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**"Why Sit Ye Here And Die" The Abolitionist Rhetoric Of
Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, And Frances Ellen Watkins
Harper**

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“Why Sit Ye Here and Die?” The Abolitionist Rhetoric of
Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Major Professor: Dr. Elon Kulii

Greensboro, North Carolina

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School of Graduate Studies
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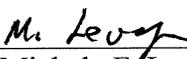
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Greensboro, North Carolina
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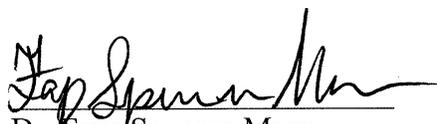
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Jack Lewis Edward Mathewson, and to my four children, Jackie, Jessica, Jason, and Joyce who have supported me wholeheartedly from beginning to end. Their love and support enriched my academic experience enormously, and made it one of great pleasure and enjoyment.

Biographical Sketch

Cora H. Mathewson graduated from the W.A. Pattillo High School in eastern North Carolina. She received her undergraduate degree in History and African American Studies from Guilford College. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts in English and African American Literature. She is a member of Phi Alpha Theta, Phi Kappa Phi, and the Golden Key honor societies.

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Abstract

This thesis highlights the contributions to the abolitionist movement of three extremely courageous African American Women: Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Though often faced with ridicule and opposition from audiences when they approached the public platform, these important historical figures rejected the narrow and hypocritical views of a woman's place, and particularly a black woman's place in antebellum society and demanded that their voices be heard. They realized that rhetoric is the foundation upon which the struggle for freedom rests and that to engage in rational discourse, whether to teach, preach or lecture was as essential for women as it was for men. Here, I examine the rhetorical significance to the movement of Stewart, Truth and Harper and explore the impact of their persuasive discourse on the audiences who received it. I reveal here how all three women, despite the public opposition they confronted because of their gender and color, harnessed the power of public discourse to help turn the tide against American slavery.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The years between 1829 and 1850 were perilous ones for antislavery advocates. Slave owners, ever resistant to the idea that slavery was wrong and confident in the legitimacy of their cause, protested vehemently against abolitionists. Proslavery advocates quoted Scripture supporting slavery and viewed the arguments of antislavery activists as “deceitful rhetoric, based purely on fiction” (*Richmond Times* 1854). Slave owners saw slavery as an economic and social institution that benefitted not only the South, but the entire nation as well. By the 1830s, the organized antislavery groups, formerly composed of primarily white males, involved both women and African Americans. Influenced by the rhetoric of antislavery sympathizers and the passionate appeals of African American men, among them David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass, the movement coalesced into an aggressive campaign that called for an immediate end to slavery. Included in the conflict were three extraordinarily courageous African American women, Maria W. Stewart, Frances Watkins Harper, and Sojourner Truth. These women, rejecting the narrow and hypocritical views of the antebellum society regarding a “woman’s place,” felt a compelling need to let their voices be heard. Though they often faced ridicule and opposition from audiences when they approached the public platform, they remained in the forefront and continued to fight for the rights of black men and women. The resulting struggle spread beyond the confines of political and legal boundaries and became one of the greatest social and political movements in the country’s history.

Inevitably, the fight faced serious challenges, as even those who endorsed the conceptual premise of the “inalienable rights” of men had problems visualizing blacks as free people. They doubted the “suitability” of the men and women whose rights they championed publicly, to

become members of the growing republic as free men and women. Many shared the belief that “slaves would be unfit for freedom, having all the habits of servitude deeply rooted in their minds” (Polgar 237). Some, like the Quakers, focused on a form of gradualism, a conservative approach, using the courts and legal maneuvers to gain freedom for the slave, while others employed the democratic strategy of immediatism (231).

Stewart, Truth, and Harper were not the only women involved in the struggle, as there was also a small army of working and middle class northern black women dedicated to the cause. The middle class women, to whom much of the scholarship regarding black abolitionist women has been devoted, descended from backgrounds of privilege and education. Shirley Yee writes that the activism of these women's families, as well as their own individual talents and professional connections with abolitionist friends, helped them gain access to the abolitionist newspapers and the public platform. This set them apart from both slaves and the majority of free blacks (113). Sojourner Truth, Maria W. Stewart, and Frances Watkins Harper represented opposite ends of this stratum. Considered somewhat unmatched by social standards, as upward mobility among blacks often related to education and wealth, Truth, a former slave, a preacher, and feminist, was uneducated, but inherently intelligent. Stewart, whose lectures and speeches assumed an almost militant tone, was brilliant as an orator and lecturer even though she too had little formal education. Harper was educated, a former teacher and a polished orator. Michael Stancliff believes that the abolitionist rhetorical culture itself was a culture of teaching and suggests that Harper’s work was primarily pedagogical. He asserts that it functioned as rhetorical instruction and that her abolitionist rhetoric and writing were critically relevant to the crusade and “opened a significant window on the innovations of political thought and rhetorical practice” (xi).

Melba Joyce Boyd writes in the introduction to *Discarded Legacy* that Harper's "practical application" of her art to her activism was consistent and demonstrated her commitment and dedication to her causes. She frequently included selections from her abolitionist poetry in her lectures, which pointed to the sexism, racism, and classism inherent in the institution of slavery (14).

Stewart, exposed to books from an early age, was primarily self-taught and learned to read while working as a servant in the homes of whites. Yet, in 1832, she became the first American woman to speak before a mixed audience of men and women, and the first to leave behind copies of her text (Logan 1). By contrast, Sojourner Truth never learned to read or write, but as an article published in the *National Magazine*, October 16, 1892, stated, she was "keen and quick witted, with a memory that never dropped a single thread, she was always ready with an answer that went straight to the mark, and often withered her opponent into silence." Truth's words, in fact, were: "I can't read a book, but I can read the people."¹ This thesis examines the rhetorical significance of Truth, Harper, and Stewart on the abolitionist movement and explores the impact of their persuasive discourse on the audiences who received them. How did these women, in light of the public opposition that they faced first as women, and again as black women, use the power of public discourse to help turn the tide against American slavery.

¹Howard Hendricks, "Sojourner Truth: Her Early History in Slavery," *National Magazine* 16 Oct.1892, quoted in introduction to Suzanne P. Fitch & Roseanne M. Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth As Orator: Wit, Story, and Song* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997) 3.

CHAPTER 2

Historical Context

Even before the American Revolution, activism was not new to blacks. During the 1700s, slaves in Massachusetts sued their masters for the freedom they believed was inherently theirs (Franklin and Moss 109). Throughout and after the Revolutionary War, free blacks petitioned the government to make the slave trade illegal and called for a gradual emancipation long before the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison appeared (109). In 1817, blacks participated in organized activities to abolish slavery when both black men and women met in Philadelphia to lodge a formal public protest against the white-led colonization movement, which proposed to send blacks back to Africa. Yet, many, believing that the hearts of whites held a prejudice against blacks that nothing short of “divine power” could eliminate, felt it best that blacks “be removed from white society” (Dorsey 141). Blacks reacted to the idea with deep resentment, rejecting it entirely. They saw the plan as a deceptive tactic instigated to rid the country of free blacks, so that they could not inspire slaves with the continued hope of emancipation. Blacks also believed that the idea originated more from “prejudice than philanthropy” (141). On September 21, 1832, Maria W. Stewart, openly defiant in her opposition to colonization, startled her audience by stating her objections in a lecture entitled “Daughters of Africa, Awake! Arise! Distinguish Yourselves!” delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston. In this lecture, she declared:

The unfriendly whites first drove the native American from his much loved home. Then they stole our fathers from their peaceful and quiet dwellings, and brought them hither, and made bond-men and bond-women of them and their little ones; they have obliged our brethren to labor, kept them in utter ignorance, nourished

them in a vice and raised them in degradation; and now that we have enriched their soil, and filled their coffers, they say that we are not capable of becoming like white men, and that we never can rise to respectability in this country. They would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through. African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heart-felt interest (*Liberator*, April 1833).

Though blacks understood the intensity of American racial prejudice, they still rejected the idea of colonization and were willing to fight for the right to become active citizens. However, as Timothy Shortell explains, “By the beginning of abolitionism, citizenship was generally understood to be based on a community of shared identity... As a result, citizenship was inevitably racial. Most whites could not conceive of sharing their community with anyone who was not of European Protestant heritage” (79). Shortell also notes that black abolitionists “sustained a more radical critique of American societies than their white colleagues.” He affirms that the same forces that produced a feeling of positivism in northern whites regarding antislavery reform generated only militancy in blacks. Blacks held no such hopes that racism would end of its own accord. Whites, he explained, worried that investing in abolitionism would mean an attack on established institutions while blacks who had nothing invested in the “status quo” felt they had nothing to lose by calling for an immediate end to slavery by any means (80). The complexities of defining freedom and what constituted citizenship thus created a gulf between black and white abolitionists. Many whites found it difficult to relate racial equality with the fight to free African Americans from slavery, and pondered whether emancipation should be gradual or immediate.

Carol Faulkner writes that an interracial group of free-produce agitators staunchly promoted immediatism as early as 1820. This little known group also preceded Garrison in calling for immediate emancipation (378). The Free Produce Society of Pennsylvania, formed in 1827, forced northerners to meet head-on the powerful connection between northern consumers and slavery (379). They insisted that northerners contributed to the “peculiar institution” when they consumed products like sugar and cotton generated by slave labor. The organization believed it to be essential that all who accepted and supported the antislavery cause desist from the use of these products. Faulkner makes clear that the Free Produce Society attempted to appeal to “religious notions of purity” and wanted Americans to create a “moral economy” by practicing personal asceticism (380). Frances Harper, a supporter of the Free Produce Society wrote “Free Labor” to represent the sentiments of those concerned with making what many considered an “ethical” choice:

I wear an easy garment,
 O'er it no toiling slave
 Wept tears of hopeless anguish,
 In his passage to the grave.

And from its ample folds
 Shall rise no cry to God,
 Upon its warp and woof shall be
 No stain of tears and blood.

O, Lightly shall it press my form,

Unladen with a sigh,
 I shall not 'mid its rustling hear,
 Some sad despairing cry... (1.2.3. 104).

In this poem, Harper expressed her willingness to wear a garment made from the roughest of fabric rather than the soft cotton produced by the forced labor of a southern slave. She hoped perhaps, that even this small sacrifice would prove beneficial to the slave. Even as Garrison rejected the notion of free-produce, believing it had served its purpose and was of no other practical use, many African Americans and women continued to support the cause. *The Colored Free Produce Society*, connecting “the sin of the consumer with the sin of the slaveholder” held its first meeting at Richard Allen’s church in December of 1831 (390).

The black church played an extremely significant role in the lives of northern African Americans. Though the abolitionist movement followed on the heels of the religious revival that swept through the New England states and New York during the late 1790s, references by “religious” whites expressing antislavery sentiments were minimal (Delatimer L119). Only later did churchgoers, attempting to “reform” society begin to preach against slavery. The church, as an organized entity, proved providential to black women, however, as they occasionally assumed secondary roles of leadership that helped them acquire strong organizational skills (Sterling 153). These skills proved useful, since the earlier black women’s benevolent societies, comprised of mostly working class women, may have laid the foundation for their involvement in the antislavery organizations. Linda Grasso expresses a different viewpoint in *The Artistry of Anger*. She argues that even though the church *appeared* to provide a place of refuge and to a certain extent, empowerment, and opportunity, “ideologies of gender subordination were as salient in the sacred world as they were in the secular.” She also notes that the church reinforced

traditional gender arrangements, whereas women were expected to continue in the roles of “self – sacrificing instruments of middle class social control.” Women, in effect, were given little incentive or time to seek fulfillment of their own needs and desires (105).

Though limited by circumstances that allowed them only minimal involvement outside the realm of what many deemed a “woman’s sphere,” black women were also inspired to serve their own. They wanted to dispel the notion that blacks overall were lazy, slothful, incapable of learning, and would only toil and labor when under the supervision of others. Records produced from an early group, *The Daughters of Africa*, 1821-1829, revealed receipts showing disbursements to the sick and the elderly, purchases for clothing for needy families and payments for funeral expenses (Sterling 110). Through the roles of fundraising and organizing, women’s groups were able to sustain not only their own organizations, but also the “male mainstream of the antislavery movement” (Skylar 496). By 1826, women contributed more than half of all donations to the antislavery societies while endeavoring to support the conventions and other functions at which men were the principal speakers. This led to confidence in their abilities to lead and the courage they had previously lacked to move forward. Because of this newfound sense of accomplishment, they began to approach the public platform as speakers. Making their own speeches moved them beyond the confines of organizers and fundraisers, and they became actively involved in areas once designated exclusively to men – that of public speaking and political writing.

CHAPTER 3

The Journey and the Epiphany

The abolitionist public discourse produced by African American women like Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Watkins Harper seems to have grown out of a separate black protest, a time when deeply religious black men and women cloaked their rhetoric in the underlying religious beliefs of a “community of believers.” Using this approach, they were able to point out the hypocrisy of a nation that professed to believe in the equality of all men, and the biblical belief that all humans, regardless of skin color, could find salvation in God’s grace; nevertheless, were prepared to ignore those commands when the “community of believers” was their black brothers and sisters.

Born a free black in 1803, in Hartford, Connecticut, Maria W. Stewart preceded both Sojourner Truth and Frances Harper to become the first American woman to address a mixed audience, choosing to deliver four public lectures between 1832 and 1833. (Truth did not begin travelling and speaking on behalf of the abolitionist cause and women’s rights until 1843, while Frances Harper did not give her first public lecture until 1854). Having lost both parents at an early age, Stewart did not have an easy life. She went to live as a servant in the home of a white minister and taught herself to read from the books in his library. These surroundings may have planted within her the religious principles and the desire for social activism, which she applied later in life. Deeply influenced by the writings of David Walker, who shared similar theological views, Stewart deliberately stepped forward to deliver her message despite the poor reception she received from her Boston public. Insisting that she and her listeners “shared the same plight,” she pointed out that her main objective was to “engender a God-believing community, so that everyone in it will flourish” (Grasso 102). Stewart apparently realized that it would be wiser for

her to envelope her message in what her listeners perceived as instructions coming from God, rather than from her. She wanted her audience to see her as the messenger chosen by Him to deliver the message. In this way, she was able to confront her listeners personally. She used aggressive language in pointing out to whites their hypocrisy in shouting for freedom against tyranny on their own behalf, while denying that freedom to others. She chastised African Americans, admonishing them to fight for their rights and demand from whites the independence and freedom necessary to live as free human beings. Linda Grasso explains:

When Maria W. Stewart stands behind the mask of an angry God, it is clear what she wants her anger to accomplish. Enraged that the “powerful force of prejudice” has denied the promise of peace, prosperity, and the pursuit of happiness to the “sons and daughters of Africa,” she urges the black community to demand the privileges of white America for themselves. The language and themes of republicanism run like a leitmotif through her texts, but in her vision concepts such as independence and freedom take on added meaning... by expanding the discourse of republicanism to include the “sons and daughters of Africa,” Stewart creates an alternative America and claims it as homeland (102).

Grasso notes further that even behind her “angry-God mask,” Stewart still could not escape the overwhelming weight of ostracism, denigration, and scorn directed towards her for being a woman. Her audience rejected her for attempting to take on a man’s role of standing before a mixed audience and delivering her message, even though she insisted that it was God who unloosed her tongue for ‘wise and holy purposes’ (127). But, even as the audiences rejected her, they may not have rejected her message. Her intent was to make African Americans aware of the power she believed they unknowingly possessed and to utilize this power as a form of resistance

to address the social and political discrimination within the African American community. In this, she may have well succeeded.

Stewart was exceptionally proficient in the rhetorical skills needed to confront and possibly, shift public opinion. Using what Marilyn Richardson referred to as a “thundering exhortation, uniting both spiritual and secular concerns,” she employed a “call and response strategy” in which she shaped and formed her lectures in an assortment of “sequential questions” giving her audience pause to consider her message from beginning to end (14). She stood squarely before whites and warned them of the perils of holding men against their will. At the same time, she severely criticized blacks for doing nothing on their own behalf to break through the mental as well as the physical chains that held them captive. When she lectured at the African Masonic Hall in 1832, she questioned their very souls:

Is it blindness of mind or stupidity of soul or want of education that has caused our men never to let their voices be heard nor their hands be raised in behalf of their color? Or has it been for fear of offending the whites? If it has, O ye fearful ones, throw off your fearfulness and come forth. If you are men, convince them that you possess the spirit of men. Have the sons of Africa no souls? (*Liberator* April 27, 1833).

Stewart believed she had a divinely inspired mission to minister to the black community, to impart her knowledge and understanding of how her religious beliefs had transformed her life. She based many of her essays, themes and images on the prophet Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations. In the style known as the “Black Jeremiad” tradition, she and other black preachers used a series of Jeremiadic themes in which they spoke of the vengeance to come to those guilty of the sin of owning slaves. Cleverly reinforcing the notion among Americans that

America was a chosen nation, the preachers warned that America could not assume its rightful place among the chosen because of its treatment of blacks. (Logan 40).

As Jacqueline Bacon writes, “certain features of the traditional Jeremiadic form resonate in the prophetic discourse of African American female abolitionists.” She found this phenomenon especially striking, not only in the abolitionist rhetoric of Maria Stewart, but in that of Frances Watkins Harper, Sarah Douglass, and Sojourner Truth as well (201). These women all believed they were answering a divine call to address the wrongs inflicted on the black community. African American orators, angered by a system that encouraged “the atmosphere of casual racial insult,” refused to be apathetic concerning their plight and used the Jeremiadic form to address their complaints. They loudly objected to a system where blacks could only live in segregated housing, in a few crowded areas of most major cities. They denounced a system where they were limited to specific sections of public transportation, lecture halls, and places of entertainment. What they found most objectionable was that the only jobs available to them were those of janitors, house cleaners, washerwomen, and tailors, no matter the level of intelligence or education. Those of the black middle class were particularly vocal.

The black middle class in many northern cities included teachers, and preachers, the owners of small business establishments, and doctors and lawyers. Middle class blacks were also among the talented writers. They started the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, which opposed rural black migration, believing the vices of the cities would entice country blacks away from their intended purpose: racial uplift. Free blacks were urged to “stay with agriculture,” and were told that, “only suffering awaits blacks in the cities” (Washington 83). Rural blacks continued to migrate to the cities, however, taking part in abolitionist parades, organizing fights against slave catchers, and protesting against the conditions they faced daily.

These tension-laced conditions led repeatedly to fights and violent confrontations between the races, a situation that Stewart believed needed her intervention. Like Sojourner Truth, her successor, Stewart relied on God to help her accomplish the task of being a spokesperson for her people. Unlike Truth, Stewart relied on no one to record her lectures and speeches as she addressed the crowds who came to hear her speak. She was an excellent writer, leaving behind much of her text and publishing many of her lectures and speeches in Garrison's *The Liberator*. Her writing, precise and organized, contained little of the ambiguity characteristic of Truth's speeches and narratives. Stewart paid a high price for speaking her mind. The experience of being personally rejected "left deep scars" as those she sought to inspire as well as those she attempted to persuade repudiated her (Sterling 156). She left Boston for New York in 1833, where she settled and maintained a low profile concentrating her efforts on her own education to become a New York City teacher, never to speak from a public platform again (156).

Sojourner Truth, however, never mastered the task of reading and writing and depended on friends and associates to communicate her speeches in writing when she presented them in public. Occasionally years would pass between the time she spoke and a written record of her words appeared in print. Much that we know of Truth's early life and the time she spent as a slave comes from the narratives she fortunately dictated to friends, which she sold to earn money to support herself and her family. Born into slavery around 1797, six years before Stewart, as Nell Irvin Painter notes in the book, *Sojourner Truth, A Life*, Isabella Bomefree/Sojourner Truth, had a miserable life, a life she constantly sought to change, even as a slave. At the age of only twenty -nine, abused and mistreated by those who owned her, she sought redress from the court for the return of her youngest son Peter. The slave owner, John Dumont, sold Peter, only five years old at the time, to one of his in-laws, who, in turn, sold the child to a slave owner in

Alabama, which was against New York State law (33). New York State had passed a law in 1817 that prohibited the sale of slaves into states where slavery would continue after 1827. Few slaves knew of the law's existence and few slave owners paid attention to the law, overlooking it altogether when it suited them to do so. Though Isabella knew about the law, she had no money with which to proceed and plodded along the roads in upstate New York pleading for assistance. The attempt to get her son back proved traumatic for her. She first went to the home of her previous owners the Dumont's, but Elizabeth Dumont mocked her saying:

Ugh! A fine fuss to make about a little nigger? Why, haven't you as many of 'em left as you can see to, and take care of? A pity 'tis, the niggers are not all in Guinea! Making such a halloo-balloo about the neighborhood, and all for a paltry nigger! (Washington 61)

Here, Margaret Washington explains Isabella, too, engages in the black Jeremiad as she issues an "explicit and implicit prophetic warning" to her former mistress. She looked directly at Elizabeth Dumont and said in a slow, measured tone, "I will have my child again." When questioned by Elizabeth, "how will you get him again, and what have you to support him with"... Isabella responded, "No... I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I'll have my child again" (62). After watching her walking the neighborhood searching for help, a member of the Ulster community finally suggested that she should seek assistance from the Poppletown Quakers and directed Isabella to them. There she was able to secure the necessary funds of five dollars from two well-known Dutch lawyers. The lawyers agreed to represent Isabella in court only on the condition that she work for them for an extended period. Everyone wondered how this "uncouth, barefoot woman," just released from bondage found the courage to demand the release of her son from a wealthy planter who lived eighteen hundred miles away in

the South, a region of the country of which she knew nothing. Washington also suggests that Isabella's stance was a direct challenge to the white women who wanted to deny her that right... the right of motherhood (67). However, Isabella knew that her child belonged with her. She took on the fight of getting her son back with just one thought: he was hers and no one had the right to take him away from her. She did eventually regain custody of her son but upon his return, Peter, beaten and horribly scarred both physically and mentally by his ordeal, refused to accept Isabella as his mother, clinging instead to the man who bought him, claiming this man as his "master" (67). This devastated her and many of her speeches and lectures as an abolitionist dealt with the pain and anguish of the "slave mother" who experienced the permanent loss of her children.

Nell Painter states in the introduction to *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* that the next stage in Isabella's life more than likely had to do with the *Second Great Awakening* and the role religion played in the lives of Isabella and thousands of other poor, black northerners. This was a difficult time, when religion served as a universal remedy, a healing balm for those searching for comfort from the wounds of slavery (xvi). Isabella Von Wagenen, (Van Wagenen was the name of the last person who purchased her), arrived in New York City in 1828 with her son Peter, at the age of approximately thirty-one or thirty-two, the year she technically became free. Feeling the need to connect to some form of structured religion, yet following her own counsel perhaps, she proceeded to leave one religious group and congregation after another searching for one that would allow her the agency she sought to be her own person. She first joined the predominantly white John Street Methodist Church. Not lingering there very long, she left John Street and joined the Zion African Church in 1831. There she reconnected with three of her siblings whom she had not seen since before slavery ended. Of her ten brothers and sisters, she had finally found three. They marveled at finding each other while cursing a system that caused such pain by

tearing families apart. She left Zion shortly afterwards and joined the “Self Appointed Messengers of God,” the Pentecostals. In 1832, she left again to follow the Prophet Robert Matthias in upstate New York, where she was the only black member (xiv). Margaret Washington suggests that Isabella, a poor, uneducated, Dutch speaking domestic did not fit in with the “race-based” middle class black benevolence groups. She believes Isabella was constantly searching for an interracial setting, which emphasized “sacred, secular, and feminine issues” (Washington 90). In this she was somewhat ahead of her time, but it was because of her association with Matthias that she was branded her a “sex-driven, common criminal.”

It was with this group, and at this time that Isabella/Truth began to preach, leading the congregation away from the emotionally charged services they liked. She discovered that she possessed the power and authority to command a crowd. She used this power to calm and influence people in a way that was remarkable in the sense that she, a former slave, uneducated and illiterate, managed to persuade so many based solely on the strength of her personality and her slave experiences. In the midst of one such meeting, the crowd ran here and there, excited about the “second coming of Christ.” Isabella bade them to be quiet, as she believed “*the Lord is as near as He can be and not be it,*” commenting perhaps on Christ’s *spiritual* presence. She asked whether the Bible cautioned them to “watch and pray,” stating, “Ye are neither watching nor praying.” She continued by telling them that if Jesus were to come, with all the shouting and the noise they were making, He could come among them and “pass through,” and they would not have known He had been there (Narrative Truth and Gilbert 75). Describing this experience in somewhat exaggerated and biblical phrasing, Olive Gilbert wrote:

The people listened eagerly to Sojourner, and drank in all she said; - and also, that she soon became a favorite among them; that when she arose to speak in their

assemblies, her commanding figure and dignified manner hushed every trifler into silence, and her singular and sometimes uncouth modes of expression never provoked a laugh, but often were the whole audience melted into tears by her touching stories (Truth and Gilbert 77).

Gilbert's characterization did little to explain the intensity of the woman who was Sojourner Truth. She spoke of the "commanding figure," the "dignified manner," and the "uncouth modes of expression," but none of these represented Truth fully. What Gilbert seems to have missed was the *spirit* of what made the woman - - her years of having survived an experience that might have killed others and her uncanny ability to discern what lay beyond the obvious. What Gilbert describes as her "uncouth modes of expression" was the pure essence of what made her so believable as a witness to what she had experienced and shared, conditions far worse than anyone could have imagined. Gilbert's description failed in the sense that she was only looking at the external, not understanding it was the internal that made Isabella, Sojourner Truth.

In 1835, the Matthias group disbanded after falling under suspicious circumstances when one member of the group died mysteriously. During this time, Isabella's next battle with authorities presented itself as she attempted to vindicate her name when accused of poisoning in connection with this death (Painter ix). She fought this battle as she did the one with her son. She went among the people who knew her best, asking for references of her character, and appealing to the decency and the influence of those for whom she worked. Isabella made her living as a cook and she could not allow the charge of poisoning to stand. She knew she had to clear her name. Isabella won her case and later sued one of the men pressing charges against her for libel. This was the man who had referred to her as a common, sex-driven criminal, linking her to Matthias and the time she spent at the "religious" commune. After this episode, Isabella

disappeared from historical records and did not appear again until her transformation to Sojourner Truth in 1843 (x).

As Painter explains in *Sojourner Truth, A Life*, it was common for black women like Isabella, women who moved and lived outside the black community to disappear from historical records (71). “Holy” women, working as housekeepers and servants were often targets of criticism of men like the educated abolitionist Martin Delany, who criticized women who appeared “satisfied to live as servants.” Delany’s views, as expressed in the *North Star*, which he edited, along with those of Frederick Douglass’ were that “they wanted to see the race flex its muscles” by becoming business owners instead of working for others. Douglass and Delany, among others, believed business ownership was the path to financial independence and it would win blacks the respect upwardly mobile blacks felt was lacking from whites. Floyd Miller states in the introduction to Delany’s *Blake a Novel*, that both men were expounding the self-help philosophy long before Booker T. Washington. They were patronizing of those whom they perceived had not developed the “sense of pride” and “community awareness” that they deemed necessary for “racial uplift” (xiii). Truth, on the other hand, knew that her calling lay in another direction. She took her cues from the Holy Spirit ignoring the political and public realm. The “racial uplift” viewpoint would also explain the historical neglect of other early nineteenth century black women preachers like, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Julia Foote. These women all focused on the word of God, while ignoring the political issues of the day, still pioneered in the area of public speaking (Painter *Sojourner Truth, A Life* 72).

Truth followed a circuitous path for what she would later become, an abolitionist, a feminist and itinerant preacher. Comparing her to John the Baptist blazing a trail in the wilderness, Suzanne P. Fitch and Roseanne M. [Mandziuk](#) make the case that Truth was a

“constant, prophetic black American speaker,” as John paved the way for spiritual redemption, so Truth “blazed the rhetorical route for secular salvation for blacks and females” (xvii). She had a continuous period as an abolitionist and feminist from 1843 until her death in 1888. Truth was also referred to as the preacher, abolitionist and feminist who “put her body and mind to a unique task, that of physically representing women who had been enslaved” (Painter 4).

In contrasting the lives of Truth and Harper to determine how they arrived at their particular destinations, one has to consider the forces in place that positioned them in their surroundings at the time. When Dumont reneged on the promise he made to emancipate Truth one year before the 1827 law went into effect, she took her youngest son and left Ulster County believing she owed Dumont nothing more of herself or her time. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, on the other hand, was born free in 1825, into a well-connected Baltimore family. Like Maria Stewart, she lost both parents at an unusually young age, but fortunately, she did not remain an orphan. She was adopted and educated by her uncle, William Watkins Sr., the prominent educator and reformer who operated a boarding school for free blacks in Baltimore. Watkins received an exceptional education excelling in the classics, mathematics, poetry, and possibly the art of rhetoric. She went on to become a poet and teacher publishing her first book of poetry in 1846. Several of her poems appeared in prominent abolitionist journals (Stancliff 2).

In 1851, Harper left the home of her uncle in Baltimore, Maryland, highly conscious of the fact that the 1850 *Fugitive Slave Law* made life for her and the majority of free blacks extremely precarious. This law granted unscrupulous slave catchers the “profit motive” of capturing unwary free blacks and selling them into slavery (2). Stancliff also writes that the “historical moment of the *Fugitive Slave Law* witnessed not only the demoralizing power of the slaveocracy in the arena of federal law, but also the galvanizing circumstance of the political

recruitment of abolitionists” (2). An antislavery convention held in September of the same year passed a resolution that vowed to support the runaway slave and resist the slave catcher by force if necessary. Editorials in the African American press denounced the law, noting it as evidence of the “corrupt intentions of state power” (2). Calling the *Fugitive Slave Law* the “abomination of the nineteenth century,” Harper declared she could no longer be complacent in the face of such outright injustice. The turning point for her came when the state of Maryland revised its slave codes to prohibit free people of color from entering the state. Working at the time as a teacher in York, Pennsylvania, Harper suddenly realized that she had become an “exile by law” (2). In addition, she learned of the death of a free black man who, because of the Maryland statute, was sold into slavery in Georgia. At that moment, she determined to “pledge herself to the antislavery cause.”

Following on the heels of the *Fugitive Slave Law* was the *Kansas Nebraska Act* of 1854. This law would allow Kansas and Nebraska to be organized as territories and each territory would have the right to decide the question of slavery independently. (Franklin and Moss 215). The law also withdrew the restrictions on slavery in the remaining territories obtained under the Louisiana Purchase and this precipitated a violent conflict between North and South for the control of Kansas. In the following years, abolitionist and pro slavery advocates for Kansas and the land set the stage for the beginning of the Civil War (215). Profoundly affected by these two pieces of legislation, Harper left her job as a teacher in Pennsylvania in 1853 and moved to Philadelphia staying briefly at one of the stations on the Underground Railroad. Stancliff thinks that this is where she may have met William Still, a key figure in the antislavery movement as well as the Underground Railroad (2). While there, Harper wrote protest poetry and gave readings. She also became a part of the antislavery network. She went from Philadelphia to

Boston and on to New Bedford, Massachusetts where she delivered her first public lecture, *The Education and Elevation of the Colored Race*. In 1854, at the age of twenty-eight, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper joined Sojourner Truth on the lecture circuit.

CHAPTER 4

The Correspondence, Lectures, and Speeches

Throughout the nineteenth century, women taking the platform to speak publicly were considered a “disorderly act that exposed the female body to public scrutiny and unsexed the speaker” (Zackodnik 51). Opponents objected fiercely on the grounds that public speaking by women, “invoked the precarious sexual purity of the female body.” In reference to black women speakers, the thought existed that their “seemly embodiment” on the platform risked further compromising the womanhood already denied to them based on their race (51).

When Maria Stewart first approached the public platform, she addressed her speeches and lectures primarily to African American women. Her goal was to effect social change, and though there were men in her audience, she believed that women bore the responsibility of communicating God’s love to husbands and children and all who came within the circle of their acquaintance. She thought that by addressing the women first, she could establish a common bond, and that this would in turn move both women and men to agitate for the political, social, and cultural rights to which they were entitled. In a speech delivered before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston in 1832 she began:

The frowns of the world shall never discourage me, nor its smiles flatter me; for with the help of God I am resolved to withstand the fiery darts of the devil and the assaults of wicked men... We this day are considered as one of the most degraded races upon the face of the earth. It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for they will never elevate us. All the nations of the earth have distinguished themselves, and have shown forth a noble and gallant spirit. Look at the suffering Greeks! Their proud souls revolted at the idea of serving a tyrannical nation, who were no better than themselves, and

perhaps not so good. Look at the French in the late revolution... and the Haytians,[sic] though they have not been acknowledged a nation, yet their firmness of character and independence of spirit have been greatly admired and applauded... O woman, woman! Upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be anything more than children, and throughout the circle of your acquaintance... (*Liberator* Nov. 17, 1832).

Stewart lets her audience know from the beginning that she is impervious to whatever may happen to her. Her sole concern is the “elevation of the race.” She informs the mostly black women gathered at the hall that they need not wait for someone else to come to their aid, for that aid would be long in coming; rather, they and God are the only ones who can alleviate the “wretched” conditions under which they labor. She continues her speech however, by employing an argument that seems too simplistic in terms of the reality of what American blacks faced when she compares the oppression of the race-based conditions in America to the subjugation of other groups and how they responded. She mentions the “proud” Greeks, the French, and the Haitians, who living under similar conditions were able to wrest from those in control, through revolutionary means, the power to end such suffering.

Stewart’s efforts to hold black women accountable for the success or failure of the entire “race” failed to get her the reception she envisioned. The condemnatory tone in which she equates less than “ideal” African American behavior regarding “moral worth and intellectual improvement” with the innate racial prejudice of whites may have also been at odds with what many northern blacks perceived. In *The Humblest May Stand Forth*, Jacqueline Bacon writes that the self-help perspective among many African Americans “shifted” after 1830, with many

no longer equating the efforts they exerted to help themselves as having anything at all to do with the racial prejudice exhibited by whites (153). Stewart's audience apparently disliked the way she presented her ideas and arguments, and her strategy of using God to express her anger at the lack of racial justice and the insufferable treatment endured by blacks, did little to protect her from their ire.

Stewart continued to be fearless and outspoken in her presentations, however, and never failed to condemn what she referred to as, "the powerful force of prejudice," which she linked to the inability of African Americans to achieve economic stability. In a lecture delivered at Franklin Hall, in Boston on September 21, 1832, she stated:

I have heard much respecting the horrors of slavery; but may Heaven forbid that the generality of my color throughout these United States should experience any more of its horrors than to be a servant of servants or hewers of wood and drawers of water! Tell us no more of southern slavery: for with few exceptions, although I may be very erroneous in my opinion, yet I consider our condition little but little better than that. Yet, after all, methinks there are no chains so galling as the chains of ignorance – no fetters so binding as those that bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of useful and scientific knowledge... *And such is the powerful force of prejudice.* Let our girls possess what amiable qualities of soul they may – let their characters be fair and spotless as innocence itself – let their natural taste and ingenuity be what they may – it is impossible for scarce in [sic] individual in them to rise above the conditions of servants! (*Liberator* Nov. 17, 1832).

Stewart's premise here is one echoed by many, that free blacks were not free in the true sense of

the word. Franklin and Moss use the term “quasi freedom” to define this condition. They explain that by the end of the Revolutionary War, in many instances, the difference between free blacks and slaves in terms of rights and liberties was hardly discernible (159). Because of the opposition mounted by whites, it was extremely difficult for free blacks to get and keep any job that afforded them economic stability. Keenly aware of this, Stewart laments that “free” blacks in the North are treated hardly better than southern slaves and finds especially deplorable the prejudice that keeps African American women uneducated and unemployed except in the lowliest of occupations. Well aware that the color of their skin determines and defines every movement of their lives, Stewart is harshly critical of the American democratic system and tries hard to communicate this to her audience.

Stewart did not always stand “behind the mask of an angry God” to deliver her message. At times she spoke for herself as when she argued the point concerning her role as a woman, despite her identification with God and her declarations of having been “sent” by Him. In her farewell address, delivered on September 21, 1833 to a crowded audience of men and women, she points out women in the Bible who rose to greatness with God’s blessings and questioned the New Testament’s version wherein Paul expressed displeasure with women as public speakers:

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not queen Esther save the lives of Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? ... St. Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offense than this; neither will he condemn this worthless worm ... Did St. Paul but know of our wrongs and

deprivations, I presume he would make no objections to our pleading in public for our rights (*Liberator* Sep. 28, 1833).

The importance of the Bible as an “essential mode of discourse” to New England blacks in the 1830s was indisputable, and to question it was an exceedingly bold move for anyone of that era, but for a black woman, it was particularly problematic. Identifying Stewart’s abolitionist rhetoric with that of the Jeremiadic tradition, Willie J. Harrell, Jr. explains that when Stewart “aligned her plight as a present day Black Woman Jeremiah with the plight biblical women endured when answering the call to social activism, Stewart challenged her audience to consider new and changing dimensions of the role of women in society” (316).

Even though Stewart may have forced the issue of women’s awareness by publicly addressing the grievances of the African American community, she received neither applause nor respect from either men or women. Many women, apparently not ready to assume such active roles, believed Stewart was acting “out of her sphere” and rejected her completely. Of course, men seeing a woman standing in a place where they were accustomed to seeing men were resentful and angry with her. Stewart in turn, condemned them and called them cowards.

Over the course of ten years, from 1833 to 1843, as conditions for blacks became more brutal and restrictive, and the abolitionist movement gained momentum, the movement appeared to welcome speakers of any gender. This helped pave the way for Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper and other women speakers. Although Stewart ceased to speak publicly, the women who came after her were unparalleled in their intensity in calling the attention of the country to the wrongs of slavery and its treatment of free blacks.

Truth, unlike Stewart in manner and dress is reported to have struck fear and intimidation in the hearts many white women. She stood close to six feet tall, with a thin frame and held

herself erect and straight. Her dress was often Quaker-like and she always wore a turban headdress. Truth, in fact, remained highly critical of women's attire throughout most of her life and never hesitated to voice an opinion on the subject. In 1870, an article appeared in the *New York Tribune* entitled, "Women's Rights, and the Fashions, a Rebuke from Sojourner Truth," in which she was quoted as saying:

I'm awful hard on dress, you know. Women, you forget that you are the mothers of creation; you forget your sons were cut off like grass by the war, and the land was covered with their blood; you rig yourselves up in panniers, Grecian bendbacks and flummeries; yes, and mothers and gray-haired grandmothers wear high-heeled shoes and humps on their heads, and put them on their babies, and stuff them so that they keel over when the wind blows.... When I saw them women on the stage at the Women's Suffrage Convention, the other day, I thought, what kind of reformers be you, with goose wings on your heads, as if you were going to fly, and dressed in such ridiculous fashion, talking about reform.

Pears to me you had better reform yourselves first... (*New York Times* 1870).

Truth was well known for her wit, common sense and her inherited gift of African oral expression that she never failed to use when the situation arose. Another feature remembered by those who knew her was her gestures. Her long bony fingers would help make her point as she admonished her listeners and opponents alike for their laziness or opposition to her causes (Fitch and Mandziuk 3). The many depictions of Truth are mainly from whites and as one writer notes, "What they appeared to grapple with was finding a way to describe Truth's powerful presence and the vast differences between her race, appearance and style and their own traits" (3). As a result, their depictions of Truth were mostly unflattering and disparaging like one from the

Detroit Post and Tribune: “Quaint in language, grotesque in appearance and homely in her illustrations.”² The depictions differed greatly, however, among those who knew and cared for her. Sensing the power and presence that she possessed, they often described an image few others saw. One family member elaborately describing Truth as a “painter’s vision:”

Scrupulously tidy and clean with nothing out of place, she sat in a great straight back chair, her hard knotty hands revealing one stump of a finger. The red of her underjacket gave just a bit of bright color to her dark waterproof dress with its sleeves turned back for her wrist. Her head is small and covered with a white turban but her dress about the neck is very like the Quaker dress... Her eyes have a keen glitter when she is in earnest, that shine into your intelligence like the light of a soul than can fire up the whole spiritual part of your own” (Washington 366).

When Truth appeared at the predominately white Women’s Right Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, her reputation having preceded her, some claimed that “the leaders of the group trembled on seeing this tall, gaunt, black woman in a gray dress surmounted by an uncouth bonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle and take her seat on the pulpit steps.” It was reported that the women feared Truth would only unite them with “n.....s and abolitionists” when their platform was women’s rights and they did not want her to speak. But the president of the women’s group insisted and her wishes prevailed.³

Sojourner Truth did indeed speak at the Women’s Convention of 1851, but what she said and whether the women were in awe of her continues to be the subject of much scholarly debate.

²“The Children of Slavery,” *Detroit Post and Tribune* 29 Nov. 1883: 4, quoted in *Sojourner Truth as Orator*, Fitch and Mandziuk, 91.

³Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *History of Women’s Suffrage*, 2: 193, quoted in Yee, *Black Women Abolitionist: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*. (The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 141.

Some historians believe the version of the speech, which the public knows as “Ar’n’t I, a Woman?” was possibly written or paraphrased in part by Frances Dana Gage, “the radical feminist writer” who served as chairperson of the 1851 convention. The publication of Gage’s version of the speech did not appear until twelve years after the event occurred. By this time, it seems highly probable that Truth’s words and/or phrases were rearranged. Nell Irvin Painter prefers the account of Truth’s remarks that appeared in a report recorded by Marius Robinson, Truth’s friend who served as secretary of the convention and understood Truth and her language. In *Sojourner Truth, A Life*, Painter writes that Robinson recorded the whole address as Truth stepped to the podium and requested to say a few words:

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man a quart – why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, - for we cant take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don’t know what to do. Why children, if you have woman’s rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble. I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if a woman upset the world, do give her a change to set it right side up again. That lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she

was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love, and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept- and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman bore him, Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard (125-26).

Painter notes that this version of Truth's remarks appeared in the *Salem Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 21, 1851. With the exception of *The Liberator*, which printed a much shorter version, other newspapers including the official *Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention* failed to mention the speech at all. Although Gage's version of the speech follows the general outline of what Truth said, there is no mention of the now famous phrase "Ar'n't I a Woman" in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle's* version nor that which appeared in *The Liberator*. Gage, it seems, added these comments in her zeal as a feminist writer and correspondent. Nor is there any mention in the other versions that Truth rolled up her sleeve and bared her right arm to the shoulder to demonstrate strength that equaled a man's. The possibility exists that Truth may have met with Gage and expressed the sentiments included twelve years later, but written evidence supports the fact that Truth did not include these comments in her speech at the Women's Convention of 1851. In addition, Gage's version of Truth's 1851 speech is the only one that has Truth speaking in thick southern dialect, which she abhorred. She had a distinctive way of speaking, but historians suggest that this was likely because she grew up among the Dutch and Dutch was her first language. She did not learn to speak English until the age of nine or ten. Truth saved an article from the *Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph* that "noted her displeasure" when those quoting

her used the dialect to record her speeches:

Sojourner also prides herself on a fairly correct English, which is in all senses a foreign tongue to her, she having spent her early years among people speaking “low Dutch.” People who report her often exaggerate her expressions, putting into her mouth the most marked southern dialect which Sojourner feels is taking a rather unfair advantage of her.”⁴

Perhaps the article in the Kalamazoo paper was Truth’s way of indicating to the public that not everything attributed to her in print should be taken literally, especially those pieces that exaggerated her speech and language; as for the passages in the Ar’n’t I a Woman? speech in which she supposedly bared her arm to the shoulder, perhaps this too came from an instance when Truth had no choice but to bear a portion of her body. But it was her breast, not her arm that she laid bare.

Because of Truth’s height, the timbre of her voice, her courage in the face of threats and intimidation, some accused her of being a man dressed in women’s clothing. At the close of a meeting in Northern Indiana in 1858, Truth, being advised by a group of antislavery representatives that a rumor existed that she was actually a man, was asked to bare her breast to a group of women present at the meeting to prove that she was indeed a woman. Amidst the confusion and uproar from the women who were indignant and ashamed of the men for making such a request, Truth rose and answered that, “she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame.” She added that her “breast had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to a man’s estate; that although they had

⁴“Sojourner Truth,” *Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph*, 8 Jul. 1879, quoted in *Sojourner Truth As Orator*, Fitch, and Mandziuk. 38.

suckled her colored breast, they were, in her estimation for more manly than they” meaning her persecutors (*Liberator* Oct. 15, 1858). The men in the audience offered no apology after seeing her breast having issued wagers among them that Truth, because of her boldness, her lack of fear and unwillingness to be intimidated was indeed a man. Margaret Washington suggests that this incident recalled scenes from the auction block where the baring of black women’s bodies served as the “pinnacle of personal humiliation for the slave” and the sole intent of the men making such a request was to indeed humiliate and dishonor Truth (Washington 286).

One of the other important events in Truth’s rhetorical career has to do with her famous statement, “Frederick is God Dead?” Frederick Douglass claims this was the question asked of him by Sojourner Truth at the meeting of the Western Antislavery Society convention in Salem, Ohio on August 23, 1852. Douglass is said to have recalled the following:

Speaking at an antislavery convention in Salem, Ohio, I expressed this apprehension that slavery could only be destroyed by bloodshed, when I was suddenly and sharply interrupted by my good old friend, Sojourner Truth with the question, “Frederick, is God dead?” No, I answered, “and because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood.” My quaint old sister was of the Garrison school of non-resistance, and was shocked by my sanguinary doctrine, but she too became an advocate of the sword when the war for the maintenance of the Union was declared.⁵

A reporter from the *Pennsylvania Freeman* reported that Truth asked Douglas the question, “Is God Gone?” and went on to say that, “no bullet ever went to its mark with greater accuracy than the question that Truth asked that day” (Fitch and Mandziuk 19). Historians believe that this one

⁵“Tenth Annual meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society,” *Anti Slavery Bugle* [Salem Ohio] 28 Aug. 1852 quoted in Fitch and Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth As Orator*, 19.

simple one-line argument was important because, along with the phrase, “A ’n’t I a Woman?” it was and still is quoted as an example of Truth’s rhetoric and showed her ability to attack with a directness and power that left her opponent speechless (19). As Fitch and Mandziuk also point out, “religion was Truth’s touchstone” (5). Religion granted her the privilege of believing in miracles wrought by God. She reminded Douglass of the miracles performed in their own personal lives. Rather than believing that “God was gone” Truth possibly preferred to believe that God was ever present and would fight the battle of slavery on His terms. Truth also did not hate the white men who had enslaved her, for she believed in eternity and wondered where the white man would be when eternity began. Truth often quoted the verse from Jeremiah, that began, “But the slave will be with God, but woe unto the slaveholder” (23).

Truth was not without her critics, however, and there were some who found her neither smart nor interesting.⁶ One New Jersey paper accused her of rambling on about everything including “copperhead Jerseys, hypocrites, freemen, women’s rights, etc. until the superintendent was forced to call her to order.” The critic concluded by saying, “She is a crazy, ignorant, repelling Negress and her guardians would do a Christian act to restrict her entirely to private life.” Critics believe many of her speeches did contain several seemingly unrelated points, but those who supported her still believe that her telling logic, rough humor and effective sarcasm more than made up for her occasional straying away from her starting point.

Whatever the occasion, historians report; Truth could always turn the talk to slavery. Truth saw herself as the nation’s conscience and wanted to keep in the forefront what she

⁶The Copperheads were a vocal group of democrats located in the Northern area of the Union who opposed the war, wanting an immediate peace settlement with the Confederates. Republicans started calling anti-war democrats, “Copperheads,” comparing them to the venomous snake.

believed mattered. As reported in an Ohio newspaper, when a Northern Ohio man said rudely to her one day following a meeting, “Old woman, do you think your talk about slavery does any good? “Why I don’t care anymore for your talk than the bite of a flea.” Truth, supposedly answered with “tremendous conciseness and not without a little salt”: “Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I’ll keep you scratching” (Fitch and Mandziuk 38). Truth did indeed keep the issue of slavery and women’s rights alive and the people agitated and “scratching” as she and Frances Harper, among others went about the business of teaching, preaching and lecturing against slavery.

Harper’s elegant prose and eloquence of speech contrasted markedly with Sojourner Truth’s plain spoken and direct style. Newspapers described Harper’s delicate hands, splendid articulation, and noble forehead. Elizabeth A. Petrino quotes from an editorial written by Grace Greenwood that appeared in the *Philadelphia Independent* in 1857, praising Harper for her “feminine qualities and genteel appearance” that allowed her to serve as a “crossover” for black and white audiences (137). Greenwood’s article described Harper’s “strong face, with a shadowed glow upon it,” which the audience claimed indicative of her “thoughtful fervor” and a “femininely sensitive nature, but not in the least morbid” (137). Petrino believes that Harper “cultivated an audience of those she believed would receive her, ‘genteel’ northern activist audiences who would support her program for political equality” (137).

But even if Harper appeared to have been accepted by those to whom she spoke, as Carolyn Sorisio notes, she still had to guard her appearance and select her words and phrases carefully (67). Americans during the nineteenth century often displayed a curious desire to hear tales that led to feelings of “spectatorial sympathy” (67). Sorisio describes the term as “a sort of pleasing anguish, an emotional experience that liberally mingles pleasure with vicarious pain.”

She suggests that nineteenth century Americans were drawn to “spectacle for both politically appropriate and for exploitative reasons.” Harper, in turn, believed she needed to represent the horrors associated with slavery, such as the torture and sale of slaves, but made every attempt to maintain the social distance too easily violated between audience and subject, especially when the latter was either a woman or a woman of color. Realizing that in the minds of most whites, “sexual promiscuity characterized the woman of color,” a reading of a naked slave on the auction block could easily have led to “pornographic images,” which she worked hard to avoid. Sorisio remarks that in the same way that Harper “deflected the audience’s gaze away from her body, so did she “manipulate the spectacle of the slave’s body in her antebellum poetry to radically alter the relationship between spectacle and spectator” (67). Harper’s poem, “The Slave Auction,” demonstrates this relationship. The poem, written to express her pathos and deep empathy with the slave mother, the young girls, husbands and children on the auction block, still manages to capture the dignity of her subjects while portraying their helplessness and anguish:

The sale began, young girls were there,
 Defenseless in their wretchedness,
 Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
 Revealed their anguish and distress.

And mothers stood with streaming eyes,
 And saw their dearest children sold
 Unheeded rose their bitter cries;
 While tyrants bartered them for gold.

And woman with her love and truth -

For these in sable form may dwell -
 Gazed on the husband of her youth,
 With anguish, none may paint or tell.

And men, whose sole crime was their hue,
 The impress of their Maker's hand
 And frail and shrinking children too,
 Were gathered in that mournful band . . . 1.2.3. (10)

Once Harper decided to join the abolitionist circuit, she apparently had no doubts that this was the right decision for her. In a letter written to William Still in 1854, she spoke excitedly about her involvement:

Well, I am out lecturing. I have lectured every night this week, besides addressed a Sunday school, and I shall speak, if nothing prevents, to- night. My lectures have met with success. Last Night I lectured in a white church in Providence. Mr. Gardner was present, and made the estimate of about six hundred persons. Never, perhaps, was a speaker, old or young favored with a more attentive audience. My voice is not wanting in strength, as I am aware of, to reach pretty well over the house. The church was the Roger Williams; the pastor, a Mr. Fumell, who appeared to be a kind and Christian man. My maiden lecture was Monday night in New Bedford on the Elevation and Education of our People. Perhaps as intellectual, a place as any I was ever at of its size (Harper 780).

She was apparently ecstatic at her popularity as a lecturer and noted that she was “very well received” at a white church in Providence (Rhode Island) where there had been at least six hundred or more persons in attendance. Watkins seems surprised at her acceptance. She

mentions that, “never, perhaps was a speaker, old, or young favored with a more attentive audience.” As with Sojourner Truth, but in a different way, her well-chosen words and strong delivery still challenged the racial and gender stereotypes of her middle class audiences. While lecturing, she would often hear whispers from the audience of, “she’s not really a woman, she’s a man,” or “she is not colored, she’s painted” (Petrino 137). African American women who spoke to “promiscuous audiences” were scrutinized carefully and were subjected to “intense speculation as to their racial identification as well as gender” (137).

Yet, written evidence suggests that Harper was not subjected to the outright violence and disrespect that Stewart and Truth endured. In most instances, her audiences received her well, as on the Celebration of Freedom in Maryland on November 28, 1864, when the state declared 87,000 slaves free. Harper seated on the platform with Henry Highland Garnett, Frederick Douglass and others was one of the few women included on the podium. *The Liberator* made the following statement regarding Harper:

The Chairman then introduced Mrs. Frances Ellen W. Harper, as one of the worthiest daughters of Maryland. In her own telling way, Mrs. Harper began by saying that the lightning (in reference to a storm recently passed) may be a minister of mercy. The tempest, with all its evils may have swept from the land disease and death; so amid the sorrows, which this war has caused, eyes may be too dimmed by sorrow to read aright the lessons, which the war is to teach. ... Mrs. Harper considered that this battle did not begin at Bull Run, but when the first slave vessel was brought by the Dutch to the shores.... Mrs. Harper paid special tribute to the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, who, with others, had taught the nation, by their own self sacrifice saying: “We can afford to die, if it break [s]

our brother's chains. ... (*Liberator* Dec. 9, 1864).

Harper, like Stewart and Truth was not afraid to question the motives of persons determined to keep blacks separate and unequal. In one of her speeches she had an answer for those who believed black men and women would never be "fit" for citizenship, having all the habits of servitude deeply rooted in their minds"⁷:

Has the record of the slave been such as to warrant the belief that permitting him to share citizenship with others in the country is inimical to the welfare of the nation? Can it be said the he lacks patriotism, or a readiness to make common cause with the nation in the hour of peril? In the days of the American Revolution some of the first blood which was shed flowed from the veins of a colored man, and among the last words that died upon his lips before they paled in death was, "Crush them underfoot," meaning the British guards. ... And in our late civil conflict, colored men threw their lives into the struggle, rallied around the old flag when others were trampling it underfoot and riddling it with bullets.... While nearly two hundred thousand joined in the Union army, others remained on the old plantation; widows, wives, aged men and helpless children were left behind, when the master was at the front trying to put new rivets in their chains, and yet was there a single slave who took advantage of the master's absence to invade the privacy of his home, or wreak a summary vengeance on those whose "defenseless condition should have been their best defense."⁸

⁷Whether blacks were "fit to be citizens of the new republic" was a frequently discussed topic during the abolitionist era. Even those fighting to liberate the slave expressed doubts. Information regarding this topic is on page 4 of this paper.

⁸Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Duty to Dependent Races," in *Transactions of the National Council of Woman of the United States*, ed., by Rachel F. Avery (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1891), 86-91.

As the country moved closer to civil war, Harper's actions became more militant. In 1858, a group of black male leaders in Detroit made an attempt to remove from protective custody a black traitor whose intentions were to expose the operations of The Underground Railroad. Harper joined the group, making an eloquent and passionate speech. Following John Brown's raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, in October of 1859, she raised money and wrote letters in support of the imprisoned abolitionist and his followers. In 1861, Harper remarried and moved to a farm in Ohio. She continued to be active as writer, lecturer, and defender of the poor until her death.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

In 1832, when Maria W. Stewart posed the question, “Why sit we here and die?” to a Boston audience of mostly black women and men gathered to hear her speak, hers was a rhetorical question, not one from which she expected an answer, for she knew the answer and went on to supply it. She wanted them to think in response to the question of decolonization, a proposal by whites to settle blacks in what to them, were “foreign” lands. Stewart unequivocally stated her objections to the proposal. She based her rhetoric against the move on her own experience as a free northern black woman, this during a time when blacks were neither free nor valued as such. When she asked the question, her boldness demanded from her audience commitment without compromise, courage without fear and boldness without diffidence.

Since the American Revolution, when the sounds and shouts of freedom rang like a bell throughout the colonies, black men and women had attempted to acquire a voice in the social and political culture shaped by the voices of those who held them captive. Black Americans, forced to listen to the rhetoric of the patriotic themes of Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death, or the words from the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal,” became infused with the hope that these words were also meant for them. In the struggle that ensued to bring that hope to fulfillment, the rhetoric of many black abolitionists, Stewart, Truth and Harper among them, became prophetic. Basing their themes and arguments on biblical passages, they attempted to exhort the nation to “righteousness” by pointing out the hypocrisy inherent in their founders’ refusal to put into action the words of freedom they penned so easily on paper and to warn them of the results if ignored. The boldness of these women and men was extraordinary at a time when speaking

out against the injustices practiced against blacks meant taking risks that few men or women were willing to take. In order for them to stand before an audience and demand that the country live up to its promise of “liberty and justice for all” they were forced to move beyond the boundaries and limits set for them by redefining the word “woman.” They challenged the status quo by using the master’s language to dismantle block by block the obstacles in their path.

The legacy they left behind cannot be overlooked. The boldness of Ida B. Wells, the courage of Fannie Lou Hamer, the aggressiveness of Malcolm X and the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. can all be attributed to the rhetors that came before them. These were all women and men who had the courage to stand before an audience and engage in the practice of argumentation and discourse of a life affirming cause during the most perilous of times. When threatened by those intent on doing them bodily harm, they framed their words to persuade, to calm, and create order out of chaos.

The actions of Stewart, Truth, and Harper require that we revisit their lives, study their speeches, lectures and texts, and ask ourselves what we can learn from them. As of July 2006, over ten percent of the entire African American male population between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine was incarcerated and the numbers continue to grow daily. When there are more African American men in jail and in prison than there are in college and university classrooms, and the infant mortality rate for African American infants continues to stand at 14% while the national average is under 6%, we have to continue the struggle begun so long ago. Harper, Truth, Stewart and other black women realized that rhetoric is the foundation upon which the struggle for freedom rests, and that to engage in rational discourse, whether it was to teach, preach, or lecture was as essential for women as it was for men. Indeed, the question, Stewart posed; “Why Sit Ye here and die?” is, as relevant today as it was in 1832.

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