asking for the ballot, because the ballot is the symbol of freedom and the denial of the ballot is a proof of slavery." Hoyt ambiguously linked these multitudes of "women" together, even though the reasons they united may have differed significantly and even conflicted. Nor did all women support suffrage—some were very much against it.

Within the national suffrage movement, leaders held different opinions about how to obtain the right to vote. In 1869, the Equal
Rights Association had split over “strategic and ideological differences,” resulting in the formation of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), led by Lucy Stone, and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), led by Stanton and Anthony. The AWSA focused on state by state ratification of the vote and supported the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote even without a Sixteenth Amendment guaranteeing the right to women. The NWSA pursued federal ratification through a constitutional amendment, and argued that the right of women to vote was paramount to that of freedmen. The two organizations united again in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

The Fifteenth Amendment and the issue of race fueled the 1869 split among the suffragists. In 1882, the Nebraska newspapers did not explicitly comment on woman suffrage and race but did reveal an invisible white bias that excluded women of color. Nebraska commentators, like most white Americans, rhetorically cast the woman voter as a refined, intelligent, moral, pure, and dutiful lady. C.L. Hall, for example, perceived politics as a corrupt arena that true women should not enter. He argued that “there are very few refined ladies taking part in politics,” and asked, “Who are the women that are clamoring for this measure? Are they mothers of families, women of refinement and culture? Are they Christian and do they practice the Christian virtues?” According to Hall, “Few women can be much in public and hold themselves above suspicion . . . Purify and make attractive your home.” The Omaha Daily Herald claimed that, “So long as nature assigns [women] a task which binds them closely to their home, they cannot perform man’s part any more than he can perform theirs . . . women’s [duties] must always remain from man’s [sic]: hers the home, his the world.” Paradoxically, suffragists and anti-suffragists often used the same arguments to justify their positions, both perpetuating the notion of separate spheres between women and men. Because this “angel of the home” was in either case portrayed as white, such arguments also revealed an invisible white bias.

The ideology of separate spheres and the cult of “true womanhood” reflected the white power structure. Beginning in the 1830s, according to Paula Giddings, “a woman had to be true to the cult’s tenets of domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity in order to be good enough for society’s inner circles. Failing to adhere to these tenets—which the overwhelming number of Black women could hardly live up to—made one a less than a moral, ‘true’ woman.” Furthermore, according to Giddings, “Black women saw no contradiction between domesticity and political action,” as black women had always worked; the separate spheres ideology did not apply to their lives. The cult’s conceptions of “woman” left a bitter legacy for black women, who had to prove they could become “ladies,” just as white women had to prove they could become stronger and more “masculine” in the political arena.

The women voters portrayed in the Nebraska newspapers were moral, true women, and their male supporters were equally noble. During her NWSA address in Omaha, Phoebe Couzins mentioned that the “intelligence, culture and good feelings of the men in Omaha were with them and would remain with their cause.” One newspaper article described the female NWSA conventioneers as “noble, able, [and] brave women,” “pioneers in the cause,” a term that may have held special meaning on the Plains as many “ladies” in Nebraska were, literally, pioneers. The Daily Nebraska State Journal often labeled the suffragists “distinguished ladies,” or “worthy and patriotic daughters of the nation,” who were accorded “high esteem and profound respect.” Amelia Bloomer, in a letter to the editor, also referred to the suffragists as “ladies.” Constructing the suffragists as ladies, “responsible, tender, and thoughtful,” demonstrated that they did not belong with other groups who were denied the right to vote, such as criminals, the insane, and imbeciles.
The conception of "lady" also implied white. Giddings points out that for black women, acculturation was translated as their ability to be 'ladies'—a burden of proof that carried an inherent class-consciousness.41

There is not yet a demographic analysis of suffragists in Nebraska. From a national perspective, the ten founding members of the Thayer County group would probably be considered middle class, but at the local, grassroots level, they might be called the "local elite." All the suffragists were white. Two were born in England, two in Scotland, and the other five in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. Three women worked with their husbands as editors, postmasters, and teachers. The husbands of the other seven suffragists were a machinist, a merchant, a livery man, a land agent, an attorney, a carpenter, and a tanner.42 The WCTU leaders and suffragists of Thayer County fit the social-economic patterns described by Ruth Bordin: "While membership in the WCTU covers a broad spectrum, all studies agree that the women who led the WCTU in the 19th century were primarily white, well-educated, economically prosperous native-born Protestants of Anglo-Saxon ancestry."43

For black women, neither the social nor the economic pattern was clear or easy. Borrowing from Edward Wheeler, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham points out the "paradoxical implications of social uplift and accommodation": "Accommodation, which of course had a submissive tone, also had a subversive quality. On the one hand, uplift meant accommodation and surrender to the concepts, principles, and ideals of the dominant society. On the other, uplift was a denial of what white society meant by accommodation, for it spoke of a possibility to move beyond the limits prescribed by the dominant society."44

Property ownership also played a role in the construction of the woman voter. Governor Hoyt stated that

All nature teaches there is [sic] inequalities in all sexes, both mental and physical, but that does not prove that an intelligent woman, who has accumulated property by her economy and devotion [to] her business, which property is taxed to support the government, is to be taxed by irresponsible and ignorant men against her consent.45

For some women, property interests informed their battle for suffrage, introducing a distinction among women, and an identification between propertied women and propertied men.46 Hoyt reversed stereotypical descriptors, labeling some men ignorant and some women intelligent. Although Hoyt's use of "economy" and "devotion" implied that he might be framing his argument in the usual context of the domestic sphere, he clearly stated that women acquired property through their own agency, not with "help" from men, an important point in relation to women's independence.

Although Nebraska newspapers portrayed "women" consistently, suffragist and anti-suffragist arguments often paradoxically agreed about what it meant to be a woman. The suffragists' emphasis on social reform and "women's" moral nature may have hurt rather than helped women in the long run, as it perpetuated the sex hierarchy within the dominant structure.47 Beginning in the 1870s, as DuBois states,

Suffragism . . . no longer understood itself primarily as part of a larger political effort to transform society and achieve true democracy. Similarly, it no longer connected itself with the radical transformation of the sexual order and the emancipation of women from coercive sexual stereotypes.48

LIMITATIONS OF THE "LADY VOTER"

Some journalists explicitly delineated women's limitations. According to the Daily Herald, "The woman suffragists dwell with strong emphasis upon the ability of women to cope with men . . . But even in lighter
employments woman is physically unfitted to compete with the more robust, opposite sex."49 This implies women were "striving" toward the "perfection" that the male standard characterized. As "refined" and "virtuous" ladies, women would ostensibly have difficulties adapting to the "robust" political arena.

An anti-suffrage article in the Daily Nebraska State Journal stated: "women are equal to men only as they become like them . . . But the ballot is not a privilege or a right to which all are equally born; it is a responsibility and a duty, which men as the stronger and more competent have taken upon themselves."50 Nebraska ladies may have been intelligent, but none of the four Nebraska newspapers portrayed them as "strong" or "robust."

In a letter to the editor, Mrs. F. Augustus Hart argued that "We want the suffrage to protect our homes; to protect our sons from temptation. We want the power to close the saloon and brothel . . . We want the right of suffrage to strengthen the marriage tie."51 This rhetoric maintained the ideological concept of "women" as the protectors of morality, as though men could not or would not be a part of closing saloons or strengthening marriages, but Hart's arguing publicly for the right to vote challenged the existing structure. Fundamentally, however, Hart's challenge was conservative because it did not pursue a radical transformation of the sexual order.

Hart continued,

I do not like the idea advanced by many that women as a class will array themselves against men as a class. They forget that we are the mothers of sons as well as daughters; that we look forward to their future with even more fear than for our daughters.

On one hand, Hart dismantled the dichotomy between "men" and "women" by arguing that mothers raise sons as well as daughters and thus, will not array themselves against men, but she also upheld the notion of difference and separate spheres by seeming to claim that mothers alone were responsible for raising children and protecting their futures. "Woman suffrage," argued Hart, "will not destroy the home. Man will remain as now the financial head of the family . . . Women will remain as now the keeper of the home, with increased power to guard its interests." Hart left unchallenged the patriarchal assumption that women would not be breadwinners, but she used a combination of feminine and masculine terms for women: "keeper" was feminine while "power" and "guard" were masculine. Thus "women" would use the "power" of the vote not to become masculine like men but rather to "guard," in a male sense, the female home. Ultimately, Hart claimed that women wanted the ballot "for the good of our families and of society."52

Clara Neymann, too, argued that "In a free country, the national life stands in direct relation to the home life. The public life reacts upon the family, and the family furnishes the material of the state."53 Similarly, Governor Hoyt stated that,

"There is a need of the ballot for protecting the family. . . . The feminine element, of course, is essential to the rearing of a family. . . . the influence of the mother, which is tender, thoughtful and earnest, is eminently fitted to build up and promote the happiness and welfare of the family."54

The vote would extend the domestic sphere outside the home. While woman suffrage would change the political dynamic, the ideological structure of society would remain intact.

Although the argument carried on in the press characterized rationality and logic as masculine and as denoting the ability to work in the "public sphere," it is not clear that the leading suffragists always subscribed to the dichotomy. After Anthony and Stanton had presented their lectures in Hebron, Erasmus Correll, the editor of the Hebron Journal, wrote that Anthony had presented a "clear, logical, and masterly exposition of the theory known as 'woman's rights,'" while "[Stanton] brought
masterly, logical, and irrefutable arguments in favor of equal rights for woman, and clearly answered the usual objections advanced against equal woman suffrage.”

If the theory of women’s rights was logical and masterly, were women also to be constructed as logical and masterly? Anthony and Cady Stanton, while employing “masculine” tools in their addresses, may have cared less about the dominant ideology than their need to adapt their messages to their audiences, including men. It was men, after all, who had to grant women the right to vote.

The suffragists may well have been using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, something both Anthony and Stanton had done in the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, which was modeled on the Declaration of Independence and thus implied that it was un-American to deny women rights, including the ballot. Simply because suffragists, like anti-suffragists, employed moral superiority arguments does not necessarily mean that they lived them—or even believed them. The contradictions evident in their arguments suggest that suffragists used all the means of persuasion available to them, including both the arguments of equality advanced for the Fifteenth Amendment and the maternal feminism of the temperance movement.

Nebraska suffrage activism demonstrated the complexities and ambiguities of the idea of “woman.” While negotiating differences and deconstructing categories is important work in general among feminists, one implication that stands out from Nebraska’s 1882 experience was invisible to the participants. To be rhetorically successful there must be a sense of identification among activists—even if it is overarching and transcendent. At the same time, however, one must remain aware of the differences between and among those involved to avoid casting and being cast by racially motivated standards that are then situated consciously or unconsciously as universal. Such are the struggles within feminism today.

Illuminating the assumptions and paradoxes within the concept of the woman voter in Nebraska sharpens our understanding of exactly whom newspapers and suffragists assumed the woman voter was, who she was not, and how such conceptions sustained ideologies on the Plains in 1882. According to Riley,

The question of the politics of identity could be rephrased as a question of rhetoric. Not so much of whether there was for a particular moment any truthful underlying rendition of ‘women’ or not, but of what the proliferation of addresses, descriptions, and attributions were doing.

The ways in which newspapers portrayed “women voters” were double-edged. On one hand, women gained power by acting and having their suffrage activism reported in newspapers. Granting women the right to vote because of their moral influence would recognize that women were the agents of their own destiny. At the same time, however, such representations perpetuated the existing sex roles and hierarchy. As Riley argues, “the closeness between an identity and a derogatory identification may, again always in specific contexts, resemble that between being a subject and the process of subjectification.”

This essay also illuminates why the vote has not resolved many issues that women still face. In the end, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton so wisely put it, “when we consider the self-dependence of every human soul we see the need of courage, judgment and the exercise of every faculty of mind and body, strengthened and developed by use, in woman as well as man.”

Stanton was well aware that the vote itself would not, in the end, emancipate women and generate equal opportunities for all. The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, giving women full suffrage, yet the social, political, legal, and religious structures that continue to deny women the opportunity to lead their lives as they choose remained intact. According to Anne Phillips, “No democracy can claim to be equal while it pretends away what are major and continuing divides; yet democracy is lessened if it treats us only in our identities as
women or men."59 Over one hundred years later, we are still in the initial stages of moving beyond conservative conceptions of what it means to be a man or woman. As Joan Scott points out, by understanding how identities were constructed discursively, we can better understand why history happened as it did and perhaps ultimately discern how more effectively to initiate future change.60

NOTES


2. Wilhite, Ibid., p. 150.


4. Ibid., p. 682.


7. Erasmus Correll, “Nebraska Legislation for Women,” MS 572, Box 1, Folder 5, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.


9. Western Woman’s Journal, May 1881, p. 27.


11. Ibid., p. 21; Stanton, Anthony, Gage, History of Woman Suffrage (note 3 above), p. 685.


14. Western Woman’s Journal, June 1882, p. 239.


31. According to the 9 November 1882 Omaha Daily Herald, the NWSA contributed $5000 to the Nebraska campaign. Anthony "believed it 'impossible to canvass every town and neighborhood,' and vowed the national association would never attempt it again." Fus, "Persuasion on the Plains" (note 1 above), p. 66.
36. Omaha Daily Republican, 29 September 1882.
37. Omaha Daily Republican, 26 September 1882.
38. See the 17 August, 30 September, and 1 October 1882 editions of the Daily Nebraska State Journal.
41. Giddings, Where and When I Enter (note 35 above), p. 49.
44. Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent (note 23 above), p. 18.
45. The Daily Bee, 14 September 1882.
46. In Great Britain, according to Denise Riley, "propertied voteless women" and "propertied voting men" were connected to who wanted the vote and why. See Riley, "Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of Women in History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 67.
47. Ibid., pp. 44-66.
49. Daily Herald, 1 October 1882.
50. Daily Nebraska State Journal, 8 October 1882.
52. Ibid.
55. Hebron Journal, 1 November 1877, 17 April 1879.