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Public Memory and Reproductive Justice in the Trump Era

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Donald Trump's victory in 2016 necessitated a rethinking of narratives of both self and nation, and a reimagining of the future for many feminists and others on the Left. Our book, *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres: Gender and Race in the 2016 US Presidential Election* (<https://boydellandbrewer.com/nasty-women-and-bad-hombres-hb.html>), connects the outcome of the 2016 presidential election with America's "historical imagination." We do this by examining how people engage with the past, including the stories they tell about it. In Rochester, New York, where we — the book's editors — live, we see this first-hand with the battle for the legacy of Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906), one of our city's most famous historic citizens, initiated by abortion opponents.

Indeed, as many women reacted to Trump's victory by taking action, across the nation and here in Rochester, contests over the past continue to animate contemporary debates about feminism. In July 2017, the Susan B. Anthony House organized VoteTilla, a week-long celebration of the centennial of women's suffrage in New York State, which featured packet boats traveling from Seneca Falls to Rochester, culminating in the Suffragist City Parade (<http://wxxinews.org/post/suffragist-city-parade-celebrates-susan-b-anthonys-impact-multiple-issues>) through downtown Rochester to the Anthony home. More than 400 participants (<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2017/07/22/thank-you-susan-b-right-vote/499579001/>) donned the suffragists' colors (white, purple, and gold) and marched in affiliation with stalwart women's organizations including the American Association of University Women and Planned Parenthood.

Nasty Women and Bad Hombres edited by Christine A. Kray,
Tamar W. Carroll, and Honda Mandel. () ("Nasty")

The crowd grew quiet, however, as a large contingent from Feminists Choosing Life of New York Action (<https://www.fclny.org/>) (FCLNY ACT) marched behind a banner featuring an image of Susan B. Anthony and the words "Celebrating 100 Years of Pro-Life Feminism: Susan B. Anthony." Creating a dramatic spectacle, about half a dozen young women wearing black leotards and with black gags tied across their mouths performed a dance at the front of the contingent, followed by women of varying ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds dressed in white wearing purple sashes with gold lettering reading "Pro-Life and Pro-Woman."¹

Those spectators familiar with the iconography of the “abortion wars” might have been momentarily confused about the meaning of the young women’s performance, as the pro-choice movement has long used gags to demonstrate against the so-called gag laws first implemented by the Reagan administration, which the Trump administration broadened (<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/trump-reinstates-reagan-era-anti-abortion-policy-n710081>), to block US foreign aid to international family planning services that provide abortion, or that provide referrals or counseling for abortion services, or that advocate for repeal of antiabortion laws.

Pro-choice activists have criticized the chilling effect the gag laws pose to women’s reproductive freedom, and have used gags to symbolize the restriction of women’s liberty, and the threat to their lives, posed by the funding bans.² In this case, however, the gags recalled a dispute in the planning of the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, D.C. The March organizers published Unity Principles (<https://www.womensmarch.com/principles/>) that included a reproductive rights plank that stated, “We believe in Reproductive Freedom. ... This means open access to safe, legal, affordable abortion and birth control for all people.” Still, antiabortion groups applied to join the march, and were refused official recognition (http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2017/01/17/pro_life_feminist_group_new_wave_feminists_removed_from_women_s_march_partnership.html) by the organizing team, raising the broader question of the place of antiabortion activists (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/us/womens-march-abortion.html>) within a feminist movement that has long prioritized reproductive freedom as a necessary condition of women’s empowerment.

Rally to support Planned Parenthood. (Fibonacci)

Blue/[Wikimedia Commons](#)

(“https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rally_to_support_Planned_Parenthood.jpg”)

Feminists Choosing Life of New York Action is not the first antiabortion group to claim Susan B. Anthony (<https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2017/05/23/susan-b-anthony-became-anti-abortion-heroine>) as a precursor; in 1993 activist Rachel MacNair took Anthony’s name for her antiabortion advocacy group, the Susan B. Anthony List, founded to counter the power of Emily’s List, a political action committee that helped elect female, pro-choice Democratic candidates to office, including Hillary Clinton.

Feminists for Life, meanwhile, has championed Anthony’s reform partner Elizabeth Cady Stanton as their pro-life historical heroine. As law professor Tracy Thomas points out, over the past two decades, antiabortion groups have succeeded in linking their cause with feminist icons from the past. Federal antiabortion legislation bears their names, including

the Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act of 2011 and the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Pregnant and Parenting Students Services Act of 2005, while “political forums for college students popularize the notion that feminists historically opposed abortion.”³

The Susan B. Anthony List and its partner super PAC, Women Speak Out, report spending more than \$18 million nationally in the 2016 election cycle, reaching at least 1.6 million voters with their antiabortion message through door-to-door, mail, and digital ad campaigns. According to SBA List president Marjorie Dannenfelser, “Not only did we work to turn out inconsistent pro-life voters, we identified and contacted persuadable Democrats, including Hispanics, who were horrified to learn about Hillary Clinton’s support for forcing taxpayers to fund late-term abortion up until the moment of birth.” This characterization of Clinton’s position is grossly inaccurate,⁴ yet there is evidence that the Susan B. Anthony List’s message succeeded, as journalists report that antiabortion activism bolstered Trump’s victory (<https://www.thenation.com/article/eighty-one-percent-of-white-evangelicals-voted-for-donald-trump-why/>).

Susan B. Anthony (Portrait by Matthew Brady

(<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012646556/>)
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Historians of women’s suffrage object to the claim that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were antiabortion, pointing out that neither leader ever advocated for the criminalization of abortion, and that the evidence on which antiabortion groups have based their claims is taken out of context, inaccurate, and wrongly applied to a contemporary debate whose terms have very different meanings than they did in the nineteenth century.⁵

To the contrary, women’s rights advocates supported voluntary motherhood and opposed what we would now call marital rape as well as criminal punishment for women for infanticide.⁶ And yet the popular comedy show Saturday Night Live aired a January 2017 sketch (<http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/susan-b-anthony/3454414?snl=1>) in which a group of young women touring Susan B. Anthony’s home encounter her ghost, who exhorts them: “Abortion is murder!” Scholars’ protests notwithstanding, antiabortion groups edge closer to realizing their goal of decoupling reproductive rights and feminism through their co-optation of Anthony, Stanton, and other nineteenth-century women’s rights leaders.

What to make of this disjuncture between history and (newly created) public memory? Thomas, the legal scholar, argues that antiabortion advocates' counternarrative, by pairing feminist icons with antiabortion sentiment, works to "undermin[e] the prevailing feminist and legal view that a woman's right to bodily autonomy and reproductive choice is a privacy right of constitutional dimension going to the heart of gender equality." Separating abortion rights from feminism thus makes it easier to diminish or eliminate them, by weakening public support for women's reproductive autonomy. This co-optation of history and of feminism can only succeed, Thomas adds, because of a "lack of popular knowledge" about Anthony, Stanton, Douglass, and other women's rights advocates.⁷ History matters, and there's a lot at stake impacting women today and their reproductive health.

For African American and Puerto Rican women in Rochester's central city, their ability to give birth to and raise healthy children is imperiled. Rochester has the highest rate of infant mortality in New York State and one of the highest in the nation — an average of 14.1 deaths per 1,000 live births from 2008 to 2010; during these years, Monroe County's white infant mortality rate averaged 3.9 while its African American rate averaged 16 per 1,000.⁸ Black mothers are much more likely than white mothers to lose their babies before their first birthday (<http://www.pbs.org/video/america-numbers-surviving-year-one/>); the deaths are caused (http://www.rwjf.org/en/culture-of-health/2014/11/babies_are_dying.html) by chronic stress, poor nutrition, and lack of access to good medical care — in other words, by poverty (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/magazine/black-mothers-babies-death-maternal-mortality.html>).

The danger of the "pro-life" counternarrative that Susan B. Anthony was antiabortion lies not only in the creation of a false public memory, but also in neglecting this context: the very real suffering of Black mothers in Rochester, who lose their babies at unconscionably high rates. The right-to-life movement's emphasis on outlawing abortion — in this case, miscast as a profeminist move — diverts public attention from the changes necessary for the realization of full reproductive justice, including child welfare.

As writer and activist Renee Bracey Sherman argues (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/opinion/michael-brown-anniversary-black-mothers.html?_r=0) in linking the fight to eliminate racial disparity in policing and incarceration with the struggle for reproductive rights, "State violence and control, whether through racist policing, the criminal justice system or the welfare system, are all issues at the core of reproductive justice. They are fundamentally about whether you, or the state, has control over your own body and destiny. ... Reproductive justice is about the resolve to raise our families on our own terms, safely. This is the fight for the right to life."

Black women in the U.S. have long fought for control of their own bodies, as recent calls to take down statues of Dr. J. Marion Sims, the white man known as the “father of modern gynecology,” who experimented on enslaved women without their consent or anesthesia, remind us. Community groups in East Harlem, New York, argued that the Sims statue must go, as he is “as a constant reminder of the silences of the black women whose bodies he operated on” — “a different form of racial terrorizing,” in historian Susan Reverby’s words (<http://www.thehastingscenter.org/doctor-experimented-slaves-time-remove-redo-statue/>).

New narratives that tackle misogyny and racism head-on are necessary to activate gender consciousness and empower female voters. As the infant mortality rates in Rochester attest, lives depend upon it. As early as 1853, Douglass wrote that, “Woman, however, like the colored man, will never be taken by her brother and lifted to a position. What she desires, she must fight for. With her as with us, ‘Who would be free themselves must strike the blow.’”⁹

Notes

1. Photographs from the FCLNY ACT contingent (<https://www.facebook.com/fclnyact/>) at the parade are available on the group’s Facebook page (as of August 2, 2017). In the summer of 2017, the group also sponsored a highway billboard in the city on Interstate 490 East with the message that Susan B. Anthony was against abortion. Return to text.
2. See, for example, Meryl Levin’s 1991 photograph of the Statue of Liberty “gagged” in a direct action protest by the New York City–based reproductive rights feminist group Women’s Health Action Mobilization (WHAM!). Tamar W. Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 2. Return to text.
3. Tracy A. Thomas, “Misappropriating Women’s History in the Law and Politics of Abortion,” *Seattle University Law Review* 36, no. 1 (2012): 1–68, quotation at 2. Return to text.
4. In the third presidential debate, Clinton voiced strong support for maintaining *Roe v. Wade*, which protects women’s right to abortion prior to viability, as well as funding for Planned Parenthood, and stated that she supported restrictions on late-term abortions only when they include exceptions to protect the life and health of the mother. Aaron Blake, “The Final Trump–Clinton Debate Transcript, Annotated (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/19/the-final-trump-clinton-debate-transcript-annotated/?utm_term=.523352eeba28),” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2016. This is consistent with her prior position on abortion rights. While Clinton has repeatedly stated her support for *Roe v. Wade*, she has stated support for restrictions on abortion after 24 weeks of pregnancy with exceptions for the life and health of the mother. Pema Levy, “Late-Term Abortion Debate Reveals a Rift between Clinton and Sanders (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/03/hillary-clinton-late-term-abortion/>),” *Mother Jones*, March 11, 2016. Return to text.

6. Historian Cornelia Hughes Dayton writes that in early America, “abortion was understood as blameworthy because it was an extreme action, designed to hide a prior sin, sex outside of marriage, not because of concern over “the destruction of the fetus.” “Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1991): 19–41, quotation at 23. As Janet Farrell Brodie details, prior to the late 1800s, abortions before “quickening,” or fetal movement, generally occurring around four months, were not punishable under common law tradition, and those performed after quickening “might be high misdemeanors if the woman died, but not felonies.” An anti-reproductive control movement led by Anthony Comstock and the American Medical Association resulted in the criminalization of both birth control and abortion in the late nineteenth century. Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 254–56. For the rise of a fetal-centric understanding of abortion in the twentieth century, see Sara Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). [Return to text.](#)
6. In addition to Thomas, see for example two leading scholars of Anthony, Lynn Sherr and Ann D. Gordon, “[No, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton Were Not Antiabortionists](http://time.com/4106547/susan-b-anthony-elizabeth-cady-stanton-abortion/),” *Time*, November 10, 2015. [Return to text.](#)
7. Thomas, “Misappropriating Women’s History,” 3. [Return to text.](#)
8. David Andreatta, “In City’s History of Infant Deaths, Some See a Crisis,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, September 22, 2012. In 2014 in Monroe County, while overall the infant mortality rates had improved, stark disparities persisted: African American infants had the highest rate of mortality: 10 deaths for every 1,000 live births, compared to white infants’ rate of 3.6. “[Child Health: Infant Mortality Rate, Race/Ethnicity, Monroe County](http://www.actrochester.org/children-youth/child-health/infant-mortality-rate/infant-mortality-rate-race-ethnicity-monroe-county),” ACT Rochester, accessed August 4, 2017. [Return to text.](#)
9. Frederick Douglass, “Some Thoughts on Woman’s Rights,” in *Frederick Douglass on Women’s Rights*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 59. [Return to text.](#)

Headline image: Susan B. Anthony (first row fourth from left) and Dr. Martha Cannon (standing far left) with suffrage leaders from Utah and elsewhere, 1895. ([Utah State Historical Society \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha_Hughes_Cannon#/media/File:Martha_Hughes_Cannon_and_Suffragists.gif\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha_Hughes_Cannon#/media/File:Martha_Hughes_Cannon_and_Suffragists.gif)/Wikimedia | Public domain)

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2 Comments



[Heather Munro Prescott \(http://hmprescott.wordpress.com\)](http://hmprescott.wordpress.com)

November 6th, 2018 (<https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/06/public-memory-and-reproductive-justice-in-the-trump-era/#comment-3151>)

Great article. It doesn't help that feminist historian Linda Gordon argues that early suffrage leaders opposed abortion and birth control. See *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*. I'm working on an article for a special issue of the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* to revise this history.



Manon Parry

(<http://www.uva.nl/en/profile/p/a/m.s.parry/m.s.parry.html>)

November 8th, 2018 (<https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/06/public-memory-and-reproductive-justice-in-the-trump-era/#comment-3152>)

Interesting Heather! Can you share when it's ready? I posted a link to my own article on the anti-choice uses of the narrative in museums on the facebook comments for this post but see it isn't linked here. There's some refs that might be useful for you re: historians' reception of the idea. Parry, M. (2015). Feminist Opposition to Abortion: Reframing Histories to Limit Reproductive Rights. In M. Aerts (Ed.), Gender and activism: women's voices in political debate (pp. 107-118). (Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis; No. 35). Amsterdam: Verloren. Download is here: https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/8237976/Parry_1e_proef_JVG35_binnenwerk_9.pdf (https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/8237976/Parry_1e_proef_JVG35_binnenwerk_9.pdf)

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