

# Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known

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In New York City on the first of June, 1843, a woman known as Isabella Van Wagner changed her name to Sojourner Truth and began an itinerant ministry. The date was momentous, for in 1843, June 1 was Pentecost, the Christian holiday that falls fifty days after Easter and commemorates the day when the Holy Spirit filled Jesus' disciples and gave them the power to preach to strangers. Pentecostals such as Sojourner Truth heed Luke's narration in the biblical book of Acts, in which the Holy Spirit made the disciples speak in tongues, in the foreign languages that let them teach people of all nations of the wonderful works of God. God said through the disciples—already this was mediated knowledge—that he would pour out his spirit upon all flesh, and men and daughters and servants would prophesy.<sup>1</sup>

Born into slavery in New York State, in the Hudson River county of Ulster, about 1797, Isabella took up her ministry in obedience to the Pentecostal imperative that had divided her life between slavery and freedom sixteen years before. The power of the Holy Spirit had struck her first in 1827, when emancipation in New York State, Pentecost, and the attendant slave holiday of Pinkster had virtually coincided. Isabella underwent a cataclysmic religious experience and the Holy Spirit, the power within Pentecost, remained a crucial force throughout her life—a source of inspiration and a means of knowing. To the woman who became Sojourner Truth, knowing and being known were always of both material and epistemological significance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isabella's name, like the names of many African Americans, changed over the course of her lifetime. Her father was known as James Bomefree, but as a slave, Isabella was known only by her first name. Her last employers in Ulster County, New York, were named Van Wagenen, the name she used until 1843; biographers have generally used that name. However, reports in New York City and records of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry indicate that in the mid-1840s, she was known there as "Isabel or Isabella Vanwagner," "Isabel or Isabella Vanwagnen," as well as "Sojourner" and "Mrs. Sojourner." See vol. 5, Accounts, pp. 245, 251, Northampton Association of Education and Industry Records, 1836–1853 (American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.); vol. 7, Day Book No. 4, pp. 24, 246, 149, 183, 209, 210, *ibid.* Acts 2:1–18.

<sup>2</sup> [Olive Gilbert and Frances Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Times, 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"* (1878; Salem, N.H., 1990), 62–71.

In this essay, posing questions that previous biographers of Truth have ignored, I will examine how Sojourner Truth used language—spoken and printed—as self-fashioning, and how others, white women with more education and facility with the culture of the printed word, portrayed her in published phrases that became the kind of source material most congenial to historians. My trajectory passes through nineteenth-century information systems and some encounters related to the construction of the Sojourner Truth persona by other people, part of the phenomenon that I call invented greats. I end with the observation that words alone do not encompass Truth's memory, for she used photography to embody and to empower herself, to present the images of herself that *she* wanted remembered.<sup>3</sup> Working on Sojourner Truth has taught me that if we are to write thoughtful biographies of people who were not highly educated and who did not leave generous caches of personal papers in the archives where historians have traditionally done their work, we will need to develop means of knowing our subjects, and adapt to our subjects' ways of making themselves known, that look beyond the written word.

Beginning on that day of Pentecost in 1843, when Sojourner Truth, this daughter and servant, set out under a new name, she reached many sorts of people, not strictly speaking in foreign tongues like the disciples, yet using various verbal and visual means of communication, various languages, so to speak. Over the course of her career as preacher, abolitionist, and feminist, Truth (c. 1797–1883) used speech, writing, and photography to convey her message and satisfy her material needs. "Sojourner Truth," which translates as itinerant preacher, described her calling rather than the occupation of household worker through which she gained her livelihood. This haunting new name expressed two of her three main preoccupations: transitoriness/permanence and distrust/credibility. As a working woman who had been born in slavery, she never became wealthy enough to take her means of subsistence for granted, and so money remained her third preoccupation.

With near literalness, the name "Truth" expresses her apprehension about trust. Isabella Van Wagner lived in a world full of people anxious to be believed, including the self-styled Prophet Matthias in whose Westchester County commune, called his "kingdom," she lived from 1832 to 1835.<sup>4</sup> Robert Matthews, who called himself "the Prophet Matthias" and "the Spirit of Truth" when he proselytized in New York City in the early 1830s, convinced Isabella and her co-religionists of his holiness. He gathered his followers around him in a kingdom that quickly disintegrated. By 1835 Matthews/Matthias had been chased out of New York City and gone west; by 1842 he had died.<sup>5</sup> The ideal of the spirit of truth lived on in his follower.

<sup>3</sup> The association of photography with power comes from Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), 4, 9.

<sup>4</sup> See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, 1982); and John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> *New York Journal of Commerce*, Sept. 26, 1834; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Sept. 26, 1834; *New York Courier and Enquirer*, Oct. 2, 1834, April 17, 1835. For a full-length treatment of Matthias, see Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York, 1994).

When Isabella became Sojourner Truth in 1843, she was not merely appropriating the cognomen of her erstwhile spiritual leader, for she had other, preexisting reasons for her own preoccupation with credibility. As a girl, she had been beaten and sexually abused, and as an enslaved worker, she had found her word doubted. In 1835 she overcame her usual reticence to persuade a New York freethinking journalist, Gilbert Vale, to present her story of the Matthias Kingdom. In a book whose subtitle ended "*Containing the Whole Truth—and Nothing But the Truth,*" Vale conveyed her desire to present "the *Truth,*" "the *truth,*" "the whole truth," "the *whole truth.*"<sup>6</sup> In the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, when her concerns about being believed were recorded, she also went to court twice over matters of enormous familial and material importance. In 1828, in order to regain custody of her son Peter, illegally sold into slavery in Alabama, she had to convince a judge in Ulster County, New York, that she was her son's mother. Seven years later, in Westchester County, New York, she sued a couple for libel because they had charged her with poisoning, an accusation ruinous to someone who made her living by cooking for other people. In both court cases, Isabella prevailed, but the experiences surely reinforced her anxiety over the integrity of her word.<sup>7</sup>

As an abused child, oppressed worker, and litigant, she was liable to be doubted in situations of the utmost seriousness. Taken together, these three kinds of experience virtually overdetermined the choice of her new name. "Truth," her self-designation, raises a host of questions related to knowledge, representation, and communication, regarding what I call knowing and being known; those questions are the subject of this essay. I will leave "Sojourner," which speaks to another set of issues regarding impermanence, for another time.

### Sojourner Truth's Knowing

Merely asking about the education of "Sojourner Truth" immediately raises the question of the identity of this complex figure. My full-length biography of Truth carries the subtitle "A Life, A Symbol" to accentuate, perhaps to exaggerate, the distinction between the symbolic figure Sojourner Truth, who stands for strong black women, and the historical character Isabella, who was born a slave in the Hudson

<sup>6</sup> G[ilbert] Vale, *Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c. A Reply to W. L. Stone, with Descriptive Portraits of All the Parties, While at Sing-Sing and at Third Street.—Containing the Whole Truth—and Nothing But the Truth* (New York, 1835), pt. I, 3–6, 63.

<sup>7</sup> On beatings, see [Gilbert and Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 26–27, 33. On sexual abuse, see *ibid.*, 29–31, 81–82. The use of corporal punishment to discipline slaves has been widely acknowledged. On the sale of Truth's son, following a practice that was illegal but nonetheless common, see *ibid.*, 44–54. Although his mother had the law on her side, she was rare among the poor and uneducated in being able to exercise her legal rights. For the most famous case of a New Yorker kidnapped and sold South, see Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, 1968). The slander case grew out of the breakup of the Matthias Kingdom. Benjamin and Ann Folger accused Isabella of having attempted to poison them; she countersued and won a \$125 settlement. See Vale, *Fanaticism*, pt. II, 3, 116; and Johnson and Wilentz, *Kingdom of Matthias*, 167–68.

River valley of New York in about 1797 and who created "Sojourner Truth" at a specific historical juncture.<sup>8</sup>

In good twentieth-century fashion, Truth created a persona that filled a need in American political culture; both the culture and the need still exist today. The image of the mature Sojourner Truth, former slave and emblematic black feminist abolitionist, works metonymically as *the* black woman in American history. The sturdy binary opposite of the debilitated, artificial white lady, Truth is appreciated as straight talking, authentic, unsentimental. She appears to be natural and spontaneous, and in the best tradition of famous Americans, she symbolizes a message worth noting.<sup>9</sup> Truth's persona demands that women who had been enslaved and whose children had been sold be included in the categories of "woman" and "the Negro."

As a symbol of race and gender, Sojourner Truth is usually summed up in a series of public speech acts, the most famous of which is "Ar'n't I a woman?" which Frances Dana Gage reported that Truth uttered at a woman's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851. This phrase is sometimes rendered more authentically Negro as "Ain't I a woman?" Truth is also known for baring her breast before a skeptical audience in Indiana in 1858. In the post-1960s, post-Black Power era of the late twentieth century, a fictive, hybrid cameo of these two actions presents an angry Sojourner Truth, who snarls, "And ain't I a woman?" then defiantly exhibits her breast.<sup>10</sup>

The metonymic Sojourner Truth has knowledge, but no education beyond her experience of slavery. She would seem to have acquired her knowledge in a figurative enslavement, which occurred in a no-time and a no-place located in an abstraction of the antebellum South, as opposed to the Hudson River valley of New York, where Isabella was actually enslaved. What the symbol of Sojourner Truth learned once and for all in slavery enables her to analyze and challenge commonplaces of American race and gender thought. Having been a slave from 1797 to 1827, she needs no further instruction, for it could not affect her opinions or her methods. Of itself, experiencing slavery—not analyzing, representing, or making use of it—primed the figurative Truth to demand, "Ar'n't I a woman?"

Within the figurative construction of Sojourner Truth, the knowledge she took from slavery seems to reach late twentieth-century audiences directly. It would seem that she spoke and automatically entered historical memory permanently, so that we still hear her a century and a quarter later through her own originating force. She would seem to speak to us with a potency that allows her words to endure just as she uttered them, undistorted, unmediated, unedited, unchanging. This Sojourner Truth would not take advantage of technology, nor would she learn tech-

<sup>8</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (forthcoming). This biography will be published in 1995 by W. W. Norton & Co.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven, 1989), 77–87; and Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York, 1986), 450–583.

<sup>10</sup> See Nell Irvin Painter, "Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic," *Gender and History*, 2 (Spring 1990), 3–16.

niques of publicity from the people around her. She would not need to learn any skills in order to make herself appealing, for that would have been her birthright. Women with access to print would immediately have seen her as memorable, and they would have recorded her transparently, powerless to shade the image that is now so eagerly consumed. Both her knowledge of the way things were and our knowledge of her would seem to be utterly natural and unvarying. Or so it would seem.

Unlike the emblematic Sojourner Truth, the historical figure, whom I am calling Isabella when I speak of her life before 1843, had an education that began in slavery but did not end there. Her first teacher was her mother, Elizabeth, who taught her to say one of the two standard prayers of Christianity, the Pater Noster or Lord's Prayer. (Isabella did not learn the other, the Credo or Apostles' Creed.) From her parents Isabella also learned her family's history of loss through the slave trade that scattered children throughout the North and conveyed thousands of black New Yorkers into perpetual slavery in the South. She was conscious of being a survivor until she reached the age of ten, when her turn to be sold came. Her parents also would have taught her appropriate behavior through corporal punishment, and as a parent she provided the same sort of education by beating her own children.<sup>11</sup>

It was not illegal in New York State to teach slaves to read and write when Isabella was a child, and from the late eighteenth century until slavery was abolished in New York in 1827, a few very fortunate slaves managed to attend missionary schools. The schools, which were located in New York City or other towns such as Albany, lay well beyond Isabella's reach.<sup>12</sup> As a rural person and as a girl, Isabella never went to school. Neither as a child nor as an adult did she ever learn to read or write.

After her emancipation, several people tried to tutor her, for like late twentieth-century people, educated nineteenth-century people took literacy as the signifier of modernity and saw reading as the best means of acquiring knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Then as now, an inability to read and write seemed the same as ignorance, although often this was not the case. Without direct access to the written word, Isabella/Truth nonetheless used reading along with other means of gathering information. In both regards, she belonged to long-lived epistemological traditions that still have vigor in today's larger worlds. Her ways were those of people who are deeply religious, rural, female, poor, or unschooled. All these categories included Americans who

<sup>11</sup> Isabella married Thomas, a fellow slave of John J. Dumont, in about 1814. Her *Narrative* provides a few clues as to the nature of their relationship, though it indicates that Isabella left Thomas as soon as she was free. Between about 1815 and about 1826, Isabella had five children, the names and birth dates of only four of whom are known: Diana, born c. 1815; Peter, c. 1821; Elizabeth, c. 1825; and Sophia, c. 1826. These dates are from the Berenice Bryant Lowe Collection (Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor).

<sup>12</sup> Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, 1966), 70, 173.

<sup>13</sup> See Carleton Mabee, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York, 1993), 60–66, 217–18; and Carleton Mabee, "Sojourner Truth, Bold Prophet: Why Did She Never Learn to Read," *New York History*, 69 (Jan. 1988), 55–77. Mabee's approach to Truth epistemology is very different from mine, in that he sees literacy as the single conduit to knowledge. His definition of truth is more rigid, for he does not discuss issues of representation.

were black and/or unfree, but the correlations were not automatic, as the dissimilar pursuits of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth confirm.

In the mid-1840s, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, two former slaves of contrasting temperament, got to know each other in the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Northampton, Massachusetts, a utopian community, founded in 1841, that engaged in the cooperative production of silk. Douglass, who had escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1838 and become a protégé of William Lloyd Garrison, was teaching himself, in his words, "to speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement"—an effort in which he succeeded brilliantly. Douglass, like many other fugitive slaves, associated illiteracy with enslavement and strove to complete his emancipation through the acquisition of fluency—elegance, to be more precise—in reading and writing. Marking his distance from Truth, Douglass recalled her as a "strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense. She was a genuine specimen of the uncultured [N]egro. She cared very little for elegance of speech or refinement of manners." While Douglass was trying to acquire the polish of a modern educated man, Truth, he said, "seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and to ridicule [me]." Literacy was the main means Douglass used as he sought to establish himself as a free person, but Truth appeared to disdain the print-based culture he was mastering. She did not need to read in order to know.<sup>14</sup>

From the 1830s until her death, observers commented upon her intelligence. According to Gilbert Vale, the free thought journalist who came to know Truth in the mid-1830s, she had "a peculiar and marked character. Nature has furnished her, not with a beautiful, but with a strong body and mind." He described her as "not exactly bad looking but there is nothing prepossessing or very observant or intelligent in her looks." After long conversations with her, he found her to be a woman of "shrewd, common sense, energetic manners . . . [who] apparently despises artifice," but he inserted a caveat: She was "not exactly what she seems." She was quiet and reflective and had her own private and very wise opinions about everything and everybody. Ever the keen observer, she usually kept those opinions to herself. In 1851, while she was still obscure, Rochester, New York, abolitionists noticed her perspicacity. One warned, "If any one wants to play a bo-peep game with truth, beware of Sojourner," for although she seems "simple and artless . . . her eye will see your heart and apprehend your motives, almost like God's." Another concluded that Truth's illiteracy was "the shield to guard her rare intuitions, her great pure heart and strong individuality from any worldly taint." Obviously, illiteracy did not separate Truth from wisdom.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What I Found at the Northampton Association," in *History of Florence, Massachusetts. Including a Complete Account of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry*, ed. Charles A. Sheffield (Florence, 1895), 131–32. Douglass's first wife, Anna, like Truth, did not read or write. Their children, however, were all carefully educated, the daughter in the arts, the sons in the printing trade. See William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1991), 92, 154, 160–61, 239, 248–49, 258.

<sup>15</sup> Vale, *Fanaticism*, pt. II, 126, pt. I, 61–63; E[lizabeth] A. Lukins, "George Thompson in Rochester," *Salem [Ohio] Anti-Slavery Bugle*, May 17, 1851.

Isabella / Sojourner Truth employed three main ways of knowing: observation and practice, divine inspiration, and, in a special sense of the word, reading. In none was she unique. First, as the New York journalist recognized in the 1830s, she was a shrewd observer of other people. As a slave, a woman, a black person, and a household worker, Isabella learned to decipher other people as a technique for survival. Once called woman's intuition, this ability to decode others without indicating what one perceives is a sense cultivated by the powerless who seek to survive their encounters with the powerful. Isabella occupied a subaltern subject position, and she kept her eyes open and her mouth closed unless she was in a protected situation or had some pressing motive for speaking out.

Isabella learned the skills she used as a worker and a speaker through apprenticeship and practice, as nonreaders have done over the ages, and as readers still do when faced with difficult maneuvers that are hard to convey in writing, such as techniques in knitting or in the use of a computer. As a free woman in New York City, Isabella worked in the households of the same people over many years; that record is testimony to her competence in performing to a metropolitan standard. These household skills served Truth in her subsequent career. When she first went on the road as a preacher in 1843, she earned subsistence and respect by cooking dishes *à la* New York City for provincials on Long Island. This knowledge proved useful again in the late 1860s, when she was employed as the matron at the Freedmen's Village in Washington, D.C., and taught freedwomen the very same household skills.

As a preacher, Sojourner Truth learned through rehearsal. Even before she left the Hudson River valley, her employer's brother reported that she worked in the kitchen "preaching as she went and kept preaching all day." Her employer "told her she ought to live somewhere in a big place where she would have a good many people to preach to." In the late 1820s and early 1830s, she preached regularly at the camp meetings that convened around New York City, where she became very popular.<sup>16</sup> By the time she joined the antislavery feminist lecture circuit in the late 1840s, Sojourner Truth was a practiced public speaker. She had long since conquered stage fright and doubts about the propriety of speaking in large, mixed gatherings when she stood up to speak to reformers.

Like many people who are very religious, Isabella/Truth learned through a second channel, divine inspiration—the voice of the Holy Spirit—a route to knowledge through faith that many believers, then and now, prefer to formal education. Pentecostals such as Truth prize the voice of the Holy Spirit as the premier means of enlightenment. Methodists and Baptists routinely praise a preacher for having spirit (in the sense of animation or soul), and one who displays abundant book learning without spirit may be dismissed as lacking. The experience of a figure from Methodist history who has much in common with Sojourner Truth may be instructive. In the early nineteenth century, Harry Hosier, a manumitted slave, was the servant and driver of the pioneering Methodist bishop, Francis Asbury, in the New York

<sup>16</sup> Carl Van Wagenen, memoir and genealogy, March 8, 1991, quoting a letter of Jan. 29, 1884, found in the home of Beatrice Jordan of St. Remy, N.Y. (in Nell Irvin Painter's possession).

conference. Called "Black Harry," Hosier was renowned as a preacher. After a fellow Methodist failed in an attempt to teach him to read, Hosier said that when he tried to read, he lost the gift of preaching. He said: "I sing by faith, pray by faith, preach by faith and do everything by faith; without faith in the Lord Jesus I can do nothing."<sup>17</sup>

Like Harry Hosier, Sojourner Truth said that she talked to God, and God talked to her. Such modern scholars as Walter J. Ong believe, with Harry Hosier and perhaps with Sojourner Truth, that literacy stills the voices in one's head that speak divine inspiration. Truth may have distrusted writing, as people bred in oral cultures have over the centuries. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells the story of Thoth, the second-rank Egyptian god who invents writing as a means of improving memory and wisdom and takes it to the paramount god, Amon. Amon is not impressed, and he denigrates Thoth's innovation as no means to wisdom, but a recipe for forgetfulness and ignorance. Socrates warns that writing cannot engage in dialectic and hence lacks the ability to defend itself properly or "give any adequate account of the truth." Writing, for Socrates and for many who came after, portended only "the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom."<sup>18</sup>

Isabella / Sojourner Truth did use writing and printing, both as a third means of learning and as a way of communicating with others. What Truth learned from written texts, especially the Bible, came, not through the solitary study that academics practice, not through seeing words and reading them silently, but in the traditional manner, through listening to someone read writing aloud. In hearing the Bible, Truth studied it. Analysts of reading and literacy emphasize that her way of using writing has been far more prevalent over the course of human history than literate people acknowledge. She was one of the masses of early nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants who believed that scholarly commentary, indeed, any commentary, obscured the deeper meaning of the Bible, which spoke directly to each believer. She preferred children to adults as readers, she said, because children would read the same passage repeatedly, without interpretation, whereas adults tended to lapse into useless explanation when asked to repeat a verse.<sup>19</sup>

In a system of spoken knowledge, authorship is a more complex matter than when thinker and scribe are one, for the functions of author and writer are disconnected. The author of the text is the knower and speaker, while the person who writes down the words is the amanuensis. Sojourner Truth used writing in this way when she dictated her autobiography to Olive Gilbert in Northampton in the late 1840s. Gilbert

<sup>17</sup> C. W. Christman, Jr., *The Onward Way: The Story of the New York Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, Commemorating the 150th Session of the Conference, June 16, 1800–May 12, 1949* (Saugerties, 1949), 79–81.

<sup>18</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 78–116; Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London, 1973), 96–99. A study of nineteenth-century black Canadians finds that literacy was often of more symbolic than material use, for it brought little advantage or disadvantage in everyday life to people so subject to racial prejudice. See Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York, 1979), 51–91.

<sup>19</sup> Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989), 125–35, 184–85, 244, 283; [Gilbert and Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 108.



interposed her own ear and by dint of having taken down a third-person narrative acquired citation as the author of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*.

Bibliographical citation encourages the contrast between Olive Gilbert, the educated manipulator of the pen, and Sojourner Truth, the narrator untouched by literate culture, but such a dichotomy separates their roles too neatly. (As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would say, so stark a contrast saturates their identities.) Only the symbolic figure of Sojourner Truth could preserve an uncontaminated ignorance of the power of printed narration after having lived around educated people for decades. The historical person Isabella/Truth was an employee and comrade of wealthy and educated people in New York City, the Matthias commune, and the Northampton Association in the 1830s and 1840s. Though she may have poked fun at young Frederick Douglass, she, like him, absorbed the ideals and practices of people who were more firmly implanted in the metropolitan culture of writing and respectability. One telltale sign is a criticism of her peers in slavery in rural Ulster County: their thoughts, she says in her *Narrative*, were no longer than her little finger. Her photographs (to which I shall return) similarly betray an acceptance of the material culture of the people with whom she lived.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to her narrative, Truth occasionally dictated letters to friends and associates, of which few are extant. Those that survive deal with commodities, with the selling and distributing of her material means of support: her books and photographs. She was looking to sell and promote her narrative when she encountered two of the educated white women who made her widely known in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Dana Gage. Their medium was written language, which the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan associates with a psychic system permeated by masculine, normative standards of culture and education.<sup>21</sup> Gage, especially, was keenly sensitive to women's disadvantages vis-à-vis men in American political culture. But compared with Truth, she possessed enormous power within the information network in which they both functioned, and her ability to shape perceptions of Truth far outstripped Truth's own, at least through print. Ironically, perhaps, in her manipulation of the written word, the radical feminist Gage stood for what Lacan calls the paternal metaphor, the symbol of culturally sanctioned authority and power, in relation to Truth. Truth had a magnetic personality, but she was not formally educated, and only through others could she communicate in writing. Hence the meanings of her persona were more subject to other people's interpretation than is usual when a literate person moves

<sup>20</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Once Again into the Postcolonial Banal," paper presented at the Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University, March 1, 1991 (in Painter's possession). Spivak uses the concept of overstated differences in several essays, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago, 1986), 262–80; and in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988). [Gilbert and Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan writes often of the "symbolic" system, but because in this essay I use "symbolic" in its usual sense, I am avoiding Lacan's terminology. The contrast between the "symbolic" and "imaginary" realms runs throughout his work. For a brief treatment, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, bk. I: *Freud's Papers on Technique*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York, 1988), 208–49, esp. 233–44.

onto the public stage.<sup>22</sup> The disjuncture between self-representation and Truth's representation at the hands of others creates unexpected complications for a biographer trained as an academic historian, for the memory of Truth resides in words that do not render their meaning straightforwardly and in images that we historians are not trained to interpret. Coming to know Sojourner Truth requires familiarity with more than our everyday printed words.

### Knowing Sojourner Truth

The first thing that strikes a historical biographer of Sojourner Truth is an embarrassment in regard to the rhetorical question, "Ar'n't I a woman?" for which she is famous. A look in volume 4 of the *Black Abolitionists' Papers* shows that, although Truth gave a speech in the famous venue, Akron, Ohio, in the famous year, 1851, the contemporary report (appendix 1 to this essay) does not include the crucial line. Before the *Black Abolitionists' Papers* went to press, the editor and staff passionately debated which version of the speech to publish. Ultimately, they followed their regular editorial policies and published the report of Truth's speech that had appeared in the *Salem [Ohio] Anti-Slavery Bugle* in June 1851. According to C. Peter Ripley, editor of the Black Abolitionist Papers Project, it was "the most complete and accurate version" of the event. Further, he adds, the circumstances surrounding the *Bugle's* report—its contemporaneity, its author's familiarity with Truth—reinforced its reliability.<sup>23</sup>

The second thing that strikes a biographer seeking to pierce the mystery of Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech is that other documentation is not to be found where historians normally look. This is true of women's history in general, as Virginia Woolf noted in 1929 in *A Room of One's Own*. There she asks, rhetorically, of research on women: "If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where is . . . truth?"<sup>24</sup> No, Truth is not in the British Museum or in other archives; her sources are mostly periodical reports of her speeches, many of which she gave to encourage sales of the objects that she sold to support herself, themselves valuable sources. These are her *Narrative* and photographic portraits ("shadows") that she paid for and therefore controlled. The answer to the question of how Truth and "Ar'n't I a woman?" became identified lies in what might be termed Sojourner Truth's marketing technique.

Sojourner Truth, the itinerant preacher, created and marketed the persona of a charismatic woman who had been a slave, and it is precisely through her marketing of herself or, as she put it, her selling the shadow to support her substance, that her name is known today. As the principal symbol of strength and blackness in the iconography of women's culture, Truth has been bought and sold for more than a

<sup>22</sup> Leo Braudy points out that the meaning of any performer is what her audiences want her to mean, for "to be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers—the media and their audience." Braudy, *Frenzy of Renown*, 583, 592.

<sup>23</sup> C. Peter Ripley to Nell Irvin Painter, Oct. 8, 1992 (in Painter's possession). C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (5 vols., Chapel Hill, 1985–1992), IV, 81–83.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; San Diego, 1981), 26.

century. She had dozens of colleagues among feminist abolitionists, such as Frances Dana Gage, and itinerant preachers, such as Harriet Livermore, whose names have been almost totally forgotten. Truth's black female peers—the abolitionists Maria Stewart, Sarah Douglass, Sarah Remond, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the preachers Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Rebecca Cox Jackson—are just as obscure.

The difference is that Truth, though illiterate, utilized the information systems of her time with phenomenal success. To recover her traces, a biographer must consult her preferred, visual medium of photography, as well as the biographer's own, which is language in print. What is known of Sojourner Truth in print comes mainly from the pens of four educated white women (Olive Gilbert, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frances Dana Gage, and Frances Titus) who were fascinated by Truth and sought to capture her in writing. Titus, who was Truth's neighbor and publicist in Battle Creek, Michigan, accompanied Truth on speaking trips in the 1870s and arranged for the republication of her *Narrative* in the 1870s and 1880s. There Titus listed herself as author.<sup>25</sup> Titus's work has a place in a comprehensive analysis of the making of the figure of Sojourner Truth, but by the time she joined Truth's enterprise, the persona and the epistemology of Sojourner Truth had already taken shape.

### *Narratives of Sojourner Truth*

The first of Truth's amanuenses was Olive Gilbert, to whom Truth dictated her life story, which Truth published in 1850 in Boston as the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. This 128-page pamphlet narrates Isabella's life as a slave, her conversion in 1827, and her experiences with New York Pentecostals (then called Perfectionists), including her time in the kingdom of the Prophet Matthias. The *Narrative* ends on a pathetic note, with Truth disillusioned by her experiences in intentional communities: the Matthias Kingdom and the Northampton Association. In a tone innocent of bitterness or anger, she expresses satisfaction that her old owner, John J. Dumont, has come to see the evil inherent in slavery. Truth emerges from the first edition of her *Narrative* as a slightly piteous figure, an object of charity whose life story is first and foremost for sale. That tale is bound to disappoint anyone seeking the powerful feminist abolitionist of the 1850s or the dignified figure of the photographs from the 1860s and 1870s.

When Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert collaborated on the manuscript that would become the *Narrative*, both were resident in the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. Truth had arrived at Northampton in the late fall of 1843, after her first half year as "Sojourner Truth." Olive Gilbert belonged to the Northampton Association in 1845 and 1846.<sup>26</sup>

Little is known of Gilbert: She was born in 1801 and was from Brooklyn, Connecticut. Relatively well educated and well read, Gilbert was of a utopian and spiritualist

<sup>25</sup> [Gilbert and Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, xii.

<sup>26</sup> Vol. 3, p. 229; vol. 7, pp. 304–27, Northampton Association of Education and Industry Records.

turn of mind. She spent almost two years between 1846 and 1849 in Daviess County in northern Kentucky, probably as a governess, which interrupted her work with Truth. After stints back in her Connecticut hometown at midcentury, Gilbert returned to Leeds, in the Northampton environs, and she still belonged to reform-minded circles in the early 1870s.<sup>27</sup>

Americans with antislavery and feminist convictions seem to have been unusually predisposed to purchase information conveyed in print. Reflecting this predilection, the ex-slave narrative as a genre came of age in the 1840s. Slave narratives had appeared since 1760, but in the 1840s several — by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Henry Bibb — became best sellers. The “great enabling text” was the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, which appeared in 1845 and sold forty-five hundred copies in less than six months. It was reprinted six times in four years.<sup>28</sup> As a publishing phenomenon and as the autobiography of a man whom Truth had encountered at the Northampton Association, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* would have inspired Sojourner Truth. The genesis of the project that became the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* is unclear, but the mid-1840s were auspicious culturally and technologically.

In the early nineteenth century, with the deployment of new papermaking and typesetting technology, publishing passed its first great developmental watershed since the fifteenth century and changed from an art to an industry.<sup>29</sup> After the conjunction of stereotyping and electroplating in the 1840s, each edition of a book no longer needed to be composed entirely anew. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Fenimore Cooper had created the paying occupation of American author in the 1820s, and there followed a small but important cohort of women novelists who supported themselves through their writing. By the time of Sojourner Truth’s collaboration with Olive Gilbert, the American reading public and the market for books had grown tremendously, yet books still reached a tiny proportion of Americans. Even in paper covers, books usually cost between thirty-eight and sixty-three cents, which represented between a sixth and more than a half of the weekly earnings of people who were paid wages for their labor. Slaves, who were not paid for their labor, lacked the resources to purchase books and papers, even if they had broken the laws and learned to read.

A distribution network was also newly in place, along which printed media moved with relative ease and speed, for the railroad network and postal system regularly served the Northampton Association with pickups and delivery of mail and

<sup>27</sup> *International Genealogical Index* (microfiche, 9,231 fiche, Salt Lake City, 1988); [Gilbert and Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 276–78. Olive Gilbert may well have been associated with her Connecticut neighbor, Prudence Crandall, who lived in a nearby town and was prosecuted in 1833–1834 for her willingness to educate black as well as white girls. George Benson, a founder of the Northampton Association, was proud of his part in Crandall’s defense.

<sup>28</sup> William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana, 1986), 97, 138.

<sup>29</sup> Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America: A History of the Making, the Selling, and the Collecting of Books in the United States* (New York, 1939), 63–64; Ronald J. Zboray, “Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation,” in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore, 1989), 188–89.

newspapers. Truth had access to the primary means of distribution of objects and information, packages, letter mail, and newspapers, the last of which numbered in the tens of thousands nationally.<sup>30</sup>

After Gilbert and Truth completed their work in 1849, Truth's Northampton connections paid off again, this time through her contact with William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the Boston-based *Liberator*. Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society had published Douglass's narrative, and both Garrison and Douglass treated the Northampton Association as a sort of progressive summer camp. Garrison had family there, for he had married the sister of George Benson, one of the association's founders. Through Benson and Garrison, Truth contacted George Brown Yerrinton, the printer of the *Liberator*, a freethinker whose ties to progressive causes and publications dated back to the 1820s. Thus the Northampton Association not only helped Truth ease herself out of preaching and into antislavery and woman's rights advocacy, it also located her printer.<sup>31</sup>

From an otherwise unknown James Boyle, Truth obtained the money to have her *Narrative* printed.<sup>32</sup> Because Truth paid for the printing, Yerrinton cannot be called the publisher of her book, though he later sold her the stereotyped plates. That Truth published herself was not unusual at the time, for the line between publisher and printer was only becoming established in the 1850s, and the functions of printing, distributing, and selling books were not always distinct. Sojourner Truth, acting as her own distributor and bookseller, was well within the bounds of ordinary practice. What was unusual was the book's price, kept low, perhaps, to facilitate purchase. At twenty-five cents per copy, her 128-page, 7¾-by-5-inch, soft-covered *Narrative* represented a bargain.

Sojourner Truth's *Narrative*, which is seldom cited as a source of information on slavery in New York or in general, seems to have been appreciated by its purchasers more as an object than as a text. Any book straddles the blurry boundary between text and object, but Truth's *Narrative* is particularly difficult to classify. It is the auto/biography of a woman who neither read nor wrote, and it was made to provide her material support. The *Narrative* seems to have been little read—it was not discussed as a text, and it may have represented less a text that conveyed meaning than an artifact, a commodity. As a work composed to raise money, Truth's *Narrative* belonged to a recognizable subgenre of black autobiography.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, it resembled the tokens that recipients of charity still offer to givers. It functioned as do the little flags that deaf-mutes sell in airports or the book by one's colleague that one

<sup>30</sup> Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1984), 10–11; Zboray, "Antebellum Reading," 190; Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, 218–19, 282. See also Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961; Harmondsworth, 1965), 186–88.

<sup>31</sup> Printers' file (American Antiquarian Society).

<sup>32</sup> Victoria Ortiz, *Sojourner Truth: A Self-Made Woman* (Philadelphia, 1974), 92. Ortiz says that Truth's *Narrative* went through six editions, but seven appear in *The National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints* (754 vols., London, 1968–), CXCIX, 469.

<sup>33</sup> Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 108.

buys but never reads, having heard the colleague speak about the subject for years. Well-intentioned reformers went to hear Sojourner Truth present herself as a slave mother and bought copies of her little book to express solidarity, to contribute to her well-being, and to indicate their own relative position and status in society. As Truth sold her being as a slave woman, her customers bought the proof of their social difference from her.<sup>34</sup>

Although they hardly belonged to a postindustrial society in which patterns of consumption are seen as markers of identity, abolitionists and feminists, among other self-conscious communities, nonetheless placed great importance on how they spent their money. Abolitionists boycotted slave-grown produce and held anti-slavery fairs to sell virtuous objects and to raise money for the cause. As Jean Fagan Yellin has shown, the feminist antislavery community generated an iconography and a world of goods that attested to the vigor of their convictions. The conjunction between money and morals worked to the advantage of Sojourner Truth, who embodied the linked causes of feminism and antislavery and had something to sell. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* promised its reader the story of one woman who had been a slave; it immediately assured its purchaser that information about her own virtue had been conveyed.<sup>35</sup>

Tending to their habits of consuming, in the literal as well as the figurative sense, many feminist abolitionists went beyond patronizing antislavery fairs and boycotting slave produce. Their morals encompassed what they ate and did not drink and their preferred means of avoiding and combating disease. Abby Foster Kelley followed the Graham whole-grain, vegetarian diet, and other feminist abolitionists believed in drinking cold water, eating whole grains and vegetables, taking water cures, and pursuing unorthodox methods of healing. In the reform culture in which Sojourner Truth moved and offered her *Narrative* for sale in the 1850s, what one bought signified what one believed or what one was. Meaning might emerge from one's purchases as well as from the printed page.

More than a century and a quarter after its publication, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* still has not found its niche in the literature of ex-slaves. Although Truth's images often figure as symbols of black womanhood, she is never discussed as a slave narrator and her account is rarely quarried for information on enslaved blacks in New York State. Compared with Douglass's three autobiographies—particularly the first, which has continually been republished in popular editions—Truth's *Narrative* until recently remained expensive and inaccessible.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets: Les essais CXXXVII* (The object system) (Paris, 1968), 14–16, 116–21; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, ed. G. Charbonnier, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London, 1969); and Nell Irvin Painter, "Difference, Slavery, and Memory: Sojourner Truth in Feminist Abolitionism," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, 1994), 140–59.

<sup>35</sup> Yellin, *Women and Sisters*, 23–26; Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'A Good Work Among the People': The Political Culture of the Boston Antislavery Fair," in *Abolitionist Sisterhood*, ed. Yellin and Van Horne. See Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York, 1979), 59–70, 76–84.

<sup>36</sup> This situation will presently change. Truth's 1878 *Narrative* is currently available in paperback through Oxford University Press: [Olive Gilbert], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Bondswoman of Olden Time: With a History*

Truth's strategy for publicizing her book and increasing its sales has served authors for centuries. Like authors then and now, Truth went on the lecture circuit after she published her book in 1850, speaking and selling copies to audiences who were intrigued by her personal appearance. Among the meetings she attended to sell her book was the 1851 woman's rights convention in Akron.

Personal appearances worked well in the market that Truth could reach personally, but her obscurity militated against her with people she could not address. To communicate with a broader range of potential buyers, she needed the endorsement of those better known than she. Although Garrison had introduced the first edition of her book in 1850, authenticating her standing as an ex-slave and attesting to the virtue of the purchase, in 1853 Truth seized the initiative when she realized that a profitable endorsement was within her reach. Joining the legions of authors and publishers seeking advantageous "puffs"—now called blurbs—Truth approached the world's best-selling author for a puff, which she received. It began:

The following narrative may be relied upon as in all respects true & faithful, & it is in some points more remarkable & interesting than many narratives of the kind which have abounded in late years.

It is the history of a mind of no common energy & power whose struggles with the darkness & ignorance of slavery have a peculiar interest. The truths of Christianity seem to have come to her almost by a separate revelation & seem to verify the beautiful words of scripture "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not, I will make darkness light before them & crooked things straight."

There is no way of knowing whether Stowe's puff boosted Truth's sales, but it certainly began a discursive relationship between Sojourner Truth and Harriet Beecher Stowe that extended into the following decade.<sup>37</sup>

The 1851 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a serial in Gamaliel Bailey's moderate, antislavery Washington *National Era* had proved wildly successful, and when the book appeared in 1852, it became a sensation that transformed its author's career. Stowe had been writing since the mid-1830s, but the shocking revision of the Fugitive Slave Act in the Compromise of 1850 galvanized her into writing the book that broke records throughout the world. The first year's sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reached a phenomenal three hundred thousand, bringing Stowe ten thousand dollars in royalties, a fortune at the time. She built Oakholm, a huge Italianate-Tudor mansion in Hartford, Connecticut, took trips to Europe, basked in adoration

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of *Her Labors & Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life"* (New York, 1991). A new Vintage edition of the original, 128-page, 1850 work has appeared: Margaret Washington, ed., *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York, 1993). I will republish the whole 1884 edition with a full introduction in 1995.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of "puffing," often a more commercial transaction than today's "blurbing," which is not done for money, see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 9. Stowe's puff became the introduction to the late 1853 edition of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. The original, in Stowe's hand, is in the possession of Lisa Baskin of Leeds, Massachusetts, and is used here with permission.

on both sides of the Atlantic, and turned her talents to the defense of her new friend, Lady Byron, and glorification of her native New England.<sup>38</sup>

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* made Stowe a highly sought-after author. Her work appeared in the *Independent*, her brother Henry Ward Beecher's prestigious national religious newspaper, but soon she wrote less for the *Independent* and more for the even more sophisticated and less political *Atlantic Monthly*, where she was paid about two hundred dollars per article. In 1863, ten years after Sojourner Truth had come soliciting a blurb, Stowe reworked a short piece she had written in 1860 and published it in the *Atlantic Monthly* as "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl."<sup>39</sup>

Having adjusted her life-style to a prosperity that could be maintained only by a constant influx of additional funds, Stowe was writing quickly about a marketable subject.<sup>40</sup> She had never been a radical abolitionist—and she was only a moderate advocate of woman's rights—but in the early 1860s material on the Negro was very much in demand. With the Emancipation Proclamation and the acceptance of black men into the Union army, northern newspapers and magazines were full of articles on blacks. Writing to the market, Stowe presented a tableau in which she and her family appeared as people of culture who appreciated Sojourner Truth as a primitive *objet d'art* and source of entertainment. In her use of the name *sibyl*, Stowe captured Truth's prophetic side. Above all, however, Stowe emphasized Truth's Africanness and otherness, rendering her speech in Negro dialect and praising her naïveté. Mining the vein that had produced her black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe made Truth into a quaint and innocent exotic who disdained feminism.

Stowe presents Truth as telling of becoming a Methodist in Ulster County in about 1827. The quote, in dialect, is framed by Stowe's comments, in standard English. Stowe quotes herself as asking: "But, Sojourner, had you never been told about Jesus Christ?" To which Truth answers:

No, honey. I had n't heerd no preachin'—been to no meetin'. Nobody had n't told me. I'd kind o' heerd of Jesus, but thought he was like General Lafayette, or some o' them. But one night there was a Methodist meetin' somewhere in our parts, an' I went; an' they got up an' begun for to tell der 'speriences: an' de fust one begun to speak. I started, 'cause he told about Jesus. . . . An' finally I said, "Why they all know him!" I was so happy! an' then they sung this hymn.

Stowe then adds, again in contrasting standard English: "(Here Sojourner sang, in

<sup>38</sup> Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 86–90, 94–99.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–98; Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl," *Atlantic Monthly*, 11 (April 1863), 473–81. On Stowe's "Libyan Sibyl," see Painter, "Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory"; and Patricia Hill, "Writing Out the War: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Averted Gaze," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York, 1992), 260–78.

<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Stowe's most recent scholarly biographer, Joan Hedrick, for this information. Joan Hedrick to Painter, Sept. 30, 1989 (in Painter's possession). See Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York, 1994).



a strange, cracked voice, but evidently with all her soul and might, mispronouncing the English, but seeming to derive as much elevation and comfort from bad English as from good)." After quoting Truth's hymn, "There Is a Holy City," Stowe explains that Truth "sang with the strong barbaric accent of the native African . . . Sojourner, singing this hymn, seemed to impersonate the fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, hunted of all nations, but burning after God in her tropic heart."<sup>41</sup>

In "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl," Stowe made mistakes, some careless, some contrived: She wrote, for instance, that Truth had come from Africa, and, even though Truth was very much alive and active in Washington, D.C., at the time, that she was dead. (Truth did not die until 1883.) For all her misstatements, Stowe provided Truth with the identity that would cling to her until late in the nineteenth century.

A more obscure person who was still in the thick of the woman's rights and anti-slavery movements might well be chagrined by Stowe's commercialism, particularly if there was an element of rivalry. Stowe's article thus roused another woman writer with far stronger reform credentials, Frances Dana Gage, to write.

An Ohio radical, Frances Dana Gage (1808–1884) was known as a woman's rights woman whose writing appeared occasionally in the *Independent*. Largely self-educated, Gage contributed to feminist and agricultural newspapers in the 1850s and 1860s under the pen name Aunt Fanny and became a popular public speaker. She corresponded familiarly with Susan B. Anthony, with whom she toured in 1856.<sup>42</sup> As an antislavery feminist, Gage was both a sharp critic of the patriarchal family and a folksy character who wrapped her critique of conventional society in the commonplaces of her role as wife and mother of eight. Although recognized as a talented speaker and writer within temperance, antislavery, and feminist circles, Gage never took the step up to the *Atlantic Monthly* or other widely read, fashionable magazines. Throughout her life she remained with the religious and feminist press, and among her eleven books of fiction, those published for temperance organizations predominate.

Gage was unusual, though not unique, in focusing her woman's rights rhetoric on working-class women. From the 1850s through the 1870s, she constantly subverted antisuffrage argument by describing women who did taxing labor, such as a woman in rags who walked along a canal in Cincinnati with "half a cart load of old fence-rails set into a big sack that was strapped round her neck . . . half bent

<sup>41</sup> Stowe, "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl," 476–77, 480. My analysis differs from that of Margaret Washington, who says that "the immediate impression of Sojourner that [Stowe] advanced was candid and memorable." Margaret Washington, "Introduction: The Enduring Legacy of Sojourner Truth," in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, ed. Washington, xi.

<sup>42</sup> See *Philadelphia Woman's Advocate*, Feb. 26, 1856; Frances Dana Gage to Susan B. Anthony, [c. 1856], Papers of Frances Dana Barker Gage, 1808–1884 (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.).

to the earth with a burden that few men could have carried" and a woman in St. Louis who walked two miles "with a child six months old—a large fat boy on her left shoulder, while on her head she is holding some thirty, forty, or fifty pounds of flour. She walks with a firm step, and carries her burden with apparent ease."<sup>43</sup> When antifeminists protested that equal rights would expose women to the rough-and-tumble of economic and political strife, Gage pointed to poor women who were already immersed in an acute struggle for existence, working as hard as men in thoroughly unpleasant circumstances but handicapped by their lack of civil rights and equal pay.

Gage had chaired the 1851 woman's rights convention in Akron where Truth had come to sell her newly published *Narrative*. She did not write an essay dedicated entirely to Truth immediately, but Gage recognized the attractiveness of Truth's persona and used her as the model for an October 1851 episode of a series she was publishing in Jane Swisshelm's *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*. In "Aunt Hanna's Quilt: Or the Record of the West. 'A Tale of the Apple Cellar,'" Gage drew the fictional word portrait of a fugitive slave whom she called Winna:

She was black—black as November night itself—tall, straight and muscular. Her wool was sprinkled with grey, that showed her years and sorrows, and her countenance was strikingly interesting. Her features once must have been fine, and even yet beamed with more than ordinary intelligence; her language was a mixture of the African lingo and the manner of the whites among whom she lived.

Winna lamented that all her children had been lost to the slave trade: "I've had thirteen of 'em. They are all gone—all gone, Miss, I don't know where's one [of them]."<sup>44</sup>

In 1862 and 1863 Gage was in the South Carolina Sea Islands working with freed people in the "rehearsal for Reconstruction," and after her return to the North, she undertook an interstate tour to solicit support for freedmen's relief. Reading Stowe's article twelve years after the meeting in Akron, Gage may well have realized that she could produce a more riveting and true-to-life version of Sojourner Truth than Stowe's quaint little character.

Less than a month after the appearance of Stowe's "Libyan Sibyl," Gage published in the *Independent* the account of Truth that we recognize today (it appears here as appendix 2). Gage quoted Sojourner Truth as saying that she had had thirteen children, all of whom had been sold away from her (although Truth had five children and said so in her *Narrative*). In this letter these famous lines appeared for the first time: "And ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm. . . . I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman?"<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, Nov. 16, 1850; *Philadelphia Woman's Advocate*, June 21, 1856.

<sup>44</sup> *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, Oct. 18, 1851.

<sup>45</sup> Frances Dana Gage, "Sojourner Truth," *Independent*, April 23, 1863.

Stowe and Gage let many years intervene between meeting Truth and writing about her by name. But while Stowe drew Truth as a quaint, minstrel-like, nineteenth-century Negro, Gage made her into a tough-minded, feminist emblem by stressing Truth's strength and the clash of conventions of race and gender and by inventing the riveting refrain, "And ar'n't I a woman?" During the mid-nineteenth century, Stowe's rendition of Truth captured American imaginations, and the phrase "Libyan Sibyl" was endlessly reworked, even by Gage, who termed Truth the "Libyan Statue" in her letter to the *Independent*, and Olive Gilbert, who in a letter to Truth written in the 1870s spoke of Truth as the "American Sibyl."<sup>46</sup>

Along with another phrase that had appeared in Stowe's piece—Truth's rhetorical and possibly apocryphal question to Douglass, "Frederick, is God dead?"—versions of the "Libyan Sibyl" personified Truth until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup> As an expression of enduring Christian faith, she became the authentic Negro woman, the native, the genius of spiritual inspiration uncorrupted by formal education. Toward the end of the century, however, Gage's version of Truth began to overtake Stowe's, as woman suffragists advanced Gage's Truth.

Although Frances Titus had reprinted Gage's letter as well as Stowe's article in the 1878 edition of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, the primary means of popularizing "And ar'n't I a woman?" was the publication of the *History of Woman Suffrage* in 1881.<sup>48</sup> As for the antislavery movement, so for woman suffrage: those nineteenth-century Americans who were attuned to the power of the published record have profoundly influenced subsequent representations of the past. Nineteenth-century evangelicals outside the mainline denominations—who were far more likely to hear, comprehend, and appreciate Sojourner Truth in her own self-definition as a preacher—were less solicitous than reformers about preserving and publishing their records. Practically by default, the feminists and abolitionists, who published copiously, fashioned the historic Sojourner Truth in their own image, the one created by the feminist Frances Dana Gage.

As the woman suffrage pioneers Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were growing old in the late 1870s, they recognized a need to gather and publish the papers of the movement they had inspired in 1848 and organized in the succeeding thirty years. They wrote surviving activists to request documents, which they combined with newspaper reports and published in three volumes between 1881 and 1886. Stanton was living in Tenafly, in northern New Jersey, as she carried out most of the work; Anthony came from Rochester, New York, from time to time to visit

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*; Olive Gilbert to Sojourner Truth, Jan. 17, 1870, [c. 1870], in [Gilbert and Titus], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 276–78.

<sup>47</sup> The "Frederick, is God dead?" anecdote appears in Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The President's Message," *Independent*, Dec. 20, 1860. On it, see Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 83–84.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage* (3 vols., New York, 1881–1886), I, 110–13.

and assist. Gage, who in the years since 1851 had moved from McConnellsville, Ohio, to St. Louis, was then living in Vineland, in southern New Jersey, a center of temperance and woman's rights enthusiasm. Having corresponded with Anthony and Stanton since the 1850s, Gage would have welcomed a request to contribute material for the *History of Woman Suffrage*. In 1879 she wrote that she was looking over her old papers and manuscripts.<sup>49</sup>

The feminist press of the 1880s testifies to Gage's enduring reputation as an ardent feminist. Although in wretched health, she continued to contribute to women's newspapers. After Sojourner Truth's death in 1883, the Boston *Woman's Journal* reprinted Gage's report of Truth's Akron speech. Through letters to feminist gatherings and published utterances, Gage spoke for temperance and woman suffrage right up to her death in 1884.<sup>50</sup> Stowe, in contrast, had turned away from reform entirely. From the early 1860s through the mid-1880s she was still writing a book a year, but she did not return to political themes. In her old age Stowe lived in Florida and became increasingly childlike, and her writing was of local color and quaint New England characters.

By the end of the century, Gage's Truth was doing feminist work for woman suffragists all around the country, though sometimes in turn-of-the-century fashion. A Memphis suffragist who imagined Truth as an "old negro mammy" nevertheless quoted Gage's report of the 1851 speech as a stick with which to beat antisuffragists, in this instance, the Reverend Thomas Dixon.<sup>51</sup> No longer the symbol of Christian trust, the uncorrupted Negro, or African genius, Truth was now the embodiment of women's strength that Gage had crafted. Stowe's 1863 portrait of Truth, written by a best-selling author whose religious sensibility was stronger than her feminism, expressed Victorian sentimentality. Gage's 1863 portrait of Truth, written by a woman whose radicalism had kept her at the far margins of American letters during her lifetime, has worn—and sold—well during the twentieth century.

### *Invention and History*

It may seem ironic that Sojourner Truth is known for words she did not say, but American history is full of symbols that do their work without a basis in life. As a black and feminist talisman rather than a text, Sojourner Truth is still selling. She remains more sign than lived existence, like Betsy Ross, Chief Seattle, and Mason ("Parson") Weems's George Washington, who are also best remembered for deeds they did not perform and words they did not utter. Like other invented greats, Truth is consumed as a signifier and beloved for what we need her to have said. It is no

<sup>49</sup> Matilda Joslyn Gage (no relation to Frances Dana Gage) aided Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in preparing the *History of Woman Suffrage*. Three later volumes, edited by Ida Husted Harper, took the story up to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the vote nationwide. *Boston Woman's Journal*, Aug. 30, 1879; Elizabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York, 1984), 176–83; Ellen Carol DuBois, "Making Women's History: Activist Historians of Women's Rights, 1880–1940," *Radical History Review*, 49 (Winter 1991), 61–84.

<sup>50</sup> *Boston Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1, 1883, Nov. 15, Dec. 27, 1884.

<sup>51</sup> Folder 1, Lide Parker (Smith) Meriwether Papers (Schlesinger Library).

accident that other people writing well after the fact made up what we see as most meaningful about each of those greats.

Parson Weems, who was, incidentally, a book distributor, invented the story of young George Washington's chopping down a cherry tree and being unable to tell a lie about his deed. The story played a major role in Weems's biography of Washington, which was, of course, for sale. It is perhaps not so well known that the legend of Betsy Ross, the woman celebrated for sewing the first American flag, is also fiction. Elizabeth Griscom Ross Ashburn Claypoole was a seamstress who lived in Philadelphia when the Declaration of Independence was being drafted, but her tale is the invention of her grandson, William Canby, who made it all up in 1870. During the mid-1770s the house that the city of Philadelphia has designated a historical place, where the Betsy Ross doll is for sale for \$19.95, was a tavern. The bones in her grave are unidentified. Canby's Betsy Ross fills the need for a Founding Mother among the parade of men who personify the birth of the United States of America.<sup>52</sup>

The practice of inventing great people endures, as in the legend of *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, a best-selling volume said to be an 1854 speech by wise old Chief Seattle, a Native American and environmental prophet. This book, which the Earth Day U.S.A. Committee sends out as a fund raiser, is the creation of a screenwriter from Texas named Ted Perry. He wrote the text in 1971 and is horrified that it has been attributed to Chief Seattle. As in the case of Sojourner Truth's "Ar'n't I a woman?" and Betsy Ross's American flag, what makes Chief Seattle's speech work in American culture has little to do with the historical person.<sup>53</sup>

Today Americans who love Sojourner Truth cherish her for what they need her to have said and buy her images to invest in the idea of strong women, whether or not they are black. As in the nineteenth century, Americans consume Sojourner Truth as the embodiment of a meaning necessary for their own cultural formations, even though that meaning has changed radically since Harriet Beecher Stowe first presented it. The market for historical symbols is not limited to words, however, and Sojourner Truth images, now distributed mostly through outlets catering to feminists, have also sold briskly. This is as it was in the mid-nineteenth century.

As a person whose depiction in print depended upon the imagination of other people, Sojourner Truth was able to influence those representations only marginally. Although she never distanced herself from the texts through which Gilbert and Gage portrayed her, she attempted to correct Stowe's article within three months of its publication, protesting in a letter to the *Boston Commonwealth* that she was not African and that she never called people "Honey." She sent the editor, James Redpath, six copies of her *Narrative*, suggesting that her correct history was to be found between its covers. She also asked readers to purchase her photograph, for

<sup>52</sup> Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (Ithaca, 1987); *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 1992, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *New York Times*, April 21, 1992, p. 1. See Chief Seattle, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky: A Message from Chief Seattle* (New York, 1991).

she was in ill health and restricted to her home in Battle Creek, Michigan. "I am," she said, "living on my shadow."<sup>54</sup> As though surrendering language to women who were initiated into the esoteric practices of writing and publishing, she sought self-representation in a medium that many Americans, even the highly educated, regarded as transparent and whose etymology came from the Greek words meaning "light writing": photography.

### *Truth in Photography*

After the Stowe and Gage essays increased her visibility in 1863, Sojourner Truth found a new means of reaching supporters and raising money in the rage for the new *cartes de visite* from France. Between 1863 and about 1875, Sojourner Truth had at least fourteen photographic portraits made of herself in two formats, *carte de visite* (4-by-2½ inches) and cabinet card (6½-by-4½ inches), in at least seven sittings. In the 1860s and 1870s, Truth stocked copies of these photographs and the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* to sell through the mail and wherever she made personal appearances. While donations of any size were welcome, Truth seems to have asked about \$.33 for each *carte de visite* and \$.50 for the larger cabinet cards, in line with the prices that photographers and publishers charged in the early 1860s, \$2.00 to \$3.00 per dozen.<sup>55</sup>

Photographic portraiture spread as soon as photography was invented in 1839. Daguerreotypes made portraits commonplace in the 1840s, and Douglass and Gage both sat for daguerreotype likenesses. Two subsequent developments—the 1851 invention of collodion wet-plate negative technology, which made it possible to print an indefinite number of prints from a single negative, and the 1854 patenting of the multilens camera—ushered in the era of popular portrait photography. *Cartes de visite*, the invention of André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri of Paris in the mid-1850s, were made with a camera with four, six, eight, or twelve lenses exposing different portions of a single large plate. If the lenses were opened simultaneously, several small photos of the same pose were produced. If the lenses were opened sequentially, the sitter could adjust her pose from one exposure to another. Once the negative was developed, the photos would be mounted and cut apart, and the four, eight, or more photographs the size of a visiting card would be cheap, having been developed and printed all at once. Because *cartes de visite* were so small, they did not permit much background or detail, but they became the most popular form of portrait in the early 1860s. In their ubiquity, *cartes de visite* began to make photographic images a means of communication as familiar and accepted as the printed word.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> "Letter from Sojourner Truth," *Boston Commonwealth*, July 3, 1863.

<sup>55</sup> Kathleen Collins, "Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth," *History of Photography*, 7 (July–Sept. 1983), 183–205, esp. 199; William C. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg, 1981), 19. The *carte de visite* appeared in the United States in 1860 and quickly gained enormous popularity.

<sup>56</sup> The Frederick Douglass daguerreotype (8 x 6.9 c.), c. 1847, is held by the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. See *History of Photography*, 4 (July 1980), frontispiece. The Frances Dana Gage daguerreotype,

During the Civil War, *cartes de visite* filled a multitude of purposes. *Cartes de visite* of great men were sold as inspiration to the masses; authors (such as Stowe), politicians (such as Abraham Lincoln, whose 1860 *carte* by Mathew Brady was a campaign token), actors, and lecturers (such as Gage) carried them about and sold them at personal appearances and through other outlets as handy forms of publicity, like twentieth-century baseball cards. More to the point for Sojourner Truth, some circulated within the Union as anti-Confederate propaganda—images of starved prisoners of war from the Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia, the scourged back of the fugitive slave volunteer Gordon, and white-looking children whose whiteness had not protected them from enslavement.<sup>57</sup> These fund-raising *cartes* may well have inspired Truth, for her portraits would also have served to remind purchasers that she symbolized the woman who had been a slave.

Had Truth's *cartes de visite* served only as abolitionist fund raising, Truth might have chosen to pose in settings or costumes that evoked the tragedy of her origins. Like Gordon of the whip-scarred back, she might have prominently exhibited some image of suffering or toil, such as her right hand, injured during her last year in slavery. Or she might have circulated the only image of Sojourner Truth other than her photographs (or engravings made from them), a sketch made of her in Northampton, probably in the 1860s. In this drawing, she is doing laundry, her arms plunged deep into wash water. That was not the kind of image in her photographs, and she did the choosing.<sup>58</sup>

The portrait below, one of her favorites, was taken in Detroit in 1864. This *carte de visite* is in the vernacular style that became widespread in the 1850s, as daguerreotypes grew more popular than painted portraits with elaborate backdrops. This photo shows no landscape or interior, and the props—knitting, a book, and a vase full of flowers on a table—are simplified into tokens of leisure and feminine gentility. As in all of the other photographs of Sojourner Truth, she wears expertly tailored clothing made of handsome, substantial material, the black and white she favored for public speaking. In several portraits she is dressed in the Quaker-style clothing that feminist and antislavery lecturers wore to distinguish themselves from showily dressed actresses, who were not respectable figures. Her hair is wrapped plainly, but not in the madras handkerchief that Harriet Beecher Stowe characterized as in the “manner of her race.”<sup>59</sup> In other photographs, Truth wears fashionable clothing, again very well tailored, and she presents the image of a respectable,

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undated, is in the possession of Jerry Barker Devol, Devola, Ohio. André Rouille, “The Rise of Photography (1851–70),” in *A History of Photography: Social and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Jean-Claude Lemagny and André Rouille, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), 40; Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography*, 1–2, 10–12, 19, 24.

<sup>57</sup> See Kathleen Collins, “The Scourged Back,” *History of Photography*, 9 (Jan.–March 1985), 43–45; Kathleen Collins, “Portraits of Slave Children,” *ibid.* (July–Sept. 1985), 187–210; and Kathleen Collins, “Photographic Fund-raising: Civil War Philanthropy,” *ibid.*, 11 (July–Sept. 1987), 173–87.

<sup>58</sup> The drawing is by Charles C. Burleigh, Jr., who was a child in the late 1840s, after the breakup of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, when Sojourner Truth still lived in Northampton. He probably drew from memory and imagination, inspired by Stowe's “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl.” Charles C. Burleigh, Jr., *Sojourner Truth*, [1860s], drawing (Historic Northampton, Northampton, Mass.).

<sup>59</sup> Stowe, “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl,” 473.



"I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance. SOJOURNER TRUTH." *Carte de visite*, 1864.  
Courtesy Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



middle-class matron but, perhaps, also that of a woman advertising her suitability as a model of civilized comportment for the freedwomen refugees in Washington, D.C.

She is sitting in a studio (in other portraits, also taken in studios, she stands with a cane or sits holding a book or portrait), with knitting in her hands and a book on the table. Truth knitted, but this yarn, held in only one hand, conveys mainly the motherliness that was central to her self-fashioning. According to the conventions of the genre of celebrity portraiture, she looks past the camera, which lends an air of weighty seriousness.<sup>60</sup> Her posture is relaxed but upright, communicating an impression of easy composure. For a woman of at least sixty-five, she looks remarkably young, but the relative youthfulness of her appearance takes nothing from the overall gravity of the persona. She is mature and intelligent, not reading, but wearing eyeglasses that might have helped her knit and that certainly, like the book on the table, gave her an educated air. In none of these portraits is there anything beyond blackness that would inspire charity, nothing of the piteous slave mother, chest-baring insolent, grinning minstrel, or amusing naïf.

The original caption, "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance. SOJOURNER TRUTH," explains the photograph's fund-raising function and is as much a part of the rhetoric of the image as the portrait itself. That caption rarely appears in late twentieth-century representations, although the image is for sale today from several feminist mail-order houses. Sojourner Truth photographs still bear a caption; however, sentences from Gage's "Ar'n't I a woman?" report replace "I sell the shadow to support the substance," because the market has changed, in its tastes and in its relation to Truth herself. Current consumers purchase images of Truth to embody strength, not dependence, no matter how dignified its composition. More to the point, it is no longer possible to contribute to Truth through purchase of her book or *carte de visite*. "I sell the shadow to support the substance" exhorted its original purchasers and today remains authentic, but in today's context, with Truth long dead and without heirs who claim her estate, it means very little.<sup>61</sup>

Like legions of other *cartes de visite*, Sojourner Truth's portraits show a solid bourgeoisie, even to the eyeglasses. The image does not capture the woman who belonged to the weird Matthias Kingdom in the 1830s or who reportedly rolled up her sleeve to bare her arm or took down her bodice to show her breast in the 1850s. The woman sitting here does not look as though she would speak in dialect, and hers is the antithesis of a naked body. Blackness, of course, conveyed its own messages.

Although prosperous African Americans had their photographs taken for their own use, bourgeois portraiture was as uncommon as bourgeois blacks. In the 1860s images of black people were rare, and most of them had not been taken at the insti-

<sup>60</sup> Susan Sontag speaks of the three-quarters gaze as conveying an "ennobling abstract relation to the future." Sontag, *On Photography*, 38.

<sup>61</sup> On captions and viewers, see Victory Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (Houdmills, 1982), 144–46. The Historical Society of Battle Creek, Michigan, sells Sojourner Truth postcards to raise funds. These photographs retain the original caption, but below "SOJOURNER TRUTH" they add "Historical Society of Battle Creek, Michigan."

gation of the subjects. Photographs of black men were most often found in the files of city police, where photography had taken its place as a tool of law enforcement two decades earlier.<sup>62</sup>

Another genre of photography also took people of color as its subject matter: the anthropological specimen photographs that displayed “types” of native peoples to educated metropolitans. In anthropological photographs, captive individuals, usually stripped of their clothing and staring straight into the camera, were displayed as examples of otherness, like insects pinned in cases or stuffed mammals in museums. British and French explorers specialized in this genre of natural history photography, but the American biologist Louis Agassiz had specimen photographs of enslaved African Americans taken in the 1850s.<sup>63</sup> Sojourner Truth’s posture, clothing, and stance distinguish her from the criminals or native types who shared her color, for she is well groomed, well clothed, and posed so as not to look directly into the camera’s lens. Nevertheless, the same underlying assumption may have made all three sorts of photographs serviceable: the widespread nineteenth-century belief that the camera captured reality.

Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others (perhaps including Sojourner Truth), thought that the photograph was, in Thoreau’s words, “an exact and accurate description of facts.”<sup>64</sup> The transparency that many saw as the identifying characteristic of photography would seem to allow an unmediated view of the subject, and that characteristic may have made photography all the more attractive to Sojourner Truth. But while theorists of photography hailed it as reality, portrait photography was thoroughly commercialized; set poses and formulaic presentations were its stock-in-trade. The poses were meant to convey two different and ultimately incompatible messages; the metonymic, through which the sitter stood for respectable social standing, and the individual, through which the image revealed the sitter’s unique inner character.

Even as her *cartes de visite* portrayed Sojourner Truth — the woman who had been a slave, the subject of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, the advocate of black emancipation and woman’s rights — they also appealed to the preconditioned sight of her clientele, which transformed the palm-sized image of a woman in a studio into the simulacrum of a well-dressed Victorian in a tasteful parlor. These inherently discrepant meanings, like the tongues in which Jesus’ disciples spoke to the people of many nations when the Holy Spirit filled them, were subject to reinterpretation. Photography may be writing with light, but like writing with words, it is a sign system and has its own rhetorics of representation.<sup>65</sup> Sojourner Truth was seizing

<sup>62</sup> Joel Snyder, “Inventing Photography,” in *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography*, ed. Sarah Greenough et al. (Washington, 1989).

<sup>63</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 343–46; Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989), 53–54.

<sup>64</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, “Photography: The Emergence of a Keyword,” in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Martha A. Sandweiss (Fort Worth, 1991), 22.

<sup>65</sup> André Rouille and Bernard Marbot, *Le corps et son image: Photographies du dix-neuvième siècle* (The body and its image: Photographs from the nineteenth century) (LaRochelle, 1986), 13–19, 30; Trachtenberg, *Reading*

control of her replicas: shaping the meaning of the images that she sold by deciding when to have her photograph taken, what to wear, what expression to adopt, which props to hold, and which photographer to patronize, while her photographer adjusted the framing, focus, and distance. Because she sold her *cartes de visite* to people whose possessions were likely to end up in repositories, she still exercises that control.

Sojourner Truth's photographic portraits are not transparent representations of her authentic being, nor do they convey a simple truth. In her *cartes de visite*, as in other photographs, the sense of reality is enigmatic. As one critic notes, photographic images are a place of "resistance to meaning."<sup>66</sup> If there is no unmediated access to Sojourner Truth, no means of knowing her with certainty, nonetheless some conclusions can be drawn about how she wanted to be known.

Sojourner Truth was willing to use the resources offered by popular culture to replicate and distribute representations of herself for her material support, and she did need the money. A slave until she was thirty, Isabella was destitute when she entered life as a free woman in 1827. She worked at ill-paid household labor in New York City until she became Sojourner Truth in 1843. Yet after the 1850 publication of her *Narrative*, she managed to buy a house in Northampton in 1850, a house in Harmonia, Michigan, in 1856, and a house in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the 1860s, in which she died in 1883. With the exception of \$390 that the Freedmen's Bureau paid her for relief work in Washington after the Civil War, her means of support were the proceeds from the sale of her book and her "shadows" and donations from her reform-minded audiences and supporters. Considering the poverty in which masses of freed people and working women remained in the mid-nineteenth century, her persona—as embodied in these objects—proved remunerative. By contrast, her husband had died in an Ulster County, New York, poorhouse before the Civil War, and her daughters died destitute in Battle Creek in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They lacked marketable personas and a supply of commodities with which to memorialize them.

As though filled with the Holy Spirit, but adapting to the nineteenth century the disciples' speaking in tongues, Sojourner Truth employed photographs as a means to communicate without writing. *Cartes de visite* might seem to circumvent the whole system of learned culture and racial stereotype that is embedded in language, so as to allow her to reach others directly. Her images, apparently unmediated, seemed to be truthful replications that communicated the essence of her real self.

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*American Photographs*, 28, 40; Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1989), 77–78, 88–89; Snyder, "Inventing Photography," 21–22; John X. Berger and Oliver Richon, eds., *Other than Itself: Writing Photography* (Manchester, 1989), n.p.

<sup>66</sup> Françoise Heilbrun, *L'invention d'un regard (1839–1918)* (The invention of a gaze, 1839–1918) (Paris, 1989), 16. For the quoted phrase, see Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, 1980), 269. Sigfried Kracauer adds that photographs are "surrounded with a fringe of indistinct multiple meanings." See Sigfried Kracauer, "Photography," *ibid.*, 265.

In photographs that she arranged and paid for, Sojourner Truth embodied herself for herself, but not in words, which would have been more convenient for her biographer. As in the 1840s, when demand for slave narratives made her own venture into that product line profitable, Truth seized upon new technology to do her work of self-representation.

As a woman whose person had been the property of others and who remembered being despised and abused, Truth may well have cherished her portraits as her own literal embodiment: as a refutation of her having deserved the abuse that she had received, as a rendering visible of the spirit otherwise trapped within. Images like hers were largely missing from American culture, even from the feminist and anti-slavery subcultures. Through her images, created by modern means, Truth earned money, ensured her physical survival, and, more, inserted herself into historical memory.<sup>67</sup> Sojourner Truth sold the shadow to support the substance when the substance was her own bodily subsistence and when the substance was her place in history. She appropriated the power of the American gaze and used it in her own mimesis.

Truth's widely circulated photographs traveled in broad currents of American culture, for by popularizing the photographic image, *cartes de visite* such as hers contributed to the simplification of experience, easing individuality into directly grasped symbol.<sup>68</sup> In the nineteenth century this process made Sojourner Truth = "the Libyan Sibyl" = black exotic, and in the twentieth century, it made Sojourner Truth = "Ar'n't I a woman?" = strong (black) woman. In exchange for handy symbolism, however, something less predictable is lost: the complicated and unexpected experience of a northern ex-slave and itinerant preacher who invented Sojourner Truth in New York City in 1843 and who made herself into a familiar figure among feminist abolitionists through the sale of endlessly reproducible objects. Her little photographs could speak to people of all nations (feminists and nonfeminists), but like the voice of the Holy Spirit, their meaning remains powerful and ambiguous.

## APPENDIX I

This is the report of Sojourner Truth's speech in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 as it appears in the *Salem [Ohio] Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 21, 1851, reported by Marius Robinson. The newspaper is held by the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

<sup>67</sup> Truth's attempt to embody herself through her photographs has not prevented critics from writing about her as though her existential and historic dimensions and her physical body were attenuated. Denise Riley uses Truth to interrogate the category "women," suggesting playfully that Truth might now ask, "Ain't I a fluctuating identity?" See Denise Riley, "*Am I That Name?*" *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis, 1988), 1. Donna Haraway reads Truth as a trickster figure, "a shape changer." See Donna Haraway, "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York, 1992), 86–100. For an analysis more kindred to my own, see Richard Powell, "Sojourner Truth and the Invention of Genteel Domesticity in Her Photographic 'Self-Portraiture,'" paper delivered at the meeting of the College Art Association, New York, January 1994 (in Painter's possession).

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *A. A. E. Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph* (New Haven, 1985).

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 any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity:

May I say a few words? Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded; I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights [*sic*]. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,—for we cant take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble. I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept—and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

This report also appears with commentary in C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (5 vols., Chapel Hill, 1985–1992), IV, 81–83.

## APPENDIX II

This is the letter that Frances Dana Gage published in the *Independent*, April 23, 1863. The letter was soon reprinted and edited by various newspapers, including the *Boston Commonwealth*, May 1, 1863, which cut the lines about being whipped. Both newspapers are in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

“Sojourner Truth.” By Mrs. F. D. Gage.

The story of “Sojourner Truth,” by Mrs. H. B. Stowe, in the April number of *The Atlantic* will be read by thousands in the East and West with intense interest; and as those who knew this remarkable woman will lay down this periodical, there will be heard in home-circles throughout Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois many an anecdote of the weird, wonderful creature, who was at once a marvel and a mystery.

Mrs. Stowe's remarks on Sojourner's opinion of Woman's Rights, bring vividly to my mind a scene in Ohio, never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it. In

the spring of 1851, a Woman's Rights Convention was called in Akron, Ohio, by the friends of that then wondrously unpopular cause. I attended that Convention. No one at this day can conceive of the state of feeling of the multitude that came together on that occasion.

The Convention in the spring of 1850, in Salem, Ohio, reported at length in *The New York Tribune* by that staunch friend of Human rights, Oliver Johnson, followed in October of the same year by another convention at Worcester, Mass., well reported and well abused, with divers minor conventions, each amply vilified and caricatured, had set the world all agog, and the people, finding the women *in earnest*, turned out in large numbers to see and hear.

The leaders of the movement, staggering under the weight of disapprobation already laid upon them, and tremblingly alive to every appearance of evil that might spring up in their midst, were many of them almost thrown into panics on the first day of the meeting, by seeing a tall, gaunt black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted by an uncouth sun-bonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and such words as these fall upon listening ears:

"An abolition affair!" "Women's Rights and niggers!" "We told you so. Go it, old darky!"

I chanced upon that occasion to wear my first laurels in public life, as president of the meeting. At my request, order was restored, and the business of the hour went on. The morning session closed; the afternoon session was held; the evening exercises came and went; old Sojourner, quiet and reticent as the "Libyan Statue," sat crouched against the wall on a corner of the pulpit stairs, her sun-bonnet shading her eyes, her elbow on her knee, and her chin resting on her broad, hard palm.

At intermissions she was busy selling the "Life of Sojourner Truth," a narrative of her own strange and adventurous life.

Again and again timorous and trembling ones came to me and said with earnestness, "Don't let her speak, Mrs. G. It will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced." My only answer was, "We shall see when the time comes."

The second day the work waxed warm. Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions brought forth. One claimed superior rights and privileges for man because of superior intellect; another because of the manhood of Christ. If God had desired the equality of woman, he would have given some token of his will through the birth, life, and death of the Savior. Another gave us a theological view of the awful sin of our first mother. There were few women in those days that dared to "speak in meeting," and the august teachers of the people, with long-winded bombast, were seeming to get the better of us, while the boys in the galleries and sneerers among the pews were enjoying hugely the discomfiture, as they supposed, of the strong-minded. Some of the tender-skinned friends were growing indignant and on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere of the convention betokened a storm.

Slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had hardly lifted her head. "Don't let her speak," gasped a half-dozen in my ear. She

moved slowly and solemnly to the front; laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me.

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, an eye piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows.

"Well, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o' kilter. I tink dat, 'twixt the niggers of de Souf 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 ober 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 with 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 yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?" and she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud. "Den dat little man in black dar, he say woman can't have as much right as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman. *Whar did your Christ come from?*"

Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eye of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated,

"Whar did you Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had noting to do with him." Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man. 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; and she ended by asserting "that if de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder," and she glanced her eye over us, "ought to be able to turn it back an git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to, de men better let 'em." (Long continuous cheering.) "Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me, and now old Sojourner ha'n't got nothin' more to say."

Amid roars of applause she turned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her great strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor.

I have given but a faint sketch of her speech. I have never in my life seen any-

thing like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the jibes and sneers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands and congratulate the glorious old mother, and bid her "God-speed" on her mission of "testifying agin concernin' the wickedness of this here people."

Once upon a Sabbath in Michigan an abolition meeting was held. Parker Pillsbury was speaker, and expressed himself freely upon the conduct of the churches regarding slavery. While he spoke, there came up a fearful thunder-storm. A young Methodist rose and, interrupting him, said he felt alarmed; he felt as if God's judgment was about to fall upon him for daring to sit and hear such blasphemy; that it made his hair almost rise with terror. Here a voice sounding above the rain that beat upon the roof, the sweeping surge of the winds, the crashing of the limbs of trees, swaying of branches, and the rolling of thunder, spoke out: "Chile, don't be skeered; you're not goin' to be harmed. I don't speck God's ever heern tell on ye!"

It was all she said, but it was enough. I might multiply anecdotes (and some of the best cannot be told) till your pages would not contain them, and yet the fund not be exhausted. Therefore, I will close, only saying to those who think public opinion does not change, that they have only to look at the progress of ideas from the standpoint of old Sojourner Truth twelve years ago.

The despised and mobbed African is now the heroine of an article in the most popular periodical in the United States. Then Sojourner could say, "If woman wants rights, let her take 'em." Now, women do take them, and public opinion sustains them.

Sojourner Truth is not dead; but, old and feeble, she rests from her labors near Battle Creek, Michigan.