

# Vitae Scholasticae

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**Book Review:**  
**Kolodny, Normalities:**  
***The First Professionally Prepared***  
***Teachers in the United States***

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Kelly Ann Kolodny. *Normalities: The First Professionally Prepared Teachers in the United States*. Charlotte N.C.: Information Age Publishing Inc., 2014. ISBN 978-1-62396-688-1. 210 pages.

Lydia Stow, Mary Swift, and Louisa Harris were three members of the inaugural class of the first state-sponsored normal school in the United States. Convening at Lexington, Massachusetts in 1839, they and 22 other young women embarked on a new type of standardized teacher preparation promoted by the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann. A pioneer in the common school movement, Mann was influenced by the Prussian state-supported system of teacher training as well as the French *école normale*, from which the normal school derived its name. (The purpose of the *école normale* was to establish norms for others schools to follow. Normal schools, by contrast, were exclusively focused on teacher preparation.)

Kolodny explains that studying the normalites (as the Lexington students called themselves) involved ten years of copious research examining letters, poetry, journals, school board reports, deeds, meeting records, and newspaper accounts. Kolodny visited the neighborhoods where the three women lived, the normal school where they studied, the places where they traveled and taught, and their grave sites. She relates an interesting account of her purchase (online, from a used bookstore) of the "Records of the First

Class of the First State Normal School in America: Established in Lexington Massachusetts 1839" – only to find that it had originally belonged to Mary Swift! The purchase contained Swift's notes on the normalites' obituaries as well as hand-written poems from her classmates. Additional documentation of Kolodny's research is found in drawings and photographs, a list of archives, libraries, historical societies and associations, and an extensive bibliography.

Kolodny decided to take a biographical approach to studying the first normal school because of the unique insights it offers readers. For example, interweaving the young women's journal entries with the contextual information of time and place provides a sense of a closeness and intimacy with the three normalites that may not be possible in other genres. Upon completing *Normalites*, the reader has a feeling of having participated in a rich, historic experience.

*Normalites* maps the three women's lives over the course of 12 chapters and 210 pages. The book is chronologically arranged and is divided into four parts that detail the women's studies, entrance into the world and the beginning of their careers, transitions in their personal and professional lives, and building of their life work. Kolodny also provides historical information on the feminization of teaching in Massachusetts after years of domination by men. This shift (which women's normal schools helped to encourage) was fostered by a belief that teaching was a natural extension of family and home, and that women instinctively loved children and interacted with them better than men. The transition was also encouraged by the nineteenth century model of Republican Motherhood that suggested women could perform a valuable civic function by teaching their sons to be good citizens.

Of particular interest in the normalites' education is the requirement that they keep journals of their studies and daily pursuits. The journals provide insights into the relationship between Kolodny's three biographical subjects as well as with their supervisor, Cyrus Peirce. A gentle man, Peirce had high standards and was at time frustrated with the students due to their "young and saucy conduct" (28). He believed that the young women were deficient in academic knowledge when they arrived, but held some promise. Peirce emphasized a rigorous curriculum of composition, enunciation, bookkeeping, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and moral and natural philosophy. He also valued decorum, orderliness, punctuality, and appropriate dress. Peirce read the young women's journals, which became conduits for their thoughts about him and the education they were receiving. At times the normalites deliberately challenged him through their journal questions and reflections, knowing he would read their entries carefully. They also used the journal to exercise wry humor, as when Mary Swift wrote on Peirce's lack of knowledge of women's fashion after he insisted that teachers should not wear tight dresses.

Kolodny recounts events at the normal school, citing famous guests and speakers such as Horace Mann, Bronson Alcott, and Samuel Gridley Howe. She also reports on discussions that occurred around a variety of topics that still command interest today, such as whether children should be forced to study, whether teachers should use corporal punishment, whether children should be given tangible rewards when they do well, and whether children should be taught about spirituality and religion.

After completing their studies, Stow, Swift, and Harris found employment in schools located in or near their towns. Their teaching situations were markedly different. Lydia Stow's first position was in a small, one-room school house. Louisa Harris taught some 44 poor children in Roxbury. Her teaching performance was evaluated by men who placed a premium on order and knew much less about teaching than she did. Mary Swift taught blind and deaf students at the Perkins Institution in South Boston. Stow and Swift's formal teaching careers came to an end when they married, but their professional pursuits did not. Swift continued to advocate for the education of deaf and blind children and eventually became the founder of the Boston Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Stow, who had actively participated in the antislavery movement and had sheltered slaves, was the first woman to become a member of the Fall River Massachusetts School Board and the founder of the Fall River Women's Union. Harris' journal reveals her belief that she had a calling to be a lifelong teacher. She remained single and taught in a variety of public and private environments for the remainder of her life.

Readers of *Normalities* need to be forewarned: this is not a book to skim through or quickly scan. The further one reads, the more intense the narrative seems to become. It is an "easy read," but is so loaded with the events of the time and the appearances of historic figures that a "skimmer" might miss out on the delights within. Stow, Harris and Swift lived and worked during the historic intensity of the Abolitionist movement, the Temperance movement, the Irish Potato Famine, the Underground Railroad, the Civil War, the Transcendentalists and the Great Awakening. A few of the people whom the women actually met, knew, visited, studied and worked with were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Helen Keller and Lizzie Borden.

This is a fascinating book that succeeds at what Kolodny intended it to do. Through their personal stories, readers feel an acquaintanceship and connectedness with Stow, Swift and Harris. My heart and mind were touched by *Normalities* to the point where I cared a great deal about the characters, valued and appreciated their legacies, and was disappointed when their stories ended. Many of us can identify with the women's struggles, successes, and reflections. I admired and respected these three women who helped pave the way for quality teaching and education in the U.S. today, and I loved this book.

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