Antoinette Brown Blackwell and the Trials of Women in Ministry

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I’m glad to come talk with you this morning. When Leigh Goodrich contacted me about a month ago to teach or preach during your meeting, I drew a blank. She said, “If you would have a word of encouragement for women who are working for equitable compensation and fair treatment . . . , we would be grateful to hear from you.” What am I working on that would be relevant or encouraging? With fall semester rushing by, nothing came to mind (that woman syndrome of feeling I have nothing to offer OR that I’ve offered so much, I’m weary). Then it hit me. I remembered the story of Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first ordained woman, that I had stumbled upon a few years ago when invited by my school to deliver an annual lecture created in her name. I’m not sure how much more pertinent or inspiring you can get than that.

I share her story with you today with the hope that it will encourage you in your vocational pursuits and spark discussion about the ongoing challenges and hopes that women share in your church and beyond. Next semester I teach a course on women, psychology, and religion, and unfortunately the problems of gender discrimination and sexism haven’t gone way. This couldn’t be more apparent than on the unprecedented eve of electing our first woman US president and all the unconscious discomfort and outright misogyny that this has provoked. So, your work is needed, and I remain ever grateful for all you do to lift women up.
One night in May 1838, Angelina Grimké, Lucinda Mott, and a few other political activists spoke publically in Pennsylvania Hall, a place built for speeches supporting abolition and women’s rights. According to one historical account, there were violent demonstrations, and the “hall was burned to the ground.”¹

Today most of us take women’s right to speak for granted. We accept and even expect women to contribute to the creation of knowledge. But history reminds us that this has not always been the case. People once rioted and razed a civic hall when women spoke out against slavery and women’s subordination. Nor is subordination and suppression of women’s knowledge a thing of the past, especially when it comes to faith traditions. The majority of the world’s Christian communities and most religions today still do not recognize women as religious leaders or thinkers.

I came across the story of the Philadelphia riot when I was invited to present a lecture named in honor of Antoinette Brown.² She was a young girl when the hall burned, and the incident foreshadowed her own efforts on behalf of women’s rights. In my lecture, I planned to speak about how our bodies shape our knowing, specifically how motherhood shapes theological knowledge, and I was curious: Was she also a mother and, if so, how did motherhood form her, particularly her theology? The more I read the more convinced I became that she illustrates provocatively my argument that women and mothers have had a greater role in constructing theology than history and scholarship have accorded them.

² See http://divinity.vanderbilt.edu/news/lectures/, accessed May 27, 2016. I am grateful to Dean Emilie Townes and colleagues at Vanderbilt Divinity School for the opportunity to present the spring 2015 Antoinette Brown Lecture as part of my work on this chapter.
In my lecture, I developed this claim first by looking at Antoinette’s life and then by exploring the silencing and the return of mothers’ voices in contemporary theology. Do we know anything distinctive through bodily practices of acute care for another, particularly as it relates to theology?—a question shaped by my longtime interest in how theological knowledge is constructed through practices such as pastoral care. Our understandings of theology have been so focused on the cognitive profession of belief and the intellectual articulation of doctrine that we have sorely neglected how what we do shapes what we know and believe. I hoped to spark imagination about what we have missed by constructing theology in such static and disembodied terms as an elite exercise whose presumed subject is the unchanging adult and the scholarly academic. With mothering as ground for imagination, beginning with Antoinette herself as an historical case study, I argue that theological knowledge is rooted in and shaped by our physical bodies. This bigger claim about where and how theology happens is the larger canvas for the smaller story I bring to you today. For here and now, I simply tell you a bit more of Antoinette’s story, beyond what we usually identify as her leading adventure of receiving ordination—first, challenges she faced and, then, bold contributions she made.

First Ordained Woman, Mother of Seven, and an Author? An Historical Test Case

Theological educators widely recognize Antoinette as the first ordained woman and a spokesperson for women’s rights and abolition. But this is often the extent of our knowledge, as was true for me even after years of attending lectures in her namesake.

Actually, as I discovered, few people have studied her. I found only one biography, and it grew out of an undergraduate term paper at Oberlin that an editor at Feminist Press fortunately deemed “worthy” of publication.\(^4\) Tellingly, I found two older “popular” accounts: a fictionalized history of her early years called *Lady in the Pulpit* published in 1951 and, not surprisingly, ending with her surrendering to the forces aligned against her ministry and returning, a little too submissively for me, home “to Floy and Sam [child and husband] who need me”\(^5\); and a second book that subordinates her story to that of *Those Extraordinary Blackwells*\(^6\)—the book title—that upholds the Blackwells as “microcosm of the reformist age.”\(^7\) All this to say: Antoinette is the “least well-known” of the nineteenth-century “pioneers in the woman’s movement,” as sociologist Alice Rossi observes. Rossi adds a provocative qualification: “But in my view the most interesting.”\(^8\)

Nettie, as her family and friends called her, earns Rossi’s esteem because, in Rossi’s words, she had “a far more finely honed intellect than most of the early [women’s movement] leaders, as sharp in purely intellectual reasoning as Elizabeth Stanton’s was in political and ideological thinking.”\(^9\) I discovered additional reasons for admiration. Nettie was one of the first US women to attend college in 1846, a prolific writer of several books and articles, and, finally, in answer to my initial question, “also a mother”


of seven children (two of whom died in childbirth) and eventually a grandmother. To
discover that she wrote at all is kind of amazing. But to learn that she had several children
and as many books, countering a prevailing myth of the time still hanging over us today,
that a woman “either has children or writes books” (or fill in the blank with ministry or
any other time-demanding vocation) is a little short of incredible.¹⁰

I have been as surprised, however, by how few people know about either her
intellectual life or her childbearing. These pursuits surely influenced her theology, but
even less is known or said about her theological work, if she is claimed as a first-wave
feminist theologian at all. On the question of how being a nineteenth-century middle-
class white mother informed her theology, the adverse pressures, even amid class and
race privilege, are as telling as the accomplishments. In the mid-1800s, educational
institutions forbid women from obtaining theological training, and Oberlin College was
no exception. A “hotbed of antislavery sentiments,” it was considerably less progressive
on women’s rights.¹¹ Oberlin only capitulated to her petition for admission into the
theology program in 1847 on the condition that she enter unofficially as what they called
a “resident graduate,” that is, with the understanding that she would not receive a
degree.¹² Mrs. Charles G. Finney, whose husband became one of her “more supportive
professors,” begged her on behalf of the Ladies Board (faculty wives responsible for
female students) not to consider further study, contending in Nettie’s words, “you will

¹⁰ Physician Robert Briffault asserted this widely held opinion as scientific fact in The
Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions (London: Allen and
Unwin, 1926).
¹¹ Cazden, Blackwell, p. 16.
¹² “Blackwell, Antoinette Louise Brown,” ed. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and
They awarded the degree belatedly in 1878. Her name did not appear with the official
listing of 1850 graduates until 1908.
never feel yourself wise enough to go directly against the opinions of all the great men of the past." Only one professor supported women’s public speaking to mixed audiences of men and women—tellingly labeled “promiscuous” assemblies—and “he was consistently outvoted by the faculty.” Another professor assigned an essay on the Biblical passages commanding women’s silence, a not too subtle provocation that simply inspired Nettie to argue all the more for women’s public voice in a paper that turned into one of her first published efforts to reconstruct theology. Interestingly, when she published her essay “Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35; and 1 Timothy 2:11, 12” in the Oberlin Quarterly Review, boldly defending women’s right to preach, she was just as uninformed about others who had challenged the traditional interpretation as we are of her own work—a lesson on how easily we forget our own history and its trials and triumphs.

These educational roadblocks pale next to those of congregational life, however. We celebrate Nettie’s ordination, but seldom do we realize that she left her first appointment in a Congregationalist church in New York State after less than a year and never returned to congregational ministry except as pastor emeritus of a Unitarian church in her eighties at the turn of the century. So, truth be told, Nettie is at once a sign of hope and a symbol of women’s ongoing exclusion and disillusionment.

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13 Munson and Dickinson, “Hearing Women Speak,” p. 112; Sarah Gilson manuscript (a 300-page memoir based on conversations with Blackwell in her eighties, letters, and speeches) in the Blackwell Collection, the Schlesinger Library, pp. 72-73, cited by Cazden, Blackwell, p. 36 (hereafter appears as Gilson ms.).
14 Cazden, Blackwell, p. 27.
Sources typically explain her church departure with abbreviated excuses, such as a “lack of sustainable resources” or “growing religious doubts”—to use the words of two bibliographical resources.\(^\text{17}\) But behind these shorthand explanations lie a host of revealing details that include not just male chauvinism in her congregation and her own crisis of faith, but also intense pressure from close friends in the women’s movement—Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton—all of whom “looked with disfavor” upon her Christian affiliation as caving into the church’s “corrupt institutional hierarchy.” Meanwhile, the women who comprised the congregation’s majority to whom she remained loyal “expected a minister to be a kind of father figure” who represented a God who was also known as “Our Father.”\(^\text{18}\) Meeting neither the physical criteria for ministry nor able to abide by the church’s Calvinist damnation of the unconverted, her situation reached a climax when she refused to interpret the death of a child born outside marriage as divine retribution or threaten a dying youth with eternal suffering to provoke his conversion.\(^\text{19}\)

Even greater obstacles impeded the theological work that she was posed to do, a difficulty familiar to women today: She married and had children. Some historians actually attribute her notoriety to marrying into one of the most prominent nineteenth-century reform clans, the Blackwells, but I am less sure about the extent to which the family advanced her cause. Granted, her sisters-in-law were the first women to earn US medical degrees, and they welcomed Nettie’s marriage to their younger brother. But they

\(^\text{17}\) Antoinette Brown Blackwell, *Wikepedia*, p. 2  

\(^\text{18}\) Cazden, *Blackwell*, p. 86.

\(^\text{19}\) Cazden, *Blackwell*, p. 86.
harbored an antipathy toward physicality, sexuality, and intimacy; opposed marriage out of a religious fervor about “living pure lives to prepare for the afterlife”; and remained highly critical of Nettie’s failure to foist these imperatives on her five daughters.  

Rossi describes Nettie as the “only woman in the Blackwell clan who seemed to have a sexually gratifying relationship.” But she bore the consequences—children! She continued to speak, preach, and write, but, according to her biographer, she “found it difficult . . . in addition to her responsibilities at home.” Even with the economic advantage of paid help and a husband open to a more cooperative partnership, the “work required to maintain a household was overwhelming.” After her third daughter, her “work as minister and lecturer was at a standstill,” leading one shortsighted historian to suggest that Nettie’s “feminist work ended after marriage.”

To imply that Nettie’s work “ended” is inaccurate. All that this standstill suggests is that factors that impinge on theological productivity today inhibited Nettie over a hundred years ago—male-centered constructions of church, God, and pastoral work; competing cultural narratives about the proper “feminist” approach to Christianity and marriage; and last but not least, child care and household work. Like many women today caught between adversarial cultures, she experienced tensions with her church and family because of her feminism and theology; and she struggled with her feminist friends because of her faith and family.

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First-Wave Theological Contributions: An Epistemology of the Body

Despite these conditions, Nettie still made theological contributions for which she receives minimal credit, the most important of which centered on persistent and insistent affirmation of women’s intellect, including efforts to determine “How to Combine Intellectual Culture,” as she titles one essay, “with Household Management and Family Duty.” Like other women of her time disillusioned by the church, she turned away from confronting Christianity to engaging science as the rising arbiter of truth. However, although people today often picture modern science as enlightened in contrast to religion’s dogmatism, Nettie was just as excluded among scientists as among pastors. When it came to women, children, people of color, and people of different sexualities, science was as repressive and ambiguous as religion. People used Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer’s so-called “laws of nature” to make sweeping claims that intermingle sexist, racist, heterosexist, and ageist ideology, grouping children, the colonialized other, the so-called unsexed, and women together as dreaded and lesser. Scientists argued, for example, that women were mentally and physically “more like ‘savages’ and children than like men,” that women’s brains were “smaller than those of men and therefore incapable of higher thought,” that limited physical and intellectual activity “produced

\[\text{\textsuperscript{23}} \text{Antoinette Brown Blackwell, “How to Combine Intellectual Culture with Household Management and Family Duty,” } \textit{The Woman’s Journal}, \text{November 7, 1874. See also “The Relation of Women’s Work in the Household to the Work Outside,” } \textit{The Woman’s Journal}, \text{November 8, 1873; “Work in Relation to the Home,” } \textit{The Woman’s Journal}, \text{May 2, 1874; “Sex and Work,” } \textit{The Woman’s Journal}, \text{March 14, 1874. See also Cazden, } \textit{Blackwell}, \text{chapter 10.}}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}} \text{As a scholar who has also turned to the sciences, I find Nettie’s shifting focus of particular interest, especially her criticism of evolutionary theories that influenced Freud.}\]
healthier babies,” and that both sport and education “would lead to unsexed women and race suicide.”

In response, Nettie made several creative intellectual moves that challenged the foundation of knowledge in both science and theology and foreshadowed arguments by modern-day feminists and post-modernists. She advanced these arguments despite having what we would describe today as troubling essentialist views of female and male nature and a classist focus on middle-class women with economic means. She was amazingly bold for her time, in other words, even if conservative and limited by our standards today.

In her second and perhaps most important academic book, *The Sexes throughout Nature*, she disavows the Bible’s ability to resolve modern gender questions and, at the same time, disputes the competence of male scientists. The scientist, as she says, “is compelled to see everything in the light of his own convictions.” Indeed, “the more active and dominant one’s opinions, the more liable they must be to modify his rendering of related facts—roping them inadvertently into the undue service of his theories.” Scientists assume the male as the “representative type” and the female as the exception, or in her words, a “modification preordained in the interest of reproduction, and in that interest only or chiefly”—assertions about men as the standard so closely resembling those made by twentieth-century feminists about developmental psychology and moral theory that they could quote her. Finally, she insists that women have knowledge about women

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based on where they stand as women that surpasses what male scientists can know from the “outside.” Rather than being unqualified, women are more qualified “to make authoritative claims.”

According to religious historians Elizabeth Munson and Greg Dickinson, this crusade to establish women’s epistemological authority in both theology and science is prescient of contemporary standpoint theory in three ways. Nettie particularized her texts as historically relative and socially shaped, she situated authority within contexts, and she placed knowledge within the realm of personal experience. She essentially turns Darwinian theory on its head, using ideas about natural selection and survival of the fittest, for example, to argue that, not only do women need to exercise their brains, the survival of humanity depends on it. In other words, she effectively challenged biblical and scientific modes of knowing by using “the very language . . . used against” women to support women. Reminiscent of her scriptural argument about women’s right to speak and preach, she makes clear that nothing good comes from keeping women ignorant and dependent. In fact, forced inactivity of half of the human race will “drag down the entire species.” If women have evolved specialized capacities for direct nurture of offspring, then men must assume secondary tasks of indirect sustenance, such as cooking, sewing,

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30 Munson and Dickinson, “Hearing Women Speak,” p. 120. See also pp. 108 and 121.

and producing food, thereby freeing “women to develop their intellectual capacities,” a view her biographer describes as unique “even among liberal reformers.” “No other writer,” says Elizabeth Cazden, “proposed publicly that men should share ‘feminine’ jobs such as child care and cooking.”

However, for all their attention to Nettie as an early instance of standpoint theory, Munson and Dickinson never once mention her work as wife and mother as a site for knowledge, even though they explore her examination of subjects like sex, reproduction, and distribution of household labor, which she undoubtedly studied in the midst of household and childrearing duties—“while she washed dishes, planted flowers, bulbs, canned vegetables,” as her biographer suggests. Consequently, Munson and Dickinson sideline experiences critical to her construction of knowledge. As Nettie herself reports, her “home duties and interests” were of “real value” in her scholarship, “even in the direction of theology,” just as they also deprived her of time to harmonize the “many-sided questions.” Her husband and the “helpfulness of the little children when they came,” in her words, “saved me from despair” and shaped her understanding of human nature and divinity. “While my children were all small,” she testifies, “generally one or two were playing about me as I carried on reading, thoughts, or writing. The habit was acquired of turning from the practical needs of others to my own individual work.”

From this very material maternal position, Nettie essentially undermines the cult of true womanhood perpetuated by both religion and science by adopting what I would call an “epistemology of the body.” Women speaking out publically constituted what

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33 Cazden, Blackwell, pp. 162-163.
34 Cazden, Blackwell, p. 144.
homiletics scholar Beverly Zink-Sawyer calls “a doubly subversive act, a twofold act of
defiance.”\textsuperscript{37} That is, they defied social norms through their words and through their
bodies as women speaking before so-called “promiscuous” audiences. Political advocacy
for slaves, housewives, prostitutes, and child laborers transgressed social norms, but
people could excuse and allow such activity as an act of selfless morality befitting the
ideology of womanhood. But promoting themselves and moving their female-identified
bodies into prohibited public spaces went beyond the pale. Thus, as Zink-Sawyer
concludes, the “platform” of public speaking became at once the “vehicle” for promoting
a political message and a “symbol of that message itself by the very embodiment of the
speaker’s words in the form of a woman speaking publicly.”\textsuperscript{38} Going public with their
bodies into mixed audiences was fundamental to their argument, and for Nettie this
included a display of her procreative activity and domestic vocation.

I conclude with one final observation on nomenclature or naming: Oddly, both the
named lecture at my school and an award\textsuperscript{39} created in Nettie’s honor by the United
Church of Christ retain her birth name Brown, but excise her marital name Brown
Blackwell, even though she was distinct among her peers in combining both names in
appearances and publications. This selective contemporary renaming inevitably expunges
an important part of her life. I am, of course, reading more into this oversight than I
should. She was, after all, unmarried and Antoinette Brown when ordained. But to use
this abridged name in perpetuity, and not Antoinette Brown Blackwell, arrests her history
and reinforces a limited grasp of her full contribution. Ultimately, it raises a larger

\textsuperscript{37} Zink-Sawyer, \textit{From Preachers to Suffragists}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{38} Zink-Sawyer, \textit{From Preachers to Suffragists}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{39} For a description of the United Church of Christ award, see
disconcerting question for us to consider: Is there something about marriage and motherhood that makes us shy away even as we try to support women in ministry?