

Packaging of Women's Equality Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Narratives are prescribed to eras, historical events and social movements. Whether done intentionally or unintentionally, the packaging of periods of time has served to clarify and simplify events and people as icons for the general public to take from ‘shades of grey’ to ‘black and white’ -- so to speak. *The Myth of Seneca Falls* by Lisa Tetrault, *At the Dark End of the Street* by Danielle McGuire, and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan all illustrate forms of the packaging of women’s history in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

*The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* is an exploration of the Convention of Seneca Falls and primarily the roles of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony during this early time period in the fight for women’s equality. After many years of dissent amongst women’s rights organizations, Stanton and Anthony destroyed all of the primary documents of the time period in their construction of their book, *The History of Woman Suffrage* in order to present a clear, singular narrative that from that point on could no longer be disputed, as there was no evidence to dispute it. *The History of Woman Suffrage* told the story of one unified fight toward achieving woman suffrage, when in reality the topic of the movement was in and of itself in question: for example, many of the movement’s leaders wanted to focus on women’s social issues that were not suffrage at all. The two disregarded the dynamic history that was the women’s rights movement during this period of time and replaced it with a ‘pill’ future generations would have an easier time ‘swallowing’ and perhaps rallying behind.

If the narrative had not been presented, a complex series of stories and disagreements would have taken its place. With Seneca Falls as the fictitious starting point of the women’s

rights movement, perhaps the new narrative made it a more marketable movement to the general public: a movement more people could get behind.

With a unified narrative for the history books, Stanton and Anthony were able to monopolize history itself. Anthony, in particular, was devoted to suffrage as the primary focus of women's rights during this time period. By creating the narrative she did in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, she was able to steer the conversation (which certainly had not come to an end) and focus toward suffrage and disregard other dissenting interests proposed. By packaging history in the way she did, she succeeded in this endeavor, as suffrage did become the forefront of the women's rights movement.

Ultimately, women's suffrage was achieved in 1920, and some would credit this to Stanton and Anthony's take-over of the movement's image.<sup>1</sup>

In Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street*, much is exposed of the role of women and sexual violence in the Civil Right's Movement in the 1950s. McGuire illustrates how the predominant narrative of the Civil Right's Movement is packaged in a way that largely diminishes the role of women in the movement. Sexual violence of black women in the south by white men as well as false accusations of sexual violence toward white women by black men were used as severe weapons of oppression against the black race as a whole.

These were not issues that were new to the 1940s and 50s, but when black female victims heroically began pursuing prosecution of their attackers through the legal system despite the extreme danger they faced of repeat attacks, the fight for racial women's equality began, or so it seemed. Though neither ideal nor equal in racial treatment, in 1965, Norman Cannon raped Rosa

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<sup>1</sup> Tetrault, Lisa. *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898*. University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

Lee Coates and was convicted with a life prison sentence. After perhaps hundreds of these cases being brought before grand juries, Coates was a 15-year-old girl whose reputation was difficult to tarnish in the skewed eyes of the current white societal norm (unlike, for example Recy Taylor whose gang rape trial was tainted by what was considered to be a mischievous past). Though prostitutes can be raped just as any other woman or man could be raped, because of their reputation, they were not ideal poster-children for successful trials against white male attackers during this time period. Coates was a relatively ideal victim package to be presented.<sup>2</sup>

After decades, the rape of black women by white men began improving (diminishing in frequency). McGuire then transitions into her discussion of Rosa Parks and the bus boycott movement. McGuire illustrates the use of Rosa Parks as an icon: she was the perfect person to begin a rebellion of sorts. Women who could be considered remotely promiscuous, intimidating, aggressive, violent, independent, etc., were invalidated in the public eye. Parks was (and continues to be in current history textbooks and children's books) presented as a tired, married, working class woman who spontaneously decided one day to take a stand that ignited an entire movement. She was packaged as relatable to the common black woman and non-threatening to the common white woman and white and black man during the time period. In his address at the Holt Street Baptist Church on December 5, 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "Nobody can call [Rosa Parks] a disturbing factor in the community... She is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there."<sup>3</sup> Her participation in activism to that date (even from her father's early activist influence) was downplayed significantly and continued

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<sup>2</sup> McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance- a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> As cited in McGuire, Daniel L. *At the Dark End of the Street*, 105.

to highlight her as non-threatening, quiet, perhaps uneducated, relatable, and beyond all else: sexually innocent.

McGuire writes of the speech Parks was preparing to give to the crowd on December 5: “Not only could she speak about her own mistreatment and abuse on the buses -- something that so many of the women assembled together shared -- she could also place her arrest in the long history of crimes committed by whites against blacks.”<sup>4</sup> But right when Parks was about to be presented to speak at the December 5 meeting, she asked if she should speak. Reverend French, “...told her that she had had enough and had said enough and, ‘You don’t have to speak.’”<sup>5</sup> Parks stood in front of the energized crowd and did not speak.

Her silence perhaps represented, once again, her image as a complacent, stereotypical woman during this time period. Whether or not she felt subjugated by the silence, Parks was in fact an activist leader of the Civil Rights Movement leading up to the day she refused to give up her seat to a white person on that Montgomery bus. However, from that point on, Parks was more of an empty female icon while King rose to be both an icon as well as a substantive activist and was perceived as such.

Her packaging in this submissive role led her to have a relatively minor role in the Civil Rights Movement going forward and was perhaps a sacrifice she made as a black woman for the larger cause of racial equality during that period of time. Maintaining her image within the parameters of the current ideological (sexist, racist) structure of the time provided a strong narrative for the movement that was less easily questioned and criticized. Her misrepresented status legitimized the role that the movement seemed to need her to play.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>5</sup> McGuire, Daniel L. *At the Dark End of the Street*, 106-7.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, was and is considered to be a game-changing publication for the beginning of the feminist movement: "It is supremely, specifically personal, and that's what gives it such gut-punching power."<sup>6</sup> In her book, packaging played a major role in the writing of the book itself. Similar to Parks, Friedan downplayed her own role as an activist prior to publishing this book. "Her stint at the *UE News* took place at the height of the anti-communist crusade, which she experienced at close quarters."<sup>7</sup> She identified, though she was not, as a middle class white woman, which was the audience she seemed to be addressing, in order to be more relatable: "Friedan laced *The Feminine Mystique* with suggestions of how much she shared with her suburban sisters."<sup>8</sup> In this way, Friedan presented herself as a sort of companion to the reader. The concepts she presented at the beginning of the book were simpler and easier to identify with, but as the book progressed, the concepts got more and more dynamic and complex. In order to not come off as the 'man-hating lesbian' that women fighting for equality were often portrayed as, she entitled the first chapter of her book "The Problem That Has No Name". This unintimidating title was intended to pull her readers in and avoid feeling stigmatized for reading a feminist book. She progresses through her book as if she, herself, is experiencing the book alongside her audience in an attempt to gain trust and companionship; for example, "Can the problem that has no name be somehow related to the domestic routine of the housewife?"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963, xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Horowitz, Daniel. "Betty Friedan and the Origins of Feminism in Cold War America." Edited by Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart. *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* 6 (2004): 481-95, 489.

<sup>8</sup> Horowitz, Daniel. "Betty Friedan and the Origins of Feminism in Cold War America", 483.

<sup>9</sup> Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, 20.

Friedan, like Parks, worked within the parameters of the current ideological structure of the time so as to alienate as few people as possible. By the end of the book, in striking comparison to her tentativeness at the beginning, Friedan makes the comparison between the psychological status of women in America to the psychological status of Jews in concentration camps during the Holocaust. The merits of this argument are at least partially valid, but what is more poignant is how provocative of an image it incites in her audience in comparison to the beginning of the book. Friedan uses a psychological strategy here: she comes off as relatable while slowly increasing the intensity of the narrative in the packaging of this story to the American people (primarily middle class white women). She gradually eases her audience into her perspective.

Additionally, while many of the concepts she discusses applied to women of all races and classes, Friedan's writing came from the perspective of a white middle class woman. Similarly to both Stanton and Anthony's use of simplifying the women's rights movement during their period of time to suffrage (also primarily for white middle class women) and Parks' deference to race as the primary focus of the Civil Rights Movement during her time, Friedan primarily focuses on one sector of society - white middle class women. This is a packaging strategy that is seen throughout history, as focusing on too many subjects at one time can cause limited progress. In all of these cases, specific groups of people and social issues are put on the back-burner -- knowingly or unknowingly; consensually or non-consensually.

The question of intentionality is a complex one. Whether Stanton and Anthony, Parks and the other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, or Friedan were aware of the methods they were using to progress their causes is unknown. What Friedan chose to or not to include in her book

are perhaps clearer examples of an intentional packaging technique, as she explicitly downplayed her past as a female activist. Parks and her counterparts could be said to have been in a similar boat, and Stanton and Anthony clearly knew what they were doing when they physically burnt historical documents. That being said, to what extent these tactics played a role in the movements and the future of the women's movements for equality is also unknown. Retrospectively in 2015, one can look at and distinctly see marketing strategies used that were very helpful. Whether or not those strategies were as apparent or intentional at the time cannot be definitively known. Honestly or dishonestly, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony created a succinct narrative of a movement; Rosa Parks utilized herself as a catalyst for a movement; and Betty Friedan largely introduced feminism to the 1960s.

## Bibliography

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