

“FOLLOWING THE INTERNAL WHISPER”: RACE, GENDER, AND THE
FREEDOM-CENTERED TRINITY OF BLACK WOMEN’S ACTIVISM, 1735-1850

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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December, 2019

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Cornell University 2019

“Following the Internal Whisper”: Race, Gender and the *Freedom-Centered Trinity* of Black Women’s Activism, 1735-1850,” explores how race, gender and class shaped a distinct activist tradition among Black women that was indispensable to the struggle for Black freedom in the United States. It argues that African American women were fighting for freedom long before the nation was founded and nearly a century before the interracial and international Abolitionist Movement emerged. Using an array of archival material including speeches, obituaries, wills, memoirs, pamphlets, newspaper articles and anti-slavery records, this dissertation traces a rich, yet virtually unexplored, tradition of Black women’s activism centered around three intersecting tiers: spirituality, education, and communalism. This trinity allowed Black women to build and serve their communities and take on leadership roles despite racist and sexist exclusions.

The focus on early America is significant because Black women’s activism provided important building blocks for women’s participation in the Abolitionist Movement, the Women’s Rights Movement, and nineteenth century American reform. Black women had an early, consistent, and evolving impact on the struggle to end slavery and racial oppression in the United States, yet scholars have yet to engage the

full scope of their contributions. In addressing this gap in the extant scholarship, this dissertation centers race and gender to underscore the significance of Black women's work, as well as the challenges they faced struggling for racial equality within a patriarchal society.

As preachers, teachers, and community leaders, Black women such as Jarena Lee, Maria Stewart, and Susan Paul promoted education as a tool for liberation and argued that freedom and equality were God's will. They boycotted slavery through the Free Produce Movement, formed antislavery societies, and were integral to the Underground Railroad. While their primary focus was abolition, Black women also embraced women's rights, temperance, spiritualism, and moral reform in their fight for freedom and equality. This dissertation adds to the fields of African American Studies and Women's Studies by documenting this forgotten chapter in Black women's history.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Candace Katungi was born and raised in San Diego, California. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree as a double major in Ethnic Studies and Political Science from the University of California, San Diego in 2002. She went on to complete a Master of Professional Studies degree in African American Studies at Cornell University in 2005 and a Master of Arts degree in History at Cornell University in 2009. She is currently an Associate Professor of Black Studies at San Diego Mesa College.

For my sister, Tiya Shani Katungi.
Thank you for always reminding me of my *internal whisper*.
Like the women of this study, your spirit lives!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the love, support, and patience of so many people. I am grateful for everyone who has encouraged me throughout this process. Words cannot express the gratitude I have for my advisor, Professor Margaret Washington, who is a model of excellence on every level. Her dedication to students is only matched by her brilliance. Thank you for the many years of mentorship and guidance. I could not have become the scholar or teacher that I am today without you. You taught me to give “voice” to Black women in a way that no one else could. More importantly, you helped me become a better person. Your compassion, love, dedication, integrity, and professionalism will always be a source of inspiration.

To Professor N’Dri Assie-Lumumba, thank you for your steady commitment throughout the years. From my time in the Africana Center to now, you have always been a source of joy and light for me. I thank you for cheering me on and reminding me that I have an important story to tell. You were the first one to help me realize how awesome it is to study Black women, and I am forever grateful.

To Professor Derek Chang, thank you for your support as well. You were a late addition to my committee, but you arrived right on time. Thank you for your time and encouragement. Thank you also for reminding me that I was capable of completing my dissertation, while maintaining that I am so much more than this work.

To Professor James Turner, thank you for your support and mentorship over the years. You instilled a foundation in Africana Studies that cannot be broken, and

have empowered me more than I can express. I am so glad to be amongst the many who say: “Turner taught me.”

To my Africana alumni family, I love you. There are too many people to thank, but the love and support are beyond measure. Thank you for being the intellectual, scholar-activist, and fun-loving community that sustained me through my many years at Cornell. A special thank you to some of my closest friends from the Africana Studies and Research Center: LaTasha Levy and Jonathan Fenderson, who have had my back since our time together in 2003. Thank you Jon, for always encouraging me and reminding me that my work on Black women is cutting edge. Tasha, you have been an especially important rock over the past 10 years, as I struggled to complete this dissertation. I could not have made it to the end of this project without you and your daily messages of support and encouragement; I look forward to a lifetime of continued friendship.

To my San Diego sis, Ryann Abdullah, who I met long after my time in the Africana Center, I thank you for all the years of encouragement as well. To Leslie Alexander, who became an immediate friend and mentor, I also thank you for the years of support. I will always remember your willingness to talk through some of my most challenging and daunting times. I eagerly anticipate finally being on the other side with you, after years of you lifting me up.

I must thank the Save the Africana Center (SAC) Action Committee: Tia Hicks, Joanne Oport, Kristin Herbeck, Courtney Knapp, Alyssa Clutterbuck, Carol Kalafatic and Greg Rothman- thank you for helping me discover all that I can be when

it matters most. Who knew a rag-tag-bunch like us could put up such a fight? Thank you, for all of the laughs and for helping me discover my power.

Special thanks to Kristin, Courtney, Tia, and Joanne, who have become friends for life. Kristin, you have a soul like no other, and are one of the fiercest advocates for social justice that I know. Thank you for all of the talks, laughs, letter writing, cries, and comics. Thank you, Courtney, for the many years of love and encouragement, and for opening your home to me when I needed a writers retreat. Thank you also for inviting me on the epic road trip (from California to New York) that helped get me back on track. Thank you, Tia and Joanne, for being the amazing women that you are. We may not talk often, but our friendship has been sealed through hope, love, and dialogue.

Thank you to Jessica Harris, who's friendship was crucial during my first few years in the History Department. You were the glue for our Black graduate quad, always opening up your home and giving your time. You encouraged me so much those first years and always have continued to do so ever since. Thank you also to Michelle Duguid, for being one of my best friends at Cornell. Our dinners, gym dates, and study sessions in your office were some of my best times in Ithaca, and I treasure the friendship that we still have. You are truly one of my sisters for life.

To my Stony Brook friends, especially Tamara Weathers, Julie Lekstutis and Rosa Guerrero, thank you for becoming my group of "phenomenal women." I never imagined I would end up as a Residence Hall Director on my road to the Ph.D., but it turned out to be an important part of my development. I learned so much from my

short time working with you all, and am forever grateful for the bond that we now share.

My best friend since college, Leslie Kuykendall, has been another essential gem in my life. Thank you for a friendship that is truly immeasurable. You embody the way sisterhood extends beyond blood, and I thank you for all of the steady years of laughter, love, and support. You have been there since before graduate school was even an idea, and have cheered me on the entire way. There were so many times that I wanted to quit, and you always reminded me that I could finish this. I love you dearly sis, and I am so thankful to have you in my life.

To my UCSD sisters: Elina Brown, Kim Daniels, Delia Pacheco, Wendy Reynolds-Dobbs and Bella Oguno, thank you for being “my girls” from then until now. It means so much to have a group of women to also call sisters. I love you all and our collective friendship. My San Diego friends have also been major support through all of these years. Special thank you to Barabara Fink, Marysol Marin, and Meagan Nunez who I can go years without seeing, and yet the friendship remains. To Jessica Cordova, thank you for being a steady friend and cheerleader since I moved back.

To my UCSD and Spelman sister Jenne Darden, what can I say: the “A” left a lasting mark and a true friendship between us. Thank you for your love and support over the years. I am especially thankful for the way you always advocate for Black women, mental health, and self-care.

To Steve, who I also had the pleasure of meeting at UCSD, I love you dearly and am so glad to call you a friend. Thank you for always believing in me, and for also listening when I just needed to cry. Richard Alexander has also been a major

cheerleader during this journey. Thank you for always being excited about my research and for valuing my work as an educator.

To Noni Session, my dear friend and sister, I thank you as well. You were there for me during one of my hardest years, and you helped me grow into a better person. From Ithaca to Oakland, your door has always been open. Thank you for sharing your friendship and your home.

To Ann Wilde, I love you and cherish the friendship we had. From the Africana Center to our time in the History Department, we became quite the duo. Your kindness and love for others were astounding. I am so thankful to have had you as a friend, and I miss you dearly. I thought of you often as I reached the finish line, but knew that you were with me in spirit.

Thank you, Eric Acree, for believing in me and for extending yourself and the Africana Library whenever I was in town. You always reminded me I was family. Thank you, Mwalimu Abdul Nanji, for your unending support. You were instrumental to my success at Cornell, especially during my first few years in the History Department. You were the first to call me “Dr.” always saying it was a done deal. I appreciate your mentorship and advocacy all of these years. I am also grateful to Ken Glover, who never stopped believing in me and always had words of advice and encouragement. Thank you for always checking on me and reminding me I have a village of support.

To Paula Ioanide, thank you for your amazing support in general, but especially in the end. You opened your beautiful home to me, without any expectations, which allowed me to finish this dissertation. Thank you for all of the

wonderful talks at night, and the steady encouragement. Thank you also to your beautiful family (Tailil, Kati, and Zeke) for allowing me to be part of your home.

Thank you to Daniel Kayoboke, who was one of the biggest supports throughout graduate school. I appreciate your continued friendship and support. I cannot thank you enough for taking care of Misha (the best dog ever) when I needed to go back to Ithaca for two months. You were always ready to do whatever was needed to help. I will always love and appreciate who you are and all that you have done for me.

To San Diego Mesa College, thank you for giving me the opportunity to do what I love. Special thanks to my colleague, Thekima Mayasa, who was also completing a dissertation when I started. I am glad we both made it to the finish line. Thank you also to my students. You all inspired me and kept me going when I wanted to quit.

To my dear friend and sister Natalie Hodge, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. From the first day we met, you believed that I could accomplish this feat. The love, support, and dedication you have shown me and this project are immeasurable. From words of wisdom to daily check-ins, you have been like a midwife to this dissertation. I am so grateful for our friendship, and so happy this baby (now a teenager) was finally born.

To my father, Nathan Katungi, thank you for your love and patience all these years, and especially as I worked to complete this project. Finally, to my mother, Margaret Katungi, thank you for being a constant reminder of the power of Black women. You always believed in this project, and have given me endless support to

achieve this milestone. You also taught me early to believe in and stand up for Black women. Thank you for setting the foundation for this entire dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION

And shall proud tyrants boast with brazen face,
Of birth—of genius, over Africa’s race:
Go to the tomb where lies their matron’s dust
And read the marble, faithful to its trust...

How long must Etheaopia’s [*sic*] murder’d race
Be doom’d by men to bondage and disgrace?
And hear such taunting insolences from those
“We have a fairer *skin* and *sharper nose*?”
Their sable mother took her rapt’rous flight,
High orb’d amidst the realms of endless light:
The haughty boaster sinks beneath her feet,
Where vaunting tyrants and oppressor’s meet

Lemuel Haynes, eulogy of Lucy Terry Prince, 1821¹

In 1821 Lucy Terry Prince—the first known African American poet—died at approximately 97 years old. She was a storyteller rooted in the oral tradition, like the griots of her West African homeland.² Prince is remembered mostly for her ballad the “Bars Fight” that recounted the Native American raid on the English colonists in Deerfield, Massachusetts on August 25, 1746.³ Although it was her only poem to be recorded and published, she was known widely as a “progeny at conversation” whose “volubility was exceeded by none.”⁴ Prince was also a spiritual woman praised for her “knowledge of scripture” and belief in an all-powerful God. Her most profound work

¹ Lemuel Haynes was an African American Congregationalist minister and a leading Abolitionist. He was born in 1753 and had served in the Connecticut militia during the American Revolution. *The Vermont Gazette*, (Bennington, VT). Tuesday, August 1, 1821 (Vo. 12, no 41, pg 3.) reprinted in Sharon M Harris, *Executing Race: Early American Women’s Narratives of Race, Society, and the Law* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 183–84.

² Griots in the West African tradition were the keepers of history and culture.

³ Lucy Terry Prince composed the poem around the age of 21, not long after the raid. It was recited by others for over one hundred years before it was published posthumously in 1855. For the first publication, see Josiah Gilbert- *History of Western Massachusetts* Vo. 1 pp 175-176.

⁴ *The Vermont Gazette*, August 1, 1821 reprinted Harris, *Executing Race*, 183–84.

occurred after she was freed from slavery by her husband Abijah, who purchased her freedom the same year they were married in 1756. The Princes went on to build a life together, having six children between 1757 and 1769, at the same time that the American colonies were inching towards revolution.⁵

Prince fought to raise her family and declare their rights to freedom and equality during the revolutionary and early national periods of the United States. She placed spirituality, education, and communalism at the center of her work and stands at the beginning of a thread of activism that African American women created in their own right. Prince used her gift of language and argumentation to protect her family's property in legal battles that reached the Vermont Governor and the state Supreme Court.⁶ Prince was also an intellectual who saw education as a tool for liberation. She educated all of her children, and in 1793 she argued before the Williams College board of trustees that her oldest son Cesar had a right to attend. Lemuel Haynes, an African American Congregationalist minister, offered a eulogy at Prince's funeral that reflected the antislavery position that Prince embodied throughout her life. Haynes proclaimed that even the "haughty boaster" of white supremacy would "sink before" Prince's feet, making clear that "tyrants and oppressors" were beneath Lucy Terry Prince's genius.⁷

This dissertation explores African American women's activism and the long

⁵ Harris, *Executing Race* 155.

⁶ The two cases were in 1785 and 1796, respectively.

⁷ *The Vermont Gazette*, reprinted in Harris, *Executing Race*, 183-184. I include domination when describing white supremacy. The ideology that whites are superior is rooted in their efforts to dominate non-Europeans, and take ownership of the world. While the ideology of white supremacy is important in understanding the institution of slavery, it is also important to understand what Black people were up against. The claim that White people are superior, was rooted in their desire to dominate other people socially, politically, and economically.

struggle for Black freedom in the United States, beginning in the Revolutionary Era and ending with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. I argue that Black women were fighting for freedom long before the nation was founded and nearly a century before the interracial and international Abolitionist Movement emerged. Their work centered around the *freedom-centered trinity* of their activism: spirituality, education, and communalism, which were the foundations of Black women's activism for several generations to come. Like the Holy Trinity in the Christian tradition, Black women's activism involved three intersecting tiers that were mutually engendering and supportive.

I look specifically at Black women's contributions to the rise of the radical Abolitionist Movement and the connections between multiple generations of Black women that can be seen throughout all stages of the Black freedom struggle. Revolutionary Era women, like poets Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley, provided important building blocks for the next generation of women, like Catherine Ferguson and Sarah Allen, to establish the first free Black communities in the Northeast. Together, revolutionary and early national Black women set the stage for antebellum Black women, like Maria Stewart and Susan Paul, who were early leaders in the interracial and international Abolitionist Movement that emerged in the 1830s. These women were especially significant in defining and maintaining a commitment to racial equality, which was part of the two-pronged Abolitionist agenda. Certainly not all White Abolitionists fully embraced the struggle for racial equality. But Black people always included equality consciously or unconsciously in their demand for freedom and civil rights, and women developed strategies along these goals.

I differentiate between “struggle” and a “movement” to emphasize the pioneering role of Black women in the formation and development of Abolitionism. Struggle is ongoing self-determination, maintaining identity, and pursuing freedom. A movement is organized structured activism with specific goals. Ending slavery immediately and giving Blacks equality were the goals of the Abolitionist Movement. The Black freedom struggle began long before the Abolitionist Movement and was manifest on two fronts: on the one hand, they challenged enslavement and a myriad of oppressive discriminatory laws and social practices that they endured on a daily basis. On the other hand, they were determined to shape their destiny as a people.⁸ Both levels of struggle emphasized freedom and equality as well as the collective history and shared oppression of African Americans in the United States.⁹

The Black freedom struggle represented the individual and collective ways in which African Americans resisted slavery, challenged racial oppression, and promoted self-determination. Black women in the nascent years of freedom and antebellum era were especially crucial in upholding family, education, communal advancement, and spiritual development. Essentially, while building and serving their communities, Black women’s three-tiered agenda also helped them develop roles of leadership and activism.

⁸ As historian Sterling Stuckey argues, the first generation of Black nationalists saw racial pride, collective action, and self-defined institution building as key to their ability to move from “oppression and dependency to liberation and autonomy.” See Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 3–7. John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), xvi, lvi–lvii.

⁹ I borrow from James Horton’s definition of the Black community in their study of free people of color in the antebellum period, which helps understand the early national struggle to build community and its relationship to racial oppression and discrimination. James Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 3.

I focus on free Black women in the Northeast, first as they transitioned from slavery to a quasi-free status; then I explore their community service. I pay particular attention to Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, the most populous cities, and spaces where Black women's activism flourished. Women of the first four generations worked for betterment of their local communities, organized across state lines, and sought to improve their material lives. We see this with Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley in the first generation. With the second generation we see legal arguments for Black freedom; the establishment of mutual aid and benevolent societies; of political organizations; and the formation of communal spaces including churches and schools that emerged during the early national period. These "first freedoms" also ushered into prominence spiritual leaders, educators, and intellectuals, whose writings and activism emphasized Black freedom, social justice, and gender equality.¹⁰

Black women's activism preceded as well as merged with the biracial Abolitionist Movement. Individual and local efforts ultimately unified under a larger national progressive agenda involving structure, leadership, organization, and outreach. As a movement, Abolition came to fruition in the 1830s when Black activists convinced Whites to reject the questionable strategies of gradual emancipation and colonization.¹¹ Black women's anti-colonization and immediatist

¹⁰ I borrow and expand upon the category "first freedoms" from Dorothy Sterling's documentary work on Black women in the nineteenth century. Her "first freedoms" section explores the lives of Black women in the North, as they transitioned from slavery to freedom from 1800-1831. I broaden her periodization to include the first generation of colonial era women. Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 87-104.

¹¹ By colonization, I am referring to the deportation efforts outlined by the American Colonization Society in 1817, and not the self-determined emigration efforts of free Black people. Before 1830 White antislavery activists promoted gradual emancipation laws, and the American Colonization Society that was established in 1817. These initiatives promoted white supremacy and were far more beneficial to slave owners than the enslaved. The anti-colonization stance of most Black activists, as well as the few

discourse helped plant seeds of moral responsibility especially among White women activists who began to call for immediate emancipation.¹²

Focusing on Black women's individual and collective activism offers a lens into their self-advancement and communal responsibility, as well as explorations of how race, gender, and class impacted social justice work. Black women activists were deliberate in organizing amongst themselves, in advancing the general Black community, and engaging in self-enlightenment when possible. Struggle, creating a voice, organization, and movement all provided the first venues for Black women to engage in socio-political agitation. Thus, Black women activists played a crucial role in fundamental change, manipulated gendered boundaries, created female centered political arenas, and proclaimed a race-conscious focus on the struggle for Black freedom.¹³

As mentioned earlier, the themes integral to Black women's antislavery and racial uplift work were spirituality, education, and communalism. As teachers, preachers, and community leaders, Black women promoted education as a form of liberation and preached that freedom and equality were God's will. Abolition was their primary focus, but Black women also embraced women's rights, temperance,

who were in favor, will be discussed in detail in chapter two. For more on emigration see Tom W Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 8–10.

¹² The British women Elizabeth Heyrick and Elizabeth Chandler were the first to call for immediate emancipation in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*.

¹³ My discussion of the women-centered spaces that Black women occupied, is in line with Nancy Cott's study of the "woman's sphere" in early national and antebellum New England. Cott explores the connection between gendered spaces and the intellectual advancement of middle and upper-class White women. She argues that there was a paradox in the "bonds of womanhood" that confined women to private spheres, but also gave them a non-threatening platform for social, political, and intellectual growth. Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

spiritualism, and moral reform. As antislavery advocates, they boycotted slavery through the free produce movement and were the backbone of the Underground Railroad. Black women filed court cases, signed petitions, and organized sewing circles for school children and self-emancipated slaves. Their activism was spiritually motivated, community-oriented, and reformist to the core. Activist locales included homes, churches, prayer groups, religious camp meetings, Sabbath schools, secular classrooms, lecture halls, as well as literary, mutual aid and benevolent societies. Such venues, often created by and for Black people, were female-centered spheres ostensibly considered apolitical. Nonetheless, as this dissertation illustrates, a multigenerational network of Black women activists and intellectuals, often working beyond male-dominated sites of protest worked tirelessly for socio-political change.

In her book *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Brittany Cooper's naming of the Black intellectual tradition of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Black women is instructive. Although she focuses on the post-emancipation era, Cooper argues that Black women have not been acknowledged as intellectuals, despite the recognition of their activism. It is imperative, Cooper argues, that we "trust" that these women were independent thinkers.¹⁴ Envisioning Black women as thinkers may seem basic, even simplistic; but it is necessary when studying a systematically marginalized group of people often denied the tools needed to leave written records of their lives. Starting with an inherent trust that Black women's activism was driven by their ideals and thought processes reveals as much about their

¹⁴ Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (University of Illinois Press, 2017).

intellectualism, as it does about their activism. Black women's voices reveal visionary leaders fighting to dismantle and subvert the social, political, and economic systems that subordinated them and their people.

Many of the women of this study were long-time activists, whose work spanned multiple generations. All of them helped lay the foundation for the Abolitionist work involving Black women through the end of the Civil War. Black women's activism represents a thread reaching across four generations: Visionaries (colonial), Framers (revolutionary/early national), Builders (early national) and Movement Makers, (antebellum).

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I (chapters 1-3) discusses the first three generations of Black women's activism. This period of striving, self-affirmation, education, and spiritual development was one of hope. It involved identification with Africinity, court cases, petitions, and self-emancipation as well as a concerted effort to build a sense of community while achieving freedom. These women helped frame the intellectual thought that would inspire Black women's activism for the next several generations. As "Visionaries," they established the *freedom-centered trinity* of spirituality, education, and communalism that became a blueprint for future action.

Chapter 1, "For the Love of Freedom" (1735-1776) explores the first

generation of Black women’s activism during the colonial era.¹⁵ Women defined freedom first and foremost as self-ownership. Next came concern for their families, the larger community, and future generations not yet born. These colonial women lived through the American Revolution and contributed to the larger debates on liberty, justice, and republicanism. They were also part of the spiritual movement known as the Great Awakening which fostered a spiritual understanding of both their oppression and their fight for freedom. Women like Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley were among the progenitors of the Black intellectual, spiritual, and communal traditions, including the “rhetoric of social criticism and prophecy” known as the Black jeremiad.¹⁶

Chapter 2, “Founding Mothers” (1776-1808) explores the ideas and activities of Black women’s activism in the revolutionary and early national period. Many women, like Elizabeth Freeman and Sarah Allen lived through the American Revolution only to find that the new nation was founded on a concept of freedom that also defined their enslavement. I call this generation “Framers,” because they proactively crafted ideas about freedom and equality for Black people.¹⁷ This second

¹⁵ This quote comes from Phillis Wheatley, who described where her “love of freedom sprang from” in her 1772 poem to the Earl of Dartmouth. John C. Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 3. Pitney focuses primarily on twentieth century men and does not take into consideration eighteenth and nineteenth century Black women.

¹⁷ I borrow the term “founding mothers” from Mary Beth Norton’s work on White women and the politics of gender during the revolutionary period, as well as Lerone Bennett’s concept of “the founding of Black America” in his work on the history of African Americans in the United States. Both Norton and Bennett offered critical interventions to the historiography of revolutionary and early national America, that had traditionally focused on the contributions and ideas of White men. I add to these works by centering Black women. See Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Lerone Bennett Jr,

generation of Black women activists, like the first, continued shaping the three-tiered framework for struggle (spirituality, education, and communalism). Women formed organizations, social networks, and other avenues of community building. Their ultimate goal was freedom and equality for all Black people. Meanwhile, they provided resources for survival and advancement.

Chapter 3, “Called by God” (1808-1831) explores the third generation of Black women activists during the early national and first years of the antebellum era. Spirituality was central to this generation. It included prominent preachers, teachers, and political writers, including Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Maria Stewart. These “Builders” asserted that they were called by God, and included women who organized around literacy, mutual-aid, moral improvement and benevolence. They also engaged in important theological work that grounded their philosophy as activists and antislavery advocates.

The “Builders” felt the impact of the patriarchal gender ideologies that developed with the growth of free Black communities and the rise of the Black middle class. Their activism involved a complicated mix of urgency, opposition, resistance, and negotiation, as they maneuvered beyond multiple and intersecting forms of oppression in their struggle for freedom and equality. Empowered by their relationship with God and using the Bible to assert their right to spread the gospel, these women’s spiritual growth provided a direct challenge to clerical patriarchy. They set the stage for the next generations assertive faith that women were called by God to do social justice work.

Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America; Sixth Revised Edition, 6th Revised edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

Black women went from extemporaneous preaching to teaching, from praying bands to political organizing, and from religious organizations to antislavery societies. Spirituality was at the root of their resistance efforts and core to their humanitarian approach to reform. This was significant because all women, regardless of race, were otherwise barred from political work at this time. This is also notable because it helps fill the gap within the historiography of nineteenth-century Black activism—with regards to ministers, community leaders, and the Abolitionist Movement—that has largely ignored the role of women. These early Black women were also impacted by the rise of gender ideologies that merged the race-consciousness of Black Nationalism with the patriarchal definitions of American freedom. Black women were expected to cultivate and nurture the next generation of Black freedom fighters but were also expected to be silent and submissive to Black men.

This generation also marks the first-time antislavery ideas, Black perspectives, and women's opinions were published for mass consumption. Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, established in 1821, was the first antislavery paper to grapple with the priority of immediate emancipation and the role of women. The *Genius* first gave women a platform for joining the antislavery debate. Black newspapers such as *Freedom's Journal*, founded in 1827, were also on the rise. They became vehicles for Black women's activism and community building in general.

Part I ends in 1831, a pivotal year. Maria Stewart published her political pamphlet "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build;" the biracial New England Anti-Slavery Society was founded; the largely Black financed antislavery newspaper *Liberator* was established by

William Lloyd Garrison. It was also the year of Nat Turner's rebellion which had a profound effect on the rise of antislavery. The struggle to immediately end slavery (something Black people had always advocated) began to take shape in earnest as a biracial movement.

Part II is chapters 4 and 5 and represents this study's final generational sweep. Part II explores activism from 1832-1850, the era when Abolition caught fire and Black women played a significant role in the Abolitionist Movement. Black women carried forward ideas and actions that were crafted, nurtured, and debated by previous generations, illustrating that their activism did not emerge out of thin air in 1833 when the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed.¹⁸ This generation of Black women were "Movement Makers" because they joined the first formal organizations and activities within the Abolitionist Movement. Moreover, in 1832, Black women established the first female anti-slavery society in the United States. The "Movement Makers" brought important organizing skills which they had cultivated for three generations. These women also carried forward the revolutionary ideology that Black freedom included racial equality.

Chapter 4, "To Get a Little More Learning" (1832-1837) looks at the central role that education played in the practical application of Black women's activism. In 1832 young Sarah Harris' entreaty to Prudence Crandall, the White Quaker school teacher, led to the ill-fated, short-term but inspired opening of the first secondary school for Black women in Canterbury, Connecticut. Black women were the pioneers

¹⁸ The American Anti-Slavery Society was the first biracial national Anti-Slavery Society dedicated to immediate emancipation in the United States.

in education, which often went hand-in-hand with their anti-slavery work. They identified education as a primary tool for liberation and developed a freedom-centered pedagogy that included their faith in God. I highlight the activities of well-known educators, like Maria Stewart, Susan Paul, and Martha Ball. I also explore the significance of literary societies that gave women the private space to discuss political issues. It was in these circles that women like Maria Stewart asked “What if I am a woman?” as they began to think critically about what it meant to be both Black and female in the struggle for freedom and equality in the United States.

Chapter 5, “We Meet the Monster Prejudice Everywhere” (1837-1850) explores the final years of this study. I pay particular attention to how Black women carved out a space for all women (including White women) within the male-dominated Abolitionist Movement. Black women were among the first to organize female anti-slavery societies, were present at the 1833 founding meeting in Philadelphia of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and had a profound effect on the National Antislavery Conventions of American Women from 1837-1839. This was also the first time Black and White women organized nationally around gender as well as other socio-political issues. Black and White women created sewing circles, led petition campaigns and the free produce movement. Relationships within biracial groups were complicated; Black women experienced a spectrum of attitudes from White women ranging from sisterhood to subordination. This chapter highlights some of the regional differences seen within these relationships that contributed to the diversity of racial experiences when Black and White women collaborated. In Philadelphia, Black women were valued leaders; in New York racism dominated,

while Boston was plagued with paternalism. This chapter also continues to explore the ways that Black women maintained their own autonomous organizations as was the case in New York.

This dissertation ends in 1850, with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law when it became exceedingly dangerous for Black Abolitionists to do their work. Slavery became the most significant political issue in the nation, and the country moved towards civil war. The year 1850 also marked the first National Women's Rights Convention and the first-time Black women were speakers on the platform. This was a significant advancement because Black women had been excluded two years earlier at the first regional Women's Convention held in Seneca Falls, NY.

1850, a year of potential for Black women and for women's rights would soon be compromised by racism within the budding Women's Movement. This watershed moment, both in terms of Abolition and Women's Rights, also marked the rise of a new generation of activists like Sojourner Truth, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, and Harriet Tubman, long recognized within general American history and Abolitionist historiography. Thus, this dissertation ends at a time often viewed as the beginning of Black women's activism in the United States.

Historiography

My generational focus of Black women's activism adds a new twist to the small but growing scholarship on Black women Abolitionists. Most notably, I build upon the works of Shirley Yee and Ann Boylan, both of whom place black women at

the center of the Abolitionist Movement.¹⁹ While Yee gives a general overview of antebellum Black women's activism in the Northeast and some parts of the West, Boylan offers a community study that highlights the organized activities of Black women in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. Together, these works expanded the historiography of the Abolitionist Movement that originally focused on White leadership. They also challenged the groundbreaking but limited works that explored Black Abolitionists from a male perspective, and women Abolitionists through the lens of White women.²⁰ While I am indebted to several different aspects of these

¹⁹ Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Anne Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Anne Boylan, "Benevolence and Antislavery Activity among African American Women in New York and Boston," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). There has also been critical work on Black women's activism during specific time periods and regions that I have used as both a model and a source. See Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Peck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Erica Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Ruth Bogin and Bert J. Loewenberg, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990); Julie Winch, "'You Have Talents--Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Many of the scholars that focus on "women," openly acknowledge that they do not focus on Black women, and often citing the thin sources available as the reason. This study, however, has been motivated by the belief that the marginalization of Black women on account of thin primary sources, is all the more reason to explore the significance of Black women's activism, especially the scantily documented early national period. Julie Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America*, 1 edition (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Some scholarship that focuses on Black men, includes Black women, but only in terms of the work that was in line with what men were doing. Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); John H. Bracey, *Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement*, A Wadsworth Series: Explorations in the Black Experience (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1971); Craig Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

works, my research expands them, by starting with the revolutionary and early national roots of the Abolitionist Movement. My examination of these earlier periods shows the foundational, consistent, and sustained presence of Black women in the struggle for Black freedom in the United States.

Shirley Yee's study has been particularly important as the first book-length monograph to explore Black women Abolitionists. She begins her study in 1828 and offers an important overview of some of the major Black women Abolitionists in the antebellum period. She also provides new perspectives on political activism to include the personal relationships and community building efforts that Black women were involved in. I extend her study by probing the roots of antebellum Black women's activism and how spirituality was at the core of their work and female networks. Spirituality was a central component of Black women's activism, which is best understood when studying the evolution of their activism beginning in the colonial and revolutionary periods. I also re-examine Yee's analysis of nineteenth century gender roles to include a more intricate look at the challenges Black women faced when working with Black men. I draw from Yee's discussion of Black women and the racially exclusive cult of true womanhood, but I also expose the intra-racial politics within Black activism, the gendered obstacles that were embedded in the Black community, and the ways in which Black women navigated the obstacles they faced.²¹

My emphasis on the various factors and intersecting oppressions that influenced Black women's activism is furthered by Martha Jones' *All Bound Up*

²¹ Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 40–59.

*Together: The Women Question in African American Public Culture.*²² In her study of “the woman question” Jones stresses the special challenges Black women faced and asserts that sexism has always been a particular obstacle for Black women activists. While her study is primarily concerned with the post-emancipation era, I support her thesis that Black women faced a unique struggle for racial equality within a patriarchal society. Black women were not just calling for women's rights, they were bending gender lines in order to improve the material circumstances of their lives and the larger Black community. Similarly, examining Black women's activism in the generations preceding the antebellum era leads to a more expansive understanding of their role in the Black freedom struggle. Beginning in the early national period shows the significance of the working class and poor Black women who helped establish the free Black communities in the Northeast. It also reveals the fluidity of the Black middle class as it developed. Even women, like Clarissa Lawrence and Maria Stewart, who managed to achieve middle-class status, were born into very humble beginnings.

This dissertation is most in line with political scientist Gayle Tate’s study of Black women’s political activism in both the North and the South from 1830 to 1860. Tate looks specifically at the links between slavery, abolitionism, capitalism, and industrialization, which she argues connected free Black women in the North to their enslaved sisters in the South. Tate contends that Black women were exploited for their labor, but they also manipulated their labor to transcend the obstacles they faced and improve their material circumstances. They also recognized shared oppression as

²² Martha Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Black women.²³

Tate begins in the antebellum period, but also acknowledges the significance of the early evangelicals like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, and understands them not just as preachers, but also as abolitionists. She also discusses republican motherhood in relation to Black women's activism. Tate's interest in labor and the market economy leads her to begin in the 1830s. I am interested in the evolution of Black women's activism, which requires starting in the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods. While we are asking very different questions, Gayle Tate and I both place women's lives, activities, and concerns at the center of our interpretive analysis of Black women. In many ways, my research builds up to where Tate's study begins.

Methodology

I organize this historical work using periodization based in the watersheds of African American life as opposed to simply superimposing the timeline of national history. I also focus on generational sweeps to identify how Black women's activism was evolving over time and in relationship to the changing world around them. Re-thinking periodization within the context of Black women's lives allows me to center women's activism during periods not generally considered.

This study's methodology privileges Black women's voices by using their speeches, political pamphlets, memoirs and autobiographies to frame my discussion. Literary scholars like William Andrews and Marilyn Richardson were the first to

²³ Gayle T Tate, *Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830-1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003).

recognize the significance of Black women's writings and Black women's voices.²⁴ I follow the models these scholars provide by focusing on the significance of women's records. However, rather than looking at the literary significance of Black women's work, I focus on their historical significance as a lens into their activism and the Black freedom struggle.

Dorothy Sterling's documentary history *We Are Your Sisters*, has been an invaluable source and example.²⁵ Her edited volume of writings by and about Black women covers almost the entire nineteenth century and explores both the North and the South. It contains a wealth of letters, memoirs, newspaper articles, and oral histories that unravel the history and experiences of nineteenth century Black women, in their own voice. Sterling's work has been a tremendous resource and her notes have been like a treasure chest of primary source leads. Sterling's documentation shows that activism was a central theme in Black women's lives throughout the nineteenth century.

This dissertation is also grounded in archival research specific to the Abolitionist Movement. I have explored personal papers, and the records of various antislavery societies, as well as major repositories such as the Samuel J. May Antislavery Collection and the Black Abolitionist Papers. Additionally, I examined public census records, city directories, local tax records, wills, and obituaries, that help identify Black women in terms of residency, occupation, community connections, income, and activism. Significantly, since these sources do not provide an internal

²⁴ William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2000); Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

²⁵ Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*.

perspective of Black women, they exemplify the many challenges I faced when seeking to center Black women's voices and experiences. Even still, by placing race and gender at the center of my interpretation, these sources have helped me position Black women within a broader context of their existence.

I examine the organizational records of the Abolitionist Movement, cognizant that Black women were often marginalized within these groups. I look for Black women in the official records but also interrogate their absence. I have been able to piece together many of the experiences of colonial, revolutionary, early national and antebellum Black women by simply reading against the grain of sources. This involves a specific kind of puzzle work that takes into account the racial oppression and gender subordination that Black women contended with when working with White women and Black and White men. Knowing for instance, that the Ladies New York Female Anti-Slavery Society refused to admit Black women led me to investigate organizations that Black women did belong to and to observe for example, that the Black Ladies Literary Society in New York City was primarily an Abolitionist organization.

Antebellum Black newspapers have been especially important in helping me unravel Black women's activism. They reveal what was important to Black people, what was happening in their communities, and the ways in which their struggle to survive was instrumental to the Abolitionist Movement. These journals contain articles, advertisements, interviews, and meeting announcements that have helped me uncover the attitudes, opinions, and activities of Black women. I include the *Liberator* in my definition of Black newspapers because African Americans were responsible for

its funding, dissemination, audience, subscriptions, and overall success especially during the first few years of the *Liberator's* life. Moreover, the “Ladies Section” of the *Genius* began a tradition copied by the *Liberator* in 1833. Both were venues for African American women to publicly add their voice to antislavery debate and other reforms.

My contribution to the fields of African American and women’s history emphasizes the long history of Black women’s role in the freedom struggle and their centrality to the Abolitionist Movement. Moreover, my study suggests ways of creating new categories (spirituality, education, and communalism) for examining Black women’s crucial participation and activism in fomenting change.

CHAPTER 1

“FOR THE LOVE OF FREEDOM” (1735-1808):

MANUMISSIONS, PETITIONS, AND GOD-GIVEN RIGHTS

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Afric's* happy seat;
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

- Phillis Wheatley, 1773 “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”¹

Notable Black women of the late colonial period merged American Revolutionary rhetoric with spirituality, race-pride, and self-determination. Lucy Terry Prince, Jenny Slew, and Phillis Wheatley are critical for an exemplary understanding of the spectrum and scope of women's agitation and its impact on the long struggle for Black freedom in the United States. These women were organic intellectuals who not only championed their own individual freedom but developed arguments and practical paths for others. We see this in their methods of individual assertiveness, in their family and communal fealty, in their expressive art, and in their writings. We see this in their legal challenges to racism and bondage through petitions, court cases, and self-manumission.

Among the first women of record was Lucy Terry. From her 1735 Deerfield, Massachusetts baptism, when she was approximately ten or eleven years old, it is

¹ Shields, *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 73–75.

surmised that she was born around 1724.² She was owned by Ebenezer and Abigail Wells and baptized by Congregationalist minister John Ashley, also a slave owner. Four other enslaved people were baptized that day: Cesar also owned by Ebenezer Wells, and others owned by his relatives. Prince family biographer Gretchen Gerzina notes, “[a]fter their baptisms, the five servants returned upstairs to the Negro and Indian [church] gallery, where they sat separated from whites.” It is significant that the first record of Lucy Terry is of her baptism because her religious background was a major part of her life and her world as a youngster. It also reflects how limited are the records of enslaved women. Information such as Terry’s birthplace, original name, and life before captivity have been lost.³

Information suggests that she was born in West Africa, kidnapped as a child, and forced to endure the brutal Middle Passage to the Americas. Evidence also suggests that in 1729 Boston slave trader Hugh Hall sold the child to the aspiring minister Samuel Terry of Enfield, Massachusetts. Before arriving in New England, she most likely passed through Barbados which at that time was the first landing site for most enslaved Africans sold in the North American British colonies. Slave trader Hall’s father was from Barbados. Thus, he had strong ties to slave traders on the island as well as customers throughout New England. He may have even orchestrated the private sale of Lucy to Ebenezer Wells in 1735 when Samuel Terry was drowning in debt.⁴

² Gretchen Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved out of Slavery and into Legend* (New York: Amistad, 2008), 66.

³ Gerzina, 67.

⁴ Gerzina, 64–66.

The Great Awakening

Lucy Terry was part of the religious revival movement known as the Great Awakening, and raised her children in this spiritual atmosphere. This religious explosion began in Europe in the 1720s but truly caught fire in the British American colonies. Preachers like Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen of New Jersey and New York, Gilbert Tennent of Pennsylvania, Jonathan Edwards of Massachusetts and especially British Methodist George Whitefield introduced a new brand of Christianity that focused on individual salvation, evangelical outreach, spiritual enthusiasm, a direct relationship with God, and spiritual egalitarianism. The new method was one of mass revivals where people spoke extemporaneously from the heart and engaged in visceral expressiveness (shouting, clapping, singing, etc. were all a part of the “joyful noise” on behalf of salvation). It was exciting, multi-dimensional, gospel-centered, and appealing to the masses. Hundreds, sometimes thousands of Whites, Blacks, and some Native Americans attended camp meetings of several days duration. The Great Awakening thrived for decades dying down around the same time that the American colonies moved towards revolution.⁵

The Great Awakening evangelical style was part of the larger Protestant rebellion against the Church of England and reflected the growing desire for a new “method” of bringing the church directly to the people. It democratized religion by removing the hierarchy between ministers and lay people. Although Black people were certainly not central to Great Awakening outreach, ministers welcomed

⁵ Jonathan Edwards’ church in Northampton was not that far from the town of Deerfield, where Lucy lived. For discussion of the Great Awakening see Sammons and Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth*, 91–92.

everyone, especially the poor, the racially oppressed, women, and the enslaved. The inclusiveness promoted by Great Awakening preachers, the emphasis on a “warm hearted” religion, and openness toward physical expression greatly appealed to the daughters and sons of Africa. However, the emphasis on spiritual egalitarianism must have been most appealing to Lucy Terry and others who had been baptized in segregated churches.

Yet, the majority of Blacks unable to attend camp meetings probably remained committed to their traditional spiritual beliefs. Lucy Terry’s neighbor, Jenny Cole for example, never converted. As a teenager around 1739, Jenny Cole and her infant son were purchased by Rev. John Ashley. While having her son baptized, she never accepted Christianity. Jenny retained a strong memory of Africa and always longed to return with her son someday. She was part of the small but notable Black community in Deerfield, the majority of whom were enslaved and lived in “ones and twos with white families.” Free Blacks in Deerfield, though small in number, nevertheless represented possibilities of life beyond bondage in the colonial period.⁶

There was still a significant Native American presence in New England at this time. The Deerfield raid on August 25, 1746 highlights the Native American nations that were still fighting with European colonists to maintain their land. Lucy Terry was about 21 years old when she composed the “Bars Fight” that recounted the violence and tension over land. Her narrative poem sheds light on how enslaved Africans were positioned within the conflict. On the surface, the “Bars Fight” could be interpreted as acceptance of or even reverence to the English colonists occupying native land. A

⁶ Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, 72.

more nuanced reading suggests there was more to the narrative that concerned early Black women's history and self-determination.⁷ First, it was a testament to the ways in which Terry had mastered the English language, which was foreign to her. It also suggests Terry was self-taught. She had no formal training and the "Bars Fight" was an example of practicing the oral tradition of history and of storytelling that was sacred to her African homeland. Although some have attributed her style to the English tradition, others recognize that the ballad's long form is consistent with the African tradition.⁸ Also the "Bars Fight" reflected her mastery of satire in the English language in the tradition of the African American trickster.⁹ Most recently, Terry's ballad has been considered satire that mocks the Native American "captivity narratives" emerging amongst the English colonists. Lucy Terry was surely aware of the irony of an enslaved African retelling a story that centered European colonists as victims.¹⁰ Yet, she could not have written it in any other tone, knowing that her enslavers would be among the listeners.¹¹

There is also the reality that enslaved Africans were sometimes pitted against Native Americans who faced a different type of oppression at the hands of Europeans. Terry's husband Abijah Prince took up arms against those Native Americans aligned with the French in exchange for freedom. Prince was 18 years older than Lucy Terry and had also spent the majority of his life enslaved. He was enslaved as early as

⁷ Harris, *Executing Race*, 80.

⁸ Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*; Harris, *Executing Race*.

⁹ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–89.

¹⁰ Harris, *Executing Race*, 80.

¹¹ Lucy Terry used her narrative poem as a site activism in a way similar to what Nancy Cott explores in her discussion of how White women camouflaged their engagement with politics. See Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*.

twelve years old by Benjamin Doolittle in Northfield, Massachusetts. Military service was his ticket to freedom and the first step in freeing Lucy Terry.

The couple probably met when Prince travelled to Deerfield with his owner to purchase supplies. The local shop owner, Elijah Williams, was down the road from the Wells' home where Lucy Terry lived. Williams was also part of the militia and on March 1, 1747, "Abijah Prince was one of nine men who enlisted in Capt. Elijah Williams's company in Deerfield," to serve in King George's War.¹² Prince worked for Elijah Williams in Deerfield after the war ended in 1748. Evidence suggests that Prince pre-arranged to use his military salary and the money he earned working for Williams to purchase his freedom in 1751.¹³ Once free, Prince moved about 16 miles south to Northampton and to a much more sizeable Black community. There he probably began to seriously court Lucy Terry, including saving money to purchase her freedom. They married on May 17, 1756, and she became Lucy Terry Prince. Although still enslaved when she married, Lucy was free before the birth of their first child Cesar, born on January 14, 1757. Cesar Prince is believed to be the first freeborn African American in Deerfield, which Lucy and Abijah Prince made sure to register in their small town.¹⁴ This was around the same time that a young girl named Bett, enslaved in Claverick NY, moved to Sheffield Massachusetts.

Bett, whose name was short for Elizabeth among the Dutch, was born around

¹² Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, 37.

¹³ Elijah Williams may have helped facilitate. The records for Abijah's enlistment, and also mentions of his salary come from Elijah Williams's date book. This date book, would also hold records of the purchases Lucy and Elijah made at the shop, which included pen and paper. Williams was also present at major points in the Princes' life, including the Baptism of their first child Cesar, which further suggests an ongoing relationship between Abijah and Elijah.

¹⁴ Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, 86.

1742 in the Hudson Valley. She was owned by the Dutchman Pieter Hogeboom, in Claverack, NY, before becoming the property of Colonel John Ashley and his wife Hannah, in Sheffield, Massachusetts. Hannah was Pieter's daughter, so the Ashley's most likely inherited Bet when Pieter Hogeboom died in 1758.¹⁵ Bett's move to Sheffield is another example of how an enslaved person could be sold at an instant if their owner's circumstances changed. Death, like debt, was one of the many reasons that an enslaved person could be ripped from the only home they had ever known. Bett's early life, like other young girls, was shaped by family separation, the brutality of human bondage, the loss of childhood, and the toils of domestic work. Her story (which will be discussed in chapter 2) was central to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts during the early national period. Until then self-manumission, as was the case with the Princes', was the only option.

Raising a Free Family

It is notable that Lucy Terry Prince gave birth not long after obtaining her freedom. Although it is unclear when her manumission took place, Lucy and Abijah certainly did everything in their power to make sure she was free before her children were born. She had six children, three boys and three girls, between 1757 and 1769. They were all born free because their mother was free. In addition, the Princes made sure all of their children were baptized.¹⁶

Lucy Terry Prince's family was her immediate concern. She provided a

¹⁵ Emilie Piper and Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman* (Salisbury, Conn.: Housatonic Heritage, 2010), 45–46.

¹⁶ Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, 86–87.

foundation for them centered on religion and education, which she believed was the key to survival and advancement. She was revered for her commitment to the Christian faith. She was also remembered for her ability to recite and discuss the Bible in great detail, sharing scripture with her family and neighbors.¹⁷ Beyond sharing God's word with others, Lucy Prince certainly used the Bible to teach herself and her children to read.

Literacy in itself was a key to self-manumission. Although Congregationalists did not promote emancipation among their slaves, they did promote literacy. The Quakers provide another model. Women enslaved by Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quakers sometimes had a more feasible opportunity to secure freedom from bondage. Quakers were the first sect in the colonies to challenge ownership of slaves among their denomination. Black women benefitted largely from this shift in Quaker polity.

Quakers and the Doctrine of Divine Presence

The Quakers had a long history of speaking out against slavery beginning with their British founder George Fox in the 1650s. The antislavery position was based on the doctrine of Divine Presence, a "central concept of Quakerism...that anyone could experience God directly and inwardly, regardless of gender, nationality, or social status."¹⁸ God was in all people, and no one had the power to own God. Quakers also believed in the Golden Rule, that one should do unto others as they wished others to do unto them. They also rejected all violence. In principle, Quakers believed slavery

¹⁷ Harris, *Executing Race*, 154.

¹⁸ Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 6.

was inconsistent with Christianity. Yet, Quaker antislavery ideals impacted the American colonies slowly, and the push back was initially isolated to individual Friends and local meetings. It took nearly a century for the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting to take an official position against slavery.¹⁹

The first action was in 1758, when the Yearly Meeting urged local meetings to “discipline” those engaged in the slave trade. This led to a significant amount of manumissions over the next twenty years. Quaker minister John Woolman of New Jersey had the most significant impact on the changing policy against slavery, preaching an antislavery message throughout the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting Region which included Quakers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and parts of Delaware and Maryland. Then, in 1776, the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting officially banned slave ownership. Those who failed to comply would be excommunicated. This decision, was no doubt influenced by the larger debates around freedom and equality that were bubbling throughout the nation. Manumission by Quaker owners, thus became a major avenue for Black freedom in the Mid-Atlantic colonies during the Revolutionary period.²⁰

Suing for Freedom

Enslaved people in New England, did not benefit from Quaker manumissions, but they did take advantage of the legal system in New England that allowed enslaved people to sue in court. New England was unique in that although legally property,

¹⁹ Soderlund, 3–7.

²⁰ Soderlund, 3–7.

enslaved people were still considered persons in the court of law. This as historians Adams and Peck demonstrate, led to “more opportunities for enslaved women as well as men to become free through the courts than anywhere else in the British North American colonies.”²¹

In 1716 Joan Jackson of Cambridge, Massachusetts became the first Black woman to successfully sue for her freedom. Thus, Black women were arguing for their freedom long before the American Revolution and decades before slavery was abolished in the Northeast.²² These earlier cases focused on the individual wrong of slave owners and violations of colonial laws. Jenny Slew, born in 1719 in Ipswich, Massachusetts of a free White woman and an enslaved Black man filed a civil suit in 1765 against John Whipple Jr., for kidnapping and enslaving her for three years. Slew argued that she was being held illegally because she was born free. This was in accordance with colonial law stipulating that a child’s status was determined by the condition of the mother.²³ Slew lost her initial suit but won her appeal in the Supreme

²¹ Adams and Peck, *Love of Freedom*, 2.

²² At least thirteen Black women initiated freedom suits in the British colonies before American independence was officially recognized. There were sixteen other cases that involved Black men, along with a number of other formal petitions for freedom in New England between 1773 and 1783. The majority of lawsuits and petitions were filed in Massachusetts, but there were also freedom suits in Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut] In Rhode Island there was a case in 1729, and then in 1772. In New Hampshire there was a case in 1742 and then in 1750, and in Connecticut there was one in 1773 For more on these cases, see Adams and Peck, 127–29.

²³ This became part of the Massachusetts Bodies of Liberty in 1670. The Massachusetts Bodies of Liberty was the first legal code in New England. It was established by the Massachusetts General Court in 1641. Section 91 recognized and protected the enslavement of “such strangers who willingly sell themselves or are sold,” making Massachusetts the first British American colony to legally recognize slavery. This section was amended in 1671 to include the clause that children inherited slave status from their mother.

Court in 1766.²⁴

Whipple had argued that Slew misrepresented herself as a “spinster” when she had been married. (Slew had actually been married twice, both times to enslaved men.) The loophole however, as the lawyer John Adams later pointed out, was that slave marriages were not recognized.²⁵ Slew was freed in 1766, on the grounds that she had been born to a free mother, and was awarded eight pounds in damages.²⁶

Adams, who was a lawyer at the time of Slew’s case, kept close tabs on several freedom suits before the American Revolution. He kept records of court rulings and also wrote years later to historian Jeremy Belknap about various arguments that were made against slavery in these freedom suits. These all preceded the argument made by the Americans who rebelled against the British.²⁷ “The Arguments in Favour of their Liberty” Adams wrote, “were much the same as have been urged since in Pamphlets and Newspapers in Debates in Parliament &c. arising from the Rights of Mankind.”²⁸

Jenny Slew’s case unfolded around the same time that the conflict between the

²⁴ Slew lost her initial case because, according to colonial law, married women did not have the legal right to file a civil suit. Her appeal was almost dismissed for this reason as well. For more on Jenny Slew’s case, see Adams and Peck, *Love of Freedom*, 137–38.

²⁵ “Adam’s Copy of the Declaration, and Report,” November 1766, Legal Papers of John Adams, Volume 2, Massachusetts Historical Society, Digital Edition, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?id=ADMS-05-02-02-0004-0002-0001>. [Also the Legal Papers of John Adams, Volume 2 (Editorial Note) in MHS – Digital Edition.]

²⁶ “MHS Digital Edition: Adams Papers,” accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?id=ADMS-05-02-02-0004-0001>.

²⁷ “Adam’s Copy of the Declaration, and Report”; “Adam’s Minutes of the Argument,” November 1766, Legal Papers of John Adams, Volume 2, Massachusetts Historical Society, Digital Edition, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?id=ADMS-05-02-02-0004-0002-0002>; “John Adams to Jeremy Belknap,” March 21, 1795, Founders Online, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-1659>. Jeremy Belknap was a historian during the colonial period, and one of the founders of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791. Belknap also wrote the first history of New Hampshire and about these cases decades later. He probably discussed these cases with his wife Abigail Adams as well, who was interested in both women’s rights, and the plight of the enslaved.

²⁸ “Adams to Belknap.”

American colonies and Britain began.²⁹ There had been violent protests in response to the 1765 Stamp Act, that imposed new taxes on the American colonies, in part, to pay for the French and Indian War. At the beginning, protestors were mostly concerned with their rights as Englishmen, which they felt were being violated by British Parliament. However, over the next ten years, the issue shifted from taxes and representation to natural rights and independence.

The Natural Rights, or the “Rights of Man,” debate was rooted in the Enlightenment, which emphasized the laws of nature, individual freedom, and human equality. Essentially, the Natural Rights philosophy rejected the class-based system of feudalism, which placed a premium on one’s heredity. Beginning with the Stamp Act of 1765, the American Revolution initially focused on the issue of “taxation without representation.” In a sense, the Americans were asserting their rights as Englishmen. However, by the 1770’s the Natural Rights philosophy had taken center stage, and patriots began referring to themselves as slaves who needed to be liberated from England. The fight was now over “inalienable”—meaning God given—rights. These arguments were clearly not lost on enslaved people.

Phillis Wheatley and Her God-given Right to be Free

The international poet and writer of letters Phillis Wheatley added her voice to debates about liberty during the revolutionary era. Wheatley was kidnapped from the West Coast of Africa and arrived in Boston around 1760, when she was approximately

²⁹ I follow the lead of historians Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Peck, who used the Stamp Act Crisis as a “chronological dividing line” when thinking about these early petitions and freedom suits in their work on Black women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England. “Among the fourteen suits of black women, nine were brought after 1763.” Adams and Peck, *Love of Freedom*, 136.

7 years old. She like so many before her, had to endure the unimaginable horrors of the Middle Passage. Wheatley was enslaved for thirteen years by the prominent John and Susanna Wheatley of Boston, Massachusetts. By some accounts, Wheatley was considered privileged because her owners recognized her genius and provided her with an education and religious autonomy. Her education went beyond basic reading and writing, as she engaged with classical literature, history, philosophy, poetry, and theology. She was also a linguist fluent in English, Latin and possibly Greek.³⁰ Even still, Wheatley always understood the evils of bondage and believed it was her God-given right to be free.

Wheatley, who was thirty years younger than Lucy Terry Prince, was the first to publish a book of poetry. In 1773. Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in England with the help of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, who was first awed by Wheatley's elegy to the evangelical preacher George Whitfield in 1770. Wheatley sent a copy of the poem to Lady Huntingdon, an evangelical leader and dear friend of Whitfield's. As historian Margaret Washington argues, Wheatley's "motives were spiritual and a freedom quest."³¹ Three years later, the Countess supported Wheatley's publication in England, which led the already well-known poet and letter writer to become an international celebrity.

Wheatley's poem, "To the Right Honourable William Earl of Dartmouth,"

³⁰ Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 40–41.

³¹ Margaret Washington, "Religion, Reform, and Antislavery," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*, eds. Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa G. Materson (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 418.

mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was part of this compilation. In it, she gave voice to what so many revolutionary era Black women experienced as they struggled for their freedom. Wheatley's "Love of Freedom" could be best understood in the context of her kidnapping and enslavement. The pain and sorrow she embodied was both personal and communal. Human bondage had not only caused her "excruciating" pain, but also her parents, from whom she was "seiz'd." A deeply religious young woman, Wheatley's prayer was that "others may never feel" the horrors of slavery.

Wheatley was manumitted in 1773, not long after the publication *Poems on Various Subjects* and her return from England. Wheatley acknowledged her friends in England for assisting in her manumission, suggesting that she may have only agreed to return to the United States if Susanna Wheatley agreed to free her upon return. Wheatley may have been heavily involved in this negotiation. She was no doubt aware of the 1772 Somerset decision "in which Chief Justice Lord Mansfield declared a slave's right to remain free in Britain," which gave her great leverage to negotiate her freedom.³² Wheatley's arguments about freedom in her writings, and in her actions, propelled her into the contemporary debates about freedom, justice, and liberty in this moment. She was often leading the charge, as she penned several letters addressing these issues with prominent figures in both England and the American colonies.

In her 1774 letter to the clerical Mohegan Reverend Samson Occum, Wheatley describes her "Love of Freedom" as a "Principal" that God had "implanted" in all

³² Washington, "Religion, Reform and Antislavery," 418.

human beings.³³ Put simply, freedom was an inalienable right. For Wheatley, it wasn't enough that she had been manumitted. All enslaved people had the God-given right to be free. Wheatley's political ideas and her spiritual prophecies were an early form of the African American Jeremiad. Her writings also reveal the intersection of religious beliefs, life experiences, and organic intellectualism, that was guiding the revolutionary spirit of Black women at this time.

Wheatley's letters were addressing the issue of natural rights that was at the center of the independence movement. The focus on universal or God-given rights—led many to question slavery's existence in the modern world. Thomas Paine's 1776 political pamphlet *Common Sense*, for example, argued that slavery was “contrary to the light of nature, to every principle of Justice and Humanity, and even good policy.”³⁴ Political leaders throughout the American colonies debated whether or not slavery was compatible with the principles they were fighting for and the nation they hoped to build. This however, was never a question for Black revolutionaries who saw a clear connection between their struggle for freedom, and the colonial fight for independence.

Legislative Petitions

As the revolutionary conflict escalated, Blacks began to challenge patriot leadership, demanding they be true to the sentiment expressed by the Declaration of Independence, that “all men were created equal, and endowed by their Creator with

³³ The Wheatley's were Congregationalists, and felt it their duty to educate Wheatley. Their religious beliefs, however did not stop them from owning slaves.

³⁴ Quoted in: Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 96.

certain unalienable rights.” This was seen clearly in the petitions for freedom that enslaved people drafted, beginning in 1773. Petitions were different from the court cases because they were often ignored.³⁵ Nevertheless, Black revolutionaries used petitions to add their voice to the Independence Movement, and the natural rights debate.

Most petitions were on behalf of entire communities, but none of the freedom petitions that we know of were signed by women. Nevertheless, given the activity of Black women in the courtrooms, they were certainly part of the larger community discussions when these petitions were drafted. Black women were related by blood and circumstances to the Black men who did sign the documents. Dinah Chase for example, married Prince Whipple, who signed a petition for freedom with the New Hampshire State Legislature in 1779.³⁶ The two married in 1781. Chase turned 21, and was freed by her master that same year. Prince Whipple was manumitted three years later in 1784. William Whipple, Prince Whipple’s owner, took eight years to officially manumit him even though he was a signer of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. There is no question that Dinah and Prince Whipple discussed their joint quest for freedom and progress during these years.³⁷

Freedom suits and petitions were just one form of resistance expressed by

³⁵ Most petitions, that we know of came from Massachusetts, and received no response, but a petition from twenty enslaved men to the New Hampshire State Legislature in 1779 did get some attention. The petition was published in the New Hampshire Gazette underneath a note by the editor that it had been printed for the “amusement” of the readers. Mark J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage* (Durham: New Hampshire, 2004).

³⁶ Sammons and Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth*; Michelle Arnosky Sherburne, *Slavery & the Underground Railroad in New Hampshire* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2016).

³⁷ Dinah Chase Whipple went on to become a founding member of the Ladies African Charitable Society, the first known mutual aid society in New England, established in 1796, the same year that her husband died. For more see Sammons and Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth*, 91–92.

Black revolutionaries during the American Revolution. There was, as Gary Nash describes, a “mass rebellion” of enslaved people who took advantage of the chaos and emancipated themselves. Many took shelter with the British, who began enticing Black men to take up arms against the Patriots in 1775 in exchange for freedom. Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation was specific to adult males, but Black men often fled with the women and children in their lives. By 1779 British General Clinton invited all slaves to flock to British lines and receive freedom. Even single women took it upon themselves to stay close to British camps at this time, taking on various roles as washerwomen, cooks, and even prostitutes, making clear that they sought freedom by any means necessary.³⁸ Some women came from as far Savannah, Georgia and arrived in New York City seeking and finding shelter and freedom once they were behind these British lines.³⁹

This freedom march was the first time women were able to rebel against slavery in massive numbers. According to historian Gary Nash, Black women constituted about one-third of the enslaved people “claiming liberty under flight to the British.”⁴⁰ Lord Dunmore was not looking to free Black women, and yet many Black women were innovative enough to stay close to the Loyalist camps. Whether it be through court cases, petitions, self-emancipation, or taking their chances with the British, Black women used the ideologies fueling the American Revolution as they struggled for their own freedom, which included racial equality. This was significant

³⁸ Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 22.

³⁹ Library and Archives Canada, “Carleton Papers – Book of Negroes, 1783,” July 16, 2015, <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/book-of-negroes/Pages/introduction.aspx>.

⁴⁰ Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution*, First Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 27.

not just in obtaining freedom, but also for surviving and advancing in the new republic after the war.

CHAPTER 2
FOUNDING MOTHERS (1776-1808):
THE SOCIO-POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK OF
“STRUGGLE”

“I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, all men are born equal and that every man has a right to freedom. I am no dumb critter; won’t the law give me my freedom?”

- Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman, 1781¹

Black women were even more assertive in their struggle for freedom and equality after the British American colonies declared independence. Elizabeth Freeman, Belinda, and Catherine Ferguson are examples of Black women who mobilized themselves, their families, and their community as they transitioned from slavery to freedom during the revolutionary and early national periods. While the new nation was defining itself, Black women challenged state constitutions, had spiritual awakenings, engaged in mutual aid, and started the first Black schools. This generation of activism began during the American Revolution and within the context of women’s everyday lives. For many, self-manumission, inspired by the revolutionary fever of the time, was the first step.

Enslaved Black women’s close proximity to many patriot leaders gave them access to important information, strategies, and perspectives. As domestics, they were constantly exposed to their owners and hence to wartime affairs. Because it took a community effort to raise money for filing petitions and building institutions, Black

¹ Miss. Sedgewick [sic], “Slavery in New England,” 422.

women also contributed financially. Given their proximity to patriot leaders and to their gatherings, some women were helpful in crafting arguments that drew from the American Revolution's philosophical rhetoric. They understood the logic of the revolutionary ideology driving moves towards independence, and they recognized the deep contradictions in the patriot cause.

Bett's "Declaration of Independence"

Enslaved Bett, in Sheffield, Massachusetts, understood the contradictions immediately the first time she heard the Declaration of Independence read during the closing months of the war. She was then almost forty years old. "Won't the law give me my freedom" she asked, pointing out the hypocrisy of all people being "declared" equal while Black people were still enslaved.² This argument became the basis of a lawsuit she and a man named Brom filed against their owner, Col. John Ashley, in 1781. Their case, *Brom and Bett v Ashley*, set an important precedent for the 1783 abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.³ It is unclear how Brom got involved but evidence suggests that Bett initiated their case and recruited their lawyers, Theodore Sedgwick and Tappan Reeve, two prominent men active in the American Revolution.⁴

² Miss. Sedgewick [sic], "Slavery in New England," in *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. XXXIV (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), 418–22.

³ The Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling in *Walker v. Jennison*, ruled that slavery violated the state constitution in 1783. The decision in this case cited the *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* decision as precedent. For more on *Walker v. Jennison*, see A. Leon Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 9–92. See also, Arthur Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 25, no. 4 (October 1, 1968): 614–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1916801>. For more on the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts see Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 1st ed, The Merrill Jensen Lectures in Constitutional Studies (Madison: Madison House, 1990).

⁴ Emilie Piper and David Levinson suggest that Brom was added because he was a man, either because of the laws against married women filing suit, or as a way to strengthen the case. They also state that

Bett, or Mumbet as she was affectionately called, was an example of how enslaved people were connected to prominent patriot leaders during the American Revolution.⁵ Her owner, John Ashley, embodied the contradiction of the American struggle for independence. He was a leading lawyer in the Southern Berkshires, a member of the General Court in Boston, and an active supporter of the Revolution. Ashley was also one of the most outspoken men in Sheffield on issues of natural rights. Nevertheless, he, like so many patriot leaders, believed *freedom* included the right to *own* human beings. Ashley owned five slaves and while this paled in comparison to slave owners elsewhere, it placed him among the wealthiest and most influential men in western Massachusetts.⁶

In 1773, Ashley was appointed the chair of a Special Committee to “assess the grievances of Americans in general,” and those in Sheffield in particular.⁷ The Committee, which included Theodore Sedgwick, met in Ashley’s home and produced the Sheffield Declaration, “a petition against tyranny and a manifesto for individual rights” that was accepted by the “freeholders and other inhabitants” of the town of Sheffield.⁸ Sedgwick was the principal author of the Sheffield Declaration, which was written as a series of resolves. The first resolve stated: “that mankind in a state of

Brom belonged to John Ashley’s son. Piper and Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman*, 68. Theodore Sedgwick had served as an officer during the American Revolution. He was a lawyer, who had moved to Sheffield during the Revolution. He went on to be a delegate to the fourth Continental Congress and senator from Massachusetts. He was the fourth Speaker of the House, and was later appointed to the Massachusetts Supreme Court. For more on Theodore Sedgwick, see Piper and Levinson, 63–69.

⁵ She was called Mumbet by both the Black and White children in the Ashely house and the larger community. Sojourner Truth’s mother, named Elizabeth was also called Bett and Maumau Bett by her Dutch owners. Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America* (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 10.

⁶ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman*, 58.

⁷ “Sheffield Declaration,” 1773, http://www.constitution.org/bcp/sheffield_declaration.html.

⁸ “Sheffield Declaration.”

nature are equal, free, and independent of each other, and have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of their lives, their liberty and property.”⁹ Ashley, like many other slave owners, talked openly about the Revolution in front of his slaves. Little did he realize that Black people would connect their own struggle for freedom with what they were hearing. Bett may have even referenced the Sheffield Resolves when she asked Theodore Sedgwick to take her case.¹⁰

Initially, Bett emancipated herself by running away, but she eventually needed to seek counsel to become legally free. Bett had always expressed a self-determined spirit, but it was the need to protect her family that ultimately led her to flee. According to most accounts, she fled the Ashley estate after an altercation with her mistress, Hannah Ashley. The fight began when Hannah attacked Bett’s *sister* Lizzy, who may actually have been her daughter. Hannah had accused Lizzy of stealing, and was threatening to strike her with a hot shovel. Bett intervened and “took the blow,” which caused a wound so deep on her arm that she took the scar to her grave. She was proud of standing up to her mistress; when asked about the fight, she stated that “Madam had the worst of it.” The mistress would never threaten Lizzy again.¹¹

Bett most likely met her lawyers, Sedgwick and Reeve, in her master’s home. She also had a direct relationship with Sedgwick, having nursed him back to health in

⁹ “Sheffield Declaration.” Also quoted in: Piper and Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman*, 63.

¹⁰ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman*, 65–66.

¹¹ Miss. Sedgewick [sic], “Slavery in New England,” 418. This story is first written by Harriet Martineau, but becomes the main staple, and most referenced when recounting Freeman’s life. Miss. Sedgewick [sic], 418–21. Piper and Levinson, point out that it is unclear whether or not these events take place. Their argument is because there was never a record of a “Lizzy” listed as her sister. I believe it is very likely that this is what happened, and that it was not her sister, but her daughter, who, also named Elizabeth, was likely to have been called “Lizzy” for short. The story itself is also very plausible, given the known relationship between slave mistresses and Black women, which were often incredibly abusive. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, New edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

1775 when he had typhoid fever.¹² She was a domestic slave who was also a nurse and midwife to both Blacks and Whites in and outside of the Ashley home. She was part of a group of skilled slaves often hired out by their owners. Slave owners had sole right to these earnings, even though many of those hired out were able to negotiate keeping a portion for themselves. This allowed some to eventually purchase their freedom. Bett probably saved the money she earned as a nurse and midwife to pay for her case.¹³

Bett adopted the name Elizabeth Freeman after she won her case in 1781. Bett had always been short for Elizabeth, but naming herself Freeman was a declaration and celebration of her freedom.¹⁴ Freeman often said that she would have given her life, “just to stand one minute on God’s airth [*sic*] a free woman.”¹⁵ Her struggle for independence however, like most free Black women in the early national period had just begun. She went on to work as a paid domestic servant for Sedgwick and his family for the next twenty-seven years.

Freeman’s case reflects how Black people adopted revolutionary ideology

¹² Piper and Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman*, 47. See also *The Berkshire Hills* 1, no. 7 (March 1, 1901), 84.

¹³ Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Peck state that it cost approximately two pounds to file a suit at that time, and points to an example of one lawyer, Mathew Robinson, who waived fees for two Black women he represented in court. Peck and Adam, suggest that this was likely a common practice, since Black women had little or no money. Adams and Peck, *Love of Freedom*, 129. While this is true, it overlooks the fact that some enslaved people, who were considered “skilled,” were able to save money over time. This was more likely with men who had more access to skilled positions, but it is not far-fetched to think a woman as skilled as Freeman may have, over time, been able to save up money towards her case. This possibility also gives insight to the real likelihood that Freeman had been plotting to sue for her freedom for a long time.

¹⁴ Sojourner Truth’s mother, named Elizabeth was also called Betsy and Maumau Bett by her Dutch owners. Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America*, 10. Taking on names that reflected freedom was part of a larger trend among recently free people. With the exception of direct quotes, the remainder of this chapter will refer to her as Elizabeth Freeman, rather than Bett, in honor of the name she chose for herself.

¹⁵ Miss. Sedgwick [*sic*], “Slavery in New England,” 422.

when considering their right to freedom during this era. Black freedom seekers merged the Enlightenment rhetoric of the American Revolution with their own spirituality, race-pride, and self-determination. While there was nothing new about Black people's will for freedom, the American Revolution provided an avenue with which to link their plight as bond people to America's struggle for independence. Mumbet and others identified the contradictions inherent in doctrines based on the principle of "liberty and justice for all," that did not include the abolition of slavery. Black people considered the Declaration of Independence to be in line with their basic human rights and desire to be free.

Elizabeth Freeman's story also highlights the role family played in the revolutionary ideology that Black women embraced as activists. Her self-emancipation was spurred by the need to protect her family. This was a continued theme for Freeman who worked her entire life so that she could leave an inheritance for her daughter. She is an example of the pioneering role revolutionary and early national era women played in securing freedom for themselves, and then a livelihood for their families. Self-manumission was revolutionary; so was creating a legacy of freedom for one's children. Freeman's resistance to her violent mistress was an individual act, but Black women also had communal responses as they created the building blocks necessary to ground and sustain free Black communities that developed throughout the Northeast.

Slavery's Demise in the Northeast

Slavery started to decline in the Northeast during the American Revolution.

The revolutionary spirit forced some Whites to rethink whether or not slavery should be permitted in the new Republic. Moreover, slavery did not reach large-scale proportions in the Northeast as it did in the South. Cooler Northern climates prevented large-scale plantation development, with a few exceptions in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. Although the majority of slave owners owned primarily domestics, northern states were deeply connected to the institution. The slave trade, financing, and industries in the North became increasingly tied to slavery.¹⁶

Vermont and Massachusetts were the only two states that abolished slavery immediately. Vermont was first in 1777; but was not part of the original thirteen colonies. Thus, Massachusetts was technically the first state to immediately abolish slavery in the United States. This was based on their 1781 State Constitution, but abolition did not occur until after the state Supreme Court ruling in *Walker v. Jennison*, in 1783. This case was part of a series of court cases involving an enslaved man named Quok Walker and his owner Nathaniel Jennison. This case went as far as the Massachusetts Supreme Court, that ruled slavery violated the Massachusetts State Constitution, citing Freeman's case (*Brom and Bett v. Ashley*) as precedent.¹⁷ Although this ruling effectively ended slavery in Massachusetts, some slave owners

¹⁶ Leon F Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 6–8; Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jennifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), xxvi; Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 1st ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 18–35.

¹⁷ Vermont Republic also abolished slavery, by virtue of their constitution, but they were not yet part of the United States. The Vermont Republic declared independence from both the American rebels and the British Empire in 1777. The new state constitution banned slavery, which had been negligible in the region prior to its Independence. The Vermont Republic did not join the United States until 1791. [citations]

were slow to comply.¹⁸

Such was the case for Jane Darby, whose owner “Mr. Ingersol” was still holding her in bondage after the *Walker v. Jennison* decision.¹⁹ Jane Darby was a self-emancipated woman from Lenox, Massachusetts. Darby fled to Sheffield sometime before 1785 when she married Agrippa Hull, the most famous Black man in Sheffield. Hull was known for his role in the American Revolution and had served alongside Lucy Terry Prince’s son, Cesar.²⁰ Hull worked for Theodore Sedgwick alongside Elizabeth Freeman, and Sedgwick helped negotiate Jane Darby’s release. Hull most likely met Jane Darby before she escaped to Sheffield and her marriage to Hull probably alerted Ingersol of her whereabouts.²¹

Elizabeth Freeman may have connected Darby with Sedgwick, since Freeman had a ten-year relationship with the lawyer, and was caring for the Sedgwick children. These two self-emancipated women certainly had a lot in common, representing the bookends of slavery’s demise in Massachusetts. Freeman’s case was the first to question whether or not slavery violated the state constitution. Darby did not go

¹⁸ The job of the Supreme Court was to make rulings based on the Constitution, but this did not include enforcement. One might think of the 20th century example of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, that desegregation of public schools, so much that the next year there was an additional ruling in *Brown 2*, that schools had to desegregate with “all deliberate speed.” While this comparison of gradual abolition, to the gradual approach to desegregation may seem to be a reach, it is significant to note the ways in which “gradualism” was used in both instances. In both cases, those who would consider themselves “moderate” called for a gradual approach to change. This was counter to the ways Black people resisted slavery in the early national period, and segregation, during the Civil Rights Era. Black people have always been at the forefront of an immediate approach to Black freedom.

¹⁹ Electa Fidelity Jones, *Stockbridge, Past and Present, or, Records of an Old Mission Station* (Springfield [Mass.] S. Bowles, 1854), <http://archive.org/details/stockbridgepast00jonerich>.

²⁰ Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, 133.

²¹ Hull like Freeman, worked for the Sedgwick’s for the next two decades. He however, was able to buy his own property by 1785, so he did not live with the Sedgwick’s like Freeman did. Lucy Prince’s son Festus also served in the American Revolution. He joined the militia on July 8, 1779 when he was only fifteen years old, before becoming part of the Continental Army. Gerzina, 135–36; Jones, *Stockbridge, Past and Present, or, Records of an Old Mission Station*.

through an official process, but she won the test case of whether or not slave owners would be held accountable to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Walker v. Jennison*.

Although some Massachusetts slave owners were slow to comply, the emancipation scenario was still better than other Northeastern states' gradual manumission. Gradual abolition was one of the clearest examples of how the Northeast privileged the economic interests of slave owners over the human rights of the enslaved. Moreover, gradual abolition laws reinforced the belief that Black people, slave or free, were destined to be a perpetual servant class. Whites still technically owned their labor, even though they were not called slaves.

Although Pennsylvania passed the first gradual abolition legislation on March 1, 1780, the law did not free anyone born before 1780, and anyone born to an enslaved woman after that date was bound to indentured servitude until they reached 28 years old. Connecticut was the second state to pass a gradual abolition law in 1784, followed by Rhode Island in 1785, New York in 1799, and New Jersey in 1804. There were notable differences but in all cases the laws did not immediately free anyone in bondage and guaranteed slave owners a generation of free labor after the legislation was passed.²² New Hampshire was an exception because although gradual abolition took place, there were never any laws passed. New Hampshire's Constitution was similar to Massachusetts in that it declared: "all men are born equal and independent."

²² In Connecticut children of enslaved women were bound until the age of 25. In Rhode Island, apprenticeship lasted until the age of eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys. In New York males were indentured until the age of twenty-eight and women until the age of twenty-five, and in New Jersey, females were held until the age of twenty-one and males until the age of twenty-five. Moreover, the 1799 law in New York only freed people born after 1799. All those before were enslaved until 1827. This is significant because New York had the largest slave population. Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation*, 226–27; McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 177–79.

There are no records of court cases that challenged the continuation of slavery in New Hampshire, however 158 enslaved people were counted in the first census conducted in 1790.²³

The Quakers, who had already taken an official stance against slavery, were big supporters of the gradual abolition legislation. They were among the first Whites to explicitly organize against slavery during the early national period. In 1787, the Society of the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage founded by Quakers, was reorganized as the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, more commonly known as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS).²⁴ The PAS had members beyond the Society of Friends, but the Quakers still dominated the ranks.²⁵ They worked hard to ensure that gradual abolition laws were followed, and that Black people were able to transition from indentured servitude to paid work. However, as the premise of gradual-abolition laws makes clear, being anti-slavery was not the same as being in favor of racial equality.

Theodore Sedgwick, one of the earliest members of the PAS was inconsistent on slavery.²⁶ Although he had been Elizabeth Freeman's lawyer, he was also known for arguing on behalf of slave owners as long as their actions were supported by law.

²³ Department of Congress and Labor Bureau of the Census, S.N.D. North Director, "Heads of Families Taken at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790, New Hampshire" (Washington Government Printing Office, 1907), 8, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1907/dec/heads-of-families.html>.

²⁴ Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Pennsylvania. General Assembly, *The Constitution of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of Free Negroes, Unlawfully Held in Bondage: Begun In the Year 1774, and Enlarged On the Twenty-Third of April, 1787: To Which Are Added, the Acts of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, For the Gradual Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1788).

²⁵ Benjamin Franklin was among the first presidents under the re-organization. He was elected in 1787 and was not a Quaker. William E. Juhnke, "Benjamin Franklin's View of the Negro and Slavery," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 41, no. 4 (1974): 386.

²⁶ Adams and Peck, *Love of Freedom*, 140.

He attacked slavery in Massachusetts because it violated the state constitution, but he defended slavery in places where it did not. For example, there was a case in Connecticut, where he defended the slave owner “trying to reclaim a female slave.”²⁷ Sedgwick did not see this as hypocritical or inconsistent with his previous arguments because his ultimate allegiance was to protecting property rights and state laws. He was also a former slave owner who had paid domestics, including Elizabeth Freeman his entire adult life.

After she won her case, Freeman worked as a domestic servant for Sedgwick and his family for nearly three decades before she could afford to live on her own.²⁸ What did this mean? It meant that early national Black women spent the majority of their lives serving Whites. Even those with support and backing of prominent Whites had a long and hard road ahead. Even Elizabeth Freeman, who occupied one of the only skilled positions available to Black women as a nurse and midwife, could not support herself through that work alone.

Transitioning to Freedom - Belinda's Petition

Most Black women worked as domestics: cooking, washing, weaving, ironing, emptying and cleaning chamber pots, and hauling trash were just some of their responsibilities. Others included feeding barnyard animals, milking, and various outside chores. Work could be especially hard for older black women. Belinda, a seventy-year old formerly enslaved woman was left practically destitute after the war.

²⁷ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 70.

²⁸ Brom also went on to work for Theodore Sedgwick.

In 1783, after she was manumitted, Belinda petitioned the Massachusetts State Legislature to be compensated for her past labor. She had been enslaved by the Loyalist Isaac Royall, one of the wealthiest slave owners in Massachusetts before the Revolution.²⁹ Royall left behind his business, his property, and the twelve men and women he owned including Belinda and her disabled daughter Prine.³⁰ As an elderly woman, Belinda was left to fend for herself. With the support of other leading Blacks in the community, including Prince Hall, Belinda petitioned for an “annual pension” to be paid to her out of her former owner’s estate.³¹

Belinda’s petition declared that no one had a right to own another human being, or the fruits of their labor.³² Her petition highlighted the toll that slavery had taken, leaving her “face marked with the furrows of time” and her body “feebly bending under the oppression of years.” Belinda recognized the value of her labor and how she had nothing to show for it. “I am denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, a part whereov hath been accumulated by my own industry, and the whole augmented by my labor.”³³

Belinda’s petition also recounted the cruelties she suffered while enslaved and presented a spiritual, moral, and intellectual appeal to be retroactively compensated for

²⁹ Roy E. Finkenbine, “Belinda’s Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 64, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 95.

³⁰ Finkenbine, 96.

³¹ Hall would go on to found the African Masonic Lodge, the first Masonic Lodge for Black men, in 1787. The African Masonic Lodge, was one of the earliest examples of a self-determined Black organization formed in the face of over racial discrimination. It’s founder, Prince Hall, set a strong anti-slavery tone, orating on the evils of slavery as early as 1797. Several of the Lodge’s members had prominent roles in the development of other racial uplift organizations. Roy Finkenbine suspects that Hall, may have helped Belinda write the petition. Belinda signed the petition with a mark indicating that she could not read or write. Finkenbine, 95. Isaac Royall’s estate had been confiscated in 1778.

³² Finkenbine, “Belinda’s Petition.” Callie House, a formerly enslaved woman from Nashville is often credited as the first Black woman to fight for reparations, as early as 1899.

³³ Finkenbine, 96.

her labor. She had been sexually assaulted, a common abuse that Black women endured from any White man who had access to them. In Belinda's case, one of Royall's "meanest [White] servants," violated her. He "robbed me of my innocence by force" she declared "at an age when my youth should have been security from pollution." Thus, Belinda's petition documents the sexual exploitation that many Black girls and women endured.³⁴

Belinda saw the American Revolution as her opening to file her petition and she framed it in republican terms:

Fifty years were my faithful hands compelled to ignoble servitude, for the benefit of a cruel and ungrateful master, until as if nations must be agitated, and the world convulsed for the preservation of that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human race, the war broke out between Great Britain and America.³⁵

It was a bold and daring response to the harsh realities that many Black women faced as they transitioned from slavery to freedom. Surprisingly, Belinda's petition was granted. The Massachusetts State Legislature "resolved" that, "out of the Treasury of this commonwealth fifteen pounds twelve shillings per annum [be paid] to Belinda, an aged servant to the late Isaac Royall."³⁶

Her petition highlights the extreme hardships early national women experienced transitioning to freedom as well as the ways they managed to survive and to challenge the system. Significantly, this generation created the foundation for the future female Black middle class, which was always a tenuous status. While trying to meet their

³⁴ Finkenbine, 96.

³⁵ Finkenbine, 96.

³⁶ Finkenbine, 96. John Hancock's signature also appears at the bottom of the Court Resolve.

immediate needs, these early national women would go on to build communities and provide resources for indigent children as well as adults who were poor, sick, and elderly.

Lucy Terry Prince Defends her Home

As Belinda was transitioning to freedom, Lucy Terry Prince was still battling to protect her rights as a free woman. In 1785, Prince went to great lengths to protect her family's property in Guilford, Vermont. Prince was about sixty-two years old and had been free for almost thirty years. Her children were grown and her husband was nearly eighty years old. Two of their children, Cesar and Festus, had fought in the American Revolution which only furthered Lucy's belief that she deserved citizenship rights in the new nation. She also knew that she had legal rights in New England which she used to protect her home.

The Princes now lived in Guilford on land that Abijah had acquired not long after he purchased his freedom. Abijah was among the first to claim a plot when the town was first settled. Thirty years later, the Princes were being attacked by White neighbors who wanted to seize their land. They were threatened and harassed, and their haystacks were set on fire in an attempt to drive them off of their land.³⁷ Lucy Terry Prince sought an order of protection. She "traveled by horse across the State of Vermont...[a]ppearing before Governor Thomas Chittendon and his council." Her request was granted, and the Prince's land was safe for the time being.³⁸

³⁷ Harris, *Executing Race*, 155.

³⁸ Harris, 155.

In 1796, Lucy Terry Prince, now a widow, was under attack again.³⁹ Prince was well over seventy years old and her mind was as sharp as ever. She represented herself in appeals that went as far as the U.S. Circuit District Court of Vermont. Prince lost this battle but fought to the end on principal.⁴⁰ Her struggle to maintain her family's land highlights the trials that even highly regarded African Americans faced as they struggled to have their rights respected and upheld during the early national period. As landowners, the Princes were exceptional in comparison to the majority of African Americans struggling to overcome poverty and forced servitude. The violence and discrimination the Princes' faced from resentful Whites, however, was quite ordinary.

Coming of Age - Servitude, Separation, and God's Love

Most Black women born during the early national period were forced to labor as children. Enslaved children were bound by law, but poor children were also "indentured out for long-term service."⁴¹ Whether free or enslaved Black girls were denied a normal childhood. Such was the case of Catherine Ferguson, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw, three spiritual women who experienced sadness, isolation and loneliness coming of age during the early national period. These early experiences were part of what led these future activists to turn to God.

Catherine Ferguson was the first Black woman to operate a Sunday School in

³⁹ Abijah Prince died in 1794.

⁴⁰ Harris, *Executing Race*, 157; Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, revised edition (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 211.

⁴¹ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 76.

New York City. She was born into bondage around 1774, while her pregnant and enslaved mother, Katy Williams, was being transported from Virginia to New York. Katy Williams was sold back down south eight years later, and Catherine Ferguson never saw her mother again. Years later, Catherine, who was also called Katy, said that the traumatic separation from her mother inspired her “life-long dedication to and compassion for children.”⁴² Like so many enslaved women, Catherine turned to God for comfort. She also saw church membership as a route to freedom.

Catherine joined the Reformed Presbyterian Church when she was about ten years old. The bold youngster then appealed for her freedom, promising her master that she would “serve the Lord forever in return.”⁴³ Catherine’s request was denied, but her plea reflects the *freedom-centered* faith of Black Christians who believed emancipation was God’s will. Catherine remained enslaved until 1790 when Isabella Graham, originally from Scotland and also a member of the Presbyterian Church purchased her freedom for two hundred dollars. Catherine was expected to repay this fee through six years of indentured service. She ended up negotiating her time down to eleven months and a payment of one hundred dollars, which was paid for by Graham’s wealthy son-in-law Divie Bethune. Catherine was about sixteen years old when she was finally free.⁴⁴ Already a skilled baker, she began work as a professional cake maker in New York City. This occupation provided some financial stability and by 1793 she was providing religious education to orphaned and needy children (both

⁴² Nancy Snell Griffith “Ferguson, Catherine,” in *Women in American History, A Social, Political, and Cultural Encyclopedia*, 256.

⁴³ Allen Hartvik, “Catherine Ferguson, Black Founder of a Sunday-School,” *Negro History Bulletin* 35, no. 8 (December 1, 1972): 176.

⁴⁴ Benson John Lossing, *Our Countrymen: Or, Brief Memoirs of Eminent Americans* (Ensign, Bridgman & Fanning, 1855), 404–5.

Black and White) in her home.⁴⁵ Decades later, White Abolitionist Louis Tappan praised her devotion and acknowledged her pioneering role as the first person to operate a Sunday School in New York City.⁴⁶

Jarena Lee, the first female preacher for the African Methodist Episcopal Church was born free in New Jersey in 1783. Born into poverty, she began working sixty miles away from her family as a “servant maid” in 1790, when she was seven years old.⁴⁷ Lee would later write that she always felt feelings of guilt and worthlessness as a child.⁴⁸ Lee eventually discovered her purpose in life when she became a Methodist. Her journey to conversion began around 1804 when she was first released from indentured service.

Lee first went to see a Presbyterian minister preach. This was not a large camp meeting, but a small service in a school room. Lee recalls the minister was “solemn” and that his reading of the Psalms struck her to the “heart” and made her feel the “weight” of her sins. “But not knowing how to run immediately to the Lord for help” Lee fell into a deep depression that included suicidal thoughts. Lee recovered enough to move to Philadelphia where she sought a church home and spiritual family that would connect her to community. She first attended an Anglican church, but did not connect with the predominantly White congregation. She described feeling as if there

⁴⁵ Hallie Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁴⁶ J. F. Johnson, *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Called by the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London From Tuesday, June 13th, to Tuesday, June 20th, 1843* (John Slow, 1843), 212.

⁴⁷ Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving An Account of Her Call To Preach the Gospel*, Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by herself (Philadelphia, 1849), 3.

⁴⁸ Lee, 3.

was a wall she could not see over. “It seemed to make this impression on my mind” she later wrote, that “this is not the people for you.”⁴⁹

Lee’s response to Reverend Richard Allen and the Black congregation he led at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia was completely different. Mother Bethel, as it was called, was established in 1794, four years after Allen had walked out of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones led Black congregants out in protest, after Jones was forcibly removed from the newly segregated pews.⁵⁰ Leaving racist churches to build their own soon became a movement of various denominations that lasted several decades.⁵¹ As religious historian Albert Raboteau explains, “Black Episcopalians, Black Methodists, Black Baptists, and Black Presbyterians founded churches, exercised congregational control where possible, and struggled with white elders, bishops and associations to gain autonomy.”⁵²

The Black Church movement was not just reactionary. Black people found community within these spaces where they could connect based on common struggles

⁴⁹ Lee, 4.

⁵⁰ Douglass, WM., ed., *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America: Now Styled the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia, in Its Connection with the Early Struggles of the Colored People to Improve Their Condition, with the Co-Operation of the Friends, and Other Philanthropists; Partly Derived from the Minutes of a Beneficial Society, Established by Absalom Jones, Richard Allen and Others, in 1787, and Partly from the Minutes of the Aforesaid Church* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, Printers, 1862), 11; Carol V. R George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 54–55.

⁵¹ Establishing Black churches that catered to the needs of their congregation was the first step in all of the major cities where free Black communities were growing. In Philadelphia, there was St. Thomas Episcopal Church led by Absalom Jones and Bethel, the African Methodist Church led by Richard Allen. Thomas Paul led the First African Baptist Church in Boston, and in New York City, there was St. Phillips Episcopal Church, led by Peter Williams and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, led by James Varick. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, Revised 3rd (Orbis Books, 1998), 104–5.

⁵² Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones* (Beacon Press, 1996), 26.

and ancestry. These Black Churches would also become sites for political organizing, education, and benevolence. This was coupled with the liberation doctrine that Black ministers preached emphasizing “dignity, freedom, and human welfare.”⁵³

Lee was inspired by Allen’s message and felt an immediate connection to his congregation. She was so moved, that she made her decision within three weeks to officially join Bethel Church.⁵⁴ “I had come to the conclusion,” she wrote, “that this is the people to which my heart unites...”⁵⁵ She recalled, the “spirit of God moved in power through my conscience,” and she spontaneously answered Allen’s call to convert in the presence of hundreds of followers.⁵⁶ It was not long before she felt called to spread the liberating power of God to others as an itinerant preacher.

Zilpha Elaw, another important itinerant Methodist preacher, was born free in Pennsylvania in 1790, and forced into domestic servitude at the age of twelve after her mother died. According to her memoirs, Elaw’s mother died during childbirth from her twenty-second pregnancy, with only three children surviving infancy.⁵⁷ Elaw’s father was still alive at the time, but he was unable to support his three children on his own. Elaw’s older brother was already living with his maternal grandparents and Elaw’s younger sister went to live with an aunt after her mother’s death. Elaw was “consigned” to a Quaker couple named Pierson and Rebecca Mitchell, where she

⁵³ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 26.

⁵⁴ Lee, *Journal*, 5.; S. J Hubert, “Testimony and Prophecy in The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 54/55 (2000): 45–52.

⁵⁵ Lee, *Journal*, 5.

⁵⁶ Lee, 3–5.

⁵⁷ *Memoirs of the life in The Life, Religious Experiences, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* There was a high infant mortality rate for all women at this time, but especially for Black women. Pamela Dwight Sedgwick had ten children, three died before age one.

remained until she turned eighteen.⁵⁸

Elaw had a difficult time in the Pierson household, and she was “sometimes met with severe rebukes” from her mistress. She would later write about this time as a defining moment in her life and part of what led her to the Methodist Church. Both Elaw and Lee became itinerant preachers and included their time as domestic servants in the spiritual narratives that chronicled their life experiences, their spirituality, and religious work.⁵⁹ Black women born and raised in the early national period often emphasized the poverty and forced servitude they experienced as children. The impact of poverty, loneliness, and domestic servitude as children also shaped their future activism, especially when it came to mutual aid and benevolence.⁶⁰

The early experiences of women like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw are revealing in regard to Black people’s loss of childhood at this time.⁶¹ Free Black children were put into service at a very early age and continued to work as servants into adulthood. Elaw’s experience also sheds light on the fact that illness and death were ubiquitous with poverty and had a lasting impact. Reflecting on the death of her father in her memoirs, Elaw’s sorrow was not just about the loss of her father but her separation

⁵⁸ Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female Of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]* (London, 1846), 53.

⁵⁹ William Andrews coins the term “spiritual narratives” in his exploration of the autobiographical and spiritual writings of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote. William Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). These works, and their significance to Black women’s activism will be discussed further in chapter 3.

⁶⁰ Although slavery has been a noted theme in the discussion of the autobiographies of enslaved women from the North, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs, women who were born free get little attention. Even in those literary works that mark the spiritual autobiography as the antecedent to the slave narrative, the discussion of how being forced into labor as a child marked their activism has yet to be explored.

⁶¹ For a study on enslaved children in the South, see Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

from her siblings and being forced to cope with life's challenges alone. Elaw was "deeply affected," by her father's death, but having already been separated from her siblings she was "constrained to weep before God" alone.⁶²

Black Women and the Second Great Awakening

Catherine Ferguson, Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw turned to God for help in navigating the world after being parted from their families. Their relationship with God was validating and empowering, as they came of age toiling as domestic servants in isolation. Faith helped them cope with everyday life and the multitudes of oppression they faced as impoverished Black girls growing up in a racist and sexist society. "How vast a source of consolations did I derive from habitual communion," Elaw said, having received "both sympathy and succor," from God.⁶³ These women were drawn to a higher power on their own and then were swept into the energy of the larger Christian revival movement known as the Second Great Awakening that emerged in the 1790s. This early national era of religious revival was marked by increases in church membership, conversion experiences, and personal relationships with God. Striving for "perfection," a major component of this era, infused the faith of these Black women just as it influenced the reform movements that evolved in the first half of the nineteenth century. The evangelical emphasis on spiritual egalitarianism was especially appealing to Black people.⁶⁴

⁶² Elaw, *Memoirs*, 53.

⁶³ Elaw, 58.

⁶⁴ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 106. For Jarena Lee's conversion experience see Lee, *Journal*, 4–5. For Zilpha Elaw's experience with camp meetings see Elaw, *Memoirs*, 64–67.

The Methodist Episcopal Church is the most important example. British founder, John Wesley believed “slavery was one of the greatest evils that a Christian should fight.”⁶⁵ Wesley made this clear when he wrote the General Rules of Methodism in 1743, which prohibited “the buying or selling the bodies and souls of men, women and children with an intention to enslave them.”⁶⁶ In 1773 Wesley’s wrote “Thoughts Upon Slavery,” where he vehemently argued against any rationale for holding slaves. “It is impossible that it should ever be necessary for any reasonable creature to violate the laws of Justice, Mercy, and Truth,” he wrote. For Wesley, there was no reason ever acceptable to God “to burst asunder all the ties of humanity.”⁶⁷ This anti-slavery position appealed to the small group of African Americans who were part of the first generation of American Methodism, including Reverend Richard Allen who was at the Baltimore Christmas Conference in 1784. Allen was also an early abolitionist, and represented the ways that Black Methodists maintained a full commitment to ending slavery as part of their religious doctrine.⁶⁸

The founders of American Methodism, Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke and Richard Whatcoat, tried to uphold Wesley’s position on slavery at first, but the

⁶⁵ Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 5.

⁶⁶ Mathews, 5. The 1743 General Rules were a guide to avoiding evil.

⁶⁷ John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (New York: [Wesleyan Anti-Slavery Society], 1834), 35; Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 5. Francis Asbury started his ministry in America in 1771, and he was always pleased to see that Black people were open to the Methodist teachings. For Asbury, this was confirmation that all people were equal before God. His acceptance of Black people “on the basis of religious equality,” turned into a solid antislavery position, after several conversations with other antislavery men. By 1778 he had concluded that Methodists needed to join the Quakers in calling for the emancipation of slaves or suffer the wrath of God

⁶⁸ Allen went on to become the first Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which in 1816, became the fully Independent African American denomination in the United States.

founders soon compromised on slavery as the Church expanded.⁶⁹ There was significant push back especially from the Southern churches. Over the next several years the Methodists leadership continued to soften their position on slavery until finally at the 1804 General Conference, Asbury “regretfully concluded that he had been fighting a hopeless fight.” He decided to focus on unifying the Church rather than an antislavery doctrine.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the fact that early Methodist leaders condemned slavery had a sustaining impact on Black people and the overall appeal of Methodism. Moreover, some evangelicals did manumit their slaves as a result of Methodist teachings, although usually in exchange for a fee.

Apart from its antislavery roots, African Americans were attracted to the Methodist style and practice. It was not as hierarchical and liturgical as the “high church” Protestant denominations, such as Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed and Episcopalian churches. Moreover, the method of class meetings, camp meetings, and extemporaneous preaching gave African Americans, women, and poor people more access than ever before. This allowed for the rise of lay preachers, which for African Methodists included women for a time. Richard Allen, for example, gave Jarena Lee permission to preach as an itinerant, not long after the independent African Methodist Episcopal Church was established in 1816. Furthermore, as an itinerant denomination, the Methodists thrived in the revival setting. It was a denomination that

⁶⁹ The founders of American Methodism, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, tried to uphold Wesley’s position on slavery for nearly twenty years. Francis Asbury started his ministry in America in 1771, and he was always pleased to see that Black people were open to the Methodist teachings. For Asbury, this was confirmation that all people were equal before God. His acceptance of Black people “on the basis of religious equality,” turned into a solid antislavery position, after several conversations with other antislavery men. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 7.

⁷⁰ Mathews, 7–10.

had been born outside, making it more accessible to the poor, the oppressed, and the enslaved.⁷¹

As the largest group to experience conversions and lead prayer groups, women were crucial to the spread of Methodism. They however were not sanctioned by the church, and thus did this work informally, as itinerant preachers and exhorters. The restrictions on women were clear, but the way itineracy worked, Black women were able to capture audiences. There was flexibility within African Methodist communities. While the rules of Methodism restricted women preachers, this rule was softened to include Jarena Lee, who although never ordained, was officially sanctioned by Richard Allen, not long after the independent African Methodist Episcopal Church was established.⁷²

The Methodists were also the most expressive and emotional of the evangelicals. For Methodists, religion was in the heart and not in the head. They were known for having visions, testifying and speaking in tongues. This was a major reason why it would be appealing to African Americans, who already had an expressive spiritual base in their hearts from the African religious traditions that had survived the middle passage.⁷³ Visions would be especially important for Black women activists who needed spectacular evidence that they were called to preach when facing patriarchal oppositions.

⁷¹ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 103–5. The treatment of Black women preachers as well as their significance to the rise and spread of Methodism as itinerants, will be discussed in chapter three.

⁷² Jarena Lee's call to preach, and the time it took to get permission from Richard Allen will be discussed further in the next chapter.

⁷³ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 6; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 36–51. Both Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw described hearing voices and seeing visions when explaining their sanctification and calls to preach. See Lee, *Journal*, 8–11; Elaw, *Memoirs*, 55–57.

Community Building through Benevolence

As evangelical Christianity was spreading, Black Methodists, and those from other denominations started to build non-denominational religious organizations that focused on mutual aid and Black politics. These organizations, such as the Free African Society of Philadelphia, preceded and then merged with the Black Church movement that developed in the 1790s.⁷⁴ This was especially true of the mutual aid and benevolent societies that Black women belonged to. These organizations were non-denominational and focused on community survival and advancement. Women like Eliza Day of New York and Sarah Bass Allen of Philadelphia, were a part of the mutual aid organizations that grew to be important communal grounds, not just for spiritual development, but for social interaction, community building and political advancement.

Following African custom, the first mutual aid societies were segregated by gender. Black women created burial insurance, saving systems, and helped provided relief for the sick, and the destitute. Burial funds were especially crucial. Drawing on Africanity, Black people considered the transition to afterlife the most important rite of passage. In African culture, death was the closing of one door and the opening of another. Even while embracing Christianity, African descended people continued to own a special other-world perspective, with even more urgency.⁷⁵ Thus, Black people

⁷⁴ The Free African Society was founded in 1787, six months before Black Methodists would officially leave the St. George Methodist Church after experiencing racial segregation and abuse. This organization was a male organization, but the needs of women and children were reflected in their primary objectives. Douglass, W.M., *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 11. For more on the Free African Society see Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 5–15; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 105–9; Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 59.

⁷⁵ The Free African Union Society, of Rhode Island, founded in 1787 was the first known organization

believed it was essential to provide a proper send-off for their loved ones.

It is difficult to say when the first Black women's mutual aid, benevolent or, African society organization was formed, as early records are scant. But their presence is recorded by the 1790s.⁷⁶ Philadelphia had the largest free Black population at the time and probably had the first benevolent organizations. The Female Benevolent Society of St. Thomas is the first known woman's society. It was founded in 1793 in Philadelphia, and was connected to St. Thomas Episcopal Church, also founded in 1793.⁷⁷ This group "worked to promote social uplift through education and financial support, they simultaneously monitored their communities, ostracizing those who failed to follow ethical codes."⁷⁸ It was not uncommon for mutual aid societies to be connected to Black churches. Both grew to be important communal grounds, not just for spiritual development, but for social interaction, community building and political advancement. The Benevolent Daughters of Philadelphia was another early organization founded in 1796, and connected to Richard Allen's Bethel Church. Sarah Bass and Jarena Lee would become two of its most faithful and prominent members.

Sarah Bass was an early Bethel member, and may have even been among those who walked out of St. George's Church alongside Allen years before. Born in slavery in Virginia, Sarah probably came to Philadelphia via the Underground Railroad. She

that allowed both men and women as members, but women were unable to vote, and formed their own organization, the African Female Benevolent Society in 1809. Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 107. As Erica Dunbar argues, "Poverty did not prevent many women from expecting an elaborate funeral, for death represented not only a solemn, sad occasion, but a jubilant event that marked an escape from the bonds of racism and poverty to a world of freedom in heaven" Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*, 52.

⁷⁶ Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 105.

⁷⁷ It was active as late as 1821. See Sterling, 105.

⁷⁸ Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom*. St. Thomas Episcopal Church was founded in 1793 by Absalom Jones. For more on Absalom Jones and the Fouding of St. Thomas Episcopal Church see Carol 61-64

married Richard Allen in 1800, but more than a helpmate, she too was also an institution builder. AME leadership would later write that “the Church, when contending with a powerful adversary, had no more able advocate than Sister Allen.” She was remembered as a “staff to her husband” and “the encourager of the pioneers who...labored hard to bring the Church out of her captivity and throw off her oppressors.” Her home was also the “resort of the bretheren who labored in the ministry; when weary and worn with the burden of duty, they found a resting place indeed.”⁷⁹ Sarah Allen was also active in helping people fleeing bondage as an early member of the Daughters of Philadelphia mutual aid society.

Early national female societies supported self-emancipated slaves who needed resources but also needed to evade slave catchers. Their antislavery mission was an expansion of their mutual aid and benevolent work. Black women were fund raisers, donors, food providers, and sources of clothing for self-emancipated slaves. These early mutual aid workers established blueprints for the anti-slavery societies that developed on a larger scale during the antebellum period, and were the mainstay of the Underground Railroad. Sarah Allen one of the early underground shepherds, was known as a “friend to the poor flying slave, trembling and panting in his flight...her purse to such, as well as others was ever open.”⁸⁰

Ona Judge may have been among the trickle of self-emancipated slaves seeking help from Sara Allen and the Benevolent Daughters of Africa. In 1796 Ona Judge, who was enslaved by President George Washington, escaped from bondage

⁷⁹ *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 87.

⁸⁰ Daniel Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. Smith, Charles Spencer (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968), 87.

after living in Philadelphia for nearly seven years. There is no record of exactly who helped her but she likely had assistance from free Blacks in Philadelphia. Ona Judge fled to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where she probably linked up with the Ladies African Charitable Society of Portsmouth. Dinah Chase Whipple and her sister-in-law Rebecca Whipple were two of the local women who helped organize this society in 1796. Dinah and Rebecca Whipple were also educators. They operated a school, in conjunction with the Ladies African Charitable Society of Portsmouth, and were among the first Black school teachers in New England.⁸¹

Chloe Minns was another early school teacher in New England, who was also involved in mutual aid and benevolence. She was also an early Abolitionist who is known as Clarissa Lawrence by the time the interracial Abolitionist Movement forms. Her place and date of birth are unclear, but she was likely born in the late 1780s as she was already a young adult by 1807. It was at this time that she became the sole teacher for the African School in Salem, a position she held until 1823. The African School had been established by the Salem School Committee after the parents of poor White children objected to the integration of Salem's public school. Reverend Joshua Spalding, a local White minister and future Abolitionist, urged the Committee to hire Minns, who was enthusiastic, spiritual, and incredibly devoted.⁸² When Minns first took the position she could read but could not write, but within three years of taking

⁸¹ Sammons and Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth*.

⁸² Dane Anthony Morrison and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory* (UPNE, 2005), 145.

the position, she had taught herself to write.⁸³

Black churches, schools, and voluntary associations were at the forefront of organizing throughout the Northeast. They were a pro-active response to the racism and segregation that systematically denied African Americans equal citizenship and opportunities. This was significant because the status of free Blacks after the American Revolution was essentially a “partial freedom,” and recently free Blacks had to find ways to sustain themselves with virtually nothing. Free Blacks were segregated in dilapidated neighborhoods, relegated to the most menial and low wage jobs, disfranchised, and denied education. They were also subject to violence and intimidation from whites, and Black laws that restricted movement, migration, and civil rights. Black people had to be creative, proactive, and persistent to battle these circumstances. They turned to each other to provide things such as burial and sick benefits, a safety net that they would otherwise not have had. Emerging from bondage into the light of freedom, they sought to provide collective resources for Black people to survive and advance as they created communities.

Communalism in the African Tradition

In the tradition of Africanity, Black people combined faith, fellowship and communalism to meet the material needs of both the free and enslaved. The naming practices with early Black institutions is also significant. By the end of the Revolution, Black people were describing themselves and their institutions as African.

⁸³ Adams and Peck, *Love of Freedom*, 190. The fact that Minns was self-taught is the first clue as to why she is absented from the archival record. She, like many women with limited writing skills, was less likely to keep a journal or leave an abundance of records

This was seen with individuals, who identified as African, as well as the institutions, such as the first Black Churches and mutual aid societies, that carried “African” in their titles. Belinda, for example made clear in her petition that Africa was her homeland, and Elizabeth Freeman always maintained she was the daughter of Africans. Both women openly identified with their African heritage. By rooting themselves in an African past they reclaimed the human dignity that slavery tried to erase. Africa became a symbol of their history, hope, pride and potential. This is why so many of the early Black mutual aid societies chose Africa as part of their name to emphasize a common heritage and unity. The African Female Benevolent Society of Rhode Island and the Daughters of Africa in Philadelphia are exemplary in asserting the sons and daughters of Africa who had a history that pre-dated their bondage in America.⁸⁴

1808 – A Watershed Year

1808 was a pivotal year for Black America in general and Black women in particular. Congress’s ban on the international slave trade became law in 1808. African Americans saw the ban on the Atlantic slave trade as part of God’s will that slavery would be abolished, and celebrations took place throughout the Northeast, especially in Black Churches. In 1808 Elizabeth Freeman was finally able to retire from domestic service. By 1808 Chloe Minns had also just concluded her first year, as

⁸⁴ This was especially significant coming out of this early national period, because this would be the last generation, to have a strong connection to those who were born in Africa. For the significance of self-definition amongst former slaves who “cast aside” slave name and named themselves see Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 194–98. For the significance of centering “Africa” and “Africanity” when naming Black institutions, see Stuckey, 199–204.

headmistress and sole teacher of the first school for African Americans in Salem, NY. Minns along with women like Catherine Ferguson, and Sarah Allen, had set the stage, in terms of institution building. 1808 was also the year Zilpha Elaw became a Methodist. Elaw later wrote “I can never forget that memorable evening on which I went formally to present my hand to the brethren, and my heart forever to the Lord.”⁸⁵ The stage was being set for the next generation of deeply committed women who merged socio-religious activism during the antebellum period.

⁸⁵ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 57. Jarena Lee may also have experienced Sanctification this year. Based on her narrative, she experienced sanctification several years after her conversion in 1804 but a couple of years before her marriage to Joseph Lee in 1811. See Lee, *Journal*, 8, 13; Chanta Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 2.

CHAPTER 3

CALLED BY GOD (1808-1831):

SPIRITUAL WOMEN AND THE GOSPEL OF BLACK LIBERATION

And it shall come to pass...that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy.

- Joel 2: 28¹

Spiritual Activism – The Sacred and Secular

Black women's activism in the beginning of the nineteenth century and into the antebellum era was anchored in a trinity in which spirituality, education, and communalism served as interdependent pillars of resistance and abolitionist activism. For spiritual Black women such as Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Maria Stewart the fight for freedom must reflect a deep relationship with God. Their faith served as motivation, inspiration, and a blueprint for action; not for the individual, but for Black people as a collective. Guided by their spiritual beliefs, Black spiritual women innovated a liberation theology that linked Christian teachings to the struggle for Black freedom. They also declared Black women were called by God to be social justice leaders. Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw did so as preachers, while Maria Stewart created a body of political writings and speeches that were spiritually driven and evangelical to the core. All of these women professed that Abolitionism was a spiritual duty to God and centered their commitment to freedom and equality around their faith.

¹ Jarena Lee used this quote from the King James Version of the Bible to begin her spiritual autobiography, first published in 1836 and then again in 1849.

Jarena Lee's Sanctification and Call to Preach

Jarena Lee's rise as a spiritual leader began with her justification and "the blessings of sanctification."² She writes about this journey in her memoirs, emphasizing the transformative power of striving for perfection. Sanctification in the Christian tradition is the process of being cleansed from sin and set apart—as holy—by God. It is the most significant stage in the Methodist tradition, which Lee learned about from a fellow Black Methodist named William Scott. He told her that Methodism had three phases. "First conviction for sin. Second justification from sin. Third, the entire sanctification of the soul to God." Lee "thought this description was beautiful, and immediately believed in it." Lee spent the next three months praying for sanctification. She heard voices when she was sanctified, which was not uncommon in the Methodist tradition. "The voice whispered in [her] heart saying 'Pray for sanctification.'" Lee described the moment as a "rush of ecstasy" as if she was "in an ocean of light."³

About four or five years later, Lee was inspired by God to preach. This time the voices she heard were accompanied by visions. Lee later wrote that an "impressive silence" surrounded her before a voice, which she "distinctly heard and most certainly understood," said "Go preach the Gospel." Lee was stunned. "No one will believe me" she replied, after which she heard a voice say again "Go Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth and will turn your enemies to become your friends." Lee then

² Lee, *Journal*, 8.

³ Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving An Account of Her Call To Preach the Gospel*, Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by herself (Philadelphia, 1849), 8–9.

had a vision of a pulpit and could no longer deny that she was inspired to preach.⁴

Jarena Lee went to Reverend Richard Allen to seek official ordination. Lee was nervous and afraid of the discrimination she might face as a woman. Like any minister at this time, Allen followed the policy of Methodism that categorically denied ordination to women. The fact that Lee recalled this event in her spiritual autobiography, which was first published in 1836, demonstrates the hurt and disappointment she must have felt when she learned from someone she admired, her spiritual leader, that women could not be ordained. She also expressed a sense of relief “because it removed the fear of the cross.”⁵ Lee believed preachers had a great responsibility to God. She also knew that she would face additional challenges because she was a Black woman. She later wrote how problematic the rules restricting women preachers were. She pointed out that to deny a woman preacher was to deny the redemptive power of God.

If a man may preach because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Savior instead of a half one? [A]s those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach would seem to make it appear.⁶

Lee was clear that God had intended for women to preach but patriarchal clergy stood in her way. She went on with her life for the time being, got married and had two children.⁷

Jarena married Joseph Lee, a Pastor from Snow Hill, Pennsylvania in 1811.

⁴ Lee, 10.

⁵ Lee, 11.

⁶ Lee, 11.

⁷ Snow Hill was only six miles away from Philadelphia, which indicates that she was fully devoted to her husband’s church, rather than stay connected, albeit from a distance, to her Philadelphia community. Jarena married Joseph Lee in 1811. Joseph was a Pastor from Snow Hill, Pennsylvania and Jarena did her best to support his ministry, but wrote of sadness and isolation she felt leaving Philadelphia and her congregation when she moved to Snow Hill.

Jarena did her best to support Joseph's ministry, which included moving to Snow Hill and leaving her beloved Bethel Church. She later wrote of how alone she felt at this time. "I never found that agreement and closeness in communion and fellowship, that I had found in Philadelphia."⁸ Lee's depression was compounded by not being allowed to preach the Gospel. She said her calling felt like the Holy Spirit burning within "but the fire had been smothered."⁹ It was not until eight or nine years later, and after her husband died, that Jarena Lee's call to preach was "renewed."¹⁰

God Qualifies Black Women

It was about 1819 and Lee went again to see Richard Allen who was now the Bishop of the independent African Methodist Episcopal denomination that was founded by a collective of Black Methodist Churches in 1816.¹¹ This time Lee asked only to hold prayer meetings in her home and exhort when she "found liberty."¹² An exhorter, as historian Catherine Brekus explains, "was an informal evangelist...they did not have the right to deliver formal sermons explaining biblical text, and they usually spoke from the pew rather than the pulpit."¹³ Even still, exhorters, both male

⁸ Lee, *Journal*, 13. Snow Hill was only six miles away from Philadelphia, which indicates that she was fully devoted to her husband's church, rather than stay connected, albeit from a distance, to her Philadelphia community. Jarena married Joseph Lee in 1811. Joseph was a Pastor from Snow Hill, Pennsylvania and Jarena did her best to support his ministry, but wrote of sadness and isolation she felt leaving Philadelphia and her congregation when she moved to Snow Hill.

⁹ Lee, 11.

¹⁰ Lee, 15.

¹¹ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 90–93. The African Methodists in New York City followed suit in 1821 when they organized the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 109–10.

¹² Lee, *Journal*, 11.

¹³ Catherine A Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 48.

and female, “claimed to have been divinely appointed, and...often spoke in front of large crowds of fervent converts.”¹⁴ Her request was granted, and her “house soon filled when the hour appointed for prayer had arrived.”¹⁵ Lee also began to visit the sick and the elderly who were unable to make it to her house for prayer. She would often travel with other spiritual women, meeting religious leaders who also believed that Black freedom was God’s will. She recalls in her narrative a time she went with two other Black women to visit a sick man whom the Reverend Samuel Cornish had also been visiting. Lee even noted that their visit with the ill man seemed to have uplifted him more than Reverend Cornish had. Perhaps it was because she had spent time “conversing with him respecting his ‘[e]ternal interests and his hopes of a happy eternity.” Jarena Lee was still not allowed to preach but her impact was extending. She would soon be preaching to hundreds after impressing on Allen first hand her ability to preach.¹⁶

Richard Allen finally granted Jarena Lee permission to preach after his own spirit was enlivened by Lee during an extemporaneous sermon she gave at Bethel Church. Once Allen had an opportunity to directly experience her exhortation, the force of her spiritual leadership shook the foundations of patriarchy, compelling him to offer his approval, short of official ordination. Her riveting exhortation of God’s plan for Black liberation touched Allen so deeply, he granted her permission to preach despite the policy of Methodism that refused to ordain women.¹⁷ Lee recalled:

¹⁴ Brekus, 48.

¹⁵ Lee, *Journal*, 11.

¹⁶ Lee, 15–16.

¹⁷ Lee, 17.

...Bishop rose up in the assembly, and related that I had called upon him eight years before, asking to be permitted to preach, and that he had put me off; but that now he as much believed that I was called to the work, as any of the Preachers present.¹⁸

Perhaps Allen's own struggles with racist policies forced him to face the contradiction inherent in maintaining gender discrimination within the freedom centered and newly independent AME Church.¹⁹

With Allen's blessing, Lee began an itinerant preaching career that lasted for over thirty years. She traveled primarily in the mid-Atlantic states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and as far west as Ohio. Her ministry also extended into the slave states of Maryland, Virginia, and Washington D.C. Lee's ministry, steeped in the trinity of spirituality, education and communalism, emphasized spiritual salvation, the humanity of Black people, the power of the Holy Spirit, and God's love. Her reputation spread so far, that enslaved men and women would walk miles to hear her preach.²⁰

Black Women's Liberation Theology

Lee's message was part of a larger liberation theology that had developed among Black Christians who emphasized the humanity of Black people and their God given right to freedom. This spiritual position was political and central to the

¹⁸ Lee, 17.

¹⁹ Lee, 17. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 106. By this time Allen had been named the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), a denomination founded to honor Black religious expression and to resist the anti-black policies of Methodism, which included racial segregation within churches and denial of leadership positions to Black men and women.

²⁰ The details of Lee's preaching, including the many audiences she reached are included in the second and revised edition of her spiritual autobiography, published in 1849. These details give us an important lens into Jarena Lee's life, and the complexity of work that she did as an itinerant preacher. This second edition is also how we learn of her abolitionist connections and activities that increased in the 1830s and 1840s. See Lee, *Journal*, 20–97.

antislavery and community building efforts happening in free Black communities across the Northeast during the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Lee emerged as a spiritual leader during a time when spirituality and black politics were intertwined. Black spiritual leaders, dating back to the colonial era, were the first to radically speak out against slavery and call for immediate abolition.²¹ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, for example, were among the earliest speakers and writers against slavery and racism.²² Lee was no different. She believed that slavery was “one of the greatest curses to any Nation” and she prayed that God would “forward on the work of abolition until it fills the world.”²³ By the 1840s she was attending abolitionist lectures and meetings that connected her to a network of Black women abolitionists, including Sara Allen, Hester Lane, and Sojourner Truth.²⁴ In fact, the spiritual processes of conversion (changing one’s life towards devotion to God) and sanctification (an ongoing process of growing into holiness) became launching points for Black women to take on leadership roles in antislavery activism, helping them to transcend the gendered barriers in the church, and by extension, Black politics.

The pulpit was, in many ways, the first radical antislavery stage for Black people. Lee however, had to create her own pulpit outside of the patriarchal

²¹ Black preachers, were the political leaders, and this was true for both men and women. As Dianne Cappiello argues, Black spiritual leaders were the leaders when it came to the Radical Abolitionist movement because they were the first to really question and attack slavery as a sin against God.

²² George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 162–70; Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 100–101.

²³ Lee, *Journal*, 90.

²⁴ Lee, *Journal*, 90. According to Lee, Sara Allen bought the first copy of her book, and she attended the American Anti-Slavery Society Meeting in 1840 with Hester Lane. She also is recorded as having participated in discussion with Sojourner Truth, at the American Anti-Slavery Convention of 1853, when a resolution was made confirming the Societies abhorrence of the American Colonization Society. See *Liberator*, “Second Decade of the American Anti-Slavery Society, December 9, 1853. Notably this meeting emphasized the significance of having reached the 20-year mark of the American Anti-Slavery Societies existence, which shows that Jarena Lee had stayed committed through its rise as an interracial movement.

boundaries of the AME Church. While she did have appointments to preach in churches, including Richard Allen's Mother Bethel, the majority of her preaching took place in communal spaces such as private homes, schools, meeting houses, and open fields. She travelled up to 14 miles a day, and thousands in a single year, preaching hundreds of sermons along the way. Her work as an itinerant preacher challenged the belief that women should be silent and that clergy was the sole domain of men. Lee's spiritual power was undeniable, and she spread Methodism, alongside a consciousness of resistance, by preaching and teaching the word of God.²⁵

A deep and abiding faith in God is what gave Lee the strength and courage to keep going, despite the dangers and difficulties she encountered as a female preacher and antislavery activist. Her travels into "slave country," for instance, posed a real threat in which she could be kidnapped or even killed.²⁶ The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 placed free Blacks in danger of being sold into slavery under the false claims of White accusers. Nevertheless, Lee said she was glad that "the Omnipresent one" was with her, and she even traveled to Canada in 1832, adding an international dimension to her preaching circuit, which mirrored the growing Abolitionist Movement.²⁷ Black spiritual women read the Bible as a liberating text that gave them hope beyond their circumstances. It also countered the attempts by many white Christians, who attempted to indoctrinate Black people with a white supremacist interpretation of the Bible that sanctioned human bondage and demanded devotion to

²⁵ Lee, *Journal*, 20–90.

²⁶ Lee, 35.

²⁷ Lee, 35.

slave masters.²⁸ Yet, Black spiritual women, like their male counterparts, interpreted God's salvation to mean they were not destined to be owned by anyone. This theology was at the heart of the argument for immediate emancipation and racial equality.

Determined to legitimize her spiritual gifts and prophetic vision of Black freedom, Lee published an autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, in which she challenged the marginalization of women within the AME Church and retells the story of the resistance she faced even among Black men like Allen and others who refused to recognize her calling, and thus, God's will. By documenting her personal journey and theology, Lee extended her reach beyond community gatherings and into the written record. Her persistence in a discipline that, as Richard Allen initially said "saw no room for women's leadership," is a testament to her belief that gender discrimination countered the will of God, and she refused to be bound by the institutional barriers to women's leadership in the AME Church.

When Lee issued a revised edition of her spiritual autobiography that included her travel journal, she linked her extensive travels to a complex activist agenda in which she educated the masses to think of slavery as an abomination. Much more than seeking out a place as a Black woman to preach, Lee offered a theory of spiritual activism that deeply connected itinerant preaching to abolitionism, and she exposed the contradictions of sexist religious doctrine.²⁹ She warned, "Oh how careful ought

²⁸ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 17–20.

²⁹ Sue Houchins discusses the significance of Jarena's travel journal in her introduction to the republication of the second and revised edition of Lee's spiritual autobiography, first published in 1849. See Sue Houchins, *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxix–xliv. I agree with Sue Houchins that the details in the revised edition, particularly the ones that detail her extensive travel, give us an important lens into Jarena Lee's life. Houchins is looking more at the connection between her travels and seeking out a place, as a black women, to preach. I however, see it more as a

we to be lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life.”³⁰ Before a recognizable abolitionist movement had spread throughout the United States, Black women such as Lee used the gospel to undermine the institution of slavery as well as the sexism that denied opportunities and recognition to women preachers. Indeed, Lee published her autobiography to challenge patriarchal norms that she insisted were a distortion of Christian teachings.

The idea that men should lead while women served as helpmates grew with the institutionalization of Black churches whose polity was based on the patriarchal norms of White churches. Although Black women made up the majority of most congregations and were the backbone of mutual aid and benevolent work, leadership was believed to be the “man’s sphere,” especially in public spaces.³¹ As the first woman to be granted permission to preach, Lee faced hostility from both men and women who opposed women preachers as if they were an affront to divine order. However, she maintained that her authority came from a higher power, and she pushed Christians to place their spirituality above gender conventions. “For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach,” she wrote, “it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God.”³² Lee obtained the status of an accepted preacher, though un-ordained, because of the way she effortlessly connected spirituality to political resistance and liberation.

way to look at the extensiveness, and complexity of the work that she did as an itinerant preacher. I argue specifically that this is where we see the day in and day out work of her spiritual activism. It is also where we learn of her abolitionist connections and activities.

³⁰ Lee, *Journal*, 11.

³¹ Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (Knopf, 2010), 23–29.

³² Lee, *Journal*, 11.

To be sure, Lee did not need the permission of clergy to recognize her own influence and spiritual power. Although Richard Allen approved of her preaching, Lee advocated for the official recognition of her spiritual activism and religious leadership. On the final page of her spiritual autobiography, she insisted on, or perhaps demanded, official recognition within the records of the AME Church. Not only was she especially influential in spreading Black Methodism in key places, she argued for the breaking of gender norms that marginalized women and thereby denied their communities of a full relationship with the Most High. Throughout the text, Lee argued that God had intended for women to preach. “And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach?” she wrote, “seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man.”³³ She continued, “Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Savior...and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity...?”³⁴ Lee was unwavering and sophisticated in her position, drawing from scripture to underscore her point. She further noted that many of the arguments used against women preachers (such as illiteracy) could have easily been used against Jesus’ disciples. Lee’s focus on a freedom-centered gospel that was both antislavery and pro-women, epitomized the ways in which spirituality, politics, and gender, intertwined within Black women’s activism at this time.

The Self-Determined Itineracy of Zilpha Elaw

Zilpha Elaw was another itinerant preacher who would use the Bible to find

³³ Lee, 11.

³⁴ Lee, 11.

her place as a spiritual activist, and she embodied the trinity of spiritual Black women in which spirituality, community and education were core principles of antislavery activism. Elaw became a Methodist in 1808. She was a member of the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, but considered herself a non-denominational preacher. “Oh I long to see the day” she wrote, when Christians will meet on one common platform...”³⁵ For Elaw, there was only “one church of Jesus Christ in the wilderness...”³⁶ Like Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw preached a freedom centered message that focused on the redemptive power of Christ. She also recorded her spiritual journey and message in her spiritual autobiography, which she published in England in 1846. Her message was one of universal freedom, and she intended to reach anyone who would listen, regardless of background or circumstance. Instead of seeking permission from male religious leaders, Elaw ordained herself. She claimed ordination according to her own authority, always maintaining that she had been anointed by God.³⁷ She was also known for her “musical voice,” and “good talents as a public speaker.”³⁸ Moreover, as one observer put it, she had “a deep-toned piety for mankind, [and] a burning charity for blood brought souls...”³⁹

Like most Black religious leaders, Elaw’s work as a preacher and abolitionist

³⁵ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 26.

³⁶ Elaw was not alone in her non-denominational approach. Jarena Lee, for example always emphasized that she cared more about what was in people’s hearts than what church they belonged to. For Maria Stewart, the activism of a church appears to have been as important as the denomination. In Boston she was affiliated with the Baptists, in New York the Episcopalians, and it is unclear which church she attended when she moved to Maryland. What was most important for these women was that people were turning themselves over to God.

³⁷ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 82, 88–89.

³⁸ F. W Chesson and Wilson Armistead, *God’s Image In Ebony Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, Etc., Demonstrative of the Mental Powers and Intellectual Capacities of the Negro Race*, ed. H. G Adams (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1854), 154.

³⁹ Chesson and Armistead, 154.

were one and the same. As she preached a freedom-centered gospel throughout the United States, she addressed the people with a sense of urgency when she proclaimed, “Dear brethren, the time is short, it is ominous, and it is perilous.”⁴⁰ Elaw traveled throughout the Northeast and into the Upper South, frequenting Virginia, Maryland, and Washington D.C. Her itinerant preaching was a daring move for any free Black person who risked kidnapping and enslavement anytime they ventured into a state where slavery was legal. Like Jarena Lee, she also attended antislavery meetings and lectures, and was among the hundreds of women to petition Congress to end the slave trade in Washington D.C.⁴¹ Most significantly, Elaw’s travels eventually took her to England in the 1840s, where she would preach the gospel and joined an international movement to abolish slavery.⁴²

Like Jarena Lee, Elaw faced opposition from those “who felt women’s preaching to be either unscriptural or unseemly.”⁴³ This was true of both her time in the United States and in England. She compared herself to biblical figures when assessing the ostracism that she faced: “Like Joseph I was hated for my dreams” she said, and “like Paul, none stood with me.”⁴⁴ Elaw was opposed by strangers but she also faced resistance and rejection from her loved ones. Her husband, Joseph, whom she married in 1810, was afraid that Zilpha would become a “laughing-stock for the

⁴⁰ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 160.

⁴¹ In 1839, for example, she signed a petition to end the slave trade in Washington D.C. Her name appeared next to other abolitionist women, both Black and White, including Caroline Boston, whose father Absalom, had been a founding member of the African Meeting House in Nantucket, where Elaw would reside when she took breaks from her preaching tours.

⁴² Elaw, *Memoirs*, 138–39; “Zilpha Elaw to John Tredgold,” August 9, 1840, Black Abolitionist Papers.

⁴³ Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 9.

⁴⁴ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 83.

people.”⁴⁵ He tried to forbid Zilpha from preaching, but she refused. This was especially significant because Elaw believed that women should be submissive to their husbands.⁴⁶ It was only her spiritual duty to God that could override this expectation.

Elaw’s relationship with God was both validating and empowering. It helped her cope with everyday life as well as the specific oppression she faced as a Black woman living in a racist and sexist society. She noted, “How vast a source of consolations did I derive from habitual communion.”⁴⁷ Elaw received “both sympathy and succor” from her God and spiritual community.⁴⁸ Over time, she knew she had to share her faith. Although she was not recognized as a minister, Elaw used itinerant preaching to education and uplift others, which she committed to for the rest of her life.

Elaw did not want to upset her husband, but she believed spreading Christianity was her spiritual duty and that she must follow her “heavenly Father’s call.”⁴⁹ To underscore her point, she drew from examples of Biblical women, like the prophetess Deborah, when declaring her right to preach. By invoking the names of these biblical leaders, she was challenging the St. Pauline doctrine that “women should be silent in the churches,” and asserting her power and place as a Christian woman to spread the gospel.⁵⁰ Joseph Elaw eventually softened his position against

⁴⁵ Elaw, 84.

⁴⁶ Elaw, 61–62.

⁴⁷ Elaw, 58.

⁴⁸ Elaw, 58.

⁴⁹ Elaw, 84.

⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 14:34-35. ESV. The Pauline Doctrine follows the writings of the Apostle Paul, who was the first to write about the role of women in the church.

women preaching “a short time prior to his death” in 1823.⁵¹

Elaw came from a long tradition of evangelical women who understood their leadership and activism to be a direct expression of God and therefore above the conventional norms of man. Whether in response to clergy, husbands, lay people, or society in general, the Bible became their ultimate defense in the face of gender oppression. Referred to as “Biblical Feminism” by historian Catherine Berkus, this line of defense also became their guide for how to live and act.⁵² This was true of both Black and White women. However, for Black women, the racial oppression that they experienced added an additional layer to their work. In addition to being empowered women, their faith was also connected to the struggle for Black freedom. Through what political scientist Gayle Tate calls a “gospel politics,” spirituality undoubtedly shaped the political consciousness of spiritual Black women. In Elaw’s case, her spiritual work was indistinguishable from her antislavery activism.

Most of what we know about Zilpha Elaw comes from her memoirs. She, like Jarena Lee, believed it was necessary to document her spiritual journey, which included her conversion, sanctification, and call to preach. Together, these spiritual processes reveal the barriers to Black women’s activism and the ways in which Black women looked internally to God to overcome the obstacles they faced.⁵³ These spiritual processes became launching points for Black women to understand their role in the struggle for Black freedom, in which they fused spirituality, education and

⁵¹ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 84.

⁵² Catherine A. Berkus, *Strangers & Pilgrims Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁵³ Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*, 19–21.

communalism in their liberation theologies. Sanctification, in particular, helped women transcend the gendered barriers in the church and within Black politics. Once they had been sanctified by God, there were no laws that men could create that were more powerful. Elaw vividly recounted the moment when her sanctification was confirmed in her spiritual narrative, which she published in 1846. “They that seek shall find” she wrote, as she described “the darkness” that was lifted from her as she was reborn.⁵⁴ Elaw had been singing the songs of Zion at a camp meeting when she “saw the Lord” advance towards her with “open arms,” she recalled. From that day forward, she was convinced “of his love” and acceptance. She was also clear that she had been anointed to spread God’s word and that God’s word would deliver humanity from the yoke of racial slavery.⁵⁵

Black spiritual women knew they had something worthwhile to share, and it was often through their written and oral testimony that they were able to declare their right as women to live, speak, and lead by God’s word. There was power in their narratives, including the power of telling a story that would otherwise never be told. Their spirituality, as Chanta Haywood argues, was a “cultural passport,” that gave them “access to physical and ideological spaces otherwise denied to them.”⁵⁶ They used these stories and created a trinity of spiritual activism that was grounded in the Judeo-Christian Bible in order to pursue freedom on earth.

⁵⁴ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 56.

⁵⁵ Elaw, 56.

⁵⁶ Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*, 20.

Black Spiritual Activism and Social Reform

The spread of evangelical Christianity continued into the Antebellum period and contributed to the rise of reform. The focus on social redemption influenced the development of Black Christianity and the connection between spiritual leaders and secular activism.⁵⁷ In addition, evangelicals sought to abolish societal evils. For many White evangelicals, this was theoretical – the idea that all people were equal before God – yet, it did not translate to social relations on earth. For Black evangelicals, God’s salvation included their time on earth. They believed they had a spiritual duty to fight for freedom.⁵⁸ This was the basis of the liberation theology that was characteristic of Black preaching.

Black Christians related symbols and lessons from the Bible to their own experiences and proclaimed freedom was God’s will. This is seen in the appeal of the Exodus story, which contextualized the sins of slavery in relation to the Puritan notion of the wrath of God and fostered a faith that God would hold slave owners and their sympathizers accountable for the cruelty they inflicted upon Black people.⁵⁹ Though this was the most significant for the enslaved, it was also important for free Black people who spearheaded the fight for emancipation and equal rights in a way that only those who experienced racial oppression could. This was especially true for Black women. There was an urgency as well as a feeling of predestination that was at the core of Black women’s spiritual activism.

The evangelical emphasis on the New Testament also appealed to African

⁵⁷ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 120–21.

⁵⁸ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 28–36.

⁵⁹ Raboteau, 28–36.

Americans for its emphasis on love, salvation, and equality. The gospel according to Luke, for example, presented Jesus as the savior of all people, regardless of their race, class, or gender. Black people felt especially favored because Jesus was an egalitarian who identified with the suffering, the downtrodden, and the oppressed. The persecution and eventual resurrection of Christ was a major source of hope in the idea that good would eventually triumph over evil. For Black people, it often meant freedom would prevail over slavery.⁶⁰

Maria Stewart and the Spiritual Politics of Liberation

Maria Stewart, the first African American political speaker and writer was among these spiritual leaders whose political voice was guided by their spiritual beliefs. Stewart was born Maria Miller in Hartford Connecticut in 1803. She was an orphan by the age of 5, at which point she was indentured to serve a White family. She was nearly twenty years younger than Jarena Lee, and yet, she faced a similar fate of child servitude. Like Lee and Elaw, Stewart reflected on her time as a child servant in the biographical sketch of herself that she included in her published work. Her childhood experiences surely influenced her perspective of the national span of racism, “for with few exceptions” she considered the condition of free Blacks “but little better than the enslaved.”⁶¹

Stewart’s political career began in 1831 with her publication of *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*, a

⁶⁰ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 8–12.

⁶¹ Maria Stewart, “Lecture, Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston Sept., 21, 1832,” in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 51–52.

political essay that condemned the gross injustice against free and enslaved African Americans. As literary critic and biographer Marilyn Richardson argues, Stewart's essay was a "pioneering statement of her religious abolitionist and feminist views."⁶² She followed up in 1832 with a year of riveting, yet controversial speeches, addressing the struggle for racial advancement in a nation that had positioned Black people as servants and slaves. Stewart forcefully argued the status of Black people had reached a point of no return—slavery was a moral wrong, and she called on Black people to rise up and demand immediate abolition. Her analysis was in concert with the growing antislavery sentiment throughout the country.

Like other Black spiritual women who rallied against slavery through Christian teachings, Stewart embodied the trinity at the root of Black women's activism, in which Black advancement was contingent upon spirituality, education, and communalism as moral imperative. Her solution was rooted in a Black nationalist perspective in which she maintained that the "chains of slavery and ignorance" could only be broken if Black people "united as one."⁶³ According to Stewart's freedom philosophy, self-determination, solidarity, and collective action were the key components for Black liberation. She challenged her audience to take the lead in their own advancement.⁶⁴ "If no one will promote or respect us, let us promote and respect

⁶² Marilyn Richardson, "Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer," in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions* (Burlington Vt.: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 11.

⁶³ Maria Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 6.

⁶⁴ As historian Sterling Stuckey argues, the first generation of Black nationalists saw racial pride, collective action, and self-defined institution building as key to their ability the key to their move from "oppression and dependency to liberation and autonomy." For more on the Black Nationalism in the early nineteenth century see Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*, 3–7. Bracey,

ourselves,” she said.⁶⁵ While Stewart’s calls for Black unity and collective action placed her among male Black nationalists of her time, she theorized a gender inclusive analysis of racial uplift that positioned women at the center of social justice work. Just as itinerant preachers like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw centered women as the cornerstone of liberation, Stewart also recognized the potential power of Black women to take on key roles in the liberation struggle. She proclaimed, “O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise...” and she challenged them to “distinguish themselves in the struggle for Black freedom and civil rights.”⁶⁶

Freedom Fighters and the Cult of True Womanhood

Stewart had not yet walked down the “promiscuous path of public speaking” but urging women to take a central role within the fight for Black freedom was still a daring move, considering she lived in a world committed to the cult of true womanhood. This patriarchal ideology regulated the attitudes and behaviors of women, and Stewart would become the first Black woman to challenge it publically.⁶⁷ The cultural norms that demanded meek subordination among women meant that Stewart’s world was one where a woman was judged by criteria established by men. But the cult of domesticity involved far more than patriarchy, as it was deeply shaped

Meier, and Rudwick, *Black Nationalism in America*, xvi, lvi–lvii. On Maria Stewart and Black Nationalism see Lena Ampadu, “Maria W. Stewart and the Rhetoric of Black Preaching: Perspectives on Womanism and Black Nationalism,” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B Conway (Burlington Vt.: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 38–54; Gayle Tate, *Unknown Tongues: Black Women’s Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830–1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 198–99.

⁶⁵ Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” 12.

⁶⁶ Stewart, 6.

⁶⁷ Within the cult, a woman’s virtue was defined by the tenets of purity, piety, and domesticity, and submissiveness.

by both race and class. It was a racially exclusive ideology constructed as a standard for middle and upper class White women. This is an important point because there has been minimal attention to the ways in which race, class, and gender impacted each other within the cult of true womanhood. Many scholars have argued that the cult held women “hostage in the home,” yet few have acknowledged Black women who were forced to work outside their homes.⁶⁸ Women who were enslaved in the South were the obvious examples, but most free Black women, like Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw, worked outside of their homes as well. Stewart experienced this first hand when she began work as an indentured servant at the age of 5.⁶⁹

Stewart moved to Boston around 1820 and continued to work as a domestic servant until she married James Stewart in 1826. James, an independent businessman and “shipper” was several years her senior and a veteran of the war of 1812. His status released Stewart from domestic service and ushered her into the middle class echelon of Boston’s Black community.⁷⁰ Yet, Stewart never stopped thinking about the other “daughters of Africa” who still had to “bury their minds and talents beneath a load of

⁶⁸ Barbara Welter was among the first to examine the intricacies of this ideology. Welter’s work was groundbreaking, yet severely limited because she failed to incorporate race and class in her analysis. Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976). Subsequent works have extended Welter’s argument to include discussions of class and white women’s agency within the cult, but there have been minimal advancements with regards to race. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*; Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*, First Edition (Yale University Press, 1983); Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Woman’s Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2007). Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 40–59. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20–39.

⁶⁹ Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” 3.

⁷⁰ Since the majority of African Americans in the antebellum period were poor, the Black middle class had more to do with skills and community standing than income. In Boston, a small group of skilled workers and small shopkeepers occupied the Black middle class as it was defined by skills and community standing more so than earned income. A very small professional class of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and ministers held the most elite positions within the Black Bostonian community. James Horton and Lois Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 1–10.

iron pots and kettles.”⁷¹ She knew from her own experience as a domestic servant that Black women often provided the labor that allowed middle and upper class white women to be positioned on the “pedestal” of true womanhood.

James Stewart died in 1829, but not before the couple established themselves within the thriving abolitionist center of Boston’s Black community. Boston’s rich antislavery sentiment was due partly to the radical tradition inherited from the American Revolution.⁷² Black Bostonians capitalized on what they saw as a slight racial tolerance relative to the rest of the nation and began organizing themselves for the “betterment” of Black people, which included, but was not limited to, the abolition of slavery. This was most apparent on the north side of Boston’s Beacon Hill where the Stewarts and the majority of Black Bostonians lived.

This area of Boston, often referred to by whites as, “Nigger Hill,” was similar to other predominantly Black neighborhoods throughout the Northeast.⁷³ Racial segregation, coupled with the productivity of a cohesive “community” meant that the majority of Black people, regardless of occupation lived in common neighborhoods, patronized each other’s businesses, and worshipped together in the same churches. They turned “segregation into congregation,” which facilitated the growth of organized activism that connected activists across the nation in their respective cities.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” 16.

⁷² Since Massachusetts was the birthplace of the rebellion, many Boston residents had difficulty reconciling the existence of slavery within the newly independent nation. This was evident in 1783 when Massachusetts became the first state to adopt immediate abolition. Slavery was ruled unconstitutional by virtue of the State constitution, which declared all men equal and entitled to liberty.

⁷³ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 2–3.

⁷⁴ I’ve borrowed the concept of “segregation into congregation” Ethnic Studies scholarship that examines African American agency in the 20th century. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (Simon and Schuster, 1996), 45; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive*

It is no coincidence then, that James and Maria Stewart were friends and neighbors with some of the most influential Black Abolitionists in the nation, including David Walker, one of the most influential Black nationalist thinkers of his time, and remembered most for his antislavery tract, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, published in 1829.⁷⁵ The Stewarts and the Walkers no doubt knew each other well; they even had a house in common. Though they did not occupy it at the same time, the Stewarts moved into 8 Belknap Street directly after David and his wife Eliza vacated it. Additionally, the house the Stewarts and the Walkers had in common was on the same street as the African Meeting House, which served as a central space for racial uplift efforts in Boston. It was home to the First African Baptist Church, housed a schoolroom, and provided a meeting space for many reform organizations.⁷⁶

The African Meeting House was one of the most important sites of Black community building in the Northeast. It exemplified the ways in which African Americans combined sacred and secular spaces in their efforts to create and maintain community. It was the most logical space for the First African Baptist Church, founded by Thomas Paul in 1805.⁷⁷ Paul's church was part of the larger Black church movement, which was one of the most profound expressions of Black self-determination that was taking place throughout the northeast. The Stewart's were not

Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics (Temple University Press, 2006), 243; George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Temple University Press, 2011), 52–70.

⁷⁵ For an extended discussion of Walker's life and message see: Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry: David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829-1830, Its Setting & Its Meaning, Together with the Full Text of the Third, and Last, Edition of the Appeal*. (New York: Published for A.I.M.S. by Humanities Press, 1965); Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Lerone Bennett, *Pioneers in Protest*, [1st ed.] (Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co., 1968).

⁷⁶ For more on segregated neighborhoods in Boston see Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 45.

⁷⁷ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 105.

official members of the African Baptist Church, but they were well acquainted with the Reverend Paul, who had officiated their wedding.⁷⁸ Maria demonstrated an even closer association when she included the First African Baptist Church in the title page of her 1835 publication of the *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*. This collection contained her first essay, her public lectures, and her spiritual meditations.⁷⁹ The fact that Stewart was so heavily affiliated with a church that she was not a member of is even more telling of the relationship between spirituality and activism in the antebellum period.⁸⁰ The African Baptist Church might not have been her central place of worship, but it was still home to those who shared her commitment to Black advancement.

Stewart's spirituality can be traced back to her childhood, and is one of the few personal details included in her introduction to the *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*. She notes that she "borrowed" much of her language from the Bible, which she had studied "during the years of [her] childhood and youth."⁸¹ Stewart likely encountered the Bible in the home of the clergyman she was indentured to, but she did not receive

⁷⁸ The marriage license, on file at the Registry of Marriages, Boston, Massachusetts reads: "James W. Stewart & Maria Miller, people of color, married by the Rev. Thomas Paul, 10 August 1826.

⁷⁹ A detailed analysis of the politics of Stewart's religious meditations will be examined in the following chapter "Preaching Women." See: Richardson, "Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer"; Ampadu, "Maria W. Stewart and the Rhetoric of Black Preaching: Perspectives on Womanism and Black Nationalism"; Ebony Utley, "A Woman Made of Words: The Rhetorical Invention of Maria Stewart," in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B Conway (Burlington Vt.: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 55–71; Dianne Bartlow, "'No Throw-Away Woman': Maria W. Stewart as a Forerunner of Black Feminist Thought," in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B Conway (Burlington Vt.: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 72–90.

⁸⁰ Stewart was Episcopalian and later joined Peter Williams' St. Phillips Episcopal church when she moved to New York.

⁸¹ Maria Stewart, "Meditations," in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 24; Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 15.

formal training until she began Sabbath School at the age of 15. Her religious grounding is evident in the biblical references she used throughout her writings. Though immersed in the bible's teachings since childhood, Stewart did not publicly profess her religious faith until 1831, two years after her husband died. Deeply saddened by the loss, Stewart turned to God for comfort.⁸²

Stewart's conversion was a call to action and a departure point for social justice work. From that moment on she vowed to "sacrifice [her] life for the cause of God and [her] brethren."⁸³ This was a "holy warfare," and Stewart proclaimed Jesus was her captain.⁸⁴ Stewart's religious awakening opened the door to the exclusively male arena of political activism. Since the church was considered part of the woman's sphere, Stewart used a pure and pious tone to breakdown the gender conventions that deemed it inappropriate for a woman to speak publicly. This was savvy indeed, because although she claimed she was but a "feeble instrument of God," her focus on religion and morality translated into a "divine right" to speak.⁸⁵

The death of Stewart's husband also helped Stewart stray from what was considered the "proper place" for women. As a widow, Stewart did not have to act as cautiously with her reputation as women who were still in the market for marriage. At the same time she was released from the responsibilities of marriage. Beyond the general hostility towards women's leadership, married women had an additional responsibility to their husbands and children. Stewart's status as a widow

⁸² Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality."

⁸³ Stewart, 4.

⁸⁴ Maria Stewart, "An Address, Delivered Before the Afric-American Intelligence Society of Boston," in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835).

⁸⁵ Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 7.

undoubtedly took her spiritual mobility further. This is not to say that life as a widow was easy. Stewart suffered extreme hardship when she was left to support herself after her husband's death. James had made provisions for his wife before he died, but Maria was swindled out of her inheritance by a group of White businessmen. This type of injustice occurred so frequently against Black women that David Walker described it in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* with, as Marilyn Richardson argues "uncanny prescience."⁸⁶ He wrote: "In this very city...when a man of color dies, if he owned any real estate it most likely falls into the hands of some White person."⁸⁷ Walker's observation was more than a coincidence. Black women's rights were often overridden in this era when being either Black or female meant the denial of full citizenship. Black women were particularly vulnerable in a court of law.⁸⁸ In Stewart's case, she was left penniless. Thus, while Stewart was clearly called to speak by God, her financial hardship was what likely compelled her to publish *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* for profit in 1831.⁸⁹ Stewart eventually solicited William Lloyd Garrison, a White abolitionist living in Boston, to help her publish her first essay, and subsequent lectures. He was most known as editor of the *Liberator*, a radical abolitionist paper that he began publishing in January 1831.

⁸⁶ Richardson, "Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer," 7.

⁸⁷ David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, ed. James Turner, third (Baltimore Md.: Black Classic Press, 1993), 39.

⁸⁸ Elleanor Eldridge of Warwick, Rhode Island is another example of the type of injustice Black women with assets faced. Eldridge was able to build a home on a plot of land that she purchased for one hundred dollars, after years of domestic work. She was cheated out of her home by a neighbor and local sheriff. Unable to look to the courts for help, Eldridge had to repurchase her own home. For more on Eldridge see: Elleanor Eldridge, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*. (Providence R.I.: B.T. Albro printer, 1838); Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 89–90.

⁸⁹ Stewart's pamphlet sold for 6 cents, and was advertised in the *Liberator* alongside other antislavery literature. *Liberator*, (Boston, October 1. 1831)

Although edited by a White man, the *Liberator* was founded by the urging of the African American community. It addressed Black issues, was financially supported by Black people, and was a testament to the ways in which Black people had been organizing long before radical abolition became an interracial movement.⁹⁰ Women were particularly significant in raising funds for Black and antislavery newspapers including *Freedom's Journal* (1827) and later *North Star* (1847) edited by leading Black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Black women collected money within their own organizations, coordinated fundraisers, and held bazaars. Once in New York, Maria Stewart, for example, was listed among the New York antislavery women who had contributed to *North Star*.⁹¹

Black newspapers provided a venue for the most marginalized voices to be heard, and Stewart was one of the first Black women to capitalize on this open media. In an 1879 letter Garrison recalls that it was Stewart's own initiative that inspired him to not only look at but solidly endorse her work. "Soon after I started the publication of the *Liberator*," he recalled "you made yourself known to me by coming into my office and putting into my hands for criticism and friendly advice, a manuscript embodying your devotional thoughts and aspirations..."⁹² Stewart's speeches and at least one article appeared in the "Ladies Section" of the *Liberator*, which welcomed

⁹⁰ The Black influence distinguished the *Liberator* from other anti-slavery newspapers, such as Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, which Garrison edited from 1829-1831 before establishing his own paper.

⁹¹ *North Star* (Rochester, NY, April 12, 1850).

⁹² "Garrison to Stewart," April 4, 1879, reprinted in Richardson, "Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer."

articles by or about women.⁹³ In Garrison's announcement of the new section he wrote: "The ladies of Great Britain are moving the sympathies of the whole nation, in behalf of the perishing slaves in the British Colonies. We cannot believe that our own ladies are less philanthropic or less influential. In their hands is the destiny of the slaves."⁹⁴ Garrison's call was reflective of the antislavery's move to include women. This however, was a painfully slow process that was more often a result of women's agency than men's benevolence.

Stewart embraced the "virtues" of true womanhood while at the same time encouraging Black women to be active in the fight for social justice. She emphasized the importance of women as—wives, mother, teachers and spiritual leaders—and argued that women's work was necessary in creating a more just world for the next generation. "O woman woman!" she exclaimed, "your example is powerful, your influence is great; it extends over your husbands and over your children, and throughout the circle of your acquaintance."⁹⁵ For Stewart, liberation was on the horizon, and Black women were central in that quest to achieve it. "It is you" she said "that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, the abhorrence of vice, and the cultivation of a pure heart."⁹⁶ Stewart had placed black women squarely within a framework of political activism while at the same time adhering to the gender conventions of the time.

⁹³ Garrison was modeling his "Ladies Section" off of Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, an antislavery newspaper out of Baltimore. He was also inspired by the activism of women abroad.

⁹⁴ "Ladies Department," *Liberator*, January 7, 1832.

⁹⁵ Maria Stewart, "An Address, Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston" in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*, 1835, reprinted in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Henry Louis Gates Jr, Ed. 62.

⁹⁶ Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 13.

Stewart was not the only one who believed “women’s work” would “uplift the race.” She was echoing what Black women had already been doing. There was indeed a growing belief that they were important to racial uplift so long as they remained in their “proper place.” Many black women had already begun to work within what was considered acceptable forms of activism. The church was often the backdrop to their activities that included benevolent and community service work. Black women raised money, organized sewing circles, and held bazaars in their efforts to provide everyday necessities for others. This was more than charity work, but a way to subsidize the unmet needs of family, friends and neighbors. They were not providing for strangers, but to their neighbors, family, and friends. The African Dorcas Association in New York, for example, made clothes and provided school materials for students in the African Free School. This enabled more children to attend school at a time when education was seen as a tool for liberation. Black women also used sewing circles to make clothes for self-emancipated slaves. Their efforts helped countless freedom seekers avoid capture. This type of work, though activist in nature, was considered acceptable because it allowed women to stay within the woman’s sphere. Yet, it was also innovative and subversive of racial and gender norms.

Black Women and the Sacred Power of Education

Black women’s commitment to secular and religious education also continued into the antebellum era. Catherine Ferguson’s Sunday School, which she operated out of her home until 1814, was now located at the Reformed Church on Murray Street,

and was known as the Murray Street Sabbath School.⁹⁷ According to the Female Union Society for the Promotion of Sabbath School records, Ferguson's school "served whites and blacks, children and adults."⁹⁸ The religious education that she provided was freedom centered; this included teaching pupils to read.⁹⁹

Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw were also involved in religious education. Elaw opened a school in Burlington, Pennsylvania around 1817 after her husband died. She received assistance "with books and other necessaries" from local Quakers who often brought visitors who praised Elaw's effort. "[I]t was gratifying to many of them to see a female of colour teaching the coloured children, whom the white people refused to admit into their seminaries," she wrote.¹⁰⁰ Elaw's school, like most Black institutions at this time, was a challenge to the racial discrimination Black people faced, which had been increasing since the early national period. Elaw said that "the prejudice was far less prevalent" in Pennsylvania during her childhood, noting that she had never been prevented from attending a school on account of race. She, like her spiritual sisters, believed racism and segregation were violations of God's will. "Oh! That men would outgrow their nursery prejudices" she said, and learn that "God hath made of one blood all the nations of men that dwell upon all the face on the earth"¹⁰¹ Elaw only makes mention of her school once in her narrative, so she may have ceased operation when she began traveling. Nevertheless, education remained central to her preaching,

⁹⁷ Johnson, *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Called by the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London From Tuesday, June 13th, to Tuesday, June 20th, 1843*, 212.

⁹⁸ Hartvik, "Catherine Ferguson, Black Founder of a Sunday-School," 177.

⁹⁹ Hartvik, 177.

¹⁰⁰ Elaw, *Memoirs*, 86.

¹⁰¹ Elaw, 86. Elaw was quoting Acts xvii: 26 from the King James Bible.

and she, like Jarena Lee, frequented Sabbath schools and secular classrooms throughout her itineracy.¹⁰²

Spirituality as a Platform for Action

Black spiritual women played a critical role in spreading Christian teachings among Black communities, free and enslaved, with the hopes of educating the masses about the link between the gospel and Black freedom. A circle of Black women, including Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Catherine Ferguson, and Maria Stewart, were expanding the liberation theology preached in Black churches to include a place for themselves as women leaders. These women used scripture to claim their place at the center of the freedom struggle. Some women preached the word of eternal salvation, while others used a spiritual framework to guide their political action. No matter the work, spirituality was at the core. Black spiritual women embodied a trinity at the heart of their activism in which they fused spirituality with communalism and education. This is evident among those who make up church congregations, camp meetings, mutual aid societies, and benevolent groups. Black women also formed prayer groups and led Sunday Schools to extend their efforts to educate and reeducate the Black masses. Spirituality was the link, regardless of whether or not these women leaders were tied to a particular church or denomination. Their faith served as motivation and inspiration. It also shaped the direction of their activism, as they got involved in community building and antislavery work. Even still, they were not

¹⁰² Jarena Lee visited schools between preaching engagements regularly. One of her most significant visits was to Louis Tappan's School in the late 1830s. Lee, *Journal*, 80.

monolithic. Black women found different ways to position themselves as spiritual leaders, and many had a complicated relationship with patriarchal interpretations of the Bible that stifled their experiences as spiritual leaders.

CHAPTER 4

“TO GET A LITTLE MORE LEARNING” (1832-1837):

EDUCATION AND THE FREEDOM CENTERED PEDAGOGY OF BLACK WOMEN ABOLITIONISTS

‘Me thinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—“Who shall go forward and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?” And my heart made this reply – “If it is thy will, be it ever so, Lord Jesus!”’¹

- Maria Stewart, 1832

Education as a Tool for Liberation

Black women believed education was a tool for liberation during the antebellum period. Women like Sarah Douglass, Sarah Harris, and Susan Paul taught in religious and secular schools, formed literary societies, and went to great lengths to educate themselves and their communities. Black women have always centered education in their definitions of freedom, but by the 1830s they were organizing around education in mass and across regions. In some cases, Black women faced violent opposition in pursuit of education. Julia Williams, for example, attended two different schools in the Northeast that were destroyed by White protestors. Nevertheless, Black women persisted and crafted a freedom-centered approach to teaching and learning that was central to their activism. Their pedagogy shaped the next generation of activists and was a launching point for Black women’s leadership and participation as the interracial Abolitionist movement took form. This chapter explores the central role that education played within the Abolitionist movement and

¹ This quote comes from Maria Stewart’s first political speech presented before an audience of both men and women. Maria Stewart, “Lecture, Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston Sept., 21, 1832,” in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835).

the ways Black women operated as teachers, critical thinkers, and life-long learners in their pursuit of freedom and equality.

The Rise of Black Women's Literary Societies

Black women were especially significant when it came to the political education of other Black women. This was seen in the rise of literary societies throughout the Northeast in the 1830s and 1840s. These organizations were based on religious principles and a commitment to learning. Black women were able to improve reading and writing skills, discuss political issues, and debate ideas in these groups.² They read articles from antislavery newspapers and also critiqued each other's written work. This was especially significant for women like Sarah Douglass and Maria Stewart, who shared their political opinions and circulated their anti-slavery writings in these groups.

The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston are two important examples. These trailblazing organizations pro-actively connected Black women's education to the rising Abolitionist movement. Both groups, for example, sent copies of their constitution to be printed in the *Liberator*.³ The Philadelphia Female Literary Association's constitution declared it a "duty incumbent upon us as women—as daughters of a despised race—to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding and

² Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 4 (October 1, 1936): 555–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2292029>.

³ The Female Literary Society was founded on September 20, 1831. Their Constitution was published in the *Liberator* on December 3, 1831. The Constitution of Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was published on January 7, 1832.

cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping.”⁴ The Philadelphia women recognized the power of their collaboration and hoped to serve as an example to other women. This is what prompted them to send their constitution to William Lloyd Garrison not long after they were founded.⁵ It appeared in the December 3, 1831 issue of the *Liberator*. The Female Literary Association’s push to be recognized is a testament to how they saw and positioned themselves as leaders in the budding movement. The *Genius of Universal Emancipation* and the *Liberator* noted the influence Black women were having on each other and the growing connections between Black women’s groups across regions.⁶ William Lloyd Garrison would later describe the Philadelphia Female Literary Association as a “source of unspeakable satisfaction.”⁷ For Garrison, Black women’s literary societies were “a new weapon...against southern oppressors.”⁸

Garrison visited the Female Literary Association in 1832 and said it was “one

⁴ *Liberator*, December 3, 1831

⁵ Sarah Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, February 29, 1832. Antislavery Manuscripts, BPL.

⁶ *Liberator*, May 5, 1832. This article was originally printed in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* and suggests that the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was founded before the Female Literary Society and had influenced the Philadelphia women to form the society. The constitution of the Philadelphia group had already been printed in the *Liberator* in December of 1831, but Garrison reprinted the article from the *Genius* without clarifying that the Female Literary Association in Philadelphia was founded first. Sarah Douglass, a leading member of the Female Literary Association wrote to Garrison, asking why they had not been acknowledged as the pioneers. Historian Julie Winch points out that the Philadelphia women must not have seen that their constitution was published in December. The fact that the *Liberator* reposted the article from the *Genius* without context was not uncommon. Garrison however, did acknowledge the Philadelphia women as pioneers in his response. Sarah Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, February 29, 1832, Antislavery Manuscripts, BPL; William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah Mapps Douglass, March 5, 1832, Antislavery Manuscripts, BPL. See also Julie Winch, “‘You Have Talents-Only Cultivate Them’: Philadelphia’s Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 10.

⁷ William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah M. Douglass, March 5, 1832.

⁸ *Liberator*, June 30, 1832.

of the most interesting spectacles he ever experienced.”⁹ He described the Philadelphia women as “full of intellectual promise” and believed that they were challenging pro-slavery arguments by their commitment to excellence.¹⁰

The members assemble together every Tuesday evening, for the purpose of mutual improvement in moral and literary pursuits. Nearly all of them write, almost weekly, original pieces, which are put anonymously into a box, and afterwards criticized by a committee.¹¹

These women were scholars, who understood the power of collectivity when learning. There were about 20 members at the time Garrison visited and that number was growing. Black women’s literary societies were, in fact, spreading across the Northeast and becoming central venues for Black women’s activism.¹² Black women like Sarah Douglass used these organizations to cut their teeth as Abolitionists.

Sarah Douglass and the Cultivation of an Abolitionist Educator

Sarah Douglas was a school teacher and founding member of the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia. She was born in 1806 into a middle-class family with deep roots in Philadelphia’s Black activist community. Sarah’s grandfather, Cyrus Bustill, was a founding member of the Free-African Society. Her mother, Grace Bustill Douglass, was a teacher and her father, Robert Douglass Sr., was a hairdresser who owned his own business.¹³ Sarah’s brother Robert Jr. was also a budding activist

⁹ *Liberator*, June 30, 1832.

¹⁰ *Liberator*, June 30, 1832; Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 58.

¹¹ *Liberator*, June 30, 1832

¹² *Liberator*, May 5, 1832

¹³ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 248.

with a special interest in education.¹⁴ Sarah's family exposed her to the various avenues of struggle, but she evolved as a thinker in her own right and a leader of the Female Literary Association.

Sarah Douglass declared in one meeting, which the women called "Mental Feasts," that "reading and conversation should be altogether directed to the subject of slavery."¹⁵ This was not long after a bill had been proposed "that would have required all blacks to carry passes," and Douglass had felt the threat of slave catchers in her neighborhood.¹⁶ Sarah Douglass embodied the trinity of Black women's activism. She was a spiritual woman who saw herself as a vessel for God's work. Her faith inspired her to become an Abolitionist through education. She once said she "had no hope in man, but much in God."¹⁷ Armed with her faith, Douglass alongside her mother Grace, became a leading member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS) founded in 1833 and a national leader at the Anti-Slavery Conventions of American Women that took place from 1837-1839. She also continued teaching and her school was sponsored by the PFASS from 1833-1837.

Douglass' participation in the Female Literary Association helped her develop an Abolitionist agenda at the same time the movement was forming. The Female

¹⁴ Robert Douglass Jr, who was also a brilliant artist, was a founding member of the Philadelphia Library Company in 1834. Aston Gonzalez, "The Art of Racial Politics: The Work of Robert Douglass Jr., 1833-46," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 138, no. 1 (2014): 10-11.

¹⁵ *Liberator*, July 21, 1832; Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 126-27. For reference to literary societies as "Mental Feasts" see also *Liberator*, May 4, 1833.

¹⁶ Sterling, 126-27; Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 139; Marie Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 65, no. 3 (1998): 265-66.

¹⁷ *Liberator*, July 21, 1832.

Literary Association most certainly took note when Black women founded the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem (FASS) in 1832. The FASS was the first women's anti-slavery society in the United States. Black women's groups across the Northeast were likely discussing this trailblazing group, whose constitution was also published in the *Liberator*. The Female Literary Society of Philadelphia would have found a lot in common with the Salem women who "being duly convinced of the importance of union morality," came together to focus on "mutual improvement" and the "welfare" of their race.¹⁸ The Salem women were supported by their own "voluntary contributions," and strove to fight slavery and inequality by providing resources and opportunities for themselves and others in their community.¹⁹ In the tradition of their foremothers, the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem was expanding the communalism of mutual aid and benevolence, to include explicitly anti-slavery work.

Maria Stewart and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society

The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston was another important group. This organization was formed at the end of 1831, which they made sure to share with the growing Abolitionist community.²⁰ Their constitution appeared

¹⁸ *Liberator*, November 17, 1832; Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 113.

¹⁹ *Liberator*, November 17, 1832; Sterling, 113.

²⁰ *Liberator*, January 7, 1832. Although the Constitution does not include a founding date, The Afric-American Female Intelligence most was most likely organized between September and December of 1831. Garrison states that he visited the organization after it was formed when he published the Constitution in January. This suggests that the organization had existed at least a few weeks before January 7, 1832. The *Liberator* also had a notice on September 1, 1833, stating that the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society would be celebrating its one-year anniversary the following week. See *Liberator*, September 1, 1832. For other scholars who speculate that the Afric-American Intelligence Society was founded in 1831 see Sterling, 110; Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 21. For scholars who identify 1832 as the founding date see Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*

in the *Liberator* on January 7, 1832. This was the same issue that included a “spirited extract” of Maria Stewart’s “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality” which was still for sale at the *Liberator* headquarters.²¹ The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society Constitution stated that:

...women of color of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, actuated by a natural feeling for the welfare of our friends, have thought fit to associate for the diffusion of knowledge, the suppression of vice and immorality, and for cherishing such virtues as will render us happy and useful to society.²²

William Lloyd Garrison introduced the constitution stating the “Society, though recently organized already embraces a large number of the most respectable females of color...”²³ These Black women were clear about their spiritual foundations, and their collective belief that all was possible with “the blessing of God.”²⁴ Black women’s literary societies provided another avenue for Black women to uplift each other and their people. Some Black women used the opportunity to delve into political issues that were otherwise seen as off limits to women. In the case of Maria Stewart, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society provided her first venue to lecture publicly.

Maria Stewart delivered her first speech to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society in April of 1832, not long after she published her second set of

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 105; Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 63; James Horton and Lois Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 32.

²¹ “Mrs. Stewart’s Essay,” *Liberator*, January 7, 1832. Maria Stewart’s last name was spelled with a D in this article. Her name was often misspelled at the beginning of her career.

²² *Liberator*, January 7, 1832. See also Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 63.

²³ *Liberator*, January 7, 1832.

²⁴ *Liberator*, January 7, 1832

essays, entitled “Meditations,” which was for sale at the office of the *Liberator* for 10 cents. The first advertisement appeared on March 31, 1832 and described Stewart’s writings as “largely of a devotional spirit.”²⁵ Stewart may have shared early drafts of this work with the Female Intelligence Society, which was not an uncommon practice.²⁶ Stewart had a clear following and support from the Afri-American Female Intelligence Society and leading Abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, when she was invited to speak before the Boston. Her first speech before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society seemed to be well received. The opposition came when Stewart started speaking to promiscuous audiences (men and women). It escalated when she directly addressed Black men at the African Masonic Hall in 1833.

The African Masonic Lodge, founded in 1794 by Prince Hall was one of the earliest examples of a self-determined Black organization formed in the face of overt racial discrimination.²⁷ Its founder, Prince Hall, set a strong anti-slavery tone orating on the evils of slavery as early as 1797. Several of the Lodge’s members had prominent roles in the development of other racial uplift organizations. The exclusively male membership however reveals the ways in which women were excluded from major sites of organizing.

Although she was formally excluded from the organization, Stewart still

²⁵ *Liberator*, March 31, 1832

²⁶ *Liberator*, June 30, 1832

²⁷ Prince Hall became a Master Mason in 1775 through the British Military Lodge #58. He was the first Mason of African descent followed in that same year by fourteen others. Hall chartered the African Lodge #459 was chartered in 1787. They remained unchartered and unrecognized by White American Masons until after the Civil War. William H. Grimshaw, *Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America* (Kessinger Publishing, 1903), 70–75; Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 70–71.

managed to position herself in conversation with its constituency. It is likely that the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA), which shared members with the African Masonic Lodge, was well represented in Stewart's audience when she delivered her address to the African Masonic Hall in February of 1833. Stewart's personal engagement is clear, but her involvement is also a testament to the ways in which Black women were informally connected to the male dominated sites of struggle. There was a race-centered dynamic in most Black homes, particularly those with known activists. Given Stewart's connections to Boston's Black activist community it is likely that she accessed the Lodge through her husband, who may have been a member.

It is also possible that Stewart was invited to speak as a courtesy to her late husband. Whatever the impetus behind her invitation, the members of the Lodge were outraged when Stewart's topic turned from women's influence to a scathing critique of black men. "Is it blindness of mind" she asked, "or stupidity of soul or want of education that has caused our men 60 and 70 years old never to let their voices be heard nor their hands be raised in behalf of their color?"²⁸ Stewart asserted that, "[t]alk without effort, is nothing."²⁹ She stated that "the gross neglect" of many Black men made her "blood boil."³⁰ It has even been said that they "jeered and threw rotten tomatoes at her."³¹

Stewart's words were harsh. But her analysis was in tune with some of the

²⁸ Maria Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall, Boston, Feb. 27, 1833," in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 64.

²⁹ Stewart, 65.

³⁰ Stewart, 65.

³¹ Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 57.

most famed Black activists affiliated with the African Masonic Lodge. Just a few years earlier, David Walker had put forth one of the most critical assessments of racism and slavery in the United States. His *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* Walker was just as critical of the men he sought to inspire. He asked how could they be “so submissive” in their own degradation.³² Like Stewart, he believed it was time for Black men to step up and “prove to the Americans and the world, that we are MEN...”³³ The *Appeal* was so compelling that it was interpreted by many as “the star in the east guiding them to freedom and emancipation.”³⁴ Stewart’s words were deeply influenced by the “noble, fearless, and undaunted Walker” whose name she invoked in her introduction to *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*.³⁵

However, Stewart was not Walker. Although she shared Walker’s commitment to Black progress, she was met with deep criticism because she was a woman. Nevertheless, Stewart continued to assert her divine right to speak. “What if I am a woman,” she demanded,

...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 the Jews: And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?³⁶

This was her farewell lecture, delivered on September 21, 1833. It was addressed to

³² David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, ed. James Turner, third (Baltimore, Md.: Black Classic Press, 1993), 36.

³³ David Walker, 50.

³⁴ *Boston Evening Transcript*, September 28, 1830.

³⁵ Maria Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 5.

³⁶ Stewart, 75.

“her friends in the city of Boston,” she was by no means exiting on friendly terms.³⁷ Nearly 20 years after Stewart delivered her final lecture, Black Abolitionist William C. Nell reflected on the rejection she must have felt from “her Boston friends” as a travesty and evidence of a real weakness in the antislavery movement.³⁸

The Cult of True Black Womanhood

The resistance Stewart encountered reflected the trickle-down effect of the cult of true womanhood, which led African Americans to adopt similar notions of “respectability.” In many ways, the Black community’s adherence to the dominant society’s gender roles was an attempt to reclaim the rights denied to them on account of race. In a society where male dominance was standard, everyone understood American freedom in sexist and patriarchal terms. Black newspapers of the time demonstrated that this was indeed a priority, often printing articles and poems that promoted unequal gender roles as a sign of progress. An 1839 article in the *Colored American*, for example, offered a comparative analysis of men and women stating:

Man is strong—Woman is beautiful
Man is daring and confident—Woman is deferent and unassuming
Man is great in action—Woman is suffering
Man shines abroad—Woman at home
Man talks to convince—Women to persuade and please
Man has a rugged heart—Woman a soft and tender one
Man prevents misery—Woman relieves it
Man has science—Woman has taste
Man has judgment—Woman sensibility
Man is a being of justice—Woman an angel of mercy³⁹

³⁷ Stewart, 72–82.

³⁸ William C. Nell, “Esteemed Friend Garrison,” *Liberator*, March 5, 1852.

³⁹ “Parallel of the Sexes,” *Colored American*, September 14, 1839.

This article was not unlike the articles on true womanhood that would appear in middle and upper class White journals, the difference being that African Americans were often using the oppressive ideology in an effort to gain racial equality.

The cult of true Black womanhood therefore was one that allowed room for racial uplift work, but only if they did not threaten the patriarchal structures within black activist circles. This complicates the recent analyses of the cult of true womanhood within nineteenth century America that have avoided a full examination of the gendered obstacles that Black women faced within Black activist circles. They argue the common cause of racial uplift gave Black women room to maneuver, without fully probing the limitations of that leeway. Yet the hostility towards Stewart after her speech to the African Masonic Hall demonstrates that Black women's activism was far more complicated. Stewart's experience revealed that women were not accepted if their actions threatened the established gender roles that had positioned men at the forefront.

Black men were not alone in their opposition to Stewart. Black women were also rooted in a patriarchal reality, many of which were uncomfortable with Stewart's open defiance of the cult of true womanhood. William Lloyd Garrison exposes this point when he indicates that Stewart's address to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was published the speech he had published at "her own request..."⁴⁰ This statement appears in the same edition that Stewart's speech is published. Garrison goes on to say that "Mrs. S. uses very plain, some may call it

⁴⁰ *Liberator*, April 28, 1832

severe language”⁴¹ indicating that he was anticipating a backlash for publishing her speech. There was likely a range of opposition between those who felt Stewart was out of line, to those who simply wanted to avoid controversy by association. These were, after all, the wives, sisters, and mothers of many of the same men who eventually ran Stewart out of town.

Finding Purpose in “Women’s Work”

Stewart was undoubtedly bitter when she left Boston. Still, her future actions demonstrated an unflinching commitment to black people. Contrary to what the literature suggests, Stewart’s activism did not end—it transcended.⁴² She never ceased her work for the social, political, and economic freedom of all black people. Stewart gravitated to more “acceptable” spheres of activism in New York, operating primarily through female abolitionist groups, literary societies and, most notably, as an educator.⁴³ Stewart’s new phase of activism was not surprising, particularly when it came to education. She had always promoted education, and encouraged women to pull together their resources so that they “might be able to lay the corner stone for the building of a high school, that the higher branches of knowledge might be

⁴¹ *Liberator*, April 28, 1832

⁴² This is a critical point, because while many scholars have acknowledged Stewart’s ground-breaking speeches, they have missed the opportunity to analyze what Stewart chose to do in the aftermath. Literary scholars such as Marilyn Richardson, Carla Peterson, and Shirley Wilson Logan have done a fine job in acknowledging Stewart’s groundbreaking speeches, yet little has been written about who Stewart was, or what happened to her after she left Boston. Shirley Logan, *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Carbondale Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Marilyn Richardson, “Maria Stewart: America’s First Black Woman Political Writer,” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions* (Burlington Vt.: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 13–37.

⁴³ “The First Annual Exhibition of Colored Public School, No. 1,” *Williamsburg Gazette* June 4, 1845.

enjoyed...”⁴⁴ Stewart put her own words into action when she entered the classroom. Maria Stewart taught at the Free African School in New York City at later in Williamsburg.

In New York, Stewart also began working with women abolitionists who were forming antislavery societies, holding conventions, and raising money for the cause. They were the bread and butter of the movement. This new phase in Stewart’s activism illuminates the innovative manner in which African American women engaged in social justice. Though Stewart was no longer in the limelight, she never faltered in her work to “uplift the race.” She dedicated the remainder of her life to improving the lives of black people through spirituality, education, communalism, and moral reform. Stewart had now joined the growing ranks of pioneering race women who were able to assert their commitment to freedom and progress, while staying within the women’s sphere. Indeed, Stewart’s story is a profound example of the ways in which black women were forced to gravitate towards “behind the scenes” efforts for racial progress. For the most part, the current scholarship on Maria Stewart has truncated her life down to the speeches she made in Boston, leaving the impression that her activism ceased when she left. A look at what she did afterwards however, sheds light not only on her individual determination, but the resourcefulness of black women in general and the significance of what has often been disregarded as “women’s work.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” 16.

⁴⁵ This argument draws from Nancy Cott’s discussion of the “woman’s sphere.” Cott acknowledges the repressive nature of the Cult, but focuses on how women manipulated it into a means for social and intellectual advancement. She argues women were able to form bonds within the Cult that led to women’s organizing. For Cott, women were not simply bound down by the Cult, but bound together

Stewart was an exceptional orator and gifted writer, yet she was far more than her speeches. She represented the epitome of Black women's activism at a time when *race* was everything, and *gender* was potent, yet sidelined. She was the first Black women to speak publicly before a crowd of both men and women, but she was not alone in her commitment to humanity. The barriers she broke and the resistance she faced were reflections of the society that she and other Black women worked tirelessly to navigate.

Daring to Learn

Sarah Harris was another Black women Abolitionist who broke unprecedented barriers in her pursuit of freedom. In 1832, Harris started down the path that led to the first high school for Black women in the United States. Her story is one of courage and dedication, and one that reflects the overt challenges to Black education as the immediate Abolitionist Movement evolved. The controversy started in September of 1832 when Sarah Harris asked to enroll in the Canterbury Female Day and Boarding School. A White Quaker woman from Rhode Island named Prudence Crandall had established the school a year earlier. Crandall had been recruited by wealthy businessmen and other local leaders who wanted their daughters to have access to an elite education. Crandall's academy offered a rare opportunity for the young White women in Canterbury. The curriculum included English, History, Geography, Philosophy, Chemistry, and Astronomy. After a few months, drawing, painting, piano

within it. Although Cott's analysis is specific to White women, her analysis is useful in understanding the agency of Black women who found creative ways to organize within the "woman's sphere." Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

and French were added to the curriculum. Crandall had about 20 students, most of whom were connected to the most influential White families in Canterbury. It was certainly the best of its kind in the state of Connecticut.⁴⁶

Sarah Harris, who was twenty years old, saw the school as an opportunity for herself and the larger Black community. Her goal was to become a teacher. She told Crandall that she “wanted to get a little more learning” so that she could teach the children of her race.⁴⁷ Crandall rejected Harris’s request. Crandall recalled her hesitance years later, in an article that was reprinted in the *Liberator*. “I thought perhaps” she said, “that if I gave her permission some of my scholars might be disturbed.”⁴⁸ Still, Harris was persistent, and Crandall was eventually persuaded to let Harris join her class.⁴⁹

Sara Harris integrated Crandall’s school in January of 1833. Her presence sparked outrage throughout Canterbury. Board members, parents, and other community members demanded that Harris be expelled, and the white students withdrew in protest. It did not matter to them that Harris only wanted to be a Day school, which required her to walk miles every day, just to attend. Harris was left the lone student in Crandall’s school, which could no longer function as it was designed.⁵⁰

Rather than close, Crandall decided her school would be exclusively for Black women. She reopened her doors, with this new mission in April of 1833. At least 15

⁴⁶ Susan Strane, *A Whole-Souled Woman: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 6.

⁴⁷ “Letter from Miss Crandall,” *Liberator*, May 25, 1833.

⁴⁸ “Letter from Miss Crandall.”

⁴⁹ “Letter from Miss Crandall.”

⁵⁰ Philip Foner, *Three Who Dared: Prudence Crandall, Margaret Douglass, Myrtilla Miner: Champions of Antebellum Black Education* (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 13–16.

Black women ranging from ages 11-20 came from across the North East to attend Crandall's school.⁵¹ They came from middle class abolitionist families, and represented the cream of the crop of up and coming Black activists.⁵²

The young women, and their teacher, were taunted, harassed and physically threatened. Protesters threw pellets of manure, dead cats, chicken heads, and other objects at the young women as they came and went from the school house. The neighboring shops refused to sell Crandall supplies, and the local doctors refused to treat the students. The students and their teacher held strong, as they endured constant insults, physical attacks, arrests, and court. Finally, the violence escalated to the point of no return. Crandall's school was firebombed and practically destroyed leaving Crandall no choice but to close her doors for good.⁵³

The attack against these Black women, was one of the most shameful moments in Canterbury's history, and became a rallying point for the Abolitionist Movement. It was, one of the leading stories covered, in the *Liberator*, and Crandall had the support of nationally known abolitionists. What is often forgotten, however, was that Sarah Harris, and the other women who dared to learn. They were the forgotten soldiers and the true champions of Black education. These women were active agents in their own development, and were the reason the school came into existence.

Crandall, without question was remarkable, but the legacy of Crandall's school involves far more than one white woman's lone battle against racism. Sara Harris

⁵¹ *Liberator*, April 16, 1833; Foner, 8.

⁵² Prudence Crandall Museum, "Students at Prudence Crandall's School for African American Women, 1833-1834," n.d. Ann Eliza Hammand, Julia Williams, and Elizabeth Douglass Bustill were the most prominent pupils listed.

⁵³ *Liberator*, April 27, 1833; "Savage Barbarity! Miss Crandall Imprisoned," *Liberator*, July 6, 1833.

understood the impact of education when she asked Crandall to join the class, and as she made clear, she was fighting for her right and the rights of the broader black community to learn. She was not alone

Another woman, Ann Mariah Davis, had also prepared Crandall for this request when she shared copies of *The Liberator* with Crandall. This would be the first time that Crandall would be reading about the growing abolitionist movement, and he plight of the enslaved. Crandall had been oblivious to the condition and status of Black people nationwide, and had also never considered herself an Abolitionist. She would later write that at that point, “save reputation” she knew very little of the friends of the negroes called abolitionists.”⁵⁴

Davis’ intervention had a profound effect, opening Crandall’s eyes to a world of activism, that she previously didn’t understand. Years later, Crandall reflected on this learning lesson in a letter she wrote to Ellen Larned. “In that the condition of the colored people both slaves and free was truthfully portrayed, the double dealing and manifest deception of the Colonization Society were faithfully exposed and the question of Immediate Emancipation of the millions of slaves in the United States boldly advocated.”⁵⁵

As a Quaker, Crandall had grown up believing slavery was a sin, but she was far from an abolitionist. Her parents were both members of the American Colonization Society, and she herself had been sympathetic to the ACS that was more anti-slavery than anti-black. Their philosophy was that the best way to deal with slavery as to

⁵⁴ As a Quaker, Crandall had grown up believing slavery was a sin, but she was far from an abolitionist. Her parents were both members of the American Colonization Society, and she herself had been sympathetic to the organization.

⁵⁵ “Prudence Crandall to Ellen Larned,” May 15, 1869.

remove Black people from the United States by sending them to resettle somewhere in Africa or the Caribbean. Many of the most forceful opponents to Crandall's school were members of the Connecticut branch.⁵⁶

Sarah Harris however, was well versed in the issues impacting Black people at this time. Like most Black who had access to the *Liberator*, Harris was an avid reader, keeping herself abreast of what was happening to, for, and by Black people. As an avid reader of the *Liberator*, both Sarah and Mariah must have been familiar with Maria Stewart's speeches and writings. It is plausible that they were inspired by Stewart's message that Black women should be leaders in education. It is important to note that Sarah Harris and Ann Mariah Davis were close friends, and likely collaborated in their efforts to have Crandall admit Black women. The two women were so close that they had a double wedding, just a few months after the school opened. Sarah Harris married George Fayerweather, and Ann Mariah Davis married Sarah Harris' brother Charles. William Harris, Sarah's father, was also an important connection. William was a local distributor of the *Liberator*, and likely the one whom Davis got the copy gave to Crandall.⁵⁷

There is no question that *The Liberator* was an important part of Crandall's political education. Abolitionists newspapers were responsible for not only spreading information, but also recruiting people to the cause. It is possible, then, that Davis and Harris strategized about using the *Liberator* as a way to gain Crandall's sympathy and entrance into her school. Either way, it became the foundation, upon which Sarah

⁵⁶ *Liberator*, July 6, 1833. Many early white Abolitionists were also sympathetic at one point to the ACS, including William Lloyd Garrison, who had been radicalized by Black abolitionists in Baltimore.

⁵⁷ Foner, *Three Who Dared*, 7–8.

Harris would be allowed to join Crandall's class.

This intervention also introduced Crandall to William Lloyd Garrison, who instrumental in getting her school up and running once it was targeting Black women.⁵⁸ Crandall advertised her school in the *Liberator*, noting that it was for “young ladies and little misses of color.”⁵⁹ Beyond exposure, Garrison also introduced Crandall to other abolitionists who not only supported her school, including Elizabeth Hammond, a member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Hammond not only set her own daughter Anna, but personally introduced Crandall to other Black abolitionists families outside of Connecticut that sent their daughters to Crandall's school. Hammond also introduced Crandall to White abolitionists George and Henry Benson, who supported Crandall when her school was being attacked.⁶⁰

Sarah Harris was important, not just for what she did to spark Crandall's school, but for what she did afterwards. Harris followed through with her plan and became a teacher. Additionally, she went on to become an important shepherd for the Underground Railroad after moving to Kingston Rhode Island with her husband, fellow abolitionist George Fayerweather, whom she married in 1833.⁶¹

Sarah Harris Fayerweather's contributions to Rhode Island were so significant, that she is locally recognized for her ties to Crandall's school and the Underground Railroad. Her family papers are now housed at the University of Rhode Island, where there is also a dormitory named after her. It is rare for an antebellum Black woman to

⁵⁸ Crandall advertised in the *Liberator*, noting that her school was for “Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color”

⁵⁹ *Liberator*, March 2, 1833.

⁶⁰ Foner, *Three Who Dared*, 19–20.

⁶¹ Foner, 10. They married in 1833.

have records housed in their own name. She remained a life-long friend of Prudence Crandall and William and Helen Garrison. These letters tell the longer story of Sarah Harris Fayerweather's activism. She did not just fade away after the Crandall school was destroyed. Fayerweather joined the growing group of Black women Abolitionists who centered education in their fight for freedom.

Susan Paul – Abolitionist Teacher and Choir Leader

Susan Paul was another major Abolitionist whose work as a teacher was central to her activism. Susan Paul was born in 1809 to a well-known Black activist family in Boston. Her father, Reverend Thomas Paul was the first minister of the African Baptist Church in Boston, established in 1805. Two of her uncles, Nathaniel and Thomas Paul, were also Baptist ministers. Like Sarah Douglass, Susan Paul's background meant she was raised in a freedom-centered atmosphere that centered spirituality and education. Her mother Catherine Paul was a teacher. Catherine taught at the African School No. 2 in Boston which later became Primary School No. 6.⁶² The impact of Susan's parents was clear. Both Susan and her brother Thomas Jr. grew up to be leading educators in Boston who were guided by their faith in God.

Susan Paul was a teacher at Primary School No. 6, in Boston, where she also conducted a juvenile choir. Her work as a teacher and choir leader propelled her into the Abolitionist Movement. In 1833, she led her Juvenile Choir as they sang songs of freedom at a New-England Anti-Slavery Society meeting just 12 days after Stewart

⁶² Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane, eds., *Who Writes for Black Children?: African American Children's Literature before 1900*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2017).

gave her “Farewell Speech.”⁶³ The significance of children learning through art and using their education to fight for freedom was not lost on their audience. The *Liberator* described Paul’s choir as “of rare and peculiar merit” valuable to “those who are desirous not only of witnessing the improvement of the colored children of this city, but also of aiding their elevation.”⁶⁴ The children’s performances, according to one observer, had the power “to beget sympathy, to excite admiration, and to destroy prejudice.”⁶⁵ As literary scholar Lois Brown argues, Paul’s juvenile choir was “educations as activism.”⁶⁶

The focus on freedom was also empowering for the children themselves. This was significant given the rising prejudice that free Black people were facing throughout the Northeast. Paul and her students felt the gut-wrenching pains of segregation laws in March of 1834, when they were refused service on a passenger railroad car. The group was traveling from Boston to Salem to perform at an Anti-Slavery meeting. The drivers refused to transport them, saying “we would sooner have [our] throats cut from ear to ear.” Paul and her students were “not surprised” by this treatment. She described the incident as “but a faint picture of that spirit which persecutes us on account of color...” Paul was angered, but not broken. “[T]his is no time to despair” she declared, in a letter she wrote to the *Liberator*. “The rapid progress of the cause which you successfully advocate will, ere long, annihilate the

⁶³ Lois Brown, “Out of the Mouths of Babes: The Abolitionist Campaign of Susan Paul and the Juvenile Choir of Boston,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 59.

⁶⁴ *Liberator*, February 1, 1834

⁶⁵ *Liberator*, February 8, 1834

⁶⁶ Brown, “Out of the Mouths of Babes,” 54.

present corrupt state of things, and substitute liberty and its concomitant blessings.”⁶⁷

Susan Paul clearly saw hope in the budding movement. It was around this time that she joined the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, which had been founded the previous year. She was soon appointed to be the group’s secretary, which led to even more leadership opportunities both locally and nationally as the movement grew.

Susan Paul was also a biographer. In 1835, she wrote joined the ranks of Black women like Maria Stewart and Sarah Douglass, who believed writing was part of their calling as activists. Earlier women like Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart, whose writing was part of their activism.⁶⁸ Paul chronicled the life of James Jackson, a young pupil who had died at a very young age. He was one of her students and a member of her choir. His favorite song, like many of her freedom-centered scholars, was “When I can read my Title Clear.”⁶⁹

Black Women Educators – Setting the Stage for Abolitionist Work

Black women were embarking on unprecedented territory within the growing Abolitionist movement, and drawing on long held commitments to spirituality, education and communalism. By the time of the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women held in New York in 1837, Black women had risen as leaders in some of the most significant Anti-Slavery Societies in the nation. Women like Susan

⁶⁷ *Liberator*, April 5, 1834

⁶⁸ Notably, Maria Stewart published the first full collection of her speeches and writings, entitled *The Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart* in 1835, and Jarena Lee purchased the first edition of her spiritual narrative *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* in 1836.

⁶⁹ Susan Paul, *Memoir of James Jackson: The Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months*, ed. Lois Brown (Harvard University Press, 1835), 86.

Paul of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and Sarah and Grace Douglass of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, would soon hold positions as national leaders.

Boston school teacher Martha Ball was another important Black woman taking the lead among women Abolitionists. She and her sister Lucy Ball were founding members of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) and Martha was elected recording secretary for the group. The Ball sisters, who could pass for white, shed an additional light on the complexity of Black life in a society defined by race and racism. These women, whose father was a colored man from Jamaica, were seen as white amongst their white peers, and often recorded as such in official documents.⁷⁰ Their emphasis on education and mutual aid, however revealed their connection to and identification with Black people.

Clarissa Lawrence, was another important educator and rising Abolitionist. Lawrence, was the first Black school teacher in Salem Massachusetts, known previously as Chloe Minns. She became Clarissa Lawrence on February 6, 1817 when she married Schuyler Lawrence.⁷¹ It is unclear why she changed her first name, but some historians speculate that whether literally or symbolically, Lawrence had done so to “shed her slave past.” There is no evidence that she was ever enslaved, but if she

⁷⁰ A report in the *Liberator* after the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women referenced Martha Ball as slightly colored. See *Liberator*, September 21, 1838 For scholars who identify the Ball sisters as Black see Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 114–15. For scholars that identify the Ball sisters as White, see Debra Gold Hansen, “The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1994), 56.

⁷¹ Schuyler was a chimney sweep. He owned his own business and was known for employing African American boys. Like Clarissa, Schuyler was an activist. He, for example, was an early member of the New England Anti-Slavery Society founded in 1831.

was a self-emancipated slave, then changing her name would be a way to help secure her safety. Or, perhaps she recognized Chloe as a common name amongst enslaved women in the South, and sought to adopt something else.⁷²

In any case, she was known as Clarissa Lawrence when she became president of the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society when it was revived in 1833.⁷³ This mutual aid society was another example of the ways Black women continued to organize communally at the same time that the interracial movement was growing. Mutual aid societies were also arenas for Black people to focus their efforts locally, while still contributing to the budding national movement. In 1833, for example, Black people raised over \$400 to help Garrison go to Europe. The Colored Female Religious and Moral Society showed their support for Garrison and the cause by sending “bon voyage gifts.”⁷⁴ Garrison’s tours were credited with fueling the movement’s later national popularity. The fact that Black Abolitionists were funding these early tours demonstrates that their impact preceded Garrison’s widespread national appeal.

Clarissa Lawrence joined the biracial Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society which was founded in the summer of 1834.⁷⁵ This biracial organization, established in 1834, is not to be confused with the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem (FASSS) that was established by a group of Black women in 1832. The development of a biracial organization in Salem is noteworthy, because it is a testament to the growth of white women’s participation in the movement, after Black women. This is a point that

⁷² Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Peck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 190.

⁷³ The organization was originally founded in 1818, but had been inactive for many years due to the age and health of the original members. *Liberator*, February 16, 1833.

⁷⁴ *Liberator*, June 1 1833; Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 20.

⁷⁵ *Liberator*, June 21, 1834

is often overshadowed by the leadership roles White women occupied when they joined the Abolitionist Movement. Black women, on the other hand, had always been among the ranks. For example, two of the officers in the Black women's FASS were also listed in the membership roles of the interracial organization after it was formed. Although Clarissa Lawrence was not listed as an original member, she most likely was since she was actively involved in mutual aid and benevolent work in Salem. She rose to leadership within the biracial SFASS by the time of the national meeting in 1837.

The Interracial Movement Brings New Challenges

By the time women began meeting nationally in 1837, Black women were already well prepared. They had been organizing amongst themselves for over three generations, and had been crafting a three-tiered agenda for their work along the way. They continued to be among the vanguard, centering their work around their spirituality, education and communalism. They were now tasked with maintaining their voice and presence in a movement that was increasingly dominated by White men and women. They soon found themselves struggling against racism and paternalism within the growing movement. This was coupled by the ever present "woman question" that was not only impacting women Abolitionists, but the movement as a whole.

CHAPTER 5

“WE MEET THE MONSTER PREJUDICE EVERYWHERE” (1837-1850)

RACISM, SEXISM, AND RADICAL ABOLITION

“Why are we thus treated?
Prejudice is the Cause.
It kills thousands every day;
it follows us everywhere,
even to the grave...”

-Clarissa Lawrence, 1839¹

By the spring of 1837 the call for immediate Abolition had turned into a full-fledged interracial movement. The American Antislavery Society (AASS) had over one thousand affiliate groups, 75 of which were organized by women.² The AASS was in its fourth year, and Abolitionist women from across the Northeast were anticipating the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women to be held in New York City, May 9-11. A notice in the *Liberator* urging women in New England to attend estimated that “hundreds if not thousands” of women would be at the meeting.³ The numbers though impressive were not nearly as large. There were 71 delegates listed in the official proceedings, with the majority of women coming from Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. The Philadelphia women had the largest presence, which was not surprising given the early cooperation between Black and White women in this group. Sarah and Grace Douglass were both there, and Grace served as one of the

¹ This quote is taken from Clarissa Lawrence’s impromptu speech on the final day of the Second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in Philadelphia in 1839. *Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Proceedings of the Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women Held in Philadelphia, May 1st, 2d and 3d, 1839* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1839), 8.

² Ira V. Brown, “‘Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?’ The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 1837–1839,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 50, no. 1 (1983): 2.

³ *Liberator*, March 4, 1837.

convention's vice presidents.⁴ There were not many Black women in attendance, reflecting the fact that interracial antislavery groups were dominated by White women. It also speaks to the fact that Black women asserted Antislavery activism in other meaningful ways.

Susan Paul was not part of Boston's first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, but her juvenile choir did resume performing that year. According to biographer Louis Brown, Paul's choir had been inactive for two years "due to death and upheaval" in her immediate family."⁵ It is also likely that the increased anti-slavery work among Boston women contributed to the choir's absence. Susan Paul had been appointed to the executive board of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) in 1834, which came with great responsibility. This antislavery work was also stressful because the growth of the movement was met with violent opposition. Susan Paul was among the Black and White women who were attacked by a mob in October 1835, during a lecture the BFASS hosted featuring British Abolitionist George Thompson. The perpetrators were especially disturbed by the participation of women, as evidenced by the propaganda put forth to prevent the lecture. In the *Boston Globe* the message was loud and clear:

...we have no patience with our own citizens who associate with him—and least of all with the females, who disgrace themselves by running after him to listen to his lectures, and to protect him from the effects of

⁴ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women Held in the City of New-York, May 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1837*, ed. Mary S. Parker and M. G. Chapman (New-York: printed by William S. Dorr, 1837), 18.

⁵ Lois Brown, "Out of the Mouths of Babes: The Abolitionist Campaign of Susan Paul and the Juvenile Choir of Boston," *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 62. *Liberator*, January 21, 1837

public excitement.⁶

Threats to Abolitionist women increased over time creating even more turmoil for Black and White women working together in the same cause. The intensity of the pro-slavery opposition however, was matched by the women's commitment to destroy the evil institution.

The National Atmosphere for Black Women

The first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was a testament to the ways Black and White women were taking the lead for themselves. It also revealed some of the regional differences in the movement with regards to the cooperation of Black and White women. Although the Ladies New-York City Anti-Slavery Society hosted the event, there was a noticeable absence of New York Black antislavery women at the convention. The New York White anti-slavery women were known for racism within their ranks and had been previously accused of excluding Black women from their group.⁷ It is not surprising then, that New York Black antislavery women attending the 1837 convention did so as representatives of Black mutual aid and literary societies. As historian Amy Swerdlow points out, “the Colored Ladies Society of New York City and the Rising Daughters of Abyssinia were both listed in the *Proceedings*.”⁸

⁶ “George Thompson,” *Liberator*, October 17, 1835. For more on the attack on the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society see, Boston Female Anti-slavery Society, *Right and Wrong in Boston: Report of the Boston Female Anti Slavery Society*. (Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1836).

⁷ Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 92–93.

⁸ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women...1837*, 15; Amy Swerdlow, “Abolition’s Conservative Sisters - The Ladies New

The New York White anti-slavery women were not alone in their racist attitudes. White women in Fall River, Massachusetts initially tried to exclude Black women from their anti-slavery society.⁹ The discrimination against Black antislavery women exemplifies how racism and paternalism impacted the interracial movement to end slavery. Even the Boston women demonstrated racist practices in their early years. Susan Paul, one of their most esteemed members, was only appointed to a position of leadership after William Lloyd Garrison accused the White women of racial discrimination.¹⁰ The BFASS invited Garrison to speak to their group in the spring of 1834, but he declined after hearing from an “unquestionable authority” that there were a number of members who were unwilling to admit Black women, and others who had a strong disdain for those who “are not colored like their own”¹¹ Garrison expressed his shock and disappointment, reminding the women that “[a] house divided against itself cannot stand.”¹² The founding secretary Mary Grew responded, telling Garrison that the racism he pointed out within the BFASS “was the feeling of but a few...”¹³ Grew went on to assure Garrison that the BFASS was accepting Black women and emphasized that Susan Paul was a new member of the board. By 1837 the BFASS had eleven Black members.¹⁴ Even still, the noticeable absence of Black women at the first

York City Anti-Slavery Societies, 1834-1840,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 40.

⁹ Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 90.

¹⁰ Brown, “Out of the Mouths of Babes,” 59.

¹¹ William Lloyd Garrison to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, April 9, 1834. Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book, April 9, 1834 to January 7, 1838. MHS: Microfilm P-176, 1 reel.

¹² William Lloyd Garrison to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, April 9, 1834. Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book, April 9, 1834 to January 7, 1838. MHS: Microfilm P-176, 1 reel.

¹³ Mary Grew to William Lloyd Garrison, April 11, 1834. *Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book*, April 9, 1834 to January 7, 1838. MHS: Microfilm P-176, 1 reel.

¹⁴ Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 90.

national convention suggests that Black women were not as integral to the Boston group as the White members liked to believe.

The Philadelphia Black women experienced the most cooperation when working with White women. The PFASS had always taken a bold stand against racial prejudice as part of their anti-slavery work. Their constitution declared “We believe that slavery and prejudice are contrary to the laws of God and the principles of our Declaration of Independence.”¹⁵ The majority of the Philadelphia women were also Quakers, which is notable given their early antislavery stance. Even still, some Quakers in New York believed in segregated seating for Black and White Friends. Grace Douglass experienced this first hand when she attended a Society of Friends meeting in New York City during the 1837 convention. She was told to sit in a segregated pew “because Friends do not like to sit by persons of thy color.”¹⁶ The fact that Grace Douglass experienced this in New York was a testament to the way racial prejudice was more pronounced in certain states. The Black women in Philadelphia must have been relieved when the second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was scheduled to be held in the “city of brotherly love” in 1838.

The second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women started off as a success. There were 203 delegates listed, and 75 corresponding members.¹⁷ There may have been even more, because it was reported that there were “more than 300”

¹⁵ “Constitution of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society” in the *Fourth Annual Report of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society*, Jan. 11, 1838 (Philadelphia, 1838) p.2; Swerdlow, “Abolition’s Conservative Sisters,” 37.

¹⁶ Margaret Hope Bacon, “New Light on Sarah Mapps Douglass and Her Reconciliation with Friends,” *Quaker History* 90, no. 1 (2001): 28–49.

¹⁷ Anti-slavery Convention of American Women et al., *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women Held in Philadelphia, May 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th, 1838* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, Printers, 1838), 13–14.

women in attendance.¹⁸ Black women were well represented. Grace Douglass, Sarah Douglass and Hetty Burr represented the PFASS; Susan Paul and Martha Ball were part of the BFASS delegation. Susan Paul was elected one of the vice presidents, Martha Ball was one of the convention secretaries, and Sarah Douglass was listed as treasurer. Sarah Douglass and Hetty Burr were also appointed to the business committee.¹⁹

Violence broke out on the second day at Pennsylvania Hall, which was built specifically to host Abolitionist lectures and meetings. The women decided to hold a public lecture that evening when White Abolitionist Angelina Grimke Weld was scheduled to speak. The women were met by an angry mob that threw bricks through the windows and set fire to the building. The intense opposition reflected the depths of pro-slavery America that extended into the Northeast. The women were also attacked because of their gender, since there was still great opposition to women taking the lead in politics. The fact that Black and White anti-slavery women were working together was one of the biggest insults to pro-slavery advocates. White women were especially looked down upon for their political cooperation with Black women. The convention of women managed to escape unharmed, and went on with the proceedings the following day at a separate location. They were rattled, but still reaffirmed their commitment to the cause, declaring that the violence they faced was “identical with

¹⁸ *Liberator*, July 20, 1838. This is an important point, because it is likely that there were several women (including Black women) whose names did not appear on the list of delegates that was printed in the official proceedings.

¹⁹ Anti-slavery Convention of American Women et al., *Proceedings of the Antislavery Convention of American Women...1838*, 2–4. *Liberator*, July 27, 1838.

the spirit of slavery in the South.”²⁰ The women discussed their petition campaign, and the Free Produce movement, among other initiatives to continue that year. The interracial group ended the day walking hand in hand through a hostile crowd.²¹ That of course was shattered by the violent opposition they encountered at the convention that culminated in the burning of Pennsylvania Hall.²²

Black women and the Rising Tension

By 1839 the movement was in the midst of turmoil. The pro-slavery violence was increasing and the debates over women’s participation and leadership in the Abolitionist Movement was becoming divisive. White antislavery women in Boston, for example, were on the verge of splitting over strategies and tactics. The “woman question” also included disagreement about whether or not women should continue to organize separately in gender specific groups. Black antislavery women stayed committed to the cause, even as they had varying responses to the current debates. Black women in Boston, for example, steered clear of some of the infighting by focusing their energy on mutual aid and benevolence.

Black women in Salem also continued to focus on the welfare of Black people. The biracial Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society (SFASS) was supportive of this mission, and Clarissa Lawrence took the lead. Lawrence had been elected Vice President of the SFASS in 1838, after which the Society put together a committee to

²⁰ Anti-slavery Convention of American Women et al., 10.

²¹ Brown, ““Am I Not a Woman And a Sister?,”” 11–12; Swerdlow, “Abolition’s Conservative Sisters,” 42.

²² Swerdlow, “Abolition’s Conservative Sisters,” 42; Brown, ““Am I Not a Woman And a Sister?,”” 11.

assess the needs of Salem's Black residents.²³ The SFASS formed a sewing school for young Black women that same year. This was an effort that not only transferred important skills to Black women, but also contributed to the anti-slavery cause, since sewing circles were often key to providing clothes for freedom seekers. In 1839, the SFASS voted to raise funds to help in "redeeming the chapel of the colored people."²⁴ Later that year, they petitioned the Eastern Railroad Company to eliminate segregation. This was likely a direct response to the discrimination Clarissa Lawrence encountered on her way back from the third Anti-Slavery Convention of American women, when she was "refused accommodations."²⁵

The SFASS also continued to assist Salem's school for Black children which they began helping in 1836.²⁶ This did not mean that the women did not participate in some of the more traditional activities of antislavery groups, such as organizing lectures, hosting fundraisers and donating to the *Liberator*. Nevertheless, their notable commitment to the free Black community was certainly a legacy from the previous generation of Black women who were committed to mutual aid and benevolence.²⁷

Clarissa Lawrence's Interjection

Clarissa Lawrence stressed the needs of the Black community on May 3, 1839,

²³ Lawrence also became a life-member of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. She was the second Black woman to do so, with Susan Paul being first in 1833. (Both women were sponsored by their students.)

²⁴ Julie Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 104.

²⁵ Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America*, 1 edition (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 127.

²⁶ Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*, 104.

²⁷ This includes the legacy of the Black women who founded the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem before the biracial group was formed.

at the third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. Lawrence spoke candidly as she addressed the depths of racism free African Americans were forced to contend with in the United States. “We meet the monster prejudice everywhere,” she said. “We have not power to contend with it. We are so down-trodden. We cannot elevate ourselves...Prejudice is the cause,” she continued, “It kills its thousands every day...It follows us everywhere, even to the grave. But blessed be God, it stops there.”²⁸

It was the third and final day of the Philadelphia convention, and the only day when northern racism was addressed so directly. Lawrence was one of four African American women to hold a leadership position at the convention, along with Grace Douglass, Sarah Douglass, and Martha Ball. Grace Douglass was listed as vice president, Martha Ball as secretary, and Sarah Douglass as treasurer.²⁹ Unlike the other Black women, this was Lawrence’s first convention. She was also the only one to make such a bold speech.

Lawrence had been appointed to the convention’s business committee the day before, and was seconding a motion to “increase efforts to improve the condition of our people of color.”³⁰ This motion, unlike others, required discussion, before it was passed. Lawrence urged White women to fight prejudice by contributing to Black advancement—something African Americans had been doing since the 18th century. “You must aid us” she said “We are blamed for not filling useful places in society; but

²⁸ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 8.

²⁹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 3–4. Martha Ball was also appointed to the Business Committee, and Julia Williams of Massachusetts was there as a delegate.

³⁰ The motion was put forward by White abolitionist Susan Grew of Philadelphia. It is notable that this motion was coming from the Philadelphia contingent as they had the most equity across race than any other biracial female anti-slavery society. *Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 8.

give us light, give us learning, and see then what places we can occupy.”³¹ For Lawrence, like most Black Abolitionists, the immediate abolition of slavery was only half the battle. Civil rights were integral to Black freedom.

As a seasoned activist, Lawrence was offering an informed opinion. By the time of the 1839 convention she had been the head mistress of a school for African American children, president of a mutual aid society for Black women, and a leading member of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society.³² She was a clear leader amongst Salem women, and this translated to her reception and experience at the anti-slavery convention. It was the first one that she was able to attend, but she was so revered, that on the second day she was appointed to the business committee, which had already been decided the previous year.³³ This is an indication that she was nationally recognized. However, Clarissa Lawrence in turn, recognized the efforts of other women. She introduced one of the last motions, asking that “the Convention express their thanks to their friends in Philadelphia, who so kindly extend to them their hospitality.”³⁴

Lawrence’s attendance at the American Anti-Slavery Convention held in New York a few days later further underscores her longstanding role as a leader in the movement. She recognized the need and had the means to attend both of these conventions. Perhaps what most demonstrated her activist preeminence are her final words in her impromptu speech in which she blessed God that “the young are

³¹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 8.

³² Clarissa Lawrence was previously known as Chloe Minns.

³³ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 7.

³⁴ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 12.

interested in the cause.” She knew that “a Brighter day was coming.” It was worth coming all the way from Massachusetts she concluded, to see all she had seen.³⁵

Lawrence’s words of encouragement were especially significant given the split that was about to take place in the national movement. The following year a delegation would walk out of the American Anti-Slavery Society and form a separate national organization. Even still, Black women continued to march forward, writing their own scripts along the way. The 1840s would be defined by an increase in autonomy for Black Abolitionists women directing their attention to the immediate needs of Black people, both free and enslaved.

In 1841, for example, Black women in the PFASS urged the organization to support the Female Vigilance Association, which had been formed in 1838. Many of the Black members of the PFASS belonged to both groups. Hetty Burr, who had attended the 1839 women’s convention, took the lead demonstrating the deep commitment of Black Abolitionist to self-emancipated slaves.³⁶ Burr was disappointed to learn that the White members of the PFASS were not as supportive of the initiative as Black women were. As historian Shirley Yee argues, this represented a “fundamental difference” between Black and White Abolitionists. For Black Abolitionists, self-emancipated slaves were the heart of what they were fighting for. This movement was about human beings, not a theoretical debate; it was about their brothers and sisters who were still in chains.

³⁵ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 12.

³⁶ Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 98.

Zilpa Elaw: International Trailblazer

The itinerant Methodist preacher Zipla Elaw added to her record as a trailblazer when she followed her faith in God on to the international stage. Elaw sat down on the morning of August 9, 1840, to write a letter to John Tredgold, the secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, after a “sleepless night” communing with God.³⁷ She wrote that God had directed her to share her message with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, whom she addressed as the “kind friends of emancipation.”³⁸

The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, was formed in 1839. They were the second national antislavery society in England. The first organization, founded in 1793, had been committed to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. This was achieved with the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. The new British and Foreign Antislavery Society focused on ending slavery throughout the world. They had just finished hosting the first and only World Anti-Slavery Convention, which took place in June of 1840. Elaw had hoped to attend this meeting, but she did not make it across the Atlantic in time.

Elaw set sail for England on June 10, just two days before the World Anti-Slavery Convention began, and arrived one month after the meeting convened. Elaw took a letter of support from Peter Macy, the vice president of the Nantucket Anti-Slavery Society, vouching for her credibility as both an itinerant preacher and abolitionist. It is unclear why Elaw did not leave earlier, given her eagerness to attend.

³⁷ Zilpha Elaw to John Tredgold. August 9, 1840, London, England.

³⁸ Zilpha Elaw to John Tredgold. August 9, 1840

This was, after all, the first time that Abolitionists from across the world came together to organize for universal emancipation.

Perhaps it was the growing controversy surrounding the role of women in the Abolitionist Movement, that pushed her to delay. Elaw had attended the American Antislavery Convention in New York City two months before the World Convention. The end result of that meeting was a split in the movement over a number of issues including the role of women. Those who were against women's leadership formed a new organization called the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

The New Org, as it was called, was modeled after and aligned with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. These organizations deeply influenced each other. Most notably, leaders of the New Org contacted the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society before the international meeting, urging them to reject the women delegates being sent by the American Anti-Slavery Society. Ultimately, the convention's male delegates voted to formally exclude women "insisting instead if they wanted to attend, they could listen to the proceedings from behind a curtained wall."³⁹

The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, had been organized to unite and strengthen abolitionists throughout the world, and yet they openly, and unapologetically oppressed women. These same women were the bread and butter of the movement through their fundraising efforts, and were among the first, especially those coming from England, to call for immediate abolition. Interestingly enough, John Tredgold's wife Elizabeth was one of the women who was refused a seat in the main hall of the meeting.

³⁹ Brown, "Am I Not a Woman And a Sister?"

Elaw had visited with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society the day before writing to Tredgold. During her visit, the same men who had silenced her abolitionist sisters, asked if she had a petition to make to them. She declined. Elaw said that she had been satisfied with her visit, but when she returned home, she was “ordered by the Lord” to preach.⁴⁰ She reasoned that this call to preach had been “hid from her” during her visit, so that she could be alone with God to receive his call.⁴¹ Given the animosity towards women’s voices and leadership, it is also likely that she knew she needed the additional armor—of God’s will—when addressing these men. This was not the first spiritual moment that led her to act. Her entire preaching career had been dictated by visions and internal calls from God. Elaw, once again, is an example of the ways in which Black women were worshiping with each other one day, and participating in the crusade against slavery together the next. Whether at the forefront, or amongst the masses, Black women were proclaiming their right, as servants of God, to join the struggle for Black freedom.

In crafting a womanist centered theology about Black freedom, Elaw merged spirituality, resistance, and liberation. She was an example of the ways spirituality inspired, mobilized, and politicized Black women during the first half of the nineteenth century. Even her trip, and eventual relocation to England, was inspired by her faith in God. Elaw had been praying for the opportunity to travel to England for over ten years.⁴² She had no idea when or how she would get there, but never stopped

⁴⁰ “Zilpha Elaw to John Tredgold,” August 9, 1840, Black Abolitionist Papers.

⁴¹ “Zilpha Elaw to John Tredgold.”

⁴² Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female Of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]* (London, 1846), 138–39.

believing that she was destined to minister the gospel abroad. She described it as an “internal whisper” that got increasingly louder in her heart.⁴³

Elaw was critical of England, describing the people as far less receptive to Methodism than Americans were. This was due to the fact that although Methodism began in England, it had not been embraced in the same way that it was in the United States. She referred to England as having “less favourable soil for the Kingdom of God” in comparison to America.⁴⁴ She also writes about the opposition she encountered in Britain on account of being a woman.

Elaw’s antislavery work, and connection to other abolitionists was also questioned when she was in England. In 1841, for example, a man by the name of William Wood, of Manchester England, wrote a letter to Peter Macy questioning the legitimacy of the letter of support he wrote for Zilpha Elaw. Macy replied that Elaw “was worthy of confidence,” but the fact that she was questioned demonstrates the depths of opposition she faced from people who should have been allies, simply because she was a Black woman.⁴⁵ But that didn’t stop her, or her belief that she had a powerful message that must be heard. Her wish to have an everlasting impact on the world, inspired her to record and self-publish her memoirs in England. Elaw was an international trailblazer when it came to Black women’s activism, but she was following in a long tradition of Black women who had confronted the “monster prejudice” and shaped the long Black struggle for freedom’s sake.

⁴³ Elaw, 138–40.

⁴⁴ Elaw, 144.

⁴⁵ William Wood Letter concerning Zilpha Elaw, 1841. Special Collection Research Center, Syracuse Libraries.

Zilpha Elaw chronicled her activism, in the *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Color: Together with an Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America*, which she published in 1846. Her most impressive details come from her travels in England, where she preached more than one thousand lectures over the course of five years. She likely had hundreds, if not thousands more to add to the list, considering she spent the remainder of her life in England. She died in 1861.⁴⁶ Although it was previously believed that there was no documentation of her life beyond 1846, Elaw, like so many nineteenth century Black women, simply got lost in the history when she married Ralph Bressy Shum in 1850.⁴⁷ This was the same year of the passage of the treacherous Fugitive Slave Law, as part of the Compromise of 1850.

The “Bloodhound Law”

It is not surprising that Zilpha Elaw chose to stay in England after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law that ignited fear and anxiety in Black people across the United States. Although self-emancipated slaves had always been subject to laws that would carry them back to slavery, this new law made everyone complicit and put all self-emancipated people at risk. Fighting abroad was the answer that many would turn to, while others carried on the struggle at home. Black participation in Vigilance Committees increased, as did involvement in the Underground Railroad. For many however, the future was bleak. Women like Clarissa Lawrence and Zilpha Elaw had

⁴⁶ “England & Wales, FreeBMD Death Index, 1837-1915,” 1873, Ancestry.com.

⁴⁷ “Saint Mary Stratford Bow, Register of Marriages,” 1850, Ancestry.com; London Metropolitan Archives.

been fighting for Black freedom since the early 1800's, and yet they were still not free.

EPILOGUE

African American women have been struggling for freedom since before the nation was founded. Indeed, colonial era women like Phyllis Wheatley and Lucy Terry Prince, were foremothers of Abolitionism before the movement was born. Their early experiences as teachers, preachers, and communal leaders opened up a world of possibilities for themselves, their communities, and future generations not yet born. Their stories involve a complicated mix of urgency, limitation, and negotiation—guided by spiritual conversion, radical Abolition, and women’s rights. Wheatley and Prince were just the beginning, followed by several generations of women, including Jarena Lee, Clarissa Lawrence, and Susan Paul, who strove to honor and protect the rights of all human beings. Yet, these eighteenth and nineteenth century Black women are the forgotten pillars of American history.

“Following the Internal Whisper” identifies a multigenerational network of Black women who were connected by their faith in God, their commitment to social justice, and their love for Black people. Their activism was defined by a *freedom-centered* approach to spirituality, education and communalism, and was rooted in self-determination. These pioneers paved the way for future activists, like Harriet Tubman, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, and Sojourner Truth. By the time the latter women entered the stage in the 1850s, four generations of Black women activists had already persisted in struggle. The 1850’s was a new era, that required new strategies. Nonetheless, the *freedom-centered trinity* of Black women’s activism (spirituality, education, and communalism) remained a viable paradigm for fomenting change and

uplifting the race.

Slavery continued to be a life or death issue. Black women Abolitionists of the 1850 responded with determined will. Self-emancipated Harriet Tubman's crusade for Black freedom began in 1849. She soon become one of the most significant and celebrated shepherds of the Underground Railroad. Free born Francis Ellen Watkins' rise as an Abolitionist began in 1850 when she moved to Ohio, taught school, then moved on as a committed Underground Railroad agent, popular abolitionist poet, lecturer, and woman's rights advocate. Significantly, these two Marylanders lived to be the foremothers of a new generation of women born in the late nineteenth century, known as clubwomen.

Then of course, there was the legendary Sojourner Truth, who rose to fame as an Abolitionist lecturer in the 1840s. Born in New York slavery and self-emancipated, Truth, who was given her name by God, added a Black woman's public voice to the rising Women's Rights Movement in the 1850s. Her most famous speech in 1851, at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron Ohio, defined both the intersectional saga of Black women in previous generations and projected the navigational waters for Black women of the future.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century Black women struggled against racism and sexism in ways that often intertwined, yet they refused to remain stuck between a rock and a hard place. This dissertation highlights the ways early Black women struggled and persevered despite efforts to marginalize them. Although often examined independently, linking these women, their struggles, and their connection to movements, offers new categories and periodizations that reveal the long history of

Black women's activism in the United States.

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