capacious in scope, spanning nearly 700 pages, and like all books, it must mark the limits of its ambit somewhere.

If the authors’ forthcoming work on the second century of Harvard Law is as sweeping as *On the Battlefield of Merit*, together these volumes will stand as the definitive history of the institution for some time to come. And there is good reason to believe that this next book might be an even richer text than the initial study. Coquillette and Kimball will supplement their archival research with an extensive collection of oral histories from administrators, faculty, and staff. Anyone who enjoys the fruits of this first installment will have high expectations for the sequel.

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In this slender volume (containing 171 pages divided into six chapters and an epilogue), Terri Snyder investigates the act of self-destruction in the context of pre-Revolutionary American slavery. Suicide was a pyrrhic act to demonstrate an individual’s power; no slave master could beat, rape, or torture a slave who preferred death as an alternative. Snyder, however, does not approach suicide exclusively as an act of resistance or slave agency; proceeding from an agency-driven paradigm risks adopting the masters’ or abolitionists’ point of view, because they saw slaves merely as resisting the will of others. To do so “obscures the finer grains of [suicide’s] political and personal significance” (17). Instead, Snyder has a more wide-ranging scope: she considers the changing cultural meanings of suicide, how slave suicides appeared in the legal system, the insights suicide might offer about slave character, and how slave suicides were remembered in African American folklore traditions of the twentieth century. In her epilogue about suicide in folklore, Snyder expands upon her 2010 *Journal of American History* article (“Slavery, Suicide, and Memory in North America”), which covered similar ground. Her exhaustive research is based on coroners’ reports and petitions for government compensation, medical texts, engravings, ex-slave narratives, poetry, abolitionist literature, private correspondence, ship logs, and other sources. Although Snyder reviewed virtually all extant pre-1840 Virginia and North and South Carolina coroner reports
(n = 999), only 35 discussed slave suicide. As a result, other sources became even more essential to flesh out her investigation.

Snyder’s study begins with two chapters about suicides in the context of the Atlantic slave trade (the middle and final passages of transport) and during seasoning and the pre-Revolutionary period. These first two chapters are perhaps the most valuable of The Power to Die. African beliefs about suicide varied widely, but the common practice of ancestor worship meant that suicide could have been seen as a method of reunion with one’s (dead) family, and could possibly even ennoble the individual in the eyes of those left behind. Rumors of possible cannibalism by slavers drove many to take their own lives. By contrast, European slavers considered suicides to be sacrilegious or criminal, and worse, a symptom of disorder aboard ship. Suicide by the newly enslaved represented lost revenue, might trigger a shipboard revolt, and could become an unstoppable contagion. Snyder considers the methods that ship captains adopted to prevent suicides, including forced feeding, removal of all cloth that could be used for hanging, and postmortem public mutilation as a form of prevention. Among newly captured slaves, drowning, starvation, and asphyxiation were the most common methods used to die. Once landed, more weapons and methods became available for them to use. Some African ethnicities, such as the Igbo, were thought to have a predilection for suicide, thus reducing their economic resale value. Unlike slavers, masters feared slave suicides for the loss of reputation that each represented. Hence, few coroners were summoned to record slave suicides, as the acts might reflect poorly on a master’s control.

The next three chapters consider slavery in a series of shifting contexts: how wilfullness, rank, and honor affected suicides and their perception by others (Chapter 3); the legal context of suicides, particularly when a slave was accused of a crime and chose suicide instead of trial (Chapter 4); and the depiction of slave suicides in print (Chapter 5). In the period prior to 1773, poetry and prose about an honorable suicide (following the example of Cato) allowed slave self-destruction to be described without criticism attaching to the institution. With the publication of Day and Bicknell’s poem about “The Dying Slave,” however, slave suicides in literature began to offer an implicit critique of power, foreshadowing abolitionist themes of later years. Nobility of spirit (for male slave suicides at least) became linked to denial of rights and the inconsistency of revolutionary ideology. The gendered meaning of slave suicide, however, placed women solely within the (master-destroyed) domestic sphere. After 1820, ex-slave narratives discussed how slaves considered suicide, even if they rejected death as an option. Through all of these topics, Snyder’s graceful prose draws the reader ever onward, despite the depressing nature of her subject.

When it comes to slavery studies, it is hard to ask questions that have never been asked before. The number of scholars working from so many different
angles (history, law, sociology, anthropology) in such a vibrant field nearly guarantees that overlap will occur. However, it is only in the past few years that two authors have tackled the important topic of early American slavery and suicide with thoroughness: Terri Snyder and Rick Bell. Both have published articles and books on the topic, although Bell’s *We Shall Be No More* (Harvard, 2012) considers suicide in a broader context, devoting fifty pages to slave suicide as part of his longer work about national identity, liberty, and order in the Early Republic. Snyder and Bell use many of the same illustrations and several of the same key events to make their points (even discussing slave suicide from a gendered perspective). What principally distinguishes Snyder from Bell are two perspective shifts: first, Snyder not only considers suicide as resistance or fuel for abolitionist fires, but also adopts a broader canvas for slave motivations: suicide has more meanings than what it represented to those left behind. Second, Snyder explores suicide at a variety of levels: African, imperial, colonial, and local, as well as remembered. Whereas Bell emphasizes the national political context and delves deeply into the ways antebellum abolitionists publicized slave suicide, Snyder works on that level and several more. Taken together, the two books prove that self-destruction by slaves can no longer be overlooked by slavery and legal scholars.

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In *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, historian Lisa Tetrault analyzes how Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony created an enduring “origins myth” for the women’s rights movement. Celebrating the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 as the birth of the movement, Stanton and Anthony ensured their own place in the history of the cause by emphasizing their role as the founders and chief strategists of the movement. As historians of the movement, however, their contribution may have been even more significant. Creating a usable past for future generations of activists, they virtually erased from collective memory the efforts of their fellow suffrage advocates, most notably Lucy Stone and Henry Browne Blackwell. They also minimized the significance of female abolitionists who paved the way for nineteenth century women to become involved in politics in the first place.