

Splitting Suffrage:
1869 and the Narrative Forms of Race and Gender in U.S. Feminism

Jen McDaneld

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Approved by:

Dr. Jane F. Thrailkill

Dr. Robyn Wiegman

Dr. Tyler Curtain

Dr. Karla Holloway

Dr. Ruth Salvaggio

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ABSTRACT

JEN MCDANELD: *Splitting Suffrage:
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(Under the direction of Jane F. Thrailkill and Robyn Wiegman)

American feminism, like American literature, has a canon: an iconic set of texts, events, movements, and figures that are so well known that the mere mention of a name or a date carries with it an entire history. This dissertation takes one such moment—the 1869 “split” within the U.S. suffrage movement over the Fifteenth Amendment and the granting of voting rights to black men ahead of women—as a site for the literary-critical analysis of the narrative practices that undergird this process of canonization. Despite the sustained attention to suffrage in the fields of American and feminist history, literary scholars have shown little critical interest in the movement. This project addresses this absence from two angles: first, by attending to the historiography of suffrage as a literary object in itself; and second, by rehistoricizing the canonical suffrage story through a variety of literary, journalistic, and polemical texts. By investigating the story of the suffrage “split” across a variety of genres and historical periods, including nineteenth-century periodicals and novels, twentieth-century historiography, and twenty-first-century popular feminist work, I demonstrate that split-narratives obscure the dynamic and shifting relationship between race and gender across historical eras and instead calcify a timeless antagonism between them. Ultimately, I argue that my readings of suffrage stories reanimate understandings of race and gender in American feminism and open up new textual terrain for American literary studies.

To TNF—my favorite.

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INTRODUCTION

The Race-Versus-Gender Problem in Feminism: Contemporary Itineraries and Historical Underpinnings

In early January 2008, just as the Democratic presidential primary contests were getting underway, Gloria Steinem took to the pages of the *New York Times* to comment on race and gender in contemporary U.S. politics. She began the piece, “Women Are Never Front-Runners,” by engaging in a bit of role reversal fantasy, suggesting that if Barack Obama were a woman, he would have never been considered a feasible contender for the nation’s highest office:

The woman in question became a lawyer after some years as a community organizer, married a corporate lawyer and is the mother of two little girls, ages 9 and 6. Herself the daughter of a white American mother and a black African father—in this race-conscious country, she is considered black—she served as a state legislator for eight years, and became an inspirational voice for national unity.

Steinem asks her readers to consider whether Obama’s biography would qualify a female candidate for the U.S. Senate, not to mention the White House; she assumes not. Not only would this imaginary figure not be a “viable candidate,” but the fact that readers presumably cannot fathom her rise “to head the most powerful nation on earth” leads Steinem to argue that “[g]ender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House.”

Steinem was perplexed. Only days before, Democrats had chosen Obama over his main rival, Hillary Clinton, in the Iowa caucuses, and Steinem wanted to know how such an upset could have occurred. Clinton had been widely expected to win the nomination in 2008

after putting in over 7 years as the junior Senator from New York in addition to her time in the White House as First Lady. But a younger, post-Baby-Boomer first-term Senator from Chicago had built a passionate coalition of supporters over the previous year, breaking fundraising records and igniting a movement that would stymie Clinton's seemingly fated path to the presidency and with it, the hope that women's highest of glass ceilings might finally be broken. How had this happened, Steinem wondered?

Obama's Iowa victory was not without precedent, according to Steinem, but "follows our historical pattern for making change" in which the constraints of gender have been more difficult to overcome than those of race. As evidence of the more formidable nature of the "sex barrier," Steinem cites the Reconstruction era of constitutional revision as a foundation for this pattern: "Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot, and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women (with the possible exception of obedient family members in the latter)." Despite her insistence that she is "not advocating a competition for who has it toughest," Steinem produces a litany of reasons why sexism is "not taken as seriously" as racism, among them, that women do most of the childrearing, are considered "naturally" different or inferior much like people of color once were, and have a difficult time wielding power without being viewed as either weak, on the one hand, or overbearing, on the other. For Steinem, it seemed like Democrats had been energized by the possibility of breaking the race barrier when it comes to presidential politics but had let the gender barrier pass relatively unnoticed. Young women in particular, she suggests, have not recognized the power and significance of Clinton's run, and she concludes by insisting that "It's time to take

equal pride in breaking all the barriers. We have to be able to say: ‘I’m supporting her because she’ll be a great president and because she’s a woman.’”

The critical response to the piece came quickly, with feminist writers, academics, and journalists variously decrying Steinem’s insistence that gender trumps race, or her suggestion that young women do not seem to know what’s best for them, or her implication that feminists must vote for the female candidate if they are to be considered true feminists. Rebecca Walker, editor of the “third-wave” feminist tome *To Be Real*, wrote a paradigmatic response, arguing that contrary to Steinem’s claim, “racism and classism are as definitive as sexism,” citing the “forty percent of black men [who] don’t finish high school in America” and the “one in four [who] are incarcerated.” Walker claims that despite what Steinem implies, “women are not only victims, but active participants in the shaping of their lives,” “men are not the enemy,” and “young women are not stupid.” Steinem’s “divisive discourse” is “bad for women,” “bad for Hillary’s campaign,” and bad for feminism too: it is rhetoric like hers that has “few women lining up behind the ‘feminist’ placard” while “many more ru[n] in the other direction.” According to Walker, these women are not “ungrateful or unintelligent,” but instead realize that “confrontational political labels and a religious fixation on gender aren’t productive.” Steinem has, in sum, “crystallized” for Walker that Clinton “runs the risk of being seen as a Second Wave candidate” who cannot connect with the next generation and cannot see that “gender is not enough to win” young women’s vote.

Other writers followed suit, claiming that Steinem’s piece represented “the very worst of second-wave feminism” and put forth a “bizarre reading of history” in which “African American men somehow [have been] standing over and above white women” (“Race and Gender in Presidential Politics”). In a debate with Steinem on *Democracy Now* one week

after the editorial's publication, feminist scholar Melissa Harris-Lacewell suggested that Steinem's use of Reconstruction history "ignores that black men were then lynched regularly for any attempt to actually exercise" the right to vote. According to Harris-Lacewell, the intersections of race and gender are "more complicated" than Steinem allows: "African American men have been complicit in the oppression of African American women. White women have been complicit in the oppression of black men and black women." She then segues into a comparison of Clinton's "difficulties" on the campaign trail with Obama's "death threats," suggesting that the two candidates cannot possibly be seen as equally disadvantaged: "she tears up at being sort of beat up by him, when her husband can come in and rally around her and suggest that we need to sort of support her because she's having difficulties, while Barack Obama is getting death threats, basically lynching threats on him and his family." According to Harris-Lacewell, Clinton's support among older white women "indicate[s] the ways in which white women's particular race and gender position can be of major benefit to them when running against an African American man." Steinem hears this claim as an accusation of racism: "Well, are white women being racist when they vote for Hillary Clinton? I do not know. We'd have to look into the heart of every person who's voting." Harris-Lacewell insists that this is not what she means, but one gets the sense from the rest of the "debate" that these two feminists are talking past one another; subsequent writers would note the acrimony of the conversation, suggesting that Harris-Lacewell "was a few nasty barbs short of calling Steinem an out-and-out racist" (Martin, "Why Race and Gender Do Matter").

If these responses seem disjointed, that's because they are. And if they seem familiar, there's reason for that too. Steinem's editorial set off a debate about race, gender, and

feminism in the 2008 election that until that point had been mostly sidelined by Democrats' expressions of enthusiasm over the possibilities inherent in their two strongest candidates for president. The ensuing discourse in the media over the next several months largely covered the same rhetorical and conceptual ground, as Obama and Clinton continued on the primary trail, with Clinton trailing in delegates but not conceding until early June. Feminist Clinton-supporters lamented their candidate's sexist treatment by the media; feminist Obama-supporters pushed back, often with critiques of what they saw as at best, tone-deaf, and at worst, racist, claims of gender's liabilities in American politics. What had been a healthy competition between two popular candidates, had devolved, according to some critics, into a "crisis" that threatened not just the Democratic party and its chances to take back the White House, but the future of feminism itself (Reed). More than four years and another election season later, how might feminists read this discursive field and the problems placed at its center?¹

The (Origin) Story of the Race-Versus-Gender Problem

One way to understand the discursive field of the 2008 primary is as the repetition of one of the oldest stories within U.S. feminism. The story is about race, gender, and politics and its touchstone moment is not 2008, but 1869. According to this story, when the Fifteenth Amendment was passed that year, giving black men the right to vote, but leaving women of

¹ See Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnnetta Betsch Cole's collection *Who Should Be First?: Feminists Speak Out on the 2008 Presidential Campaign* (2010) for a selection of both popular and academic responses to the Obama-Clinton contest. The 2008 Democratic primary race—and the public debate surrounding it—is beginning to receive more attention from scholars interested in race and gender in contemporary U.S. politics and culture; sociologist Enid Logan published the first monograph on the topic in 2011. See Logan, "At This Defining Moment", esp. Chapter 4, for a discussion of the dynamics of the Obama-Clinton race for the presidency.

all races out, an insidious pattern was put in place: white women would betray the promise of an integrated liberation movement that would fight both racial and gendered oppression, choosing instead to fight for their rights in racist terms. This betrayal would not remain mired in the past, so the story goes, but would haunt U.S. feminism at every turn over the next century and beyond. Like any story, this one has its primary characters, both villains and heroines; its integral plot points, both high and low; its arc of action, central tropes, and themes. And most crucially, it has its lessons—the morals of the story that make its telling so worthwhile. It is to this story, and the effects of its reiteration, that this project attends.

The public debate over the Obama-Clinton contest represents both an overture to and exemplar of this most fundamental feminist story. In the popular media, the 2008 primary presented a choice not only between two candidates and their visions for the nation, but between two categories of identity. Would race or gender be the winner in the “zero-sum game” of “breakthrough politics?” (Leibovich) As Mark Leibovich, political reporter and Chief National Correspondent for *New York Times Magazine*, framed it in a representative piece aptly titled “Rights vs. Rights,” “Either Senator Barack Obama will be the first African-American or Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton will be the first woman to win the presidential nomination of a major American political party.” Each candidate would seize the nomination “soaked in history as a culminating figure of one of the great ideological movements of the last century—civil rights or women’s rights” (Leibovich). The choice between the two movements that Democrats faced, according to this writer, is not unique to the contemporary American political environment, but “ha[s] a long, complicated history dating back to abolitionism and the origins of modern feminism” that portends “an inevitable friction” between Clinton and Obama. Post-Civil War America again provides a parallel,

when abolitionist and woman suffrage activists such as Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton “split” in a “bitter case” over who would win the vote, and when. The “ideals” of these two historical figures, and the two groups they represented

would eventually clash, resulting in increasingly divisive rhetoric that reached a harsh climax after Stanton condemned the 15th Amendment—which gave black men the right to vote but left out women of all races—as something that would establish ‘an aristocracy of sex on this continent.’ She also alluded to the ‘lower orders’ like Irish, blacks, Germans, Chinese. (Leibovich)

Other writers refer to this Reconstruction-era “split” as a “bitter schism in the long alliance of abolitionists and suffragists, and within the suffrage movement” (Applegate) and an “ugly history of the nineteenth century, when the failure of the women’s movement to bring about universal adult suffrage metastasized into racial resentment and rift that weakened feminism throughout much of the twentieth century” (“Morning in America”).

The choice in 2008 between Obama and Clinton represents, in these renderings, a recursive problem in American political history, one in which the election constitutes a contemporary illustration of the eternal struggle between race and gender. Would women line up behind Clinton because she’s female? Would African Americans vote for Obama because he’s black? And what, then, about African American women? Would they, as one writer put it, “choose their racial identity over their gender identity in deciding where to use the power of their votes?” (Feldt)

The race-versus-gender choice was clear: when faced with a white woman, a black man, and the opportunity to take back the White House after eight long years, what would Democratic voters do? Some critics attempted to refuse this “choice” and instead analyze the “oppression sweepstakes” or “oppression Olympics” that the media seemed to be

constructing and stoking (Pollitt; Martin, “Why Race and Gender Do Matter”).² While a handful of these analysts denounced the “competition between race and gender” as it was currently delineated, insisting that we resist the “toxic Punch and Judy show of embattled identity” and refuse to turn a “historic breakthrough moment” into one “marred by having to choose between ‘race cards’ and ‘gender cards,’” it seemed far easier to employ the race-versus-gender framing than avoid it (Pollitt; “Morning in America”). For instance, Clinton-supporters repeatedly decried sexism as “the worst of the ‘isms,” and cited their belief that “[p]eople are more sensitive to racism than sexism” (Saslow; Long). And as Steinem’s editorial indicates, even when authors explicitly assert that they want to avoid the race-versus-gender rhetoric of which group “has it toughest,” they appear to be pulled into just that sort of discourse. For example, Robin Morgan, author of the infamous takedown of the sexist male Left in her 1970 “Goodbye to All That,” updated her essay with a second iteration that begins by critiquing the “competition” between “two communities” over the Obama-Clinton primary, but then formulates the problem in precisely those terms. Morgan condemns the sexism Clinton endures on the campaign trail, insists that Obama has not experienced parallel indignities, and places sexism beyond racism by suggesting that sexual oppression precedes racial oppression: “A few non-racist countries may exist—but sexism is everywhere. No matter how many ways a woman breaks free from other discriminations, she remains a female human being in a world still so patriarchal that it’s the ‘norm’” (“Goodbye to All That #2”).

Obama-supporters, on the other hand, frequently underscore the misogyny on the campaign trail but then maintain that racism is in fact “more insidious and trickier to

² Along with Pollitt and Martin, “Why Race and Gender Do Matter,” see Price and Bravo for additional pieces that attempt to take a critical stance toward the race-versus-gender framing.

confront” (Reed). Author Lorrie Moore writes that Obama’s election would be more meaningful because “middle-class white girls” “have managed on their own” while boys, “especially boys of color” “are suffering in this country.” Another writer goes to great lengths detailing the sexism of the anti-Clinton progressives, but then pivots into the claim that “[i]n today’s United States, racism continues to have more damaging economic and social structural implications for African-Americans than sexism has for women” (Traister). While sexism certainly exists, according to these arguments, it exists as a milder, less pernicious form of discrimination, one that should not be compared to historical or contemporary forms of racial discrimination.³

But comparing the two forms of discrimination appears irresistible to the feminist writers supporting Clinton. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the discursive production around the 2008 primary is the feminist practice of constructing reversals and parallels to illustrate their arguments about the damaging effects of sexism. As I noted above, Steinem begins her editorial with this sort of reversal, imagining Obama to be a woman in order to demonstrate the double-binds of gender when it comes to American politics. Other writers construct more elaborate analogies, in which every instance of misogyny used against Clinton undergoes an imaginary reversal to become instead about race—the point being to demonstrate that racism is “beyond the pale” in ways that sexism is not (Pollitt). A t-shirt that reads “Hillary, cook my food, but don’t run my country” becomes “Obama, shine my shoes, but don’t run my country” in order to show how unacceptable, even inconceivable, such

³ Even as these writers allow that misogyny plays a role in U.S. politics, they frequently reinscribe the problem by referring to Clinton, or those who defend her, in misogynistic terms. See Goldberg, “Hell Hath No Fury,” for a description of Clinton-supporter Robin Morgan as “hysterical” and O’Rourke’s description of Clinton as “brittle” and “embittered” for two examples. See Traister and Fortini for longer analyses of the sexist treatment of Clinton by progressives.

rhetoric would be if it were racialized instead of gendered (Long). When another button-wearing Hillary-supporter is stopped by a stranger on the street and told that “A woman’s place is in the kitchen,” her response is to reverse and redirect the sexism into racism: “Would he have stopped a black man and said something derogatory like that?...No, I don’t think so. But somehow sexism is still okay. We all know racism is endemic in this society, but people who would never dare to make a racist comment on purpose say sexist things all the time” (qtd. in Saslow). Morgan’s “Goodbye to All That (#2)” provides a host of these reversals, saying “goodbye to the toxic viciousness” of “sociopathic *woman-hating*” by way of representing its parallel form of racism:

[Goodbye to] John McCain answering ‘How do we beat the bitch? With ‘Excellent question!’ Would he have dared reply similarly to ‘How do we beat the black bastard?’ *For shame*. Goodbye to the HRC [Hillary Rodham Clinton] nutcracker with metal spikes between splayed thighs. If it was a tap-dancing blackface doll, we would be *righteously outraged*—and they would *not* be selling it in airports. *Shame*...If it were about Jews, we would recognize it instantly as anti-Semitic propaganda; if about race, as KKK poison. Hell, PETA would go ballistic if such vomitous spew were directed at *animals*. Where is our sense of outrage—as citizens, voters, Americans?

Feminist supporters of Clinton clearly feel that sexist discourse in the campaign was alternately either not visible, or visible yet acceptable, and their method for rectifying this problem is to represent it through the lens of race. The lamentations about what these writers see as the discursive permissibility of sexism in the public sphere are not quite the same thing as the claim that sexism is more serious than racism, but the repeated comparisons and parallels drawn in these pieces makes it easy to conflate the two arguments, especially when high-profile writers such as Steinem make precisely that claim.⁴

⁴ See Mitchell, “Full Transcript,” in which Clinton herself claims, like Steinem, that gender is more of a liability than race in presidential politics. In parsing these claims, I do not mean to say that Clinton-supporters did not engage in racist rhetoric in their critiques of Obama or the

In this contest, the different sides of the race-versus-gender problem come to stand in not only for racial and sexual identities, but also as markers of age and generational feminism. Media coverage of the primaries frequently notes the “split” among Democratic women, which ran “largely along generational lines, with older women who had waged their own battles showing more solidarity and younger ones arguing that voting for a male candidate over a female one was itself a sign of progress and confidence” (Kantor). National Organization for Women leaders claim that “The problem is that too many young women have...turn[ed] to Obama because they feel no obligation to vote for a historic first for their gender” (Saslow). Another writer suggests that the primary has “provided a Rorschach for our intergenerational disconnect” (Martin, “More Than a Mother-Daughter Debate”). Clinton-proponents note with consternation that younger women supported Obama at higher rates than Clinton and suggest that the younger cohort is “eager to win male approval by showing they’re not feminists” (Morgan, “Goodbye to All That #2”). When one feminist writer admits, in a confessional tone, that she is not supporting Clinton “at least in part because she reminds [her] of being scolded by [her] mother,” feminist scholar and Clinton-backer Linda Hirshman retorts that this admission is not just an insult to these young women’s mothers, but to “all those women who had the effrontery to start the feminist movement in the 1960s” (Hirshman, “Hillary Clinton as the Battleground”).⁵

campaign more generally. See comments by Geraldine Ferraro for an example of this kind of rhetoric, in which the former Vice Presidential nominee suggests that Obama was “very lucky to be who he is” because “[i]f [he] was a white man, he would not be in this position” (qtd. in Farber). See also Maddaus for Ferraro’s subsequent defense of her comments, in which she suggests critics attack her “because [she’s] white.” For a longer-view analysis of the racist rhetoric of the Clinton campaign, see Berman.

⁵ See also Bennetts for a piece on the “anger of older female voters” who resented calls for Clinton to step aside in the face of “Obama’s inevitability.” Bennetts correlates this call with

Feminist Obama-supporters likewise see the support for Clinton as an index both of women's age and the "wave" of feminism with which they identify. As one journalist puts it, "the frustration with the feminist old guard's reaction to Hillary Clinton is not unmerited. The exhortations from Robin Morgan have not exactly been lyrical, or tuned to ears of women younger than 50" (Traister). As evidence, the author cites younger women claiming they were "appalled" by "those editorials by Gloria Steinem" and Morgan, which they say "alienated" them "from second-wave feminism" (Traister). The outcome of the primary becomes not just about which form of identity wins out—race or gender—but which form of feminism—young or old? "second-wave" or third?—will triumph. As one feminist Obama-supporter puts it, "If Clinton wins, the older-line women's movement will continue; it will be a continuation of power for them. If she doesn't win, it will be a death knell for those people. And that may be a good thing—that a younger generation will start to take over" (qtd. in Reed). The struggle is not only a struggle between race and gender, but a struggle for the "future of feminism"—will the "rage" of the "old guard" Clinton-feminists "damage" feminism into oblivion? (Goldberg, "Hell Hath No Fury") Will older women's reluctance to fall in line result in the "grimmiest irony imaginable"—the election of the antifeminist John McCain? (Goldberg, "3A.M. for Feminism") Or perhaps the results will be less dire, but the debate will still "unravel" feminist progress and "weaken" the feminist movement, which Hirschman describes as "having trouble reproducing" (Reed; Hirschman, "Looking to the Future"). The outcome of the primary was not clear, but already its discursive framing had become a "crisis" for feminism, one rooted in the pitting of race against gender and its

the more general tendency for society to discard older women "[o]nce they've passed the age of facile objectification and commodification."

subsequent translation through feminist “waves” and their age and generational corollaries.⁶ What had begun as a hopeful, exciting opportunity had devolved, according to these accounts, into something else entirely: not inspiring or grand at all, but a drearily familiar “rhetoric of disenfranchisement” that had “become destructive” (Goldberg, “3 A.M. for Feminism”).

The public discourse of the Obama-Clinton primary election is at once an instance of contemporary feminist political debate and a map of the conceptual terrain of the race-versus-gender problem within U.S. feminism. The contours of that terrain are all present in this discourse: the competition between “who has it toughest”—white women or black men; the cataloging of identity-based discriminations; the recriminations of white feminist racism, the defensive measures taken in the face of such accusations, and the age- and “wave-” based extrapolations from the resulting back-and-forth. Race and gender are pitted against one another, a discursive formulation so compelling that writers and scholars are drawn into it even as they critique and attempt to avoid it. The problem is represented as intractable and part of a long history, on the one hand, and a mortal danger to the future of feminism, on the other. Indeed, the “choices” presented by the Obama-Clinton rivalry are vital to ensuring a viable feminism in the present and at the same time discursively rooted in similar “choices” made by woman’s rights activists in the nineteenth century.

⁶ During this debate in the popular media, only one piece that I am aware of suggested that the Obama-Clinton primary was productive for feminism, rather than a crisis; see Fortini, in which the author suggests that the debate would “leav[e] behind a legacy of reawakened feminism—the fourth wave, if you will.”

Shifting the Story

I was both fascinated and perplexed by the Obama-Clinton debate in 2008. It seemed that the discursive dissonance between what feminists claimed to be arguing, and the forms those arguments took, was not simply a cause for alarm, or dismay, but something to consider critically. It appeared as though commentators were unable to view things from each other's perspective, for one thing; Clinton-supporters seemed not to see how their claims for gender's more oppressive liabilities registered as a form of discounting the oppression of African Americans of both sexes. Feminist scholars and Obama-supporters, on the other hand, seemed not to hear the frustration of these white women who felt as though sexism was "allowed" in ways that racism was not. And I wanted to understand how the position of black women functioned within these arguments—at times figured as the ultimate symbol of the race-versus-gender "choice," at times made completely invisible, at times fetishized as the only position unimplicated in a politics of negation. I was also curious about how history was deployed to buttress both sides of the debate—either as a way of pointing to the "origin" of the problem or as a form of evidence for which "side" deserved to win the contemporary iteration of the contest.

The race-versus-gender problem represented in the Obama-Clinton debate circulates widely in feminist studies, both as a pairing in which one is pitted against the other, and as corollary to the critique of white feminist racism. While the critique of racism within the women's movement dates back to the mid-nineteenth-century, over the past four decades it has received greater scholarly attention, particularly by critics interested in bringing the experience and contributions of women of color into clearer view. Scholars such as bell hooks argued that white women took for granted that their experience was universal, forcing

black women to remain marginal “others” in the struggle for equality with white men (*Feminist Theory* 3). White women’s concept of “sisterhood” was thoroughly critiqued for its universalist assumptions and its sometimes overt, sometimes covert aggression in allowing white women to set the feminist agenda in the name of *all* women.⁷ Other axes of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality, were made central to the analysis of women’s lives and women’s oppression, and the concept of intersectionality was used to critique how a “single-axis framework” of either race *or* gender “erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw 140). These interventions did not, of course, undo feminist racism or halt new iterations from circulating, but they certainly changed the field of feminist inquiry.⁸

While this shift in the field has had enormous critical and political significance, it has also produced a body of literature that relies on the nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement as a point of origin for the problem of white feminist racism. These narratives offered valuable correctives to a white feminist practice that uncritically valorized feminist forbearers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and the development of a historical “sisterhood” among all women that ignored difference, and differences in power, within that category. Nineteenth-century suffragists such as Stanton and Anthony were read instead as problematic figures who represented the racism at the core of the development of

⁷ See the groundbreaking collection *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull et al.), esp. xvii-xxxii, for one of the first critiques of the silencing of women of color in both movement feminism and its scholarly counterpart.

⁸ For a small sampling of this influential body of work, see Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; Thornton Dill; hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?* and *Feminist Theory*; Spelman; Lorde; Anzaldúa; and Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

U.S. feminism. The condemnation of the suffragist movement and the representation of its mistakes served a narrative of feminist failure, in which the feminism of the past is recursively chastised for failing to live up to present-day standards, and present-day feminism is in danger of falling prey to the same fate if it is unable to learn from this past. One curious effect of this critical practice has been to solidify a rhetorical and conceptual framework that places race and gender in opposition to one another in the name of critiquing white feminist racism. While the problem of white feminist racism is certainly of great significance, both in contemporary terms and in its historical formations, the reiteration of the critique of this object, and the uses of history to underwrite the narrative of critique, have gone unexamined.

This project interrogates these issues through the lens of a historical event referenced with remarkable frequency in both feminist academic work and the media coverage of the Obama-Clinton primary: the 1869 “split” in the U.S. suffrage movement over the Fifteenth Amendment and its granting of the right to vote to black men ahead of women. Just as this event was used as a form of evidence for both sides of the primary debate (recall that Steinem used it as proof that gender presents a more difficult barrier to break than race, while Harris-Lacewell referenced it to demonstrate the recursive problem of white feminist racism), it has also circulated as a governing trope in wide-ranging narratives of U.S. feminism over the past fifty years. I argue that this event has been consolidated through narrative practices into a hypercanonical symbol of the race-versus-gender problem in American feminism, the reiteration of this symbol functioning as a way for feminists to secure progressive, antiracist positions in the present. This process has, paradoxically, made it more difficult to understand how racism and racialized rhetoric functioned in the Reconstruction era, on the one hand, and

obscured the theoretical contributions of black woman suffragists, on the other. Further, the canonization of the 1869 “split” has solidified the sense that the race-versus-gender problem is intractable, unavoidable, and destined to repeat itself in ways that threaten the future of feminism. This, then, is the practice I would like to intervene in. Through readings of a wide array of texts, from women’s movement historiography, to radical feminist polemical work of the 1960s, to a variety of nineteenth-century print culture and oratory, I attempt to interrupt the naturalized narrative of 1869 and loosen race and gender from the fixed positions the “split” has calcified for them. Ultimately, I hope to show how critical attention to a variety of “split-narratives” illustrates how the two categories are not fixed in antagonism, but part of dynamic processes of political strategy and resistance.

Suffragism and its Absence in U.S. Literary Studies

While scholars in the fields of American and feminist history have demonstrated an intense and sustained focus on suffragism over the past 30 years, literary critics have largely passed over the movement. The extent of the literary-critical engagement with American suffragism lies primarily in the realm of the fictional representation of suffragists in a handful of novels.⁹ Even this area of study has gone relatively unexamined from a literary perspective

⁹ Most of this work looks at fictional depictions of suffragists and the movement as part of wider examinations of woman’s rights and feminist activism of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. For studies of the literary production of nineteenth-century suffragism, see: Petty; Bardes and Gossett; Kahane; Levander; Chapman and Green; Chapman. There is some indication that the scope of the critical interest in suffrage might be widening beyond the fictional representation of the movement and its activists to a more diverse set of texts; for recent studies of suffrage performance and material culture (such as parades and advertisements), see Lumsden, Ford, Lunardini, and Finnegan; on suffrage theater, see Glenn, Goddard, and Friedl; on women’s periodicals, see Russo and Kramarae, Cane and Alves, and Solomon.

due to what scholars have described as a reluctance to “treat seriously” the fiction of reform and instead to view these texts as mere didactic tracts of little literary interest (Petty 1). Critics such as Leslie Petty have noted that because of the lack of attention to texts that “explicitly depict feminist activism,” a work such as Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) has frequently been read as a “unique text about feminist reform” rather than “as part of a larger tradition of such fiction” (1).

The obscuring of this fictional tradition is certainly something to remedy, but it is equally important to widen the scope of suffrage scholarship within American literary studies. Mary Chapman and Angela Mills’ recent edited collection, *Treacherous Texts: U.S. Suffrage Literature, 1846-1946* (2011) begins this work by bringing together an impressive array of suffrage texts chosen for their creative and rhetorical strategies as well as their various interventions into the culture and politics of their respective eras.¹⁰ As the editors note, there is a “vast, creative, and stylistically interesting” body of American suffrage literature, but this work has “not yet received adequate attention from historians, rhetoric scholars, or literary critics,” a fact that can at least partially be attributed to the lack of availability of these texts, many of which are out of print or only available on microfilm (4). Chapman and Mills’ collection aims to begin the process of “recuperation” of suffrage as an area of critical significance in American literary studies by demonstrating the wide scope of suffrage print culture—fiction and poetry as well as autobiography, essays, and drama—from before the Civil War to well after passage of the 19th Amendment (4).

¹⁰ As Chapman and Mills note, the only other collection devoted entirely to U.S. suffrage literature is Bettina Friedl’s *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Suffrage Movement* (1987), although a handful of other anthologies include literary selections along with historical documents of the movement; see Boydston et al. and Kraditor.

While *Treacherous Texts* brings together a fascinating group of texts that will surely prove valuable to scholars as they take up the study of U.S. suffrage politics and its associated cultural production, in the current project I am more interested in reframing what might count as “suffrage literature.” Certainly there is a vast body of traditionally-literary texts, from both nineteenth- and twentieth-century iterations of the movement, but why not also look to the massive body of work right underneath our noses? By this I of course mean the immense historiography of U.S. suffrage that has amassed over the past forty years alongside the development of the new women’s history. These historiographical works might be read not only for their critical work in reclaiming woman’s suffrage as a topic of significance for the historical record, or for their interventions in tracing women’s involvement in the sphere of politics, but also as narratives that circulate widely and perform significant work in the realm of feminist studies. When read this way, not simply as histories of suffrage but as suffrage *stories*, a canonized narrative of suffrage emerges, one that might be read as a literary object in itself. When thought of in terms of canonicity, a host of new questions arise: what makes one suffrage story more canonical than others? What does this canon exclude, and what does it produce? And what are the consequences of telling a story so frequently that it hardly need be told anymore, when a mere reference to a date (1869) or a term (the “suffrage split”) can stand in for the story as a whole?

Reframing 1869

The woman’s suffrage movement “splitting in two” over whether to support or denounce the Reconstruction Amendments is indeed one of the most frequently-told stories in the history of the American women’s movement. These narratives, found across a variety

of historiographical, theoretical, and polemical texts, reference a real historical event, to be sure, but they also construct that event through the narrative practices they employ. This project takes these practices as an entry point into understanding how a standard narrative map of this event in feminist history develops over time and across a variety of different types of texts. This methodology owes much to the work of Clare Hemmings, whose recent study of narratives of progress and loss in contemporary feminist theory frames a body of work not usually read for its production of narrative as a genre with distinct narrative practices. In *Why Stories Matter* (2011) Hemmings explores what she calls the “political grammar” of feminist narrative with the goal of “breaking open dominant forms” of storytelling within feminist theory through the analysis of how those stories work on their readers and develop into commonsense, naturalized ways of understanding the past (3). Hemmings takes the glosses of feminist history found in articles across the major academic journals of feminist theory as her primary objects of study, looking to how these narratives are transformed into shorthand ways of understanding feminism “despite the fact that we know that history is more complicated than the stories we tell about it” (16). Similarly, I am interested in how narratives of the 1869 suffrage “split” within feminist historiography have been constructed and then translated into shorthand iterations that repeat across a variety of texts. As Hemmings notes, what we take for granted in feminism’s past has effects in the present—and interrogating “the technologies of the presumed” and “the politics of the rehearsed” of these self-evident stories is a method for understanding those contemporary consequences (19, 20).

Hemmings is exclusively interested in the consolidations of history in feminist theory, but when it comes to what to do after this reading, her work does not provide as much

guidance—a point she repeatedly acknowledges at the outset of *Why Stories Matter*. In arguing for the importance of focusing on dominant narratives and the techniques through which these narratives are secured, Hemmings presents the alternative to this method as “corrective redress” that, in her view, is ultimately doomed to produce new blindspots and gaps “while the dominant [narrative] that is corrected remains intact” (14-15). For Hemmings, one is either interested in “the politics that produce and sustain one version of history as more true than another” or one is attempting to “intervene at the level of truth-telling” to create a “fuller, richer version of the recent past of Western feminist theory than these dominant narratives allow” (16, 12); one is either analyzing how dominant narratives function or hopelessly attempting to “plug the gaps” in flawed histories in order to make them whole (16). Indeed, the dominant/alternate relation Hemmings produces appears to leave little room for any other type of rehistoricization beyond a “corrective” attempt to “set our story straight” once and for all (20).

But what if one would like to try to read the disorder of an individual historical moment that lies beneath its historical consolidation and the stories we tell about it? To be interested in this, in my view, does not necessarily commit one to a “corrective” account of that history, or even to an “alternate” version of it; it can instead work as an attempt at accounting for the sheer complexity of any historical investigation and as a method for deconstructing naturalized narratives of the past. Hemmings wants the chaos of a historical moment, what she calls the “snapshot of the discursive dissonance that makes up feminist history,” to “operate as a reminder that all histories are selective and motivated”—for her, the messiness of the history of feminism can only serve to highlight the ways that there is no one, true, objective way to tell the past (16). But I am less interested in using this dissonance as a

reminder than I am in rendering that history again in order to think through the ways that feminists' commonsense knowledge of feminism's past obscures the objects it canonizes. To that end, in this project I explore both contemporary itineraries of the discursive construct of the "split" as well as a variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts that shift the terms and shape of those well-known stories.

In the first chapter, I demonstrate how feminist historiography has not simply documented but constructed the 1869 "split" within suffragism through narrative practices organized around a consensus that one "side," led by Stanton and Anthony, betrayed feminism by opposing the Fifteenth Amendment in racist terms. These narratives, in turn, produce the "split" as a self-evident critical object for contemporary scholars, one that need only be invoked to signal this germinal betrayal. Through readings of foundational historiographical studies by Eleanor Flexner, Aileen Kraditor, and Ellen DuBois, as well as the next wave of suffrage histories that build on their analyses, I show how this body of work deploys narrative tropes, techniques, and affective strategies to secure progressive feminist positions in the present at the expense of the recognition of the complex subject positions of nineteenth-century suffragists, both black and white. This process has not only obscured other ways of understanding this historical moment—it has effaced the very betrayal it takes as its primary focus by failing to explore the potent contexts in which race and gender operated in the volatile decade following the Civil War.

In the next two chapters I then turn to a variety of nineteenth-century suffrage texts to explore other ways of understanding the movement in 1869. In the second chapter, I explore how white suffragists deployed rhetorics of race in Stanton's feminist newspaper, *The Revolution* (1868-1870). By tracing the periodical's framing of the Fifteenth Amendment

debates across its two years of publication, I call attention to the specific ways that white suffragists construct the figure of the black woman to navigate their position as victims of male privilege, on the one hand, and inheritors of white privilege, on the other—as both oppressed and oppressing. Despite the fame of its founder, this periodical has been given little focused critical attention; when the newspaper *is* cited, it is primarily used as historical evidence for Stanton’s betrayal of feminist solidarity, rather than as a text that can shed light on the shifting relation between the formation of feminist politics and its discursive contexts. I argue that a close reading of *The Revolution* allows for a fuller view of the ways that white suffragists such as Stanton deployed racialized rhetorics for particular purposes, exploiting the black female figure to perform a number of strategic functions in negotiating their ambivalent and shifting positions in relation to the racist and patriarchal postwar political system of the nineteenth century. My analysis suggests more generally that by focusing on volumes, rather than texts published in weekly installments across a number of years, literary critics have missed an opportunity to trace an unstable, unfolding history in which suffrage arguments and positions evolve over time and in response to shifting political and cultural conditions.

The Revolution represents an example of an unexplored text that, when read not just for its documentation of suffragist failures but also for its discursive strategies, can illuminate the contexts and consequences of white suffragist rhetoric that narratives of the 1869 “split” obscure. The third chapter examines how the historiographical construction of this event also subsumes the activism and intellectual work of black woman suffragists such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper by representing them as having to “choose” between their race and their sex in the face of the Fifteenth Amendment debates. Through readings of her novel

Minnie's Sacrifice (1869), as well as her Reconstruction-era short stories and oratory, I argue that Harper develops a black female standpoint that critiques the false “choice” between race and gender and redefines the concept of suffrage as not simply a right to be won, but a method for understanding difference and oppression. Harper’s work suggests that in framing the suffrage issue as a struggle or choice between race and gender, split-narratives rhetorically erase white and male privilege and at the same time render black women’s theoretical contributions to the movement invisible. By putting Harper’s literary work alongside the split-narratives that suppress it, the chapter demonstrates how American literature can be used to transform the narratives of American feminism by exposing their blind spots and shifting their critical focus.

In the final chapter, I track the discursive construct of the 1869 “split” as it circulates through foundational radical “second wave” feminist texts, exploring how representations of the nineteenth-century suffrage movement undergird the wave periodization of feminism and are used as a method for defining—and claiming—feminism in the late-1960s and early-1970s. These movement documents and manifestoes construct their own historical narratives that produce the “split” not in race-versus-gender terms, as the historiography does, but in terms of radical-versus-conservative politics. These stories of the past form the basis for a radical feminist heritage that legitimates the present-day movement and defends it against liberal feminists, on the one hand, and male Leftists, on the other. While this body of work has been critiqued for its reproduction of the racism of “first-wave” feminists such as Stanton, I argue that the feminist practice of reiterating “second-wave” failures has become a canonical narrative that produces the political agency of feminism in the present by refusing to recognize other stories these radical feminist texts can tell about the political culture in

which feminism is generated. Ultimately, I suggest that “splitting suffrage” and “waving feminism” are parallel narrative practices, the “split” and the “wave” two canonical narrative figures that allow feminists to connect with the past and at the same time guarantee the superiority of the present and the future of feminism.

These chapters demonstrate how stories of the 1869 suffrage “split” have effaced the past in ways that run contrary to what those narratives appear to advocate. Racism and the race/gender opposition are not objects of critique or sites of interrogation, but instead are deployed as tropes that obscure their historical formation and reproduce them as fixed, timeless things rather than dynamic, historical processes. This dissonance is akin to Hemmings’s concept of narrative amenability, which she describes as the ways in which “our own stories, narrative constructs, and grammatical forms” can circulate within “discursive uses of gender and feminism we might otherwise wish to disentangle ourselves from” (*Why Stories Matter* 2). As the 2008 Obama-Clinton debate demonstrates, the construction and reiteration of the race/gender opposition is not solely an issue for feminist scholarship, but one that circulates in both feminist and non-feminist popular culture. The development of the 1869 “split” as a commonsense story of the origin of the race-versus-gender problem and white feminist racism becomes a self-fulfilling narrative with wide-ranging itineraries; in an important sense, race and gender are locked in eternal, permanent opposition not because history proves it so but because we keep telling it that way.

CHAPTER 1

U.S. Suffrage Historiography, White Feminist Racism, and the “Risks of Replication”: Readings of the 1869 Suffrage “Split”

“I am particularly interested in feminist stories when a consensus emerges about what really happened, because that indicates fixing of both the past and present as providing their own evidence for one another in ways that reduce rather than increase political and theoretical accountability. The story no longer needs to be interrogated because we all recognize it; we no longer need to explain why we think this story needs to be told; the storyteller is not responsible for its effects.”

—Clare Hemmings, “What is a Feminist Theorist Responsible For?” 72

“At the end of the century, all sorts of references echo back in assessments of the past and echo forward in predictions of the future; the whole exercise can be construed as fantastic.”

—Joan Scott, “Fantasy Echo” 285

Turning on the radio in my car one day this past July, I was surprised to find myself listening to a discussion of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her effects on the U.S. suffrage movement. Steve Inskeep, the host of NPR’s “Morning Edition,” was interviewing historian Lori Ginzberg about her recent biography of the famous suffragist and co-founder of the nineteenth-century U.S. woman’s rights movement. It was clear from the outset, however, that this biography was no mere celebration of that woman, or her movement, or its successes—far from it. The clue to this came early on, when Inskeep introduced Stanton as a figure who “deeply influenced women’s rights as we talk of them today, even though she didn’t really fight for all women.” Ginzberg takes this idea and runs with it, describing Stanton as a suffragist who claimed to be fighting for universal suffrage, when in fact, she actually meant elite white women such as herself. When Inskeep asks Ginzberg to elaborate

on this point, she responds by briefly outlining the post-Civil War “battle” over the Fifteenth Amendment, in which one “side” of the suffrage movement supported the enfranchisement of black men while other suffragists such as Stanton wanted to “hold out” for an amendment that would include women too. Stanton, in Ginzberg’s view, “claimed” that her side stood on the “highest moral ground” but in reality, they “descended to some rather ugly racist rhetoric” that had “modern implications” for us as feminists: according to Ginzberg, this event in suffrage history “helped create” an “ongoing problem” for feminism, in which the term “women” comes to silently stand in for middle-class, white women and the movement is forever marked by its inception in racism.

It was a brief interview, but listeners could quickly get the drift—in Ginzberg’s narration of it, there were two sides to the nineteenth-century suffrage movement, and Stanton was on the wrong side, the racist side. According to the narrative, this wrongness, these mistakes, were not quarantined in the past, but permeated feminism’s future—Stanton’s mistakes are, in fact, our own. Listening to Ginzberg tell it, I found myself cringing, a reaction that, upon closer consideration, contained a number of impulses and desires. As I later tried to map this reflex, I saw that it first contained the recognition of myself as white, and through this recognition, I came to see myself as tied to Stanton and her racism. This recognition turned into feelings of disgust and loathing, affects that then led to a desire to disavow Stanton as a symbol of white feminist racism. Ginzberg’s rendering of the suffragist-as-racist created a strong need to disidentify with Stanton and her followers in some kind of imaginary effort to be the right kind of white feminist in contemporary terms.

I begin with this short exchange and my reaction to it because they so neatly illustrate a narrative process within contemporary U.S. feminism that calls for interrogation. What

Ginzberg was describing is known as the “suffrage split” in the historiography, a phrase that references a real historical event but, as I will argue, also constructs that event in particular ways that we ought to consider. A term that has become remarkably common within both U.S. feminist history and theory, the suffrage “split” refers to the emergence of two national suffragist organizations in 1869 after woman suffrage leaders disagreed over the Fifteenth Amendment and the enfranchisement of black men ahead of women. Stanton, as Ginzberg indicates, was at the head of the group of suffragists who rejected the Fifteenth Amendment and argued for the need to enfranchise women and black men at the same time, often while deploying a wide variety of racist rhetoric.

But the NPR interview did not simply describe a historical event—it produced one that in turn became the symbol for the failures of a movement. Ginzberg’s rendering of Stanton’s role in the “split” portrays a political actor whose racist beliefs and rhetoric tainted not only her legacy, or the legacy of suffrage, but the entire future of U.S. feminism; the story of the “split” becomes a story of the suffrage movement, its failures, and their lasting impacts on and meanings for feminism today. In the process of telling this story, the interview produced not just a particular kind of past, but also a particular kind of present-day feminism and its attendant contemporary listener. In listening to Ginzberg’s narrative, I was encouraged to disavow Stanton and through that disavowal identify with the “correct” side of a contemporary feminism—the one that Ginzberg endorses, the one that has learned the lesson of the past and not simply inherited its failures, but moved beyond them. The story of nineteenth-century suffrage was simultaneously a story of feminism’s present, one that urged the listener to listen in specific ways that entail a proper feminism, cleansed of the errors of history.

This is an example of the kind of narrative practice that I want to explore in greater depth. The NPR narrative is not unique in its construction of the “split” within suffrage or its implications for the future of feminism; it represents a popularized and current form of a widespread narrative practice within feminist historiography that dates back to the 1950s and the emergence of the new women’s history. This body of feminist historiography constructs the 1869 “split” again and again, in ways that allow it to function as a self-evident, virtually obvious critical object—a reference to the “split” efficiently evokes the race-versus-gender quandary and white suffragist racism, without need for elaboration. It is not that those two objects are not interesting or important, but here I am more concerned with tracking their recursive invocation and the narratives that facilitate it, rather than an attempt to verify that racism, on the one hand, or redeem its historical subjects, on the other. The establishment of the historical facts of this suffrage event has certainly been a valuable development in women’s and feminist history. But these facts seem to have crystallized into a standard narrative formula, a kind of shorthand that you might expect to have consequences because of its ubiquity in the historiography, the significance assigned to it, and the axiomatic quality it has developed. It is those consequences that are going unexamined in favor of the continual reiteration of this historical “rupture” within the feminist movement. In this chapter, I select from a variety of this work to explore how the “split” has become shorthand for white suffragist racism, and the consequences of this now-commonplace feminist story. I argue that while this narrative practice has allowed contemporary readers to secure a progressive antiracist feminist position in the present, it has simultaneously, and paradoxically, obscured both the critical object of white suffragist racism and the complex subject positions of nineteenth-century suffragists, both white and black.

My analysis, then, seeks not to dispute the historiographical consensus of this event, but rather develop an understanding of the effects of this consensus. To be clear: my critique of split-narratives is not meant to suggest that white suffragists were somehow not racist; that Stanton and other white U.S. suffragists deployed a variety of racisms, both subtle and overt, benevolent and malicious, as they lobbied for their cause, is a historical fact. My readings of the split-narratives within feminist historiography that focus on this racism are not meant as “apology” for white suffragist bigotry or a tempering of its harms, but as an accounting of the work the narratives of this event perform in their construction of a feminist history and contemporary understandings of our present.

Deploying History

Studies of the U.S. woman’s suffrage movement, once but a footnote in the historical record, flourished in the second half of the twentieth century. With the advent of “second wave” feminism in the political arena and the new women’s history in academia, the unearthing of women’s experiences within and contributions to U.S. political and cultural life took on new significance.¹ Wide-ranging accounts of the early woman’s movement appeared.

¹ This scholarly movement questioned the lack of a historical record of women’s activities and opened up a new field that could correct this absence. See Deutrich and Purdy, “Introduction” xv-xviii, for an overview. This new field would not simply “add women” to the annals of history, but also sought to transform what history was and could be. Joan Kelly suggested in 1976 that the recovery underway “ha[d] shaken the conceptual foundations of historical study” (1); she continues: “the moment one assumes that women are a part of humanity in the fullest sense—the period or set of events with which we deal takes on a wholly different character or meaning from the normally accepted one (2). These women’s historians were not only critiquing a lack of attention to women in the discipline of history, but also arguing that in order to gain full emancipation in U.S. society, this absence must be redressed. In other words, women’s history was not just about history, but about the present day; as Sheila Ryan Johansson argued in 1973, the stakes of this new historical enterprise were dire—women needed to gain a sense of their history in order to develop a

Biographies of central activist figures were written. Women's absence in familiar histories was redressed, where the addition of women to traditional history often transformed what that history was and could be. That the suffrage movement took on a large role in this reform and transformation of the historical record is perhaps not surprising; the movement was, after all, a large mobilization of women struggling for the previously inconceivable right to legal recognition and citizenship.² And it was a struggle that was arduous and long, but ultimately successful; enfranchisement did not secure women's political, social, or economic equality (as some activists at the time thought it could), but it was a victory of a specific and

"consciousness of collective identity" and to avoid "collective amnesia" (427). Likewise, Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck introduce their volume *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (1979) by suggesting that women's history is bound up with present-day feminist politics: "The endeavor of truth-telling begun by researchers, teachers, and writers of women's history in the past decade has served a 'consciousness-raising function: women who learn more fully about their own history often become more conscious of identification with their gender-group, more aware that their personal circumstances carry the legacy of a sex-specific historical experience, more determined to advance their position as women" (9). Women's history, in other words, was not a solitary scholarly enterprise, and its effects were not limited to the scholarly world; the stakes were political, they were big, and they were urgent. See Deutrich and Purdy, eds; Carroll; and Cott, ed. for detailed examples of the field and its mission.

² Indeed, the history of suffrage developed alongside this new women's history; what I call the "classic" histories of the suffrage movement by Eleanor Flexner (1959), Aileen Kraditor (1965), and Ellen DuBois (1978) were the first histories of the movement to appear and an important part of this larger movement toward recovery, revision, and transformation of the historical field of knowledge as well as the larger field of U.S. politics. This does not mean, however, that these histories were not challenged by the theorists of the new women's history; each of them were variously critiqued for focusing too much on the political arena at the expense of a focus on the domestic and everyday. See Lerner, "New Approaches"; Gordon, Buhle, and Dye; and Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman," for examples of this type of critique. DuBois responds in a 1980 symposium on "Politics and Culture in Women's History" in which she defends the study of the political sphere as a vitally necessary part of the project of women's emancipation. See also Gordon, "What Should Women's Historians Do?" for a similar argument, in which she suggests that studying social conflict is important and necessarily involves political history of the sort often criticized by early proponents of the new women's history.

meaningful kind, both in its symbolism and in its practice. Indeed, the movement and its accomplishments did not signal the end of women's subordination but instead (one of) the beginnings of U.S. feminism.

If the history of suffrage has proven central to the history of feminism, it has also produced central governing anxieties there. To read this body of work is to become well acquainted with the ultimate success of the movement, but it is its "failures" that permeate the historiography in myriad ways that are striking and evocative. The 1869 "split" within the suffrage movement is one such "failure."³ Rooted in the vagaries of Reconstruction-era politics, this historical event dominates the history of suffrage in ways that require interrogation. Indeed, I argue that the historiography is overdetermined by this event; it functions not simply as a familiar historical fact but as an extraordinary outlet for a variety of critical exigencies of feminist work. Reading the historiography as a narrative practice, for the stories it produces, provides a way to explore this process and its meanings. While these split-narratives are rehearsed in a number of registers and with multiple techniques, they are all based on the same historical details.

Those details are as follows: after the Civil War, Congress passed a series of amendments to the Constitution that guaranteed specific rights to newly-freed black men. The first of these, the Thirteenth Amendment, was proposed and ratified in 1865, abolishing the institution of slavery at the close of the war. The Fourteenth Amendment, passed by Congress in 1866, guaranteed citizenship to all persons born in the U.S. While it did not go

³ I put the term "failure" in quotations because it seems that these moments might be characterized in multiple ways, not only in the registers of dysfunction and disappointment. That this is not the case—that failure is the dominant idiom through which this historical event is articulated—is a narrative phenomenon that this chapter, and the project as a whole, seeks to unpack.

so far as to guarantee voting rights, this amendment, in a series of convoluted sections, stated that any state that abridged male suffrage would have its representation reduced by the same proportion that it disenfranchised its male inhabitants. The amendment took two years for state ratification, and on its heels in 1869 came the Fifteenth Amendment, which clarified its predecessor by guaranteeing male suffrage and making it illegal to deny the vote to citizens “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (US Const., amend. XV, sec. 1). With the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, the Reconstruction-era of constitutional revision came to a close.

The proposal and passage of the Reconstruction Amendments were closely followed, debated, supported, and protested by woman suffragists of the period. In particular, the Fourteenth Amendment’s insertion of the word “male” into the Constitution, gendered language not previously present anywhere in the document, was lamented as a setback for those interested in arguing that women were citizens under the amendment’s first section.⁴

⁴ The first section reads: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (US Const., amend. XIV, sec. 1). Many woman suffragists would later argue that under this section women were defined as citizens, even as the amendment’s second section appears to take a narrower view: “Representatives shall be apportioned among the several States according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each State, excluding Indians not taxed. But when the right to vote at any election...is denied to any of the male inhabitants of such a State, being twenty-one years of age, and citizens of the United States, in any way abridged, except for participation in rebellion, or other crime, the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such State” (US Const., amend. XIV, sec. 2). The apparent contradiction between these two sections would be the source of significant debate among suffragists for the next several years. See Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 407-520 for a detailed account of the “New Departure,” the suffragist strategy that hinged on a broad interpretation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments through which suffragists claimed women were

The Fifteenth Amendment, which protects voting rights on the basis of race, but not that of gender, added more certainty to suffragists' fear: women were not to be recipients of these newly-enumerated rights.

In New York in May of 1869, as Congress sent the Fifteenth Amendment to the states for ratification, activists held a meeting of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), an organization created by abolitionists and woman suffragists three years earlier to advance the cause of freedom for former slaves and women. This particular meeting of the AERA focused on whether to support ratification of the Fifteenth or protest it on the grounds that it failed to grant women suffrage along with black men. From records kept of the meeting's proceedings, we know that several prominent suffragists came out in favor of the Fifteenth Amendment, citing the precarious situation of the newly-freed black men who needed the vote as protection against mounting terror and violence in the Southern states.⁵ Other suffragists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony among them, disagreed; in their

already enfranchised. This strategy sought to have the courts recognize women as citizens under the first section of the Fourteenth Amendment. See also DuBois, "Taking the Law into Our Hands," for an analysis of this strategy. The Supreme Court would eventually reject the New Departure in 1875 with *Minor v. Happersett*.

⁵ See Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 378-399 for the minutes of this meeting. They are also available in the pages of Stanton and Anthony's suffrage newspaper, *The Revolution*; see "Annual Meeting" (May 20, 1869) and "Annual Meeting" (May 27, 1869) for the full stenographic reports. That both of these sources were compiled and edited by Stanton and Anthony, who were of course not neutral observers of this event, raises obvious questions of whether the records are slanted toward one side of the debate. Buhle and Buhle note this limitation when they write of Stanton and Anthony's "partisan" treatment of issues ("Introduction" xix) and their *History* as a work that "was at once a profoundly personal and self-consciously political venture" ("Introduction" xviii). Isenberg takes a similar view, suggesting that the massive *History* provides a sense of totality when in fact the work is an interested narrative: "The process of creating a total historical account means that some of the cultural imperatives that defined the movement have been lost or masked, because all stories and myths of origins create the illusion of completeness" (2). See Kerr 77 for a similar analysis.

view, the Fifteenth Amendment should be defeated because it failed to grant universal voting rights. A motion to support the Fifteenth Amendment was passed at the meeting.⁶

Immediately following, Stanton, Anthony, and several other supporters of woman suffrage convened to another location and founded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), an organization that would focus on winning women's right to vote. Weeks later, the woman suffragists who supported the Fifteenth Amendment formed their own association, resulting in the formal founding of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in November of 1869. Despite multiple attempts at unifying over the ensuing years, these two national organizations would remain separate until 1890, when they formed the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).

Nearly all suffrage histories (and a substantial amount of more general feminist work, both historical and theoretical) deal with this historical event in some way; it is undoubtedly one of the most commonly cited episodes within the history of suffrage and the "first wave" of feminism more generally.⁷ And while the details of this event are easy enough

⁶ The motion that passed read as follows: "Resolved, That the American Equal Rights Association, in loyalty to its comprehensive demands for the political equality of all American citizens, without distinction of race or sex, hails the extension of suffrage to any class heretofore disfranchised, as a cheering part of the triumph of our whole idea. Resolved, therefore, That we gratefully welcome the pending fifteenth amendment, prohibiting disfranchisement on account of race, and earnestly solicit the State Legislatures to pass it without delay" ("Annual Meeting," May 27, 1869: 321). The defeated motion that Stanton proposed read: "Until the Constitution shall know neither black nor white, neither male nor female, but only the equal rights of all classes, we renew our solemn indictment against that instrument as defective, unworthy, and an oppressive charter for the self-government of a free people" (qtd. in Aptheker 47).

⁷ For histories of the U.S. suffrage movement, see: Flexner; Kraditor; DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*; Aptheker; Scott and Scott; Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*; Kugler; Wheeler, ed.; DuBois, *Woman Suffrage and Women's Rights*; Terborg-Penn, *African American Women*; Weatherford; Baker, ed., *Votes for Women*; Baker, *Sisters*; Hill; and Dudden. For studies that focus on a specific topic in relation to U.S. suffragism, see: Tax;

to delineate, it is their interpretation that becomes more fraught, more freighted with the weight of their historical impact on present-day feminist politics. Once ignored, like the rest of women's history, this episode within suffragism has been uncovered, explored, and assigned historical significance, rescued from the male-centered historical record that more often than not considered suffrage a political transaction between men.⁸ That this is a necessary, valuable development seems clear. What interests me, however, and what provides the central motivation for this chapter, is the conversion of this historical event into an omnipresent scene to which each subsequent history must trace back, explain, and understand, again and again. How do we get from the details outlined above to something we now know as the "split?"⁹ The distance between these two objects, between the past event

Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; Bardes and Gossett; Andolsen; Scott, *Natural Allies*; Lebsack; Giddings; Graham; Marilley; Marshall; Isenberg; Newman; Vacca; Wellman; Davis, *Political Thought*; and Sneider. This is not an exhaustive list but should give a sense of the interest in the movement since 1959.

⁸ In their study of women within the discipline of history, Schmidt and Schmidt show that women had been virtually erased from college level American history textbooks, and reference texts that manage to do this even in regard to the issue of women's suffrage: they quote from Leland D. Baldwin and Robert Kelley's *Survey of American History* (1967) as an example of a work "making the passage of the nineteenth amendment strictly a political maneuver between men" (50). They go on to suggest that it is not just textbooks and their authors that are to blame: "More mysterious than the ability to depict a world without women, a world whose existence is clearly denied by the writers' and readers' own experiences, is the fact that until very recently not a single professor protested that historical 'truth' should be so unlike reality, not a single paying customer demanded her money back on the basis that she had paid for a history course and had been sold a male fantasy instead" (54). For another critique of textbooks from the women's history movement, see Gordon et al. "Historical Phallacies."

⁹ I put quotation marks around the term "split" to signal its constructed nature and to make clear that understanding this historical moment in this language is not the only way one might approach the event. While the quotation marks are distracting, this distraction is precisely the point: the "split" is so ubiquitous in the historiography that it necessary to remind oneself that it is not a given object, but one produced through that body of work.

and the canonized point on the timeline of feminist history, can be measured in narrative terms. Indeed, narrativizing this suffrage moment is obligatory in this body of work; the stories produced are often quite varied, but each are anchored to, and one might say burdened by, the necessity of explicating why and how the suffrage movement “split in two.” How should we read this compulsion to return to this moment in feminist history? And what are the effects of this obsessive historiographical practice for feminism?

Joan Scott coined the term “fantasy echo” to describe the ways that inchoate and messy history is transformed into something usable in the present, a concept that applies nicely to the historiographical construction of the “split.” In “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity” (2001), Scott suggests that history be thought of as “a fantasized narrative that impose[s] sequential order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences” and that this narrative, in turn, “contributes to the articulation of political identity” (290). In Scott’s formulation, fantasy “mobilizes a collectivity” (287) through narrative that “evokes, erases, and thereby resolves social antagonism” (290). The “echo” part of Scott’s concept is meant to convey the uncertainty of fantasy’s origins: does it exist in the past or the present? How can an original “source” ever be located? The “echo” serves as “a reminder of the temporal inexactness of fantasy’s condensations, condensations that nonetheless work to conceal or minimize difference through repetition” (292). Scott uses this term to consider how two fantasies of feminist history—the maternal figure and the female orator—have operated as common ground for feminists interested in establishing solidarity not only across difference, but also across time. These narratives, while certainly having salience in what Scott calls the “‘real’ world,” are examples of how “political movements use history” to

create continuity and commonalities out of disunity, disorganization, and disharmony: as Scott succinctly puts it, “this has been [their] efficacy” (303).

What I find so useful about Scott’s concept is its insistence that we take seriously the way critical and political desires are projected onto—indeed, woven into—the histories we tell. That this is a principally narrative process suggests that we ought to read history closely for the ways it constructs its stories and what those stories ask of us as readers. Indeed, this is precisely what historian Laura Mayhall calls for in her examination of the relationship between social history and suffrage when she suggests that any recuperation of the political for suffrage history “would analyze not only the language and practices of women suffragists, but also the tropes and narrative forms utilized by suffrage historians, as well as the processes by which the archives of the movement were constructed” (179). Exploring the narrative practices of suffrage history draws attention to the constructed nature of the canonical stories of feminism that are “all too easily naturalized” (King, “Producing Sex, Theory, and Culture” 83).

Clare Hemmings’s recent work on feminist storytelling is instructive for understanding the significance of the narrative construction of feminism. In *Why Stories Matter* (2011) Hemmings brings into focus the methods and techniques by which dominant stories of feminist theory have become legible to readers. By looking to the citation practices in feminist theory to understand how feminist stories become easily recognizable and commonplace, she suggests that the moment a story of feminism no longer seems to need interrogation is precisely the moment when we should read more carefully for that story’s narrative tactics and their effects. Hemmings reminds us that dominant narratives of the past become dominant for a reason, emphasizing the way we read these stories, the way they

work on us as readers, as a method of intervening in the “politics of the rehearsed” (20).

While each of these scholars track different disciplines and subjects within feminist studies, they all underscore a central point: that the narrativization of feminism is not a problem to be fixed, but a process to be interpreted. The suffrage “split” provides just this sort of interpretive opportunity. In the following sections, I trace the ways this historical event is constructed and deployed through narrative in three classic histories of suffrage, map how these narrative techniques and tropes circulate in a variety of later historiography, and finally, consider what is produced (and what goes missing) in the process.

Classic Constructions of the “Split”

The earliest histories of U.S. suffrage—those by Eleanor Flexner (1959), Aileen Kraditor (1965), and Ellen DuBois (1978)—construct different narratives of the 1869 event, but each of them define that event in terms of a “split” that must be explicated. These three accounts have been fundamental in the field of feminist history—they are widely cited, echoed, critiqued, and praised in succeeding work—and I argue that one crucial aspect of their influence has been to provide a narrative template that subsequent histories will employ. All three histories construct the historical event as a “split”; all three consolidate the “split” into a race-versus-gender problem; all three then construct narratives out of this problem that proliferate the “split’s” significance within feminist history. They perform these rhetorical moves using much of the same historical evidence, and yet they do so in widely divergent ways, with varying effects.

The first major history to appear, Flexner’s *Century of Struggle*, covers a significant portion of the woman’s rights movement in the United States, from its pre-Revolution form

to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, and within this long period, develops a concise progressive narrative of the suffrage movement, moving from its disorganized origins in the abolitionist ranks, through internal conflict and division, to eventual success in obtaining its goals. Within this larger story of progress and eventual triumph, Flexner constructs the “split” in such a way that roots it in white suffragist racism. “The first inkling of what was in store came in the wording of a proposed Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which was introduced into Congress in the early summer of 1866” (143)—Flexner’s initial foreshadowing of the moment provides chronological depth to the event (it was not sudden, but began years before) but also anchors it in debates over the Reconstruction Amendments: despite the detailed account of the division within the movement that will follow, for Flexner, the problem begins here. “What was in store” for the movement is the suffragists’ disagreement over how to react to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the insertion of the word “male” into the Constitution, and the granting of the right to vote to black men ahead of women.

After properly foreshadowing the trouble on the movement’s horizon, Flexner moves to show Stanton and Anthony’s racism in order to set up the division to come. She cites Anthony’s promise that she would ““cut off this right arm of mine”” before she would support an amendment that gave the ballot to black men but not to women and Stanton’s use of slurs such as “Sambo” and her warnings of the dangers of enfranchising “ignorant foreigners” before women (144).¹⁰ Against these comments and attitudes, Flexner pits the

¹⁰ Stanton’s comments on “ignorant foreigners,” comments that will be echoed in many of the subsequent histories of suffrage, points to a lacuna within the historiography. While it is not simply black men that are enfranchised by the Fifteenth Amendment, but men of all races, the historical narratives of the 1869 event largely cover over this fact. This is one of the complexities that is not borne out by the consolidation of the “split”—the problem

more moderate Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe, who both argued for women's enfranchisement but refused to jeopardize black men's chances at the ballot; she quotes Stone: "I will be thankful in my soul if *any* body can get out of this terrible pit" (qtd. in Flexner 145) to demonstrate the stark differences between the sides' rhetoric. This "rift" was only "deepen[ed]" (149) by Stanton and Anthony's friendship with George Francis Train, a notorious and wealthy financier, as well as an alleged Copperhead—according to Flexner, this relationship "brought down on their heads fresh wrath from former adherents" who could not support an alliance with a man who was known to openly oppose negro suffrage (150).

This questionable alliance leads Flexner to her accounting of the "actual split" that occurs in May of 1869 (151). When the AERA refused to support an amendment for woman's suffrage at one of its conventions, Stanton and Anthony immediately created the NWSA, citing the need for a group to take up woman's cause in the serious and sustained way that had been lacking in the current abolitionist framework. This new organization, according to Flexner, was less open and flexible than the previous one; while Stanton and Anthony claimed that membership was open to "any woman who believed in suffrage," "in point of fact, only those joined who were willing to follow the uncompromising policies of its leaders (152). To this distinction, Flexner adds a series of other differences between the two organizations—the AWSA avoided issues not directly related to suffrage, while the NWSA took a broader view of woman's rights; the AWSA focused on state and regional suffrage efforts, while the NWSA worked for a federal amendment; and more broadly, the AWSA developed into a more conservative organization, while the NWSA became more

becomes one of black men versus (white) women, thereby erasing a significant segment of the population enfranchised by the Reconstruction Amendments.

radical—but by this time in her construction of the historical moment, it is clear that whatever these subsequent differences were, they were not the more fundamental difference over the question of whose “hour” it was (as Wendell Philips famously put it): the negro’s, or woman’s?

Even as her story makes white suffragist racism central, Flexner’s construction of the “split” contributes to her narrative of progress. Flexner shows that the “split” is rooted in different reactions among white female suffragists to black male enfranchisement—the moderate, sensible, and pragmatic against the radical, stubborn, and idealistic. The reader is repeatedly encouraged to see Stanton and Anthony as out of step with political reality and angry about it: their “indignation” “knew no bounds” after the Fourteenth Amendment was passed (144). Writing of Stanton, Flexner continues: “She might have listened to Frederick Douglass (who had so staunchly supported her unprecedented plea for woman suffrage at the Seneca Falls convention) when—speaking in the spring of 1869—he drew a distinction between the predicament of the freedmen in the South and that of the women...” (144).¹¹

Flexner continues in this vein, suggesting that Stanton and Anthony should have been able to see that their political goals were ahead of their political time: Stanton and Anthony argued that it would have been “easy” to include women in the amendment, but according to

Flexner, “they failed to see that such a step was still far ahead of practical political

¹¹ The use of Frederick Douglass in these suffrage narratives warrants exploration; it seems to me that he is employed as a stock character, one who is always invoked in a positive light, but ultimately in ways that invariably lack depth. Indeed, he becomes both strikingly symbolic and empty at the same time—freighted with meaning and yet void of substance and overly simplified. See Kraditor 167, Giddings 67, Davis, *Political Thought* 137 for additional examples. The use of Sojourner Truth functions in a very similar way, although interestingly, she shows up less than Douglass in narratives specifically dealing with the 1869 “split.” I explore the historiographical deployments of Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in the third chapter.

possibilities” (148). The “failure” of these suffragists is made clear; the narrative voice informs us that they should have known better.

Ultimately, however, Flexner grants Stanton and Anthony sincerity if not practicality. Though they are labeled “irreconcilables” along with all those who “sided” with them, they are at least genuine in their political desires: “Those who held out for linking the two issues of Negro and woman suffrage believed in all sincerity that they would help, not harm, each other” (145). Despite this grudging approval of the earnestness with which Stanton and Anthony fought for women’s right to vote, with the benefit of hindsight Flexner interprets their strategy as doomed from the start:

From a historical vantage point, their optimism seems unfounded. Slavery and the condition of the Negro had been a boiling national issue for thirty-five years; a war had been fought over it. No such intensity of feeling existed yet regarding the status of women, even among the women themselves, excepting in a still relatively small group. (145)

Like many of the historical actors she explicates, Flexner pits the fight against slavery against the issue of woman suffrage; in her view, the former was a mature cause, the latter, in its infancy, and this developmental understanding of the situation contributes to the sense that Stanton and Anthony were ahead of their time but unable to accept it. Even the United States Congress seemed to understand the situation better; indeed, Flexner directly juxtaposes Stanton and Anthony with their sensible congressional counterparts. Unlike Stanton and Anthony, “Friends of the women’s cause in Congress were realistic. Since there was little hope of either amending or opposing the Fifteenth Amendment, they acted instead to keep the woman suffrage issue alive by taking steps towards a federal woman suffrage amendment” (149). Positioning congressmen in this way not only suggests that these men react to (rather than help to create) some sort of hazy but real “political reality” of the nation,

but also that they were the ones responsible for keeping the issue alive in spite of the misguided actions of the NWSA. In this formulation, Stanton and Anthony are indeed out on a limb on their own; they are the only ones not able to see the obvious incommensurability between black male suffrage and woman suffrage, the only ones not able to come to terms with the governing politics of the time—mistakes the reader, with Flexner's help, will not duplicate.

The question hangs over the narrative, however: why did Stanton and Anthony not seem to understand what everyone else did, namely, that woman suffrage was not of the same urgent importance as black male enfranchisement during Reconstruction? Here the reader might recall Flexner's citation of Stanton's slurs, or Anthony's insistence that she would rather cut off her own arm than support the Fifteenth Amendment, but Flexner positions her primary subjects in such a way that it is difficult for the reader to wholly indict them. Throughout the narrative, Stanton and Anthony are constructed as heroic characters—misguided and rash, yet willing to expend enormous amounts of energy for their cause and entirely devoted. For example, in explaining the responses to the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, Flexner gives the reader a sense of Stanton's stunned reaction: "an appalling vista of herculean labor opened up before the women leaders; Mrs. Stanton was of the opinion that woman suffrage would be set back a full century if the proposed amendment were adopted" (144). This portrayal of Stanton's mindset creates sympathy in the reader while simultaneously building Stanton's stature as a character who is willing to take on this monumental task. Not only do we see that Stanton is not too far off in her prediction (the Nineteenth Amendment would be ratified by the states on August 15th, 1920) but we also

know that despite this “appalling vista” of “herculean labor” that Stanton envisions, she keeps fighting for the cause.

Flexner repeatedly evokes admiration in her devoted protagonists even as she positions them as wayward and often wrong. When she describes events that lead up to the “split,” Stanton and Anthony’s actions are situated as a causal factor for the divide, and yet they are also couched in the language of determination and verve:

Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony and their followers held doggedly to their views and worked hard to secure petitions against the Fourteenth Amendment. The first signs of a split in the forces backing greater rights for women became apparent in the gatherings of the American Equal Rights Association, which was organized at the close of the war to further the interests of both Negroes and women, but whose emphasis, under the leadership of Wendell Phillips, Horace Greeley, Gerrit Smith, and others, shifted to passage of the Fourteenth Amendment at all costs. (145)

Flexner pits Stanton and Anthony and their tireless work and numerous petitions against abolitionist leaders; in this formulation, it is almost as though it is *because* Stanton and Anthony are so “dogged” and inexhaustible that the “split” is bound to happen. The reader is encouraged to see Stanton and Anthony’s energy and exertion as a threat to the unity of the suffrage cause but also as a testament to the power of individual activism and commitment. With their “doggedness” Stanton and Anthony almost single-handedly brought down the AERA—in Flexner’s narrative, this is both mistaken and extraordinary.

Flexner’s narration in these segments clearly aligns the reader with two positions: first, that Stanton and Anthony were unrealistic and radical compared to their counterparts in the AWSA and congress, and second, that we should forgive them these flaws, because they were borne out of optimism, sincerity, and determination. This flexible positioning of her subjects contributes to the pervasive optimism of the larger narrative; the reader is encouraged to see the suffrage “split” as a problematic obstacle, but one that can and will be

overcome on the steady march of progress. The “split” was unfortunate, but the suffrage cause would not be stopped because “there were far too many other forces pushing it forward” (154). This obstacle adds tension to a story whose end we are already familiar with, and this narrative conflict in turn provides evidence that these activists had to work, and work hard, to reach their goal. While Flexner’s narrative emphasizes the “split’s” origin in the pitting of race against gender, and that Stanton and Anthony were clearly on the wrong side of this equation, the reader is still encouraged to view them in a positive sense and to even perhaps learn something about the arduous work of political change.

The next major suffrage history to appear, Aileen Kraditor’s *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920*, relied heavily on Flexner’s work and consolidates the “split” even more. Kraditor credits Flexner in her Preface for producing the “only scholarly work that covers the entire movement in all its aspects” (vii) but suggests that despite being a “fine” example of woman’s history, “[i]ts very breadth, however, prevents it from dealing with ideological questions in great detail” (vii). Kraditor aims to explore these ideological questions in part by limiting her account of the movement to its last thirty years, beginning in 1890 when the two suffrage organizations reunited. This, however, does not prevent her from constructing the 1869 moment in terms of a “split” as a way to provide the necessary background for an understanding of the 1890 formation of the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA). While the event itself is not Kraditor’s subject, because she needs to give at least a brief report of it in order to set up her period of interest, she distills the event into a few paragraphs scattered throughout her history. Laying out her opening chapter on the “History of Suffragist Organization,” she refers to the 1869 “split” as first and foremost stemming from a “disagree[ment]” between suffragists over the Fourteenth

Amendment and its use of the word “male” (3). As in Flexner’s account, the scene for conflict in the movement is set by the Republicans’ assertion that it was the “Negro’s hour” and that women, many of whom had fought for decades in the abolitionist ranks, would have to “wait for their rights” (3). Kraditor continues:

Some of them, including Miss Anthony and Mrs. Stanton, thought it would be better if the amendment were defeated, while others, including Mrs. Stone, argued that if women could not win their political freedom, it was well that Negro men could win theirs. On this and other issues the suffragists found they could not agree. In 1869 two separate organizations came into being...The split lasted until 1890 when the two factions merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and a new era in woman suffrage history began. (3-4)

Kraditor’s distillation of Flexner is notable for the way it condenses the reasons for the “split” down to a matter of wanting to defeat the Fourteenth Amendment or wanting to support black male suffrage—it is chiefly this, along with unenumerated “other issues” that cause the division. Whereas in Flexner those “other issues” are briefly named (if not given much significance), in Kraditor’s narrative, they are not salient enough to the author’s main point for even a cursory delineation.

While Flexner constructs a narrative of inexorable progress out of the “split,” Kraditor performs a different sort of reading, employing the “split” to delineate periods within the suffrage movement and explain both its failures and successes. For Kraditor, the “split” forms the foundation for a suffragist reunification that would bring about a “new era” for the movement, a period that would ultimately end with the passage of woman suffrage. This periodization of the movement, which creates a twenty year void after the “split” (reinforced by the 1890-1920 timeframe that Kraditor constructs and explores) suggests that the disagreement over black male enfranchisement results in an unproductive lull in the movement, precipitating a stage of dormancy between the furious activity of the 1848-1869

interval and the “new era” that would culminate in eventual success, but success with a cost.¹² Far from Flexner’s narrative of progress, in Kraditor’s account the “split” has deadening, and lasting, effects on the movement.

In her chapter “The Southern Question” Kraditor clearly positions the “split” as an originary event in the movement, one that organizes suffragist eras and provides an unavoidable heritage for future activists. Fixing the suffrage future to this past, she writes, “The development of the woman suffrage organization from a strictly Northern group of crusaders for the rights of all men and women to a nationwide association that all but officially sanctioned second-class citizenship for Negroes may be traced in specific events in the history of the NAWSA” (166).¹³ Kraditor lays out the history of suffragism in the South in the lead-up to the final passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, again focusing on the final thirty years of the suffrage movement, but the “events” that transform the movement from a democratic struggle for universal voting rights to a racist movement for elite white women only are rooted in 1869. Kraditor continues, noting that “[t]he seeds of change from the

¹² Kraditor is not alone in this characterization of the various periods of suffrage activity; the same year she published *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, James M. McPherson published “Abolitionism, Woman Suffrage and the Negro” in which he argues a similar point. Flexner too suggests a period of dormancy (although she emphasizes the inevitability of such a lull, rather than a strict cause-and-effect relationship due to the “split”); she writes that “[t]he division in the suffrage ranks was unfortunate; but it was inevitable during the 1870s and ‘80’s, a period of intense economic development and change during which social forces polarized in the midst of widespread unrest. The break would continue until one trend or the other—respectability or radicalism—became dominant. In the meantime victories would also continue to be won, and the last major area in which, until now, no gains had been registered—that of politics—would be breached” (154-155).

¹³ At this point in the margins of my used copy of *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, an active reader has pithily summarized this transition as “equality to racism” with an arrow underneath, a rather succinct iteration of the narrative consolidation that I am investigating here.

founders' equal concern for woman and for the Negro sprouted very early" when abolitionists who were also woman suffragists "discovered that they sometimes had to choose between their causes" (166). While these women could "theorize" that "whatever helped one group of Americans toward full equality helped the other too," "the choice that circumstances sometimes forced was not easy" (166). Kraditor then provides a specific example:

In discussions, for instance, of the Fourteenth Amendment prior to its passage, the Stanton-Anthony wing of the suffrage movement insisted that the cause of human freedom would be set back by an amendment that made it easier for the black man to vote while, by inserting the word *male* in the Constitution for the first time, it made it harder than before for women to get the ballot. The Lucy Stone wing, on the other hand, argued that if efforts to secure the vote for both Negroes and women failed, the women ought to acquiesce in the enfranchisement of Negroes, happy that one group at least had won its rights. Inevitably some suffragists soon began to speculate whether Negroes or women needed the suffrage more. (166)

While much of this narrative will sound quite familiar because it coincides closely with Flexner's, there is a significant difference between Flexner's depiction of the "split" as an obstacle to feminist progress and Kraditor's characterization of it as a seed that germinates within suffragism, intertwining itself with the tenets and tactics of the movement until fully incorporated. Like Flexner, Kraditor cites Frederick Douglass's view that black male suffrage was more urgently necessary than woman suffrage—in her paraphrase, she writes: "To you, he told the women, the vote is desirable; to us it is vital" (167)—and juxtaposes this with women's assertion that they too deserved the vote just as much, if not more:

Many women, however, declared that their rights deserved priority: first, because women were half the population whereas Negroes were only a small minority and, second, because in their opinion, after the Civil War the Negro man was in many ways better off than any woman, black or white. The latter assertion was buttressed by painstaking researches by women lawyers into the legal disabilities of women. (167-168)

The race-versus-gender problem that the “split” represents here will not only prove long-lasting within suffragism, but will actively allow for the movement’s ultimate success: Kraditor writes that after 1869, “The stage was now set” (168) for a Southern-influenced (and increasingly racist) movement that “opened a new era for woman suffrage” (169) and culminates in the Nineteenth Amendment. The suffragists of the next generation—the cohort that came of age after Stanton and Anthony had retired or passed—are saddled with the “split’s” legacy and the implications of the cost of success. For Kraditor, the “split” figures not as obstacle, but as inheritance—a historical moment to which future problems, tactics, and patterns can be traced back.

The third history of suffrage, Ellen DuBois’s *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement In America, 1848-1869* (1978), reinforces the idea of a “split” and its roots in suffragist opposition to black male enfranchisement. In the final chapter, “The Fifteenth Amendment and the Emergence of Independent Suffragism,” DuBois provides perhaps the most detailed assessment of the “split” to date. Unlike Kraditor or Flexner, in this chapter she takes the event as her central focus. According to her narrative, disagreement among the suffragists as to how to relate to the Republican party and its Reconstruction plans led to the creation of the two organizations. Specifically, the Fifteenth Amendment was at the heart of the rift: “Stanton and Anthony denounced it for excluding women, while the pro-Republican suffragists accepted and supported it in exchange for the promise of future Republican support for votes for women” (163). DuBois continues: “Inasmuch as the Republican party had clearly rejected the equal rights strategy of advancing the enfranchisement of blacks and women together, the New England suffragists’

dependence on the party forced them to grant black suffrage strategic priority over woman suffrage, even on their own platform” (166).¹⁴

This prioritization of black male suffrage over woman suffrage, according to DuBois, is what Stanton and Anthony could not abide. And in February 1869, when Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment and began the process of ratification, “the differences within the woman suffrage movement” were “intensified” (172); the “New England” suffragists supported the amendment; the “New York” suffragists opposed it, and this opposition “inflamed already severe conflicts among reformers” (173). While DuBois argues that the NWSA’s opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment was rooted in a feminist desire to point out the “distinct system of sexual inequality” that they believed existed, she also notes that “this feminism was increasingly racist and elitist” and that “[t]he women among whom it was growing were white and middle-class and believed themselves the social and cultural superiors of the freedmen” (174-175).¹⁵ DuBois quotes Stanton frequently here to support this narrative:

‘American women of wealth, education, virtue and refinement,’ she wrote in behalf of a sixteenth amendment, ‘if you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood to make laws for you and your daughters,...to dictate not only the civil, but moral codes by which you shall be governed, awake to the danger of your present position and demand that woman, too, shall be represented in the government!’ (178)

¹⁴ Here, as in other histories, “New England” refers to what would become the AWSA; in the literature as well as the primary sources, “Boston” is sometimes used instead. “New York” refers to the NWSA.

¹⁵ DuBois notes that members of the AWSA were certainly not free of their own racist rhetoric, but that they were compelled to keep their racism mostly concealed because of their remaining Republican and abolitionist ties, a strategy NWSA members had no incentive to emulate.

This type of open racism, along with frequent attacks on the Fifteenth Amendment, created the “rift” within the AERA that culminated in the formation of the National Woman Suffrage Association. This, in turn, prompted the New England suffragists to form the AWSA, in which they “emphasized the importance of agitating for woman suffrage within a framework of support for the Fifteenth Amendment, and of proceeding in a more methodical and orderly fashion than had the National Association” (195). While DuBois makes it clear that differences between the two rival organizations would only grow over the following years, her narrative of the “split” places the enfranchisement of black men at the center of the divide between the two groups. Like her forerunners, DuBois constructs a narrative of the 1869 event that consolidates it into the either/or question of race and gender.

But unlike Flexner or Kraditor, DuBois defines the “split” as a generative rather than destructive force, arguing that the divide ultimately allowed feminists to form a self-reliant and more radical base from which to argue for women’s rights. According to DuBois, feminist reliance on abolitionist frameworks, organizations, and tactics, once a source of inspiration and guidance, had become, in the post-Civil War era, a hindrance and obstruction to feminist growth.¹⁶ The “split” allowed one “wing” of the movement—the NWSA—to develop unfettered and in ways that would ultimately benefit the larger women’s rights movement of the twentieth century. Far from Kraditor’s grim interpretation of what the conflict signified, DuBois sees growth and possibility where others find missteps and stagnation. Rather than framing the “split” as an obstacle to be overcome (like Flexner), or as

¹⁶ More generally, DuBois argues that women’s independent involvement in the suffrage struggle, rather than the vote itself, was the ultimate catalyst for “new social relations between men and women” (201). For her, then, the “split” between the NWSA and the AWSA allowed the former to create an autonomous group that was not reliant on male abolitionists or political parties for their rhetoric, strategy, or definition of goals.

a corrupting origin that will be passed down to future generations (like Kraditor), DuBois frames it as a necessary milestone in an overarching developmental narrative.

Framing the “split” in terms of feminist growth coupled with her insistence on Stanton and Anthony’s racism requires a considerable amount of reader alignment, character background, and rhetorical finesse. For instance, when analyzing the AWSA’s charge of racism against Stanton and the NWSA, DuBois concludes that the strategies that they “developed for advancing the feminist movement in this period were often racist” and that “in particular, they began to use arguments that exploited white women’s fear and hatred of black people” (178). She continues: “Such arguments slandered the freedmen by implying that poor black men were more responsible for women’s disenfranchisement than rich white ones. They also narrowed the focus and appeal of the suffrage movement. While ostensibly defending the rights of all women, Stanton spoke only on behalf of those of the white middle and upper classes” (178). In DuBois’s narrative, there is no equivocation about the racist tactics that Stanton, Anthony, and the NWSA employed to advance their cause. And yet, at this point in her interpretation, the reader has been consistently encouraged to identify with Stanton and Anthony and their feminist struggle. Not only does the history focus primarily on them—DuBois calls them “the central characters in this book” (19-20)—but the reader is repeatedly reminded that they are central precisely because they severed their abolitionist ties and began developing an independent feminist movement: “It was they who realized most clearly the limitations that political dependence on abolitionism imposed on feminism, and who took the lead in finding a new political context for woman suffrage” (20). Stanton and Anthony are set up as visionaries who are able to see beyond their current political landscape to a “new context” in which suffragism, and feminism, will flourish.

DuBois's narrative also makes it clear that while Stanton and Anthony employed racist tactics, these tactics were not their first choice in terms of political strategy. More than Flexner or Kraditor, DuBois provides considerable background of her "central characters'" actions, with the effect of tempering their later choices. Before introducing the Fifteenth Amendment and the eventual "split," DuBois primes the reader with Stanton and Anthony's earlier attempts to have women recognized in the Fourteenth Amendment. During this period, Stanton and Anthony worked to strengthen (rather than sever) ties with abolitionists in a quest for universal suffrage to be constitutionally recognized. Their "wing" of suffragists are portrayed as active and decidedly open to collaboration and interdependence; they "take the lead" in developing a coalition and they are the ones to "invite" abolitionists to merge with them in an attempt to broaden their political base and thus increase both groups' political power. DuBois notes that Stanton and Anthony were "optimistic" about the potential of this coalition but these hopes are soon dissolved in Reconstruction politics and the Republican refusal to support the women's cause (64). She sums up this period in a way that develops Stanton and Anthony's characters as reasonable, tireless, and, importantly, right: they were attempting to "make progress for woman suffrage in the face of abolitionists' reluctance to support them," and despite this reluctance, they kept trying (77). These attempts allowed them to "move beyond" their abolitionist phase and begin to "make their own strategic assessments and lay their own political plans, which was the only way the woman suffrage movement could grow" (77). Not only does DuBois's assessment place blame on abolitionist "reluctance" to support woman suffrage, but it emphasizes how willing and hopeful Stanton and Anthony were about the universal suffrage strategy, despite indications that it would not be "stable" or "viable." They tried to draw themselves closer to

abolitionists, but when this failed, they were forced to “move beyond” this strategy toward new horizons. Importantly, DuBois notes that this is the “only way” that suffragism was going to develop into a successful movement. Stanton and Anthony are thus positioned as the “true” feminists, the ones that knew what must be done to stimulate feminist growth.

Indeed, DuBois repeatedly sets up Stanton and Anthony as the torchbearers of feminism; their opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment is couched in language that urges the reader to view them as not only prescient but also genuine. Like Flexner, DuBois refers to Stanton and Anthony’s prediction that if Reconstruction ended without granting women the vote, the question would not be opened again for a generation. But DuBois goes further and makes it abundantly clear to the reader that they were undoubtedly right in this fear; she quotes several later suffragists and historians who affirm it, and then affirms it herself: “From an even longer perspective, it is clear that, after Reconstruction, suffragists did not have another substantial chance to secure the franchise for women in the Constitution until the decade following 1910” (172). DuBois suggests that those suffragists who supported the amendment were not as attuned to feminist politics, which leads to the most salient effect of such a statement: those suffragists, such as Stone and Blackwell, were not only not as prescient, but they were not as *feminist* as Stanton and Anthony: “The amendment’s supporters proudly proclaimed that it would make universal manhood suffrage the law of the land and bring the country that much closer to a true democracy. From a feminist perspective, however, this exclusively masculine definition of democracy was a step backward for freedom” (175). In this telling of it, the AWSA might have a reasonable perspective, but it is decidedly not a *feminist* one—the NWSA’s opponents are working to create *less* freedom for women, whereas Stanton and Anthony are committed to fighting this

at any cost. DuBois constructs a narrative of true feminist development out of the “split,” and Stanton and Anthony are its standard-bearers.

The “split” in this iteration is a necessary event on the developmental trajectory toward authentic feminism. There is a sense of narrative momentum that allows the reader to identify with the opening up of possibilities that this moment in suffragism makes possible. Throughout the narrative, the event is described as a motor for change and development: “While the Fifteenth Amendment debates stimulated woman suffrage from outside, conflict among suffragists powered the movement from within” (163). Far from being a moment of stagnation or setback, the “split” here is an engine of propulsion into the future; it “advanced the woman suffrage movement as a whole by providing it with a much firmer basis for sustained growth and with a sustained political program, which it had always lacked” (164). The “split” precipitates fresh and positive advancements; it allows feminists “to explore new alliances, new constituencies, and new strategies” (103) and ultimately represents the “greatest achievement of feminists in the postwar period” (164). DuBois goes so far as to say that “In many ways, American feminism was just beginning in 1869” (201). This language of forward-momentum and growth is irresistible, and as Stanton and Anthony propel feminism forward the reader is propelled along with them.¹⁷ The simultaneous representation of the “split” as both a result of tension between race and gender as well as an unquestionably positive development for feminism sets this narrative apart from its

¹⁷ That this development is predicated on forms of racism among the suffragists puts the reader in the odd position of simultaneously identifying and disidentifying with the characters of the narrative; we want to be “true” feminists but we do not want to reenact the racist strategies that Stanton and Anthony used on their way to developing an independent, and in DuBois’s narrative, genuine, movement.

predecessors. Like Kraditor, DuBois uses the moment to demarcate suffrage eras, but in this account the “split” brings about a new dawn for feminist struggle.

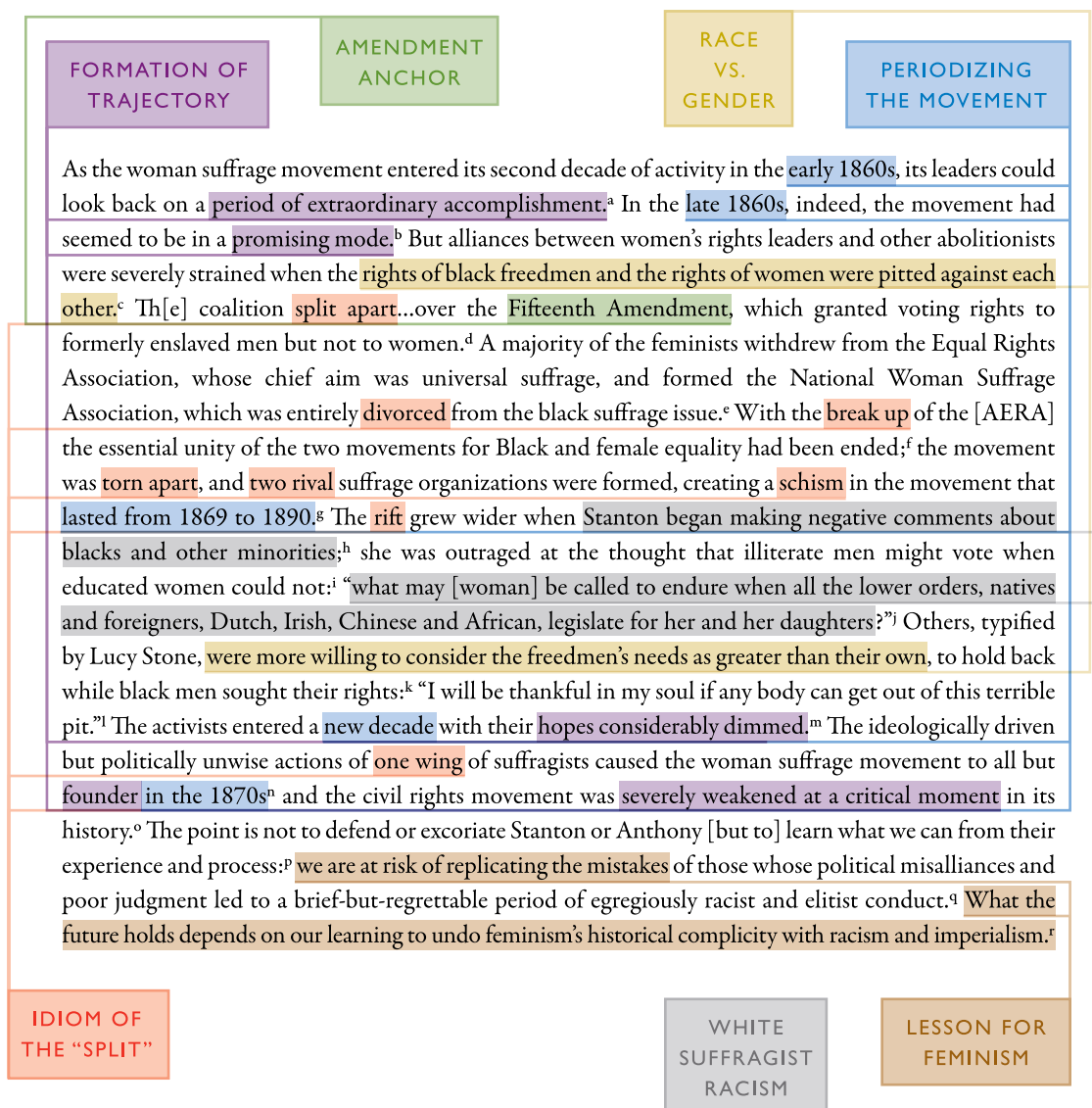
Using similar evidence, plot points, characters, even dialogue, these classic histories of suffrage offer up split-narratives that explain the movement and its implications for feminism. By constructing the historical period in terms of division, defining that division in terms of white suffragist racism and competing priorities between race and gender, and then extrapolating to suggest particular meanings and trajectories for feminism, these narratives convert the events of 1869 into something that appears simultaneously more simple and more complex. Whether lauded as a positive development, lamented as a contaminating setback, or located somewhere in between, the “split” is converted into an narrative explication of feminist history and cultivates readers’ affective responses toward that history and the present it produces. The “split” is freighted with extraordinary significance in these narratives, each iteration producing understandings of how feminism’s past underwrites the feminist future.

Mapping the “Split” and its Narrative Travels

While close attention to the construction of the original split-narratives provides a nuanced sense of how the event figures as a touchstone in feminist historiography, it also allows for the isolation of specific parts of what I see as a narrative formula for producing the “split.” This formula is not stationary, but travels throughout subsequent iterations of split-narratives. Like the earliest examples, later histories would perform their own consolidations and proliferations of the “split,” taking up similar techniques and evidence to tell their own stories of the event. In this section I map how this formula functions across a variety of

historiography to flesh out the different narrative effects the “split” can produce, but also to demonstrate the wide circulation of the “split” as a canonical object in feminism. Drawing from multiple sources, I have mapped a composite example to illustrate each part of a split-narrative and its role in the production of this historical event (Figure 1). Because in this section I am concerned with the development of the split-narrative as a genre, rather than any one narrative and its place in the historiography, in what follows I refer to “narrators” and their stories, leaving authors’ names and works to the citations. My hope is that this tactic allows for a fuller sense of the ways this body of work functions as a whole to both consolidate the past event and amplify its meanings for the feminist present.¹⁸

¹⁸ Mapping a composite split-narrative drawn from multiple histories, rather than one narrative from a single work, has the advantage of visually demonstrating how widely the “split” circulates, but also how these narratives within feminist history and historiography work together to produce a canonical object in feminism, to create a sense that this is a moment we all already “know.” The composite also highlights the constructed nature of my own reading of these narratives.



^a Kerr 62; ^b Scott 134; ^c Andolsen 1; ^d Wellman 226; ^e Terborg-Penn 20-21; ^f Aptheker 50;

^g Kerr 61; ^h Hill 37; ⁱ Scott 135; ^j Sue Davis 147; ^k Scott 135; ^l Kerr 70; ^m Hill 39; ⁿ Kerr 63;

^o Aptheker 13; ^p Aptheker 51, 52; ^q Kerr 63-64; ^r Newman 185.

Figure 1. Diagram of a Composite Split-Narrative.

Perhaps the most obvious element of the split-narrative formula is the term "split" itself: this terminology is already an interpretation of sorts, and yet it has become the dominant idiom through which the historical event is known within feminist history. Readers

are introduced to the suffrage event through this lens of rifts, breaks, and fissures. As I have shown above, Flexner employs the terms “split” and “rift” several times (151, 150) while DuBois describes the event as a “break” and a “breach” between woman suffrage leaders, suggesting that “the split between abolitionists and feminists...brought the conflict into the ranks of feminists themselves” (DuBois *Feminism and Suffrage*, 80-81). Subsequent narratives declare that the “essential unity” of abolitionism and feminism was “ended” after the “division” between suffragists occurred” (Aptheker 50, 42); the “rift grew wider,” the coalition “split[s] apart,” resulting in different “wing[s]” of suffragists (Hill 37, Wellman 226, Kerr 63). As one narrator succinctly puts it, “The movement was torn apart, and two rival suffrage organizations were formed, creating a schism in the movement” (Kerr 61).¹⁹

The idiom of the “split” is often merged with stronger characterizations that shade it with meaning in less subtle ways; for instance, while Kraditor describes the “split” as “the final divorce of woman suffrage from abolitionism” (173) another narrative suggests that the “rift” among suffragists widened and “provoked a crisis in the women’s suffrage movement that had been looming for several years” (Hill 37, 36). For another narrator, the “split” precipitated “a series of disagreements, disappointments, and conflict that would divide the prewar leaders” for some time to come (Scott, *Natural Allies* 135).

The language of “splitting” and its attendant characterizations of division, crisis, and divorce do not merely report a historical event but characterize it from the outset. One could easily imagine alternate ways of describing this episode within suffrage—why not describe it as a “branching off,” for example? This description would of course generate its own

¹⁹ See Flexner 145; Kraditor 3-4; DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage* 164; Terborg-Penn, *African American Women* 26; Davis, *Political Thought* 139; Marilley 78; and Giddings 67 for additional examples of split-language.

production of the event—there is no completely neutral way of telling its story—but my point is that the metaphor of “branching off” has precisely *not* dominated the historiography, while the language of the “split” indeed has. Not only does this language already characterize the event in a particular way, with its suggestions of endings, rancor, and disillusionment, but it has become very nearly the *only* way of describing what happened within the suffrage movement in 1869.

The “split” idiom contributes to larger narratives of the suffrage event and its causes that inevitably anchor the divide in the Reconstruction Amendments and the ensuing disagreements about granting black male suffrage ahead of women’s suffrage. Flexner tells us that the “first inkling” of the “split” can be seen “in the wording of a proposed Fourteenth Amendment” (143) and other narratives likewise embed the “split” in the different suffragist reactions to the amendments, which represent a conundrum for suffragists, one that will end up “splitting” the movement in two when activists find they cannot agree. The historiography repeatedly sets up the problem of the “split” as a problem rooted in this dispute; “the issue was divisive” (Scott, *Natural Allies* 135) and the “coalition split[s] apart...over the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted voting rights to formerly enslaved men but not to women” (Wellman 226).²⁰

Other narratives put the problem in strategic terms, suggesting that suffragists disagreed in their political calculations: “White abolitionist-suffragists could not agree on whether it was better to accept what the proposed amendments offered, or hold out for amendments that also recognized the rights of white and black women” (Newman 63) but the resulting problem is the same—the “split” is borne out of the Amendments and suffragists’

²⁰ See Kraditor 3-4, Marilley 76, Giddings 64, and Kerr 69 for additional examples of the use of the “Amendment Anchor.”

differing reactions to them. On the one hand, “The AWSA supported the Republican party’s effort to ratify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments out of a conviction that a partial extension of the franchise was better than no extension at all” (Newman 63). But on the other, “The NWSA opposed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments on the grounds that these amendments provided no constitutional protections for women, white or black” (Newman 63). As another narrator puts it, “Eventually the reformers split among themselves over whether to accept the Reconstruction amendments as steps toward equality” (Marilley 68). The “split” is a direct result of the disputed amendments: “All parties at the time of the split understood the issue to be the acceptance or rejection of Stanton and Anthony’s campaign to defeat the Fifteenth Amendment” (Kerr 77). In these descriptions, there is no room for doubt about the origins of the event.

In rooting the “split” in the Reconstruction Amendments, this body of work consequently defines the problem in terms of competing priorities of race and gender. The story of the “split” becomes the story of suffragists “choosing” between women and black men: who “deserved” the vote more? As one narrative frames it, the movement was “severely strained when the rights of black freedmen and the rights of women were pitted against each other” (Andolsen 1). This problem is “structured” into the AERA and forced members to take sides: “Some of these women and men had a primary commitment to black suffrage. Others suffered divided loyalties between women and the freedmen” (DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage* 166, 68). The division in the suffrage movement is thus a division of allegiance; two “sides” emerge, one supporting suffrage for black men and one supporting suffrage for women. “Many members of the [AERA] favored passage of the Fourteenth Amendment as written. Figures such as Stanton and Anthony, on the other hand, felt

reluctant to support an amendment that did not give the ballot to women” (Hill 33). The “split” is figured as a choice between race and gender, with one “side” choosing women, another choosing black men, and the suffrage movement splitting in two as a result.²¹ It is a choice between “the rights of two groups” that have “come into conflict” (Kerr 63); by deploying the idiom of a “split” and anchoring that construction to the Reconstruction Amendments, the narratives make the event within suffrage about an either/or “choice” in which the needs of newly-freed black men are measured against women’s.²²

The narrative construction of this race-versus-gender choice facilitates the focus on white suffragist racism—one side, represented most often by Stanton, refuses to support the amendments, while the other is willing to set aside women’s rights in order to observe what was often labeled the “negro’s hour.” While one group “moderated their dissent against the Fourteenth Amendment by appealing for black male suffrage and woman suffrage as equal rights reforms,” the other “intensified their demands for woman suffrage criticizing black male suffrage” (Marilley 74). Quotations of white suffragists’ racist commentary become evidence for why the movement breaks up; narratives frequently cite Anthony’s insistence that the Fifteenth Amendment “cast [women] under the heel of the lowest orders of manhood” (qtd. in Giddings 66) and Stanton’s use of slurs such as “Sambo” and her warnings of the dangers of enfranchising “unwashed, unlettered ditch-diggers, boot-blacks,

²¹ See Kraditor 221; Andolsen 1; and Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 76 for additional examples of this formulation.

²² One effect of this kind of narration is to make the term “women” a referent for “white women,” performing the very same kind of universalization that feminist historiographers lament in the rhetoric of suffragists such as Stanton (recall Ginzberg’s criticism that Stanton “didn’t really fight for all women” even as she waved the banner of universal suffrage). This goes to my point, elaborated on in the final section of the chapter, that the focus on the “suffrage split” ultimately obscures the very objects of analysis that it seems to highlight.

hostlers, butchers, and barbers” before women (qtd. in Davis, *Political Thought* 147).

Stanton’s speeches and editorials in particular are frequently called upon to demonstrate the

“increasingly racist and elitist” brand of feminism one “side” was brewing (DuBois,

Feminism and Suffrage 174). For instance, several histories cite Stanton’s prediction of

“fearful outrages” that white women would be vulnerable to if black men won the vote first:

“what may [woman] be called to endure when all the lower orders, natives and foreigners,

Dutch, Irish, Chinese and African, legislate for her and her daughters?” (qtd. in Davis,

Political Thought 147)²³ Against these racist exhortations, these histories juxtapose the more

“moderate” side, the one that is willing to prioritize black men’s needs ahead of their own.

Suffragist Lucy Stone is frequently cited here as evidence of this side’s principled position:

“I will be thankful in my soul if *any* body can get out of this terrible pit” (qtd. in Kerr 70).²⁴

These repeated juxtapositions belie some histories’ insistence that the divide was not “a

division between racists and non-racists”; the “split” is at every turn made to show how one

“wing” of the movement was more virulently and eagerly racist than the other (Marilley 79).

Indeed, racism becomes the primary method of explaining why the “split” occurs.

The “rift grew wider when Stanton began making negative comments about blacks and other

minorities” (Hill 37). The moderate “wing” could not tolerate the “racist appeals” the other

side employed and this racism winds up costing the movement “a solid core of female equal

rights reformers” (Marilley 77). The historiography shows, again and again, that while “some

white women were able to reconcile themselves to an amendment that affirmed black men’s

²³ See Dudden 166 and 169; DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage* 178; Terborg-Penn, *African American Women* 33; Kerr 68; and Graham 5 for additional examples of the narrative use of quotations such as these.

²⁴ See also Flexner 145 and Marilley 77 for similar uses of Stone’s quotation.

right to vote,” the other group was “clearly rankled” and began to “retreat from support of racial justice” (Newman 64, 5). The “split” becomes not just a question of competing priorities, but a matter of one side’s “retreat” from justice and their anger at being prioritized behind black men. These narratives construct the “split” as not just a divide of “allegiance,” but a divide between racist suffragists and non-racist suffragists—racism becomes the primary method of explaining why the “split” occurred, the way to show the differences between the two “sides” constructed in the historiography.

These elements of the paradigmatic split-narrative work together to organize not just the suffrage past but its consequences for the feminist present. Thinking back to the NPR interview, the “split” in that particular iteration was figured as an original source of trouble for the feminism of the future—its “modern implications” were such that as I listened, I was encouraged to disidentify with Stanton and her followers, to castigate those figures so that I could be part of a future cleansed of past errors, rather than complicit in that problematic past. In the same fashion, the “split” is figured as a governing event in the historiography of suffrage: it constructs feminist historical eras and trajectories and cultivates the reader’s affect toward that past. The “split” thus does not just produce a certain form of feminist history; it produces a particular kind of reader who can be the antiracist feminist that the future requires.

The “split” functions as a delimiter in the construction of suffrage history and its place in the larger movement for women’s rights by dividing the movement into discrete and usable segments. “In the late 1860s,” one narrator suggests, “the movement had seemed to be in promising mode” but the “split” puts an end to this era and brings about a period of setbacks and defeats (Scott, *Natural Allies* 134). This period of pre-“split” “promise” is

emphasized in a number of histories; another work describes this period as a “golden age” of woman suffrage in which the movement had experienced a “period of growth unprecedented in the annals of reform” (Kerr 62). At the beginning of the 1860s, suffragists “could look back on a period of extraordinary accomplishment” but the postwar “split” “threatened to reverse the gains of two decades” and causes the movement to “founder” (Kerr 62, 63). The “split” does not just become a way of marking the divide between productive and non-productive periods of activism, but actively creates those periods—in fact, I would argue that there would be no “golden age” of suffrage if not for the “split” that ends it.

The corollary to this point, of course, is that if the “split” marks an ending within the movement, it also signals a beginning. This “new” era may be a period of “foundering” and frustration, or it could be one of development and growth, but in each case the “split” differentiates one suffrage era from another, allowing the narrator to organize the movement’s past. After the “split,” one history suggests “the activists entered a new decade with their hopes considerably dimmed” (Hill 39). The “promise” of the “golden age” of suffrage is dashed by the “split,” which brings on a period of “foundering” in the 1870s (Kerr 63).²⁵ The “split” provides a way to divide up the movement and signal to the reader the differences between two discrete periods of time. In each of these iterations, the “split” references an actual event, but as a critical object it simultaneously exceeds that event—it becomes a way to manage the history of the movement. The “split” emerges as a form of periodization, a method for categorizing suffrage history into blocks that can then be named, described, and evaluated by historians and their readers.

²⁵ See Kraditor 169; DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage* 201; Scott, *Natural Allies* 134; Kerr 61; and Aptheker 13 for additional examples of periodizing language in split-narratives.

One consequence of this process is the creation of trajectories in which the history of the movement is constructed as a continuous arc of time that leads to the present. The direction or shape of this arc—whether it signals a trajectory of advancement, or one of decline—is largely shaped by the rendering of the “split.” The examples above have gestured toward this consequence; as the “split” divides up eras of “promise” from periods of “setbacks and defeats,” for instance, it becomes clear that the event marks the beginning of a kind of downturn within the movement. The “split” does not simply function as a neutral marker but a directional one, a narrative construct that tells the reader which way the movement is headed. Most of the time, that direction is decidedly down—the “split” very often signals the beginning of decline rather than the dawn of a new and promising era.²⁶ “Without the unity between the two freedom movements,” one narrator writes, woman suffrage was “nearly lost,” a nascent feminism was “badly damaged” and “the civil rights movement was severely weakened at a critical moment in its history” (Aptheker 13). The “split,” in this iteration, is an event with far-reaching implications for both suffragism and the larger freedom movements of the period—it signals a new era, but one that is figured by loss, damage, and weakness.

Likewise, another narrator sets up the trajectory by suggesting that the suffrage movement was optimistic, productive, and decidedly on the upswing prior to the “split.” This

²⁶ While here I trace the trajectory of decline because of its prevalence in the historiography, as I show in the previous section, the work of Ellen DuBois constructs a trajectory of growth and progress out of the “split” that is an exception worth noting. As I note in my close reading of her split-narrative, for DuBois, the “split” is an event that allows the movement to “move beyond” the old era toward a future in which “the woman suffrage movement could grow” (*Feminism and Suffrage* 77). This narrative construction presents the reader with considerably different affective choices, but as in narratives of decline, the “split” remains a controlling event in suffrage (and feminist) history.

was a movement in motion—“woman’s rights, including the right of suffrage, had swept the land”—but this forward-momentum is brought to a halt when “[t]he ideologically driven but politically unwise actions of one wing of suffragists caused the woman suffrage movement to all but founder in the 1870s” (Kerr 62, 63). The kind of narrative momentum created in this iteration is a common way to indicate a coming decline post-1869—the period before the split, according to another history, was one of “vigorous agitation,” a time when suffragists across the country “had been optimistic” and “grew more hopeful” (Scott, *Natural Allies* 134). According to this iteration, “In one state after another new suffrage organizations...had begun to appear” and success was imminent (Scott, *Natural Allies* 134, 135). The description of the period before the “split” is fueled by optimism, instructing the reader to envision the suffrage movement at this point as productive, dynamic, and on the rise. This hope, however, is not capitalized on but rather dashed with the “split” of the movement, an event that “prevent[ed] women in places like Iowa and Ohio from taking advantage of the promising fluidity of the immediate postwar period” (Scott, *Natural Allies* 135). The “split” becomes the agent that precipitates a loss of this optimistic and productive period—because of it, the golden age is squandered, the momentum is stymied, the promise is lost.

When a narrative creates a trajectory of decline out of the “split,” the reader is urged to disavow the choices of particular suffragists in order to set feminism’s path aright. One narrative suggests that the “split” ended a political “unity” that eventually “would have rebounded to the benefit of woman,” something that Stanton and Anthony and their “side” could not understand (Aptheker 49, 50). The narrative evokes nostalgia and regret in the reader: “had this unity not been broken” the civil rights and feminist campaigns would have been more successful and “the betrayal of Reconstruction would have at least been tempered

by an organized opposition” (Aptheker 50). The reader is encouraged to wish for that world in which the unity of the two movements has been restored, to be able to change the painful course of Reconstruction. This regret simultaneously requires the disavowal of Stanton and Anthony: if not for their actions, we might have had that world. Even as the narrator tells us that “the point is not to defend or excoriate Stanton or Anthony” but to “learn what we can from their experience and process,” we are reminded that it is Stanton and Anthony’s “deep form of white chauvinism which requires attention” (Aptheker 51, 52). The real purpose of uncovering the racism at the root of the “split” is to “learn” from it, to recognize that the mistakes of the past have perpetuated and created injustice, and to translate this educational narrative into political action in the present day, action that avoids these mistakes and thereby avoids the disappointments, setbacks, and conflicts of the past. By disavowing one “side” of the “split” and its racism, the narrative employs the past as a method for both guiding and shielding the present. The reader must identify with the correct “side” of the “split” and its historical interpretation in order to secure an antiracist feminist position in the present and thus be a part of the kind of feminism that has learned from its past and therefore moved beyond it.

Other narratives of decline produce fear instead of regret or nostalgia to construct cautionary stories for present day feminism and feminist readers. For instance, one narrator suggests that the “split” is not simply something to regret or wax nostalgic about, but is actually dangerous; the theoretical problems it represents are not safely kept in the past, but can seep into the present endeavor of historical writing (and reading) as well. The “split” “posed serious problems for woman suffragists then, and for women’s historians now,” and unless we produce the right kind of history, “we are at risk of replicating the mistakes of

those whose political misalliances and poor judgment led to a brief-but-regrettable period of egregiously racist and elitist conduct” (Kerr 63-64). History is a risky business in this iteration: if the “split” is interpreted the wrong way, if it is suggested to be a matter of “federal versus state suffrage work, or radical versus conservative ideologies,” for example, then “we risk perpetuating a means-and-ends argument that fails to take into account the political exigencies of a particular historical moment” (Kerr 71, 64).

The “split” takes on the role of litmus test; if a historian makes an interpretive misstep in constructing it, she is guilty of ignoring the racism of the past and risking contamination in the present through the original historical event. This warning extends to the reader as well—she is encouraged toward the “proper” side of the “split” and just as historians are urged to write the “split” correctly, readers are urged to read it right. The “consequences” of the “split” “furnish a cautionary tale to those who continue to work for full equality today”—ultimately, the reader is instructed that “ignoring what is painful in woman suffrage history diminishes the capacity to build on its strengths by learning from past mistakes” (Kerr 77-78). The reader needs to not only disavow one “side” of the “split” but also learn from that disavowal—we do not want to repeat the mistakes of the past or “diminish” the capacities of feminism in the present, and therefore, we are encouraged to align ourselves with the right suffragists and the right narrative of the historical event, the one that enables us to properly understand it and thus inoculate ourselves against the danger of contagion. This is a process of fear—fear of not only being a bad feminist subject (by not choosing the correct side) but of risking the future of feminism more generally (by repeating the mistakes of the past).

Each of these iterations produces forms of inheritance narratives that are simultaneously educational narratives; readers are urged to be the kind of feminist who can

learn from the lesson of history and ensure a healthy future for feminism. If we learn it properly, we can unhinge feminism from its tainted past and project it into a future that is free of its problematic, traumatic history. And if we do not learn the lesson, then this narrative formula suggests that we are then doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, remaining mired in the ugliness of an intractable history of racism. The process of constructing the “split” around racism and then deploying it to organize feminist history and the reader’s affective relation to that history is, in Joan Scott’s terms, a way to “evoke, erase and resolve” the origin of racism within feminism (290). The “split,” like Scott’s female orator or the maternal figure, could be considered in terms of feminist fantasy—it consolidates the historical moment, creating what Scott calls a “commonality,” or what Hemmings calls a “consensus” out of an event. We “know” something called the “suffrage split” is about white suffragist racism, and we “know” that this then explains the history of suffragism as well as U.S. feminism. The “efficacy” of this process has been to allow feminists to locate racism elsewhere, to rhetorically cordon it off, and in doing so protect the present-day movement from the mistakes of the past. These narratives encourage the reader to locate racism within feminist history in order to inoculate herself (and contemporary feminism) from implication in present-day racism.

But of course, this “origin” is never resolved—nor could it be. We are left instead to interpret the consequences of such reiteration. We have seen what the “split” produces, but what does it obscure?

The Effects of the “Split”

The suffrage “split” performs a significant amount of work within feminist historiography: it organizes and manages eras, creates trajectories out of those eras, and cultivates readers’ affective responses toward the feminist past and present. These narratives deploy the “split” in various ways, but the reader is always encouraged to understand it as a governing event, as the fissure that has a dominant impact on the future of feminism. Readers must identify with the “correct” side of the suffrage divide in order to be proper feminist subjects—sometimes this means repudiating one group such as the NWSA, sometimes it means repudiating the past more generally, sometimes it means celebrating suffragists’ achievements while parsing their faults; but in each iteration, the stakes are big for present-day feminism—correctly understanding the event is required to understand how feminism is to move forward and progress. Ultimately, the “split” produces proper feminist readers who can read the past in such a way that an antiracist future of feminism is secured. It’s not that this isn’t a laudable goal; it’s that this narrative practice allows readers to distance themselves from the very object that is never elucidated. White suffragist racism is made the cause for lasting failure and permanent crisis in feminism, but in its repetition in split-narratives, it is never explored in the complexity of its history. The historiography of suffrage relentlessly produces this story, and reproduces it so well, in fact, that it is the de facto, shorthand way of explaining where racism in the U.S. feminist movement originates.²⁷ In this practice, however, racism becomes a method for explaining an event, a trajectory, a feminist past and present, rather than a historical structure in need of explication itself. Racism is transformed

²⁷ See Valenti 168-169 for a popular version of this kind of “shorthand” understanding of the suffrage “split.”

into a trope in these narratives, and as effective as that trope is for constructing feminism's past and readers' affects toward that past, it is not very good at historicizing racism as an inseparable part of that past. The "split" instead performs a metonymic function, in which narratives of racism stand in for the complex politics of race, gender, and class in the nineteenth-century suffrage struggle.

By critiquing these narratives, I do not mean to suggest that there exists a neutral way to narrate this event, one that is not always embedded within the perspective of the narrator or her search for what feminist historians call a "usable past."²⁸ But my examination of the narrative production of this canonical event provides the opportunity to not simply consider what those narratives ask of readers, or produce for feminism, but also the opportunity to figure the period again, differently, not just as a "corrective" or a way to fill in the ever-present gaps of history, but as part of the process of refiguring feminism's timeline, its major events, figures, and problems. How else could the story of this period within suffrage be told?

According to Hemmings, telling other stories, what we might call the non-canonical narratives of feminism's past, cannot intervene in the power of dominant feminist narratives.

²⁸ Indeed, split-narratives themselves should be read as embedded in their own historicity, one in which they can be seen as working against conceptions of hegemonic feminism by "correcting" a critical impulse to develop a "sisterhood" on exclusively, and unacknowledged, white terms. In "How Does Asia Mean?" Sun Ge writes of the critical tendency to critique historical actors without attention to the contexts in which those actors are produced and constrained. As she puts it, "We tend to easily criticize our predecessors for the limitations of their thinking while neglecting the rationale peculiar to the historical context against which the thinking takes its form, hence we also fail to see the possibility of the growth of knowledge. All this makes it too easy to delude ourselves into thinking that we are breaking new paths" (41). This point, in my view, applies not only to nineteenth-century suffragists, but also to those scholars of suffrage and feminist history who circulate split-narratives.

I, however, am convinced by feminist scholars who insist that the feminist past is “never exhausted” but rather is “always capable of giving rise to *another* reading, another context, another framework that will animate it in different ways” (Grosz 1020).²⁹ In her recasting of “second wave” feminism from the perspectives and experiences of women of color, historian Becky Thompson produces a “second wave” narrative that is markedly different than the one we think we know so well. Thompson’s purpose is to intervene in the process of feminist storytelling by “interrupt[ing] normative accounts before they begin to repeat themselves, each time, sounding more like ‘the truth’ simply because of the repetition of the retelling” (350). Like Thompson, I want to employ the understanding of how split-narratives work to self-consciously intervene in the narration of this period in feminist history. By remaining critically moored to the problem of race-versus-gender, split-narratives prevent a contextualized analysis of the complexity of white suffragist racism at the same time that they whittle down black women’s activism to one “side” or another, to their having to choose between their race or their sex, as it is often put. In encouraging feminists to secure our own progressive subject positions, these narratives end up obscuring the complicated subject positions of past activists. Making these subjects central to a telling of this historical period interrupts canonical split-narratives and refigures their critical problems—not in the name of producing a “settled alternative,” but in unsettling what we think we know.

²⁹ See Barlow 421-422 and Burton 67 for similar exhortations.

CHAPTER 2

White Suffragist Dis/Entitlement: *The Revolution and the Rhetoric of Racism*

There is a paradox in the way the U.S. woman suffrage movement and its most famous figures have been canonized. While Elizabeth Cady Stanton is arguably the movement's most recognizable symbol, historians Ellen DuBois and Richard Cándida Smith have recently pointed out that “little of her writing has been easily available” and she is “known today for only a handful of pieces” (“Introduction” 1). Even as Stanton is the focus of numerous biographies, documentaries, and scholarly studies, her large body of work is simultaneously overlooked.¹ One reason for this contradiction, as DuBois and Smith note, is that Stanton never wrote one *big* book that would allow future historians and critics to synthesize her contributions. Instead, much of Stanton's work is divided among speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers, and while many of these pieces have been anthologized, these collections simply cannot represent the sheer volume and sweep of her oeuvre, which runs to thousands of pages.² As a result, our acquaintance with Stanton's writing is rather shallow even as Stanton's identification as a symbol of U.S. woman suffrage has become ubiquitous; one of the most canonical figures of the movement is, strangely enough, also relatively unknown.

¹ For recent Stanton studies, see DuBois and Smith, eds; Ginzberg; Davis, *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*; Gornick; Wellman; and Kern.

² See Gordon, *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*; DuBois, *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Reader*; and Buhle and Buhle, eds.

This paradox is mirrored in the critical focus on racism within white suffragism. The historiography of U.S. suffrage of the past 25 years has documented the many forms of bigotry embedded within the movement and espoused by its central figures; Stanton in particular has been fully and frequently established as a looming figure of racism in U.S. feminism's past.³ In a recent collection of essays on Stanton's work, historian Ann Gordon points out that the "luster" of the infamous co-founder of the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement has been "dimming" in recent years because of the "close scrutiny" now given to the racialized rhetoric in her speeches and writing ("Stanton and the Right to Vote" 111). Study after study documents Stanton's use of racial slurs, the racial constructions her thought relied on, and the bigotry behind her blind-spots—as Gordon notes, Stanton's "failures are now well established" (124).

Well established, but not well understood. White suffragist racism is rarely explored or explicated in these works, only confirmed. As with our acquaintance with Stanton herself, this racism is now notorious even as it remains obscure. As I demonstrate in the first chapter, scholars have persistently produced this racism as the reason for a "split" within the suffrage movement over whether to support or oppose the Fifteenth Amendment and the enfranchisement of black men before women, but in doing so have made that racism into an explanation for an event, a way to understand the fissures and failures of the movement. This critical desire has represented an important intervention in feminist historiography, but one of

³ See Dudden; Ginzberg; Stansell; Mitchell, "Lower Orders"; Newman; Kerr; Caraway; Andolsen; Aptheker, and Davis *Women, Race & Class*, esp. 70-86. The emphasis on the racism of white suffragists is not confined to this body of work, but can be seen in generalist and popular works of feminist studies as well, in which white suffragism is often determined as an originary site of racism within the feminist movement; see Valenti 168-169 for a representative example. The uncovering of racism within the white woman suffrage movement has been a significant recovery in the field of U.S. women's history; my analysis is not meant to discount the important contributions of this work, but to build upon them.

its effects has been to convert white suffragist racism into a shorthand way to understand how the suffrage movement “split in two” in 1869. I am suggesting that the critical tendency to always-already understand this historical moment as an originary site of white feminist racism has paradoxically resulted in the obfuscation of the ways that racism functioned. White suffragist writing is thus in the peculiar position of being canonized and overexposed and at the same time under-considered.⁴ Gordon points to this problem when she suggests that documenting Stanton’s bigotry and elitism is an important task, but “[n]onetheless, the exploration of *what* [these things] signify needs better tools and maps than are currently in use” (“Stanton and the Right to Vote” 124).

This chapter seeks to contribute to this exploration through a tracing of white suffragist writing in the short-lived periodical, *The Revolution*. The critical paradox of Stanton’s work and white suffragist racism are, I argue, bound up with the pervasive critical bypassing of this important text. Published from 1868 to 1870 in New York under the editorial leadership of Stanton and Anthony,⁵ the newspaper is in many ways ground zero of the canonical construction of “the split”—it was expressly created by the most canonical figures in the suffrage movement as a vehicle to disseminate their ideas, the racist content of many of its editorials are some of the most frequently cited and denounced writings within suffrage historiography, and its very existence is often included as one of the reasons for

⁴ Indeed, historians often protest that too much work focuses on figures such as Stanton and Susan B. Anthony at the expense of lesser-known, marginalized figures of the movement; see Farrell 46 and Kerr 71 for two examples from the historiography that call for more attention to alternate suffrage figures and less attention to Stanton and Anthony.

⁵ Anthony sold the paper to Laura J. Bullard in May of 1870 due to its increasing financial difficulties (most of which Anthony took on herself, leaving her with substantial debt). Bullard would only be able to keep *The Revolution* in publication for another two years, until allowing it to be merged with the New York *Christian Enquirer*.

growing animosity within the suffrage movement.⁶ Indeed, Stanton and Anthony's foray into the world of publishing would pave the way for a competitor in the American Woman Suffrage Association's *Woman's Journal*, a more popular and enduring periodical that would eventually contribute to *The Revolution's* demise. In looking for the ways that the canonization of "the split" consolidates the historical events, ideas, and materials it deals in, *The Revolution* provides a prime venue; it lies at the heart of "the split" and yet I argue it also demonstrates the ways in which the historical moment in suffrage exceeds its narrative construction. But interestingly, Stanton and Anthony's newspaper has not been given much focused critical attention, despite the incessant, obsessive focus on "the split" within suffrage.⁷ While much of the evidence of Stanton and Anthony's racism comes from

⁶ Feminist historiography often constructs the advent of *The Revolution* as a precursor to the Fifteenth Amendment debates and the eventual "split" in the movement. Eleanor Flexner writes that "Even before the Fifteenth Amendment had begun deepening the rift between the two camps in the women's movement, Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony had found a new friend...None roused a greater outcry than their brief but lively association with George Francis Train" (150) and then suggests that Train's support of *The Revolution* helped to bring about division in suffragism. Other histories place *The Revolution* more directly at the center of the divide. For instance, Bettina Aptheker describes the paper as the catalyst for "the split," writing that its "main editorial thrust was its opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment" (46). See also Giddings 66 for a representative critique of the paper's racism and its role in the "break-up" of the movement.

⁷ While *The Revolution* would gain notoriety, at least in part, for its connection to Stanton and Anthony, it was certainly not the first newspaper to take on the issue of women's rights. That distinction generally goes to *The Lily*, an eight-page periodical founded by Amelia Bloomer and published monthly from 1849 to 1858. *The Lily* was originally conceived as a forum for women's opinions on temperance, but Bloomer came to realize early in her tenure as editor that to discuss the effects of men's alcohol use on women's lives necessarily broached other questions about women's broader rights in society. The other major pre-Civil War periodical devoted to women's issues was *The Una*, a sixteen-page monthly publication funded and edited by Paulina Wright Davis. This newspaper, which ran from 1853 to 1855, is in many ways more of a precursor to *The Revolution*, given its focus on the principles of women's rights rather than the practicalities that *The Lily* tended to cover. Davis would later help fund *The Revolution*. See Russo and Kramarae for a more in-depth account of early women's rights journalism. See also Solomon for overviews of the woman's suffrage press.

Revolution editorials, in the historiography, this evidence is used as an end in itself—as an explanation for why the suffrage movement “split in two”—rather than as a text to be explicated or explored. While “the split” has dominated discussions of suffrage and feminist history, *The Revolution* has been relatively ignored.⁸

In this chapter I draw from this neglected body of suffragist work to call attention to the specific ways that racism functioned within white suffragist rhetoric to mediate the subject positions of white, middle-class women during Reconstruction. *The Revolution* writings demonstrate that the racist representation of black women positioned white woman suffragists as victims of male privilege, on the one hand, and inheritors of white privilege, on the other—as both oppressed and oppressing. The figure of the black woman becomes a means of negotiation of the white suffragist’s contradictory identity; racially and economically empowered by the racist and male-dominated political system, these women were nonetheless subjugated by that system because of their gender. *The Revolution* shows how suffragists negotiated this web of conflicting inheritance through the appropriation of the black female figure, using black women’s racial and class differences to manage white women’s gender difference.

My rehistoricization of white suffragist writing seeks, then, not to dispute the historiographical consensus about white suffragist racism, but to give a closer account of it, its complexities, and how it operates. Stanton, Anthony, and other U.S. suffragists without doubt relied on a variety of racist and racialized rhetoric as they lobbied for their cause, and *The Revolution* writings verify these forms of bigotry in a host of ways. But beyond simply

⁸ The neglect of this text is certainly at least in part due to its lack of availability. While it can be found on microfilm at most major research libraries, the periodical has not been digitized in any form.

providing evidence of racism, this work can yield a more nuanced sense of how this racism functioned within the larger discursive fields in which suffragism was embedded, revealing how white woman suffragists constructed and deployed the figure of the black woman to mediate the liabilities of gender in order to legitimate their claims in a hostile and volatile public sphere. Tracing the complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction within white suffragist writing shifts the critical focus from a desire to document and lament white suffragist racism to the consideration of the rhetorical and political contexts in which that racism is embedded. Ultimately, this rehistoricization demonstrates that taking white suffragist racism as a starting point, rather than a conclusion, opens up unexplored critical terrain in American literary studies. Re-reading *The Revolution* allows us to read the complexity back into this historical moment, a process that opens up a larger textual field in which we can understand the political failings of historical figures and movements not only as warnings or warrants for our critical interventions, but also as symptoms of a political discursive arena that systematically produced fissures between oppressed groups by circumscribing both their rights and the discursive contexts in which they were engaged to win them.

The Figure of the Black Woman in Feminist Historiography

In the previous chapter I argue that twentieth- and twenty-first century feminist historiography of suffrage privileges “the split” and narrates its origins in the competing priorities of race and gender in the face of the Fifteenth Amendment. This privileging produces stories that are consumed with racism and yet strangely oblique when it comes to understanding how racism functions in relation to gender. This, I argue, is one effect of deploying racism to explain “the split,” rather than as a phenomenon that warrants

exploration as a critical object itself. There are, however, moments in this body of work that gesture toward this kind of complexity without actually dealing in it. Following Clare Hemmings, I use the term “traces” or “hauntings” to describe these moments, but one might just as well turn to the Marxian concept of simple abstraction to do the same sort of work. Michael McKeon explains this concept as a “deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process”—the gist is that a simplified term, or figure, or idea is made to stand in for a decidedly not-simple process, and is made to do so in such a way that the process is both contained and obscured (20). The fleeting references to black women in split-narratives function in much the same way—they reference a figure or class that appear to have what McKeon calls a “givenness” without explaining the category, its history, or its deployment. Black women are present in many of these narratives, but they exist as figures in their margins, and even when these figures are directly referenced, they appear oddly blurred, never quite in focus, a thing to be assumed in a story rather than a figure to be explored in the history.⁹

⁹ Two other narrative traces in the historiography that I think would prove especially promising to excavate are the repeated use of the catch-all term “other issues” to gesture toward emerging differences among suffragists without having to explicate them, and in a similar vein, the deployment of the nebulous idea of “political reality” to explain suffragist actions and ideologies. For instance, Aileen Kraditor uses the term “other issues” as a way to succinctly signal that “the split” was not only about the Fifteenth Amendment or one group’s racism, but never explores what they might be, instead using the phrase to move from one era to another: “Some of them, including Miss Anthony and Mrs. Stanton, thought it would be better if the amendment were defeated, while others, including Mrs. Stone, argued that if women could not win their political freedom, it was well that Negro men could win theirs. On this and *other issues* the suffragists found they could not agree. In 1869 two separate organizations came into being... The split lasted until 1890 when the two factions merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and a new era in woman suffrage history began” (3-4, emphasis added). As for “political reality,” Suzanne Marilley deploys the idea in ways that make one wonder who, exactly, constructs that “reality”—for instance, in a characteristic use of the term, she writes, “Inclusive equality as pictured by the Garrisonian’s liberalism of equal rights conflicted with the reality of post-

For instance, in her narration of the 1869 “split,” historian Aileen Kraditor focuses on the debate over which group ought to take precedence in the suffrage struggle. She sets this struggle up in such a way that it is clearly between (white) women and black men: “[m]any women” “declared their rights deserved priority” (167). Kraditor’s explanation for this demonstrates that the “women” in her formulation are by default, white; according to Kraditor’s narrative, these women believed they deserved the vote more than any other group “first, because women were half the population whereas Negroes were only a small minority and, second, because in their opinion, after the Civil War the Negro man was in many ways better off than any woman, black or white” (167-168). The modifiers in the second part of Kraditor’s statement mark her earlier use of “women” as reflexively white. But by the end of the sentence, the modifier appears, and the black woman partially emerges—even as her representation is erased between Kraditor’s formulation of “women” and the “Negro man,” the reader is reminded of her presence. The figure of the black woman appears, and not coincidentally, in my view, as Kraditor attempts to describe women’s sense that their status was more vulnerable than black men’s, who were “better off” after passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. Black women are represented in the narrative just as white women’s status as

Civil War political life” (76). This construction has the effect of covering over significant antisuffrage influence, obscuring agents of deeply antifeminist ideologies. There are abundant examples of these two traces throughout the historiography of suffrage; not only do they offer different starting points for an analysis of how feminist historiography constructs the suffrage movement, but my larger point is that they demonstrate that the interpretive opportunities within this body of work are certainly not exhausted by my exploration of one of these traces.

victims becomes salient.¹⁰ Here, on the periphery, they are not quite visible and yet not quite concealed.

Other split stories contain similar narrative hints of the figure of the black woman without ever fully delineating that figure's role in the suffrage debates. Andrea Moore Kerr does this by first specifying that the debate over the Fifteenth Amendment hinged on the "rights of two groups—in this instance, black males and white women" coming into "conflict" (63-64). But directly after this description of the conflict, she narrates the problem in a rather different way: "In the years after the war, the rights of women—black and white, former slaves and free—came to be counterpoised against the rights of newly emancipated black males and free southern black males" (63-64). In the first instance, black women are not left out due to the default use of "women," as in Kraditor, but they are still expressly removed from the conceptual problem as Kerr tells it. In the second iteration of the debate, black women make it into the picture—it is their rights as well, along with the rights of white women, which are at stake in the fight over the Fifteenth.

Even when black women are not directly referenced in a split-narrative, their representation is hinted at in more oblique ways. When Suzanne Marilley writes that the racism of suffragists ultimately "divided political action that ironically undermined their own project of generating solidarity among women *as women*" (186) the reader is reminded, without ever being directly told, that one of the consequences of white suffragist tactics was to alienate black women from the cause. Even more implicitly, we might look to Ellen DuBois's formulation of the pair "blacks and women" to describe the divide created by the

¹⁰ This point will become more pertinent in the next section, where I argue that this representation of black women is a common technique used by suffragists in *The Revolution* to buttress white women's claims to their own oppression.

Fifteenth Amendment. DuBois reminds readers of black women's salience to the suffrage story when she notes that their "double disfranchisement" alters the conceptual framework of the Fifteenth Amendment debates, a reminder that is highlighted when black women are then obscured when the divide is described (*Feminism and Suffrage* 68).¹¹ It is "women and the freedmen" who are juxtaposed, over and over (68), or, alternately, it is "[b]lacks and women" who end up as "enemies of each other's enfranchisement" (96). Black women are broached, only to recede into the background as women again become white in order to demonstrate the divide in the movement.

One might argue that none of these histories make black women central to their narratives, and that indeed, this lack of historical representation was one of the many problems addressed in "second wave" black feminist work. But even here, I wonder whether shifting the focus to black women as historical actors changes the impulse toward narrating "the split" as a matter of "priorities" and racism. For instance, Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* offers a wide-ranging examination of black women's long-ignored roles in U.S. history, culture, and politics, and yet in this exploration she constructs a split-story that is strikingly similar to that of the historiography outlined above. In Davis's telling of it, white suffragists' criticism of the Fifteenth Amendment "exposed the tenuous and superficial nature of their relationship to the postwar campaign for Black equality" (76) and is the root of the "schism" in the Equal Rights Association (82). She cites and agrees with Frederick

¹¹ DuBois writes that "The most creative response of equal rights leaders to this contradiction in their midst was to turn their attention to black women" but then notes that this attention was "more rhetorical than real" (*Feminism and Suffrage* 68, 69). She continues: "As the possibilities for a joint struggle for black and woman suffrage evaporated, and as the woman suffrage forces became increasingly independent of abolitionism, the image of the black woman—for she had never been much more than an image—receded into the background" (71). This recognition of the rhetorical function of the figure of the black woman emphasizes that figure's absence in DuBois's construction of the divide in the movement.

Douglass's argument that black men needed the vote more than women because of economic deprivation and continued racial violence in the postwar South, calling his case "logical and compelling" (79) and juxtaposing it with the rather comfortable situation of white women, who "could not claim that their lives were in physical jeopardy" in the same way (79). Ultimately, these white women "were not, like Black men and women in the South, engaged in an actual war for liberation" (79).

In Davis's narrative, "the split" is again a matter of white feminist racism that puts an end to the "potentially powerful" alliance between the abolitionist and women's rights movements (84). And again, as in the other histories, it is Douglass who represents black interests against this racism. Here the narrative shifts, however, and Davis's reminder that it is black men *and* black women who are still fighting for their freedom, still the victims of horrific violence, stands in contrast to Douglass's larger argument for the enfranchisement of black men alone. Black men are tacitly shifted into the position where black people have been described. While Davis presents Douglass's claims approvingly, the rhetoric used to support these claims covers over this shift. As in the examples above, black women are only hinted at in this narrative, despite the fact that much of the larger work of which it is a part expressly takes black women as its focus. It would seem that "the split" does not yield itself to an exploration of this figure, and yet, it cannot seem to be told without her completely.

Other black feminist historiographies of the suffrage era note this absence of black women in the history. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn points out that while the topic of Black men tends to dominate the discussion of the suffrage "split," "the literature on the schism rarely refers to African American women, and when it does they are mentioned in passing" (*African American Women* 27). Terborg-Penn's *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote*,

1850-1920 (1998) aims to address this absence, but as the quote above indicates, the closer consideration of black women does not preclude the construction of the historical moment as one of “schisms,” “splits” and divided priorities. Not only does the “split” still play an important role in the figuring of the history, but the event is still narrated in terms of the same white suffragist racism that we see in the historiography that ignores black women all together. She writes that the “split” “divided the universal suffrage movement into two camps, those who felt that Black men needed the vote even more than women, and those who were unwilling to postpone woman suffrage for the sake of Black males” (8). This unwillingness, according to Terborg-Penn, is a result of “pitt[ing] Black men against women in a racist way” and as a result, black women “were often torn between identifying with racial priorities or with gender priorities” (27). While Terborg-Penn gives close attention to the reactions of black women activists such as Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in explicating this dilemma of competing priorities, the “split” remains a surprisingly stable construction that is once again explained by white suffragist racism.¹²

Indeed, it appears that a sustained focus on black women can provide a stronger warrant for the consolidation of the historical moment; black woman suffragists’ perspectives can be employed to, among other things, foster affective reactions and historical judgment toward the “split” and the figures who precipitate it. For instance, Paula Giddings’s *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black women on Race and Sex in America* (1984) constructs the suffrage “split” in the familiar way: “As both the race and feminist issues intensified in the 1840’s and 1850’s, it was inevitable that Black and White women

¹² I take up the representation of this “choice” between race and gender for black woman suffragists at greater length in the next chapter. For now, however, it is enough to point out that even when black women are represented in split-narratives, their activism and ideas are not allowed to refigure the historical moment, but instead, are subordinated to “the split.”

abolitionists would come to a parting of the ways. The parting was due not only to White racism, but also to the primacy of race or sex as issues in their respective struggles” (55). In discussing black women who supported the Fifteenth Amendment and the AWSA “side” of the “split,” Giddings deploys the position of these women as a way to buttress the commonsense judgment of the event. Writing of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and her expression of support for enfranchising black men ahead of women, Giddings makes it clear that black women knew which “side” was ultimately right: “Harper and others understood that the rights of Black men had to be secured before Black women could assert theirs. If the race had no rights, the women’s struggle was meaningless” (68). This statement of plain fact—in Giddings formulation, it was obvious to black women that race *must* come before gender—lends the interpretation of the “split” rhetorical influence; black women, who were uniquely positioned at the nexus of the “choice” between race and gender, chose race, and readers are encouraged to understand the “split” in the same terms. My point is that even when black women are made central to a narrative of this suffrage era, their historiographical presence is often employed in ways that solidify the familiar construction of the “split.”¹³

Reading the historiography of the suffrage “split” for the ways it alternately represents, obscures, and deploys the figure of the black woman is related to, but distinct

¹³ There are, of course, examples of black feminist historiography that seek to uncover black women’s political activism in ways that are not connected to the national suffrage movement on which the history often focuses. For instance, Elsa Barkley Brown’s “To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Black Women’s Political History, 1865-1880” (1997) traces black women’s postwar political activities without a single reference to the suffrage “split,” instead considering how black women engaged in activities that were not traditionally considered “political” and yet were experienced as political nonetheless. In the process Brown asks us to reconsider how politics might look different in black female communities. In a different vein, Janice Sumler-Edmond (1997) explores a similar timeframe by analyzing black women’s experiences in the court systems through postwar case law. As in Brown’s essay, Sumler-Edmond manages to never reference the suffrage “split” even as her study covers the infamous year of 1869.

from reading this body of work for the inclusion (or exclusion) of black women as historical actors. Although the revision of the feminist historical record to include black women's histories has been a scholarly and political project of enormous value, my interest in this case is in the way the *figure* of the black woman emerges as a textual representation within narratives of the "split." It would seem that whether this figure is mostly elided or centrally positioned, these histories reliably produce a story of the divide that is committed to an interpretation of white suffragist racism as its governing explanation. In their incessant focus on explaining how the movement was divided, these histories home in on the Fifteenth Amendment debates as an interpretive ground zero, and in doing so, tend to obscure the figure of the black woman or alternately deploy this figure as a means of underwriting an explication of the "split." My point in finding the figure of the black women in these histories—a task that is easier to do in some than in others—is to draw attention to the sheer narrative staying power of the "split," its intractability. Exploring the deployment of this figure without an overriding focus on the "split" can help develop a more specific explication of the white suffragist racism that split stories rely on but never elucidate.

The Lost *Revolution*

The Revolution has been all but ignored as a text in itself, despite the fame of its founders.¹⁴ When the text is cited, it is most often in connection with Stanton's criticism of the Fifteenth Amendment and her anger over women's exclusion from Reconstruction-era

¹⁴ There is very little literary criticism on *The Revolution*, or for that matter, suffragist writing more generally. Studies that employ the newspaper as evidence for white suffragist racism exist primarily in the areas of history, historiography of feminism, and biography; see note 3. Studies that take *The Revolution* as a central object of study are confined to a handful of edited volumes and essays in Communication Studies; see Solomon for a single essay on *The Revolution*, and Rakow and Kramarae for an edited selection of *Revolution* articles.

constitutional revision. Through this focus, the newspaper has gained notoriety primarily as evidence for Stanton's racism, rather than as a text worth exploring in its own right.

Scholarship often skips the original *Revolution* text all together, in favor of citing from anthologies or Stanton and Anthony's *History of Woman Suffrage*, which compiled many of the periodical's editorials. To take a representative example: as she sets up her history of white suffragist racism, historian Louise Michele Newman employs an infamous Stanton quote to undergird her narrative: "'Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans Yung Tung,' Stanton proclaimed in 1869, 'who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who can not read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling-book, making laws for Lucretia Mott, Ernestine L. Rose, and Anna E Dickinson'" (qtd. in Newman 5). Newman takes this passage from Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle's *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage* (1978) but the original text of the quotation was published on the editorial page of *The Revolution* on December 24, 1868, in an article entitled "Manhood Suffrage."¹⁵

Indeed, "Manhood Suffrage" is the original source of some of the most frequently cited passages in critical work on Stanton and U.S. suffrage, but the original text is often ignored; historian Sue Davis cites this piece in her analysis of Stanton's racism, but again, her footnote leads to an anthology of Stanton's papers edited by Ann Gordon (*The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* 147).¹⁶ Similarly, Paula Giddings quotes from *Revolution* articles but the footnote leads not to the original text, but to the work of Terborg-Penn (Giddings 66). My point is not that this form of citation is somehow faulty; it is that this common and useful way of citing historical sources carries with it certain consequences. In

¹⁵ See Buhle and Buhle, eds, 254.

¹⁶ See Gordon, *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, vol. 2, 196.

the case of *The Revolution*, those consequences amount to the canonization of a source that is simultaneously lost; the reiteration of anthologized material produces the impression that we “know” this text even as it reduces that text to a few notorious lines.

Even when work does cite directly from *The Revolution*, extracts are most often deployed as evidence of racism within white suffragism, rather than as significant parts of a larger object of analysis that warrants examination. In a typical instance, one scholar cites a series of derogatory statements about black men directly from *The Revolution* to demonstrate the increasingly vitriolic form of racism Stanton and her supporters espoused; when the newspaper “stepped up its anti-black rhetoric, making references to the ‘barbarism,’ ‘brute force,’ and ‘tyranny’ of black men,” the rift between Stanton and her abolitionist allies grew (Kerr 70). Likewise, when historian Eleanor Flexner explains the widening divide between white suffrage leaders, she employs quotations from *The Revolution* to explain the “split” in the movement: “Mrs. Stanton made derogatory references to ‘Sambo,’ and the enfranchisement of ‘Africans, Chinese, and all the ignorant foreigners the moment they touch our shores’” (144). Stanton biographer Lori Ginzberg employs a similar tactic, pulling directly from *The Revolution* to accumulate evidence for the “Reconstruction-era schism” between suffragists who supported the Fifteenth Amendment and those, like Stanton, who opposed it (130). In each of these cases, the text provides evidence for a growing “split” within the suffrage movement over the Fifteenth Amendment and Stanton’s racist opposition to it. *The Revolution* is reduced to a method for explaining an event in the movement, a use that covers over the text’s illumination of the shifting discursive relationship between racism, race, and gender and the circumscription of that relationship in the public sphere.

The Revolution is thus simultaneously overexposed and relatively unknown, a combination that neatly mirrors white suffragist racism more generally.¹⁷ While at its height *The Revolution* never gained more than 3,000 subscribers (although its actual circulation is assumed to be much larger than that, as it was loaned, borrowed, clipped, and disseminated in a host of other ways through communities of women across the U.S.), this periodical provides a prime venue for reading the racism that has become so ubiquitous to our understandings of white suffragism.¹⁸ While the historiography of suffrage pins Stanton and Anthony's reaction to the Fifteenth Amendment to a narrative of increasing, and increasingly vitriolic, racism and its large and lasting effects for U.S. feminism, this racism is not taken as an object of study, never explicated with any specificity, and instead functions as an originary moment of trouble for the future of feminism. Drawing attention to the Fifteenth Amendment writings in *The Revolution* can help historicize the object of racism that has gone under-analyzed in split-narratives. In tracing these pieces across its two years of

¹⁷ While my focus here is on a single topic across one periodical, it would be productive to undertake similar studies of other newspapers of the era. In particular, the *Woman's Journal*, founded by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell in 1870 and a direct competitor of *The Revolution*, would be an important text with which to continue the rehistoricization of white suffragist racism. Like Stanton, Stone's work is often compressed down to her stance on the Fifteenth Amendment (she strongly supported it) and her role in the "split" of the movement; see Flexner 145 and Scott, *Natural Allies* 135 for representative examples. An analysis of Stone's periodical could provide welcome context to this common reading of Stone and her representation as the head of the "non-racist" suffrage wing. My hope is that the current analysis demonstrates the interpretive possibilities that suffragism more generally—its associated print culture, oratory, and activism—offers for scholars of U.S. literature and culture.

¹⁸ Nineteenth-century newspapers played an important role in creating links between disparate groups of women across geography and class, and likewise, those connections provided routes for the dissemination of these publications' ideas. This symbiotic relationship helped strengthen the nascent woman's rights movement; see Jerry 27 and Rakow and Kramarae 4-9 for analyses of the circulation of newspapers among women in the nineteenth century.

publication, what emerges from this feminist periodical is an evolving response to a similarly changing political landscape—what the historiography makes static and rigid, *The Revolution* shows to be dynamic and flexible.¹⁹ The arguments white suffragists employed shift in accordance with the shifting politics of the era, and while they never shift out of a racist mode, I think we can be more specific about how this racism functions. Suffragist opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment becomes not simply increasingly racist but a lens for analyzing the operations between race and gender and their embeddedness within the era's politics. In particular, white suffragists deploy the black woman as a representational figure to perform a number of rhetorical and strategic functions in negotiating their ambivalent positions in relation to the racist and patriarchal postwar political system.

¹⁹ Tracing a particular idea or set of responses across a wide span of issues of this periodical is one of at least two possible methodologies for this sort of project. I choose this method in this chapter because it can yield an alternate way to think about white suffragist opposition to black male enfranchisement, an opposition that I note above is constantly changing and more unstable than split-narratives recognize. The other method, however, would be to do a close reading of a single issue in which a response to the Fifteenth Amendment is only a part. This kind of synchronic approach, while unable to produce a long-view evolution of suffragist rhetoric, could produce something else quite valuable: a sense of how suffragist debates were in dialogue with multiple other debates, political topics, and cultural texts, all at the same time. This technique, one that takes into consideration the whole periodical, from masthead to back-page advertisements, would interpret what Jean Marie Lutes has recently termed a “daunting miscellany within the object itself” that “frustrates attempts to synthesize its content, while its unmistakable contingency demands more attention than we are usually willing to pay to the nuances of specific social and political environments” (339). Similarly, in their recent survey of the field of periodical studies, Latham and Scholes celebrate the “fascinating intertextual connections” within single issues of periodicals, noting that “Magazines and newspapers, in particular, create often surprising and even bewildering points of contact between disparate areas of human activity” (528). While I do not use it here, this methodology strikes me as a particularly promising way to think about the suffrage debates in 1869, one certainly worth pursuing. The juxtaposition of disparate subject matter, genres, and authors allows for a consideration of the radical embeddedness of the Fifteenth Amendment debate within a larger field of current events, political tactics, and feminist issues. See Lutes and Latham and Scholes for overviews of the field of periodical studies and its place at the nexus of literary criticism, journalism, and cultural studies.

Managing Multiplicity

The debate over the Fifteenth Amendment begins to appear in the pages of *The Revolution* in the middle of 1868; as Congress was lobbied to pass the amendment, Stanton and Anthony went on record opposing it. One of the first traces of this opposition comes in a response to a reader's letter to the editor in the April 9 issue of the newspaper. The letter-writer, Jane Elizabeth Jones, a prominent activist in the temperance, abolitionist, and woman's rights movements, takes Stanton, Anthony, and *The Revolution* to task for not supporting black male enfranchisement. While Jones expresses respect for the women and their journalistic enterprise, she is concerned that they have lost their way, their commitment to equal rights: "But what means this new system of ethics of Mrs. Stanton—protesting against the enfranchisement of another man, black or white, until woman is enfranchised? I have not thus learned reform. I have not thus learned christianity. If I am a slave, heaven forbid that I should desire any other being in the universe to share my degradation" (Stanton, "Sharp Points" 212). Jones makes clear that opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment goes against the tenets of both abolitionism and Christianity, and more, that the oppressed should naturally want to see others free, even if they themselves are not. Her letter suggests that if women fear that black men will use the vote to keep women in subjection, then they must "trust in the progressive and regenerating spirit that emancipated them" and have "faith in those eternal principles of justice" to eventually grant women the ballot as well (212). Ultimately, Jones's letter represents an appeal to the universal rights platform that Stanton and Anthony had advocated for years. She expresses dismay that the former-abolitionists seem to be turning away from "principle": "if it be an effort to establish a just government, do not let us violate its fundamental law by demanding the continuance of bondage for any

one subject, or any class of subjects, until another class can be enfranchised. This is to me absurd” (212).

Stanton’s reply to this letter provides an excellent entry into an analysis of white suffragist racism and its rhetorical functions. In her response, she draws on a number of rationales for enfranchising women along with black men. First, she suggests that it is in “the best interests of the race” for women to be granted the vote, since this will “restore” the “equilibrium of sex” in the realm of politics (212).²⁰ Indeed, Stanton writes that women’s enfranchisement would “do more to hasten the onward march of civilization” than any other reform, whether it be the spread of religion, temperance, or granting black men voting rights (212). Stanton’s discourse of civilization, which runs throughout the response, is rooted in the rhetoric of women’s cultural and spiritual superiority to men: according to Stanton, “the men at the helm, lacking the spiritual intuitions of women by their side, are steering without chart or compass” and therefore women’s voice is desperately needed to right the course.²¹ Women’s different, and in Stanton’s view, better, perspective is vital for the “nation’s life” (212).

Stanton combines this discursive thread with a second: the representation of black women as the ultimate victims of the Fifteenth Amendment. She argues that “as an

²⁰ It appears that in this instance Stanton is referring to “the human race” rather than “the white race,” although her category of “the human” certainly universalizes whiteness.

²¹ The discourse of civilization, as Gail Bederman argues in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (1995), was a potent tool for a number of conflicting ideologies. Bederman traces its use across the work of four turn-of-the-century figures—Ida B. Well, G. Stanley Hall, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Theodore Roosevelt—to demonstrate the ways that male dominance was tied to racial dominance. Adding Stanton to this list of figures would certainly enrich any consideration of the deployment of “civilizing” tropes for political and ideological purposes. See Newman, Chapter 2, for an exploration of suffragist rhetoric that examines the trope of “civilization.”

abolitionist we protested against the enfranchisement of the black man alone, seeing that the bondage of the women of that race, by the laws of the south, would be more helpless than before” (212). Taking on the mantle of abolitionism, Stanton reminds readers that adherents to the anti-slavery cause should be wary of any political solution that excludes black women. “What to her the loosing of the white man’s chains, if the ignorant laborer by her side, who has learned no law but violence, her equal to-day, is henceforth to become her master? To us the black women of the south are as precious in the scale of being as the men” (212).

Stanton’s implication of black male violence is repeatedly cited in the historiography of suffrage as evidence of her racism, but here the text allows us to be more specific, to read Stanton’s racism as inextricably bound up with misogynistic public discourse; in this instance, she deploys the image of the violent, “ignorant” black man to intervene in the rhetoric of male protection that antisuffragists espouse.²² Stanton suggests that if anyone should be ashamed of their stance on the Fifteenth Amendment, it is abolitionists, who seem to have forgotten that if black men need the vote for protection, then black women must need it as well.

This argument leads Stanton to delineate the sufferings of black women, who experience a “degradation man can never know”:

The strongest appeals made by abolitionists in the past against slavery have been on woman’s wrongs, and now, when the day of emancipation comes, shall man enter into all the rights, privileges and immunities of citizenship while the woman by his side is left without that scepter of power, the ballot, for her protection? Wendell Phillips says that emancipation is mockery to the black man without the ballot? Have not the women of this nation suffered

²² I use the terms “antisuffragist” and “antisuffrage” to denote the political figures who opposed women’s enfranchisement and the ideology deployed with this aim (rather than, say, those figures and ideologies that opposed black suffrage). This is in keeping with the historical use of the term. Those who opposed women’s suffrage were often simply referred to as “Antis.”

enough from man's unjust legislation, to know that such emancipation as he offers the black woman is a mockery also? Those slaves have worked and suffered side by side, shared each other's sorrows, fears, and anxieties through centuries of heathenism and bondage; and now shall abolitionists consent that another race of men shall find their liberties over this fresh holocaust of womanhood? (212)

Stanton represents the black woman as a rebuke against abolitionists who claim they are serving the best interests of the former-slaves by enfranchising black men. White women, like the author herself, are invisible in this argument, replaced by the abject figure of the black woman, who, after suffering the horrors of slavery, must surely deserve, and desperately need, the franchise as much as black men. This substitution, black women for white, becomes an important tool with which to critique abolitionist support for the Fifteenth Amendment; Stanton suggests that abolitionists attack her now because she sees "their vulnerable points"—the hypocrisy in arguing for individual and natural rights during the anti-slavery movement when now, by arguing for black male suffrage alone, "they compromise the best interests of the race they would serve, throw over board one-half 'their clients,' stultify their past declarations, and prove false to their education and high calling, as the statesmen of the hour" (212). By drawing on the image of the vulnerable black woman, Stanton beats back the letter writer's criticism that she has betrayed her equal rights roots, and instead, pins that accusation squarely on the abolitionists themselves.

This discursive deployment of black women leads directly into a third thread of Stanton's argument: her insistence that she is, in fact, arguing an equal rights platform, in that she wants women and black men enfranchised at the same time. She exhorts readers to remember that "[t]his is not with us a question of personality as between the individual black man and Saxon woman, but a principle of government" and that the question of "who goes first" is unnecessary, a Republican distraction: "If people were enfranchised by car-loads at

the Capitol of the nation, it might be a question who should go first, but suffrage for all in this hour of reconstruction could be more easily and logically secured than for a new class” (212). In this formulation, the black woman reverts to the white woman again, and after this rhetorical substitution is made, universal suffrage is once again urged: “Our demand has long been suffrage for all, white and black, male and female, of legal age and sound mind” (212).

In the course of her response, however, Stanton drifts away from this equal rights assurance to address the letter’s idea that a slave ought to rejoice at seeing anyone freed—Stanton disagrees, but not without first shifting white women into the position of the slave: “We believe that woman’s first duty is to herself and God, then man. If you are a slave, it is your first business to break the yoke that galls your own neck; you are to accept slavery or degradation at no price, from no mistake notions of white men’s rights or black men’s wrongs” (212). Stanton again makes a substitution, this time with white women taking the place of black female slaves, in order to argue that the oppressed should necessarily be selfish and fight for one’s own rights. The substitution is fused to Stanton’s insistence that if *it is* a matter of “who goes first”—and she insists it is not—then women ought to take precedence: “The most pitiful spectacle this country presents, is that of educated American women consenting, in this hour of our country’s danger, to this incoming tide of ignorance, poverty and vice, from every quarter of the globe, to legislate for them at the polls, without demanding that it be outweighed with the wealth, virtue and intelligence of their own sex” (212). Of course, Stanton now means “white women” when she writes women—the figure of the black woman she utilizes above disappears, to be replaced with the racialized language of education, class, and purity.

This exchange, one of the first instances of Fifteenth Amendment debate within the pages of *The Revolution*, demonstrates the wide assortment of arguments deployed against the amendment and the context within which those arguments are made. Stanton moves between the ideas of women's difference and superiority, black women's victimization, equal rights philosophy, and racist educated suffrage rhetoric with curious ease; in her attempt to address her interlocutor's arguments, she does not limit herself to one rhetorical thread or technique and instead employs a host of them. Stanton juggles arguments, not as a catchall technique or measure of desperation, but in response to a specific letter-writer, and more widely, past critics, and more widely still, readers and politicians who she wants to influence with her ideas. What seems vertiginous, then, can be read as a supple single response to multiple contingencies in an intersecting network of public discourse.

This tactic makes for disorienting reading, to be sure, but I am struck by the multiplicity of Stanton's rhetoric—the sheer breadth and restlessness of her response calls for an accounting of the way her racist rhetoric operates, which is exactly what we do not get when scholarship uses this racism as a method for explaining tensions within the movement or its subsequent disappointments and failures. When suffrage histories rely on racism as their interpretive warrant, they wind up unable to read the very object that they put at the center of their accounts. Unpacking this racism, on the other hand, offers a more specific understanding of the white suffragist position and the way it is managed through the exploitation of racial difference.

This multiplicity of Stanton's reasoning, the management of varied arguments and rhetorical threads, is facilitated by the figure of the black woman. Stanton is able to move from one line of argument to the next by shifting the suffrage subject from white woman to

black woman and then back again. When a universal category of “woman” is needed to shore up the claim of female cultural superiority, the suffrage subject is implicitly white; when the argument turns to abolitionist hypocrisy, however, that subject must now be black in order to rail against the charge of racism, of forgetting her equal rights roots. When the argument turns to the need for the protection of the vote, the black female figure does nicely—her wrongs delineated, her abjection decried, her victimization is without question. Once established, this figure’s victimization is transferred to the white female subject through the likening of women’s subjugation to slavery in order to argue the universal suffrage position, and, by the conclusion of the piece, the figure of the black woman is again invisible, replaced by the signifiers of whiteness in a call for educated suffrage. The representation of the black woman manages the multiplicity of this response; she is a cipher that allows Stanton to shift back and forth between varied and conflicting ideas and arguments.

Shifting Suffrage Subjects

This technique turns out not to be isolated to this single response, but is employed, in various ways, throughout the Fifteenth Amendment debate in *The Revolution*. For instance, another letter-to-the-editor published on June 18, 1868, suggests that *The Revolution*’s association with George Francis Train, the racist eccentric Democrat and advocate for woman suffrage who originally financed the paper, called into question the editors’ commitment to an equal rights platform. In their response, the editors move directly from defending the financing of their paper to a critique of the Fifteenth Amendment that hinges on their unwillingness to “forget” black women; they ask, “Is it not perfectly consistent with the record of the editors of “The Revolution” to remember the two million black women in

the land of bondage, when abolitionists threw them overboard?” (“What the People Say” 374)

The accusation of racism by association is immediately deflected through the representation of black women and their “betrayal” by abolitionists. Not only were black women “forgotten,” but the editors imply that they were the reason that “the word ‘male’ was introduced” into the Constitution in the Fourteenth Amendment in the first place—an action performed “expressly to avoid the calamity of enfranchising all the black women of the south” (374). Unlike abolitionists now calling for women to wait their turn, the editors claim their “love to humanity” is not “circumscribed to black men” (374) but instead is borne of a love for all people:

We have demanded his rights, not because he was a man or black, but because he belonged to the human family; and the same love of the race impels us to-day to demand the same rights for the woman by his side, for the multitudes of young girls in all our cities asking for work and wages, and widows and orphans struggling for a foothold in this whirlpool of vice and corruption with no strong arm to shelter or protect. (374)

Here again the figure of the black woman provides rhetorical cover for an equal rights argument. The black man is linked to the black woman, who is then linked to working class women of the North, and then linked further to an abject class of widows and orphans who desperately need the protection the vote could give them. Conspicuously missing from this lineage are middle and upper-class white women such as Stanton herself. Ignoring this constituency, the editors instead choose to highlight their magnanimity against abolitionists’ narrowness, who they call “so sectarian” that they can only recognize “that small fraction of humanity, the ‘black man’” and choose to “ostracize” anyone who seeks to widen the sphere of the “human family” (374).

In this formulation, the figure of the black woman becomes a symbol for both failed abolitionism and principled feminism—the representation enables the authors to defend themselves against charges of political compromise (in the form of taking money from Train for *The Revolution*) and shift those charges onto antisuffragists instead. It is the suffragists who oppose the Fifteenth Amendment who are, in actuality, remaining true to the spirit of abolitionism in their unwillingness to “forget” the black woman. On the other hand, it is this representation of the black woman that simultaneously forms the base of a wronged class—a class that sufficiently embodies the kind of vulnerability and victimization that elite white women lacked—and thus could more convincingly argue for suffrage rights. It is the figure of the black woman, the “woman by his side,” who links white working class women’s need for the vote to black men’s need of it—a need that was widely agreed upon, repeatedly emphasized, and considered beyond question by abolitionists in their campaign for the Fifteenth Amendment. In representing black women as the bridge between black men and white working class women, the authors are able to solidify their own beneficence while at the same time constructing the basis for their own enfranchisement—the figure of the middle-class white woman disappears here, but her interests are well-represented through the deployment of the black woman as a mediator between a universal rights paradigm and one based on the needs of an injured class.

Employing black women as a transferable symbol of victimhood develops into a highly portable strategy, one that is used repeatedly in the columns of *The Revolution* to beat back antisuffragist criticism and argue for the recognition of white women’s rights. In Stanton’s lead column in the Dec. 3, 1868 issue, she critiques Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson’s speeches at the November Woman Suffrage Convention in Boston by homing in on

the concept of a “negro’s hour”: the need for women to wait until the black man is safe before pressing her cause. She points out that while Wilson believes in woman’s suffrage, “he thinks it is not the *time* to make the demand,” a tactic Stanton lambasts as “one of the old arguments used by politicians from the beginning” to avoid doing what is right (“Hon. Henry Wilson” 338). Stanton reminds readers that the term “negro’s hour” only stands for black men: “Women must wait until the calling and election of the negro are first made sure! The negro *man!* we should have said, for the negro *woman*, who drank the deepest, bitterest dregs of American slavery, is to have no hope or life in this first resurrection, for republicans and abolitionists alike tell us that emancipation without the ballot is mockery” (338, emphasis in original). Stanton puts herself in the position of the “savior” of black women, both rhetorically and materially—if the concept of the “negro’s hour” erases black women and their experience in slavery, then by pointing out the false universal, Stanton makes black women visible again. Representing black women, in this instance, is both a technique with which to bludgeon the political opposition, and a method of building up the author’s character and credibility. Rendering black women visible becomes a concise way to point out abolitionist hypocrisy and its juxtaposition with suffragists’ steadfast loyalty to this group.

Black women are made visible, however, in a very specific way: as the supreme victims of the atrocities of slavery. The image of the suffering black woman becomes one of the most powerful tools with which to argue against the Fifteenth Amendment. They are the ones who “drank the bitterest dregs” of slavery, a formulation repeated time and again in *The Revolution*.²³ Indeed, the degradation of black women proves eminently useful in attacking

²³ Examples of this rhetoric abound in the pages of *The Revolution*, some of which I will analyze in more detail below. But pointing to additional instances of this depiction can perhaps help illustrate the frequency and vehemence with which the figure of the black

black male enfranchisement. In an editorial responding to abolitionist Gerrit Smith's refusal to sign an equal suffrage petition, the authors argue that "[e]very argument for the negro is an argument for woman and no logician can escape it" but they cement this point by again shifting from the general term "woman" to the degraded figure of the black woman:

[Smith] would undoubtedly plead the necessity of the ballot for the negro at the south for his protection, and point us to innumerable acts of cruelty he suffers to-day. But all these things fall as heavily on the women of the black race, yea far *more so*, for no man can ever know the deep, the damning degradation to which woman is subject in her youth, helplessness and poverty. ("Gerrit Smith on Petitions" 24)

Again, black women are deployed as the ultimate victims of slavery. They have not only suffered, but suffered *more* than black men, in particular gendered ways so horrific that men cannot even comprehend them.²⁴ But by the end of the passage, the author is back to

woman is called upon: for instance, in an editorial entitled, "The Fifteenth Amendment," Parker Pillsbury writes that black women are "the more wretched and helpless" of all disenfranchised people, and describes this figure as the "most helpless, abject, miserable being of human kind" (408). Similarly, in a reprint of suffragist Phoebe Couzins's speech to the NWSA, black women are constructed as the exemplar class of victims who "are, and always have been, in a far worse condition than that of the men," "subjected to greater brutalities, while compelled to perform exactly the same labor as men, toiling by their side in the fields, just as hard burdens imposed upon them, just as severe punishments decreed to them, with the *added* cares of maternity and household work; their children taken from them and sold into bondage, and no *man* can measure the depths of a *mother's* love; suffering a thousand fold more than any man *could* suffer, because no man can realize the depth of humiliation to which a woman can be thrust" (Couzins 12, emphasis in original). These examples are representative of a host of other similar descriptions of black female abjection in *The Revolution*.

²⁴ These repeated references to the "bitterest dregs" and "damning degradation" of black women are almost certainly referring to the rape of black women by white masters under slavery. While articles in *The Revolution* rarely invoke the term "rape," they point to it in multiple ways, often as they critique arguments about miscegenation. For instance, in an editorial by Parker Pillsbury in the Aug. 6, 1868 issue, the author critiques those who feign horror at miscegenation when the real horror lies in the crimes committed against black women by white men; the "co-mingling" of the races is the result of "that horrible havoc of colored female virtue by white men (or monsters) which has been perpetrated for almost a hundred years!" ("More Unsatisfied" 72). Likewise, in a brief article on the reaction to an

referring to a more general class of women—the young, the abandoned, the poor. The shift is slight and rather ambiguous—after all, Stanton began the sentence referring to the “women of the black race” and could be referring to young, vulnerable, and impoverished former black female slaves by the sentence’s conclusion—but it is the ambiguity and slipperiness of the rhetoric that make it effective for Stanton’s ends. The shift from black women to non-black women is almost imperceptible, but ultimately lends legitimacy to the call for all women to be enfranchised—the victimhood of black women is transformed to stand in for the victimization of *all* women.

Suffrage and Selfishness

But again, the white, female, middle-class subject, the one often penning these editorials, is markedly absent in these formulations. She is not the young, abandoned, or poor woman referred to in the above passage. Where exactly, then, is she? And why is she made invisible in these arguments? As *The Revolution* continues its fight against the Fifteenth Amendment, the reasons for this subject-shifting become more clear: the figure of the black woman allows white suffragists to toggle between the requirements and opportunities presented by nineteenth-century domestic discourse and its attendant charges of female selfishness.²⁵ In her “Editorial Correspondence” on Jan. 28, 1869, Stanton refers to the

Arkansas law that enforces equal rights in public places for blacks and whites, the authors mock the “crying out on every hand, ‘here we have the first step towards miscegenation’” by retorting: “Slavery survived until, through some cause or other, very few purely black skins were found in the south. Had the white people anything to do with that horrible and wholesale ‘miscegenation’? Answer, who dare!” (“Equalizing the Races” 17)

²⁵ Indeed, suffragist writing would be a promising ground for the investigation of the varied discursive deployments of domesticity. Like my discussion of *The Revolution*, much of the scholarly work on domesticity attempts to unpack its discursive effects in ways that do not

dilemma; in a moment of conciliation, she notes that it has been difficult for her to witness the “antagonism with men whom we respect, whose wrongs we pity, and whose hopes we would fain help them to realize” (49). She then acknowledges that it might not look particularly magnanimous for elite white women to argue against the Amendment: “When we contrast the condition of the most fortunate women at the North with the living death colored men endure everywhere, there seems to be a selfishness in our present position” (49).

Stanton then shifts, however, to argue that in fact, what “seems” to be “selfishness” is actually an act of selflessness—white women are fighting for black women, not merely themselves: “But remember we speak not for ourselves alone, but for all womankind, in poverty, ignorance and hopeless dependence, for the women of this oppressed race too, who, in slavery, have known a depth of misery and degradation that no man can ever appreciate” (49). The linkage is reversed in this instance—the middle-class white woman is connected through “all womankind” first to poor women and then black women—but the technique produces the same subject-shift to answer antisuffrage criticism. Stanton becomes the benevolent ventriloquist, speaking for those whom she claims cannot speak for themselves, for those who are too poor, too dependent, too oppressed to fight for their own rights. Rather than argue an equal rights platform—that is, that suffrage should be granted to all as a universal and unalienable right (an argument often utilized in *The Revolution*, by Stanton and others), here Stanton attempts an alternate strategy in which she positions herself as the black

simply ascribe to it complete liberation, on the one hand, or total subjugation, on the other. Domesticity instead “necessitates a method of analysis responsive to privileges that do not amount to dominance and disenfranchisements that do not constitute powerlessness” (Romero 10); this seems to me to parallel the current project in that my point is to show how white suffragists negotiated the contradictions of their own privileges and disenfranchisements. For discussions of domesticity, see Kelley, Romero, Tonkovich, and Sutton-Ramspeck.

woman's protector while the black woman simultaneously becomes white women's protection against antisuffrage critique.²⁶

In "A Pronunciamento" on July 15, 1869, Stanton even more directly addresses this charge of "selfishness" and pinpoints the hypocrisy of abolitionists who level it. She quotes Wendell Phillips at length to demonstrate the opposition's argument: he writes that he is "not much surprise[d]" by woman's rights activists' opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment, but that "[i]t is sad indeed" (qtd. in "A Pronunciamento," 24). Sad, in Phillips's view, because of the self-serving nature of the woman suffrage movement, which he deems "essentially a selfish one" in comparison to the "disinterested" spirit of abolitionism: "[Woman suffrage] is women contending for their own rights; the Abolitionists toiled for the rights of others. When women emphasize this selfishness, by turning aside to oppose the rights of others, it is, in truth, no generous spectacle (qtd. in "A Pronunciamento," 24). The opposition Phillips creates between a "disinterested" and self-interested political movement performs a number

²⁶ In fact, it seems worth pointing out that universal suffrage rhetoric is far more prevalent than calls for educated suffrage in the pages of *The Revolution*. For instance, Stanton frequently writes of the "natural" right of suffrage and the necessity for its universality: "So we say, to-day, to the abolitionists and republicans, we cannot accept your platform, because it is not based on the idea that suffrage is a natural right, we admit that 'negro suffrage' is a step in the right direction, but to educate the people to this partial demand even, we need the enthusiasm of a principle, which you do not proclaim, so long as you ask simply the extension of suffrage to two million men, instead of its universal application to every citizen of the republic" ("Going Over to the Copperheads," 361). Similarly, in an editorial entitled "Universal Suffrage," Stanton debunks the arguments for a variety of voting qualifications and argues, one by one, that they are inimical to democracy; as for the qualifications of color and sex, she writes: "neither time, money or education, can make black white, or woman man; therefore, such insurmountable qualifications, not to be tolerated in a republican government, are unworthy our serious consideration" (57). She then specifically rejects the idea of educated suffrage: "If property and education were a sure gauge of character, if intelligence and virtue were twin sisters, these qualifications might do: but such is not the case...if a man cannot read, give him the ballot, it is school-master. If he does not own a dollar, give him the ballot, it is the key to wealth, education and power" (57). While there are many more examples of universal rights rhetoric in *The Revolution*, these two demonstrate that this position was certainly well-represented at times in the periodical.

of tasks: first, it obscures the role of black men and women in the abolitionist cause, who not only fought for the freedom of others, and the right to freedom more generally, but also specifically for their own freedom. There is no space for these subjects in Phillips's formulation, and instead, abolitionists are by default white and benevolent. Abolitionism is presented as a completely self-effacing movement whose only concern is the protection of others. This mantle of altruistic protection, however, is withheld from woman suffragists—Phillips's contention that (white) women are dishonorably fighting for their own rights in their opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment erases black women and instead constructs the image of the selfish white suffragist, unreasonable, unbecoming—a “spectacle” to behold.

Phillips's argument puts the white suffragist in the difficult position of needing to respond on two fronts at the same time: she must argue against the gendered edict that women should necessarily be selfless because they are women, while simultaneously demonstrating that the charge of suffragist-selfishness is an example of the abolitionist refusal to recognize black women in their quest for black men's rights. This is no easy task, requiring one to argue “we're not selfish” on the one hand, and yet, “why shouldn't we be?” on the other. Stanton's response shows how she performs this rhetorical balancing act:

We should like to know why a movement among women for the outraged and oppressed of their sex is more selfish than that of man for his sex. Is not the philanthropy of Paulina Wright Davis pleading for the enfranchisement of the black woman of the south as pure as that of Wendell Phillips pleading for the black men, or of Frederick Douglass for his own race? (24)

Again, the figure of the black woman is shifted into the object of the suffrage fight; in an attempt to pierce the universalism of the male category, Stanton points out that white men are fighting for black men in the same way that she claims white women are fighting for black women.

Stanton then turns to dismantling the notion that a “disinterested” politics is the most effective or truest form of politics by reminding readers that abolitionists’ commitment to the cause was forged in their own “persecution”—it “strengthens reformers in their positions and makes their philanthropy, however disinterested in starting, in time, more or less a personal matter” (24). Why shouldn’t politics be personal? Stanton suggests that the standard for a “pure” politics lies not in its impersonality, but in its adherence to principle: “The same clear perception of the beauty of a principle, the same essential elements of heroism, are shared by all those who advocate reforms in advance of their day and generation, whether affecting their own class or another” (24). To match Phillips, Stanton employs two types of arguments—she reminds readers that white women are fighting for the “outraged” black woman, while at the same time suggesting that woman suffragists (and all political activists) should not be held to a false standard of selflessness.²⁷

If it seems like this is a case of wanting to have it both ways, I think that is precisely the point—the doubleness of Stanton’s rhetoric in this piece, as elsewhere in *The Revolution*, demonstrates the demands of the political context in which it seeks to intervene. Stanton’s insistence that white suffragists are not selfish because they are fighting for the forgotten black woman pivots into an insistence that selfishness should not be anathema to politics—Stanton fights to make black women visible as the victimized subjects deserving the vote while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal notion of self-sacrificing womanhood. She

²⁷ The exchange between Phillips and Stanton is a good example of how the so-called “cult of true womanhood” functioned as both a limiting and empowering discourse for white woman suffragists; see Welter; Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl”; and Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* for early considerations of the “cult of true womanhood.” This highly generative concept has been reformulated, expanded, and critiqued over the past forty years by scholars interested in tracking not only the historical phenomenon it attempts to describe but its contemporary critical deployment; see Kerber, McCall, Helley and Reverby, Kaplan, Davidson and Hatcher, and Rupp.

is developing both offensive and defensive strategies to respond to a conflicting web of political discourse, both engaging with that discourse and attempting to transform it.

This multiplicity is on full display in Stanton's May 20, 1869 editorial, "The Fifteenth Amendment." Stanton protests not only the amendment, but the American Equal Rights Association's official stance on it, which she claims stifles women's own political work, using evidence from the proceedings of the May AERA convention. "With men in our associations, in our committees, to-day managing our conventions, the women's thought is practically oversloughed, and no resolution that is in conflict with republicans and abolitionists, can be presented on our platforms" (313). Stanton suggests that just when a possible Sixteenth Amendment should be the focus of the organization, the "warp and woof of our speeches and resolutions," the Association instead wastes time passing resolutions of support for the Fifteenth Amendment:

Yet we are required by black men, alike in Washington, Boston, and New York, on Woman Suffrage platforms, not only not to oppose the Fifteenth Amendment, but to pass resolutions rejoicing in its adoption, which is practically rejoicing that every shade and type of manhood, however ignorant and degraded, whether native or foreign, shall henceforth make laws for us and our daughters to the third and fourth generation, compelling us, too, to stultify ourselves as abolitionists, and rejoice in the fact that 2,000,000 of black women at the south are simply to change their form of slavery from white to black masters, under the same code of laws we have been repudiating for ourselves for the last twenty years. (313)²⁸

²⁸ The resolution Stanton is referring to was published in the May 27, 1869 issue of *The Revolution* as part of a three-part printing of the proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association. The transcript reads as follows: "Fred. Douglass said that as there is a most important question submitted to the American people, he wanted to have a vote upon it from that audience. He then read the following resolutions: Resolved, That the American Equal Rights Association, in loyalty to its comprehensive demands for political equality of all American citizens, without distinction of race or sex, hails the extension of suffrage to any class heretofore disfranchised, as a cheering part of the triumph of our whole idea. Resolved, therefore, That we gratefully welcome the pending fifteenth amendment, prohibiting disfranchisement on account of race, and earnestly solicit the State

This passage makes what could seem like a bizarre and schizophrenic set of claims; how are we to read the scathing racism of such an argument, on the one hand, with the claim to abolitionism, on the other? The first half of this response hinges on the racist anger at being prioritized behind “ignorant and degraded” black (and foreign) men, while the second half expresses indignation that black women are left behind. Blackness, in Stanton’s formulation, is both an advantage (for men), and a source of victimization (for women).

In arguing against the amendment, Stanton again uses the figure of the black woman to solidify her commitment to equal rights, while equating white “masters” to newly-freed black men, eliding both the history of slavery and the differences in power between the two groups. Black men, at this juncture, are not experiencing the “living death” that Stanton previously acknowledges, but instead, armed with the vote, are catapulted to a position of superiority in the U.S. political system. Stanton’s expression of victimization by this development is channeled through the black woman, yet again—unable to sufficiently embody a credible victim, Stanton must position the black woman to do this rhetorical work for her. This, I think, is the source of the confusion in such an argument, the method by which Stanton can in one breath produce a litany of racist laments and in the next claim the mantle of noble abolitionism. Shifting the suffrage subject to black women becomes a mode of transition between the doubled-arguments Stanton employs between universal rights and rights based on the qualifications of class injury.

Legislatures to pass it without delay” (“Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association: Second Day’s Proceedings” 321).

Turning the Tables

A final example from *The Revolution* demonstrates the degree to which the representation of black women becomes a device within white woman suffragist rhetoric. In an editorial entitled “The Fifteenth Amendment: The Tables Turned,” Stanton constructs an imaginary world in which white women rule in political, economic, and social terms, and where men are utterly without rights. Hoping to “enable our masculine law-makers to take a feeling view of the situation,” Stanton depicts men as a feminized-class that has been systematically deprived of “inalienable rights to person, property, wages, [and] children,” who are “weary and heartsick of their oppressed, down-trodden condition” (56). The miserable situation comes to a head when “the country was in such a terribly disorganized condition” that changes had to be made (56):

The women naturally enough thought that the extension of suffrage to all their sex might bring about the much needed reform; so a great discussion arose all over the country, on the general question of suffrage, as to whether it was a natural or political right, and if natural, then black women, no one thought of men, as well as white should share its privileges. Accordingly it was decided to enfranchise the black women, and the proposition was received with wild applause from Maine to California, and after much debate in Congress and out an amendment to the Constitution was submitted, demanding ‘womanhood suffrage’ in every state in the Union. (56)

In Stanton’s vision, men begin to “pric[k] up their ears” at this development and question whether adding more women to the ranks of voting citizens will improve their dire situation—if the best “native born women of property and education” have proven “tyrannical,” why should the addition of “all the ignorant, degraded types of womanhood” make that situation any better? (56) The men come to the conclusion that this idea is “preposterous” and demand that if anyone is to be enfranchised, it should be the tax-paying, educated, (white) men, rather than black women (56).

But just as the (white) men begin to clamor for their rights in Stanton's imaginary world, just when "their enthusiasm was at white heat" and they are ready to seize what is rightfully theirs, they are admonished by a "silver tongued orator" who lambasts them for making political claims at such a precarious time:

"Down, you ignorant, narrow, selfish men, you besotted democrats, masquerading in the garb of human rights! had you been educated in my school, you would not stand here to-day clamoring for your own rights nor those of your race or sex, but you would make angels weep with your eloquent appeals for the black women of the south, the most peeled and down-trodden of all God's creatures!" (56)

The men are properly "charmed" by this argument, and they are almost swayed to begin chants of "Womanhood Suffrage!" and "This is the black woman's hour!" when the figure of Mr. Phillips intervenes to tell the men they are about to be deceived—he asks: "What assurance have you that the ignorant hordes you are now marshalling into the political citadel will not be the first to pull up the draw-bridge and bar the gates?" (56) Phillips suggests that the result of black women's enfranchisement would be "national suicide" and expresses disbelief that (white) women would have the gall to "regard the opinion of the most ignorant of their own sex as of far more value than the wisest from man!" (56) Stanton pithily concludes her scene with a request that "readers make the application" to present-day reality, "for this is the way the case stands to-day for women" (56).

This is the most conspicuous example of white suffragists' rendering of black women as a rhetorical tool to engage their political opposition—in Stanton's imaginary, they are shifted into the black man's position to demonstrate the absurdity of the antisuffrage abolitionist argument. Clearly, one of Stanton's "lessons" is that white men would never think to prioritize black women ahead of their own rights. And yet, black women are still, as always, constructed as the definitive figures of abjection; even as they embody the black

male subject position, they retain this victimized status as the most “down-trodden” on earth. This deployment of black women is perplexing; we could read it as an indictment of abolitionist hypocrisy, as yet another way of highlighting black women in a debate that often obscures them. This is no doubt one effect of Stanton’s narrative; she “rescues” the black woman again, placing her in a central rhetorical position—rather than existing on the margins, she is the focus of this fantasy creation. This is further emphasized by the invisibility of black men in the narrative—“no one thought of [them]”; their conspicuous absence in the story demonstrates the incongruity between black men’s and black women’s real-world political positions.

On the other hand, what kind of rescue is this if black women are simultaneously denounced as “ignorant hordes” who will bring about national ruin? Yes, black women are shifted into the subject position of black men in the rhetoric of the story, and therefore this slur is supposed to describe the men and not the women. But Stanton’s racism bleeds through both the imaginary and the reality; as you read it becomes almost impossible not to begin questioning who is supposed to represent what. Do we read this reversal as a subversive highlighting of black women, or is it, alternately, a racist threat against them? The doubleness of Stanton’s story represents an attempt to again deploy black women in multiple positions and in varied ways—it is this shifting multiplicity that drives the narrative and holds together Stanton’s rhetoric.

It is also the representation that again allows Stanton to represent white women’s victimization. This imaginary role-reversal, oddly enough, takes place through the representation of white men. The story elevates black women with enfranchisement, which we are told is deserved because of their suffering, while white men are left behind and made

to wait. But white men are imagined to represent another form of victimhood, and their suffering is juxtaposed with black women's; the same words are used to describe both groups—white men too are “down-trodden” and oppressed. Through this juxtaposition with black women, they come to realize that they should not have to wait for their rights; the elevation of black women is the catalyst for Phillips's plea. Stanton places her adversary in her own subject position, again ventriloquizing, imbuing his “character” with her own thoughts and words, giving her the kind of control over her opposition's political rhetoric that she cannot possess in political reality. His “eloquence” and desperation are her own. White men become the ultimate victims of the story, demonstrating the lengths to which elite white women could go to represent their own wrongs without ever representing themselves.

Representing White Woman Suffragists' Contradictory Inheritance

Stanton's attempt to “turn the tables,” and the multiple shifts in subject positions that this entails, suggests that the figure of the black woman is wielded as an incredibly malleable, eminently usable tool with which to represent white women's claims to suffrage. The deployment of this figure in the Fifteenth Amendment debates in *The Revolution* demonstrates the ways that suffragists used black women's racial difference to manage gender difference. When the category of “women” is not recognized by antisuffragists as a group needing the vote, that category is raced to make women visible, to make their victimization seen. When white women are boxed in by the ideals of true womanhood and their prohibition on unseemly political behavior, racial difference is used to provide evidence that suffragists did indeed fit within the parameters of female goodness. When political adversaries ignore the universal rights platform they once advocated, white women remind

abolitionists of their hypocrisy through the lens of race in the form of the black woman.

Racial difference is not simply feared or reviled, then, but also used strategically to highlight and mitigate gender difference and shield white women from its proscriptions. The relationship between racial and gender difference that emerges within *The Revolution* is not only an antagonistic or exploitative one, though it certainly is both of these things; it is a field in which the political and ideological vulnerabilities of gender are translated through race in order for white woman suffragists to become more deserving, more palatable, or more visible.

But it might seem strange that white woman suffragists would need to find ways to gain this kind of recognition—after all, they were some of the most privileged women in the country—or that they used the figure of the black woman, a figure who represented *less* power and privilege, to make these claims. This dissonance, however, can be read as an indicator of the contradictory inheritance of white suffragists, who were both privileged and subjugated by the political system they were embedded in and fighting against. Entitled and yet disenfranchised, both empowered and oppressed, suffragists such as Stanton represent the conflicting nexus of the racialized, classed, and gendered political identity of the white middle class woman. The doubleness of this position—its inherent contradiction and friction—is reflected in the shifting, inconsistent and at times paradoxical rhetoric seen in *The Revolution*, and undergirded by the figure of the black woman. White woman suffragists repeatedly construct and exploit this figure to negotiate the complexities of their subject positions and their circumscription by Reconstruction political discourse; tracing this figure demonstrates the ways in which white suffragist racism represented a form of management of

this conflicting inheritance, both of an embodied subject position and a discursive field not of their own making.

When split-narratives overlook a text like *The Revolution*, or use it solely as confirmation of white suffragist racism, this kind of complex operation is covered over; in losing the text, the interpretive opportunities to elucidate the operations of racism and their relations to a web of political and social discourses are lost as well. Relying on racism as a form of evidence, as a way of understanding *something else* rather than as an object in need of explication itself, produces a critical gap that engulfs the very movement and leaders that have been painstakingly canonized over the past fifty years. Tracing the figure of the black woman in white suffragist writing offers a way to read this racism and in doing so, read some of the complexity back into a history that is drained through the process of our coming to know it so well.

Calling attention to the representation of black women demonstrates that not only do split-narratives not do a very good job of explaining the operations of racism (preferring to instead use it as a trope and the reason for “the split”) but that these stories seem oddly attached to an empty explanation even as they weight that explanation with significant meaning for both the history and present of U.S. feminism. That this process comes at the expense of an analysis of the operations of race and gender should be read as a sign of just how important “the split” is for building a past that can be used for feminism’s present. The divide must be maintained as the central moment of suffragist history in order for feminism to understand its trajectory, its present problems, and its future. How this process manifests in the concept of feminist “waves” is a topic I take up in the final chapter.

But before looking to the wide-ranging feminist circulation of split-narratives and their attendant charges of racism, I want to turn to the other side of the canonization problem, moving from representations of black women in white suffragism to black women's own representation of the historical moment, to the sort of non-canonical material that rarely makes an appearance in split-narratives. While in this chapter I have been concerned with the work of canonized suffrage figures and their negotiation of their contradictory subject positions, in the next chapter, I look to non-canonical black woman suffragists to explore how their accounts might intervene in the privileging of the suffrage "split." How do readings of black women's suffragist writing reorient our suffrage narratives, and what do they produce for our understandings of the movement? In constructing a second story of suffragism, I hope to emphasize that there are multiple possibilities in rehistoricization that can produce valuable readings of what we have come to take for granted in feminism's history.

CHAPTER 3

Frances Harper's Feminist Deconstruction of the Suffrage "Split"

"Talk of giving women the ballot-box? Go on. It is a normal school, and the white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America."

—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day* 219)

With this rebuke, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper concluded her speech to the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention in May 1866. It was her first on the woman's suffrage platform, and would be one of only a handful of her speeches recorded in that forum. We know that the major white figures in the suffragist movement were present—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott, to name a few—but there is no record of their reactions to Harper's speech, only the cryptic, suggestive "[Applause]" inserted into the proceedings, an invitation to speculate on the predominantly-white audience of woman suffragists' reactions to such a thorough critique of their movement. Scholars routinely suggest that Stanton and Anthony were less than pleased with Harper's speech, noting that they refused to include it in their massive *History of Woman Suffrage*, still the largest collection of U.S. suffrage documents and commentary to date. It was, as Nell Painter puts it, "too strong for those soon to be the country's leading woman suffragists" (*Sojourner Truth*, 225).¹ But the above excerpt and the remarks that precede it are far more complex than a simple take-down of white suffragist racism. What does Harper mean by her comparison of

¹ See Peterson, *Doers of the Word* 257 for a similar interpretation.

voting rights with teacher training? Why would suffrage be more necessary for white women than black women, who Harper specifically leaves out of this formulation? And what might the ballot have to do with white women's class position, or their selfishness? Harper's conclusion, with its harsh criticism of the movement's leaders, might at first glance be the most striking aspect of the piece, but her speech as a whole prompts a consideration of Harper's configuration of the suffrage question and its place within the post-war struggles for racial and sexual equality.

Indeed, Harper began her speech in a rather different vein, not critiquing the suffrage movement, but instead telling her audience how she came to understand the need for women to join together in the struggle for equal rights. She admits that she has been more preoccupied with "wrongs" instead: "Born of a race whose inheritance has been outrage and wrong, most of my life had been spent in battling against those wrongs. But I did not feel as keenly as others, that I had these rights, in common with other women, which are now demanded" (217). It was not until her husband had died, and a state administrator had taken her home, sold her belongings, and forced her to leave the state—not until then did Harper understand the difference that being a woman made. "Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time he would have had another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, and sold his bed, and taken away his means of support" (217). Not until then did she realize that "justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law" (217).

Harper's moment of conversion to a woman's rights platform, however, comes with a stipulation: that this platform be expansive enough to hold all oppressed classes. Moving from the personal realization to the idiom of collective politics, from the language of "I" to

the rhetoric of “we,” Harper shifts what women’s equality might mean: “We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul” (217). Woman’s rights become meaningless if those rights cannot encompass racial justice too. But on the heels of this expansive notion, Harper shifts again, this time to the language of “you”: “You tried that in the case of the negro. You pressed him down for two centuries; and in so doing you crippled the moral strength and paralyzed the spiritual energies of the white men of the country” (217). Harper’s shift to the second-person is jarring, and jolts her audience out of the lofty collective sentiments just uttered and into a reality in which women, the collectivity just called upon, are divided.

Harper’s rhetorical shifting between personal, cooperative, and divisive language continues throughout her remarks; just when listeners are lulled into a sense of uncomplicated collectivity, she jars them awake with a reminder that this collectivity is fraught, fragile.² She talks of her desire for a day when America has “no privileged class, trampling upon and outraging the unprivileged classes, but will be then one great privileged nation,” but follows this national ideal with a statement of what separates its constituents: “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man’s hand against me” (218). The national collective

² Shirley Wilson Logan notes the ways these interchanges move between tactics of association and dissociation in order to persuade Harper’s audience with what Logan calls “strategic shifts from ‘apart of’ to ‘apart from’” that “allow [Harper] first to build community, then to point out weaknesses in its construction” (47). See Logan, *We Are Coming*, Chapter 3, for a discussion of Harper’s rhetorical strategies, and especially 57-59 for an analysis of Harper’s 1866 speech. Elizabeth Petrino also examines the language of this speech for the links it constructs across race and class, creating “solidarity” between the poor white working class and the freedpeople; see “We Are Rising As a People” 136.

cannot be achieved without recognition of the injustices perpetuated against its individual parts. From “you” back to “I,” Harper notes her personal experience on the street cars of Philadelphia, where she is often humiliated by being relegated to the smoking car, or simply refused altogether. “They did it once, but the next time they tried it, they failed; for I would not go in. I felt the fight in me; but I don’t want to have to fight all the time” (218). Harper uses her personal experience with the humiliations of travel to connect her experience with that of another black woman, Harriet Tubman. For Harper, Tubman is a “Moses” figure “who was brave enough and secretive enough to act as a scout for the American army” and yet, this courage and service does not save Tubman from the same indignities and violence that Harper encounters while travelling. According to Harper, the last time the two met, Tubman’s hands were “all swollen from a conflict with a brutal conductor, who undertook to eject her” from her seat on a train (219). The injustice Harper experiences is not only a personal, individual matter, but one that black women, both formerly enslaved and free, in the North and the South, faced daily.

This brings Harper to the conclusion of her speech, where she shifts back into language that marks the divide that exists within the category of “women,” calling the vote a “normal school” that white women desperately need to be educated in. In light of the rhetorical strategy Harper maps throughout the speech, this final shift and its juxtaposition of a collective of black women who have served, sacrificed, and experienced daily injustice with a class of white women who need the vote in order to be shaken out of “their airy nothings and selfishness,” takes on a different tenor (219). Harper is not simply calling out white women for their racism or their lack of interest in the world around them; the vote, in Harper’s terms, is a form of education that can open up those who exercise it to the diverse

social world in which they live. Harper turns the discourse of “educated suffrage”—the idea that education should be a qualification for the ballot—on its head, transforming the vote into a source of education itself. In this reversal, black women are more educated than white women—they are the class who know the world better and understand the injustices and oppression that need remedies. Suffrage, in its educational sense, is superfluous to black women—it cannot teach them what they already know. Voting rights, in this formulation, will not change the world, but instead, will expose that world to a new class of people, constructing a new perspective from which to view the nation. Harper limits what suffrage can accomplish, but she also expands it as an act that can instruct citizens in the “brutal element in society” and through that standpoint of awareness, effect social change. Suffrage is both smaller and bigger than her white colleagues imagined; it is not simply a right to be granted, but a method of understanding oppression.

Harper’s reconfiguration of suffrage through the “normal school” trope has been ignored in the historical archive. While historians often note that Stanton and Anthony erased Harper’s 1866 speech from their suffrage records, the erasure of this speech, and its revision of suffragism, is mirrored in the historiography of suffrage that constructs and examines the 1869 “split.” While Harper herself is often represented in this body of work, albeit in a limited way, these narratives largely pass over “We Are All Bound Up Together.” This omission is striking. Given that the “split” is constructed around white suffragist racism, one might expect Harper’s speech to serve as evidence of black women’s indictment of white suffragist bigotry. But Harper’s speech is absent, even as its most available reading seems tailor-made for the “split.” Why might this be?

This chapter focuses on the relationship between Harper's work, the historiography of suffrage, and feminist studies. The historiographical construction of, and obsession with, the 1869 "split" creates a critical dichotomy wherein scholars focus on a rupture between two "sides," use evidence to assign historical figures to one side or the other, and then articulate whether or not these figures were "correct" in their political choices. This structure pairs Frances Harper with another activist of the era, Sojourner Truth, as black women who had to "choose" between their race or their sex in the face of the Fifteenth Amendment and the debates it sparked in the suffrage movement. These figures are alternately assigned to the "race" side of the question—the pro-Amendment, American Woman Suffrage (AWSA) "side" that repudiated Stanton, Anthony, and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA)—or the "sex" "side" represented by Stanton and the NWSA. But in either case, the "split" remains the governing framework by which the work of these activists comes to be understood, with consequences not only for the historiography of suffrage, but for the larger field of feminist inquiry. The "split" produces and proscribes positions for these black women as symbols in ways that foreclose the possibility of a more complex understanding of their negotiation of race and gender. As symbols, they are deployed to fulfill the logic of the "split" and become the means to endlessly reinscribing it. In the process, Harper becomes an important African American literary figure, disconnected from suffragism *per se*, while Truth stands "for" feminism, an iconic foremother of the movement. I argue that the critical attachment to the "split" and its attendant need to understand how historical figures reacted to the divide effaces Harper's career as a writer-activist and the feminist theorizing that can be drawn from her work.

Race vs. Sex, Harper vs. Truth

“As we know, in the emplotment or narrativization of any history, much depends on familiar vocabularies of reference—on the circulation of names, proper names, and some names are more proper than others.”

—Deborah McDowell, “Transferences” 158

The name “Sojourner Truth,” according to Deborah McDowell, is one of those “more proper names” that circulate in critical and popular discursive arenas, a name to “drop” in order to flash what Nell Painter calls one’s “political correctness” when it comes to matters of feminism and race (McDowell 158; Painter, *Sojourner Truth* 273). Like McDowell and Painter, I am concerned with the effects of this kind of circulation, but I am simultaneously interested in thinking through the process of how one name becomes more “proper” than another. Why, for instance, can you go online in 2013 and buy a Sojourner Truth decorative throw pillow but not one for Frances Ellen Watkins Harper?³ In this section I sketch an answer to this question through an analysis of each woman’s discursive construction within the historiography of suffrage and feminist theory, ultimately suggesting that if Harper’s feminism is obscured, we might look beyond the logic of the “split” in order to recover it.

Sojourner Truth, as McDowell and Painter both attest, has attained an iconic status in both popular U.S. culture and scholarly work. She is among the most recognizable figures of feminism, and is arguably the most famous black female historical figure. She is most well-known for the “Ain’t/Ar’n’t I A Woman?” speech at the 1851 Akron, Ohio Woman’s Rights Convention⁴—a speech that historians now know to be apocryphal, not because she did not

³ See <http://www.cafepress.com/+sojourner_truth_throw_pillow,106290308> for the pillow in question.

⁴ The title of Truth’s speech is most frequently referred to as “Ain’t I a Woman?” but the word “Ain’t” never appears in any of the three transcripts that have circulated since 1851; the

give a speech at that time and place, but because its most famous “transcription” was produced by a white feminist 12 years after the fact and differs widely from a much more brief transcript published by a journalist less than one month after the event. Frances Gage, a white activist, poet, and writer of the era, published the now infamous account of Truth’s speech in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on May 2, 1863. It was republished as a part of Truth’s 1878 edition of her *Narrative*, and again in Stanton and Anthony’s *History of Woman Suffrage* in 1881. The transcript now considered more accurate was published by Marius Robinson in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 7, 1851.⁵ In an analysis of the two versions, historian Carleton Mabee concludes that

Gage, the poet, intended to present the symbolic truth of Truth’s words more than the literal truth; that Gage, the novelist [...] felt pressed to make Truth’s story more compelling than it was; that Gage, the passionate advocate of blacks’ and women’s rights, embellished her report to strengthen the causes she favored, imposing her own ideas and expression on what Truth said. Disappointing as it may be, the comparison makes it unlikely that Truth asked the thrilling question, ‘Ar’n’t I a woman?’, the principal words by which Truth is known today. (80)⁶

most popularized transcript repeats the refrain “Ar’n’t I A Woman?” (Gilbert 134). See Logan, *With Pen and Voice* 17-27 for two versions of this speech, one written in an exaggerated dialect of the plantation South, and one twentieth-century version with the dialect edited out. Neither of these transcripts represent Truth’s voice accurately (not that this is possible when there is no recording of her speech)—Truth was fluent in English and Dutch, born and raised in New York rather than the South, and thus unlikely to speak with any similarity to the imagined language of the Southern slave; see Haraway, esp. 97-98, for a discussion of the “counterfeit language” of these transcripts and the ways that their repeated comparison “retroubles the ear” and “makes us rethink her story” (97). See Peterson, “*Doers of the Word*” 47-55 for another analysis of the difficulty Truth’s figure poses for the historian.

⁵ See Mabee, esp. 67-68 for a thorough analysis of these two “transcripts” of Truth’s speech.

⁶ See also Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, esp. Chapter 14, and Painter, “Difference, Slavery, and Memory” for an analysis of Gage’s version and why it has retained such staying power.

And yet, Truth's "words" continue to circulate in both popular culture and academic work: her image graces countless forms of merchandise and memorabilia and she has had her own U.S. postage stamp since 1986, while her name in feminist studies has become synonymous with the dual-challenges to misogynist notions of women's inherent weakness, on the one hand, and the implicit whiteness of the category of "woman," on the other.⁷ She is one of the most frequently cited historical figures of the abolitionist period, and scholars routinely refer to her "legendary status" and her position as the "best-remembered African American woman of the nineteenth century" (Peterson, *Doers of the Word* 24; Jones 106). Indeed, the frequency with which Truth is called upon in a variety of critical work has now become a critical curiosity of its own, with one scholar noting that Truth has become a "standard exhibit in modern liberal historiography" (Palmer 152).

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, on the other hand, has not achieved this kind of legendary status in U.S. culture or its academic contexts. Not only are there no Harper bumper stickers or commemorative stamps, none of the popular culture references that circulate Truth's name, but her recovery as a significant historical figure has been far less pronounced, taking place primarily through the revision of the literary canon, rather than the historiography of the women's movement.⁸ This literary recovery even began rather late, relative to the recovery work done in the 1970s and early 1980s by feminist literary critics

⁷ See Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 60-64; Giddings 54-55; Riley 1; hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 159-160; White 13-16; and Haraway for examples.

⁸ This discordance may be evidence of another "split" worth investigating: a disciplinary one between history and literary studies. As I detail below, black feminist literary critics are largely responsible for Harper's recovery, and more, have used her literary works to generate feminist theory from their criticism (see Christian and Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* for early analyses). But these contributions, as well as Harper's literary work, are virtually ignored in the historiographical archive. My point is that it is precisely these kinds of texts that can bring Harper's contributions to feminist theorizing into focus.

interested in unearthing previously disregarded or unknown female authors. The primary work she is known by, the novel *Iola Leroy* (1892), only came out in paperback in 1987, and until Frances Smith Foster's 1990 anthology of Harper's work, many of her most important texts—including poems, short stories, and speeches—were unavailable. Foster went on to uncover three serialized novels by Harper, publishing an edition containing *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-1877), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889) in 1994. Since then, Harper has been established as a significant literary figure, one who traversed multiple genres and offers varied opportunities for revising the way critics view black women's writing in the nineteenth century.

Barbara Christian begins her 1980 study of black women novelists by showing how Harper's *Iola Leroy* demonstrates the ways black women writers had to work within and against the representations and stereotypes that proscribed their worlds. According to Christian, the novel is important, “not because it is a ‘first’ or because it is a good novel, but because it so clearly delineates the relationship between the images of black women held at large in society and the novelist's struggle to refute these images” (5).⁹ While she comes to different conclusions, Hazel Carby also looks to Harper's novel to reassess how it changes the way critics understand the genre in the nineteenth century. In Carby's view, *Iola Leroy* not only performs important political functions as a tool of social change, it also makes us reconsider several literary conventions critics thought they understood, such as the use of the mulatta figure, the dominance of female-authored texts by male frameworks, and the genre of

⁹ For a significant part of the twentieth century, *Iola Leroy* was considered the first novel published by a black woman in the U.S. See Christian 253 and Carby, “Introduction” ix. As Carby notes, that distinction now goes to Harriet Wilson with the 1859 publication of the autobiographical novel *Our Nig*.

sentimentalism.¹⁰ After Christian and Carby devoted sections of their ground-breaking works to Harper, other literary critics followed suit, producing analyses of Harper's novels, poetry, oratory, and rhetoric and justifying her inclusion in the canon expansion debates of the 1980s and 90s.¹¹ These contributions demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between Harper's work and black feminist literary criticism—as black feminist critics recovered Harper's oeuvre, reevaluated it, and used it to challenge and transform the canon of American literature, this process in turn became an important method for the development of black feminist literary theory. While today there are few full-length studies of Harper's work, and she is still primarily known as the author of *Iola Leroy*, she has certainly become if not a major writer, a significant minor figure in the widening sphere of U.S. literary studies.

Harper's canonization in literary criticism, however, has not translated into a similarly secure position as a major figure of U.S. feminism. This is surprising; Harper's work not only deals in some of the most important questions of race, gender, and the work of

¹⁰ Christian and Carby disagreed about Harper's use of the mulatta figure in *Iola Leroy*; for Christian, Harper's transformation of the mulatta from a tragic figure to one of hope and possibility represents a refutation of white stereotypes, whereas Carby sees Harper's deployment of this figure as a method for exploring and juxtaposing two worlds, one black and one white. As Ann duCille points out, this distinction can be traced to a more general difference between the two critics: Christian reads Harper as far more conservative, more "accomodat[ing]" to white readers, whereas Carby, along with duCille, read Harper as more radical, producing a savvy figure that is "both a rhetorical device and a political strategy" (duCille 7). See also Tate 144-149 for a similar argument, in which the novel is read for the way it "uses the mulatto's inherent transitional racial and class status to construct emancipatory resocialization, grounded in virtue, education, and hard work" (147).

¹¹ For general criticism of Harper, see: Nerad, Foster, "Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism," Robbins, Rutkowski, Boyd, Sorisio, Johnson, and Peterson, "Frances Harper." For criticism of Harper's oratory and rhetoric, see Stancliff, Logan *We Are Coming*, and Logan "Black Speakers, White Representations." For criticism of Harper's poetry, see Foster, *Written By Herself*, Petrino, "We Are Rising," and Sherman. See Lauter for a discussion of the resistance to including Harper in the U.S. literary canon.

Reconstruction in the nineteenth century, but her wider career as an activist-intellectual offers considerable possibilities for feminist interpretation. Harper was one of the few black women of her time to go on the lecture circuit;¹² she was deeply involved in the suffrage cause and worked within both white and black suffrage organizations;¹³ she travelled to the South to help newly freed people as they navigated the dangerous and difficult period of Reconstruction;¹⁴ and she expressed a particularly keen interest in helping the freedwomen as

¹² Harper began her work as an anti-slavery lecturer in Rhode Island in August 1854, and would continue her public speaking, in both the North and South, over the next three decades. While trained as a teacher, she was drawn to devoting herself full-time to the abolitionist cause when her native state of Maryland passed a law banning free blacks from entering the state. Harper heard the story of a man who had unknowingly violated this statute, was sold into slavery in Georgia, and later died during an attempt to escape back to the North. Her friend William Still recounts Harper's declaration: "Upon that grave I pledged myself to the Anti-Slavery cause" (758). After making this decision, Harper moved to Philadelphia, where she lived at Still's home, one of the major hubs of the Underground Railroad, and read as many abolitionist tracts and anti-slavery documents as she could in order to train for her new calling. See Still, 755-780 for an account of her early lecturing years and excerpts of her letters from the lecture circuit. See also Boyd, 119-125 for additional analysis of this period of Harper's activism.

¹³ Harper worked in a number of woman suffrage organizations, some specifically geared toward winning the vote and others more loosely affiliated with political reform: from 1866 until the end of the century, she attended meetings or was a member of the Association for the Advancement of Women, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Universal Peace Union, the American Woman Suffrage Association, and the International Council of Women. She was a co-founder of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 (Collier-Thomas 49). Within many of the organizations run by white women, Harper was "frequently referred to as *the* principal representative of 'colored women'" (Collier-Thomas 52).

¹⁴ During Reconstruction, Harper made frequent trips to the South in the capacity of educator and lecturer. According to Still, Harper's work during this period was extensive and varied: "For the best part of several years, since the war, she has traveled very extensively through the Southern States, going on the plantations and amongst the lowly, as well as to the cities and towns, addressing schools, Churches, meetings in Court Houses, Legislative Halls, &c., and, sometimes, under the most trying and hazardous circumstances; influenced in her labor of love, wholly by the noble impulses of her own heart, working her way along unsustained by any Society" (767). Still frequently references the danger of Harper's travels, writing that "in no instance has she permitted herself, through fear, to disappoint an audience, when

they attempted to make new lives for themselves and their families after the war.¹⁵ These facts of Harper's career make her relative obscurity in the feminist canon more peculiar.¹⁶ Valerie Palmer-Mehta has recently noted this oddity in her critique of what she calls the "lacuna in contemporary literature regarding the contributions Harper has made to feminist theory" despite the obvious role Harper has had in the history of U.S. feminism (193).¹⁷

While Palmer-Mehta does not speculate as to why this critical lacuna around Harper and feminist theory exists, Nell Painter has suggested that Harper has not gained feminist recognition because Stanton and Anthony did not emphasize her participation in suffragist organizations and omitted much of her presence in their *History*. As I noted earlier, none of Harper's speeches on woman's rights, suffrage, or Reconstruction politics are recorded in any of the anthology's volumes. Painter contrasts Harper's relative erasure with Stanton's co-optation of Truth, a figure more easily molded to the political discourse of the period. Truth,

engagements had been made for her to speak, although frequently admonished that it would be dangerous to venture in so doing" and noting that despite these warnings, she travelled to all of the southern states except Texas and Arkansas. See Still 767-778 for excerpts from Harper's correspondence during this period of travel.

¹⁵ In a letter to Still, written when Harper was working in Greenville, Georgia in 1870, she tells of her particular interest in speaking with the black women of the South during her tours there: "I am going to have a private meeting with the women of this place if they will come out. I am going to talk with them about their daughters, and about things connected with the welfare of the race. Now is the time for our women to begin to try to lift up their heads and plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone" (Still 772).

¹⁶ While notable biographies have been written about other nineteenth-century black feminist figures such as Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Ida Barnett-Wells, there is no major biographical work on Harper.

¹⁷ Palmer-Mehta's insightful piece looks at three feminist concepts and traces the way Harper's work contributes to their development and understanding: her rhetorical connection of personal anecdote with political goals as a precursor to the "second wave's" personal-is-political mantra; the use of strategic essentialism; and a focus on broad-based social change over narrow legislative objectives.

as an ex-slave, could symbolize the horrors of slavery, an evil that all abolitionists could agree upon after the war; as Painter puts it, activists “agreed on slavery; it was Reconstruction that was tearing them apart” (*Sojourner Truth* 229). Truth became the “symbol of slavery” that could unite post-war abolitionists who disagreed about political strategy and priorities (229). On the other hand, Harper was born into a free family, was well-educated, and light-skinned. In this, she seemed too similar to white woman suffrage leaders to embody the kind of “black female authenticity that white audiences” saw in Truth and rallied around (224).¹⁸ Truth was the black woman white suffragists needed, and, according to Painter, their embrace of the woman in turn “produced a new symbolic Truth—the Stanton-Anthony suffragist...[who] tends first and last toward women” (233). This symbolic Truth would come to “blot out” Harper’s contributions to the movement (233); Truth would take on the fame of the white suffragist leaders who wrote the history of the movement and thus assured her canonized status in the future of feminism.¹⁹

¹⁸ Whereas Truth told and retold the story of her life both in and out of slavery, and published a version of it in her *Narrative*, the details of Harper’s life are relatively unknown, especially those of her early years. Almost all of the information we have about Harper’s life comes from Still’s *The Underground Railroad* (1871), which includes a number of excerpts of Harper’s personal correspondence. She was born free in Maryland Sept. 24, 1825, but her parents are unknown and her mother is thought to have died while Harper was quite young; she was cared for by an aunt and eventually attended the Baltimore school founded by her uncle, Reverend William Watkins, an academy known for an emphasis on the classics and biblical studies (Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day* 7). In 1850, Harper left the South and moved to Columbus, Ohio to take a teaching position at Union Seminary, and then moved again to Pennsylvania in 1852. According to Still, during this period Harper was unsatisfied with teaching, and began to write, a vocation that, along with lecturing, she would continue for the next fifty years (757). Harper was married in 1860 and had one child; she wrote extensively during her marriage and after her husband’s death in 1864 she immediately returned to the lecture circuit.

¹⁹ bell hooks has written about white feminists’ expectations and proscriptions of which black women could constitute appropriate feminist allies, noting a similar phenomenon to the Truth-Harper dichotomy Painter points to. According to hooks, educated, middle-class black

Painter's interpretation is convincing, and her pairing of Truth and Harper raises important questions about the ways that historical figures are symbolically deployed within history. But I want to expand Painter's analysis of Truth, Harper, and feminism to suggest that the origin of the difference in feminist status between the two women can not only be traced to Stanton and Anthony's approval and co-optation of Truth—although this is certainly a part of the story—but to the historiographical construction of the 1869 suffrage “split” more generally. It is not simply that Stanton and Anthony constructed a symbolic Truth that better served the purposes of their suffrage politics, or even that contemporary historians and critics have perpetuated the mythology around Truth and reinscribed her symbolic worth; it is that in constructing the “split” between two “sides” of the suffrage movement, scholars have assigned each figure to an allegiance to racial or sexual difference, and thus recapitulated the very problem they critique. To put it more simply, one might read the “split” as the critical object that vaults Truth to widespread feminist fame and relegates Harper to relative obscurity. Any historiography or criticism that deals in the “split” is bound to reinforce this dichotomy even as it attempts to temper Truth's feminist mythology or

women's voices were often marginalized by white feminists more interested in hearing from black women who fit their imagined idea of what “blackness” looked and sounded like: “Our presence in movement activities did not count, as white women were convinced that ‘real’ blackness meant speaking the patois of poor black people being uneducated, streetwise and a variety of other stereotypes. If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse” (hooks, “Black Women” 37). See also Painter “Difference, Slavery, and Memory” for a discussion of the ways that Truth utilized white women's stereotypes and expectations of black women to “guarantee her place in the history of antislavery feminism”; according to Painter, Truth “knew full well that her experience in slavery authenticated her being and reinforced her message” and used it to her advantage, “widening the distance between herself and her audiences” in order to take “maximum advantage of being exotic” (154). While it is clear that white suffragists represented her for their own ends, this relationship ran both ways. Truth was no mere “puppet,” but instead, as Painter notes, incredibly skilled in manipulating white ideologies to her own ends.

recover Harper's feminist relevance. Painter, in my view, correctly assesses the problem when she notes that the symbolic Truth covers over Harper's feminism, but she finds its origin in Stanton's canonization of Truth and the way that subsequent scholars uncritically take up that figure, rather than in the critical attachment to the "split" to which her work itself contributes.

In a wide array of historical and critical work, the "split" becomes an integral method of differentiating between Truth and Harper; it delineates "sides" and assigns these historical figures to one or the other. Its formulation often shows how black activists would duplicate the "break-up" of the predominantly white abolitionist-suffragist organization; as one historian puts it, "by 1870, African American activists, male and female, would split along the same lines that split apart the Equal Rights Association" (Jones 140). Painter's history sets up the "split" in a similar way, as a central moment in delineating black women's relationship to the cause: "Suffrage priorities—who should vote first—split reformers. From the breach emerged two competing woman suffrage communities, each seeking the blessing of Sojourner Truth" (*Sojourner Truth* 222). Rosalyn Terborg-Penn performs the same move, writing that "divisions among female suffragists affected black affiliation in the resulting suffrage associations. Hattie Purvis attended NWSA meetings, as did Cary. Harper affiliated with the AWSA. Sojourner Truth attended meetings of both groups" (Terborg-Penn, "African-American Women" 140). Three years later, Terborg-Penn would revise her division of black women's affiliations: "Despite the assumptions modern-day writers have about Black women's participation in the two groups, a larger number selected the AWSA than the NWSA. Of the known African American women who participated in the two national organizations during the 1870s, nine selected the AWSA and six selected the NWSA"

(Terborg-Penn, *African American Women* 42).²⁰ She then appends two lists to illustrate the division of these women; this time, Sojourner Truth and Frances Harper are both placed on the AWSA side, along with a footnote that explains her latest research has contradicted the findings of others that Truth “sided” with the NWSA or took a middle position. While Terborg-Penn does not say precisely what this research is, my point is not to question whether she, or her colleagues, have correctly assigned Truth, Harper, or any other activist to their respective “sides” of the “split,” but rather to point out how central the “split” is to these narratives, and how it necessarily results in a formulation that requires this sort of list-making, assigning these black female figures to one list or another.

The “split” formulation creates a need to construct and choose “sides,” but in these narratives, those “sides” come to represent not only allegiance to one organization or another, but a larger allegiance to race or gender. For instance, when critic Carla Peterson describes the suffrage “split,” the account becomes an entry into black women’s identity “choices.” She first explains how the 1869 AERA convention “split in two over the issue of black male suffrage and allegiance to the Republican party” (*Doers of the Word* 224) and then shows how black female figures reacted to the “split”: “It was at this convention that Harper...affirmed both her allegiance to ‘race’ over ‘sex’ and her distance from white women whose racism continued to oppress the black woman worker” (224). Peterson then describes the “striking contrast” offered by Sojourner Truth, who “chose to participate in the activities of Stanton and Anthony’s more ‘radical’ National Woman Suffrage Association” (224). Harper and Truth are represented as having to “choose” between not just the NWSA or

²⁰ While Terborg-Penn refers to this division as evidence that black women were more likely to “side” with the AWSA, it seems worth noting that a 9-6 ratio is hardly a decisive difference. I read this as yet another sign of the critical importance in maintaining the “split” at all costs, even when the evidence suggests a murkier history.

the AWSA, but the competing facets of femaleness and blackness; the women come to stand in for the respective “sides” of the “split” through the language of loyalty and identity.

These figures are made to embody the inevitable “choice” between race and gender through the repetition of two quotations, one attributed to Truth, and one to Harper. Split-narratives frequently explain Truth’s position through a statement she made at the 1867 American Equal Rights Association (AERA) meeting in which she suggested she agreed with what would become the Stanton-NWSA position: that woman’s suffrage should not be prioritized behind black male suffrage. Shirley Wilson Logan provides a representative example of how this quotation is used to explicate Truth’s “choice”:

Truth entered the debate over the proposed Fifteenth Amendment to grant black men but not women the right to vote. There she estimated the consequence of such a change on black women in particular: ‘There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored woman; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women get theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before.’ (*We Are Coming* 11)

Logan then juxtaposes Truth’s 1867 statement with Harper’s contrasting views: “Black women intellectuals like Frances Harper and, later, Ida B. Wells, while clearly supportive of women’s rights, considered it more important to align themselves with racial concerns than with cross-racial gender issues” (11). Truth’s statement is made to stand in for Truth’s “choice” between race and gender in the face of the Fifteenth Amendment. Over and over again, scholars deploy this statement to explain why Truth represents the black woman “choosing” gender over race when confronted with the “split.” Paula Giddings uses the statement to show the similarity between Truth’s position and Stanton’s and to demonstrate that Truth worried about black male dominance over black women: “Sojourner Truth took the position of not supporting the amendment. She was fearful that putting more power into

the hands of men would add to the oppression of Black women. ‘There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women’ ...” (65). Peterson deploys the “great stir about colored men” statement to explain Truth’s “striking” contrast with Harper, and to show the “complex ideological negotiations between the categories of race, sex, and class” (*Doers of the Word* 225).²¹

Harper, on the other hand, is represented through a very different statement, made at the 1869 AERA meeting, that depicts her as deferring her own rights in order for black men to win theirs first. Collier-Thomas employs this statement as a way of interpreting Harper’s “choice”:

Harper agreed with Frederick Douglass, an ardent supporter of woman’s rights and friend of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, that black males must have the vote and that the plight of black women was more related to their race than to their gender. Taking a broad historical view of the role of race in American society, she argued that emancipation had not eliminated race as the major determinant of one’s status. ‘When it was a question of race I let the lesser question of sex go. But the white women all go for sex letting race occupy a minor position.’ (50)

Harper is depicted here as understanding gender as a less significant “determinant” of identity within U.S. legal and social structures; her statement that “sex” is a “lesser question” is evidence of the “broad historical view” that oppression is racialized first, and gendered after. Harper’s quotation is relied on repeatedly to do this kind of organizing work in these narratives. Giddings deploys the statement to show the difference between Harper’s position and Truth’s, to show that Harper knew something Truth did not—that she “had much more faith in the abilities—and intelligence—of Black women, and Black men, than Sojourner

²¹ For additional examples of the critical use of Truth’s statement, see Collier-Thomas 50, Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 83, Stewart xliii, Mabee 179, Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 226 and Painter, “Voices of Suffrage” 46. As I discuss below, Davis, Painter, and Mabee all deploy the infamous Truth quote in much the same way but then attempt to distance her from the Stanton-NWSA position.

Truth did” (66). She quotes Harper’s “lesser question of sex” statement and then continues: “But Harper and others understood that the rights of Black men had to be secured before Black women could assert theirs. If the race had no rights, the women’s struggle was meaningless” (68). Harper’s choice is self-evident; according to Giddings, she understood that race necessarily preceded gender. Likewise, Painter uses the quote to illustrate Harper’s ultimate “choice” of race over gender: “Concluding that she must now choose between her identity as a woman and her identity as a Negro, she abandoned black women and rallied to the side of black men: ‘when it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go’” (*Sojourner Truth* 231). Davis too shows Harper’s “choice” in these terms: “This outstanding Black poet and leading advocate of woman suffrage insisted that the enfranchisement of Black men was far too vital to her entire people to risk losing it at such a critical moment. ‘When it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go’” (*Women, Race & Class* 84). Over and over, historians and critics perform the same rhetorical move with Harper’s statement, making it clear that Harper was firmly on the “side” of race in the race-versus-gender conundrum.²²

The construction of the “split” creates a need to juxtapose Truth and Harper and distill their ideas down to the pith of two statements that can then stand in for both the difference between white and black woman suffragists, and the differences within black woman suffragists as a group. One effect of this dichotomy in these narratives is to recapitulate the same rhetoric of “choice” that the “split” fosters; black women symbolize the nexus of this choice, but they also, in “split” terms, must “divide” themselves so that we can understand how they relate to this governing moment within suffragism. The “split” is the

²² For additional examples, see Aptheker 47, Boyd 128, Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 68 and Terborg-Penn, *African-American Women* 32.

controlling factor in the conversion of these black women into symbols within feminism; once the historical moment is depicted as a “split” in the movement and made central, the rest follows.

As Terborg-Penn’s note makes clear, while Harper is always “assigned” to the AWSA “side” of the “split,” there appears to be some confusion about how to categorize Truth. For instance, Giddings puts Truth on the side of the NWSA, explaining that although “women like Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper held similar views about the rights of Blacks and women” they “came to different conclusions about supporting the amendment” (65), with Truth in support of Stanton and Anthony’s stance, and Harper disagreeing with it. Collier-Thomas concurs with these assignments; when “the issue of which should be first, woman or Negro suffrage” emerged, “the old abolitionist coalition, which included a racial and gender mix of key reform leaders, collapsed” with Harper in support of the AWSA. Truth, on the other hand, is “sided” with the other suffragist “wing”: “When this issue surfaced at the meeting of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) in May 1869, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frances Gage, and Sojourner Truth emphasized their support for universal suffrage. However, they indicated that if there were no other choice they favored enfranchising women, including black women, over black men” (50).

What is striking, however, about these assignments of Truth to the NWSA “side,” is how much explanation it takes these historians to interpret her “choice”; Giddings quotes Stanton saying that black women would be better off the slave of an educated white man than a black male former slave, and writes that Truth “evidently agreed with this perspective, or at least with the idea that the White feminists were better informed than Black women” (65). Collier-Thomas notes that “Of course, Sojourner Truth regretted having to make a choice and

continued to emphasize that her first choice was for universal suffrage” (50). Angela Davis deals with the problem of Truth’s assignment by depicting her perspective as evolving over time: “Two years earlier Sojourner Truth might possibly have opposed the position of Frederick Douglass. At the 1867 ERA convention, she had opposed the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment because it effectively denied the franchise to *Black* women” but “By the final meetings of the Equal Rights Association in 1869, Sojourner Truth had recognized the dangerous racism underlying the feminists’ opposition to Black male suffrage” (83). Carlton Mabey performs a similar move, distancing Truth from Stanton’s “side” by degrees; Truth, in his view, could “reasonably be called radical in 1867 for insisting like Stanton and Anthony that suffragists should push for the vote for both blacks and women together” but “by 1869 and 1870 she was not as adamantly radical as Stanton and Anthony had become on this issue, because she did not join them in resisting the Fifteenth Amendment” and instead had “become more moderate and conciliatory, more like Lucy Stone and most other feminists, including the blacks Douglass, Charles Remond, Robert Purvis, and Frances Harper, who supported the Fifteenth Amendment even though it did not give women the vote” (180). Painter distances Truth from Stanton as well, using paragraph after paragraph to delineate the ways in which Truth’s views were different from Stanton’s in almost every way, even as they seemed to agree on the universal suffrage priority; Truth stood for a middle ground “when straddling was still possible in woman suffrage circles” (*Sojourner Truth* 229).

The confusion and hedging over Truth’s “side” can be read as an index of scholars’ struggle with this “choice” between race and gender even as the “split” commits their work to a repeated reinscription of that choice. Truth “sided” with gender, but she regretted having

to “choose,” or she tempered that choice and became less radical, or she eventually came around to the other “side” in 1869 when the chips were down. In contrast, Harper’s “choice” does not seem to require as much critical intervention in order for it to be understood; her “siding” with her race is presented as more self-evident than Truth’s “siding” with her gender. This, in my view, is an effect of the “split” coming to stand in for white feminist racism: Truth’s agreement with the figures of that racism becomes problematic, whereas Harper’s apparent distancing herself from it appears natural and more politically progressive.

As noted earlier, Painter has suggested that Truth, rather than Harper, was the black woman that white suffragists needed in the face of the Fifteenth Amendment debates. I would only add that if present-day feminists need Truth, they also need Harper in order to make sense of the “split” and the “choice” between race and gender. It is the pairing of the two women that is necessary to represent the split’s dichotomy, which helps explain why even though Truth did not attend the infamous 1869 meeting when the debates took place, she is still paired with Harper, who was present. Indeed, Truth’s “great stir about the colored men” statement so frequently used as evidence of her position on the issue is taken from 1867, more than two years before these debates would come to a head. On the other hand, Harper’s “lesser question of sex” declaration is from the transcript of the contentious 1869 meetings. This temporal asymmetry between the two women’s symbolic representation within the “split” suggests that two black women were needed to provide support for its dichotomy. One of these women was canonized, the other suppressed. That Truth was not present at the climactic moment of the “split” only makes it more clear that her canonization has much to do with the ways in which she can come to symbolize critical desires in ways that Harper cannot. It is easier to see Truth as what we want her to be, a critical problem that

is exacerbated by the fact that Truth, who is assumed to have been unable to read or write English, left no written work of her own behind, and whose statements and own narrative is always filtered through other, primarily white, historical figures.

When Deborah McDowell writes of the ways that names such as “Sojourner Truth” are “dropped” in contemporary criticism, she is referring to this problem. For McDowell, Truth is a signifier at once empty and full, one that “seems to perform for some an absolution of critical guilt” even as the repetition of her name “makes no *real* difference”: “In dominant discourses it is a symbolic gesture masking the face of power and its operations in the present academic context. As a figure in remove, summoned from the seemingly safe and comfortable distance of a historical past, ‘Sojourner Truth’ can thus act symbolically to absorb, defuse, and deflect a variety of conflicts and anxieties over race in present academic contexts” (162). According to McDowell, the repetition of the symbol of “Sojourner Truth” becomes a method for gesturing toward race within feminism without actually dealing with it in any substantive way. McDowell refers primarily to the repeated reference to Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, but her point can be extrapolated to help make sense of the ways that the “split” has worked to frame Truth as an iconic feminist figure and relegate Harper to relative anonymity.

If Truth needs more interpretation in order to be understood, if her “choice” needs extra critical explication in order to be palatable for contemporary scholars, then why is she also simultaneously an iconic figure of feminism in ways that Harper simply is not? If, as I argue in Chapter 1, contemporary critics construct narratives of this historical moment in order to identify with the non-racist “side” of the “split,” one might expect Harper to be held up as the symbol of principled feminism. But this has not been the case. Truth appears easier

to name-drop, easier to shift into the critical position scholars need her to inhabit; her “choice” might require critical rationalization or even chastisement, but she is still converted into a metonym for loyalty to gender above all else. Harper’s “choice” of race, on the other hand, might be more legible, even praised, but it still is not represented as feminist—instead, it is represented as a refusal of white feminism. Leaving aside the fact that these positions are over-simplified, whittled down to their most portable and symbolic, my point is that split-narratives implicitly define feminism as white, not only in their description of the historical moment, but in their narration of what that moment means in the present. As bell hooks has noted, to gain recognition in both activist and academic contexts, black women’s contributions and ideas must be correlated to those of dominant white feminists, rather than, say, allowed to reconfigure the theoretical and political problems they deal in or define new areas of debate (“Black Women” 37). I am arguing that split-narratives perform the same function by governing the logic through which we understand these actors as figures of feminism. Despite some critics’ attempt to work against this logic by explaining the context of the situation, or attenuating Truth’s choice, or emphasizing Harper’s activist work for women, the commitment to the “split” ties these narratives to a dichotomy that prescribes the parameters of the historical understanding of these figures from the outset.

The “split” thus makes Harper’s feminism difficult to recover by remaining critically moored to a white feminism that operates on the single axis of gender rather than imagining a feminism of critique that is intersectional, dynamic, and, importantly, not centered on the white female subject. It seems to me that the attachment to Truth in this instance is more about an attachment to the “choice” of gender over any other axis of identity, even as her “Ain’t/Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech would suggest that Truth herself deconstructed this choice

long before the Fifteenth Amendment debates.²³ The “split” dominates the telling of these women’s ideas and keeps scholars and readers tied to the problem of race-versus-gender even as we “know” better now. The fact that Harper is not broadly represented as an important figure for feminism or feminist theory suggests that critics cannot let go of the very thing they aim to critique.

Harper’s Concept of Suffrage, Expanded

“I cannot recognize that the negro man is the only one who has pressing claims at this hour. To-day our government needs woman’s conscience as well as man’s judgment. And while I would not throw a straw in the way of the colored man, even though I know that he would vote against me as soon as he gets the vote, yet I do think that woman should have some power to defend herself from oppression, and equal laws as if she were a man.”

—Minnie to Louis (Harper, *Minnie’s Sacrifice* 78)

In the transcripts of the May 1869 AERA meetings published in Stanton and Anthony’s *History*, Harper’s contributions are never directly transcribed, and even those indirect statements that were included rarely capture much of the content of Harper’s words. The well-known “lesser question of sex” statement is just one such example, but we know that Harper spoke on other occasions during the three days of the event. This erasure had precedent; Harper’s 1866 speech to the Eleventh National Woman’s Rights Convention was compressed down to a mere mention between a list of other speakers and a note about

²³ While in the Robinson version of the text, Truth is never recorded as saying the phrase “Ain’t/Ar’n’t I a woman?” the transcript shows that Truth spoke about her equal ability and strength in terms of the work of slavery: “I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth* 125). Truth debunks the patriarchal notion of female frailty while simultaneously refusing to define the suffrage issue in terms of the white female domesticity; as a black woman, she is, as she puts it, a “woman’s rights.”

collecting contributions: “Mr. Beecher was followed by Wendell Phillips, Frances Dana Gage, Frances Watkins Harper; the Financial Committee meantime passed through the audience for the material aid to carry forward the work” (Stanton et al. 171). Similarly, Harper spoke to the assembly during the May 14th afternoon sessions of the 1869 Convention, but the only note of this speech is an oblique reference: “Mrs. Harper spoke on matters concerning her own race” (399). This substitution not only stands in for the content of Harper’s speech, but it also tells us something about the reasons for its erasure. In narrating the history of this moment, the editors divide suffrage concerns from “matters concerning [race]”; while we do not know what precisely these “matters” were, it is clear that Stanton and Anthony viewed them as separate from the suffrage issues at hand.

When split-narratives reinscribe Harper’s suppression, they also reproduce the same division by which suffrage politics are separated from other forms of politics. What were these other “matters” that Harper spoke about in the midst of the Fifteenth Amendment debates? I suggest that we imagine how to fill in this historical gap through an examination of Harper’s 1869 fiction: the serialized novel *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, published in twenty installments over the course of six months in the *Christian Recorder*, and the short allegorical piece, “The Mission of the Flowers,” published as part of her 1869 poetry collection.²⁴ These works, while very different—one is a sweeping narrative refiguring of the classic mulatta-plot, the other a brief symbolic sketch employing the conceit of the flower garden—offer a way to understand Harper’s suffrage views, and her feminism, as more than

²⁴ Harper contributed frequently to the *Recorder*, a weekly newspaper founded by the publishing arm of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Philadelphia and aimed at a primarily black reading public. Its masthead defined its mission as the “dissemination of religion, morality, literature and science” (Lewis 756). See Cole, Lewis, and especially Kachun for interpretations of the importance of this periodical.

simply one side of the “split,” but as a radical expansion of the political boundaries of suffragism. Contrary to Stanton and Anthony’s attempt to cordon off “matters of race” from the issue of suffrage, Harper’s 1869 pieces instead demonstrate a very different scope of suffrage, one rooted in the history and perspective of injustice. By expanding what split-narratives compress, Harper’s 1869 fiction not only allows us to imagine an “outside” to the consuming binary logic of the “split,” but more than this, it provides an incisive critique of the “choice” between race and gender that split-narratives reinscribe.

Since its recovery in 1994, critics have frequently read *Minnie’s Sacrifice* in one of two ways: as a forerunner to *Iola Leroy*, with similar plots and characters, or as a novel of racial uplift, meant to educate Northern blacks in the importance of self-reliance and community-building.²⁵ These interpretations have provided an important literary context for Harper’s work and have helped place her within the traditions of nineteenth-century American women’s writing and African American literature—crucial tasks in making black women writers visible in a discipline that often erased them in favor of black men or white women.²⁶ There has not been much attention, however, to the ways the novel intervenes in

²⁵ For instance, Boyd writes that “*Minnie’s Sacrifice* is clearly a precursor of *Iola Leroy*” and that “In many ways the two works complement each other” through their “parallel” structures, similar characters, and “consistent” themes (170-171). See Griffin for a contrasting interpretation of the two works, in which the author sees Harper’s Reconstruction fiction as more radical than her later work. See Robbins, esp. 179-193 and Stancliff 62-80 for analyses of Harper’s rhetoric of uplift and education in the novel. For additional criticism on *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, see Toohey, Peterson, “Frances Harper” 44-50, O’Brien, and Lewis. Recently, critics have taken an increased interest in periodical studies and *Minnie’s Sacrifice*; see Cole for an example.

²⁶ Frances Smith Foster notes that while Harper has not been ignored in literary history or criticism, critics have often expressed an “embarrassment” over Harper’s chosen genre of popular and didactic literature and her middle-class sensibilities: “Many of us in African American literary studies, especially, have learned to privilege the extremes: to deify the modernists and the revolutionaries and to entertain the folk or primitive over the productions

the suffrage politics of 1869. With the exceptions of the recent work of Martha Jones and C. C. O'Brien, this aspect of the novel has been under-considered, covered over by the critical need to develop literary relationships between Harper and other black women writers, on the one hand, or the need to place her within a tradition of nineteenth-century racial uplift, on the other.²⁷ I argue, however, that we might read this novel as a suffrage-novel—which is not to say that the novel is limited to the issue of suffrage, but that it expands the concept of suffragism into something much more than the quest for voting rights. By drawing attention to white privilege and positing a black female perspective as Reconstruction's ideal source of education, Harper's fiction refuses the Fifteenth Amendment "choice" between race and gender and develops a suffragism, and a feminism, that places black women at the center of national development and the pursuit of social justice.

This reading of the novel is at first counterintuitive. Suffrage does not seem to be its central concern; the issue does not even appear until one of the last chapters. Indeed, the wide scope of the novel seems to dwarf the issue of suffrage with its sheer sweep over a period of

that reflect the aesthetics and values of the churchgoing Christians or the black middle class and those who aspire to it" ("Gender" 49). Similarly, Carla Peterson argues against Richard Brodhead's 1993 assessment that postbellum fiction became more cosmopolitan, more representative of "high-cultural literary values" by pointing out that this formulation obscures black women writers during Reconstruction, who were explicitly interested in combining literature and politics to effect social change; by organizing the period in such a way, Brodhead "profoundly misreads African American postbellum cultures of letters whose writers refused to disassociate literary career from political participation; they insisted instead that verbal creation could never be an autonomous cultural zone and that one of its current functions was to intervene in and comment on the politics of national Reconstruction" ("Frances Harper" 40). Like Foster, Peterson shows how Harper reconfigures the genres of domestic and didactic writing in order to make black women's participation in the domestic household a "basis for inclusion in American society" ("Frances Harper" 58-59).

²⁷ See also Boyd 126-132 for an early but brief discussion of Harper's literary work in relation to the suffrage question.

time filled with the characters' deeply personal dramas and the era's historically significant events. Minnie and Louis are both born in the South to enslaved mothers and fathered by white masters; each is sent North to be raised and educated as white rather than black. Minnie is taken from her mother and sent to live with Quaker abolitionists in Pennsylvania because she "looks so much like" her master that the master's wife could not tolerate her presence out of social embarrassment. Louis, on the other hand, in a retelling of the Moses story, is born to an enslaved mother who dies during childbirth.²⁸ The master's white daughter, Camilla, begs to raise him as an adopted white child, a request the master eventually grants. The plot of the novel revolves around how each of these characters discover their pasts, and what they choose to do with that new knowledge—do they remain in the North, leading lives of relative luxury and passing as white, or do they embrace the racial heritage of their mothers and identify with the enslaved people's struggle during the war and its aftermath? Minnie and Louis, who eventually meet, fall in love, and marry, both choose the latter, travelling South to work with the freedpeople after the war. They open a school and travel as speakers and teachers throughout the small towns of the South, but their lives are overshadowed by the threat of Klan violence, and at the novel's end, Minnie is lynched. Louis is heartbroken but determined to honor her legacy by continuing her work as a friend and teacher to the former slaves they lived among. The novel ends with Harper's conclusion,

²⁸ Harper's interest in the Moses narrative is well-documented; one of her 1856 poems was entitled "The Burial of Moses" and in her 1859 essay "Our Greatest Want," she writes that Moses is one of her favorite characters because he "would have no union with the slave power of Egypt" (Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 136). She references Moses in her 1866 speech to the National Woman's Rights Convention when she speaks of Harriet Tubman, and in 1869, she published a long narrative poem entitled, "Moses: A Story of the Nile." See Rutkowski and Foster, *Written By Herself* for interpretations of the 1869 poem and its relation to Harper's biblical rhetoric.

in which she hopes that “the lesson of Minnie” might “have its place among the educational ideas for the advancement of our race” (90).²⁹

The novel’s expansive scope initially might seem to dilute its intervention in the political questions of suffrage in 1869, but its textual representations of whiteness across a wide range of time expose the privilege that is masked by the race-versus-gender formulation of the Fifteenth Amendment debates. From the very beginning of the narrative, whiteness is shown to be a complicated signifier, both a type of property and a means of oppressing and abusing the property white masters had in their slaves. Both Louis and Minnie, white enough to pass, are saved from slavery and sent North by the white masters who fathered them—not because these fathers recognized the children as their own, but because *other* people recognized the likeness. Minnie, at the age of 5, is “mistaken” for the daughter of Le Grange, the white master who fathered her through the rape of one of his “favorite slaves,” Ellen (15).³⁰ When Le Grange’s wife, Georgietta, invites several acquaintances to a luncheon, one guest, “calling the attention of the whole party to her” compliments the little girl, exclaiming that she is “the very image of her father” (16). When the mistake becomes clear, Georgietta is mortified as “the gentlemen exchange glances, and the young ladies screw up their mouths to hide their merriment”; she later fumes to her husband that rather than bear that sort of humiliation again, she plans to sell Minnie “as soon as a trader comes along” because she

²⁹ The recovered text of *Minnie’s Sacrifice* is missing several installments, including the pivotal scene of Minnie’s death. See Foster, “Introduction” xl-xliii for a discussion of the text’s archival discovery and her quest to recover Harper’s missing work.

³⁰ The terminology for the sexual exploitation of female slaves by white masters is fraught; the term “rape” is never used within the novel, and certainly there were gradations of sexual violence and exploitation within the slave system, but “consensual” relations lose meaning under the historical conditions of that system. See Spillers for a discussion of the impossibility of articulating black female sexuality under slavery in terms other than ones of violence and coercion.

could stand to buy a “new set of pearls anyhow” (16). As Georgietta relates the story to Le Grange, she is busy chopping off Minnie’s curls, punishment for the (mis)recognition of her as a white daughter of the family, rather than the black slave child of the plantation. Le Grange thinks of himself as “too humane” to sell the child who Ellen painfully reminds him is “his own flesh and blood”—he “winces” when he hears these words—but instead he arranges to have her sent North to Pennsylvania to live with abolitionists willing to adopt her (19). The set-up of the novel’s plot highlights the ways that whiteness both saves Minnie from a life of slavery while simultaneously tearing her from her mother, her only family. But in depicting this paradox, the narrative simultaneously emphasizes the role of the white male master and the sexual violence of the slavery system. Le Grange’s white male privilege allows him to exploit Ellen, his legal property, and then, congratulating himself on his own “humanity,” take the property produced by this exploitation away from her mother.

Louis’s origins are similar—the product of the sexual exploitation of a slave woman, Agnes, and a white master, Le Croix—except his mother dies during childbirth. Le Croix, a widower, is not forced to send Louis North because of a jealous wife, but because his young daughter Camilla is struck by the baby’s beauty; she wants to take him in because he is “so white, nobody would ever know that he had one drop of Negro blood in his veins” (6). At first Le Croix resists this request, but Camilla persists, waiting a few months and then noting again to her father that “it is a shame for this child to be a slave, when he is just as white as anybody” and that “[h]e is so beautiful, I would like him for my brother; and he looks like us anyhow” (8). Eventually, Le Croix acquiesces, and realizes that Camilla’s plan actually “rather suited him, for then he could care for [Louis] as a son, without acknowledging the relationship” (11). Again, whiteness pays the child’s way out of slavery while the role of the

white master/father is brought into relief. Both Louis and Minnie are born out of a context of sexual abuse, a narrative foundation that, as C.C. O'Brien puts it, "deflects the question of sexuality away from blacks and back toward white men who have the power to exploit women sexually" (609). By rooting the narrative in the unequal relationship between black female slaves and white masters, Harper draws attention to a history of victimization, one in which black women were systematically abused as the sexual property of white men.³¹

The narrative pairing of Minnie and Louis continues throughout the novel, each experiencing a climactic moment when their "true" parentage is revealed. These moments force each character to make a momentous choice: do they remain content to live as the white people they thought they were, or do they embrace their black heritage?³² For Minnie, this moment comes more than twelve years later when her mother finds her on a village street in

³¹ Harper's depiction of black female victimization in the novel is paired with an accompanying development of black women's strength and unique point of view, a point I will discuss in more detail below. This combination differentiates Harper's construction of the black female figure from Stanton's use of that figure as a form of rhetorical management, the subject of the previous chapter. This dual-focus on black female victimization and development in *Minnie's Sacrifice* is mirrored in Harper's correspondence, in which she frequently writes of the need to help "our crushed and helpless sisters, whose tears and blood bedew our soil, whose chains are clanking 'neath our proudest banners, whose cries and groans amid our loudest paeans rise" (qtd. in Still 759) while also commenting on the resilience, courage, and knowledge of the freedwomen she encountered in the South, such as a formerly-enslaved woman who "took on her hands about 130 acres of land, and with her force she raised about 107 bales of cotton" (qtd. in Still 774).

³² See Neraud for an interesting discussion of passing in which the author argues that critics ought to reconsider how they interpret characters who unintentionally pass, shifting to a focus on the legal fiction of race rather than the uncovering of a character's "true" racial origins. For Neraud, "[t]exts of unintentional passing...destabilize notions of biologically constructed racial identity precisely because the passers are unaware that they are transgressing legal boundaries. The discrepancy between legal race categories and racial self-perceptions reveals how race functions in the United States to maintain socioeconomic inequalities by controlling an individual's sense of identity and her place within family, community, and nation" (814). Her point is that by taking the concept of passing at face value, critics "renaturalize the concepts of race that we conscientiously try to reveal as racial, and often racist, ideology" (814-815).

the Western part of Pennsylvania; Minnie is shopping with a white friend, and even though that friend abandons her once she understands the situation, Minnie takes her mother in and eventually accepts that she is her biological daughter. When asked about this choice later, Minnie responds with the admission that it was a difficult thing, to find out what she did, but that “there are lessons of life that we never learn in the bowers of ease” and that eventually she came to understand that she needed to embrace her new identity as a black woman in order to do her part in bringing peace and justice to an oppressed people. By claiming her black heritage, she could pay her mother back for all her hardship, “brighten her old age with a joy, with a gladness she had never known in her youth”—“And how could I have done that had I left her unrecognized and palmed myself upon society as a white woman?” (72). The wages of whiteness, in Minnie’s estimation, would not make up for “the loss of her self-respect” if she did not try to do what she could for her “mother’s race” (72). “So, when I found out that I was colored, I made up my mind that I would neither be pitied nor patronized by my former friends; but that I would live out my own individuality and do for my race, as a colored woman, what I never could accomplish as a white woman” (72). Whiteness, in this instance, is represented as an impediment to education and change; the “bowers of ease” that whiteness provides are also the circumstances that keep Minnie from realizing her true potential as an actor for social justice. A white woman “never could accomplish” these things, and Minnie needed the revelation of her blackness in order to spur her on toward better, more important things. She has a choice, she acknowledges, but she chooses to live her life not just as a “colored person,” but, as she notes, a “colored woman” (72). Black womanhood, in this formulation, offers more hardship, but also greater access to knowledge and the opportunity for good than white womanhood.

Black women in this novel are indeed the catalysts for transformation, action, and justice. Just as Ellen puts into motion the revelation that will change Minnie's life and allow her to transform herself into the kind of figure she aspires to be, Louis's own transformation is brought about by Miriam, his black grandmother. When Louis is about to join the Confederate army, Miriam tells Camilla that she must inform him of his past: "Miss, Camilla, I can stand it no longer;--that boy is going to lift his hand agin his own people, and I can't stand it no longer; I'se got to tell him all about it. I just think I'd bust in two if I didn't tell him" (57). When Camilla agrees and says she would rather see him know his heritage than "go against his country and raise his hand against the dear old flag," Miriam emphasizes that "it's not the flag nor the country" she cares about, but "that one of my own flesh and blood should jine with these secesh agin his own people" (58). When Camilla and Miriam confront Louis about his plans, Camilla attempts to tell him about his mother, but she hesitates, and it is Miriam who gathers the courage to tell him the truth, that "you, Louis Le Croix, white as you look, are colored, and that you are my own daughter's child, and if it had not been for Miss Camilla, who's been such an angel to you, that you would have been a slave to-day, and then you wouldn't have been a Confederate" (59). This revelation, though it makes Louis feel as though he was a "mariner at midnight on a moonless sea...who had lost his compass and his chart," sets Louis on a journey through which he comes to understand the plight of his mother's race, the wrongs of slavery, and his own responsibility in "not join[ing] its oppressors" but in repaying the debt that he owed the black people of the South (61). Like Minnie, Louis chooses to embrace his black heritage and to learn from this blackness and from the collective experience of that oppressed people. White privilege, in

both cases, comes to symbolize a lack of perspective and an inability to act, deficiencies these characters address in embracing the blackness of their mothers.

Black women in the novel are the source of unique knowledge that allows them to, as Minnie puts it, “see clearer” (83). Their victimization at the hands of white masters has provided a perspective on the injustice of the slave system and patriarchy that they then use to teach others. Minnie’s mother, Ellen, repeatedly guides her when Minnie becomes unsure of her new path as an activist and educator in the South. Using storytelling and anecdotes of her religious faith, Ellen tells Minnie of black women’s perseverance during slavery, and the awareness that comes from the hardships of their oppression. It is Ellen’s storytelling that sustains Minnie when she feels that the violence and terror of the Reconstruction South is too much to bear. And when Minnie goes into the homes of the freedpeople, she not only educates them, but is educated by them as well. She might help them learn to read, or inform them of current political events, but her “scholars,” as she calls them, in turn help her to understand how to continue in the face of intolerable white violence and unbearable injustices. Her students live in shacks and sheds that viscerally demonstrate their poverty, and yet one family adds to their economic hardships by taking in “two orphans of their race” (83); another woman tells Minnie “how her child had been taken away when it was about two years old, and how she had lost all trace of him, and would not know him if he stood in her presence” and yet she perseveres with the idea that justice is possible in the face of this overwhelming past. Minnie comes to understand the symbiotic relationship she has with these women, that she “must learn from them” as much as they can learn from her (84). She is learning to be a black woman from other black women, and while she is inundated by accounts of cruelty and subjugation at the hands of white men, she is also shown how to not

simply continue on, but begin to transform that oppressive system. These women are not only victims, then, but agents of education and change—actors who are not just determined by the system of oppression but who can intervene in that system through the education of others.

Harper's concept of a standpoint is not, however, an essentialized notion limited only to black women, but a perspective that can be translated to others through narratives of injustice and the observation of its effects.³³ The development of the character of Camilla, the white daughter who takes Louis in as her brother, demonstrates the way perspective is figured in the novel as dynamic and transferable. As a young girl, Camilla finds it inconceivable that a child "as white as [he is]," with beautiful blue eyes and golden hair, could be a slave: "She had heard that word before; but somehow, when applied to that fair child, it grated harshly on her ear" (4). She tells Miriam that she thinks "it is a shame for him to be a slave, when he is just as white as anybody" and that "if [she] had [her] way, he should never be a slave" (4-5). Miriam, in another instance of black women strategically wielding their knowledge and influence, encourages Camilla in her desire to see the child saved from slavery by subtly pointing out the girl's powerful influence with her father: "And why can't you have your way? I'm sure master humors you in everything" (5). Camilla reacts to this compliment by sketching out her plan in more detail: she would have Louis raised as her father's adopted son, never telling him or anyone else that he was not white. Continuing with her strategy, Miriam challenges Camilla to actually put the plan into action by telling her, "Laws, honey, it would be frustrate, but your Pa wouldn't hear of it" (5). Camilla, clearly

³³ See Lewis 762-763 for a brief yet incisive analysis of Harper's development of the concept of "standpoint" in *Minnie's Sacrifice*. See Hill Collins, "Social Construction" for a discussion of the black feminist standpoint and its theoretical and political implications.

incensed that her power could be considered so meager, insists that she will in fact be successful, and that she will immediately go to her father to prove it. When she submits her plan to him that afternoon, her father pleads that his hands are tied—after all, he tells her, despite the child’s appearance, “he belongs to the Negro race; and one drop of that blood in his veins curses all the rest” (7)—and calls Camilla his “little Abolitionist” (6). The girl vehemently rejects this label: “No, Pa, I am not an Abolitionist. I heard some of them talk when I was in New York, and I think they are horrid creatures” (7). She continues, however, to urge her father on, refuting his arguments that he would “lose caste” among his social circle and be subjected to “insult and injury” if he were to do such a thing; Camilla reminds him that he has never cared for socializing in the past anyway, and that it would not be difficult to keep the child’s racial origins from others: “I am sure that we could hide the secret of his birth, and pass him off as the orphan child of one of our friends, and that will be the truth; for Agnes was our friend; at least I know she was mine” (7). With Camilla’s persistent pressure, her father eventually agrees to the plan, and Louis is adopted and sent North to be educated.

The opening encounters between Camilla and Miriam, on the one hand, and Camilla and her father, on the other, show the white girl to have a sense of slavery’s injustice, but only as it applies to a child who looks like she does. She can only understand the slave system as oppressive when she imagines it applied to a white person. This consideration is enough to compel the girl to save Louis, but not enough to make her reconsider the system as a whole, or identify with the “horrid” abolitionists she has heard talk about the evils of slavery. Her perspective, however, continues to evolve when she travels to New York with her father once again. This time, when the two happen upon an anti-slavery meeting in the

city, Camilla intently listens to a formerly enslaved man tell of the horrors of slavery: how traders had taken his wife from him, how he had watched as his children were sold at the auction-block. The man's story has a strong effect on Camilla, who "grew red and pale by turns, and clutching her little hands nervously together" asks her father to leave. Her father regrets having upset his daughter, and once home, apologizes for exposing her to the frightening scene, telling her he "didn't believe a word that nigger said" (13). Camilla, however, does believe him, which is precisely the problem; she had heard similar stories from the family's own slaves: "[O]ur Isaac used to tell me just such a story as that. If I had shut my eyes, I could have imagined that it was Isaac telling his story" (13). Recounting Isaac's separation from his family on account of a master's whim, Camilla begins to question the institution of slavery, again imagining it in personal terms: "Pa, I wonder how slavery came to be. I should hate to belong to anybody, wouldn't you, Pa?" (14) As her father tries to assure her that the practice is just, Camilla repeats again that she "can't understand slavery" and that "that man made me think it was something very bad" (14). While her father at this point cuts off the conversation, claiming that the little girl should not try to understand problems that the "wisest statesmen cannot solve" (14), she continues to ponder the matter:

Camilla said no more, but a new train of thought had been awakened. She had lived so much among the slaves, and had heard so many tales of sorrow breathed confidentially into her ears, that she had unconsciously imbibed their view of the matter; and without comprehending the injustice of the system, she had learned to view it from their standpoint of observation. (15)

If Camilla is first introduced to the wrongs of slavery through her likeness to a slave-child, what the narrator calls "her sense of justice" is piqued by the stories of hardship and oppression she is raised on at the plantation (15). The narratives of the slaves around her develop Camilla's "standpoint," allowing her to see the institution from a different vantage.

Camilla's character, in this sense, becomes a demonstration of the effects that black storytelling can have in "awaken[ing]" white people to the injustices of the world around them.

The narrative development of this standpoint, however, is not complete—Camilla, who grows up to head her family's plantation, eventually free her father's slaves and support the Union's cause in the South, does not come to understand racial equality, even as she learns to deplore the oppression of slavery and the evils of racism. When Louis brings Minnie to meet his half-sister, Camilla is pleased to welcome her. And yet, as the three of them head to Camilla's house, Camilla is unsure how to understand this new social situation. Rather than join Louis and Minnie in his carriage, "Camilla follow[s], wondering how she would like the young wife. She had great kindness and compassion for the race, but as far as social equality was concerned, though she had her strong personal likings, yet, except with Louis, neither custom nor education had reconciled her to the maintenance of any equal, social relations with them" (69). Camilla might have been induced to take on black people's "standpoint of observation" but she remains unable to imagine them as her peers. The novel, however, holds open the possibility that Camilla's perspective will continue to evolve. Her standpoint has changed throughout the narrative, and when she meets Minnie, the reader is encouraged to see their interaction as yet another step in altering Camilla's perspective. Upon meeting, the two "soon fell into a pleasant and animated conversation"; "[m]utually they were attracted to each other" (69). Minnie quickly feels "quite at home with Camilla" and Camilla, in turn, "gaz[es] with unfeigned admiration" at Minnie's beauty, and "listen[s] with deep interest" as Minnie and Louis describe their pasts and their plans for the future. When Camilla asks Minnie how she came to accept her mission as a black woman in the South,

when she could have led a life of leisure as a white woman in the North, Minnie launches into a long monologue explaining her reasons for wanting to do what she could for the freedpeople. Minnie's explanation represents yet another instance of black female instruction in social justice and civic duty; Camilla listens, the apt student, and responds: "I think I understand you" and then begins to apply Minnie's lessons about the need for the more privileged to help those less privileged: "I feel we owe a great debt to the colored race, and I would aid and not hinder any hand that is ready to help do the needed work. I have felt for many years that slavery was wrong, and I am glad, from the bottom of my heart, that it has at last been destroyed" (73). The narrative ends soon after this conversation, but the reader is assured that Camilla's perspective is not frozen or stagnant, but continues to evolve, this time through her interaction with the newest addition to her family, Minnie.

Harper's development of a black female standpoint, and its transference to the novel's central white female character, represents a stark reversal of the popular mid-nineteenth century notion that black female slaves learned from their white mistresses and thus would be more prepared for the duties of voting and citizenship than black men—what O'Brien calls the "logic of the 'mistress narrative'" (612).³⁴ In *Minnie's Sacrifice*, it is white women, symbolized through Camilla, who must learn from the black women and men around them in order to develop new perspectives on the social world. Camilla is powerful, indeed—even when just a child, she has the influence to free slaves and dismiss overseers who she finds

³⁴ An example of this logic can be found in the transcript of the 1869 AERA meeting, in which Paulina Wright Davis worries that if the Fifteenth Amendment were passed without including woman's suffrage, "woman would have a race of tyrants raised above her in the South, and the black women of that country would also receive worse treatment than if the Amendment was not passed." She then notes that the country would be better off if black women were given the vote, rather than black men, because "The black women are more intelligent than the men, because they have learned something from their mistresses" (Stanton et al. 391).

excessively cruel, and as an adult, she uses her family's wealth to support the Union and fight racial violence in the South—but she needs the guidance of the freedpeople in order to develop that power into a force for justice. As a child, she “can’t understand it,” and as an adult, she “think[s] she understands” it—a progression of development in her racial consciousness, to be sure, but one in which black women have played, and will continue to play, an integral role. This reversal of who would be educating whom in the postwar nation is echoed in Harper’s other 1869 work of fiction, the short allegorical piece “The Mission of the Flowers.” This story, in which a rose bush is granted the power to change an entire flower garden into roses, only to find that the garden’s beauty is diminished, can be read as a sort of companion piece to *Minnie’s Sacrifice*. The allegory offers a strong critique of white woman suffragists’ universalizing deployment of the category of “woman” and the damaging effects of their limited perspective.

Just as the character of Camilla can be read as a metonym for white women in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, white women are again represented in “The Mission of the Flowers,” this time in the form of the rose tree.³⁵ The story opens on a “lovely garden, filled with fair and blooming flowers,” in which the rose tree “was the centre of attraction” (230). Its flowers were widely admired and sought after, and the rose, who “was very kind and generous hearted” thinks it only natural that, “seeing how much joy she dispensed,” all the other flowers of the garden should be transformed into roses too (231).³⁶ When a spirit emerges to

³⁵ “The Mission of the Flowers” originally appeared in Harper’s 1869 volume *Moses, a Story of the Nile*. All citations of the story here are taken from Foster’s anthology, *A Brighter Coming Day* (1990).

³⁶ As I read this story, there is more than a note of sarcasm in Harper’s figurative construction of the white woman who holds herself in such high regard and is so self-absorbed that she cannot imagine others *not* wanting to be transformed into her likeness.

grant the rose her wish, she is humbled, and “bowed her head in silent gratitude to the gentle being who had granted her this wondrous power” (231). But the rose is quickly unable to appreciate the world around her—she “scarcely heeds” the stars in the sky, and “hardly noticed” the “gentle dews” which “kissed the cheeks of her daughters”—instead, she eagerly anticipates the beginning of her “work of change” (231). When the morning comes, she begins to transform all the other flowers in the garden into her likeness—tulips, verbenas, violets, and poppies are all converted into roses, and when her work is done, and the rose tree sits among the other rose trees, she realizes that something is wrong: “every flower was changed by her power, and that once beautiful garden had changed, but that variety which had lent it so much beauty was gone, and men grew tired of roses, for they were everywhere” (232). As she looks around in horror at the sea of sameness, where “the humblest primrose would have been hailed with delight,” the rose “wished the power had never been given her to change her sister plants to roses” (232). When it turns out that the rose’s assault on the garden had only been a dream, she is happily relieved: “she had learned to respect the individuality of her sister flowers, and began to see that they, as well as herself, had their own missions” (232).

It is a simple story on the surface, but when read as a theoretical counterpart to *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, the piece expands Harper’s critique of white women’s limited perspective. The rose is powerful, like Camilla, but again lacks perspective—she is unable to understand that the other flowers of the garden offer different talents and beauties, and that in turn, their individual missions together create a better garden. The violets are the first to bloom and “herald the approach of spring,” while the dahlias brightened the end of the season and “loved the fading year”; the tulips are bright and tall, while the snow drops are

small and enveloped in white (231-232). Together, the varieties of flowers create a harmonious scene that can be enjoyed any time; their diverse colors and blooming seasons meld to produce the beauty of the garden. The rose, however, thinking that she represents all flowers, does not understand this diversity or the way it works to produce the garden's splendor; she has to learn this lesson when the garden is overrun by roses and loses its loveliness.

The story gives a detailed account of the negative effects of the lack of perspective that comes with privilege and power: not only is the garden worse off, but the other flowers deeply resent their transformations. Though they all eventually "submit" to this "unwelcome destiny," they do so with "heavy hearts," "bitter sobs," anger, and indignation (231). The flowers look at their transformations as "doom" and with "tearful eyes and trembling limbs" and "quiver[s] of agony" they "shrank instinctively" from the rose's power (231). Harper's use of the language of dread and resentment makes clear that the rose is not only ruining the whole of the garden, but doing violence to her individual "sister flowers," "whose mission she did not understand" (232). This is a powerful critique of the false universal of the category of "woman"—white women's dominance not only shatters the individuality of all other women and squanders their talents and purposes, but also damages the world in which those women live. Much as the rose cannot stand in for all flowers, white women do not represent all women—the story exposes the limited perspective of privilege and its failure to produce a just world. Harper debunks the false universal of "woman" and replaces it with "women," and her focus on a wide variety of difference suggests that she is not simply bifurcating the category in terms of race, but also by differences of class, education, and

location.³⁷ White women are again figured as needing an education in standpoint—they must learn that their views do not stand in for all women’s views, and that their privilege obscures their perspectives in ways that damage the world they are trying to intervene in.

The education of white women, as theorized in both *Minnie’s Sacrifice* and “The Mission of the Flowers,” provides an important backdrop to Harper’s theory of suffrage. The issue of voting rights does not emerge in the novel until near its conclusion, and this narrative placement importantly frames the suffrage issue as part of a wider set of issues and a longer history. By the time woman’s suffrage is broached between Minnie and Louis, the narrative has brought white male sexual violence to the fore, underscored white women’s privilege, and emphasized the central role of black women in educating the public in a standpoint based upon a need to remedy racial and sexual injustice and oppression. From this narrative foundation, Minnie argues for women’s right to vote against a skeptical Louis, beginning with a broad argument for universal suffrage:

“I think the nation makes one great mistake in settling this question of suffrage. It seems to me that everything gets settled on a partial basis. When they are reconstructing the government why not lay the whole foundation anew, and base the right of suffrage not on the claims of service or sex, but on the broader basis of our common humanity” (78).

When Louis replies that the nation is “not prepared” for woman’s suffrage, echoing Wendell Phillips words, that “[t]his hour belongs to the negro” (78), Minnie responds: “But, Louis, is it not the negro woman’s hour also? Has she not as many rights and claims as the negro man?” (78). Louis concedes that this might be true, but that “you cannot better the condition of the colored men without helping the colored women”—an idea that Minnie dismisses,

³⁷ Indeed, the bulk of the brief story is taken up by the careful detailing of the differences in place, personality, and physicality between the flowers, creating a garden geography that represents a symbolic map of women’s differences.

claiming that black women need the protection of the vote just as much; she does not think that “the negro man is the only one who has pressing claims at this hour” (78).

Minnie’s argument for the need for woman’s suffrage is underscored by its narrative link to her death. The lengthy suffrage dialogue immediately precedes the foreshadowing of Minnie’s killing—directly following this conversation, the narrator informs the reader that “the pleasant home-life of Louis and Minnie was destined to be rudely broken up” (81).

Interestingly, it is Louis who begins to receive anonymous threats, telling him he is a “doomed man” and to “beware” (81), but it is Minnie who is ultimately killed by the Klan. The chapter depicting Minnie’s death is missing, but the conclusion of the novel suggests that Minnie was lynched while out visiting her students on an evening when Louis has gone to lecture in another town. While it is Louis who repeatedly worries about the increasing levels of violence in the South in which the “Ku Klux spread terror and death around” (85) and who receives the threats and intimidation, it is Minnie who dies at the hands of this violence. The extant narrative only includes the aftermath of Minnie’s death in which the community comes to pay their respects to Minnie’s body before it is buried, but during this procession of visitors, the story of another black woman’s death is linked to Minnie’s. Louis overhears a conversation between two women who, contemplating Minnie’s body, relay the story of how one of their daughters was killed for saying she would like to marry one of the Union soldiers who came through the town during the war: “Now when Amy seed de sojers had cum’d through she was mighty glad, and she said ina kine of childish way, ‘I’s e so glad, I’m gwine to marry a Linkum soger, and set up housekeeping for myself.’ I don’t spect she were in arnest ‘bout marrying de sojer, but she did want her freedom” (87). According to the woman, a white man hears the girl’s comment, has her beaten, “tried” by a mob of

Confederate soldiers for “saying ‘cendiary words,” and then hung (87).³⁸ While the extant text of the novel does not provide us with the details of Minnie’s death, the story of Amy’s hanging stands in for it and provides a narrative double that underscores how we might read Minnie’s “sacrifice”—not as a black woman who sacrifices her rights for her husband’s, but as a black woman who is sacrificed to racialized and gendered violence because of her institutionalized inequality. Amy is hung for trespassing against the tenets of miscegenation and for approximating a female domesticity reserved for white women—for stating, if only in the future tense, that she possessed a social equality that she did not have. And she is killed for this inequality, for not having the protection of the law. Minnie, though she comes from a different class, well-educated and never enslaved, meets the same kind of death. Neither have the protection of the law, neither are seen as equal—not to black men, and not to white women; both are killed at the hands of white male violence.

³⁸ The story of Amy’s death has its roots in an account Harper heard while lecturing in South Carolina in 1867. In a letter to Still, she writes, “Our army had been through, and this poor, ill-fated girl, almost a child in years, about seventeen years of age, rejoiced over the event, and said that she was going to marry a Yankee and set up housekeeping. She was reported as having made an incendiary speech and arrested, cruelly scourged, and then brutally hung. Poor child! she had been a faithful servant—her master tried to save her, but the tide of fury swept away his efforts. Oh, friend, perhaps, sometimes your heart would ache, if you were only here and heard of the wrongs and abuses to which these people have been subjected” (Still 768).

The Refusal of Race-versus-Gender and the Reformulation of Suffrage

“[C]laims for justice against racism and claims for justice against both patriarchal and heterosexual privileges were made to compete with each other: this competition among harmed collectivities remains one of the major spectator sports of the American public sphere. It says volumes about the continued and linked virulence of racism, misogyny, heterosexism, economic privilege, and politics in America.”

—Lauren Berlant, “The Queen of America Goes to Washington City” 98

Minnie’s Sacrifice puts forth a concept of suffrage that is quite different from Harper’s 1866 speech in which she figures the vote as a method of educating white women in injustice, but this is precisely my point: Harper develops suffrage into a flexible, transitional concept that means different things to different groups. Indeed, in Harper’s formulations, suffrage becomes a proxy for understanding difference itself: it is not a universal or static idea but a partial and dynamic process for recognizing the differences between women and their changing needs within their social and political environments. Harper’s simultaneous critique of white privilege and development of a black female standpoint generates a more expansive theory of suffrage than the discourse of the “split” allows, one that is embedded in a complex history of injustice that cannot be parsed or remedied through a simple focus on white feminist racism, on the one hand, or male privilege, on the other.

Harper’s larger body of Reconstruction work puts forth a view of suffrage that is quite far from the “lesser question of sex” line that her views are usually whittled down to in the historiography. Her expanded idea of suffrage roots the concept in both racial and gendered injustices that cannot be extricated from one another—black women’s inequality cannot be parsed as only a function of their race, on the one hand, or of their gender, on the other. We might imagine this narrative framing of the issue as a response to Frederick

Douglass's 1869 AERA claim, in which he argues that black men's need for the vote is more urgent than women's:

I must say that I do not see how any one can pretend that there is the same urgency in giving the ballot to woman as to the negro. When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own. (Stanton et al. 382)

The transcript of the meeting notes that "A Voice" calls out from the audience: "Is that not all true about black women?" to which Douglass responds: "Yes, yes, yes; it is true of the black woman, but not because she is a woman, but because she is black" (382). Douglass's view—that a woman's identity could be parceled up and partitioned, with race on the one side pinned to oppression, and gender on the other, rendered insignificant—is thoroughly debunked in Harper's fiction. In *Minnie's Sacrifice* it is black women, not black men, who are depicted as the primary victims of white male violence. From the novel's beginning with black female slaves who are raped by white masters, to its end with the violent murders of Minnie and Amy, the narrative demonstrates over and over black women's need for the protection of the law. Were Agnes and Ellen raped because they were black, or because they were women? Were Amy and Minnie murdered because of their gender, or because of their race? Harper's work points up the absurdity of such inquiries and the impossibility of ever "answering" those questions. These women's identities cannot be divided up, and in establishing this point, the suffrage question is simultaneously framed in the same way: the need for the protection of the vote is rooted in both racialized and gendered injustices that

cannot be extricated from one another and instead must be understood as “bound up together,” but in different ways, with an eye toward multiple, and shifting, differences.

By developing the concept of standpoint, Harper’s work extends this critique of the “choice” between race and gender and instead draws attention to white privilege, male privilege, and their oppressive effects. Black female characters are used to highlight the narrowness that stems from the white perspective, their viewpoints deployed to educate white characters on the failures of a purportedly democratic nation. Harper’s work suggests that in framing the suffrage issue as a struggle between race and gender, white and male privilege are erased. Her 1869 texts can be read as a deconstruction of that choice and a shifting of focus to those privileges that the Fifteenth Amendment frame obscures, the ones she figures as the origins of oppression. By developing parallel lines of critique in 1869, in which the fallacy of the white woman suffragist universal is exposed, its oppressive and damaging effects highlighted, while demonstrating the need for women’s legal equality, Harper’s work constructs a complex suffrage stance, one that transgresses the borders of the black man-versus-white woman debate and emphasizes the importance of the situational perspective of the oppressed. Harper’s black female perspective posits not simply the impossibility of ever discerning which facet of one’s identity is the source of one’s oppression, but that the framework of that question produces its own critical problems.

Indeed, we can read Harper’s 1869 fiction as not just a deconstruction of the 1869 “split” and its “choice” between race and gender, but as a representation of the ways the framework itself works to efface black women’s contributions to feminist theorizing. The critical circulation of the “split” as the primary way to understand the suffrage issue in 1869 absorbs and reinscribes the historical race/gender “choice” in its own narrative construction.

Harper comes to represent a facile, race-is-greater-than-sex position, and while this position is critically lauded, often by black feminist critics, it elides the feminist theorizing that can be drawn from her work. The critical attachment to the split, in this instance, obscures Harper's contributions to theorizing the historical moment—the persistent focus on white feminist racism compresses her work into a choice of her race over her sex, which drains her ideas down to a “side” of the split, ultimately reinscribing the same blindspots of the racism split-narratives critique. Ironically, we might read this focus as the reason Harper is not a major feminist historical figure today, the “split” effectively blocking her from this status in order to critique white feminist racism—a doubling-down on the critical problem, in the name of its solution. The “split” renders us unable to read Harper's suffrage ideas as feminism, and her critique of feminism as feminism, because its narratives are committed to an either/or paradigm through the idiom of “sides” and “choices.” Instead, the historical object these narratives describe—the “split's” race-versus-gender conundrum—becomes the paradigm by which present-day feminism is articulated. Split-narratives and their rhetoric are enmeshed in the very problem they seek to intervene in, a recursive practice that produces Harper as a symbol of race-before-gender, and thus as the non-feminist to Truth's feminist, all in the name of critiquing white feminist racism. When Nell Painter notes that the “symbolic Truth”—the Stanton-Anthony version of Truth who stood for sex over race—“blots out” Harper's feminism, I think she is pointing up a symptom not only of the way that Truth has been canonized within feminism but to the way the “split” has dominated the telling of its history (233). It's not the symbolic Truth that obscures Harper's feminism, it's the “split”—and our understanding of both the suffrage question, and black women's theorizing of it, is obscured in the process.

The critical attachment to the “split” is also an attachment to the historical moment of 1869. While I have kept to the 1869 parameters in this chapter, and used it as a center-point in Chapter 2, in order to expose the ways in which that moment exceeds its future narrative construction, it is necessary to point out the simple fact that the “split’s” emphasis on this year as a sort of benchmark produces its own kind of effects. Most notably, the year “1869” comes to represent a watershed for U.S. feminism, one that formulates its history into periods of development and setback that are defined by racism and the race-versus-gender problem. “1869” becomes an organizing sign that feminist narratives must relate to, and return to, again and again. Deborah McDowell writes about the ways the critical repetition of Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” amounts to a knee-jerk feminist reaction, one that does not “capture” the “immediacy” of the words in Truth’s time or “reactivate it for our own”; instead, McDowell suggests that the question “functions not to document a moment in a developing discourse but to freeze that moment in time” (163). McDowell’s formulation, which asks after the effects of the repetition rather than what it might mean to “capture” the historical moment’s “immediacy,” can be aptly applied to the discursive circulation of the suffrage “split,” which effectively freezes the historical moment of 1869 into a discrete and usable part. The temporality of the “split,” as Harper’s work suggests, produces a periodization of feminism that forecloses on black women’s activist and theoretical contributions.³⁹ This problem of

³⁹ In her work on African American women’s public culture in the nineteenth century, Martha Jones notes that only a few years after the Fifteenth Amendment debates, black women were given an important political right, one that would be overshadowed by the critical focus on the “split” and the year of 1869: “In 1876, female members of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church won the right to vote and to hold office within their denomination” (151). According to Jones, “If black women had largely ceded the reigns of party politics to their male counterparts, they simultaneously took up a new campaign grounded in the politics of race, as well as sex, to redefine their public standing” (152). Jones’s point is to demonstrate how history looks different when black women are

periodization, and its entanglement in critiques of feminist racism, are explored in the next chapter.

made central and the temporal focus is unmoored from national events dominated by white women. For other analyses of the difference an attention to black women makes for the periodization of U.S. feminism, see Terborg-Penn, *African American Women*, Chapter 3; Barkley-Brown; and Thompson.

CHAPTER 4

Feminist “Waves,” the “Monster Ballot,” and the Politics of the Past

“We are dedicated to a revival of knowledge about our forgotten feminist history, and to a furthering of the militant tradition of the old radical feminist movement. We define this roughly, as: The whole American Woman’s Rights Movement until 1869, the Stanton-Anthony group thereafter (National Woman’s Suffrage Association) and much later the revived militant tradition associated with Harriet Stanton Blatch in the U.S. (the Congressional Union, later the Woman’s Party) and with the Pankhursts in Great Britain (The Woman’s Social and Political Union).”

—New York Radical Feminists, “Organizing Principles,” 1969 (119)

So begins the founding document of the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF), calling forth a “new” form of feminism in 1969 by tracing a historical lineage of the movement back to the nineteenth century. The task to which founding members Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt, and Cellestine Ware dedicate themselves is a weighty one: if feminism has languished over the past 50 years, its true history forgotten, then this new group will devote itself to a “revival” of that lifeless past. This “revival,” in turn, provides the ground on which to build a movement in the present, one that is simultaneously “new” and “old,” steeped in tradition and yet radically contemporary. History, it is clear, is vitally important to the success of this new endeavor and would in fact be integral to the new group’s organizational structure, which the “Principles” describe as a system of “brigades”: small groups of women named after pairs of historical figures from the “old” movement,

each taking on group-determined tasks to further the feminist cause.¹ More than a perfunctory process of paying homage through a namesake system, each brigade would need to put history at the center of its own formation through a program of self-education. The first task of the founding group, the Stanton-Anthony Brigade, was to develop a three-stage system by which each incoming group of women would become an official brigade, one of which was to devote “six weeks of intensive reading and discussion of feminist history and theory (preferably direct sources)” in order to “acquaint each member of the group with her own history and to give her a sense of continuity with the feminist political tradition” (120).² History is not just about the past, but is a part of the present as well: the NYRF training period would demonstrate to each new member that she already has a feminist history to connect with and carry into the future.

Firestone reiterates this call to history in the opening to *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), published less than a year after the establishment of the NYRF, by invoking a feminism of the past to which the contemporary movement can link to across time. According to Firestone, “In the radical feminist view, the new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality” but instead, “is the second wave of the most important revolution in history” (15). The goal of this revolution is the “overthrow of the

¹ The manifesto defines a brigade as a “core group of five to eight people or more” and suggests that each brigade chooses a name that reflects the goals of the group: “Thus an analysis-oriented group would not choose Pankhurst Brigade, nor would an action-oriented group choose Gilman Brigade” (120-121).

² The concern with using original sources to acquaint feminists with the history of the women’s movement runs throughout radical “second-wave” texts; this could be read as a reflection of the lack of trust these activists felt for historians who had ignored women’s history for most of the twentieth century, but it is also a sign of the radical feminist desire to take control of the framing of that history and deploy it for its own purposes. See Sarachild 14-15 for another example of this concern.

oldest, most rigid class/caste system in existence, the class system based on sex” that has been “consolidated over thousands of years” (15).³ She continues: “In this perspective, the pioneer Western feminist movement was only the first onslaught, the fifty-year ridicule that followed it only a first counteroffensive—the dawn of a long struggle to break free from the oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by man” (15). As in the “Organizing Principles,” Firestone deploys history to not only “revive” feminism but to ground the “new” movement in a long and significant struggle to break free from oppression.

Firestone’s “waving” of the movement calls forth a nineteenth-century feminism that dissolves into a “fifty-year” rut after woman’s suffrage is won and must be reconstituted by radical feminists in the present. That a “first wave” of U.S. feminism did not exist until a self-described “second wave” named it is one of the more peculiar hallmarks of the periodization of the movement. While nineteenth-century women’s rights activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony certainly saw their movement as historic, and famously wrote the history to prove it, these figures did not describe their work as the first of what they hoped would be many waves of a rising feminism washing over the nation.⁴ In the popular lexicon the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* often marks

³ The use of superlatives such as “oldest” and “most rigid” is a common technique used across a variety of radical feminist texts to describe women’s oppression under patriarchy. I will discuss this practice and its effects in more detail below.

⁴ In the Preface to the first volume of *History of Woman Suffrage*, the editors demonstrate that they are keenly aware that in writing the history of the movement as it unfolds, and writing themselves into history, they open themselves up to charges that they lack impartiality or are “egoistic” (8). They argue, however, that while “to be historians of a reform in which we have been among the chief actors, has its points of embarrassment,” it has more advantages: “those identified with this reform were better qualified to prepare a faithful history with greater patience and pleasure, than those of another generation possibly could,” and more importantly, the movement’s documents could be lost forever if they were not collected and published while the central figures of the movement were still living (7-8).

the beginning of the “second wave” of feminism, but it was not until the late 1960s and the advent of radical feminism by figures such as Firestone that the concept of feminist “waves” came into being.⁵ While Firestone never actually refers to a “first wave,” instead using the language of a “first onslaught” and “the dawn of a long struggle,” by defining her movement as a “second wave” she implicitly constructs a history that retrospectively calls forth the “wave” that came before. History is at the center of the “new wave,” the legacy of the past facilitating the production of a contemporary movement.

But it is not just any feminist history, or even any nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement, that these texts evoke and emphasize; it is a particular periodization and lineage that is drawn in order to connect with the present, one that relies on a familiar date. In the “Organizing Principles,” it is initially the whole woman’s right movement of the nineteenth-century that is established as the root of this lineage, but after 1869, it is only a part of that movement, the Stanton-Anthony group, that carries on the feminist tradition. Before this watershed year, the authors claim the broader movement was “militant,” but after, they only identify with one “side” and trace their heritage through it, rather than the movement in its entirety. While the term “split” is never used in this passage, it is implicit in the idiom of “wholes” separating into “parts” after the infamous year. By invoking the past movement, the NYRF establish a historical tradition that demonstrates that they are not the first group in history to fight for women’s rights, but by “splitting” that movement they cordon off one

⁵ Firestone was not the first to use the “wave” metaphor to describe the feminist movement. Journalist Martha Weinman Lear’s March 10, 1968 article, “The Second Feminist Wave,” is the first published reference to feminist “waves,” although the concept almost certainly had been circulating in radical feminist organizations for months, if not years, before its publication.

“side” from the other, a strategy that performs a number of strategic tasks in bringing to “life” a new feminism one hundred years later in 1969.

In this project I have examined how feminist historiography has constructed canonical narratives of the 1869 suffrage “split,” producing and compressing that event in ways that subsume the complexity of white feminist racism and black women’s theorizing of the movement, all in the name of a progressive antiracist feminism in the present. It is not the referent of this story—the “split” itself—but the narrative practices through which this referent has taken on hypercanonical status that has motivated this exploration. The “split” articulated in foundational texts of women’s history of the late 1950s and 1960s circulates widely across the historiography of the following fifty years, so widely in fact that it now stands as a shorthand reference to the struggle between race and gender. These narratives have deployed the past as a means for constructing the political agency of present-day feminism, the “split” underwriting the authority of contemporary iterations of the movement.

This type of practice can also be seen in the historicizing gestures of the movement documents and manifestoes of radical feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁶ These

⁶ The term “radical feminism” is a contested one, both an ideological and institutional category, sometimes used in opposition to liberal, or cultural, or socialist feminism, sometimes used to differentiate between larger, national organizations and smaller, loosely-affiliated, regional groups of feminist activists. In this chapter I use the terminology to refer to the latter; that is, I focus on the foundational texts of the small groups of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), rather than, say, on the texts of the (liberal) National Organization for Women, or the (socialist) Women’s Liberation Union, or the (black feminist) Combahee River Collective. Not only were the early, self-defined radical feminist groups the first to publish movement documents and manifestoes that articulated the strategies and goals of radical feminism through the construction of a feminist past, they were the only vein of feminism to do so in terms of the 1869 “split.” Other feminist organizations and groups of the era do not reference this historical event as an important touchstone in building their movement. I use the term “radical feminism,” then, not as a normative practice but as a descriptive one meant to delineate a set of groups and their texts rather than suggest that other groups of the era were not “radical” or “feminist” in any sense

texts take up the “split” after it was delineated and discussed in Eleanor Flexner’s *Century of Struggle* (1959) and Aileen Kraditor’s *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (1965) but before it had become a hypercanonical symbol through its reiteration in feminist historiography.⁷ This body of work constructs what we might call a non-canonical narrative of the “split”—the story of the nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement that did not become the dominant way for feminists to understand and use the past. In the previous two chapters, I have looked to other ways of understanding the era of the “split” without privileging the “split” itself; in this chapter, I am instead exploring a different itinerary of this discursive construct as another method for seeing around the hypercanonicity of the race-versus-gender narrative. I track the 1869 “split” as it travels through this body of work, exploring how radical feminists construct a story of the nineteenth-century as a method for defining—and—claiming—feminism in the late-1960s and early-1970s. These movement texts produce their own kind of narratives that produce the “split” not in race-versus-gender terms, as the historiography does, but in terms of the radical and the conservative. Their narratives of the nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement, in turn, rely not on an opposition between race and gender, but on analogies between those two categories. This production of the past becomes a story by which radical feminists stake their claim as the true

of those words. See Echols for an understanding of radical feminism in opposition to what she calls cultural feminism. See King, *Theory in Its Feminist Travels* for a critique of these sorts of typologies, which she argues “giv[e] edges and borders to threads of connection” and thereby make static and rigid what she sees as fluid and shifting (10).

⁷ The next major history of suffrage to appear after Kraditor’s was Ellen DuBois’s *Feminism and Suffrage* (1978). It was not until the 1980s that the “split” begins to circulate widely among a diverse set of texts of feminist history and women’s studies.

feminists of the “second wave,” defending their strain of the movement against liberal feminism, on the one hand, and radical leftists, on the other.⁸

This body of work has been read as “reproducing” the same “troubling structure” of the “first-wave” feminists such as Stanton and Anthony, with critics suggesting that the radical feminists of the “second wave” revived and repeated the racist practices of the nineteenth-century movement (Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister* 77).⁹ But I argue that the reiteration of the “second wave’s” failure on issues of race is a parallel narrative practice to the radical feminist construction of history, in which the feminist past is consistently retrieved and retold in order to bring about a new movement. That is, feminist historiographers and critics use the wave metaphor to reproduce the past in terms of its failures, but this practice might be read as part of the same narrative script in which feminist history is rendered in particular ways so as to produce the political agency of feminism in the present. The critique of the radical feminists has certainly been warranted, but it has contributed to an ahistorical canonized narrative that refuses the ways in which their texts can also be read as a story for understanding the political culture in which feminism is generated.

“Waving” Radical Feminism

Much like the canonical narrative of the Stanton-Anthony “side” of the nineteenth-century suffrage movement, a standard story of the radical feminists of the “second wave”

⁸ I use quotations around all references to the “second wave” and other “wave” language in what follows. My aim is to call attention to the constructed nature of the wave model and to resist the pull to reify the metaphor.

⁹ Although I do not intend to make a causal argument here, I suspect this has much to do with the way radical feminists read the “split” in fact; they identify with the wrong “side”—the Stanton-Anthony “side”—and are therefore rendered unusable by present-day critics for whom this “side” represents a symbol of white feminist racism.

has developed over the last thirty years. According to this narrative, the “second wave” of the U.S. feminist movement emerges out of middle-class white women’s myopic focus on gender at the expense of analyses of race and class.¹⁰ Critiques of the racist underpinnings of the “second wave,” and especially the tendency within the manifestoes of the movement to envision white women’s experience as women’s experience, exposed the false universals of the emergent feminism of the 1960s and demonstrated how they obliterated the experiences of women of color. Some critics focused on individual works of the early Women’s Liberation movement, like Hortense Spillers, whose incisive and at times scathing critique of Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex* points up the myriad ways in which that work uses the term “woman” as a “universal and unmodified noun” to produce “an unrelenting ‘objectification’ of women and men of color” (159).

Other critics focus less on individual texts and instead invoke the failures of a more general Women’s Liberation movement to see race and sex as intertwined forms of oppression. For instance, in her influential analysis of race in feminism *Ain’t I A Woman* (1981), bell hooks describes how she was “disturbed by the white women’s liberationists’ insistence that race and sex were two separate issues” and their refusal to confront the racism embedded in their thinking:

The group of college-educated white middle and upper class women who came together to organize a women’s movement brought a new energy to the concept of women’s rights in America... Yet as they attempted to take feminism beyond the realm of radical rhetoric and into the realm of American life, they revealed that they had not changed, had not undone the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others. Consequently, the Sisterhood they talked about has not become a

¹⁰ This zero-sum reading—that to focus on gender oppression must *necessarily* entail a denial of racial or class oppressions—is one of the tropes that secures this narrative’s claim about the “second wave” and race.

reality, and the women's movement they envisioned would have a transformative effect of American culture has not emerged. (121)

Without specifying it overtly, hooks takes the self-defined radical feminists of the "second wave" as the object of her critique; she does not invoke particular texts or writers, but it is clear that it is this emerging feminist work of the 1960s that is responsible for this failure. Rather than bring about a truly revolutionary movement that would eradicate oppression and discrimination for women and men, black and white, this group of feminists could only reproduce the same "hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationships already established in American society" (121).

One might read these influential critiques of the early Women's Liberation movement as foundational for what would become a standard trope in the field of feminist studies. No where is this practice more apparent than in the literature of the "third wave" of feminism. While the radical feminists of the "second wave" might have established the wave metaphor as its guiding narrative trope, the model was taken up by a self-described "third wave" in the mid-1990s. Like the "second wave," this new "wave" established itself not only through a set of "new" problems, issues, and styles of activism, but through the narrative construction of the "wave" that preceded it. In the primary texts of the "third wave," the "second wave" is produced as a monolithic, static unit, one that not only resists dissent or change, but difference itself. In telling the "second wave's" story, the "third wave" imagines a feminist legacy to connect with, and then deploys that legacy as a means of taking on the mantle of feminism. This narrative production of its predecessor creates an opening through which the "third wave" can tell its own story about feminism, one that uses the "second wave" as a foil to highlight the need for a new feminist politics that can address the problems of the past. In

this process, the contingency and context of the previous “wave” are obscured as a means of highlighting the superior clarity and clear superiority of a new feminist movement.

For instance, in Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin’s “third-wave” collection *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (2004) the editors suggest that a new feminist movement is needed because the “second wave” has focused too narrowly on gender at the expense of other facets of women’s identities; in forming a “third wave” the writers suggest they primarily want to “split open” the “borders of feminism” “so that other identity claims of race, sexuality, class, nationality, and geography can move beyond being simply ‘tolerated’ or ‘included’” (xxvii). In this narrative, the “third wave” is borne out of the “inattentiveness to racial, cultural, sexual, and national differences” that the “second wave” failed to address (xxviii). This “third wave” will “g[o] beyond the rhetoric of inclusion” because they have “learned from the second wave’s faux pas” in regard to issues of race and class: the “feminist movement cannot succeed if it does not challenge power structures of wealth and race” (xxix). The “third wave” emerges and is defined through its difference from the “second wave” over difference—no reference to specific texts or activists of the “second wave” are needed in this narrative of feminist rejuvenation; feminist readers know this story by heart.

My point is not to minimize or dismiss the critique of “second wave” feminism, but to show how that critique becomes an integral part of a feminist narrative in which the history of the movement is evoked and deployed in the idiom of failure so that a new movement can forge ahead. This story of “second-wave” feminism generates the basis of a new feminism that will be able to move beyond the mistakes of the past and bring about the revolutionary change that the earlier “wave” failed to produce. This narrative practice is so economical that

readers need not even be given a text or name by way of example of the failures the writer draws on; the connection between the “second wave” and the failures on race are so airtight that these citations are not needed. Indeed, by not citing specific texts from the previous “wave,” that connection is more firmly cemented as a form of common knowledge among feminist readers—the story is so well-established that it need not be documented.¹¹

The work of the radical feminists of the “second wave” might be imagined as those missing citations in narratives like Labaton and Martin’s. As feminist historian Catherine Orr has suggested, the “third wave” tends to “flatten” what is a “very complex and contradictory social movement into a few shorthand caricatures,” allowing an “image of the monolithic, ideal, ‘mainstream’ feminism” to emerge, an image that the “third wave” can then “battle” because it “is rarely examined *as a representation*; rather, it almost always is accepted as ‘real’” (32). According to Orr, “the addition of historical nuance to this generation’s perspective” will not necessarily intervene in the storytelling process on the part of the “third wave.” Instead, she suggests that this form of narrative shorthand is “central” to the “reinvention process” of waves (32). Likewise, my point is not to validate or deny the “third wave’s” construction of the “second wave” but instead to demonstrate how this “reinvention process” is emblematic of a feminist narrative practice in which the history of feminism—and the failures of that history—underwrite the authority of successive iterations of the movement.

The wave metaphor itself facilitates this process; it is through “waves” that feminism’s past is now most commonly organized and understood, in both popular and

¹¹ See Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* 110-112 for a discussion of the absence of citation in feminist theory, which she argues is “often more significant” than its inclusion for the ways it “both references and produces reflective agreement” in narratives of the past (110, 112).

academic contexts. In its classic form, this practice designates the “first wave” of feminism as the period between the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the “second wave” as beginning in the 1960s, and a “third wave” that commences on the heels of the second in the mid-1990s.¹² While the wave model has been tremendously influential in popularizing and promoting feminism and its history, its periodization popularizes and promotes a particular version of the feminist past, a singular and unified narrative that stands in for the multiplicity and contradiction of the history of the movement.¹³

Radical Feminism in History

“There we were standing at the microphones, hands stretched up. [The chairman] rams [Murray’s] resolution through; refuses to call on us; as soon as the whole thing is over this little kid, smaller than I am, rushes in front of me to the microphone, raises his hand, is recognized and the first thing he says is ‘ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to speak to you today about the most oppressed group in America, the American Indian.’ Shulie Firestone and about three or four other people...were ready to pull the place apart. Then William Pepper patted Shulie on the head and said, ‘Move on little girl; we have more important issues to talk about here than women’s liberation.’ That was the genesis. We had a meeting the next week with women in Chicago.”

—Jo Freeman, recounting her experience at the 1967 National Conference for New Politics (NCNP) (qtd. in Evans, *Personal Politics* 198-199)

In August of 1967, leaders of the Left held a meeting in Chicago to attempt to draw together the “increasingly fragmented” Movement, outline its goals, and nominate presidential and vice presidential candidates for the upcoming 1968 election (Evans,

¹² See Laughlin 76 for an example of this classic structure. For histories that rely on the wave structure more generally, see Echols; Legates; Rosen; Ezekiel; Dicker and Piepmeier; Evans, *Tidal Wave*; and Reger.

¹³ See Davis, *Moving the Mountain* 11, Cobble 87, Garrison 238, Gilmore 105, and Aikau et al. 3 for descriptions of the utility of the wave metaphor for popularizing feminism in the public sphere.

Personal Politics 195). According to Sara Evans's influential history of the period, this was a "parting attempt" by organizers to unify a large and diverse Movement that had been transforming into myriad movements with increasingly different focal points, aims, political strategies, and geographic locations over the past three years (196). Black Power and separatism had replaced the integrated movements Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as the "touchstone of 'true radicalism,'" leaving white leftist men in a position in which they "could only admire and emulate the black movement" (197). According to Evans's history, the NCNP meeting became a space for these white men to "receive validation" from these black activists, and as delegates shouted "Kill Whitey!" and demanded that Black Power be given fifty percent of the conference vote and committee slots despite their numbers adding up to approximately one-sixth of the conference, white male leaders "applauded enthusiastically" and "capitulated" to the demands (197). According to Evans, the "pressing emotional needs" of these black and white male activists—anger and guilt—"proved far stronger than the desire for a strategic alliance" and the conference would fail to produce a unified front for the Left (197).

It would, however, produce the final incident of sexist treatment that would inspire many women to leave the Left and form an independent Women's Liberation Movement. Watching the Black Caucus successfully assert their demands, a "radical minority" of white women, including Jo Freeman and Shulamith Firestone, began drafting their own resolutions to be read at the conference. Among these were demands for women to receive 51% of the vote and committee representation, condemnation of the media's portrayal of women as sex objects, and the "revamping of marriage, divorce, and property laws" (Evans, *Personal*

Politics 198; Echols 48). According to Evans, these women “had learned a lesson from black power and were demanding their rights without apology” (198) but had “failed” to foresee the “ridicule and dismay” that their resolution would produce in the male crowd (198). The resolution committee refused to give them the floor, and as Jo Freeman would recount later, the Chair told the women that the conference had “more important issues to talk about here than women’s liberation” (qtd. in Evans 199). Soon after Freeman and Firestone would convene groups of women in Chicago and New York that would form political strategies for women’s liberation that were independent from the Leftist groups from which they sprang.

This was not the first time this sort of dismissive tactic was deployed against women in the Movement. By 1967 there was already a history of women’s marginalization within the various civil rights and leftist groups, but this was, according to Evans, the event that “broke [the] dam” (201).¹⁴ The NCNP conference would result in the proliferation of small, independent groups of women committed to Women’s Liberation, many of which would declare themselves “radical feminists.” Some of the more active of these include the

¹⁴ See “SNCC Position Paper (Women in the Movement),” written (at the time anonymously) by Mary King and Casey Hayden, reprinted in full in Evans, *Personal Politics* 233-235. In this paper, presented at the Nov. 1964 staff retreat of SNCC, the authors critique the male leaders of the organization for their unwillingness to see women as equals in terms of power: “it needs to be known that just as Negroes were the crucial factor in the economy of the cotton South, so too in SNCC, women are the crucial factor that keeps the movement running on a day-to-day basis. Yet they are not given equal say-so when it comes to day-to-day decisionmaking. What can be done?” (qtd. in Evans 234). The use of the analogy between race and gender would become a common technique for expressing women’s marginalization in later radical feminist documents, one that I discuss below. See also Hayden and King’s “Sex and Caste,” commonly referred to as the “Kind of Memo” from Nov. 1965, reprinted in Evans, *Personal Politics* 235-238, in which the authors expand their original critiques of women’s position in SNCC.

Redstockings, The Feminists, New York Radical Feminists, and Cell 16.¹⁵ These groups produced and published their own manifestoes, journals, and pamphlets and deployed a variety of political practices, including the now infamous consciousness-raising groups, sit-ins, and zap-actions designed to gain mainstream media attention through outrageous or shocking tactics. While the groups differed in terms of membership, size, and political emphasis and strategies, they all defined their projects and goals in terms of a “radical” feminism. In what follows, I focus on the texts of these groups, most of which were produced between 1968 and 1972. We might imagine this archive of self-defined radical feminism as the silent stand-in when an amorphous, unarticulated “second wave” feminism is evoked by feminist critics or writers of the “third wave.” While the “second wave” of feminism can, and sometimes is, understood as encompassing a wide variety of feminisms across a longer period of time, its use as a discursive construct tends to flatten that field, with the work of the radical feminists delineated here functioning as a metonym for the entire “wave.” It is to this body of radical feminist work, in fact, that the ubiquitous wave metaphor for feminism can be traced back.

¹⁵ Most of these groups were based in New York, but many smaller ones began in Chicago, including the Women’s Radical Action project, and later, would spread to Boston and other cities around the country. See Evans, *Personal Politics* 207-211 for descriptions of some of the smaller groups at the forefront of the movement. By the late 1970s, radical feminists would be responsible for setting up thousands of small groups committed to Women’s Liberation in some way or another (Evans 222). See also Echols 65-101 for descriptions of the early women’s liberation groups.

History in Radical Feminism

“In short, feminism, which one might have supposed as dead as the Polish Question, is again an issue. Proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the great sandbar of Togetherness. When I prepared to do an article on this new tide, I prepared also to be entertained; it is the feminist burden that theirs is the only civil-rights movement in history which has been put down, consistently, by the cruelest weapon of them all—ridicule.”

—Martha Weinman Lear, “The Second Feminist Wave,” 1968 (24)

Lear’s 1968 *New York Times* article is the first known published reference to “second wave” feminism. Her description of both the history of the movement, and its status in the present day, suggests that this “new” feminism was rooted in the nineteenth-century suffrage movement, and shared with its forerunner the misfortune of not being taken seriously. The link between the “first wave” and the feminist “tide” of the contemporary moment is silent, but significant: Lear writes that the first “wave” “ebbed” after the vote was won and then “disappeared” into a “sandbar of Togetherness”—a reference to Betty Friedan’s critique of women’s domestic role in the early 1960s. Friedan’s prospectus for *The Feminine Mystique* was initially titled “The Togetherness Woman,” a critical reference to a popular advertising campaign that was running in various women’s magazines of the era.¹⁶ Lear’s evocation of “Togetherness” suggests that if the “second wave” does not include Friedan, it certainly can be traced back through this figure to the suffragists of the “first wave.” Indeed, the article begins with a lengthy section on the National Organization for Women—a group established in 1966 and of which Friedan was president—but midway through, Lear pivots to explore a

¹⁶ Friedan initially submitted “The Togetherness Woman” as an article to *McCall’s*, who promptly rejected it. She later submitted it to *Ladies Home Journal*, who agreed to publish it but not without editing it to make precisely the opposite point that Friedan had intended; Friedan refused to publish the edited version. She then sent the piece to *Redbook*, who rejected it as well, declaring that Friedan must have “gone off her rocker” (qtd. in Coontz 146). For more on the publication history of Friedan, see Horowitz, esp. 197-223 and Coontz.

different group of feminists: “Not all of the new feminist activity is centered within NOW. To its left is a small group called Radical Women—young, bright-eyed, cheerfully militant—which recently splintered off from Students for a Democratic Society” (50-51).¹⁷ These feminists, according to the author, are the “theoreticians” of the movement, as opposed to the NOW members who “attack concrete issues, tied primarily to employment” (51). Lear interviews a handful of these more radical activists, including Ti-Grace Atkinson, and determines that while they may be “atypical” they are at least “interesting” (51). After this foray into the “militant” part of the movement, a side that Lear says the more “conservative faction” of NOW views with a “certain ambivalence” (51), Lear gives Friedan the last word on feminism and its future, again evoking the radical/liberal divide: “We work with the realities of American life, and in reality our job now is to make it possible for women to integrate their roles at home and in society. But as to whether we will finally have to challenge the institutions, the concepts of marriage and the nuclear family—I don’t know. I just don’t know” (qtd. in Lear 56).

Lear’s representation of the second feminist “wave” popularized a lineage that radical feminists would dispute over the course of the next decade. It is clear that for Lear, the “wave” began with Friedan, and its precursors were the suffragists. “Radical” feminists are given their due, but primarily as outliers of the “real” movement that was interested in getting “concrete” things done. The effort to define the “second wave” was officially on, and the claim to feminism in the present would come to hinge on the representation of the past. A variety of radical feminist texts spanning the next five years construct an emerging narrative

¹⁷ See Barakso, esp. 11-38, for a history of the founding of NOW.

of the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement that would play an integral role in defining the new "wave," its goals, and its future.¹⁸

These writings represent the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement as a lost past that must be uncovered and connected with for the "second wave" to commence. The New York Radical Feminists published its journal *Notes from the First Year* in 1968, and Shulamith Firestone's lead essay establishes a historical context for the present-day movement. The history of the women's movement is not what women had thought it was, according to Firestone. In "The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View," she writes of a "suspicious blank in the history books when it comes to the WRM, one of the greatest struggles for freedom this country has known," suggesting that this "blank" has been filled with a false image of the past: "Little girls are taught to believe that all their rights were won for them a long time ago by a silly bunch of ladies who carried on and made a ridiculous display, all to get that paper in the ballot box" (par. 6).¹⁹ Firestone sees the primary task of the "new" radical feminism—the work that must be done before any contemporary goals can be achieved—as filling in this "suspicious blank" by historicizing the movement.

¹⁸ As the publication dates of these texts makes clear, in this chapter I am less interested in constructing a new periodization of feminism, one that alters its central figures or shifts its timeline, than I am in developing an understanding of how the "classic" or founding texts of this model exceed their narrative construction. I am in agreement, however, with scholars who argue that the wave model has highlighted the activism of white women while obscuring the work of women of color, and that shifting the periodization of feminist history allows for different issues and problems within feminism to emerge, indeed, allowing for different feminisms to come into view. See Springer and Thompson for two exemplary cases against the current wave model.

¹⁹ Firestone's article would be revised and republished a year and a half later in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970).

This call to the past is repeated throughout the texts of the radical feminists. Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, authors of one of the first studies of the revival of the women's movement and its origins, constructs this historical void too. In their 1971 essay, "The First Feminists," they suggest that the proud history of the nineteenth-century movement "has been only cursorily discussed in American history textbooks" (5).²⁰ This gap in history, according to Hole and Levine, must be filled in order for contemporary women to understand the origins of women's liberation and the many parallels between the two eras' movements. By constructing a narrative that fills this gap, the radical feminists of the "second wave" establish a connection to the past that allows them to place their movement within a longer historical trajectory. These historicizing gestures frequently rely on generational language to draw this ancestry, as when Firestone describes the contemporary radical feminist movement as "the direct descendant of the radical feminist line in the old movement" (*Dialectic of Sex* 37). Like the contemporary radical feminists, this "old line" of feminism saw "feminist issues not only as *women's* first priority, but as central to any larger revolutionary analysis" (*Dialectic of Sex* 37).²¹ The "new" radical feminism is both new and deeply rooted in this feminism of the past.²²

This drive to historicize their feminism appears contradictory for a movement often concerned with demonstrating the ways in which they are on the cutting edge of a new

²⁰ This article first appeared in Hole and Levine's *Rebirth of Feminism* (1971) and was reprinted the same year in the NYRF journal *Notes from the Third Year* (1971).

²¹ See Sarachild 27 and Morgan, "Introduction" xxii for similar examples.

²² While here I am interested in tracing how a "second wave" narrative of the nineteenth-century woman's right movement emerges, again it is worth noting the language of Firestone's claim to the past: she insists that feminism must be the "first" priority of women, and that these issues are "central" to any larger social revolution, a rhetorical strategy that I will discuss in more detail below.

politics—why should they temper that edge with the historical knowledge that they were not the first, after all, to insist on women’s liberation? While these writers often relish their newness, in one sense, they also repeatedly insist that their radicalism had precedent.²³ Hole and Levine put it this way:

The contemporary women’s movement is not the first such movement in American history to offer a wide-ranging feminist critique of society. In fact, much of what seems ‘radical’ in contemporary feminist analysis parallels the critique made by the feminists of the nineteenth century. Both the early and the contemporary feminists have engaged in a fundamental reexamination of the role of women in all spheres of life, and of the relationships of men and women in all social, political, economic and cultural institutions. Both have defined women as an oppressed group and have traced the origin of women’s subjugation to male-defined and male-dominated social institutions and value systems. (“The First Feminists” 5)

Contemporary feminism might seem radical, but it is a radicalism with a history, and therefore, perhaps not so radical after all. The radical feminists of the “second wave” were not the first to develop these lines of feminist analysis, and if nineteenth-century women were making many of the same arguments, how extreme could their demands really be? Radical feminism is at once defined as revolutionary and rooted in a long tradition.

Stanton and Anthony’s *History of Woman Suffrage* becomes an important touchstone for this dual exercise in establishing a radical feminist history to connect with, on the one hand, and moderating “second wave” radicalism, on the other. In her essay, “The Power of History” (1975) Kathie Sarachild describes the importance of Firestone’s initial foray into the nineteenth century and specifically her recovery and rehabilitation of Stanton and Anthony’s major work: “Had we gotten any idea of what that work was all about—its purpose and the breadth of its contents and even its method—we would have been spared much of the

²³ See Morgan, “Introduction” xxiii, Atkinson 32, and Willis “Women and the Left,” 56 for additional examples of writers claiming, and delighting in, their “new” radical politics.

confusion about the historical ground on which we were standing and would have felt much stronger than we had known possible” (38).²⁴ *History of Woman Suffrage* represents a form of knowledge production that the new movement could emulate; it demonstrates “the correctness and necessity of the ‘new’ movement’s writing its own history and writing it accurately” (38) and would allow “second wave” radical feminists to make crucial links between the problems both “waves” faced. According to Sarachild, “Many of the issues of history that have come up in our wave of the movement, Stanton, Anthony and Gage address as well” (38). The two movements are connected by the same kinds of issues; the “new” movement is not so much new as it is a continuation of a historical process begun more than a century before. The “first wave” provides a set of historical parallels that can both authorize and guide the radical feminism of the “second wave” as it establishes itself in the present.

And if the issues have not changed all that much, then how radical can the new movement really be? In establishing connections between the two eras, the use of *History of Woman Suffrage* as a grounding object in the construction of these historical narratives also stresses how *old* the problems facing women are. For example, the introduction to the anthology *Voices of Women’s Liberation* (1970) is drawn directly from Stanton and Anthony’s *History*; in the proceeding chapter, volume editor Leslie Tanner explains the editorial decision as a demonstration of the utter reasonableness of the radical feminism of the “second wave” and its necessity in the present: “If it could have been written today, how far *have* we come? Compared with Susan B. Anthony and other early feminists, *are* we so radical? A glance at the origins of our movement will show that we have a most radical

²⁴ Sarachild’s essay appears in the Redstockings’ collection, *Feminist Revolution* (1975), of which she was also editor. Sarachild was a member of New York Radical Women in addition to Redstockings, and co-founded the New York-based feminist newspaper, *Woman’s World*.

heritage” (“Foreword” 25, emphasis in original). The radical feminists of the “second wave” cannot be too extreme because, after all, there is Stanton and Anthony’s *History*, able to stand on its own as a contemporary document even as it was a century-old text.²⁵ But again, does this make the these “new” feminists verifiably radical, or does it just seem that way in comparison to a contemporary political culture uninterested in women’s oppression? Establishing a “radical heritage” paradoxically moderates contemporary radicalism. Tanner rejects the idea that women’s rights have progressed in any real way; her rhetorical questions posit a present-day feminism that cannot be asking for too much because it had all already been asked for before. The parallels between the two “waves” offer a way to root feminism in the past and at the same time temper its radical reputation in the present.

The contradiction in these texts—the desire to construct a radical feminist history while simultaneously declaring their contemporary politics not that radical—can be read as a strategy for the legitimation of radical feminism in the present. While on the one hand these writers construct a “first wave” that can be juxtaposed with their own to ground their claims and mitigate their perceived extremism, on the other hand they employ that construction to show precisely that feminist radicalism has a long history that should be respected. If feminism is not a serious movement on par with other civil rights movements of the period, if its demands have not been taken seriously, as Lear suggests is its hallmark, then perhaps establishing a radical lineage would shore up its claims to legitimacy. But this strategy requires a particular construction of their nineteenth-century counterparts. When Firestone

²⁵ Specifically, it is the “Introduction” from volume 1 of *History of Woman Suffrage* that Tanner uses as the Introduction to *Voices From Women’s Liberation*. The practice of including excerpts from nineteenth-century feminist works is quite common in these radical feminist texts; see Sarachild 19 and “Account of the Proceedings of the Trial of Susan B. Anthony” in *Notes from the Third Year* 11-12 for additional examples.

refers to the “second wave” as “the direct descendant of the radical feminist line in the old movement” (*Dialectic of Sex* 37), or when Tanner writes that her aim is “to draw parallels to the movement today and to show the militancy of the early fighters for women’s rights” (“Foreword” 29), they are not making connections with the nineteenth-century movement as a whole, but constructing a particular strain within it. Firestone makes this distinction immediately apparent in a footnote appended to the acronym “W.R.M.” in which she clarifies the definition of the term: “Women’s Rights Movement, sometimes confused with one of its branches, the Suffrage Movement” (“Women’s Rights Movement,” par. 2, emphasis in original). Firestone is not interested in establishing ties with suffragists; she instead constructs suffrage as its own movement, a branch that is separated from the wider movement for women’s rights. The suffrage struggle might have been the most visible of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, the only one historians had bothered to write about up until then, but it was “only one small aspect of what the W.R.M. was all about” (*Dialectic of Sex* 23).

Radical feminist texts repeatedly highlight this distinction. Hole and Levine write that “[a]lthough the Seneca Falls Convention is considered the official beginning of the woman’s suffrage movement, it is important to reiterate that the goal of the early woman’s rights movement was not limited to the demand for suffrage” (“The First Feminists” 7), adding that suffrage had not even initially been included in the resolution drafted at the 1848 convention. Suffrage is portrayed not as a laudable goal, but a paltry part of a larger, more radical whole. In her essay “Women and the Left” (1969) Redstockings co-founder Ellen Willis describes what suffrage meant to the radical feminists marching on Washington in the anti-Inaugural activities of the Left in January 1968: not much. The women’s liberation group involved in

the march designated the rally's theme as "Give back the vote;" the women would burn their voter registration cards as an act of "repudiation of suffrage as a sop for women" (55).

Suffrage is historicized as a symbol for misguided efforts and compromised politics; far from a revolutionary struggle, suffragists could be satisfied with the mere crumbs of democracy, rather than the transformation of the nation.

Radical feminists consistently construct narratives that divide the suffragists from the true revolutionaries of the past movement, who they claim have never truly been understood. According to Firestone, "the Nineteenth Century WRM was indeed a radical movement from the start" but this "radical strain" "has been purposely ignored and buried" so as to be more palatable, less threatening ("Women's Rights Movement," par. 2). Hole and Levine similarly suggest that historians have purposely obscured the radicalism of the "first wave":

It must be remembered, however, that for most of the period that the woman's movement existed, suffrage had not been seen as an all-inclusive goal, but as a means of achieving equality—suffrage was only one element in the wide-ranging feminist critique questioning the fundamental organization of society. Historians, however, have for the most part ignored this radical critique and focused exclusively on the suffrage campaign. By virtue of this omission they have, to all intents and purposes, denied the political significance of the early feminist analysis. Moreover, the summary treatment by historians of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century drive for woman's suffrage has made that campaign almost a footnote to the abolitionist movement and the campaign for Negro suffrage. ("The First Feminists" 10)²⁶

The authors use suffrage to again symbolize a "sop" that lacked the "political significance" of the more "radical critique" offered by the other part of the movement, the one more concerned with "wide-ranging" issues and the fundamental reorganization of society. The same narratives that invoke Stanton and Anthony as icons of political struggle

²⁶ As I will discuss in greater detail below, these texts frequently use references to the black struggle (both nineteenth-century and Civil Rights era iterations) as a way of representing their own struggle.

simultaneously disavow suffragists: on the face of it, this is rather astonishing. Two of the most famous suffragists, according to this narrative, were actually not suffragists at all, but women's rights revolutionaries ahead of their time. This reinvention is an ambitious task, but the return on this narrative work is substantial. These radical feminist writers authorize the politics of the "new" movement by dividing the "first wave" into conservative and radical "sides" and then declaring that the conservative "side" failed women even as it won them the vote.

Radical Narratives of a Divergent Past

The 1869 "split" is the discursive construct by which this narrative feat is accomplished. Cellestine Ware, co-founder of the New York Radical Feminists along with Firestone and Anne Koedt, writes that "the schism between the National and the American was one between radical and conservative" and that while Stanton and Anthony's "side" was interested in "women's rights as a broad cause," the AWSA "avoided issues that it considered might alienate the influential sectors of the community" (149). Hole and Levine construct the "split" in a similar way, to symbolize radicalism versus conservatism: the AWSA wanted to make woman's suffrage "respectable" and therefore "limited its activities to that issue" while the NWSA "embraced the broad cause of woman's rights of which the vote was seen primarily as a *means* of achieving those rights" ("The First Feminists" 8). In their essay "You've Come A Long Way Baby: Historical Perspectives," Connie Brown and Jane Seitz likewise deem the NWSA "militant" and the AWSA "more respectable" (17-18) while Firestone writes that the "conservatives formed the [AWSA]" while the "radicals separated into the NWSA" (*Dialectic of Sex* 18).

This recurrent trope of radicalism versus conservatism in the past allows these writers to identify with the radical “side” while assigning the conservative “side” the blame for “killing” feminism. Ellen Willis hints at this strategy as she describes why women wanted to “give back the vote” in 1968: “Since women’s 80-year struggle for the vote had achieved a meaningless victory and vitiated the feminist movement, we planned to destroy our voter registration cards publicly as a symbol that suffragism was dead and a new fight for real emancipation beginning” (“Women and the Left” 55). In this iteration, suffrage is separated from the struggle for true freedom; by declaring the old suffragism “dead,” a new, “real” feminism is born.²⁷ Suffragism is not represented as part of the feminist movement, but instead, as a separate entity that would ultimately destroy the movement.

“Real feminism” had existed once before, but after the “split,” it was eventually subsumed by the suffrage struggle. Firestone writes that even though “the Stanton-Anthony forces struggled on in the radical feminist tradition for twenty years longer,” “the back of the movement had been broken” (*Dialectic of Sex* 18) after 1869. The true feminists could not withstand the onslaught of the conservatives; by the time the NWSA and the AWSA merged in 1890, the radical cohort was too old to put up much of a fight for radical strategies, and instead “[was] slowly being replaced by a second group far more limited in their political analysis” (Hole and Levine, “The First Feminists” 9). Brown and Seitz pin this reunification “on the basis of a surrender on the part of the more militant NWSA” (19). While the 1869 “split” allows these narratives to designate a radical side to identify with, the 1890

²⁷ While the habit of declaring feminism “dead” is by now a rather familiar one in both popular and academic contexts, to my knowledge the “second-wave” radical feminists that are the focus of this chapter were the first to develop this narrative practice. See Gubar “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” and “Feminism Inside Out”; Henry, “Feminist Deaths”; Marcus; Moi; and Elliot for scholarly examples of a similar practice. See Wiegman for a critique of this mode of feminist criticism.

“reunification” represents the death knell for radicalism. In “The Women’s Rights Movement in the U.S.” Firestone laments the uniting of the two organizations:

“Stanton and Anthony made a mistake merging their radical feminist National Suffrage Association with the timid provincial American Suffrage Association...But [they] were getting old, and with many misgivings, they finally merged with the ‘better organized’ American, a single issue organization, devoted strictly to suffrage, and working on the state level. Again, they might have saved fifty years. Once the pressure was taken off Washington, the Suffrage issue sank into the ‘doldrums’ until years later...” (par. 31-32)

The radicals make a “mistake,” in this rendering, but as they were aging, and running out of time to make headway on their sweeping agenda, they caved into the conservatives. The dilution of the radical feminist cause, in turn, causes suffragism to founder as well. In Firestone’s narrative, the suffrage “side” is separate from the radical “side,” but it is powered by the radicals’ momentum, nonetheless. Once the radicals are subsumed by the suffrage cause, it is suffrage itself that suffers a setback.

While Firestone’s describes suffragism as mired in the “doldrums” after 1890, the fact remains that suffrage would eventually be won thirty years later.²⁸ The attainment of suffrage, however, is defined not as a victory, but as another defeat in these radical feminist texts. Tanner notes that the “conservative turn” in the movement causes its eventual “collapse” (“Foreword” 29) while Hole and Levine identify the winning of the vote with both feminist dissolution and fatigue: “By 1920, so much energy had been expended in achieving

²⁸ Several radical feminist narratives use the term “doldrums” to discuss this post-“split” period, always with quotation marks around it but without citation. They appear to be taking the term from Flexner’s 1959 *Century of Struggle*, who to my knowledge is the first to use the terminology to refer to a “lull” in the movement’s momentum; see Flexner 248. Kraditor picks up the term six years later in the introduction to *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (1965); see Kraditor 6. See Rupp and Taylor for a critique of this terminology.

the right to vote that the woman's movement virtually collapsed from exhaustion" ("The First Feminists" 10). This "exhaustion" would have lasting effects; after the movement "virtually died in 1920," "feminism was to lie dormant for forty years" (10).²⁹ Winning the vote is not a triumph, but rather an enervating blow to the "real" movement. In *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (1975), Jo Freeman details the suffrage "defeat" as a "failure of imagination" on the part of suffragists who had "failed" "to provide an ongoing program which the vote could be used as a tool to institute" (18). To the contrary, the momentum of the movement was stymied once they achieved their goal: "They never faltered until the end. No defeat was as devastating as victory" (18).

Firestone provides what is perhaps the clearest iteration of the defeat-in-victory narrative:

The granting of the vote to the suffrage movement killed the W.R.M. Though the antifeminist forces appeared to give in, they did so in name only. They never lost. By the time the vote was granted, the long channeling of feminist energies into the limited goal of suffrage—seen initially as only one step to political power—had thoroughly depleted the W.R.M. The monster Ballot had swallowed everything else. Three generations had elapsed from the time of the inception of the W.R.M.; the master planners all were dead. The women who later joined the feminist movement to work for the single issue of the vote had never had time to develop a broader consciousness; by then they had forgotten what the vote was for. The opposition had had its way. (*Dialectic of Sex* 22)

Firestone encapsulates the radical feminist "second-wave" narrative of the "first wave" in its entirety: she references the limitation of the movement through the "split" and the eventual conservative takeover; the depleting result when radicalism is subsumed; and the subsequent

²⁹ Firestone constructs a particularly gloomy iteration of this narrative: "When, in 1890, with their leaders old and discouraged, the radical feminist National merged with the conservative American to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), all seemed lost. Conservative feminism, with its concentration on broad, unitive single-issues like suffrage, with its attempt to work within and placate the white male power structure—trying to convince men who knew better, with their own fancy rhetoric yet—had won. Feminism, sold out, languished" (*Dialectic of Sex* 18).

death of the movement. The image of the “monster Ballot” consuming feminism constitutes a profound reversal; far from representing women’s rights, suffrage is a monstrous creature that feeds off of women’s energies, sucking them dry and leaving them with less than they had before. Three generations of activists, the radicals included, as well as the drive, direction, and future of the movement—all are casualties laid at the feet of the rapacious Ballot. The vote is so powerful and insidious, it even seizes the memories of woman’s rights activists, clouding their recollections and making it impossible to remember the radical “side” of the movement that knew what to do with suffrage if it were ever to be won. The power of the vote lay in the radicals’ vision of its use, and without that, the figure of the Ballot is not a success for women’s rights, but an accomplice of the antifeminists who could accept the change of woman’s suffrage as long as women’s position in society did not change.

The production of the “monster Ballot” is perhaps the most striking of the narrative techniques used in these radical feminist texts to secure the ground for their “new” movement. The image contains the entire story of the “first wave”—its split, its failures, and its death—and allows Firestone to point to the need for a new movement that could take up the radicalism that was snuffed out by suffrage. Firestone’s main point, after all, is to show that there is work to be done, rights to be won, in this new era of feminism; she concludes “that contrary to what most historians would have us believe, women’s rights were never won. The Women’s Rights Movement did not fold because it accomplished its objectives, but because it was essentially defeated and mischannelled. SEEMING freedoms appear to have been won” (“Women’s Rights Movement,” par. 34, emphasis in original). The suffrage success only *looked* like achievement; the objectives accomplished only *appeared* to bring

women more freedom. Instead, this narrative suggests that the suffrage “victory” provided cover for the failure of the movement to fundamentally change society in any “real” way, and if that was victory, then defeat was preferable.

In *Woman Power* (1970), Cellestine Ware deploys a similar, succinct version of the same rationale for the new movement’s necessity; for her, the “split” “narrow[ed] the struggle for emancipation” to the suffrage cause, and “[t]his narrowing of the focus of feminism, with its eventual rejection of a radical analysis of the position of women, meant that feminism could never get to the root causes of women’s oppression. The result was that the full emancipation of women has yet to be achieved” (144). Suffrage is again imagined as the culprit behind the lack of change in women’s social and economic positions. It covers over the “root” of women’s subjugation, which, according to Ware, the radicals could have revealed and, presumably, eradicated. Fooled by the mighty Ballot, women did not gain the emancipation they had been promised. This, then, is where the “second wave” radical feminists come in—by picking up where the radical strain of the nineteenth century left off, learning from their mistakes, and refusing to be fooled again. By constructing suffragism as a separate movement, and imagining it as the assassin of true women’s rights, these texts construct an imaginary world in which they can reject the traitor Suffrage and identify with, and resurrect, true feminism.

False Feminism, True Radicalism, and “The Arcs of History”

The narrative resurrection of the “real” feminism of the “first wave” is not simply a means for claiming a historical predecessor, but a method for radical feminists to define and control the “second wave” in the contemporary moment. This process includes the

construction of an origin story about the new “wave’s” official inception: who ushered in the start of this revolution? Firestone’s decision to publish *Notes from the First Year* with the New York Radical Feminists in 1968 was an effort to begin documenting the history of the women’s liberation movement as it unfolded.³⁰ If historians had failed to take account of the significant milestones, events, and texts of the “first wave,” or if the figures, strategies, and goals of that “wave” had been distorted through the hazy lens of history, then these activists were not going to let that happen again. As Firestone and Koedt put it in their editorial introduction in the journal’s next installment, *Notes from the Second Year*, the movement needed a venue “in which to present the proliferation of new ideas and to clarify the political issues that concerned us” and that could “expand with the movement, reflect its growth accurately, and in time become a historical record” (2).³¹ The NYRF were “sick and tired” of their ideas being “distort[ed]” by “intermediaries”—the *Notes* periodical would give them a way to reach other women directly with their political messages and at the same time leave behind an unmitigated historical record.

But that is not the only work the *Notes* series would perform. By defining the “first year” of the new “wave” as 1968, the editors shift the movement’s timeline forward to the

³⁰ *Notes from the First Year* was edited by Firestone and Anne Koedt. They describe the publication as “the first feminist journal put out by the new Women’s Liberation Movement” and frame its low official circulation as a form of making the journal all the more coveted and valuable: “Almost impossible to get hold of even within the movement—one dare not leave one’s tattered copy unguarded even now—its impact was nevertheless profound” (“Editorial” 2).

³¹ In this editorial, Firestone and Koedt compare *Notes* to nineteenth-century suffragists’ foray into movement journalism; they want their periodical to “function politically much as did Stanton and Anthony’s *Revolution* exactly a century ago” (2). This type of historical analogy is a recurrent reference in these movement documents, using the “first wave” as both a grounding and a model for “second-wave” activities and strategies. And as I trace above, it is most frequently Stanton and Anthony who are the points of reference. See Ware 165-169; Tanner, ed.; and Hole and Levine, “The First Feminists” 5 for additional examples.

official founding of the radical feminist movement in New York, and away from 1963 and Betty Friedan. This periodization places the origin of the new feminism squarely in the radical camp, relegating liberal feminism to the margins of its historical trajectory of revolutionary time. Claiming the mantle of true feminism means tracing a radical nineteenth-century lineage directly to 1968, specifically passing over Friedan, the *Mystique*, and the National Organization for Women. The origin story of a radical “side” to the “first wave” that was subsumed by a conservative, suffragist “side” is tied to the 1968 resurrection of that radical feminism. By identifying who the real feminists were in the past, and why they failed after their more conservative cooptation, the NYRF attempt to cordon off liberal feminism from true feminism in the contemporary moment.

Kathie Sarachild’s “The Power of History” provides a representative case for this kind of historical “protection” against false feminists who sought to temper the aims of feminism and lower the revolutionary expectations of the women in the movement. As its title suggests, Sarachild’s article is concerned with the uses (and abuses) of history and its potential liberatory (or oppressive) effects. From the outset, the author’s anxiety about “losing” the meaning of the original ideas of the “second wave” is palpable; she is worried about the liberal feminist cooptation of the (true) feminist cause:

The sources of the movement’s achievements are unknown—disembodied ideas, slogans, phrases. Though only a few years old, their origins are already seemingly unidentifiable, attributed to nothing more precise than ‘the women’s liberation movement’ and, therefore, their meaning is highly debatable and imprecise, their definitions lost, and with this, the power behind them. (14)

The “origins” of the “second wave” have already become murky, according to Sarachild, and this is a problem; without the originary claim, its ideas become subject to “debate,” ambiguity, or, worse, redefinition. “Power,” in this iteration, does not come from the ideas of

the movement, but from being able to pin those ideas down to a particular time, place, and “part” of the movement. She continues:

What is more, even though the actual, living people who began the movement are treated as unascertainable and irrelevant, history itself is not treated as irrelevant. Instead a new, false ‘feminist’ history is blithely created out of mistaken secondary sources to support political strategies long ago discredited by real history (as traced through the original sources). (14)

The strategies Sarachild refers to here are the accommodating, measured, and mainstream ones of liberal feminist organizations such as NOW. The false feminists have constructed a false history that covers over the failures of the liberal strain of feminism in the U.S. and relegates the radicals to invisibility and disrepute.³² As these narratives have demonstrated, radicals were the source of true feminist promise in the nineteenth century, the promise that was destroyed by the conservative, suffragist “side.”³³ But if history could be used to install a false feminist pretender as the real thing, it can also be used to set the record straight and deliver the movement back to its true pioneers. By returning to history, the pretenders can be unveiled: “When one does realize there are original sources and checks, one discovers that personal variations of the idea are substituted for original versions, and liberal versions for radical versions—all selling under the original names. The interpreters both cash in

³² Sarachild notes that this process has happened before, to the radicals of the nineteenth century, again constructing a narrative of the past that draws a connection to the present. In discussing the importance of history in general for the women’s movement, and the significance of the rehabilitation of the “real” “first wave,” she writes that Firestone was the first to show how “feminists in general and the radicals in particular [were] written out of the history of the last century” and then makes the correlation to the present day: “we ourselves almost immediately began to experience this invisibility happening to us even as we were there” (13).

³³ The terminology is different, but these radical feminist narratives define the liberal feminists of their era as the inheritors of the conservative “side” that won out in 1869.

on and water down the original ideas” (15).³⁴ “Radical,” here, is the corollary to “original,” while “liberal” is relegated to the “personal”—the inference is that true feminism is radical, while liberal feminism is a weak substitute used for personal gain (rather than collective progress).

Sarachild identifies the goal of this liberal bait-and-switch: “to wipe the original, authentic feminism and radicalism out of visibility” (22) and “to take it over, to lasso it for one’s private ends, to slow it down, to stop it” (20). To combat this process, radicals must follow Firestone’s lead and learn to use history to wrest control of the movement from liberal feminists and define the “second wave” in radical terms.³⁵ While she suggests that she was initially resistant to “using history” for these ends, she writes that once she learned “how to use the past for taking present action and mapping future change,” she saw how history could become a powerful “tool” for radicalism, likening “continuity—or history” to “unity” and then claiming that continuity is a “higher form” of power in politics “because it also involves

³⁴ If these excerpts from Sarachild’s essay seem vague, or strangely lacking in substantive nouns or references to the actual ideas the author is worried about losing, that is because they are. One of the remarkable features of this article is its drive to use history as a tool for the definition of feminism’s proper strategies and goals, without ever articulating what those strategies or goals are. History, in this sense, comes to stand in for the promise of radical feminism, rather than its substance.

³⁵ Sarachild lists off a number of Firestone’s accomplishments where this project is concerned: starting the *Notes* series, writing about the radicalism of the nineteenth-century movement, and lastly, dedicating her book to Beauvoir: “Firestone displayed again her sense of history and derivation and established in one of the few places on the public record that the feminism of the radical women who put the women’s liberation movement on the map and into the world vocabulary derived from the radical Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex*, not the liberal Betty Friedan—with all the political implications this involves... We knew, of course, that personally we derived from Beauvoir, not Friedan. But too few of us had enough of a sense of history, particularly our own history, to see the political importance of making our tradition clear” (27). See the cover page of the Redstockings’ *Feminist Revolution* for another Beauvoir dedication. See Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister* 68-72 for an extended analysis of the “choice” of Beauvoir over Friedan by radical “second-wave” feminists.

the power of persistence. To win, women uniting is not enough. Women must unite and persist! But without a history, persistence is impossible” (24). Narrating the past is the method by which feminism is not only defined and controlled, but also able to “persist” into the future. Constructing the “first wave” is an exercise in pinning down feminism as a movement in the present, controlling the terms in which it is articulated, and determining its future direction, parameters, and goals.

The “power of history,” put simply, is its use as a detector of false feminism. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in a rough line-drawing included in the middle of Sarachild’s essay. The image depicts two “arcs of history”: one in which the women’s liberation movement is plotted against “truth,” and the other in which liberal feminism is plotted against radical feminism (see Figure 2). The “truth” and “radical” axes are correlated, both with arrows pointed up toward the blank space of the page, presumably on a trajectory of greater and greater knowledge, enlightenment, and progress. The “liberal” and “present state of the Women’s Liberation Movement” trajectories, once also ascendant, are shown to flatten out. They do not point toward the same future of “truth” and liberation but instead, to more of the same. Here is perhaps the most direct iteration of the radical feminist/truth narrative. History is the tool by which radical feminism critiques its liberal feminist rivals as “false” and claims the designation as the true feminism of the “second wave.”

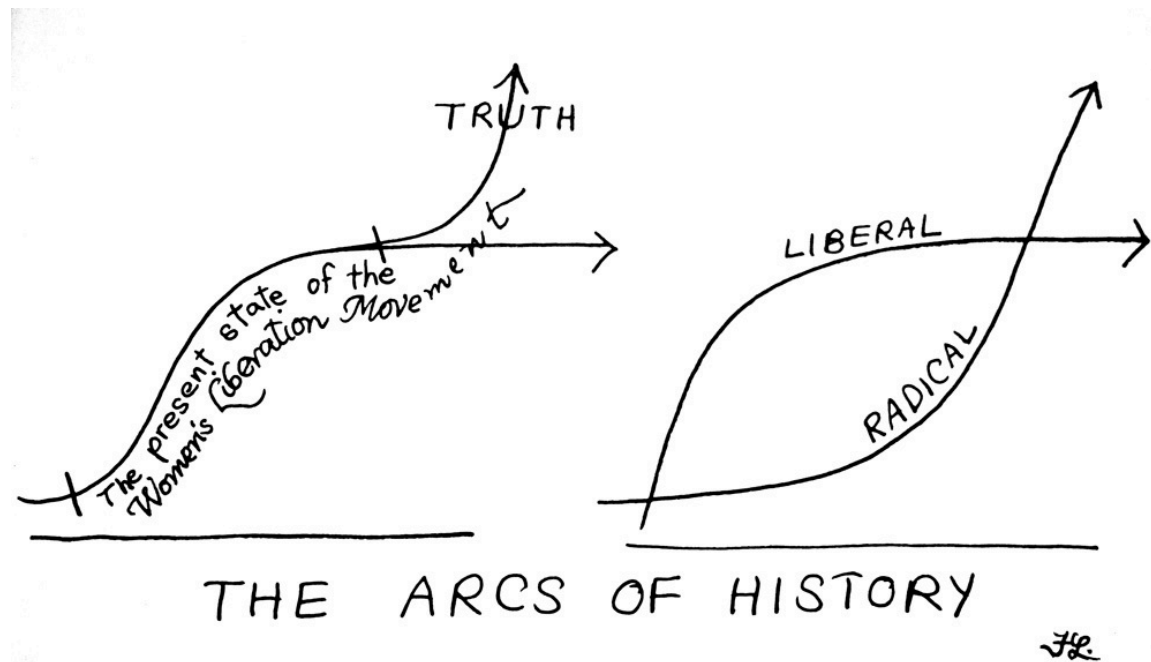


Figure 2. “The Arcs of History” (Sarachild 39).

If constructing and connecting to one “side” of the “first wave” allows these “second-wave” writers to separate false feminism from the genuine sort, it also provides legitimization of that feminism as not only truly feminist, but truly radical. Ellen Willis demonstrates this problem at the outset of “Women and the Left” when she describes “certain assumptions about the women’s movement” that subsume women’s liberation under the umbrella of a larger cause, as “a branch of the Left and women a constituency like students or GIs” (55). This part-of-a-larger-whole view of the movement expects that its “emphasis is on contributing our special insights to the Left as a whole and using feminist issues as an organizing tool” (55). Willis, however, rejects this view; feminists, according to Willis, “are not simply a part of the Left” but instead must “make [their] own analysis of the system and put [their] interests first, whether or not it is convenient for the (male-dominated) Left” (55).

Willis is concerned with establishing a feminist movement that is independent from the male Left; working within the “larger” movement only subordinates women’s ideas and concerns and “perpetuate[s] the idea that our struggle is secondary” (56). Being a part of the Left, in these terms, means “subordinating [women’s] concrete interests to a ‘higher’ ideology” and defining feminism as a lower form of revolutionary politics. As a mere part of a larger Left, the women’s movement is not only limited, but less significant; according to Willis, “To believe that concentrating on women’s issues is not really revolutionary is self-depreciation” (56). Willis’s narrative demonstrates the central problem between the Left and radical feminism: true radicalism lay in a “higher” form of Leftist politics committed to destroying capitalism or racism, and feminism only aspired to “secondary” struggles that were not universal in the same way.³⁶ Radical feminism, however, could be construed as *more* radical, because it demanded the overthrow of not one, but two systems: both capitalism and the patriarchal family (56).

Firestone uses the same language of parts and wholes, smaller and larger, to build a cast of characters of the new movement and then delineate which ones are the “real” feminists who can create true revolution. This cast includes a variety of types of “politicos,” including “Ladies’ Auxiliaries of the Left,” “Middle-of-the-Road Politicos,” and “Feminist Politicos,” but all of them fall prey to the same problem: they “see feminism as only tangent to ‘real’ radical politics, instead of central, directly radical in itself” (*Dialectic of Sex* 33). Politicos see “male issues” like the draft “as universal” and see “female issues,” like abortion, “as sectarian” (33) and likewise think of feminism as part of a “Larger Struggle” that is ultimately more significant. Firestone pulls a quote from a leftist underground

³⁶ See Willis “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism” (1984) for a later, but similar, iteration of this argument.

newspaper, *The Movement*, to give voice to this character and the kinds of things she is likely to say.³⁷

“[Feminists] lose sight of the *Primary Struggle*. Some special organizing of women’s groups is possible, perhaps, but dangerous: in terms of turning in on themselves, in terms of becoming petit-bourgeois little cliques where they can just talk about *taking care of the kids* all the time, or become a *gripe session*. (qtd. in *Dialectic of Sex* 34, emphasis in the original).³⁸

When women discuss women’s issues, it’s complaining; when men discuss men’s issues, it’s radical. Firestone gives voice to the classic Leftist critique of feminism: that it is a personal crusade without real political or revolutionary potential. The Left is the true radical Movement, and feminism in this depiction is not only “smaller” or a mere branch of it, but actually anti-radical, the “petit-bourgeois” to the Left’s revolutionary proletariat.

But after portraying the Leftist critique, Firestone sets out to debunk it and turn its assessment of feminism toward the Left itself. Politicos are not true feminists because they see feminism as “secondary in the order of political priorities,” something that “must be tailored to fit into a preexistent (male-created) political framework” (36). They do not see feminism as “a legitimate issue in itself, one that will (unfortunately) *require* a revolution to achieve its end” (36). Firestone pronounces the verdict on this “type” of activist: their need of Leftist “approval” “consign[s] them to mere left reformism, lack of originality, and, ultimately, political sterility” (36). Politicos, in their attachment to the Left, are actually tying

³⁷ Firestone clearly resents the Left’s ownership of the label “the Movement”—she frequently, and sarcastically, refers to it in capital letters and in parentheses, underscoring the radical feminist desire to secure legitimacy as a “Movement” with a capital M in itself.

³⁸ Firestone notes in an aside that this quotation is taken from women associated with the Black Panthers. The choice to voice the male leftist critique of feminism through black women is peculiar, but one that points toward a larger strategy in these texts: the use of the black struggle as a medium through which to represent the women’s movement as significant, radical, and necessary.

themselves to a less radical and less innovative movement. The Left is depicted as not only less revolutionary and less productive, but “sterile”—unable to produce a politics of change or a truly emancipatory future. The reversal here is clear: it is not the feminists who are sectarian, or “small,” or short-sighted, but the Leftists. They are the ones who are producing dogmatic and restrictive analyses that are less revolutionary and even antithetical to the spirit of a radical politics.³⁹

In describing the Leftist critique of feminism, and then reversing that critique to apply it to the Left itself, Firestone sets up a clear contrast with radical feminism, which she then describes as “the direct descendant of the radical feminist line in the old movement, notably that championed by Stanton and Anthony” (37). While above I have shown how this radical lineage distinguishes radical feminists from their liberal counterparts, it simultaneously breaks the link between radical feminists and leftist radicals. Firestone insists that radical feminism does not get its radicalism from the male Left; how could it if the so-called “Movement” has grown tired, narrow, and doctrinaire? Instead, radical feminism derives from the politics of the radical “side” of the “first wave.” By establishing an alternate narrative of the movement’s heritage, Firestone reroutes where “radicalism” comes from: not from the Left but from a century-old, established heritage of feminism. Firestone continues to contrast this radical feminism rooted in history with the contemporary Left:

It [radical feminism] refuses to accept existing leftist analysis not because it is too radical, but because *it is not radical enough*: it sees the current leftist analysis as outdated and superficial, because this analysis does not relate the structure of the economic class system to its origins in the sexual class system, the model for all other exploitative systems, and thus the tapeworm that must be eliminated first by any true revolution. (*Dialectic of Sex* 37, emphasis in original)

³⁹ See Echols 103-138 for a more general description of the relationship between “second-wave” feminists and the Left.

Feminism is the new radical vanguard; it is the radical feminists who are on the cutting edge, while the Left struggles to adapt and expand its perspective. But Firestone goes further here, moving beyond the root of radicalism (which lies in feminism and its history) to establishing a root form of oppression: patriarchy. Indeed, feminism is more radical than the Left precisely because it takes on this originary exploitative system while the Left leaves it in tact. If the “sexual class system” is the “model” for all other oppressive systems, if it is the “tapeworm” that drains the body politic and renders its other ailments less urgent, then the movement that takes this system as its primary target will necessarily be the most revolutionary. Firestone’s depiction of an originary form of oppression is directly linked to the need to establish the feminist movement as radical in the face of a male-dominated Left that refused to understand women’s issues and analyses as important, revolutionary, or universal.

This drive to legitimate feminism’s radicalism by constructing sexism as the root of all other kinds of oppression is a narrative technique deployed across a variety of radical “second-wave” texts. For instance, in the “Redstockings Manifesto” (1969), a statement of principles by the New York group’s founding members, patriarchy is identified as the ultimate origin of subjugation; as they put it, “Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest...*All men* have oppressed women” (113, emphasis in original).⁴⁰ As in

⁴⁰ Willis and Firestone founded the Redstockings in 1969 after leaving the New York Radical Feminists; the group would function for less than two years. As they put it, they wanted to launch “an explicitly radical feminist group, as opposed to a group [like NYRW] that had

Firestone's narrative, this declaration positions feminism as the one indispensable, and truly radical, form of critique and activism; if patriarchy is at the root of all other forms of exploitation, then feminism is necessarily the most essential and far-reaching movement. Establishing an original form of oppression is a method for establishing radical credentials in these texts. Legitimizing radical feminism as both the true form of feminism and the real sort of radicalism requires the creation of historical origins in the form of a founding heritage, on the one hand, and a founding oppression, on the other.

The Race/Sex Analogy in Radical Feminism

Establishing patriarchy as the originary oppression paradoxically occurs through the development of parallels between race and sex. These parallels often take the form of an explanatory aside that forms an analogy between the two categories, as when Ti-Grace Atkinson explains that women must paradoxically hope for the "eradication" of their group: "The feminist dilemma is that it is as women—or 'females'—that women are persecuted, just as it was as slaves—or 'blacks'—that slaves were persecuted in America: in order to improve their condition, those individuals who are today defined as women must eradicate their own definition" (33). The idea that women might constitute a class does not stand on its own, but is supported through the analogy to "slaves" and "blacks." Women's oppression is rhetorically fused to the oppression of slaves, their "persecution" undergirded by the persecution of another class.

Willis deploys a similar tactic in "Women and the Left," equating gender difference with racial difference in order to argue that the two struggles are inherently similar: "Our

radical feminists in it along with other people" (qtd. in Echols 140). The NYRF continued on without its founding "brigade" until 1972.

oppression transcends occupations and class lines. Femaleness, like blackness, is a biological fact, a fundamental condition. Like racism, male supremacy permeates all strata of this society” (56). In this iteration, sexism and racism are parallel forms of oppression, both fundamental facts that construct people’s lives, but as Willis continues, sexism becomes not just the same as racism, but perhaps even more damaging because it is “even more deeply entrenched” and while “[w]hites are at least defensive about racism,” “men—including most radicals, black and white—are proud of their chauvinism. Male supremacy is the oldest form of domination and the most resistant to change” (56). Initially parallel, the two forms of oppression are then separated to demonstrate the seriousness of the feminist cause. Willis uses the analogy with racism to bolster the idea that sexism, too, is a significant issue, and once established, uses women’s legitimated oppression as a tool for establishing radical feminism as the most revolutionary movement of the era. Racism is appealed to as the most obvious, most extreme form of oppression that then highlights the comparative invisibility of sexism.

Willis plays out this analogy at length in a “Sequel” piece to “Women and the Left,” as she defends her article to a letter-writer who claimed that she was not “thinking seriously” because of her view that the “enemy is man, not capitalism” (57). After explaining how capitalism is subordinated to patriarchy, Willis ends by constructing an elaborate imaginary conversation between black activists and white liberals of the Left. When white liberals suggest that both black and white activists should work together to defeat the “common enemy” because “racism affects [them] too,” she constructs a black activist response:

“We can’t work together because you don’t understand what it is to be black; because you’ve grown up in a racist society, your behavior toward us is bound to be racist whether you know it or not and whether you mean it or not; your ideas about how to help us are too often self-serving and patronizing...If you

as whites want to work on eliminating your own racism, if you want to support our battle for liberation, fine. If we decide that we have certain common interests with white activists and can form alliances with white organizations, fine. But we want to make the decisions in our own movement.” (58)

Willis then ends the “conversation” by reversing its characters: “Substitute man-woman for black-white and that’s where I stand” (58).

In this fantasy dialogue, the “black position” stands in for women’s position, racial oppression substituted for women’s oppression. But why is this substitution necessary? Could a “conversation” such as this not have been constructed around a radical feminist and a male Leftist? The black activist is used to voice radical white women’s ownership of the feminist movement; the claim to feminism is filtered through the claim to the black struggle. Rather than directly represent the case for the necessity of an independent women’s movement, that case is represented through the black activist claim to the civil rights movement. Again, the black struggle is deployed as the struggle all activists can understand; it is above questioning, above reproach, and cannot be denied, and because of this, becomes a tool for white women’s claims to their own forms of oppression.⁴¹

The analogy is then deployed to underline the perceived lack of political concern over sexism. Directly after Willis suggests that substituting “woman” for “black” demonstrates her point, she goes on to make “one important exception:” “while white liberals and radicals always understood the importance of the black liberation struggle, even if their efforts in the blacks’ behalf were often misguided, radical men simply do not understand the importance of our struggle” (58). These men, according to Willis, see the woman’s movement as “just

⁴¹ See Firestone, “Abortion Rally Speech,” par. 21; Firestone, “The Women’s Rights Movement” par. 3; Hanisch and Sutherland par. 3; Morgan, “Introduction” xv; and Brown and Seitz 3 for additional examples of this tactic.

chicks with ‘personal’ hangups” and “minimize the extent of male chauvinism” (58). Male Leftists do not “grasp that we have a grievance, and that we are serious,” a lack of understanding that ultimately makes sexism and racism not parallel, but different. Women’s oppression is not as visible as black oppression, but this lack of visibility does not mean it is not there—to the contrary, it instead signifies the ways in which sexism is acceptable in ways that racism is not.

The construction of the race/sex analogy in these movement documents has been fully critiqued, most notably by hooks in *Ain’t I a Woman*, for the way it obscures black women’s experience and its tendency to envision sexism as more harmful than racism. The problematic use of the analogy in radical feminism is surely one of the reasons behind the canonical narrative of the “second wave’s” failures when it comes to race. Hooks suggests that the analogy “would not have been necessary” “if the situation of upper and middle class white women were in any way like that of the oppressed people in the world” (142). Hooks argues that the use of this analogy covers over not only the true oppression of people of color, but also the fact that the women using it were not *really* oppressed. But this kind of critique, and its subsequent canonization through the wave model, does not account for *why* the analogy is turned to again and again, and is instead satisfied to construct a monolithic (and white) “second wave” that failed the future of feminism.⁴² In situating this technique within the larger narrative practices of radical feminists, it becomes more clear how we might read the analogy as a representation of a political culture in which feminists sought to

⁴² For instance, black feminist Cella Ware has virtually been written out of the history of the “second wave,” with her monograph *Woman Power* (1970) receiving very little critical attention. We might read this absence as a result of her association with Firestone and the NYRF, and the ways in which Ware’s activism and written work fails to fit the standard story of the “second wave.”

legitimate their movement through the movement considered “most radical” at the time—Civil Rights. Just as Casey Hayden and Mary King attempted to demonstrate women’s position within SNCC through the struggle the organization’s leaders knew best, radical feminists demonstrated sexual oppression in terms of the racial oppression that the Left claimed to understand. The tendency to read this tactic as simply the failure of feminism, rather than an index of the political economy that radical feminists negotiated, is an illustration of a larger feminist narrative practice that I have been mapping throughout this chapter, in which narratives of the feminist past underwrite the authority of the feminist present.

Fixing Racism—and Race-vs-Gender—in Feminism

These radical feminist texts display a continual shifting between competing contemporary political needs in an ongoing effort to establish feminism as a truly radical movement. Feminism is thus both new and rooted in a long history, both radical and conventional, both the same as the civil rights movement and more significant. The reversals and contradictions that stem from these shifts might be read as a representation of these needs, rather than only as evidence for the latent or manifest problems of race in the movement. The canonical story of the “second wave” cannot recognize the race/gender analogy in these texts as anything other than pernicious, but we might also read it as a narrative form for attempting to draw connections between race and gender rather than conceiving of the terms in opposition to one another. These attempts are by no means always successful—as we see above, radical feminists at times privilege gendered forms of oppression by minimizing racial oppression. But the critical tendency to construct and deploy

that failure as a warrant for a present-day feminism refuses to situate these practices as part of larger narratives of legitimation that radical feminists construct as they negotiate the political culture of their era.

I want to suggest that the narrative production of the failures of the “second wave” cannot be attributed solely to improper reading of these texts, as if somehow they have not been truly understood in all their context, but also, that these narratives are fundamental to what Catherine Orr calls the “reinvention process” of feminism itself (32). Just as the radical feminists of the “second wave” construct a legitimating narrative out of a “first wave”—splitting that “wave” and declaring one “side” responsible for the failures of feminism—the story about the “second wave” is not simply a convenient way to convey the broad strokes of a previous movement (though it is that too), but a story about authority over feminism in the present. The metonymic practice of “waving” the past—substituting a part of a historical feminism for its entirety, defining its contributions and displacing others—is not just a method for controlling who “owns” the past, but who can inhabit the future of feminism. Wave narratives are thus about who controls, defines, and enacts feminism, or, as Clare Hemmings puts it in a different context, about the true subject of feminism.

In her critique of narratives of progress and loss in feminist theory, Hemmings suggests that forms of storytelling rooted in generational logic are those that we ought to be “most wary of” because they place “too much emphasis on the capacities of feminist subjects to safeguard as progressive the politics of the narratives they author” (*Why Stories Matter* 150). While “waves” and “generations” are not precisely the same thing—the latter relies more strictly on a familial framework, while the former evokes a looser structure of heritage, ancestry, or lineage—Hemmings’s critique could productively apply to the wave model as

well. She continues, citing that the trouble with “generations” is that it “allows loss without responsibility and progress without obligation” (150-151). Wave discourse, in my view, facilitates much the same process: political problems and needs are displaced onto the past in order to allow for the present to come into being, unfettered and free. In this way, we might read “waving” feminism as a parallel practice to “splitting” suffrage: both practices manage present-day feminist anxiety by telling a story about the past and its failures so as to secure a progressive feminism that can move beyond the “old” and toward a successful politics in the future.

While feminist theorists have recently called for an abandonment of the wave model, or at least its recalibration, the attachment to the year of 1869 in feminism that I have tracked throughout this project suggests that the periodization of feminism is a narrative process undergirded by strong attachments not so easily eradicated.⁴³ If the attachment to 1869 and the “split” has operated as a method for displacing feminist racism onto the past and calcifying the race/gender opposition in the present, wave discourse recapitulates both of these problems by functioning as a rhetorical strategy for “fixing racism,” in all the multiple meanings of that phrase: pinning racism to the past; conceptualizing racism as a static thing, rather than a changing practice; and through this process, ultimately repairing the problem of racism in the present. Just as radical feminists of the “second wave” attempt to legitimate the movement through the narrative of failure rooted in the “split” of 1869, “third wave” critiques of this legitimation operate in much the same way, pinning failure to its predecessor and thereby establishing a “new” feminism, absolved of the problems of the past.

⁴³ See Boris, Hewitt, Gallagher, and Cobble for recent calls to recalibrate “waves.”

Hemmings suggests that generational discourse “carries the weight of what might better be characterized as theoretical or political differences of opinion manifest in the present, rather than across time” and “thus not only substitutes change over time for contest or concurrence in the present, but further, acts as a mechanism for obscuring these contests or concurrences” (151). Wave logic performs a similar function, substituting the discourse of an increasingly sophisticated teleology of feminist progress for the “contests or concurrences,” contradictions and conflict, of feminism in the past. This substitution allows for narratives of superiority and progress while refusing stories that highlight the ways in which feminism is compromised within its historical context, a practice that maintains the race/gender opposition in the name of maintaining a progressive feminism.

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