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POLITICS AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE EARLY WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Felice Batlan*

LISA TETRAULT, *THE MYTH OF SENECA FALLS: MEMORY AND THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT, 1848-1898* (UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS 2014) PP. 296. HARDCOVER \$34.95. PAPERBACK \$27.95.

I know now the personal heartbreak and pain of losing an election. I first drafted this review while the 2016 Democratic Convention played in the background. My first sentence read: "By the time this review is published, it is likely that the United States will have its first female president." Finally, it would happen—a women president in my own lifetime—thirty-three years since Geraldine Ferraro had run for vice president. Then the nightmare of election night, which I can only remember in slow motion, like a car crash. For so many people, Hillary Clinton's loss was not just political but one that was deeply personal, the visible manifestation of misogyny, xenophobia, racism—perhaps even fascism. Thinking of the current administration creates a gnawing ache deep inside my body and triggers a level of anxiety that I have never before experienced. Today, January 22, I sit redrafting this review. It is the day after the historic post-inauguration Women's March, which may ignite a new social movement—one that is inclusive and egalitarian. I have seeds of hope. At least, I am not alone. I have millions of sisters.

During the election and yesterday's protest, I thought about First Wave feminism and the suffragists. Perhaps I understand a bit more what it felt like to devote oneself to a cause, only to see one loss after another. I can comprehend better the logistical nightmares of creating a unified national movement of women at a time without the internet, telephones, or airplanes—the long train rides, the difficulty of printing material, the heavy suitcases, the winter cold, the constant public appearances in towns small and large, the drafting and re-drafting of legislation, and the sheer and utter exhaustion. Perhaps the lessons of the past—lessons about social movements, leadership, unity, politics, strategy, and inclusion, can give us strength to mobilize and do better than our foremothers, while still appreciating their accomplishments.

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Lisa Tetrault's *The Myth of Seneca Falls* does both, it challenges the received wisdom that the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was the beginning of the organized struggle for women's rights and women's suffrage. Instead she argues that this myth was created intentionally in later decades by, primarily, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and their allies. This origin myth was, in part, intended to mask the continual divisions and disagreements in the nineteenth century women's rights/suffrage movement, while intentionally creating a usable past.¹ The myth served, Tetrault asserts, to make suffrage—especially white women's suffrage—a priority and to ensconce Stanton and Anthony as the rightful leaders of the movement.² The complicated politics of whom, if anyone, would lead the movement, what would be on the movement's agenda, and what tactics and strategies would be used, were no less fraught with political maneuvering and large and conflicting personalities than the budding current day progressive movement.

The *Myth of Seneca Falls*, as well as a cornucopia of histories of the nineteenth and early twentieth century women's movement written in the past three decades, narrates how women's suffrage grew out of the abolitionist movement and how it was women such as the Grimke sisters and Lucretia Mott who challenged women's status while speaking on behalf of abolition.³ It was through abolition that a young Elizabeth Cady Stanton met the much older Mott at the 1840 London Anti-Slavery Convention.⁴ Although Stanton would claim that the two became quick friends and spoke of planning a women's rights convention, this would not happen for another eight years, and Mott herself was uncertain about what was actually said or planned at the time.⁵ Instead, women's rights and abolition were deeply tied together, and abolitionist conventions were a common occurrence, especially in the political hotbed of upstate New York.⁶ The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was in fact, quickly put together with a couple of days' notice following an abolitionist convention in the area.⁷

Seneca Falls attracted considerable attendance, but, despite decades of constructed myths and misunderstandings, the facts are that Susan B. Anthony was not in attendance, Stanton and Anthony had not yet met, other conventions calling for women's rights had taken place earlier than Seneca Falls, and many would occur only slightly later.⁸ Thus, in 1848, the Seneca Falls convention was not *The Seneca Falls Convention*. Moreover, the famed Declaration of Sentiments issued at the convention, which called for a broad array of women's rights including property, family, social, and economic rights, was not just or foremost about women's suffrage. So, how did

1. LISA TETRAULT, *THE MYTH OF SENECA FALLS* 2-6 (Thadious M. Davis & Mary Kelley eds., 2014).

2. *See id.* at 8-9.

3. *See, e.g.*, NANCY F. COTT, *THE GROUNDING OF MODERN FEMINISM* (1987); ELLEN CAROL DUBOIS, *FEMINISM AND SUFFRAGE* (1978); KATHRYN KISH SKLAR, *WOMEN'S RIGHTS EMERGES WITHIN THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT, 1830-1870* (Katherine E. Kurzman et al. eds., 2000).

4. *See* TETRAULT, *supra* note 1, at 2, 10.

5. *Id.* at 2-3, 12.

6. *Id.* at 12.

7. *Id.* at 121-22.

8. *Id.* at 123-125.

Seneca Falls and the Declaration of Sentiments become forever associated with women's suffrage and understood as a groundbreaking and singular event? Tetrault answers this question in a manner both sophisticated and readable.

Tetrault locates her answer in the Post-Civil War period.⁹ Historians have long known that women's suffrage and women's full civil and political rights were part of the Post-Civil War debate regarding what full and robust citizenship would consist of for women and African Americans.¹⁰ State after state held constitutional conventions, and women reformers, on a grass roots level, organized, lobbied, and spoke in front of such conventions. Women reformers of all sorts also believed that the yet-to-be-completed Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments would grant women new rights, which included the right to vote and the right to political equality. Yet, this moment of extraordinary potential evaporated quickly. State after state failed to amend their constitutions to allow for universal male and female suffrage; in fact, to the appall of women's rights reformers, radical republicans—their long-time allies—drafted the Fifteenth Amendment such that it only provided for male suffrage. Whether or not women reformers would support these new Amendments tore allies apart. Stanton and Anthony, making bedfellows with white supremacists, refused to support the Amendments, and long-time abolitionists and women's right reformers such as Lucy Stone did.¹¹ Women's historians have now spent decades puzzling through the problems and meanings of this split within the women's movement.¹² Do we understand Stanton and Anthony's failure to support the Reconstruction Amendments and their alignment with white supremacists to be strategic at a time when radical republicans deserted them, or was it deeper? What can women historians, hoping to create a useable past, do with this troubling aspect of women's history? How can current activists create a women's movement that encompasses and does not eclipse the pressing issues of race discrimination, immigration, and growing inequality?

The Myth of Seneca Falls makes clear that the nineteenth century women's movement was chaotic and magnificently vibrant as women of all sorts created their own agendas for women's rights from the conservative Women's Christian Temperance Union to Victoria Hull's free love agenda.¹³ We might even imagine this as a type of popular constitutionalism.¹⁴ Yet, from Anthony and Stanton's perspective, in order to be effective, to produce real and permanent gains, and to prevent such promiscuous chaos, they needed to produce and control the narrative that would legitimate their leadership and their strategy for attaining suffrage.¹⁵

9. TETRAULT, *supra* note 1, at 3.

10. *See, e.g.*, BARBARA YOUNG WELKE, LAW AND THE BORDERS OF BELONGING IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY UNITED STATES (Michael Grossberg & Christopher L. Tomlins eds., 2010); Reva B. Siegel, *She the People: The Nineteenth Amendment, Sex Equality, Federalism, and the Family*, 115 HARV. L. REV. 945 (2002).

11. TETRAULT, *supra* note 1, at 23-25.

12. *See, e.g.*, DUBOIS, *supra* note 3.

13. TETRAULT, *supra* note 1, at 47-51, 53-57.

14. *See generally* LARRY D. KRAMER, THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES: POPULAR CONSTITUTIONALISM AND JUDICIAL REVIEW (2005) (discussing popular constitutionalism).

15. TETRAULT, *supra* note 1, at 46.

Tetrault is deeply concerned with the question of who writes history and why. In answering these questions, she adds to the historiography on women's suffrage and the newer field of the history of memory and remembrance. Simplified greatly, Stanton and Anthony claimed that Seneca Falls was the first women's rights convention in order to write competitors with different, and at times more radical, visions out of the picture.¹⁶ But Stanton and Anthony did more, Tetrault asserts; in authoring what was to become a multi-volume history of the women's suffrage movement (demonstrably entitled, *The History of Woman Suffrage*), they created the first work of U.S. women's history, while dictating who would be written into history and who would be excluded. As they crafted this history, Seneca Falls as an event and the beginning of the women's movement became further mythologized and canonized.¹⁷ Tetrault writes, "With the publication of the *History*, Stanton and Anthony effectively monopolized a movement origins tale, one that anointed them, and they consequently appeared to be the movement's more legitimate strategists."¹⁸

The Myth of Seneca Falls is full of beautifully rendered characters that Tetrault gently knocks off of their pedestals in ways that bring new life to figures we think we already know. Tetrault paints a picture of especially Susan B. Anthony as driven, ambiguous, pugnacious, and willing to make enemies. She also sees her as one of the earliest and very best women's and social historians, essentially creating these genres herself. Yet, as Tetrault points out, there were other ways to tell the story of women's suffrage that would have been more inclusive and revealed a multivariate nineteenth century women's movements—precisely what the myth sought to hide.

The racial divide that Tetrault discusses plagued both first wave and second wave feminism. Current times provide us with another opportunity to create the broadest women's movement that we possibly can. We must fight for reproductive rights, the enforcement of employment discrimination laws, LGBTQ rights, and against domestic and sexual violence while we remember Eric Garner, Laquan McDonald, and other African-American men murdered by police. We must think about the grassroots and the national. When we should speak and when we should listen. Yesterday, as the winter weather felt like spring, I was elbow-to-elbow with women of every color, age, ability, religion, and sexual orientation in numbers that none of us could have imagined. Our signs were funny and heartbreaking; some made reference to healthcare, Black Lives Matter, immigration rights, and the environment. We chanted, we sang, we prayed together. My millions of sisters gave me the courage to rewrite this book review.

16. *Id.* at 71, 111.

17. *Id.* at 112-116.

18. *Id.* at 137.