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from the  
editors

In February we began a blind review process in which our editors, in consultation with graduate student readers, evaluated over 100 submissions and selected nine distinguished papers for publication.

It is difficult to generalize from this collection; the works represent diverse regions, periods, methodologies and narrative styles. The authors use cultural, economic, environmental, gender, intellectual, legal, political, religious and women's history to advance our understanding of the past. Written in Brown courses and as part of thesis projects, their work is marked by sophisticated analysis of original sources and critical engagement with secondary literature.

This is our second issue. It has benefited from the enthusiasm and the feedback that followed from our launch last spring. With only three returning editors, a new undergraduate staff came together to expand and, we hope, improve the publication.

We trust that our colleagues will carry on this project and better it with their energy and initiative. We hope, too, that the University community will continue to find this journal meaningful for the cocurricular space that it provides, for the experience that it affords those who are involved and for the outstanding student scholarship that it shares. We are grateful for your interest and support, and are pleased to present the second issue of the Brown Journal of History.

David Beckoff  
Jill Luxenberg  
May 2008

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# women's rights and women's health

IN THE PROVIDENCE PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY, 1850-1851

BY JENNY WEISSBOURD

“I will not shut myself out of this globe of action and transplant an oak into a flower pot, there to hunger and pine.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 1837<sup>1</sup>

In early January of 1850, nearly eighty women gathered together for the first meeting of the Providence Physiological Society, an organization dedicated to women's health education.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by a series of free lectures on anatomy and physiology delivered by prominent feminist Paulina Wright Davis, the group formed to engage in bi-weekly lectures and conversations on health and the body. Ten months and over fifteen meetings later, several current and future leaders of the Providence organization traveled to Worcester, Massachusetts for the first national women's rights convention. Among them were the four women who delivered medical lectures to the physiological society in 1850 and 1851: Paulina Wright Davis of Providence, Dr. Martha Mowry of Providence, Dr. Mary Johnson of Ohio (and later Providence), and Dr. Harriot Hunt of Boston. At a historical moment when few women studied anatomy and physiology, these four progressive New Englanders formed a partnership to educate women on their bodies and their rights.

Davis, Mowry, Johnson and Hunt's work in women's rights reform was not unrelated to their health education program. Their fundamental objective in both reform activities was to encourage female participation in the world of action. Influenced by their exposure to the Transcendentalist movement, they argued that a healthy woman exercised her body as well as her mind and spirit. They believed that an active lifestyle could prevent and perhaps cure many of the illnesses plaguing nineteenth century American women, above all the phenomenon of rampant female invalidism. It took participation in the Worcester convention, however, to demonstrate to the four lecturers that women's health depended upon women's rights. In the months following the 1850 convention, the leaders of the Providence Physiological Society articulated a direct and reciprocal relationship between women's rights reform and women's health for the first time. They suggested that granting women rights would improve their health, and that educating them about

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in Lawrence Buell, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Amy L. Nathan, “Paulina Wright Davis” (Senior Honors Thesis, Brown University, 1977), 43.