
The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898, Lisa Tetrault; The University of North Carolina Press, 2014, 279 pages, $27.95.

Anyone who followed the lead up to the 2017 Women’s March on Washington knows the relations between women were anything but harmonious. When white organizers suggested naming the March the “Million Woman March,” black organizers quickly pointed out the name had already been used by black women in 1997, when they had marched to protest their continued marginalization in white-dominated feminist agendas. The name was quickly changed, but the faux pas, committed by a group of Hillary Clinton supporters known as the “Pantsuit Nation,” exposed only one of a multitude of tensions. Many of the organizers of color were longtime political activists who resented white women assuming leadership of a movement that many believed existed largely to clean up the mess white women had created, in this case by voting for Donald Trump. The “Pantsuit” women pleaded for the universality of their cause and when that didn’t work, they pointed to uneducated white women (Hillary’s “deplorables”) as the real culprits, prompting white working-class and rural women to take offense at once again being everybody’s favorite scapegoats. A year later, the next Women’s March showed no signs of improvement as accusations of anti-Semitism and homophobia entered into the festering mix.

While the constant in-fighting left many resentful and disheartened, others recognized that what we were witnessing was “intersectionality” pushing into the mainstream, and the
women assuming the universality of their grievances were getting a quick education. First coined in 1989 by black feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality challenges the idea that the primary factor determining a woman’s fate is gender, arguing instead that there are many dynamics at play (race, class, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) and that none should be discounted or diminished in favor of another as they are all inextricably linked. Although this analytic framework had been in use before Crenshaw officially named it, the internecine battles of the Women’s March as well as the #MeToo Movement have proven that there still remains much work to be done.

To that end, a spate of female historians has been shining a light on the problematic history between women to reveal some of the conflicting ideologies at play in these longstanding rifts. While the two books reviewed here have seemingly different (but overlapping) focal points, one on nineteenth-century antebellum sexual reform and the other on myth building and the women’s suffrage movement, both also attempt to reveal some of the ways in which certain women determined the course of early feminist thought and even the writing of women’s history itself, and how this has affected those who got written out of the historiography along the way.

April R. Haynes’ lively Riotous Flesh takes us through a little-known sexual reform movement called “reform physiology,” which started in New England in the early 1830s. An outgrowth of Sylvester Graham’s better known “Lecture to Boys,” in which Graham lectured young men against the “solitary vice” (masturbation) in order to develop the necessary self-restraint for virtuous citizenship, reform physiology incorporated women into the discussion, arguing that they were biologically equal to men in both their sexual passions and their ability to control these passions through the cultivation of virtue. As women at that time were largely viewed as passionless creatures, this approach represented a paradigm shift and many women
flocked to Graham’s women-only lectures, known simply as “Lectures to Mothers,”¹ to learn about their own anatomy and how to avoid indulging in the solitary vice as a sign of their “knowledge, virtue and civic worth.”² Haynes asserts that by assuming women to be similar in their sexuality to men, Graham’s ideas gave female reformers an opening to challenge men “who defined women in sexual terms that justified male dominance.”³ Perhaps more disruptive, though, Haynes also demonstrates that by imparting the same code of virtue to mothers as to young men, Graham suggested that the two groups had an equal capacity for citizenship, a connection which was not lost on the men who also flocked to Graham’s lectures to angrily protest.

Graham’s lectures, however, drew protests not only because he lectured to women-only audiences about their sexual citizenship but also (and perhaps more importantly) because he allowed black women to attend as well. Unlike the common view of white women as passionless, black women were eroticized as oversexed Jezebels, and the worry was their licentiousness would rub off on white women’s “purity.” As the reform movement became more racially mixed, the riots increased as well, led by an assortment of men ranging from Jacksonian Democrats and libertines to gentlemen of property and standing. Here, Haynes humorously catalogs how women not only stood up to the rioters but also provoked physical confrontations in order to get press coverage for the movement as well as public censure for male protesters. While the riots seemed to energize female attendees, they had the opposite effect on Graham, who slowly retreated from public life, leaving women to take over the leadership and push the

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¹ Ironically, more than 1/3 of the women who attended these lectures were in fact single or childless, but the use of “mother” lent a level of propriety and respectability to the movement. Haynes, p. 42.
² Haynes, p. 82.
³ Haynes, p. 29.
movement in new directions. The intensity of the rioting convinced female reformers that mastering their bodies held political significance, but Graham’s ideas allowed for another radical view: If human nature was fundamentally the same everywhere, then both whites and blacks had the same propensity for virtue. This was the entry point for many female black reformers and the beginning of a brief but important window of time (roughly 1835 to 1840) which Haynes refers to as the “interracial moment.”

The interracial moment brought black abolitionists like Nancy Gardner Prince, Grace and Sarah Mapps Douglass, Lavinia Hilton and David Ruggles into the physiology movement with the support of more radical white reformers like Lydia Fuller and Sarah Grimké. These black activists radically altered the focus of the movement from “purity,” which could be taken against a woman’s will (and frequently was), to the cultivation of virtue through the lifelong pursuit of righteousness and justice, which was possible for all women to achieve. According to Haynes, by privileging moral virtue over physical purity, these reformers “not only argued for gender equality, they also directly challenged the Jezebel stereotype that specifically harmed black women.” Building on this idea, Haynes shows how Graham’s early forays to expand reform physiology into Hawaii prompted a similar turn: When indigenous Hawaiian women were questioned about their attitudes towards masturbation, the most common response Graham received were protests about the licentiousness of white Christian men who sexually exploited indigenous women, bringing syphilis to the islands in the process. Echoing similar concerns, African American reformers now turned the campaign against licentiousness, which was often unfairly associated with black women, into a protest against white men’s licentiousness, which

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4 Haynes, p. 76.
opened up critiques about everything from sexual abuse to slavery and white supremacy. However, black reformers took this turn one step further, asserting that if white women didn’t cut ties with slavery, then they were guilty of licentiousness themselves, adding that a woman could remain “pure” without ever becoming virtuous if she turned away from her “suffering colored sisters.”

In this way, the goals of the sexual reform movement and the anti-slavery movement merged as many white women took up black women’s fight as their own, writing about the hypocrisy of white men who harassed black women on the street for sex but then showed up to riot against white women and black women working together at reform meetings. Haynes uses this contradiction to argue that while male rioters claimed to be protecting white feminine innocence, in practice what they were really targeting was women’s interracial activism. But as reform physiology increased in influence, white reformers increasingly saw themselves as protectors and defenders of women from sexual predation. Moreover, while radicals like Grimké were clear about the distinction between purity and virtue, many other white women were not. The continued talk of black women as enslaved victims of sexual abuse often reinforced the very stereotypes African American women fought to overcome while at the same time positioning white women in the role of moral savior. White lecturers like Mary Gove of the Ladies’ Physiological Society of Boston started to claim that women were exhibiting a “false delicacy” when they blamed men for women’s licentiousness, and as her published lectures gained popularity amongst rural white women, slowly the discourse was redirected away from activism towards purity and self-government, with the assumption that women who mastered their own

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5 Haynes, p. 71.
passions were then fit to master over other women. When white reformer Margaret Dye lectured about needing to end slavery because white men’s licentiousness was harming the virtue of their wives (not the virtue of the black women being exploited), many African American reformers and white radicals took this as their exit cue. Having circled back around to a focus on controlling the solitary vice and maintaining one’s purity, reform physiology went on to pave the way for white women as moral custodians of society. In this way, Haynes argues that white women’s privileged claims to sexual morality were slowly revealed to be dependent on black women’s continued debasement.

As the interracial moment recedes, a new cast of characters moves in and out of focus but always with the same aim: the abolishment of the solitary vice. Some of the characters prove more colorful than others, such as the free love advocate, Frederick Hollick, who promotes the pursuit of female pleasure as long as it comes at the hands of one’s husband. Unsurprisingly, Hollick’s philosophy spawns a boom in sales of sex manuals as well as abortifacients and contraceptives, so (married) women could satisfy their passions without suffering the consequences. Haynes is quick to point out, though, that while white women embraced Hollick’s philosophy as liberating, ironically his ideas also appealed to libertines, who were only too happy to be made the controllers of female pleasure. In this way, Haynes argues that instead of liberating women, Hollick established heteronormative standards that women are still trying to dismantle (or conform to) today. Also problematic were Hollick’s notorious sex manuals, which portrayed white women’s bodies as beautiful and normal while pathologizing black women’s anatomy. As many of Hollick’s supporters had been former anti-Graham rioters and since most of the radical female reformers had abandoned the movement after the interracial moment passed, this racism went unchallenged.
Haynes does an admirable job of juggling both research and analysis to create a fascinating, if dense, read. The book is so interesting, in fact, that its attractions can eclipse some moments when Haynes makes contentions which are perhaps precipitous and in need of more primary support. This is particularly true in her discussions about rural women, which are often supported by a mixture of secondary sources with a smattering of primary sources, mostly minutes from the same small selection of rural meetings.

Haynes is at her best, however, in the final chapter about black reformer, Sarah Mapps Douglass, who broke from white reformers after the interracial moment to form her own physiology school for young black girls. Here Haynes painstakingly pieces together Douglass’ personal papers and teaching materials to see how she combined Graham’s anti-masturbation rhetoric on self-control to promote virtue (as opposed to purity) while at the same time using Hollick’s information on anatomy, contraception, abortifacients and disease combating home remedies to help black women deal with the sexual realities of their continued exploitation, both under slavery and in the workplace. It is a quietly powerful chapter which illuminates not only Douglass’ ability to direct the discourse towards helping black girls protect themselves, but also a painful reminder of the different realities black and white women faced. For many black women, “purity” was simply not a condition they had any control over.

Unfortunately, Haynes’ portrait of Douglass is not the final word, as the epilogue shows that by the time 1860 arrives, the distinction between virtue and purity has all but vanished, with purity the clear winner. Thus, it is the ideology of white women as the moral custodians of society that carries into the burgeoning women’s suffrage movement, relegating many black and radical voices to the margins of history in the process.
While much has been written about the woman’s suffrage movement in general, and the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in particular, Lisa Tetrault’s book, *The Myth of Seneca Falls* is dedicated to “understanding how this founding myth was created as well as the politics and lessons it contained.” By myth, Tetrault is clear she does not mean a “falsity” but rather a “venerated or celebrated story”\(^6\) that is used to give meaning, in this case, to the woman’s suffrage movement. For certainly, no one is questioning whether the Seneca Falls Convention occurred, or if Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (though notably not Susan B. Anthony) were present. Neither is there any doubt that at the Convention, Stanton presented her Declaration of Sentiments, a reworking of the Declaration of Independence that specifically included women, and that when a vote was taken on whether to support the Declaration, Frederick Douglass stood up and elegantly spoke in favor of adopting all of the document’s principles, including its controversial appeal to universal suffrage. None of this is in question. But what is up for debate is whether the Seneca Falls Convention was in fact the “origin” of the woman’s rights movement or if the origin could have just as easily been located in one of the many other women’s conventions happening at that time. While this may seem of little consequence, Tetrault astutely demonstrates that the decision to locate the origins at Seneca Falls was a conscious construction that had ideological repercussions for the women’s movement which historians are still trying to unravel today.

Tetrault begins her story with the newly ratified Fifteenth Amendment, granting black men (but not women) the right to vote, and how this amendment split the women’s movement into competing camps. Many activists, like Mott, were unsure if they should support the

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\(^6\) Tetrault, pgs. 5-6.
amendment while other women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were livid. Stanton in particular voiced her disgust (and racism) when she notoriously declared, “Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung, who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling book, making laws for Lucretia Mott or Susan B. Anthony.”

To be sure, abolitionist men exhibited a similarly problematic track record with regards to supporting gender equality: While men like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison demonstrated a lifelong commitment to women’s rights, most abolitionist men, regardless of race, did not share this enlightened view. Feeling burned by the Republican party and abolitionists alike for shutting women out, Stanton and Anthony turned to Democrats like George Francis Train to drum up support.

Unsurprisingly, the Democrats were also appalled that black men should have the vote, so men like Train were only too happy to use their racism to advocate on white women’s behalf. For abolitionists in the women’s movement like Garrison, Lucy Stone, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, this turn would prove a breaking point from which the two groups would never fully recover. Anthony and Stanton soon formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, and in response, Lucy Stone et al. formed the American Woman Suffrage Association. In addition to disagreements over race, the two associations would follow divergent ideological paths in their interpretation of the Fifteenth Amendment – for Anthony and Stanton, the amendment was a disaster, but they believed it took voting out of states and into federal hands; as a result, they advocated a Sixteenth Amendment as the way forward. Meanwhile, Stone’s group believed the

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7 Tetrault, p. 28.
path to success was specifically the opposite: namely, woman’s suffrage would only be achieved at the state level, a strategy that was supported by the fact that Wyoming and Utah had already given women the right to vote.

Tetrault smartly shows that while these two groups battled it out on a national level, other local groups were doing their own thing and making it clear they were uninterested in being “led,” much to the frustration of Anthony, who felt unity (with herself at the helm) was the only way forward. More problematic, though, were the many competing agendas which Anthony saw as scattering the movement’s focus into irrelevancy. Tetrault gives these other narratives their due process, though, and in so doing, shows that there was nothing inevitable (and perhaps even something unwise) about pursuing suffrage instead of the many other issues women faced at the time. For example, African American women formed the Colored National Labor Convention in 1869, chaired by Mary Ann Shadd Cary, to pursue matters specifically affecting black women, such as access to employment opportunities, physical safety from rape and lynching, and post war reunion with their families. Meanwhile, free love advocate, Victoria Woodhull, entered the national movement with her calls for spiritualism and radical labor politics only to be kicked out when she got embroiled in a sex scandal involving Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brother, Henry. Woodhull remained influential from the sidelines, though, with her assertion that women’s inequality lay in private relationships and a lack of financial autonomy, not politics, and she continued to advocate for a radical reworking of marriage laws along with a host of other sexual reforms. Working class women, on the other hand, agreed that women needed economic independence, but they saw this as best achieved through the introduction of labor laws granting women equal pay and access to higher paying male dominated professions. These women, in particular, were not sold on woman’s suffrage as the way forward, pointing to how little the vote
had done for poor white men. Given the diversity of grievances, Anthony had her work cut out for her as she tried to force everyone down the path of suffrage. How she and Stanton did this form the crux of Tetrault’s revelations.

After the Civil War, there was an immediate attempt to control memory and how the War would be handed down through the generations. As men around the country erected new statues and organized war tributes in order to assert their importance in the history books (and to write women’s important contributions out of the record), Anthony and Stanton followed suit with their own mythmaking in order to gain control of the women’s movement and direct it to their ends. Taking advantage of the historical moment, the two women decided to organize the thirty-year anniversary of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, describing the Convention as the “origins” of the women’s suffrage movement.8

According to Tetrault, there were several problems with using Seneca Falls as the origins of the movement. First, Stanton’s claim that the 1848 Convention was conceived by her and Mott in response to being denied seats at the 1840 World’s Anti-Slavery Convention because they were women, is only loosely corroborated by Mott’s own recollections. While Mott recounted being denied a seat because of her gender, she did not note this as particularly unusual since this was a common scenario she had faced many times before. More importantly, Mott had no recollection of making any pact with Stanton to have a future woman’s convention in response to being snubbed, and it was later discovered that the idea for the 1848 Convention had occurred at a Quaker meeting that Stanton happened to have attended with Mott. Second, and perhaps more problematic, Anthony wasn’t even at the Seneca Falls Convention. While this was

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8 In fact, they had already had a twenty-five-year anniversary of the 1848 Convention, but it was really with the thirty-year celebration that the origins myth was solidified.
tricky, it wasn’t impossible to get around since both Stanton and Mott had been there. What was more important, however, was that no one from Lucy Stone’s Association had attended Seneca Falls. Thus, if Seneca Falls was the birth of the suffrage movement, then Stone and her colleagues were essentially written out of the history as originators, making their narrative easy to marginalize if not ignore altogether. What’s more, by locating the idea for the Seneca Falls Convention at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, what Anthony and Stanton were also saying was not that the women’s movement had arisen out of the abolition movement, as Lucy Stone (and most scholars) claimed, but rather that it had arisen *in reaction to* it.

Unsurprisingly, Lucy Stone refused to recognize Seneca Falls as the origins of the movement, favoring instead the 1850 National Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts (which she and her colleagues had attended), so no one from her association went to the thirty-year anniversary celebration. Her absence, however, only further served the myth that Anthony and Stanton were the real leaders of the movement and their version of events the true story.

As the narrative surrounding Seneca Falls solidified and as suffrage proved to be a battle that would have to be won by the next generation, Anthony and Stanton, along with Matilda Joslyn Gage,\(^9\) set out to get their version of the movement’s history down, both for posterity and as a guide for the next generation of activists. This section comprises one of the most fascinating parts of Tetrault’s book as we watch the women teaching themselves how to be historians by collecting letters, pamphlets, speeches, any source that could be used to build an archive of the women’s movement,\(^10\) eventually becoming the *History of Woman Suffrage*, a work that is still

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\(^9\) Gage, unlike Anthony and Stanton, had a background in history and tried to include multiple voices in the account, which only served to get her work rewritten by Stanton, much to Gage’s anger. As Gage seemed unwilling to get on board with Anthony’s hagiography, she was pushed out altogether after the second volume.

\(^10\) Ironically, the Declaration of Sentiments, which had been presented at the Seneca Falls Convention, had not seemed important enough to preserve at the time, so Stanton and Amy Post, who had signed the original, had to
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read today (though perhaps for different reasons since the publication of Tetrault’s book). Here, Tetrault astutely compares the women’s struggles to make themselves into historians with the professionalization of history occurring at the same time at Johns Hopkins University, where J. Franklin Jameson became the first person to receive a doctorate of history in 1882. The comparison is telling - since women had no access to this type of training, they were forced to train themselves.

While the first two volumes of Anthony and Stanton’s History were largely collaborations, by the third volume, Stanton had lost interest, leaving Anthony as the sole author and owner of the copyright, an enormous undertaking regardless of her problematic biases. But just as we might start to admire Anthony, at the very least for her immense will and unflappable chutzpah, she does something genuinely shocking, and here I provide a spoiler alert to skip to the final paragraph if so desired. After Anthony dedicates the final years of her life to building an archive of women’s history and writing the first three volumes of that history down for posterity, she and her assistant, Ida Husted Harper, take the massive archive, the largest of its kind ever dedicated to women, and they spend several days burning it in Anthony’s backyard, thus leaving Anthony’s (very biased) historical accounts behind as the main version of the suffrage movement. While Tetrault downplays this final coup de grâce, it will be hard for readers to forgive Anthony for what she has done.

In the final pages, Tetrault shows how the myth of Seneca Falls has only strengthened over the years, so much so that now Anthony is often cited as having been present at the 1848...
Convention in the yearly commemorations. Still, this will seem of little consequence given Tetrault’s other revelations. While both Tetrault and Haynes recover moments of women’s history that will be hard for many to celebrate, their works also demonstrate what is at stake when history favors the winners. To that end, both of the books here suggest that perhaps the best way forward for a women’s rights agenda that includes all women is to first spend some time looking back.