

Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic¹

NELL IRVIN PAINTER

Sojourner Truth has been listed among great African-Americans since early in this century. Her Civil War image adorned the cover of the first volume of this scholarly journal, and her name serves to identify a feminist monthly from Cambridge, Massachusetts. You can buy postcards that show her portrait on one side and her words on the other and a button with her picture for your lapel to display your feminist credentials. Most North Americans, particularly those who are black and/or feminist, recognize her name. Her words inspire us, we say, but rarely do we know her deeds. Even so, her name is weighted with meaning while most of her contemporaries' have been forgotten. Although few white women's, black men's, or black women's reputations have survived from the nineteenth century (particularly if they belonged to people who were poor and uneducated), Truth's memory endures. Considering that she was illiterate, it is remarkable that her words, recorded by others, constitute her power and her fame. Solidly rooted in the evangelical culture of the antebellum northern United States, she nevertheless represents a phenomenon that we usually associate with the twentieth century: being famous for being famous. But what did she do? A brief biography will help define the historical figure, as opposed to the legend, to which I will return.

Sojourner Truth in Life

Isabella the Slave

Sojourner Truth, born Isabella in 1797, was the daughter of James and Elizabeth (Betsey) Bomefree, slaves in Ulster County, New York, and she appeared to be of unmixed African ancestry. As a child she received from her mother minimal religious instruction that included teaching Isabella the 'Lord's Prayer' in

Dutch. In 1810 Isabella moved to New Paltz, New York, to become the slave of John Dumont, with whom she remained for seventeen years. As Dumont's Isabella she gained a reputation for working hard and considering herself apart from and above the general run of slaves. In her 1850 *Narrative* she disdains her peers, whose thoughts, she says, 'are no longer than my finger.'² At some point during her stay in New Paltz she married a man known only as Thomas, who was also enslaved, with whom she had five children. Thomas did not figure in her life after New Paltz.

Isabella's first act as a public person took place approximately a year before she was emancipated by New York state law in 1827. One of her younger children, Peter, had been sold into perpetual slavery in Alabama, which was illegal under New York state law. Isabella appealed to local Quakers, who helped her find a lawyer and recover her son. At about the same time she became a Christian after seeing a blinding light that she identified with Jesus, whom she saw as an intercessor. She also initiated a change of owners and spent her last year in slavery in Kingston with a Quaker couple, the Van Wagenens. There she met a Miss Greer (or Grear), a fervent Methodist, who took the newly emancipated Isabella with her to New York City in 1828 or 1829.

Isabella in New York City

In New York, Isabella attended the predominantly white John Street Methodist Church (the oldest Methodist church in the United States, founded in 1766) and the black African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (founded in 1796, when blacks withdrew from the John Street Church because of racial discrimination). She also began to forge her own reputation as a gifted Methodist preacher and visionary at the camp meetings that were frequently held around New York City during the Second Great Awakening, that massive religious upheaval that stretched from Kentucky to Maine, and from the 1790s through the 1830s.

In New York City Miss Greer introduced Isabella to Elijah Pierson, who was involved with the Magdalene Asylum, a mission of middle-class New Yorkers, mostly women, to prostitutes on Bowery Hill.³ Isabella soon found the Magdalene Asylum too raucous for her taste, but she continued as a household worker with Pierson for several years. In Pierson's house Isabella met Robert Matthews, an American of Scottish descent, who called himself Matthias, and she converted to his views in 1832. Matthews had been an itinerant preacher in and around Rochester in the late 1820s. In 1830 he declared himself a prophet and Jew and took the name Matthias. With Pierson's support he established a "kingdom," a sort of religious commune, first in New York City, then up the Hudson River in Sing Sing.

In Matthias's kingdom Isabella occupied an anomalous position. She, like the white members, had contributed her material resources to the commune. Yet she functioned as a domestic worker as much as a full-fledged member.

The white women in the commune did some housework, but the brunt of the hardest and dirtiest labor fell on Isabella. Nonetheless she was clearly far more integral a member of the commune than a mere domestic drudge. She had joined the kingdom out of religious conviction and stuck with it as a conscious decision. Though not a leader of the commune – the leaders were male – her opinion mattered.

The kingdom disintegrated in 1835, after spouse swapping at Matthias's behest and Pierson's death in questionable circumstances. Considering that Isabella remained in the kingdom until it fell apart, she probably shared many of Matthias's religious tenets. It is not possible to know exactly what she believed at this point, for neither Isabella nor Matthias recorded their beliefs. After the commune's demise, however, journalists reported that Matthias thought that women were the fount of all evil, that eating pork was wrong, that heaven would be achieved only on earth, that the world would soon burn up, and that God was angry with people.⁴

Sojourner Truth

After the break-up of the Matthias kingdom, Isabella continued to do household work in New York City until divine revelation changed the direction of her life. As often happened in the United States in the early nineteenth century, God spoke to her directly. In 1843 she took the name Sojourner Truth and set out to preach love and brotherhood on the roads and camp meetings to the east of New York. As an itinerant female preacher, she belonged to an established tradition of women evangelists, Quakers and Methodists, in which her closest peers were black women like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw.⁵ Prohibited by church discipline to head established churches, these female prophets heeded the divine calling to preach and reached wide, heterogeneous audiences.

Preaching as she went, Sojourner Truth traveled through Brooklyn, Long Island, and Connecticut and into Massachusetts, where she encountered the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, a labor commune along the lines of Brook Farm. Established in 1841 and headed by George W. Benson (William Lloyd Garrison's brother-in-law), the Northampton Association brought together middle-class reformers who prized honest labor, peace, and racial and gender equality. Prominent abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and an anti-slavery Member of the British Parliament, George Thompson, were frequent visitors.

In Northampton as in New York and Sing Sing, Truth belonged to a commune whose other members were well-educated whites. But where the Matthias Kingdom had stood for an uncodified, personal religion, the Northampton Association represented contemporary transcendentalism and Fourierist socialism, which were far less insular and more sophisticated philosophies. In Northampton Sojourner Truth came into contact with prominent Garrisonians under whose influence she honed her preaching gift and developed into the



*'Sojourner Truth' from a photograph taken during the Civil War.
© Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass., USA.*

bearer of the antislavery and feminist messages that her late twentieth-century audience remembers. Although the Northampton Association dissolved in 1846, Truth remained with the Bensons, to whom she contributed household labor.

By the late 1840s she had acquired a reputation as a powerful speaker, so that by the time she went to Ohio and Indiana in the early 1850s she was already well known. Never able to accumulate much personal wealth or income, she supported herself through donations and the sale of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, recorded by Oliver Gilbert and originally published in Boston in 1850. In the 1850s she was often one of several speakers at antislavery meetings where Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison also appeared. She was never the featured speaker at abolitionist and women's rights meetings, perhaps because, in contrast to Frederick Douglass and others who commented in an informed manner on current political topics, she was considered a speaker who could be relied upon to be brief, idiosyncratic, and highly entertaining. Her remarks were often omitted from newspaper summaries or mentioned only briefly, as though her message were already well known. She does not appear in the official proceedings of the women's rights meeting in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, for instance, at which she uttered what is now her most famous line: 'Ar'n't I a Woman?'⁶

In 1856 Truth moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, which served as her permanent base, although she spent long periods on the road. Continuing to lecture on the antislavery and women's rights circuit, she bared her breast to prove that she was a woman in 1858 and the following year answered Frederick Douglass's admonition to southern slaves to seize their freedom forcibly by asking Douglass whether God were dead.

As was the case with other abolitionists, the Civil War changed Sojourner Truth's priorities. She became concerned with the plight of fugitive slave refugees in Washington, DC, who were known as 'contrabands,' and between 1864 and 1870 spent much of her time there working on their behalf. Volunteering alongside other abolitionists like Josephine Griffing, Harriet Jacobs, and Laura S. Haviland, she visited hospitals and homes, preaching 'order, cleanliness and virtue.'⁷ As a small-scale effort to place freedpeople with prospective northern employers came to an end, Truth became convinced that the freedpeople needed land and their own state in the West. Nine years before the black Exodus to Kansas of 1879, she presented President Ulysses S. Grant with a petition calling for the settlement of the freedpeople on public lands. She visited Kansas in 1871-72, advocating black migration to the West. Truth's itinerant ministry and freedmen's aid campaign ended in 1875, when her grandson and amanuensis, Sammy Banks, fell ill and died, forcing her return to Battle Creek. The historian Saunders Redding writes that her funeral in 1883 in the Congregational and Presbyterian churches in Battle Creek was the town's largest ever.⁸

In the most general phrasing, Sojourner Truth's deeds were three-fold: she

had been an enslaved worker, an experience she called upon regularly to authenticate her views; she was an inspired, moving preacher with a style that combined the power of her African heritage and the rhetoric of Second Great Awakening evangelism; and she was a forceful advocate for the rights of blacks (enslaved and emancipated) and women (black and white). In the era of the self-made man, Sojourner Truth, the poor, uneducated former slave, created the persona of the prophet.

The Legend of Sojourner Truth

Truth had begun to forge a reputation as a speaker at antislavery and women's rights meetings in the 1840s, and by 1850 she was famous enough to merit the recording of her life in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. This account contains all the material that is widely known about Truth, which has reappeared countless times in subsequent biographies. The now famous 'Ar'n't I a woman' speech to the 1851 Ohio women's convention did not become emblematic of her rhetoric until the late 1870s, for contemporary newspaper accounts, while capturing the gist of her remarks – that women deserved equal rights with men and that black women who had worked all their lives and enjoyed no privileges were just as much women as pampered ladies – did not appear in the form in which we know them.⁹ In the mid-nineteenth century, Truth's more famous line was 'Frederick, is God dead?', the second clause of which was carved on her grave stone.

During her lifetime, Truth's reputation within and beyond abolitionist and women's rights circles was greatly enhanced in an essay by Harriet Beecher Stowe, 'Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl.' After the publication of Stowe's article, Truth was often called the 'Libyan Sibyl,' as in newspaper accounts of her speeches and in the caption of the frontispiece illustration of the 1878 edition of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. This single essay is so important an ingredient of the Sojourner Truth legend and is so useful in explicating Truth's nineteenth-century persona that it deserves closer examination.

The 'Libyan Sibyl'

When Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote 'Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl' for the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1863 she had not seen Truth for several years.¹⁰ Stowe was writing a great deal rather quickly, perhaps carelessly, when she penned 'The Libyan Sibyl.' Stowe's Sojourner Truth, based on memory, cursory research in Truth's and Gilbert's *Narrative* and anti-slavery newspaper coverage from the late 1850s, presents Truth's characteristics, genuine or not, that were most useful to this hurried author. According to Stowe, Truth was born in Africa and had already died. Hence the essay is far more valuable as an indication of how Truth was seen by her audiences than as a source of information about her life. Considering that much reportage on Truth was

inaccurate, perhaps Stowe become all the more valuable as a reflection of Truth's mid-nineteenth-century persona.¹¹

Stowe describes a singular character who had visited her home and staged an amusing performance before several prominent preacher guests. Writing at length and in dialect, as though she is quoting Truth, Stowe has Truth present a short slave narrative, sing hymns and mention her preaching frequently. Stowe's Truth is more an ex-slave than an abolitionist (though Stowe says that she is known only in radical abolitionist circles) and not a very enthusiastic supporter of women's rights. One of Truth's two comments on women's rights is deprecatory, ridiculing the idea of wearing bloomers. The other paraphrases part of an 1851 version of Truth's remarks before the Ohio women's rights convention. To round out her description, Stowe quotes Wendell Phillips quoting Truth asking 'Frederick, *is God Dead?*' Through Phillips, Stowe records Truth's ability to move an audience with a few well-chosen words. As Stowe presents her, Truth sees herself primarily as a preacher whose main text is her conversion experience. In her description, Truth is depicted as a charismatic figure with what Stowe, the spiritualist, terms 'a strong sphere.'¹²

In this sketch, Truth appears first and foremost as an exotic; she is so far outside the cultured mainstream that she had never heard of the most prominent preacher of mid-nineteenth-century America, Stowe's brother, Henry Ward Beecher. When Stowe introduces Beecher, Truth, with the temerity of the ignorant, compares herself to him. Stowe's Truth is an African, a native, a character who embodies the 'fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, hunted of all nations, but burning after God in her tropic heart. . .'¹³ In an essay that is about 5250 words long, Stowe uses the words Africa or African eleven times, adding several other phrases that include 'tropics,' 'Libyan,' 'Ethiopian,' 'Egypt,' and 'native.' While she compares Truth to a strange and foreign work of art, Stowe draws upon a domestic stereotype, that of the pickaninny, to characterize Truth's nine-year-old grandson, James Caldwell. In Stowe's hands, Caldwell becomes 'the fattest, jolliest woolly-headed little specimen of Africa that one can imagine.'¹⁴ As in her description of Uncle Tom's and Aunt Chloe's children in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this black child becomes a grinning example of thoughtless mirth, a figure that belongs to the panorama of American racist caricature.

The immense cultural distance between the naive Truth, on the one hand, and Stowe and the 'eminent clergymen' on the other is emphasized as Stowe quotes one of her educated guests as requesting, more than once, that Truth come entertain them because they are feeling 'dull.' As though she were a sideshow, Truth (who is ostensibly a house guest for a few days) is summoned to spice up a boring evening. Indeed, Stowe says that 'an audience was what she wanted.' Truth, in this setting plays a part reminiscent of one of P. T. Barnum's antebellum performers, Joice Heth, who claimed to be a 161 year-old slave who had nursed George Washington.¹⁵

The Sojourner Truth that emerges from Stowe's essay is an ideal nineteenth-

century type – the pastoral, which is primitive, exotic, and utterly unlike civilized people. Pioneers in American studies like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx long ago pointed out the attractiveness of the pastoral in nineteenth-century American imaginations.¹⁶ As the northern United States industrialized and urbanized, educated white Americans caught up in a complex and alienating urban reality sought out the pastoral, figures of pristine purity, unspoiled by education and civilization. Whereas cultivated folk were enervated by the complex realities with which they grappled daily in offices and factories, exotics supposedly represented an older, or at least a simpler reality, isolated from the complicated facts of conflict and responsibility.¹⁷ In the 'Libyan Sibyl,' Stowe marks off the boundaries between herself and Truth and her grandson by stressing their otherness – Truth as 'the' African, uneducated, divinely inspired, and charismatic – her grandson as a figure of fun. Stowe's approach, which stresses Truth's ethnic and racial heritage as the source of her genius, represents what historian George M. Frederickson calls the 'romantic racialism' so prevalent among abolitionists.¹⁸

Current scholarship identifies this nineteenth-century primitivism and romantic racialism with imperialist literature which, employing the singular – as in phrases like Stowe's 'the African seems to seize on the tropical fervor and luxuriance of Scripture imagery as something native' and 'the African nature' – stresses disparities of power and distinctions between European and Euro-Americans and natives, domestic and foreign.¹⁹ This sort of characterization leads easily to racial generalizations, whether favorable (as in Stowe's portrait of Truth) or vicious, as in late-nineteenth and twentieth century racism. Recent literary scholarship terms generalizations such as Stowe's 'orientalism' or 'essentialist metonymy' that tends to deny the individuality of the native/colored subject.²⁰

For all her fondness for Truth, or what she makes of her memory, Stowe reduces her to the status of a primitive whose observations might be witty, divinely inspired, but valuable only as entertainment.

Valuable she was and familiar as a type that did not force her white audiences to adjust their preconceptions about race and sex. The very familiarity of the pastoral as a genre may well explain the resilience of Truth's legend while her more educated black female counterparts in abolition and women's rights remained largely unknown until quite recently. Truth's naive persona did not force her white audiences to reevaluate their stereotypes about black women, as did educated black spokeswomen like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Grace and Sarah Douglass, Maria Stewart, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In a society in which most white Americans assumed that black women were subjects to be instructed and patronized, these better-educated and less picturesque figures were hard for many of their white colleagues to stomach. Women like Harper and Stewart, who did not capture the popular imagination as did those closer to the pastoral, were quickly forgotten by all but specialists in Afro-American history. For a century or more the two most famous nineteenth-century black women were both untutored

ex-slaves: Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Until just now, at least, the naive, rather than the educated persona seems to have better facilitated black women's entry into American memory.²¹

Stowe's portrait of Truth, though far better fleshed out than shorter descriptions that appeared in the newspapers, has much in common with them, in part because the latter often drew on the influential 'Libyan Sibyl' portrait. Every article mentions Truth's powerful personality and eloquence. But at the same time, Truth's function as an amusing performer is also noted, even before black audiences.²² The 1878 edition of the *Narrative* contains reprints from newspapers (undated, but from the late-1860s and early 1870s) that reinforce this impression:

From the Fall River, Massachusetts, papers: (p. 201) 'Sojourner Truth – the colored American Sibyl – will speak in the vestry of the Franklin Street Church, on Monday evening. Come and hear an *original*.'

From the New Jersey Papers: (p. 204) 'Springfield, Union County, New Jersey, and its Presbyterian Church were honored on Wednesday night by the presence of that lively old negro mummy, whose age ranges among the hundreds – Sojourner Truth – who fifty years ago was considered a crazy woman . . .'

From the Detroit Papers: (p. 237) 'This remarkable woman, born a slave in the State of New York more than eighty years ago, and emancipated in 1827, will speak in the lecture room of the Unitarian Church, corner of Shelby Street and Lafayette Avenue, on Monday evening, to any who will choose to hear her. Her lecture will be highly entertaining and impressive. She is a woman of strong religious nature, with an entirely original eloquence and humor, possessed of a weird imagination, of most grotesque but strong, clear mind, and one who, without the aid of reading or writing, is strangely susceptible to all that in thought and action is now current in the world. . . .'

Mid-nineteenth century audiences and readers would have seen a Sojourner Truth that was different from her late twentieth-century characterization. Only after the Civil War did her image change somewhat, though not entirely, in the direction of the twentieth-century persona.

Before the Civil War, Truth spoke for women's rights and abolition in general terms. If she had a concrete aim, it was to sell copies of her *Narrative* and illustrated calling cards, which were her main source of income. But once she went to Washington during the war and discovered the pressing needs of the southern refugees, her speeches took on a pointed edge. She spoke to collect monetary aid for the freedpeople and to gain signatures on her petition for their relocation in the West. By the late 1860s, then, her coverage grew more serious as she represented needs that were readily apparent. With her virtual retirement from the lecture circuit in the late 1870s her coverage improved again, particularly as Frances Gage's version of Truth's 1851 speech gained currency. This version, which first appeared in the 1870s, quotes Truth's lines as they are known today: Truth speaks of her work and

her sufferings, repeating three times the rhetorical question, 'ar'n't I a woman?' Although she did not die until 1883, by the late 1870s Truth had been off the lecture circuit long enough for her actual performances, with the amusing naivete that obscured the sharpness of her intellect, to fade from memory. Increasingly this speech, along with her question to Frederick Douglass, established her reputation as a great black American.

Sojourner Truth in American Memory

The desuetude of American feminism at the turn of the century readjusted Truth's status, and her memory slipped away from white feminists and into the hands of blacks. In the early twentieth century, Truth's legend depended mainly on black compilers, who, remembering her value to white reformers as an exotic, recast the Stowe-inflected version of Truth's contributions to reform. Whereas white antislavery and women's rights advocates had found Truth's naive persona charming and attractive, twentieth-century blacks were ambivalent about her antebellum success as a representative, before white audiences, of the American pastoral.

The very otherness that had made Truth so appealing to Harriet Beecher Stowe diminished her in the eyes of educated, forward-looking African Americans. Frederick Douglass mentioned her only briefly in the 1892 version of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, and the scholar known as the father of Negro History, Carter G. Woodson, saw Truth as a minor figure. In a book that originally appeared in the 1920s, Woodson spoke of Truth as 'an illiterate woman' who, accompanying serious antislavery lecturers such as Frederick Douglass and Charles Lenox Remond, would 'stir audiences with her heavy voice, quaint language, and homely illustrations.'²³

Hallie Q. Brown, the president of the National Association of Colored Women, published *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* in 1926, in which a neutral, six-page profile of Truth paraphrased material from Truth's *Narrative* and featured a photo of her with President Abraham Lincoln. Another pioneer black historian, Benjamin Brawley of Howard University, included Truth in his *Negro Builders and Heroes* published in 1937 by the University of North Carolina Press, which also published Arthur Huff Fauset's touching, perceptive, full-length biography of Truth in 1938, the first since Gilbert's *Narrative*.

Not surprisingly, Truth's story acquired renewed attractiveness during the 1960s, when she appeared in collective biographies, such as Sylvia G. L. Dannett's *Profiles of Negro Womanhood*, New York, 1964, and in full-length biographies for young readers such as Jacqueline Bernard's *Journey Toward Freedom*, New York, 1967. These accounts lack both the amusement of nineteenth-century witnesses of an exotic and the ambivalence of early twentieth-century black scholars toward an illiterate who charmed white audiences.

By the late twentieth-century, Sojourner Truth emerges as an admirable figure who is not at all to be patronized or dismissed. With her words unencumbered by her ambiguous personal presence, Truth has by now been distilled into an essence of her nineteenth-century strength: an ability to delve to the heart of a controversial matter with a few, well-chosen words. Her genius no longer complicated by a presentation that played into the hands of romantic racists, Sojourner Truth today symbolizes a self-made woman of extraordinary perception. She serves the interests of African Americans and feminists by demanding that feminist thought – so long the preserve of middle and upper-class northern whites – include black women and poor women who have worked for other people all their days. Today Sojourner Truth is the embodiment of the need to reconstruct an American history that is sensitive simultaneously to race, class, and gender.

A Scholarly Biography?

For all this attention, however, no historian has yet published a scholarly biography of Sojourner Truth, doubtless for reasons that I have encountered in my own work on this formidable character. The first difficulty concerns the virtual lack of autobiographical documents. Although Truth has a narrative, it is built of materials that had already been stylized and sanitized. The 128-page section of her slave narrative represents stories that she told countless times on the lecture circuit and out of which she had by 1850 distilled much nuance and affect. As an illiterate all her days, she left only a handful of letters that were dictated to her grandson or others and that again provide few glimpses into her thought or feelings.²⁴ While it is a commonplace that every biography has an autobiography at its heart, it is also true that without autobiography, biography remains a hollow undertaking. In Sojourner Truth's case, the lack of personal materials has meant that each of her biographies retraces the familiar ground of her *Narrative* and other published sources.

Truth was powerful, poignant, and entertaining on the lecture circuit, but the illiteracy that authenticated her naive persona entails serious drawbacks for her biographer. Illiterate as she was and more influenced by divine (rather than institutional) realities, Truth stayed outside the organizational loops of antislavery and feminist circles. Not having filled regular organizational roles, she attracted and generated very few documents. No letters to or from her detail her position in these movements, and principals, such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe barely comment upon her in their correspondence. The lack of documents from Truth might not be so crippling if she had played a less peripheral part in the movements upon whose platforms she spoke. Almost nothing remains from her about events, experiences, and people, almost nothing about her in other people's correspondence. Yet documents (that do not exist from or about Sojourner Truth) are a biographer's essential raw material. As well-known as she is today, Truth remains the phantom of the abolitionist movement, unheard-of in

biographies of abolitionists and feminists and missing almost entirely from histories of their movements.

Faced with insurmountable barriers to the composition of a scholarly biography, why do I not simply give up and call this an impossible task? When it comes to producing a conventional biography, this must be the response. But as a historian of people who have been termed inarticulate, I cannot stop there. The obstructions in the way of Sojourner Truth's biography are commonplace and lie between the biographer and most of her female, poor, and/or non-white subjects. If Sojourner Truth, who is at least very famous, poses such challenges to biographers, there are scores – hundreds? – of other, less-known but worthy subjects who pose exactly the same problems. The Sojourner Truth biographical problem becomes a larger question of how to deal with people who are in History but who have not left the kinds of sources to which historians and biographers ordinarily turn.²⁵ In order not to cede biography to subjects who had resources enough to secure the educations that would allow them to leave the usual sources for the usual kind of biographies, we need to construct new biographical approaches. In this case, I begin – here in the most preliminary and tentative way – by attempting to understand what made Sojourner Truth a historical phenomenon, for that is what the sources permit.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the support of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California, National Endowment for the Humanities grant #FC-20060-85, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the assistance of Philip Lapsansky of the Library Company of Philadelphia, Bettye Collier-Thomas of Temple University, Dorothy Sterling of Wellfleet, Massachusetts, Carleton Mabee of the State University of New York, New Paltz, Joan D. Hedrick of Trinity College, Lynn Hudson of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Leen-Kiat Soh of the University of Kansas School of Business.

2. Written down by Olive Gilbert, a Connecticut abolitionist who is now known only as the author of *the Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, the *Narrative* originally appeared in 1850. Subsequent editions included additional material. I have used Gilbert's *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century With a History of her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from her "Book of Life,"* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1878). The quote is from page 24.

3. See Carroll Smith Rosenberg, 'Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman': A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,' in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Harper & Row, New York, 1985). pp. 109–28. Smith Rosenberg was not aware of Sojourner Truth's association with the Magdalene Asylum.

4. G. 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), part I, pp. 45–46.

5. See William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1986).

6. *The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention. Held at Akron, Ohio. May 28 and 29, 1851.* (Bert Franklin, New York, 1851.) These proceedings contain an apology for omitting some material for lack of space, but what was considered most important, such as letters from important persons who did not attend, was included.

7. Quote in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Norton, New York, 1984), p. 255. This collection contains the most interesting extant letters from Sojourner Truth. Others are in the 1878 edition of Truth's *Narrative*. Harriet Jacobs is currently the object of considerable scholarly interest, though until the mid-1980s, she was less well-known than Truth.

8. Saunders Redding, 'Sojourner Truth,' in Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women*, Vol. III (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 481.

9. The now-standard account (by novelist and poet Frances Dana Gage, president of the women's convention of 1851) of what has become known as the 'Ar'n't I a Woman?' speech first appeared in an article, probably in the *Boston Woman's Journal* in the late 1870s, that I have not yet been able to locate. This account was reprinted in the 1878 edition of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, reprinted again in the *Woman's Journal* of 1 December 1883, and again for the first volume of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage's *History of Woman Suffrage* (Fowler & Wells, New York, 1881), the source that most quotes cite.

I have seen two 1851 accounts of Truth's remarks. The report in the *Boston Liberator* (13 June 1851) says of Truth, in its entirety: 'Sojourner Truth spoke in her own peculiar style, showing that she was a match for most men. She had ploughed, hoed, dug, and could eat as much, if she could get it. The power and wit of this remarkable woman convulsed the audience with laughter. I wish I could report every word she said, but I cannot.' The report in the *Ohio Anti-Slavery Bugle*, collected in the *Black Abolitionist Papers*, goes into more detail, but as in the *Liberator*, does not mention the 'ar'n't I a woman?' refrain that has come to characterize this speech.

10. 'Libyan Sibyl', *Atlantic Monthly* XI, no. 66 (April 1863), pp. 473-81.

11. Reporters often made mistakes, and Truth was not exempt as a subject. In 1861 the *Boston Liberator* (21 June 1861) carried a story by Josephine Griffing that described her as half Indian. In 1876, seven years before her actual death, the *Boston Woman's Journal* (5 August 1876) reported that she had died and named Harriet Beecher Stowe rather than Olive Gilbert as the compiler of her narrative. When the *Woman's Journal* (1 December 1883) correctly reported her death, it gave her age as 110.

12. Stowe, 'Libyan Sibyl,' pp. 473, 477.

13. Stowe, 'Libyan Sibyl,' p. 477.

14. Stowe, 'Libyan Sibyl,' p. 474. See also Jacqueline Bernard, *Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth* (Norton, New York, 1967), p. 178.

15. Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1986), p. 501. According to an undated Philadelphia newspaper reprinted in the 1878 edition of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*: 'Sojourner Truth jocularly denies that she ever nursed General Washington, but she says she 'has done quit' telling people how old she is.' (Page 224)

16. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1950), pp. 49-52, 84, and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1964), pp. 5-11.

17. See Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1971), p. 163.

18. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Harper & Row, New York, 1971), pp. 97–117.

19. Stowe, 'Libyan Sibyl,' p. 480.

20. See Abdul R. JanMohammed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', and Mary Louise Pratt, 'Scratches on the Face of the Country' or, 'What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen,' in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *'Race,' Writing and Difference* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986), pp. 87 and 139, and Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon, New York, 1978), pp. 40–49, 72–73, 206–207, 232–235.

21. The lives of educated nineteenth-century black women are the subjects of the following partial list of published and forthcoming works: Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America* (Random House, New York, 1972); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Sharon Harley, eds., *The Afro-American Woman* (Kennikat Press, Port Washington, NY, 1978); Paula Giddings, *"When and Where I enter . . .": The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (William Morrow & Co., New York, 1984); Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Norton, New York, 1984); Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1987); Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Abolitionist and Feminist Reformer* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, forthcoming).

22. E.g., a report of a Truth speech at the Anthony Street Church, whose congregation was African-American, is studded with the notation '[Laughter].' (New York *Anti-Slavery Standard*, 10 December 1853)

23. Carter G. Woodson and Charles H. Wesley, *Nego Makers of History*, 6th ed. (Associated Publishers, Washington, DC, 1968), pp. 201–2; Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, (New York, 1892, reprinted 1972); Arthur Farset, *Sojourner Truth: God's Faithful Pilgrim* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1938); the photograph that appears opposite page 16 in *Homespun Heroines* is a composite image.

24. Carleton Mabee's 'Sojourner Truth, Bold Prophet: Why Did She Never Learn to Read?' *New York History* (January 1988), pp. 55–77, provides a thoughtful, sustained inquiry into Truth's life-long illiteracy.

25. Two recent biographers, Robert Hill on Marcus Garvey and Martin Bauml Duberman on Paul Robeson, have faced this problem. Hill, whose biography is forthcoming, is relying on the Garvey papers, which collected every extant document about Garvey. Duberman, in his *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (Knopf, New York, 1989), relied heavily on the journal and correspondence of Robeson's wife, Eslanda.