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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 (1995, 158)

The name **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper** is not as proper a proper name within US feminism as one might expect, given Harper's prolific production and popular reception in the nineteenth century.¹ Certainly not as proper as that most recognizable name from the same era, Sojourner Truth, the figure Deborah McDowell refers to in her discussion of feminist name-dropping and its uses for contemporary criticism (1995). Troubled by the practice, McDowell especially takes issue with the way Truth's name has been converted into a method for signaling a certain kind of easy progressivism within feminism when it comes to matters of race and gender. Truth has become so useful to contemporary critics, in fact, that she is now one of the most frequently cited historical figures of the abolitionist period, and scholars routinely refer to her "legendary status" (Peterson 1995, 24) and her position as the "best-remembered African American woman of the nineteenth century" (Jones 2007, 106). Indeed, the frequency with which Truth is called upon in a variety of critical works has become a critical curiosity of its own, with one scholar noting that Truth has become a "standard exhibit in modern liberal historiography" (Palmer 1983, 152).

Harper's name, on the other hand, appears to be in little danger of being used (or abused, in McDowell's terms) in this way. While Truth has attained an iconic status both in US popular culture and in scholarly work, with her own postage stamp, bumper stickers, and a series of monographs and articles that deploy her most famous refrain, "Ain't/Ar'n't I a woman?" in their titles,² Harper is primarily known simply as the author of the 1892

¹ Harper is generally regarded as one of the most popular African American writers of the nineteenth century; for a discussion of her contemporary reception, see Foster (1990, 3–40).

² For examples of works citing and quoting Truth, see hooks (1981, 159–60), Linthwaite (1987), Haraway (1992), White (1999), Craig (2002), Brah and Phoenix (2004), and Koshy (2011).

novel *Iola Leroy*. Not only are there no postage stamps or bumper stickers, none of the popular-culture references that circulate Truth's name, but Harper's recovery as a significant historical figure for feminism has been far less pronounced, taking place primarily through the revision of the literary canon rather than the historiography of the women's movement.³

This absence is surprising. Harper's oeuvre not only deals in some of the most important questions of race, gender, and the work of Reconstruction in the nineteenth century; her wider career as an activist-intellectual also offers considerable possibilities for feminist interpretation. Harper was one of the few black women of her time to go on the lecture circuit, she was deeply involved in the suffrage cause and worked within both black and white suffrage organizations, she traveled to the South to help newly freed people as they navigated the dangerous and difficult period of Reconstruction, and she expressed a particularly keen interest in helping the freedwomen as they attempted to build new lives for themselves and their families after the war.⁴ These facts of Harper's career make her relative obscurity in the feminist canon more peculiar. 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" (2007, 193) despite the clear role Harper has had in the history of US feminism.

While Palmer-Mehta doesn't speculate as to why this critical gap around Harper and feminist theory exists or why Truth has appeared to be the touchstone historical figure when it comes to all matters of race, gender,

³ For general literary criticism on Harper, see Christian (1980), Carby (1987), Boyd (1994), Foster (1997), Peterson (2000), Sorisio (2000), Robbins (2004), Johnson (2008), and Rutkowski (2008). For criticism on Harper's oratory and rhetoric, see Logan (1999, 2004) and Stancliff (2011). For criticism on Harper's poetry, see Sherman (1974), Foster (1993), and Petrino (2005). For a discussion of the resistance to including Harper in the US literary canon, see Lauter (1988).

⁴ Harper worked in a variety of woman suffrage organizations, some specifically geared toward winning the vote and others more loosely affiliated with political reform. For a discussion of Harper's organizational affiliations, see Collier-Thomas (1997, 49–52). For an account of Harper's early lecturing years and excerpts of her letters from the lecture circuit and from her travels in the South during Reconstruction, see Still ([1872] 1992, 755–80). Writing from Greenville, Georgia, in 1870, Harper tells Still that she has a 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" (quoted in Still [1872] 1992, 772). See also Boyd (1994, 119–25), for additional analysis of Harper's activism.

and US feminism, scholars routinely suggest that the difference in their respective positions within the feminist canon has roots in Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's massive *History of Woman Suffrage*, still the largest collection of US suffrage documents and commentary to date (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage [1881] 1970). Indeed, none of Harper's writing or speeches on woman's rights, suffrage, or Reconstruction politics are recorded in any of the anthology's six volumes, while Truth appears several times across the collection. Nell Irvin Painter contrasts Stanton's erasure of Harper with Stanton's co-optation of Truth, suggesting that Truth was a figure more easily molded to the political discourse of the period, a "symbol of slavery" that could unite postwar abolitionists who disagreed about political strategy and priorities (1996, 229). Harper, on the other hand, had been born into a free family and 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). 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; 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 (233).⁵

Painter's analysis of the relative feminist status of Truth and Harper is convincing, but it conspicuously pins the source of the phenomenon to the past rather than to the ways contemporary scholars have narrated that history. I suggest, instead, that the origin of the difference in feminist standing between the two women should be traced not only to Stanton and Anthony's approval and co-optation of Truth—although this is certainly a part of the story—but also to the historiographical construction of a particular moment within suffrage history: the "split" within the movement in 1869. A term that has become remarkably common within both the history and the theory of US feminism, the "suffrage split" refers to the

⁵ For an account of white feminist expectations about which black women could constitute appropriate feminist allies, see hooks (2001). According to bell hooks, educated, middle-class black women's voices have frequently been marginalized by white feminists more interested in hearing from black women who fit their imagined idea of what "blackness" looked and sounded like (37). See also Painter (1994) 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" (154).

emergence of two national suffragist organizations in 1869 after woman suffrage leaders disagreed over the proposed Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution and the enfranchisement of black men ahead of women.⁶ Stanton, Anthony, and their supporters refused to support the amendment and founded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA); other suffragists, such as Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, supported the amendment and founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). Nearly all US suffrage histories, as well as a substantial amount of more general feminist criticism and theory, deal with this historical event in some way; it is undoubtedly one of the most commonly narrated episodes within the history of suffrage and the first wave of US feminism.

These “split-narratives,” as I call them, have had an enormous effect on the articulation of the history of American feminism and its meaning for the present, and one of the most significant of these consequences has been to frame black women’s contributions to the movement in ways that occlude their theorizing of its central issues. Split-narratives, in their drive to show how suffragists divided and what the effects of this fissure were, create a critical dichotomy wherein scholars focus on a rupture between two sides of the movement, 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 narrative structure pairs Harper with 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, AWSA side—or the anti-amendment, “sex” side represented by Stanton, Anthony, 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 as well. By producing and proscribing positions for these black women as symbols, the split forecloses the possibility of a more complex understanding of their negotiations of race and gender. Instead, as symbols, these black women are deployed to fulfill the logic of the split and become the means to endlessly reinscribe it. This process produces Harper as an important African American literary figure but one who is discon-

⁶ I use quotation marks around the term “suffrage split” to highlight its constructed nature as a critical object, but for stylistic reasons I do not continue this practice in what follows. While the repetition of the term “split,” both in this essay and in the historiography, tend to naturalize it as the only way to explain this history, readers should note that the term is itself part of the interpretive practice that I am reading here.

nected from suffragism per se, while Truth stands “for” feminism and is thus an iconic foremother of the movement. Far from simply a historical phenomenon, it is, I argue, the critical attachment to the split and its attendant need to understand how historical figures reacted to the divide that effaces Harper’s career as a writer-activist and the feminist theorizing that can be drawn from her work.

Race versus sex, Harper versus Truth

In a wide array of historical and critical work, the suffrage split represents an integral method of differentiating between Truth and Harper. Its formulation often shows how black activists would replicate the breakup of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), 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 AERA (Jones 2007, 140).⁷ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn performs the same move, showing how black woman suffragists replicated white suffragists’ split: “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” (1998, 42). She then appends two lists to illustrate the division of these women; Sojourner Truth and Frances Harper are both placed on the AWSA side. My point, however, is not to question whether Terborg-Penn, 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 sides in these split-narratives, however, come to represent not just an allegiance to a particular organization but a larger allegiance to race or gender. For instance, when the 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” 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

⁷ For a similar example, see Painter (1996, 222).

the black woman worker” (1995, 224). Peterson then describes the “striking contrast” offered by 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” not just between the NWSA and the AWSA but between the competing facets of femaleness and blackness; these 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 a purportedly 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 AERA meeting in which she suggested that she agreed with what would become the Stanton-NWSA position: that black male suffrage should not be prioritized above women’s 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’” (1999, 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). Scholars repeatedly turn to Truth’s “great stir about colored men” statement to explain why Truth represents the black woman choosing gender over race when confronted with the split.⁸

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

⁸ For similar examples of the critical use of Truth’s statement, see Davis (1981, 83), Giddings (1984, 65), Mabee (1993, 179), Stewart (1994, xliii), Peterson (1995, 225), Painter (1996, 226; 2002, 46), and Collier-Thomas (1997, 50). As I discuss below, Angela Y. Davis, Nell Irvin Painter, and Carleton Mabee all deploy the infamous Truth quote in much the same way but then attempt to distance her from the Stanton-NWSA position.

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." (1997, 50)⁹

Harper is depicted here as understanding gender as a less significant factor of identity within US 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 frequently relied on to do this kind of organizing work in these narratives—to show that Harper understood that "if the race had no rights, the women's struggle was meaningless" (Giddings 1984, 68) and that "the enfranchisement of Black men was far too vital to her entire people to risk losing at such a critical moment" (Davis 1981, 84). Harper's choice is presented as self-evident; she knew that race necessarily preceded 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'" (Painter 1996, 231). Again and again, 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.¹⁰

⁹ Just as transcripts of Truth's speeches raise significant questions of interpretation, Harper's famous statement was also paraphrased by a reporter and is unlikely to be accurate. For the most detailed description to date of the 1869 AERA meeting, see Dudden (2011, 161–88). My primary interest, however, is not in the accuracy of these statements but in their discursive deployment within split-narratives—how they have become part of a commonplace narrative structure that has significant effects for feminism. 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; for an exploration of the "political grammar" 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, see Hemmings (2011).

¹⁰ For additional examples, see Aptheker (1982, 47), Carby (1987, 68), Boyd (1994, 128), and Terborg-Penn (1998, 32).

But as the examples above indicate, although Harper is always “assigned” to the AWSA side of the split, there appears to be some confusion about how to categorize Truth, despite her “allegiance” to gender. We’ve already seen that Terborg-Penn puts Truth on the AWSA-race side of her list. But Paula Giddings, on the other hand, places Truth on the side of the NWSA and gender, 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,” with Truth in support of Stanton and Anthony’s stance and Harper disagreeing with it (1984, 65). 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 and Truth in support of the Stanton “wing” (1997, 50). But what’s striking about these assignments of Truth to the NWSA side is how much explanation it requires from these scholars to interpret her “choice.” Giddings quotes Stanton saying that a black woman would be better off the slave of an educated white man than of 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 underscores the difficulty the “choice” presented: “Of course, Sojourner Truth regretted having to make a choice and continued to emphasize that her first choice was for universal suffrage” (50). Painter distances Truth from Stanton and the NWSA 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. According to Painter, even though Truth “sided” with Stanton, she still stood for a middle ground “when straddling was still possible in woman suffrage circles” (1996, 229).¹¹

The confusion and hedging over Truth’s “side” can be read as an index of scholars’ struggles 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 (Collier-Thomas 1997), or she tempered that choice and became less radical (Mabee 1993), or she eventually came around to the other “side” in 1869 when the chips were down (Davis 1981). In contrast, Harper’s “choice” does not seem to require as much critical intervention in order for it to be understood;

¹¹ For additional examples of how scholars attempt to explain away Truth’s “choice” by showing how her perspective evolved over time, see Davis (1981, 83) and Mabee (1993, 180).

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: Stanton, Anthony, and the NWSA frequently resorted to racist rhetoric in their efforts to organize against the Fifteenth Amendment, and split-narratives often foreground this racism as a means of explaining why the movement “fractured.”¹² Truth’s agreement with the figures of that racism becomes problematic, whereas Harper’s apparent distancing herself from it appears not just more natural but more politically progressive.

If Truth needs more interpretation in order to be understood, if her “choice” needs extra critical explication in order to be palatable to contemporary scholars, then why is she also simultaneously an iconic figure of feminism in ways that Harper simply isn’t? Given the framing of their “choices” in the historiography, one might expect Harper to be held up as the symbol of principled feminism, but this hasn’t 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’s 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 praiseworthy, but it still isn’t represented as feminist—instead, it’s represented as a refusal of white feminism. Leaving aside the fact that these positions are oversimplified, 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 womens’ contributions and ideas must often 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 (2001, 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’ attempts 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.

¹² For two representative examples of how split-narratives deploy racism—and, in particular, Stanton’s racist rhetoric—to explain the “breakup” of the suffrage movement, see Aptheker (1982) and Kerr (1995).

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, significantly, not centered on the white female subject—indeed, the very sort of feminism Harper's work offers. 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.¹³ The split dominates the telling of these women's ideas and keeps scholars and readers tied to the race-versus-gender problem even as we like to think we know better now. The fact that Harper is not broadly represented as an important figure for feminism or feminist theory suggests that scholars cannot let go of the very thing they aim to critique.

Reconfiguring educated suffrage

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 (“We Are All Bound Up Together” [1866] 1990, 219)¹⁴

With this rebuke, Harper concluded her speech to the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention in May 1866. It was her first speech on the woman's suffrage platform and would be one of only a handful of her speeches recorded in that forum. Harper's pointed closing raises a number of questions about her conceptualization of suffrage: What does she mean by her comparison of voting rights with teacher training? Why would suffrage be more necessary for white women than black women, whom Harper

¹³ In the most reliable version of the text, Truth is never recorded as saying the phrase “Ain't/Ar'n't I a woman?”; however, the transcript does show that Truth spoke about her equal ability and strength in terms of the work of slavery, debunking the patriarchal notion of female frailty while simultaneously refusing to define the suffrage issue in terms of white female domesticity. For discussions of the multiple versions of Truth's speech, see Haraway (1992, 97–98), Mabee (1993, 67–68), and Logan (1999, 17–27).

¹⁴ A “normal school” refers to a teachers college; I discuss the significance of Harper's use of the term in more detail below.

specifically leaves out of this formulation? And what might the ballot have to do with white women's class position, or their selfishness? The 1866 speech is largely ignored in split-narratives, but it offers a prime entry point into Harper's continual reconfiguration of the suffrage question and her refusal of its race-versus-gender terms.

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's been more preoccupied with wrongs than rights: "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" ([1866] 1990, 217). It wasn't 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" ([1866] 1990, 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 abrupt and jolts her audience out of the lofty collective sentiments just uttered and into a reality in which women 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.¹⁵ 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” ([1866] 1990, 218) 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 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 streetcars of Philadelphia, where conductors often force her to sit in the smoking car or simply refuse her 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” (219), and yet this courage and service do not save Tubman from the same indignities and violence that Harper encounters while traveling (219). 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 the formerly enslaved and the 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 within the category of “woman,” 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 ([1866] 1990, 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

¹⁵ See Logan (1999, chap. 3) for a discussion of Harper’s rhetorical strategies and, especially, 57–59 for an analysis of Harper’s 1866 speech.

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 for understanding oppression.¹⁶

Reimagining a suffragist standpoint

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 (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Minnie's Sacrifice* [1869] 1994, 78)

If Harper conceptualizes suffrage as a form of education for white women, what does suffrage mean for black women? Her first serialized novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), written the same year the Fifteenth Amendment debates would come to a head, imagines a response to this question through the construction of a black female standpoint.¹⁷ Like Harper's 1866 speech,

¹⁶ Harper's reconfiguration of suffrage through the “normal school” trope has been ignored in the historical archive. While historians frequently 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.

¹⁷ One might very well place Harper's work within a genealogy of feminist intersectionality and standpoint theory, in which scholars have demonstrated how a single-axis framework of either race or gender “erases Black women in the conceptualization, identi-

her novel's narrative transforms the concept of suffragism into something much more than the quest for voting rights. Harper suggests that black women need the vote not as a form of education but as a form of protection; in this iteration, suffrage is not a method for exposing an unjust world but an expression of black women's transformative perspective on that world. Harper reimagines suffrage as a means for expressing difference—between black women and white women, on the one hand, and black men and black women, on the other.¹⁸

The sweeping narrative follows the development of two central characters, Minnie and Louis, both born in the South to enslaved mothers and their white masters. Each child 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, is born to an enslaved mother who dies during childbirth. 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 Minnie and Louis discover their respective pasts and what each chooses 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 Civil War and its aftermath? Minnie and Louis—who eventually meet, fall in love, and marry—both choose the latter, traveling 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

cation, and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw 1989, 140); for the field-defining statement of feminist intersectionality, see Crenshaw (1989, 139–67). For key formulations of feminist standpoint theory, see Hartsock (1983), Harding (1986), Haraway (1988), Hennessey (1993), Hekman (1997), Collins (2000), and Sandoval (2000). I am suggesting that placing Harper's work within this lineage can both underscore her significance for feminism and provide a richer historical context for contemporary feminist theory.

¹⁸ While my focus here is on two of Harper's Reconstruction-era texts, her volumes of poetry offer additional configurations of suffrage and standpoint. In particular, Harper's volume of poems *Sketches of Southern Life* (1887) and her short fictional piece “Mission of the Flowers” ([1869] 1990) might be read as part of a wide range of attempts to educate white women through the black female standpoint. For a reading of Harper's poetry that highlights her use of reversals to educate both white audiences and black audiences, see Foster (1990, 140–53). See also Boyd (1994, chap. 7) and Robbins (2004, chap. 5) for discussions of Harper's work as a site of “national education for all Americans” (Boyd 1994, 208).

their lives are overshadowed by the threat of Ku Klux Klan violence, and at the novel's end, Minnie is lynched.

Harper develops her concept of standpoint through the character of Minnie and her eventual discovery of her true parentage. For Minnie, this moment comes when her mother tracks her down more than twelve years after she is sent North; Minnie takes her mother in and eventually accepts that she is her biological daughter. When asked about this choice later, Minnie admits that it was difficult to absorb her mother's revelation, 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 to bring peace and justice to an oppressed people (Harper [1869] 1994, 72). 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": "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 is again represented as an impediment to education and change; the "bowers of ease" that whiteness provides are also the circumstances that would keep Minnie from realizing her true potential as an actor for social justice during Reconstruction. A white woman "never could accomplish" these things; Minnie needs 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 a more truthful, more productive perspective on the world around her.¹⁹

¹⁹ Harper's concept of 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 observations of the effects of injustice. The development of the viewpoint of Camilla, the white daughter who convinces her father to save baby Louis from slavery, demonstrates how white women can "lear[n] to view" the institution of slavery from black women's "standpoint of observation" (Harper [1869] 1994, 15). 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

This standpoint provides an important backdrop to Harper's theorization of suffrage for black women. The issue of voting rights doesn't emerge in the novel until near its conclusion, and this narrative placement importantly frames the suffrage question 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 highlighted white male sexual violence through the origin stories of its main characters, underscored white women's lack of perspective, and emphasized the central role of black women in the pursuit of social justice. From this narrative foundation, Minnie argues with a skeptical Louis over women's right to vote, 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[?]" (Harper [1869] 1994, 78). When Louis replies that the nation is "not prepared" for woman's suffrage, echoing the abolitionist Wendell Phillips's statement that "this hour belongs to the negro" (78), Minnie responds by pointing out that the "negro's hour" formulation erases black women: "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, claiming that black women need the protection of the vote just as much; she doesn't think that "the negro man is the only one who has pressing claims at this hour" (78).

Minnie's argument for black woman's suffrage is underscored by its narrative link to her death. The lengthy suffrage dialogue immediately precedes the foreshadowing of Minnie's killing. Although scholars have been unable to locate the chapter that depicts Minnie's death, the conclusion of the novel suggests that Minnie was lynched while out visiting her students on an evening when Louis had gone to lecture in another town. The extant narrative includes only the aftermath, in which the community members

female slaves learned from their white mistresses and thus would be more prepared for the duties of voting and citizenship than would black men. Instead, in *Minnie's Sacrifice*, it's white women, symbolized through Camilla, who must learn from the black women around them in order to develop new perspectives on the social world. This reversal of who would be educating whom in the postwar nation echoes Harper's 1866 speech: white women, in Harper's formulation, are again in desperate need of an education. For a discussion of Harper's reversal of the "mistress narrative," see O'Brien (2009); for a brief yet incisive analysis of the concept of standpoint in *Minnie's Sacrifice*, see Lewis (2006, 762–63).

come 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 stands in for 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, 'T'se so glad, I'm gwine to marry a Linkum sojer, 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 overheard woman, a white man hears the girl's comment and has her beaten, "tried" by a mob of Confederate soldiers for "saying 'cendiary words," and then hung (87).²⁰ While the extant text of the novel doesn't provide us with the details of Minnie's death, the story of Amy's hanging provides a narrative double that underscores how we might read Minnie's "sacrifice"—not as a black woman who sacrifices her rights for black men'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 possesses a social equality that she does 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, educated and never enslaved, meets the same kind of death. Neither has the protection of the law, neither is seen as equal—not to black men, and not to white women; both are killed at the hands of white male violence.

Harper's critique of the race-versus-gender paradigm

Minnie's Sacrifice puts forth a concept of suffrage that is rather different from Harper's 1866 speech, in which Harper figures the vote as a method of educating white women in injustice, but this is precisely my point: Harper's work 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, rather, 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

²⁰ The story of Amy's death has its roots in an account Harper heard while lecturing in South Carolina in 1867; see Still ([1872] 1992, 768).

white privilege and her 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 focus on a spurious “choice” between race and gender.

Harper’s larger body of Reconstruction work puts forth a view of suffrage that is markedly removed 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 each other—black women’s inequality cannot be parsed as a function only of their race, on the one hand, or only 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. (in Stanton, Anthony, and Gage [1881] 1970, 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 work. 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 Minnie’s and Louis’s mothers raped because they were black or because they were women? Were Amy and Minnie murdered because of their gender or be-

cause of their race? Harper's work points up the absurdity of such inquiries and the impossibility of ever answering such 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 thus instead must be understood as "bound up together"—but bound up in different ways, with an eye toward multiple differences.

By developing the concept of standpoint, Harper's work extends this critique of the parameters of the Fifteenth Amendment debates by drawing attention to white privilege, male privilege, and their oppressive effects—the very critical objects that are erased when the suffrage issue is framed as an choice between race and gender. Far from an expression of having to "choose," Harper's Reconstruction texts can be read as a deconstruction of such a choice and a shifting of focus to those privileges that the Fifteenth Amendment frame obscures, the ones she figures as the origins of oppression. This critical shift exposes the false universalism of both white woman suffragists and their male opponents who argued that black male suffrage must be prioritized above women's enfranchisement. Harper shows how these groups wield suffrage as a tool for obliterating the black female perspective; she instead uses that very perspective to theorize suffrage not as a universal concept but as an expression of difference. This is a complex suffrage stance, one that redefines the concept of universal suffrage and transgresses the borders of the black-man-versus-white-woman debate, instead emphasizing 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 work as not just a deconstruction of the 1869 split and its "choice" between race and gender but equally as a representation of the ways the framework itself effaces black women's contributions to feminist theory. 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 in the historiography, it elides the feminist theorizing that can be drawn from her work and her reframing of the suffrage question. The critical attachment to the split renders us unable to read Harper's suffrage ideas as feminism, and her critique of feminism as feminism, because its narratives are enmeshed in the very problem

they seek to intervene in, a recursive process that produces Harper as a symbol of race-before-gender, and thus as the nonfeminist to Truth's feminist, all in the name of locating the root of the struggle between race and gender within US feminism. When 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 identifies a symptom of the problem rather than the problem itself: it's not the symbolic Truth that elides Harper's feminism, it's our attachment to the split—and our understanding of both the suffrage question and black women's theorizing of it is obscured in the process.

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