

Sojourner Truth's Multifaceted Anti-Slavery Struggle or the Insistence of the Black Subject's Lived Experience

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'An abolition affair!' 'Woman's rights and niggers!' 'We told you so!'
'Go it, old darkey!'
Comments on Sojourner Truth's participation at the 1851 Women's
Rights meeting in Akron, Ohio, as reported by Frances Dana Cage.¹

Introduction

Born a slave c. 1797 in Swartekill, Ulster County, in the state of New York, Isabella Baumfree served five masters: Johannes Hardenbergh, his son Charles Hardenbergh, John Neely, Martinus Schryver and John Dumont. At Charles Hardenbergh's death in 1806, Isabella was sold for \$100 to John Neely, near Kingston, New York, with a flock of sheep; she was nine. Neely sold her two years later for \$105 to Martinus Schryver of Port Ewen. She remained with that fisherman and tavern keeper for eighteen months, a moment in her life that she recalled as rather carefree. In 1810 Schryver sold her to John Dumont of West Park, New York. A modest landowner of Huguenot ancestry, Dumont is credited in her narrative for being a kind master, but his second wife, Elizabeth Waring Dumont, harassed Isabella. Dumont promised her that he would free her a year before the official date of emancipation in the state of New York, July 4th, 1827. Yet he rescinded his promise as she had hurt herself and could not work as quickly as he demanded. Having spun the amount of wool desired, Isabella fled her last master's property, in the fall of 1826, with her youngest daughter, Sophia, who was still an infant. She then stayed with the Van Wagenens, a couple whose name she briefly took. At the Wagenens', she experienced her first vision and conversion on the day of June 1827 when, upon her request, her master came to take her back and Jesus interceded between God and herself. This first conversion coincided with Pentecost, or the celebrations of "Pinkster" for the free blacks of New York State that fell on June 4th, 1827.² From 1829 to 1843, she lived in the city of New York as a servant to social reformists and religious leaders and was a member of various religious communities. She gave herself the name of Sojourner after being called by the Spirit to go east and preach on June 1st, 1843.

Truth never learned to read or write, yet her anti-slavery struggle was primarily waged through the publication of her narrative "as-told-to" the abolitionist Olive Gilbert which details her life as a slave, her conversion, her flight, but also the speeches she gave at Millerite camp-meetings.³ It was published in 1850 as *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern*

¹ Written twelve years after the Convention, Frances Dana Gage's reminiscences of the Akron convention were first published as: « Ain't I a Woman? », *Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 2, 1863. Reprinted in the 1881 edition of Truth's *Narrative*, Gage's text is widely reproduced, see Elizabeth Cady Stanton *et al.*, *The History of Woman's Suffrage. Vol I* (1886). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28020/28020-h/28020-h.htm>. Nell Painter explains that Marius Robinson's version published in 1851 (Fitch and Mandzuik 1997) might be more accurate and Truth was not so unwelcome at the meeting (Painter 1994b). The text can also be accessed on various websites, such as <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>. Accessed January 10th, 2019. See also Painter 1996 90-93.

² In keeping with this sudden first conversion and the times of its occurrence, Painter labels Truth's faith as Pentecostal, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and Luke's narration in the Book of Acts of the Apostles speaking in tongues (Painter 1994b 461).

³ William Miller (1782–1849) was an American Baptist preacher who predicted that the Second Coming would occur in 1843, and then in 1844, based on his readings of the Book of Daniel. When this event did not take place, his followers experienced the Great Disappointment. His teachings gave rise to new denominations, such as the Advent Christians (1860), the Seventh-day Adventists (1863), and other Adventist movements.

*Slave Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York in 1828. With a Portrait.*⁴ Her fight for the abolition of slavery cannot be divorced from her religious faith, her calling as a preacher, and hence the very content of her speeches which put forward her own experience as slave woman. Since she was a skilled orator who drew crowds, her speeches also detail her position on slavery and the arguments she used when she lectured. Beyond the social reformist and perfectionist circles she frequented in New York, the context of her struggle is also that of the Northampton Association in Massachusetts and, more broadly, the feminist abolitionist movement, as is amply documented by her biographers. Sojourner Truth is always qualified as a supporter of women's rights *and* abolitionism, both struggles overlapping in her case in her physical being. She remains the most famous black woman abolitionist of the nineteenth century, along with Harriet Tubman, the "Moses of her People," who led around 300 slaves to freedom.⁵ Rendering her position is run through pressing issues of appropriation, in particular by white abolitionists and women's rights activists, and the parallel gesture of iconization.⁶ As a self-determined subject, Truth nonetheless exceeded these attempts, notably because she herself played with these identifications, correcting them when she deemed necessary.

Truth's faith and New York domesticity

Truth's abolitionism is one with her religious faith which can be traced to her childhood and went through numerous stages to reach the brand of evangelical Protestantism that was hers when she set off on the lecture circuit in 1843. Brought up by a religious mother among members of the Dutch Reformed Church (N 6-7), Isabella in her young age spoke directly to God (N 45) since she thought that he would only fulfil her wishes if he heard her. Her conversion might be couched in a language that recalls the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, yet she was not acquainted with a church until 1827.⁷ She attended the Methodist church of Kingston, Ulster County, and, once in New York, the white Methodist church of John Street and then the black Zion African Church, founded by Blacks who had experienced racial discrimination.⁸ She was caught up in the effervescence of the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840), the numerous prophets and itinerant preachers who emerged in that era, the spirit of revivalism and social reform that prevailed at the time. When in New York, she worked as a servant for James Latourette, a dissenting Methodist, who opposed slavery and the consumption of alcohol, and then for the Pearl Street merchant Elijah Pierson, also a Perfectionist.⁹ Her son Peter, whom she had rescued from slavery, took the name of Peter Williams.¹⁰ Peter Williams, Jr. was the founder in 1827 of the first black newspaper in the country, the *Freedom's Journal*. He founded the *Phoenix Society* in 1833, the

⁴ Sojourner Truth is the subject of numerous biographies, notably in the mid-nineties: Fauset 1938; Bernard 1993; Mabee and Newhouse 1993; Painter 1996; Washington 2009.

⁵ Born in 1801, Gilbert was a member of the Northampton Association from 1845 to 1846. She was a friend of Sarah, George Benson's sister, the founder of the Association. Considering the way in which she reports the Millerite camp-meetings in which Truth participated, she may have been attracted by Miller's teachings in 1843-1844 (Painter 1996 106).

⁶ The difficulty of accessing "Truth" is explored by Xiomara Santamarina (2005) who explains that her legacy is mired in highly polarized readings: either Truth is depicted as subjected to her interlocutors' agendas or she is celebrated as all-powerful. She reframes Truth's incongruity and historical liminality in relation to the value that she gave to her work. John Ernest (2006), for his part, asserts that Truth's "fluidity" is conscious and self-fashioned.

⁷ To document Truth's faith and her environment, I am relying on Painter 1994a and Washington's 2009 biography of Truth in context.

⁸ Although the Methodist Church of John Street welcomed Blacks, they in fact met as a group at separate prayer meetings.

⁹ Perfectionism is a revivalist movement within Methodism. On Perfectionism, see Painter 1996 38-47, Washington 2009 82-86, and Raynaud 2019.

¹⁰ Born after 1799, Peter was not a slave. First Dumont sold him to Mr. Gidney, then Gidney's brother, Solomon, sent him South to one of his relatives in Alabama, Mr. John Fowler. Sojourner succeeded in having her child brought back to her through pressure exercised on Gidney thanks to an advocate, Herman Romney, and constable Matthew Styles, paid for by her Quaker friends. For a revision of the ways in which African Americans had access and used the judicial system, see DeLombard 2007.

year he joined the AAS (*American Anti-Slavery Society*). He opposed colonization: i.e. relocating free black people to Africa. His house and his church were burnt down in the 1834 New York riots.

When working with Mrs. Latourette and Mrs. Gear within the *Retrenchment Society*, Truth attended prayers at the Magdalen Asylum, a mission for prostitutes, whose founder, Arthur Tappan, was later to become a prominent abolitionist. She then belonged to the "Kingdom of Matthias," until its demise in 1835 due to a scandal in which she was charged with murder. Influenced by James Grandison Finney, the leading figure of the Second Great Awakening, Robert Matthews had come to New York after a revelation that led him to prophesy the destruction of Albany. He grew a beard and Truth first took him for Jesus when she first saw him. With Elijah Pierson, Benjamin Folger and Sylvester Mills, he established a commune, first in New York, and later in Mount Pleasant, whose members, relinquishing established marriages, fasted, and refused medical assistance since disease was the sign of evil spirits. Amid a sexual scandal, Matthews was accused of poisoning Pierson, but he was acquitted, and so was Truth. She was supported by a British journalist and free thinker, Gilbert Vale, who published in her defense *Fanaticism. Its Source and Influence Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c.* (New York, 1835).¹¹ In fact, some sections of this essay are incorporated verbatim in the *Narrative* (Raynaud 2016, note 100 et 102, 126). Truth left New York in 1843, nearly a decade after the kingdom was disbanded, having worked there as a servant to various masters. While she lectured and hence made her religious opinions clear, her status as a domestic, her race, made her appear in the margins of the communes to which she belonged, essentially due to the paucity of material that relates her whereabouts and, more specifically, her opinions and statements. Although it is said that she was treated as an equal in the *Narrative*, she was nonetheless serving the others. Her closeness and her faithfulness to the doctrinal content of Matthias's preaching, however, is evident in the choice of her name long after the demise of the commune: Truth is short for "(the Spirit of) Truth."¹²

Among abolitionists at the Northampton Association (1842-46)

Truth came into contact with abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips at the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in 1843. George Benson, and more precisely his sister, Sarah Benson, introduced Truth to the Association.¹³ Helen Eliza Benson, Garrison's wife, was herself extremely active in the abolitionist movement.¹⁴ This utopian community that gathered up to 240 members united by an anti-slavery sentiment was created in 1842. Its members sought to set up a society based on equality, in which "the rights of all are equal without distinction of sex, color or condition, sect or religion." They jointly owned and operated a silk mill. Most of them were followers of William Lloyd Garrison. Noted abolitionists Wendell Phillips, Giles Stebbins, Parker Pillsbury,¹⁵ and the health reformer Sylvester Graham¹⁶ are associated with that utopian

¹¹ Gilbert Vale (1788-1866) came to the US in 1829 where he engaged in teaching and lecturing. He published *Citizen of the World*, the literary and scientific journal *The Beacon* and wrote a biography of Thomas Paine. The text of *Fanaticism* is available from the following website: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/vale/vale.html>;

¹² Santamarina reads this choice as influenced by Vale's *Fanaticism* and Truth's desire to tell the truth about what had actually happened at the Kingdom of Matthias. (Santamarina 2005).

¹³ Hall Judd (1817-1850), William Adam (1796-1881), David Mack (1804-1878), and Samuel Lapham Hill (1806-1882) were the founding members of the Association. George Benson, Samuel Hill and Thayer gave Truth certificates of morality placed at the end of the *Narrative*.

¹⁴ See Hélène Quanquin's research on the domestic dimension of Garrisonian abolitionist activism in this collection of essays.

¹⁵ A Harvard graduate, Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) was an attorney and a brilliant orator who, after witnessing Garrison's attempted lynching in 1835, joined him in the abolitionist cause, and subsequently wrote pamphlets and editorials for *The Liberator*. He was a prominent member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and his engagement places him, along with Garrison, as the most cited

socialist community. Frederick Douglass lectured there, when he came to visit in 1844 and 1845. His retrospective autobiographical account, "What I Found at the Northampton Association" (1895), both insists on the number of denominations present at Northampton and the joint anti-slavery feeling of its members:

Fresh from slavery at that time, and keenly alive to its horrors, my mind was occupied by the last -ism [abolitionism], and yet with a strong leaning towards communism as a remedy to all social evils. I found, too, that the men and the women who were interested in the work of revolutionizing the whole system of civilization were also deeply interested in the emancipation of the slaves. (in Sheffield 1895 131-132)

Douglass mentions his old friend, the black abolitionist David Ruggles,¹⁷ then blind and cared for by the members of the commune. He also gives a scathing portrait of Truth whom he met there:

I met here for the first time that strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense, who seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and to ridicule my efforts to speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement. I allude to Sojourner Truth. She was a genuine specimen of the uncultured Negro. She cared very little for elegance of speech or refinement of manners. She seemed to please herself and others best when she put her ideas in the oddest forms. She was much respected at Florence, for she was honest, industrious, and amiable. Her quaint speeches easily gave her an audience, and she was one of the most useful members of the Community in its day of small things. (in Sheffield 1895 131-132)

Douglass clearly distinguishes himself from Truth on the basis of class and pits himself as the cultivated elegant black man against the "quaint" coarse old woman ("oddest").¹⁸ He also brings forward Truth's usefulness to the group on an everyday basis and the hard work she did ("industrious"), which leaves no doubt as to her ancillary position. In her *Narrative* Truth owns, for her part, that she "did not fall in love with the place" (N 97). Though living

pro-abolition activist. He devoted himself to temperance, women's rights, and universal suffrage after the Civil War. Giles B. Stebbins (1817-1900) was an abolitionist and an author who toured on the lecture circuit with Abby Kelley and Stephen Forster in 1845. His views were close to Garrison's, yet he remained on cordial terms with Douglass and Gerrit Smith. In 1853 he published a book about the opinions of prominent Blacks who opposed colonization, *Facts & Opinions Touching the Real Origin, Character and Influence of the American Colonization Society*. Parker Pillsbury (1809-1898) was a lecturing agent for the New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and American antislavery societies. He held these posts for over two decades. He edited the Concord (N.H.) *Herald of Freedom* in 1840, in 1845 and 1846. He was a supporter of the women's movement and wrote an account of anti-slavery and pro-slavery figures, *The Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles*, in 1883.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t3xs5tp92;view=1up;seq=17>. Accessed March 8th, 2019.

¹⁶ Sylvester Graham (1794-1851) was an American Presbyterian minister and dietary reformer known for his promotion of vegetarianism and the consumption of whole-grain: the "graham" crackers are named after him. Served by remarkable oratory skills and drawing on the temperance movement, his message combined patriotism and theology, but also addressed diet and lifestyle. In 1850, he founded with William Metcalfe, William Alcott, and Russell Trall, the American Vegetarian Society in New York City.

¹⁷ David Ruggles (1810-1849) was a prominent black abolitionist who created the Committee of Vigilance, a group of black and white New York anti-slavery activists, in Manhattan in 1835. A printer in New York City in the 1830s, Ruggles used journalism to ceaselessly promote his cause. As a member of the Underground Railroad, he helped more than 600 fugitive slaves to freedom, one of whom was Frederick Douglass. By 1845, Ruggles established the first water cure hospital in the United States while at Florence. For a biography of Ruggles, see Hodges 2010.

¹⁸ A letter from Douglass to Amy Post, in which he explains that he cannot give Truth money, is not as disparaging; he refers to Truth as "our old friend." Post Family Papers Project, April 19th, 1879.

<https://rbscpexhibits.lib.rochester.edu/viewer/4222>. Accessed March 10th, 2019.

conditions at the Northampton Association were spartan, she later recalled that she found a “home in a ‘Community composed of some of the choicest spirits of the age’ where all was characterized by an equality of feeling, a liberty of thought and speech, and a largeness of soul, she could not have met, not the same extent, in all her wanderings” (N 98). These words could be Truth’s, but they could also be Gilbert’s biased and propagandist celebration of her own milieu. Through the associationists, however, Truth became acquainted to the wider world of nineteenth-century reform. She would subsequently become well-known, not only in anti-slavery circles, but in the women’s rights and temperance movements as well.

At the Northampton Association, Garrison introduced Truth to his circle, notably Isaac and Amy Post¹⁹ from Rochester, New York, to whom Sojourner remained acquainted throughout her life. The abolitionist writer Lydia Maria Child, author of the 1833 book *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*,²⁰ and her husband stayed at Northampton from 1838-1841 where they had come to cultivate sugar beets to oppose the exploitation of the slaves in the sugar trade. Moreover, a set of seventy-five letters published in 2004 by Christopher Clark of the Stetson family who stayed at Northampton for four years gives more information about the daily life, the characters and the interaction of the members of the NAEI. This document helps revalue how the associationists perceived Truth. She is said by Dolly Stetson to be extremely strict in matters of morals and sexuality, an affirmation that must be read in light of the impact of the sexual scandal linked to the Kingdom of Matthias, as well as an expression of her evangelical fervor (Clark 1995; Clark and Buckney 2004; Gaffney 2004). She is noted as leading meetings and funerals with songs and prayers on several occasions (Clark and Buckney 2004 168).

The Narrative as an anti-slavery pamphlet²¹

Like most slave narratives, the 1850 *Narrative* details the cruel conditions of her early life. Truth first dwells on her parents’ plight: her mother’s sudden death and her father’s illness. They were granted freedom in their old age since they had lost the labor value that constituted their worth in the economy of slavery. A young slave, Robert, fell in love with Isabella and may have been the father of her first child. He was almost beaten to death by his owner who did not want his slaves to have children outside of his own property, and hence contribute to the increase of another’s “chattel” (N 22-23). *The Narrative* reports how Truth fought in the courts to get her son Peter back when the latter was illegally sold South in Alabama (N 30-32). Peter’s story illustrates the prevalence of slaves’ and slave children’s kidnappings at the time.

Faithful to the generic structure of the slave narrative, Truth’s own account goes through the *topoi* of the genre: the auction block (N 8-9), the dispersal of the family, corporal punishment (N 15), the mistress’s cruelty (N 17-22), the other servants’ jealousy (N 18-19), the flight (N 28-30) and freedom. It stresses the price paid by the white slaveholders in the system: immorality, cruelty, murder and madness. Such common places disturb the trust

¹⁹ Isaac (1798-1872) and Amy Post (1802–1889) were Hicksites Quakers from Rochester, New York, whose radical views repeatedly led them to break away from the more orthodox religious communities to which they in turn belonged. They were cofounders of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society. Open to abolitionist meetings—Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Sojourner Truth spoke there, as did Susan B. Anthony—, their house in Rochester became a station of the Underground Railroad. The Posts helped Douglass fund his paper *The North Star* and Harriet Jacobs publish her narrative in 1861. Amy Post was an ardent advocate of women’s rights who participated in the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and signed the Declaration of Sentiments. The Posts became one of the first believers in Spiritualism after the Fox sisters stayed with them.

²⁰ In this book, Child argues in favor of the immediate emancipation of the slaves without compensation to slaveholders.

²¹ Santamarina (2005) focuses on the 1845 *Narrative* and explains how it must be reread within the tradition of black autobiography written by workers, in contradistinction to the literate tradition of the slave narrative written by him/herself. This emphasis on Truth as a working woman must also be set in the context of her religious faith and beliefs (see Raynaud 2019).

that the reader may have in the truthfulness of the record. It also points towards what has been omitted for “motives of delicacy,” a euphemism that covered sexual content.²² Truth had five children, but she speaks mostly of her son Peter whose letters she includes in the text. Scholars are debating whether she was sexually abused by her master—her daughter Diana could have been fathered by Dumont—or her mistress (Mabee and Newhouse 1993; Painter 1996 16; Washington 2009 112).

The Narrative is inserted between authenticating documents: William Garrison’s preface and her previous owners’ certificates of morality. The 1850 edition also includes an excerpt from Theodore Weld and Angelina and Sarah Grimké’s *Slavery As It Is. A Thousand Witnesses* (1839). Thus, not only is Truth’s testimony in itself a plea to end slavery, but it is framed by two abolitionist texts at the height of the controversy,²³ which enhances the performative quality of her narrative. Moreover, as I have underlined in my introduction to the translation of *The Narrative*, Gilbert’s voice at times intervenes—she had spent two years in Daviess county, Kentucky—and blurs Truth’s own account, redirecting the ideological thrust of the text through her own outspoken abolitionist agenda and personal testimony (Raynaud 2016 XXIX-XXXIV; XXXIX-XL).²⁴

Truth sold her *Narrative* and her cartes de visite at meetings to support herself and to finance the purchase of a house in Michigan.²⁵ In that way, she maintained control over the text and its re-editions (Roy 2018 204-209). Garrison insists on people buying her little book at the end of his certificate of morality (N 104) and Truth appeals to her audience to do so at the close of her lectures. The 1853 edition contains an introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe whom Truth had visited that same year;²⁶ in this “puff,” Stowe praises Truth as a “person of excellent character who has spent the greater part of her life in laborious industry.” She also enjoins the readers to buy the book to help Truth buy a house. Relating that 1853 visit and undermining its truth-value as a reliable testimony, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* later wrote the famous 1863 text, “The Libyan Sibyl,” that ensured Truth’s fame and gave her a nickname that she herself even used in the reedition of her *Narrative* and her speeches.²⁷ Later editions that include press reports of Truth’s lectures help understand the rawness of anti-abolitionist violence, such as this statement from a journalist in New Jersey: “She is a crazy, ignorant, repelling negress, and her guardians would do a Christian act to restrict her entirely to her private life” (Painter 1996 137). Public appearances of ex-slaves were to anti-abolitionists an assault on society’s well-guarded divisions which relegated servants to the private sphere and beyond, to invisibility, in continuity with their former slave status.

²² For an analysis of these ellipses, see Washington 2007.

²³ In his preface, Garrison mentions the violence that pitted abolitionists against anti-abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s. He may refer to Elijah Parish Lovejoy, an abolitionist journalist who was killed on Nov. 7th, 1837 by anti-abolitionists when he writes: “down with freedom of expression” (N 123).

²⁴ In her textual analysis of the *Narrative*, Santamarina (2005) traces the contradictions between Truth’s statements and her emphasis on her efficiency and Gilbert’s own views in relation to the slave’s work value.

²⁵ This detail is noted by Teresa Zacknodnik: “Truth’s *Narrative* went through five editions from 1850 to 1884, and she is said to have carried copies of it in a distinctive cloth bag along with *cartes de visite* and cabinet cards she had made and reprinted between 1863 and her death in 1883.” (Zacknodnik 2005 118).

²⁶ This introduction signed as “Andover, 1855,” in what claims to be an 1853 edition can be consulted at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071140142;view=1up;seq=10>. Accessed on March 8th, 2019. It presents Truth’s religious conversion as a miracle of the Heavenly Father, a “separate revelation.”

²⁷ Originally published as “Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl,” *Atlantic Monthly*, April 9th, 1863. See Truth in Painter 1998 103-117.

Bearing witness: her body and her words²⁸

Contrary to white abolitionists, Black abolitionists were at the same time defenders of the cause *and* its living symbol. When Truth took to the platform, she can be said to thus “exhibit” her body, such demonstrations—echoes of the auction blocks—were indeed called “slave exhibits” (Bennett 1969 137). She is reported to have bared her arm in 1851 at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, to show her physical strength when delivering her speech, which claimed that it did not exclude her from the category “woman.” She is also said to have bared her breast in October 1858 during another anti-slavery meeting at Silver Lake, Indiana, asking the audience to come and suck them since they were cry-babies. Thus, her anti-slavery struggle cannot be separated from these performances. She is also said to have shown her maimed fingers—they are visible on some of her cartes de visite—and she referred to the lashes given her by Neely in her talks. Her *Narrative* indeed relates the corporal punishments to which she was submitted when she did not understand his orders since they did not speak the same language (N 15).

Triggered by her call to preach, Truth’s public career as a lecturer benefited from the context of the Second Great Awakening (Barnes 1964) and her religious speeches cannot be divorced from her slave background. The report and contents of two religious meetings are included in the *Narrative* (N 88-101). As a public speaker allowed to harangue the crowd in 1843 during a Millerite meeting at Windsor Lock, CT, about Christ’s impending second coming which they thought would occur on October 22nd, 1844, Truth retorted to the preachers that:

If the Lord should come, he'd change you to *nothing!*. . . You seem to be expecting to go to some parlor *away up* somewhere, and when the wicked have been burnt, you are coming back . . . I am not going away; I am going to stay here and *stand the fire*, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! And Jesus will walk with me through the fire, and keep me from harm." (N 90)

Truth’s unflinching determination stems from her slave experience: her fight must be fought in this world rather than in the next; there was no real solace in an eschatological vision.

In her article on Truth and feminist abolitionism (Painter 1994b), Nell Irvin Painter explains the reasons why Truth was sought after by white abolitionists; she was a forceful speaker, but other women—Frances Dana Gage, Frances E. W. Harper, Nancy Prince, Emma Coe, Jane Swisshelm—could also address an audience. It was the creation of a singular persona through her insistence that her enslavement authenticated and reinforced her message that singled her out: “She made her persona as different from the educated white women who made her famous as they thought it possible to be.” (Painter 1994b 155). Truth was indeed walking a thin line between the exoticism which white abolitionists upheld²⁹ and forced upon her and her own agency as a deeply religious self-determined and hard-working black woman.

One can trace some of Truth’s interventions and public engagements in the local press, public letters, and reports (Fitch and Mandzuick 1997 101-204). In May 1843, she spoke in the Colored Methodist Church on Sixth Street (Washington 2009 147). In the fall of 1844, she made her first antislavery speech in Northampton. In May 1845 she spoke at the annual meeting of the *American Anti-Slavery Society* in New York City. At the time, the struggle for Black rights and that for women’s rights would lead to irreconcilable divisions and breakups. While the leading feminists upheld women’s suffrage over the rights of black men, Garrison supported the 1850 meeting in Worcester, Massachusetts, at which Truth spoke, but acted

²⁸ See Raynaud 2016 for a reflection on testifying and bearing witness in relation to Truth’s life story, notably the trials she was involved in, and her activism. See also Foster 1979 and McBride 2001.

²⁹ She was also compared to Dinah from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, thus crystallizing the connection between the fictitious and the real. Dinah is the head family cook in the novel and, like Truth, she smokes a pipe (Grigsby 2015, note 20, 195).

more as a preacher than as a woman's right activist. In 1851 she joined British abolitionist George Thompson³⁰ and went to Rochester, New York where she stayed with Amy Post. From 1851 to 1853,³¹ she travelled across Ohio with the journalist and activist Marius Robinson,³² delivering the lectures that made her reputation. In 1852, for instance, she attended an abolitionist meeting in Salem, Ohio, where she confronted Frederick Douglass with an ironic remark that challenged his views on how to fight slavery: "Is God gone?"³³ She insisted that God would come to her help: there was no need to fear the worst and doubt God's ultimate design. Insurrection was not the proper course. In 1854, she appeared at a meeting on the twelfth anniversary of the American Anti-slavery Society in New York at which Wendell Phillips spoke and countered the argument defended by a Mr. Barker of the plight of English lower classes as opposed to slaves. Typically, on the second day of the proceedings, she sang "a plaintive song" and it is said that she spoke about "the wrong Slavery had done to herself and others," but that speech is not recorded, while Barker's answer to Phillips is.³⁴ This historical record and primary source material is a painful reminder of the ways in which arguments among men, their debating skills, are viewed as more worthy to be preserved than the words of the slave. In 1856 she addressed the Friends of Human Progress Convention in Battle Creek, through the efforts of Michigan Quaker, Henry Willis. Accompanied by her grand-son Samuel Banks, she travelled across numerous other states, such as New York, Ohio, and Indiana.

Although Douglass denigrated her wit and stressed her illiteracy head-on, Truth used her humor precisely to strike home and link with her audience (see Goldner 2012). She always relied on the Scriptures, a text with which her public was extremely familiar, to make her point. She also sang hymns, substituting her own words to the familiar verses. Her powerful, far reaching, deep voice, was indeed the most incisive instrument of her struggle; as proof of the strength and endurance of the spoken word, some of her most catching phrases, veritable "punch" lines, have remained to this day, illustrating what writer Harryette Mullen has theorized as "resistant orality" (2012).³⁵ In the speech delivered at Framingham in 1854, for instance, Truth stressed the fact that sufferings have to be felt in the flesh. She thus underlined the legitimacy of her experience in contradistinction to white people's, who spoke about slavery, but had not vicariously lived it. She couched her plea in religious terms: white people will have to answer before God—they have a debt to Black people who have suffered more than them—and asked repeatedly the question: why do white people hate blacks? She thus inscribes her speeches in the tradition of the Black Jeremiad.³⁶

³⁰ George Donisthorpe Thompson (1804–1878) was a British orator and activist who worked towards the abolition of slavery through lecture tours and legislation while serving as a Member of Parliament. He first travelled to the United States in 1834. In 1850, he returned in the context of the fugitive slave laws. During this final visit in 1864, he joined William Wells Brown in his fight against slavery.

³¹ She spoke at a suffragist mob convention at Broadway Tabernacle, New York in 1853.

³² Marius Robinson was a journalist abolitionist from Ohio who suffered from mob attacks. His wife was teaching free blacks in Cincinnati while he was on the lecture circuit.

³³ Scholars have underlined the difficulty of knowing exactly when and where these words were uttered. See Goldner 2012; Ernest 2016.

³⁴ That exchange is reproduced on the following site: <https://glc.yale.edu/speech-wendell-phillips> and <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/support4.html>. Accessed on March 8th, 2019.

³⁵ I make a similar argument in Raynaud 2016. See also DoVeanna Fulton 2006.

³⁶ The Black Jeremiad has been theorized by Wilson J. Moses as an expression of messianic nationalism in his *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (1982). This tradition of black political thought places sin at the center, as well as black people, viewed as God's Elect, both in line with and separate from the "American Jeremiad" inherited from the Puritan founders' own Jeremiad: i.e. a contradictory gesture of critique and utopianism as articulated by Sacvan Berkovitch in 1978. For a revision of Moses' controversial thesis, see David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (1990) and his 2005 follow-up. Ida B. Wells and Mary McLeod Bethune figure in this list of African American thinkers, but Truth does not.

In the 1850s she became close to the “Progressive Friends” who had adopted Spiritualism, a religious doctrine, derived from Swedenborg, that supported the belief that one can communicate with the spirits of the dead. She then reunited with Isaac and Amy Post, who had relinquished Quakerism, and with the feminist Elisabeth Lukins, in the practice of that emerging religion. From Florence, Massachusetts, she went on to Harmonia, Michigan, in 1857. From her Battle Creek residence where she had settled in 1860, she participated in the recruitment of Black soldiers and urged her grand-son James Caldwell to join the 54th Regiment, Mass. Volunteers (The Glory Regiment). She met President Lincoln in 1864 after the official Emancipation Proclamation, as well as Harriet Tubman (1822-1913), the same year, in Boston. With other abolitionists, among whom Frederick Douglass, she worked towards the passing of the 15th Amendment that granted Black men the vote.

Conclusion

As this essay makes clear, it is difficult to disentangle the religious denominations she was close to from the different causes Truth espoused: evangelism in its Pentecostal and Perfectionist versions, anti-slavery, women’s rights, temperance, desegregation in public transport. It is equally uneasy to separate her life-story and the different media she used—her public addresses, the various editions of her *Narrative*, her photographs—from her fight for it takes different hues and forms accordingly. Print, visual media, performances, including songs, may have created the persona of the enduring slave woman, molded her into the “type” of the slave. It was her life as it enfolded that testified to her resilience and commitment to her causes. Her “life-work” is indeed a testimony to the power of the autobiographical dimension of her struggle and should settle the debate about her lack of agency in the hands of white abolitionists, notably in view of the work scholars have accomplished to separate historical facts from the legend and to conduct precise thorough textual analyses of her interventions.

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