

Gender, Class, and the Performance of a Black (Anti) Enlightenment: Resistances of David Walker and Sojourner Truth

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Abstract:

The course toward freedom pursued by late-nineteenth-century black activists is as ideologically and philosophically complicated as the question of freedom itself. Dynamics of gender, class, race, religion/spirituality, and one's experience with enslavement affected the schematization of the course.

Keywords: African American Studies | Slavery | Abolition | Gender | Class | Race | David Walker | Sojourner Truth

Article:

Throughout the nineteenth century, the discourse around black subjection and freedom was never far from a rhetoric and practice of enlightenment. According to critic Saidiya Hartman, "the equality of rights to be extended to freedmen depended upon the transformation of former slaves into responsible and reasonable men. As would be expected, the norms at issue were masculinity, rationality, and restraint."¹ Indeed, before and after legislative emancipation, black freedom was paradoxically defined by its capacity for restraint. Not only did this definition emerge out of a white supremacist fiction and fear of black recklessness (or unenlightenment), but, more profoundly, it worked to shape and constrain performances of freedom advocated by black activists themselves.

This essay examines how gender and class figured centrally in these performances and modes of comportment. In particular, I consider how David Walker's black reformist insistence on focused movement, moral uplift, and masculine refinement was often counterposed against (even if animated by) acts ideologically imagined as wayward, nonsensical, unenlightened, and off-track. Strikingly, the latter set of performances were often gendered and classed in ways that suggest a powerful set of associations (forged in Revolutionary War-era American Enlightenment philosophy) between blackness, (the absence of) manhood, poverty, slavery, and unenlightenment.

In particular, Thomas Jefferson, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, argues that the "imagination [of black people] is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought [i]ncoherent and eccentric."² He further maintains that the "eccentric" absence of reason is attributable to "nature" and not to condition.³ In many ways, Jefferson's claim that black people privilege sentiment over reason resonates with European Enlightenment claims about white women. For Immanuel Kant, (white) women are more inclined to sense than reason, "love pleasantries and [being] entertained by trivialities."⁴ Implicit in Jefferson's formulation, then, is an understanding of black men (the default gender under attack) as lesser men, unmanly, indeed, feminine, unrestrained, and irrational.⁵ The language of comportment (how one holds oneself, behaves, performs) is, for Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers, always already racialized, gendered, and classed.

Significantly, David Walker countered Jefferson's racist document by attributing black unenlightenment to white supremacy and racial slavery. His *Appeal to The Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) is a formalized response to Jefferson and the Euro-American Enlightenment project, more broadly, as well as a call for a Black Enlightenment; an uplift project that dissociated enlightenment from racial difference but naturalized its relationship to manhood and formal education. For Walker, formal literacy and moral rectitude (what he esteems as central to the project of black enlightenment) facilitates the emergence of black manhood. Such manhood, determined as coextensive with racial enlightenment, is impossible if black people remain enslaved. Not only does slavery refer to actual bondage but also to a state of intellectual and moral ignorance. Whether legally free or not, to be uneducated is, for Walker, tantamount to enslavement.

This assumption held by Walker and by leading statesmen and women connected to the reformist impulse in antislavery (Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, et al.) held profound implications for formally illiterate radicals such as Sojourner Truth. Truth's illiteracy, for many, tied her to slavery and with it, unenlightenment; as a result, her rhetorical and bodily enactments of freedom were often reduced to a form of racialized, intellectual caricature. Even though Truth offered a philosophy of liberation, the racial, economic, and sexual logics of supposedly enlightened embodiment missed the profundity of her revolutionary movement.

David Walker

Antislavery activist and author of the *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829), David Walker entered the world untethered to the shackle by law and yet haunted by its rattle. This particular contradiction was a painful reality for free blacks living in the Lower Cape Fear region of Wilmington, North Carolina, who were forced to cohabitate with the unfree. "[Reacting] with particular intensity against being grouped with the unfree—not, however, because he rejected slaves but because he reviled the condition that degraded his race," Walker asked for his mother's blessing to leave for the North.⁶

In many ways, the ideological creation of the *Appeal* began in the Lower Cape Fear region and its writing commenced with Walker's departure.

Having traveled over considerable portion of these United States, and having in the course of my travels taken the most accurate observation of things as they exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction that we, (coloured people of these United States) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began, and I pray God, that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.⁷

Traveling across the United States, for Walker, produced philosophical insight into the supposed wretchedness of the current and former enslaved as well as revealed the strange relationship between slavery and Enlightenment. Implicit in the *Appeal* is an argument connecting the degradation of slavery and unenlightenment as well as the suggestion that formal education, manhood, and middle-class values forge the performative conditions of freedom. The aim of the *Appeal* is to reconcile the causes of racialized, gendered wretchedness, embodied in some ways by the place from which Walker fled, Lower Cape Fear, and how this condition is both produced as well as remedied by a recuperated American enlightenment.

The text's contradictory and complicated relationship with enlightenment is, in fact, a central structuring tension. The *Appeal's* preamble begins with an indictment of Euro-American waywardness, the vicious movements of enlightenment. Walker starts here because it is the "source from which most of our miseries proceed."⁸ It is this misery, a misery with a history that extends from the violently colonized nations of antiquity to the nineteenth-century United States, which has had God's ears ringing "with the cries, tears, and groans, of his oppressed people."⁹ For Walker, it is the background noise of this pain that constitutes a troublesome dissonance in this "*Republican Land of Liberty!!!!*"¹⁰

The use of exclamation marks indicates a deliberate and heartfelt emphasis on the idea of the United States as ideologically contradictory. Emotion erupts into the text to make this plain. I signal the exclamation mark for it constitutes an internal dissonance within the *Appeal* that breaks up the even (enlightened) tone that Walker sustains via language and ideology. Seemingly, the *Appeal* struggles in traveling rapidly away from a heart that threatens to burst. It is this irony, which has something to do with the haunting performativity of Lower Cape Fear that troubles Walker's own candidacy for Black Enlightenment.

Returning to the *Appeal*, Walker continues with his critique by elaborating upon the ideological relation between hegemonic articulations of American enlightenment and the "causes of our wretchedness."¹¹ Here, Walker condemns Thomas Jefferson's racist arguments about black inferiority in his *Notes* and, accordingly, urges that black people be considered as subjects (as opposed to objects) of [American] enlightenment.¹² To be a subject of enlightenment, for Walker, is to be free from harm. This belief speaks to Walker's larger political activism in Boston. In response to the endless persecution and harassment of the Boston black community, Walker became involved with a group that "endorsed a program that was fiercely anti-slavery and anti-discriminatory, that was committed to black improvement, especially through education, and that virtually obliged service to the black community at larg[e]."¹³

Resistance to racist violence took the form of an enlightenment project, with improvement of the self becoming interchangeable with antislavery. Undoubtedly, the assumption that racism could

be most effectively dismantled once black people *acted free* reveals a larger anxiety around the impact of slavery on black performance. As Saidiya Hartman observes, the degradation wrought by enslavement was counterposed to an uplifted manhood, "the prized figure of the discourse of racial uplift."¹⁴ In this way, degradation suggests an association between an unenlightenment (lack of formal literacy and middle-class mores) and femininity. Antislavery, for Walker, was predicated on a very particular masculinist narrative of social comportment, discernible as the antithesis of ignorance. In *Article II: Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance*, Walker observes the following:

Ignorance, my brethren, is a mist, low down into the very dark and almost impenetrable abyss of which, our fathers for many centuries have been plunged. The Christians, and enlightened of Europe, and some of Asia, seeing the ignorance and consequent degradation of our fathers, instead of trying to enlighten them, by teaching them that religion and light with which God had blessed them, they have plunged them into wretchedness ten thousand times more intolerable, than if they had left them entirely to the Lord.¹⁵

There is a complicated engagement with the European Enlightenment here; on the one hand, according to Walker, the projects of Christian humanism and imperialism carried the potential for black elevation. On the other hand, what the emissaries of the Enlightenment taught were lessons in black subjugation, lessons that, for Walker, continued to shape black political and social performance.

Particularly, in his journey, Walker observes the absence of enlightenment in the form of scenes of collusion among the enslaved with the slaveholders. In viewing some of the practices of "my brethren in league with tyrants," Walker callously jettisons the possibility of fear and intimidation by blaming ignorance instead as the root cause.¹⁶ Despite the fact that resistance to slavery has often meant indirect, disclosed forms of opposition, Walker's position on antislavery resistance is a self-assured conviction that "I would suffer my life to be taken before I would submit."¹⁷

The ability to choose not to submit inscribes a narrative of agency into a situation where the enslaved are already scripted outside of such terms. Hartman problematizes the terms of resistance and will by arguing the following:

If the forms of power determine what kinds of practice are possible within a given field, what are the prospects for calculated action given that the very meaning of slave property is "being subject to the master's will in all things," and that issues of consent, will, intentionality, and action are utterly meaningless, except in the instance of 'criminal' acts. Bearing this in mind, what possibilities for agency exist that don't put the enslaved at risk of a greater order of pain and punishment since the slave is a legal person only insofar as he is criminal and a violated body in need of limited forms of protection?¹⁸

Following Hartman, the inscription of subject-status onto the enslaved at once defers a consideration of how it is that the slaves are already relegated outside of such liberal citizen-

subject paradigms—"being subject to the master's will in all things," as it were—as well as assumes that terror is not a structuring feature of the antebellum quotidian.¹⁹

Further, Walker's accusatory and anxious tone should be considered within [a] rising new spirit" of Black Reform; one that "promoted racial solidarity and moral elevation."²⁰ Embedded in the early-nineteenth-century Black Reform movement was a "painful paradox" that involved negotiating antislavery resistance and black solidarity on the one hand and an ideology of emancipation that aspired to "a fuller participation in the dominant white middle-class culture of the North" on the other.²¹ It is precisely this painful paradox that engenders what Hartman calls "the burdened individuality of freedom"; an ideological double bind that is marked by "the onerous responsibilities of freedom with the enjoyment of few of its entitlements, the collusion of the disembodied equality of liberal individuality with the *dominated, regulated, and disciplined embodiment of blackness*, the entanglements of sovereignty and subjection, and the transformation of involuntary servitude effected under the aegis of free labor."²²

The disciplining of blackness and black performance in Walker, then, was a twofold project. In criticizing the unenlightened, Walker disciplines and is disciplined:

And when my curious observer comes to take notice of those who are said to be free (*which assertion I deny*) and who are making some *frivolous pretensions to common sense*, he will see that branch of ignorance among the slaves assuming a more cunning and deceitful course of procedure. He may see some of my brethren in league with tyrants, selling their own brethren into *hell upon earth*, not dissimilar to the exhibitions in Africa but in a more secret, servile and abject manner. Oh Heaven! I am full!!! I can hardly move my pen!!!²³

By taking a "standpoint outside himself"—to be the "curious observer" as it were—is to sustain both a straight and disinterested course of argumentation as well as to discipline himself as a black man of reason.²⁴ The straightness of his course, however, is compromised with the irruption of "deceitful course[s] of procedure," introducing dark, dangerous roads and "African" detours into his path.²⁵ In particular, Walker evokes Africa, and the equally elusive concept of "what happens there" as a way to criticize the absence of enlightenment among the enslaved. "Africa" is a scene of unenlightenment that also threatens to throw Walker off course.

By preceding as well as serving as emotion's condition of possibility, Africa becomes tied to a whole set of terms Walker's European counterparts had already invented. Its (Africa's) metonymic relationship with Lower Cape Fear writ large (places Walker traveled to and "rapidly away" from), femininity, irrationality, and the anti-enlightenment is embodied and repressed through Walker's urgent call for his brethren to "stand and be MEN."²⁶

"Men of colour, who are also of sense, for you particularly is my *Appeal* designed."²⁷ Walker calls upon this particular set of racially degraded "men of sense" to do the work of enlightening their more wretched brethren. These "ignorant brethren" include those who work in collusion with and claim happiness while performing tasks for their master.

I met a coloured man in the street, a short time since, with a string of boots on his shoulder; we fell into conversation, and in course of which I said to him, what a miserable set of people we are! He asked why?—Said I, we are so subjected under the whites, that we cannot obtain the comforts of life, but by cleaning their boots and shoes, old clothes, waiting on them, shaving them, etc. Said he, (with the boots on his shoulders,) "I am completely happy!!! I never want to live any better or happier than when I can get a plenty of boots and shoes to clean!!!!"²⁸

Walker's subsequent critique of the man in the street's happiness invokes the previously discussed problem of agency. In other words, the rendering of his supposedly ignorant "brethren" as agent eclipses the complexity of how it is that the unenlightened move and resist in ways that are both recognizable and unrecognizable to Walker's *curious observer*. Perhaps the man in the street's happiness was a defensive posture adopted to deflect judgment from the well-dressed Northerner who arrogantly interrupted his walk to suggest a different path. Unfortunately, Walker uses the fact of a surface expression to determine the existential and philosophical depth, or wretchedness, of his more "ignorant" brethren.

Certainly, Walker's man of non-sense was the reason for this *Appeal*. Women (both enslaved and free), are nowhere named as its subject. Their absence speaks of a larger anxiety surrounding women and reason as it related to the project of racial sense making. To be sure, black women, such as Maria Stewart, were centrally involved in the political project of black reformism. But even as she critiqued black male sexism, she had to tread carefully in the advocacy of (educated) black women's political freedom. Historian Martha Jones writes:

A skilled rhetorician, Stewart crafted her message such that her provocations were muted by reassurances. Seemingly aware that some might question her right to speak in public, Stewart attempted to deflect overt criticism. . . . She celebrated female domesticity, urging women to influence husbands, children, and circles of acquaintance. Piety, "delicacy of manners," "gentleness and dignity," contempt for the vulgar and vile, prudence and economy were qualities to which she advised women to aspire. . . . Respectability marked the difference between slavery and freedom far more than it did that between private and public for women like Stewart.²⁹

By way of complication, the inclusion of black women in the project of racial uplift depended upon a specific kind of gendered and classed performance. Stewart's advocacy of black women's enlightenment, in some ways, introduced a new kind of "women's work." Black women are often described by Stewart as figures of influence, at once critiquing and sustaining patriarchal narratives of reason and progress.³⁰ As historian Louise Newman argues, "[r]acial uplift entailed self-help, racial solidarity with black men (rather than criticism of them), temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity as well as acceptance of patriarchal authority."³¹ Because the performance of respectability here was predicated on an adherence to a particularly masculinist and patriarchal narrative of women's role in racial enlightenment, their presence in uplift was often always already absent. In many ways, black female gender was "inscribe[d] as a scene of negation," their wretchedness cloaked by patriarchal, middle-class-normative performance.³²

Further, what we know about Walker was that his mother was born free and his father enslaved. Can we assume, even still, that she remained among the wretched given that his (Walker's) subjects of enlightenment are "[m]en of colour, who are also of sense[?]"³³ The irony stands however that despite his mother's absence, the performative conditions of the *Appeal*'s possibility were predicated on her blessing.

The particular kind of knowledge invested in Mrs. Walker's blessing is repressed (perhaps only to emerge as emotion) in favor of Walker's strenuous commitment to "prov[ing] to Americans and the world, that we are MEN."³⁴ When Walker's pen threatens to stop moving, the specter of Mrs. Walker and the attendant set of haints of a feminized Lower Cape Fear (as well as other unspeakable locations), come to the surface endangering the straight course the *Appeal* otherwise engenders. It is precisely the force of the feminine that makes the difference in how Walker moves, either "solemnly tak[ing] a stand" or "with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness."³⁵

Shrinking back before God, back before his manhood, back into the place before he left his mother forms part of the set of performances that threaten to throw Walker off course. They suggest the presence of forces Hortense Spillers defines as Mother Right. In what follows, I quote Spillers at length:

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve. This human and historic development—the text that has been inscribed on the benighted heart of the continent—takes us to the center of an inexorable difference in the depths of American women's community: the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law. Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an "illegitimacy." Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males that has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be-fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of "yes" to the "female" within.³⁶

As "the shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated," Mother Right asserts itself in Walker's text in ways equally visible and invisible.³⁷ Walker's pen and the abundance of exclamation marks demonstrate the irrepressibility of emotion, those things feminine, those things unseemly to this man "of sense," while, at the same time, marking the absolute illegitimacy of Mother Right. This is an illegitimacy that manifests in her resolute nonexistence as a site of violation and as the subject of enlightenment. Walker says "no"—albeit emphatic and with a decidedly unmasculine pitch—to the "female" within. Early in the *Appeal*, Walker exclaims, "I am with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness before my

Maker, and exclaim again, thy will be done, O Lord God Almighty!"³⁸ To exclaim again, "thy will be done" is a move that nullifies the ontological specificity of the zone to which Walker might shrink back. It is not a nothingness, but rather a *something* to which Walker cannot possibly make a direct *Appeal*.

Walker misses the mark of this *something*. While identifying at the end of the *Appeal* as "one of the oppressed, degraded, and wretched sons of Africa," one question becomes abundantly urgent.³⁹ In his claim to be a son, where did his mother go? She appears as the necessary blessing, the "influence," borrowing Stewart's language, for Walker's rapid travel to the North. Yet, she is shadowily evoked and foreclosed when the category of those to be saved leaves mothers by the wayside.

Tragically, black women who were associated with the vestiges of slavery—residing in the South, lacking formal literacy and middle-class respectability, or who were born enslaved—were marginal in conversations on freedom. Not only were poor, illiterate, black women excluded from the project of black enlightenment, but they were further silenced by concurrent projects of racial and sexual freedom. Critic Louise Newman discusses their exclusion from white women's abolitionism and suffragist discourse:

The exclusion of enslaved black women from the categories of both "slaves" and "women" was a common feature of white abolitionist suffragist discourse, although white women sometimes invoked claims to a universal sisterhood that contained assumptions about a universal womanly character. At the same time, the tropes of sisterhood and uplift began to foster and reflect a new self-understanding among white women that they, as white women, had a moral responsibility to reform an evil social and political system. As historian Jean Fagan Yellin has pointed out, these tropes were readily apparent in iconography that white female abolitionists used on their stationery and transformed into folk art through their needlework. The imagery depicted a kneeling slave-suppliant asking the question "Am I Not A Woman and a Sister?" A phrase that white suffragist Frances Gage put in the mouth of Sojourner Truth when she retold Truth's 1851 address ("Ar'n't I a Woman?") in the article Gage published in 1863.⁴⁰

Enslaved black women were often imagined as "fallen" because of the level of amoral sexual brutality experienced while in captivity. In some ways, they were conceived of as moving off-course, aimless in their relation to white feminist humanism.⁴¹ Being off-course and fallen is juxtaposed to the already uplifted white woman. Strikingly, as observed in Newman's description of the disturbingly pervasive iconography of the "slave suppliant," this moral difference is often represented as a pose.

The anonymous, generic slave woman that accessorized nineteenth century white women's stationery is fixed outside of language and subjectivity, as blank, decorative performativity. This is instructive when we consider the ways that Sojourner Truth also constituted a blank page for the projections of others. I am interested in how the radical, spiritually forged activism and philosophy of Sojourner Truth was fixed at the margins of other people's reason. Further, I argue that this marginalization of Truth was achieved through the coercive theatricalizations by others; theatricalizations that manifest themselves at the level of externally imposed gestures, accents

and deeds.⁴² I believe that there is an intense relationship between the codification of Truth as boundless "plot space" (a body that rehearses and performs according to the needs of others) and a deeper anxiety over the threat a particular kind of eccentric (which is always already working-class) performance posed to the politics of social re/form. In many ways, Truth's itinerancy and purported eccentricity presented a crisis for a patriarchal, uplift-oriented politics that otherwise required her to stay posed and in place.

Sojourner Truth

Born in Hurley, Ulster County, New York, in the late 1790s, Sojourner Truth (known then as Isabella) grew up enslaved and spent most of her childhood in a "cold, dark, and damp cellar . . . on the eastern side of Roundout Creek."⁴³ She lived there with her parents, James and Betsey, and brother Peter. Upon slaveowner Charles Hardinbergh's death, Isabella's family broke up, sending Isabella to work for two more owners, John Neely and John Dumont, respectively. Enduring great cruelties at the hands of Neely and Dumont, Isabella survived through prayer, learning from her mother that if "she spoke out loud to God and asked Him for direction, He would always come to her rescue."⁴⁴

Isabella's "dialogic relationship with God" was such that when the time came to leave the Dumont plantation, she sought His assistance in revealing the "deeper pattern" for her escape.⁴⁵ Because slaves in New York were to be emancipated in 1826, Isabella promptly informed Dumont of the date of her departure. While Dumont initially agreed to emancipate Isabella at this time, he subsequently changed his mind upon an assessment of Isabella's changes in labor value (she suffered a bodily injury). Though consenting to stay longer to compensate for her decline in value, Isabella eventually left. "In 1826, Isabella heard the voice of her God instructing her when to set out on her own as a free woman. Just before dawn in the late fall, she left the Dumonts' carrying only her baby, Sophia, and a supply of food so meager that it fit in a cotton handkerchief."⁴⁶

God "directed her steps . . . to the safe asylum" of the Van Wagenen residence, a distant acquaintance.⁴⁷ She stayed with the Van Wagenens for a few months though foresaw an eventual return to her former master, John Dumont. Despite the atrocities committed by Dumont, including the illegal sale of her son Peter to a Southern slaveholder, Isabella was divinely informed that she should still return to him. It was on the occasion of her return that Jesus Christ illuminated the ever-presence of His friendship for Isabella.

This phantasmatic encounter occurred as she mounted herself and child onto Dumont's carriage for the passage back to the farm. It was then that she felt the omnipotence of God. He was everywhere, guiding every step and maneuver she would make. But it was also at this moment that she experienced God's omnipotence to be as miraculous as it was frightening, "with the breath of his mouth, [a] lamp [is blown out] so that no spark remains."⁴⁸ Contemplating the possibly annihilating potential of a deep proximity to God, Isabella was soon soothed by the intervention of "a friend who appeared to stand between herself and the insulted Deity."⁴⁹ This friend, she observes, was Jesus. As Frances Titus recounts, it was here that Isabella became symbolically baptized in the Holy Spirit.

It was from that moment on that Christ became a consistent mediating force between Isabella and the overwhelming luminescence of God, helping Isabella carve out her place of reason in God's light: "The place she selected . . . was a lonely spot, and chosen by her for its beauty, its retirement, and because she thought that there, in the noise of those waters, she could speak louder to God, without being overheard by any who might pass that way."⁵⁰ During her enlightenment, Truth had to be cautious so as to not be "overheard." What is further interesting in Frances Titus's account (within which this anecdote is featured) is the way that Truth's communion with reason is untrespassed by her amanuensis. Titus, who otherwise attempts to "commodify [her] subject's interior life" in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, leaves Isabella's conversations with God alone.⁵¹ Not only did she recount the Lord's Prayer in Dutch, but she also spoke with an invisible interlocutor.⁵² The fact that this central element in Truth's reason is indecipherable reveals its successful subversion of colonial surveillance while foreshadowing how Truth's purported eccentricity was diagnosed precisely because of these kinds of resistances to other people's reason. We will return to examine the performative effects of this resistance, but for now, it is important to understand the central role God played in Truth's enlightenment.

The conversations with God that began at that "small island" intensified with time, and in such a way as to mark as glorious as intimidating her religious conversion to Methodism. It was Methodism, in particular, that enabled Isabella to "discove[r] a new means of power, what Pentecostals call the power of the Spirit, that redressed the balance between someone poor and black and female and her rich white masters."⁵³

Having been racially excluded from New York City's prominent John Street Church, she joined the African Zion church. It was during this time that she met and began to work for James Latourette. Latourette, "having left the regular Methodist church, because of its falling away from the ideals of John Wesley," began to organize small meetings for the dissatisfied faithful, among them Isabella. Known as the "Holy Club," this particular sect promoted self-righteousness, moral propriety, and asceticism. The small group eventually became tied to a burgeoning movement called "New York Perfectionism [which] sought to eradicate the corruption of this world, just as John Wesley's Methodism was meant to purify the Anglican Church."⁵⁴ What is more, for Isabella, the narrative of moral rectitude was disaggregated (unlike black reformism) from sexual and economic difference. "Thirty years of enslavement and sleeping on pallets in Dutch kitchens shaped Isabella's understanding that neither unfortunate circumstances nor proximity to 'evil' was synonymous with moral degradation."⁵⁵

Arguably, this refusal to associate slavery with degradation or wretchedness is partly responsible for Truth's marginalization in historical narratives of antislavery activism. Though she is remembered as an iconic (albeit stagnant and excessive in that iconography), proto-black feminist, her black radicalism is often overshadowed by the critiques of prominent black statesman during that era, including Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany. Delany, for example, heavily criticized black people's association with white people, particularly associations that contained though were not necessarily defined by an economic relationship (Isabella worked for The Grears, the Piersons, and the Prophet Matthias during her membership in their Second-Day Adventist groups). "For the most part, unseen holy women like [Catherine] Ferguson and Isabella, who performed household labor and were known more for piety than for

wealth or agitation, served as targets of criticism. The educated black abolitionist, Martin Delany, for instance, berated blacks satisfied to live as servants."⁵⁶

Because Isabella's "politics of race" were always mediated by forces larger than the State—belonging to the ethical and metaphysical realm of the Holy Spirit—her "ways out of humiliation" were figured as more eccentric and problematic than complex.⁵⁷ Black and white itinerant female preachers, though attuned to the sinfulness of racism and sexism as instantiated practices, prioritized being true to oneself and God as paramount goals. This feature, in conjunction with the oft-observed fact of female preachers' tendency toward being "outspoken and unconstrained," rendered their contributions to black history relatively neglected.⁵⁸

Concerning the latter, Isabella/Truth's "outspokenness" served as reason enough for her unharmonious relations with prominent black reformers and abolitionists. Like Delany, Frederick Douglass was often unsettled by Truth:

Frederick Douglass's first meeting with Truth occurred at Northampton (a utopian society), as Douglass was charting a course into freedom divergent from hers. Like many other fugitive slaves, Douglass associated illiteracy with enslavement, and strove to complete his emancipation through the acquisition of fluency—elegance, in his case—in reading and writing. He saw himself as a statesman-in-the-making and modeled his comportment on the well-educated antislavery leaders with whom he worked.

Though some twenty years younger than Truth, Douglass patronized her industry and amiability, calling her one of the community's most useful members "in its day of small things." What most galled Douglass was Truth's lack of sympathy with his own means of personal rebirth. While Douglass was schooling himself to "speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement," Truth, he said, "*seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up* in my speeches and to ridicule my efforts." Douglass saw Truth as "a genuine specimen of the uncultured [N] egro," who cared very little for elegance of speech or refinement of manners.⁵⁹

There are several interesting points to remember from this observation. As demonstrated earlier, the association of illiteracy with enslavement is a key belief in black reform literature emerging during this period. We observed how this association played out in Walker's argumentation about his more "ignorant brethren." It emerges again in Martin Delany's, the father of Black Nationalism, writings, specifically manifesting as an inscribed, backward "Negro dialect." Generally, there is an underlying connection between backward speech and behavior, speaking out or being "outspoken" in Truth's case, and an alleged complicity with an enslaved (as opposed to reformed and enlightened) posture.

Furthermore, in Douglass's case, something about the way Truth moved and spoke "tripped" him up. I'm reminded here of the "African" scenes in Walker's *Appeal*, how recalling images of subjection made his pen stop. Indeed, these scenes resonate with Gayatri Spivak's arguments on the sublime:

It is not too excessive to say that we are programmed, or better, tuned to feel the inadequacy of the imagination (thus *tripping the circuit* to the superiority of reason) through the pain incited by the Sublime. The language is persistently one of inescapable obligation, although the concept in question is that of freedom.⁶⁰

The feeling of the sublime is, indeed, a feeling of magnitude, incapable of being fully expressed by reason. It produces either extraordinary pain or pleasure. In short, it moves. In the case of Sojourner Truth, her very presence moved Douglass enough for his feet to begin tripping the circuits into reason's superiority, making claims that Truth herself was a "genuine specimen of the uncultured [N]egro," who "cared very little for elegance of speech or refinement of manners."⁶¹

It is precisely this patronizing refusal of Truth's profundity that affected the representation of her in subsequent years. Truth, for Douglass and others, was more often than not represented "as otherness through the use of what they [historians, critics, reformers, et al.] thought was *Negro dialect* and they dwelled at length on descriptions of her body."⁶² Truth was her name. She moved herself and others in ways that exceeded the imagination. As a result, those who tripped the circuits into reason theatricalized Truth as "quaint," a "special human, not one that could bind up the whole people through her unremitting figuring of critical difference—that is, not an unruly agent preaching her own unique gospel of displacement as the ground of connection."⁶³

Because Sojourner Truth was consistently figured as outside of reason and with it, counterhegemonic projects of racial and gender sense-making, she was subjected to the peripatetic whims of the literate public's imagination; that is, those who recorded, codified, and ultimately nonconsensually theatricalized her countless philosophical performances. Tragically, the descriptions of these philosophical performances, most notably Truth's famous (and invented) speech act *Ar'n't I am Woman?* push the limits of accuracy with accent, gesture, and imagery.

Truth was heard in multiple ways but I have chosen two, the first by Marius Robinson, editor of the *Ohio Bugle* and the second by (white) women's rights advocate and abolitionist Frances Dana Gage to illustrate the radically divergent impressions Truth's movement made:

Marius Robinson:

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey an adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience:

May I say a few words? Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded; I want to say a few words about this manner. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we can't take more than our pint'll hold.⁶⁴

Frances Dana Gage:

Slowly from her seat rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had hardly lifted her head. "Don't let her speak," gasped a half-dozen in my ear. . . . There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced "Sojourner Truth," and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments. The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eye piercing the upper air like one in a dream.

"Well, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o' kilter. I tink dat, 'twixt the niggers of the de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking 'bout? Dat man over dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place"; and, raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, "And ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm," and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power. "I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man, (when I could get it,) and bear de lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman? *When dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head. What dis dey call it?'"*Intellect," whispered some one near. "Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do with woman's rights or niggers' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and you holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"⁶⁵

The differences between Robinson's and Gage's versions are nothing less than striking. While Robinson ("who was familiar with Truth's diction") recorded her speech in "standard" English, Gage represented Truth with an "inconsistent dialect" "modeling Truth's idiom on a conception of Southern black plantation speech to which readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been accustomed."⁶⁶ The association between Southern black plantation speech and Truth at once "fails to account for black speech patterns in the Ulster County area (Upstate New York, where Truth was enslaved)" and implicitly renders the idiom of black plantation speech the sign par excellence of ignorance.⁶⁷ For example, Gage's rendition finds Truth unable to "locate" the word for ignorance. Here, most explicitly, the conflation of a "plantation speech" with ignorance becomes the occasion for one's movement off-course, being lost as it were in the abyss of unawareness.

Gage's Truth is quaintly unaware, her speech powerful though muddled in such ignorance that it succeeds in losing Gage's attention. "Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of Mother Eve. I cannot follow her through it all. It was pointed and witty and solemn; eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause."⁶⁸ This comes at the end of Truth's speech, at the end and beginning of Truth's philosophy. This is precisely where Gage admits to having lost her. She cannot follow her through it all.

Deep below the superficial assumptions concerning the incomprehensibility of Truth's diction, there exists the inescapable fact that something in the way Truth philosophized and performed

threw Gage off. They were no longer on the same path, in this case, (white) women's advocacy. Truth was somewhere else, enmeshed in an antebellum imaginary that Gage created and that black reformists determined as unenlightened and unfree, an imaginary with limits that Truth maneuvered and exceeded. As Donna Haraway argues,

[P]erhaps, we need to see her [Sojourner Truth] as the Afro-Dutch-English New World itinerant preacher whose disruptive and risk-taking practices led her to "leave the house of bondage, to leave the subject-making (and humanist) dynamics of master and slave, and seek new names in a dangerous world. This sojourner's truth offers an inherently unfinished but potent reply to Pilate's skeptical query "What is Truth?"⁶⁹

Isabella's new name revealed that the truth was in the sojourn. Her path toward freedom was its own, independent though sometimes concurrent with the courses that moved beside it. Sojourner's Truth, truth's sojourn, sometimes tripped people up, and contained bends and turns that prevented others from following it. The trip was hers alone.

The course toward freedom pursued by late-nineteenth-century black activists is as ideologically and philosophically complicated as the question of freedom itself. Dynamics of gender, class, race, religion/spirituality, and one's experience with enslavement affected the schematization of the course. For David Walker, growing up in a region where the free and unfree were made to live together inspired his quick departure. His path toward freedom was shaped by competing desires; the anxiety around this path's moving quickly out and forward to the North ran tide and tied with another anxiety concerning the curves the memories of his home were wont to produce. Walker's path ran with and against itself, pausing now and then to recover a tired journeyer whose full heart threatened to lead him astray.

Sojourner Truth's path was unpredictable in shape, as heavenly guidance inspired a different pace and direction. It seemed that Frederick Douglass wished she moved a little faster, more directly and upright, and kept up with his pace (and progress). Though many, like Douglass, were frustrated with how differently she moved, Sojourner Truth stuck to her pace. She neither sped up to others nor attempted to slow down so much that others could follow her.

Though these activists have dramatically different conceptions of the path, they share a similar desire for free movement. It is this desire that forms the junction where divergent ideas about antislavery, freedom, enlightenment and conduct, publicity and privacy come together and reveal the impact of slavery on the gendered and classed philosophical performances of black humanity after captivity.

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Notes

1. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 175.
2. Thomas Jefferson, "The Difference Is Fixed in Nature," in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 100.
3. *Ibid.*, 97.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 77.
5. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, both black men and women are the objects of Jefferson's racist vision.
6. Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 20.
7. David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet, *Walker's Appeal and Garnet's Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (Nashville: Winston, 1994), 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 13.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 26.
13. Hinks, *To Awaken*, 81.
14. Hartman, *Scenes of Seduction*, 179.
15. Walker, *op. cit.*, 29.
16. *Ibid.*, 32.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Hartman, *op. cit.*, 55.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Hinks, *op. cit.*, 93.
21. *Ibid.*, 255-56.
22. Hartman, *op. cit.*, 121; my emphasis.
23. Walker, *op. cit.*, 33, my emphasis.
24. Kant, *Observations*, 75.
25. Walker, *op. cit.*, 33.
26. *Ibid.*, 40-42.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 24.
30. See Stewart's "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America," in *Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
31. Louise Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

32. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 7, no. 2, "Culture and Countermemory: The 'American' Connection" (Summer 1987): 66.
33. Walker, op cit., 40.
34. Ibid., 42.
35. Ibid., 40.
36. Spillers, op cit., 80; author's emphasis.
37. Ibid.
38. Walker, op cit., 40.
39. Ibid., 82.
40. Newman, op cit., 60-1.
41. Ibid., 62.
42. In Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, she brilliantly argues the ways that black subjection was achieved through its endlessly coerced occupation and theatricalization Hartman writes: "Antebellum formations of pleasure, even those of the North, need to be considered in relation to the affective dimensions of chattel slavery since enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body and the subjection of the captive, the diversions engendered by the dispossession of the enslaved, or the fantasies launched by the myriad uses of the black body. For this reason the formal features of this economy of pleasure and the politics of enjoyment are considered in regard to the literal and figurative occupation and possession of the body" (Hartman, 26).
43. As Truth historian Nell Painter observes, the exact birthdate of Isabella is unknown. "No one wrote down and kept information of where or when she was born, because no one who could write anticipated that an enslaved baby would become an American legend." Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 11.
44. Olive Gilbert and Frances Titus, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century: With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from her "Book of life"* (Battle Creek: published for the author, 1881), xxxvii.
45. Ibid., xliv.
46. Painter, op cit., 23.
47. Gilbert, op cit., 42.
48. Ibid., 66.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 60.
51. Naomi Greyser, "Affective Geographies: Sojourner Truth's Narrative, Feminism, and The Ethical Bind of Sentimentalism," *American Literature* 79, no. 2 (2007): 278. **[End Page 85]**
52. Account described in Margaret Washington's *Sojourner Truth's America* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 56.
53. Painter, op cit., 30.
54. Ibid.
55. Washington, op cit., 92.
56. Painter further observes
Delany and other up-and-coming young men ached to see the race exert its manhood by going into business and becoming financially independent. Here, they thought, lay the route to respect from a wider American population, so busily persecuting would, in a sense, go into business and

become more or less finally independent, her ways out of humiliation were not those of Martin Delany or other leading black men.

Mental orientation as well as ideals of gender divided leading African Americans from Isabella. They took their cues from the public realm, from politics and business, where she headed the voice of the Holy Spirit. As men, they moved earlier into the larger world. In the 1830s and 1840s, the imperatives of politics drove educated, urban black men—later they would call themselves "representative men"—and the upstanding, middle-class black women lecturers who would join them on the antislavery lecture circuit. For this majority of urban black people most noted in historical accounts, public life held much attraction. History, however, ignored an untold number of women for whom the politics of race did not supply meaning to life.

(Painter, 72)

57. Ibid., 72.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.; my emphasis.

60. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.

61. Quoted in Painter, op cit., 98.

62. Ibid., 98.

63. Donna Haraway, "Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: the Human in a Posthumanist Landscape," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Joan Scott and Judith Butler (New York, Routledge: 1992), 97.

64. Painter, op cit., 126.

65. Ibid., 167-68.

66. Ibid., 171; Erlene Stetson, *Glorifying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 113.

67. Stetson, Ibid.; my emphasis.

68. Painter, op cit., 168.

69. Haraway, op cit., 98.