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**Abolitionism and Womanism¹: An Intersectional² Reading of Sojourner Truth's
Ain't I a Woman? (1851)³**

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When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, woman will occupy a large space in its pages; for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause.⁴

Defined and denounced for its radicalism by many a historian, the abolitionist movement in the United States was for a long time decontextualized and oversimplified. The larger context and implications of a multifaceted movement were often overlooked. Michael Fellman, the author of *Antislavery Reconsidered* (1979) explains that even in the first half of the twentieth century, abolitionists were viewed as "irrational extremists who refused to adjust to the American genius for gradual change."⁵ However, the very nature of the movement and the "culture of dissent" it put forward, makes it clear that it was much more complex, as a movement, than what was/is generally believed: "As an issue fraught with public implications, abolitionism disturbs the tidy balance between narrative and analysis, between moral judgment and dispassionate research."⁶ By establishing the interracial nature of the movement, *Prophets of Protest* (published in 2006) not only brought a context to abolitionism—showcasing, for instance, the importance of black institutions (mainly churches, cf. Richard Allen) as the bedrock of militancy.⁷ The book also helped to broaden the scope

(from the abolitionism of slavery to the notion of interracial democracy) and extend the timeline of the movement (from the 1830s to a movement that actually started in the revolutionary era and whose stakes extended far beyond emancipation⁸).

In fact, by the 1840s, the antislavery movement in the United States did not merely reflect Garrisonian immediatist activism. While the general relevance of the printed press, in abolitionism, cannot be overstated, John Brown Russwurm's *Freedom's Journal* and David Walker's *Appeal* did more to open up the antislavery movement to the larger diaspora and showcase freedom for the black community, both enslaved and free, than a lot of the single-issue pamphlets published at the time. The fact that they did not gain as much visibility as Garrison's outspoken, omnipresent activism somehow painted a false picture of abolitionism that is now being corrected. Similarly, while the work of women abolitionists was acknowledged towards the middle of the nineteenth century, it was mainly the work of white women that gained national attention, from the 1840s onwards.

Fortunately, scholars of abolitionism, in the last two decades, have endeavored to bring to light a crucial element in the antislavery movement/struggle⁹: the fact that it arose, to a very large extent and for transparent reasons, from the African American community, via a full-fledged activism stemming from black institutions, mainly churches (with the ongoing efforts of black preachers such as Richard Allen), the rise of the black press (via *Freedom's Journal*) and the rise to prominence of African American leaders, some of whom, like Frederick Douglass, had made the journey from slavery to freedom, and testified about their experiences, both publicly and in writing. While some, like *Freedom's Journal* editor John Brown Russwurm, or ultimately Richard Allen, were ultimately tempted to return to Africa¹⁰, the greater part of African American abolitionists was keen on changing things from the inside: for enslaved people, it meant doing away with slavery; for Free Blacks, this meant struggling toward equality – the political and social endeavors being perceived as equally urgent.

By the 1840s, not only had black abolitionists achieved recognition, alongside, and sometimes jointly with, their white counterparts on both sides of the gradualist/immediatist spectrum. They had also paved the way for life after freedom. Whether activists had experienced slavery or not, they now found themselves on the freedom side (freedom from slavery, freedom of speech) – on the side of American

democracy, which had been considerably undermined by the growing polarization between North and South that ultimately led to the Civil War. As was the case with the Civil Rights movement in the twentieth century, it was the grassroots activism that made a difference.

Meanwhile, the role that black women played in the abolition movement was largely overlooked. According to Nell Irvin Painter, this is mainly due to the fact that black history “traces the struggles against white racism, and because that struggle was not the paramount mission of black (preaching) women.”¹¹ In this context, abolitionists were deeply split about the place of women in the movement. Many (urban) black male abolitionists—among whom some “Black Founders”—had very traditional ideas of women’s place in society. As Truth and other women became more prominent, these less radical men left the movement, which left a void, readily filled in the 1840s and 1850s, by women. In this context, one can only imagine what it took for an illiterate woman preacher to make room for herself in the movement—at a time when most former slaves, including Frederick Douglass, associated illiteracy with slavery, and their mastery of the written word as the condition and symbol of their freedom. In fact, Sojourner Truth’s presence in the movement served the cause in so many ways: her very life testified to the abuses of slavery *in the North*; it epitomized from very early on the deep connection between the Church and the antislavery movement arising from the black community—she was an Evangelical preacher before she became an abolitionist or a feminist; lastly, she was the very first black woman who had experienced and survived slavery, to actually speak out against the ‘peculiar institution’ and for women’s rights.

Among the “Black Founders”, Frederick Douglass, was among the first to embrace women’s rights, as a logical outcome of their antislavery militancy:

Observing woman's agency, devotion, and efficiency in pleading the cause of the slave, gratitude for this high service early moved me to give favorable attention to the subject of “woman's rights”.¹²

Appealing to common sense, Douglass called attention not only to the highly invisible work of women in the abolitionist movement, but also to women’s equal capacity to fight for freedom and equal rights, thus bringing the two issues together. Convinced that “woman’s influence would greatly tend to check and modify the

barbarous and destructive tendency” of governments, Douglass made it clear that women should not be excluded from the political and voting rights that had become part of abolitionist demands:

In respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for man. [...] All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman; and [...] there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering the laws of the land. Our doctrine is, that “Right is of no sex”. (Women’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, NY, 1848)¹³

Therefore, by the time Sojourner Truth gave her speech in Akron, Ohio, the abolitionist movement had not only opened its doors to and showcased the women’s rights issue, but Douglass and others had also appealed to the common sense of the American people to take action on both fronts. Truth herself had only just started to take part in women’s rights and antislavery events: she spoke at a women’s rights meeting in Worcester, Massachusetts in October 1850. Claiming that “Woman [had] set the world wrong by eating the forbidden fruit, and now she was going to set it right!”, she sowed the seeds for the powerful speech she was to give but a year later.¹⁴ By contrast, the speech she gave at the annual meeting of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery society, in November 1850, was not as outspoken, though it emphasized the rhetorical power of repetitions and binary oppositions: she had been a *slave*, she said, and was not now entirely *free*. She said she didn’t know anything about politics but thanked God that the law was made – that “the *worst* had come to *worst*, but the *best* must come to *best*” (emphasis mine)¹⁵. Though her career as a major abolitionist and women’s rights advocate had not quite started, she had realized, by 1850, that her oratory power lay in simple rhetorical figures and biblical imagery.

On 28 May 1851, the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention, chaired by Frances Dana Gage (who published the second, most famous transcription of Truth’s speech), taking place but a year after her *Narrative* was published, marked a new beginning in Truth’s career (literally, overnight). The meaning of her speech just cannot be overstated. As Parker Pillsbury pointed out in the *Saturday Visiter*: “That *any* woman has rights, will scarcely be believed. But that *colored* women have rights, would never have been thought of, without a specific declaration.”¹⁶

Sojourner Truth's speech, at the intersection of race and gender, has been much assessed as one of the very first pieces of black feminist thought and expression. I would also like to suggest that Truth's speech inscribes itself as part of a continuum in black abolitionism. The combination of both contemporary issues—abolitionism and women's rights—not only demonstrates the larger scope of the antislavery movement in the decades leading to the American Civil War. In fact, it also inscribes the speech in the black struggle for civil rights, past and present.

My paper, dedicated to Sojourner Truth's speech today known as *Ain't I a Woman?*, is embedded in the reassessment of abolitionism by way of a rehabilitation/acknowledgment of African American abolitionism purporting and transitioning to an actual democracy. The two versions of her speech, equating man and woman, freed and enslaved black people, exemplify an early specificity of black abolitionism: the dual struggle for abolitionism and equality. In that sense, the rhetorical question: "Ain't I a Woman?", present in the second recorded version of her speech, truly lays the ground for the larger equality-minded black struggle, from the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—including the "I am a man" March in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968—to the Black Lives Matter movement. Though the term "intersectionality", coined in the 1980s, has more modern connotations, its emphasis on the overlapping of multiple forms of oppression, and on the resulting necessity to tackle these issues together (as opposed to separately), is epitomized in Sojourner Truth's speech which has mainly been appropriated by (black and white) feminists, while its abolitionist element has been subdued.

In a similar fashion to her narrative, which she dictated to a white woman (Olive Gilbert) and was thus told in the third person, her speech deliberately does not follow the slavery-to-freedom pattern that was characteristic of slave narratives—including, and more especially, Douglass's. Nor can it be boxed into an either/or dichotomy—either feminist or abolitionist—hereby preventing appropriation. Believing that literacy would possibly/probably spoil her storytelling and rhetorical talents, Truth chose to remain illiterate throughout her life. Literacy was therefore never a gateway to freedom, as was the case for Douglass and others, who authored *and* wrote their narratives. Over a century before Audrey Lorde, she refused to use, and be used by, "the master's tools":

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable (...) women know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.¹⁷

Beyond its political message, Truth's speech is also deeply relevant on a cultural level. As much as her unlinear, sketchy *Narrative* departs from the black literary tradition of self-narratives, the very rhetorical nature of her speech does not so much mark a departure from the tradition of didactic speeches that characterized abolitionist publications (meant to teach the larger public about the nonsense and evil of slavery). A comparison with Frederick Douglass's speech on the "Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" (a talk he gave in 1852, one year after Sojourner Truth's speech) clearly demonstrates the difference, in terms of *reception*, between Douglass's eloquent, elaborate rhetorics and Truth's more immediate call on her audience to take home her message. While the former was originally written, to be delivered orally, the latter was only subsequently written down by a person in the audience. First transcribed by Marius Robinson, the speech was first published about one month after it was delivered, appearing in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* on June 21, 1851. This speech was therefore *originally* deemed as a full-fledged testimony/mouthpiece of the abolitionist struggle. In this first version, the question "Ain't I a Woman?" was not asked. Beyond the musing that is bound arise from this absence, and subsequent addition, which changed the meaning and reception of the text, the former version decisively invites an abolitionist reading. Marius Robinson introduced the speech in emphatic terms in *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*:

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey an adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones.¹⁸

From the very start, Truth's very intense physical presence was emphasized – to the point of making it impossible to convey its *effect*. As Robinson warns, the very purpose

of transcribing the speech is bound to be defeated from the start. Setting out to do so anyway, about a month after the event, is thus not only a statement of how crucial the speech was, but it is also a political choice¹⁹. The speech, as transcribed by Robinson, reads as a demonstration that can be divided into two parts: a womanist call with an appeal to common sense, followed by biblical arguments leading to Truth's ultimate conclusion. Here is the first part of the speech, quoted in full:

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

As the peculiar phrase "I am a woman's rights"—in-between metonymy and hypallage—equates her own self with the larger scope of her ambitions, its very universal quality exemplifies what Pulitzer Prize recipient Alice Walker has named "womanism":

a black feminist or feminist of color [...] Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female [...] Traditionally universalist [...] Traditionally capable [...]. (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Preface²⁰).

Calling for equal rights between men and women (based on equal strength, needs, and intelligence, all of which she posits as evident), responding to men's reservations or fears of granting such rights, Truth appeals to reason and common sense. The second

part of her speech, rendered by Robinson, marks a departure from a common sense justification for women's rights to the knowing authority of the Scriptures:

I can't 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.²¹

This second part of her speech conjures up Truth's deep religiosity and biblical knowledge—a text she cannot read but can definitely *hear*—with her discussion of several key passages. Similarities can be drawn with the *Narrative*, in which Truth's conversion and religiosity occupy a very large space, tied as they are to the act of freedom. Her emancipation, as Irvin Nell points out, was triple: emancipation from slavery, spiritual emancipation and personal emancipation:

She left slavery with the Dumonts when *she* thought the time was right; she freed herself from fear through a discovery of Jesus' love; and, empowered by her new religious faith, she broke out of the passivity of slavery by using the law toward her own ends.²² ICIB

In the Akron speech transcribed by Robinson, the Bible is more than ever the main legitimate authority justifying women's rights and demanding emancipation. Her final sentence (referring to the "tight place" man is in) should clearly be read as: "the *white* man is in a tight place". In a subtle twist, Truth explains that, should the white man keep going down this slavery-male domination path, he is bound to be trapped by the very systems he has erected: burdened by the "peculiar institution" he has set

up and allowed to thrive, threatened by the women seeking to obtain the rights he has kept away from them, he cannot be on the winning end of the struggle; the established order of racial and sexual domination will backfire. Deeply political, the end of Truth's speech thus explicitly conveys *both* an antislavery message and a call for women's rights, hereby demonstrating, over one century before Crenshaw, the need to take into account and reflect the intersectional experience of black women.²³

Though much has been written about the questionable authenticity of her speech (transcribed with her approval), its very impact, and the necessity of its message at the time it was given have somehow authorized suspension of disbelief and challenged the precedence of writing over orality. Truth never depended on the written word, which gave her the freedom to express her thoughts and the authenticity she sought to convey. As Olive Gilbert wrote in the *Narrative*, "the impressions made by Isabella on her *auditors* can never be transmitted to paper".²⁴ Similarly to what Marius Robinson said about Truth's speech, there are no words to convey people's experience and reception of Truth's words and her impact – especially in writing. Having but the written transcription of her speech can therefore never be satisfactory, and yet it is the only way her political message can be voiced.

I would now like to turn to the second version of the speech, as it was "transcribed", re-constructed or actually recreated, by white feminist Frances Dana Gage. This second version of Truth's speech was published in the 23 April 1863 issue of the *New York Independent*, twelve years after it was delivered. It is the one, written in southern African American vernacular, we are most familiar with:

Well, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o'kilter.
I tink dat, 'twixt de niggers of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-
talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon.
But what's all this here talking 'bout?
Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and
lifted over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar.
Nobody eber helps me into carriages or ober mud-puddles, or gives me
any best place.
-And 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?

I could work as much as 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?

Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head.

What dis dey call it?

Dat's it, honey.

What's dat got to do with women'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 a little half-measure full?

Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman.

Whar did your Christ come from?

Whar did your Christ come from?

From God and a woman.

Man had nothing to do with him.

If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder ought to be able to turn it back and git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to, de men better let 'em.

Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner ha'n't got nothin' more to say.²⁵

This second version, more in tune with the general perception of Truth's persona, has won greater visibility, appeal and fame. Interestingly enough, though, so much was added to the speech, beyond the rhetorical phrase "Ain't I a Woman?" and the clear 'women's rights now' message, that it reads as much as a reflection of Gage's convictions as Truth's—if not more. Indeed, a close comparison between the two speeches suggests that Gage herself was using Truth's channel to voice her own thoughts: the call for men to grant women their rights ("de men better let'em"). As a

result, while it carries home a feminist message, explicit in the title it was given, and mentions the “fix” the white men will be in “soon”, it is weaker as an antislavery speech. Transcribed twelve years later, in the midst of the American Civil War, the issues raised by “de niggers of de South” and “de women at de Norf”, in this later version of Truth’s speech, have become more sectional than intersectional.

Aside from these serious considerations of authorship and what looks like a partitioning of the message compared to the first version of the speech, the Southern slave vernacular could not possibly be a reflection of Truth’s northern experience. In fact, Isabella had been born a slave in New York State, in rural/agrarian Ulster County. Her narrative, though not traditional in the sense that it is not a slavery-to-freedom narrative, offers a portrayal of the “peculiar institution” that was not so different from the one the Southern slave experienced: Isabella had indeed “plowed and planted and gathered into barns” and had born the lash, as her very back testified. After experiencing years of physical and sexual abuse, she set herself free one year before slavery was abolished in the state.²⁶ However, most readers of Gage’s transcription cannot rely on a solid knowledge of Truth’s life, let alone on an attuned aptness to read between the lines of the speech. As a result, the political message *voiced by a black woman* is much subdued, if not altogether erased in this later version of ‘her’ speech.

Isabella-Sojourner Truth never lived in the South and could not possibly have naturally taken up the Southern black vernacular. The addition of vernacular was ultimately deemed part of the message, not only because it better encapsulated the black experience in people’s eyes – which in itself is questionable –, but also because it gave a more theatrical quality to the speech. In the second version of Truth’s speech, *truth* or authenticity – the actual name she chose for herself – does not seem to matter as much. Notably enough, the subject ‘I’ is not necessarily telling ‘my’ story; it is more a persona. In fact, according to what biographers know about Truth’s life, she did not bear thirteen children, but five. The question is: does it really matter? The public’s response, if we look at how famous it has become, is most likely: no, it doesn’t. Meanwhile, the *political* antislavery message is much subdued, which leaves a void that can hardly be compensated by the speech’s emphasis on universal and personal elements (combined with its more obvious feminist elements). Nonetheless, another

reading, encompassing Truth's experience as a black female, does prove considerably empowering.

As Nell Irvin Painter writes in *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, the very question *Ain't I a Woman* "inserts blackness into feminism and gender into racial identity. (Truth) was the pivot that linked two causes—of women (presumed to be white) and of blacks (presumed to be men)—through one black female body."²⁷ The negative interrogative sentence "Ain't I a Woman?" challenges the double negation of humanity and femalehood, while making the combination organic and positing an affirmative answer to the question as self-evident, at a time when neither black humanity or womanhood could be taken for granted. In the speech, every black woman's antebellum experience is conveyed, at the intersection of race and gender. The skillful distance established by the tone—in turn ironic, provocative or humorous—and figures of speech—metaphor and metonymy—is soon relinquished when Truth's black woman's experience is told. There is a personal story behind the more 'universal', public-friendly speech we hear—between the lines, behind the dialect and the rhetoric: an all-too-familiar story of "plowing, planting, gathering into barns, bearing the lash and seeing [one's] children sold off to slavery".

The second element that makes the speech empowering is its bringing out of several cultural elements from the African American tradition, namely the dialogical elements of speech.²⁸ Indeed, this second version of Truth's speech is immersed in the cultural and musical tradition of *call and response*: meant for an audience, it is a call for people in that audience to take part in the speech, and fill in its blanks. In fact, Truth is not so much addressing "that man over there" or "that little man over there"—such direct addresses are probably reconstructions as well—as she is answering predictable arguments against women's rights through rhetorical questions. The only word that is actually coming from the public—"intellect"—does not appear in the speech itself and must be conjured by the reader as participant. But it is mainly the repeated questions—"Ain't I a Woman?", "Where did your Christ come from?"—that turn the speech into a fully controlled oratory act²⁹.

So what is particularly remarkable in this second version of the speech—which, even though it was claimed by Truth, cannot be solely attributed to her—is the way it reflected Truth's, and every African American woman's gender identity that had its

roots in slavery and had survived the ‘peculiar institution’, some twelve years before emancipation and fifteen years before the abolition of slavery. As Irvin Nell Painter points out, some of Truth’s children were not free by the time she became an abolitionist: in fact, Sophia, her last child, gained her actual freedom (from indentured servitude) in 1851, the year Truth gave her famous speech – so that she could not be but still very much concerned by abolition.³⁰ The antislavery message can and must therefore be reconstituted through Truth’s life story elements.

Publically known, through her narrative, her preaching, her speeches, and reified by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her article “Sojourner Truth, the Lybian Sybil” (an ambivalent piece that turned Truth into a celebrity overnight³¹), Truth was an essential part of the African American struggle for equality. As Nell Irvin Painter writes in her admirable biography of Sojourner Truth, the symbol Truth has become unfortunately tends to erase the greater relevance of her outstanding achievement:

Because we are apt to assume that the mere experience of enslavement endowed Truth with the power to voice its evils, we may forget a shocking fact: No other woman who had been through the ordeal of slavery managed to survive with sufficient strength, poise, and self-confidence to become a public presence over the long term.³²

An illiterate black woman who was canonized during her lifetime and beyond, Sojourner Truth was the first African American woman abolitionist and women’s rights activist to set out to use her own oratory gifts to testify about her experience as a slave and as a woman. Interpreted by so many women, novelists and actresses, the speech she gave in Akron, Ohio, told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted, has always evaded capture.³³

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NOTES

¹ I am using the term « womanism », as defined by Alice Walker in her nonfiction collected essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

² The term "intersectionality" was first coined in 1989, by Columbia Law School Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw's essay is predicated upon the need to acknowledge the overlapping of multiple forms of discrimination in the specific case of black women's oppression. Doing away with what she refers to as a "single axis framework" (racism or sexism), this essay offered a new reading of black women's situation, at the crossroads of racism and sexism, neither term excluding the other (« Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics », University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989 Issue, Volume 8).

³ This paper was given on the occasion of a seminar organized by Monia O'Brien Castro and Maboula Soumahoro at the University of Tours on 22 March, 2019.

⁴ *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 2008, 274

⁵ See *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*. McCarthy, Timothy Patrick and Stauffer, John (eds.). New York: The New Press, 2006. I am here quoting the foreword by Michael Fellman, one of the editors of the seminal study *Slavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists*. Perry, Lewis & Fellman, Michael (eds.), Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979.

⁶ *Antislavery Reconsidered*, 1979, Introduction, viii.

⁷ Abolitionist scholars, in the last two decades, have endeavored to bring to light this main element in the antislavery movement/struggle: the fact that it arose, to a very large extent and for transparent reasons, from the African American community, via a full-fledged activism stemming from black institutions, mainly churches (with the ongoing efforts of black preachers like Richard Allen), the rise of the black press (via *Freedom's Journal*) and the rise to prominence of African American leaders, some of whom, like Frederick Douglass, had made the journey from slavery to freedom, and testified about their experiences, both publicly and in writing. While some, like *Freedom's Journal* editor John Brown Russwurm, or ultimately Richard Allen, were ultimately tempted to return to Africa – Russwurm's plan, sponsored by the American Colonialization Society, was harshly denounced by the community of Free Blacks –, the greater part of African American abolitionists was keen on changing things from the inside: for enslaved people, it meant doing away with slavery; for Free Blacks, this meant struggling toward equality – the two parallel fights being perceived as equally necessary. See *Prophets of Protest*, 2006.

⁸ As the editors of *Prophets of Protest* explain in their introduction to their book, the number of abolitionists rose dramatically after the Civil War, when « the prospects for biracial democracy seemed bright » (Introduction, xiv). The fact that abolitionism was largely reassessed during the Civil Rights era, with its push for equal rights, is a case in point.

⁹ See *Prophets of Protest*, more especially Richard S. Newman's article: "'A Chosen Generation': Black Founders and Early America" (59-79).

¹⁰ Russwurm's plan, sponsored by the American Colonialization Society, was harshly denounced by the community of Free Blacks.

¹¹ *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, 1996, 74.

¹² *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 2008, 277.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, Women's Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, NY, 1848. *The North Star* (Rochester, NY).

¹⁴ Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, 1996, 115.

¹⁵ New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 28 November, 1850. In Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, 1996, 115-6.

¹⁶ Pillsbury, in Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 1996, 123.

¹⁷ Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In: *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. Silver Press, 2017.

¹⁸ In Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 1996, 125.

¹⁹ The written transcription of Truth's speech was of course crucially symbolic in the context of slavery. More often than not, as Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr explains, when referring to slave narratives, the slave wrote "not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community". Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*, 1988, 2014, 140.

²⁰ Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harvest, 1967, 1983.

²¹ Transcription by Marius Robinson, *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 21 June, 1851.

²² Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 21 June, 1851. In Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 1996, 22.

²³ While a comparison between Robinson's transcription and Gage's, based on their level of authenticity, does not strike me as being very fruitful, one based on intersectionality seems much more rewarding.

²⁴ *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 1850, 2008, 166.

²⁵ Transcription by Frances Gage, *The New York Independent*, 23 April, 1863.

²⁶ Her master, Dumont, had promised her to do so, but had broken his promise. Still, after making sure she gave him what she owed, by way of her hard work, she left one day in the Fall of 1826, with her baby and a very small satchel, leaving behind her husband and other children. Making her way to the house of abolitionists who lived about five miles away, she waited for Dumont to come and get her. When he did, the couple she was staying with offered payment in return for Isabella's (and her baby's) freedom.

²⁷ Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 1996, 171.

²⁸ See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 1988, 2014.

²⁹ Such mastery is paralleled by Truth's control over her self-image in the press early on in her career. See Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, 1996, 185-199.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

³¹ See chapter 17, « The Libyan Sybil », in Painter, *Sojourner Truth: a Life, a Symbol*, 1996, 151-163.

³² *Ibid*, 4.

³³ To name but a few interpreters of her speech, author Alice Walker, and actresses Cesely Tyson, or Kerry Washington.