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Tried as By Fire:

Free African American Women's Abolitionist Theologies, 1789-1880

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy in Gender Studies

by

Jaimie De' Anna Crumley

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Aisha Finch, Chair

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black Christian women in the United States contributed socially, politically, and intellectually to the transatlantic abolitionist movement through their use of proto-Black feminist and womanist theological language. *Tried as By Fire* is a five-chapter Black feminist intellectual history that studies Black Christian women from the Early Republic through the end of the Civil War. It examines how their writings and actions expanded Evangelical Christian ideas about freedom, race, and gender in the New England and mid-Atlantic regions. It focuses primarily on freeborn Northern preaching women, Jarena Lee, Maria W. Miller Stewart, and Zilpha Elaw. However, it also grapples with the liminal nature of Black freedom by exploring the abolitionist theologies of Black enslaved women who became free, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Jane Johnson. Wheatley, Truth, and Johnson embodied abolitionist theology by insisting upon dictating the terms of their own lives.

Tried as By Fire joins recent intellectual history projects on nineteenth-century Black women's political work in the Northeastern United States. However, it differentiates itself from these scholarly projects by situating Black Christian abolitionist women as un-ordained ministers to the nation and the Atlantic world more broadly. They framed abolition as a theological framework, and they deployed their theology to call for the creation of a new heaven and a new earth in which

everyone would be free. *Tried as By Fire* engages with Black Christian women's writings and actions and treats them as abolitionist political theory. Black Christian women in the Northeastern United States remade Evangelical Christianity through their distinctive ways of engaging with it. This dissertation tracks their visions through textual sources such as spiritual autobiographies, essays, speeches, and sermons. It also proposes Black feminist and womanist archival reading methods that will allow scholars to read against the grain of the archives of Black unfreedom to uncover how Black women, even those who did not write political essays and speeches, embodied abolitionist theologies. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians' political frameworks are instructive in our present moment. Their epistemologies offer a Black feminist genealogy and generative political theory for contemporary activists who continue to demand abolition.

The dissertation of Jaimie De'Anna Crumley is approved.

Kyungwon Hong

Brenda Stevenson

Sarah Haley

Aisha Finch, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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Biographical Sketch

Jaimie De'Anna Crumley is a Black feminist intellectual historian whose archival research is at the intersection of Black feminist theory, womanist Christian ethics, and American History. Before pursuing her doctoral studies at UCLA, Crumley earned her Master of Sacred Theology (STM) and Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degrees at Yale Divinity School. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. Crumley is an ordained Christian minister whose ordination is recognized by the American Baptist Churches USA. She is committed to interpreting Christian theology and Scriptures using a Black feminist and womanist framework. Although the American Christian tradition is defined by settler colonial violence, in her work as a minister and scholar, Crumley deploys Black feminist and womanish ways of practicing the Christian faith to reimagine it as a political theory of liberation. Crumley has been a member of the UCLA Black Feminism Initiative Faculty-Graduate Working Group and the American Examples Religious Studies Working Group at the University of Alabama. She has also benefitted from research fellowships from the Center for the Study of Women at UCLA, the Boston Athenaeum, and the Institute for Citizens and Scholars.

Introduction

A Site of Contradictions: African American Intellectual Women

“Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately (sic); but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.” -Thomas Jefferson, 1785

“Anyone can rise from the dead, for isn’t Phillis here and breathing, and wasn’t her ship a coffin?” -Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, 2020

In her September 1833 farewell speech to the city of Boston, thirty-year-old abolitionist essayist and public speaker Maria W. Miller Stewart proclaimed her vision for a new heaven and a new earth which she declared would be devoid of “hatred and contention. The young activist was frustrated because of white supremacy but also by her perception that other people who shared her race did not support her political radicalism. She proclaimed to her audience that “God has tried me as by fire . . . Yet, I chose to suffer affliction with his people . . . I believe that a rich award awaits me, if not in this world, in the world to come.”¹ The racism and sexism that were created to destroy her became for Maria W. Miller Stewart a refiner’s fire.

Like other eighteenth and nineteenth-century women of African descent in the Americas, Miller Stewart intrinsically knew what it meant to be born again through trials by fire. The daily terrors of Black women’s lives beginning in the early Republic ironically made them well-equipped to live out the American Protestant moral code in the most exemplary ways. Their distinct social positionality provided them with the skills to remake Christian theological life. Many of them did just that. Although Black womanhood was a social category that was designed to hold them captive, they moved adroitly and transformed captive space into what Black women’s historian Stephanie M.H. Camp called a rival geography. They exercised “mobility in the face of constraint.”² Despite the state’s best efforts to suppress Black women’s revolutionary actions, they emerged to theorize about humanity, futurity, and morality in ways that would upend state power.

Tried as By Fire is a Black feminist intellectual history of Black Christian women from the Early Republic through the end of the Civil War. This project focuses primarily on Black Christian women,

including Jarena Lee, Maria W. Miller Stewart, and Zilpha Elaw, who were born free in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania respectively, and tracks their transnational political activist lives. The women discussed in this project who were not born free, Phillis Wheatley and Jane Johnson, became free in Boston and Philadelphia about eighty apart from each other. Both Wheatley and Johnson claimed freedom on their own terms because they believed themselves to be worthy of it.

Tried as By Fire joins recent intellectual history projects that have focused on nineteenth-century Black women intellectuals' activist efforts in the Northeastern United States. However, it differentiates itself from these scholarly projects by situating Black Christian abolitionist women as un-ordained ministers to the nation whose activism called not only for the end of slavery but also for a new world order. Their proto-womanist and Black feminist engagement with Christian Scriptures and with the American Evangelical Christian tradition allow us to consider the political possibilities of Black Christian women's thought in new ways. *Tried as By Fire* is about how Black Christian women in the Northeastern United States remade Evangelical Christianity in the nineteenth century through their distinctive ways of engaging with it. The Northeastern focus recognizes that freedom was simultaneously being negotiated in the Southern states, but the Northeast's commitment to anti-slavery ideologies starting in the Early Republic offers generative space to consider the possibilities and limitations of freedom for Black women.

The historical period that *Tried as By Fire* covers was a time of international transitions which historians have characterized as an Age of Revolutions.³ The rapid changes of the time compelled religious fervor as people struggled to make sense of a rapidly modernizing world in which many people encountered ethnic and cultural differences they had never seen before.⁴ The Revolutionary spirit of the time captivated people from across the African diaspora in ways that historian and theorist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, aptly characterized as “unthinkable” to many people of European descent who believed a myth of Black inferiority.⁵ As nineteenth-century Black women's historians have

demonstrated through decades of scholarly production about African diasporic women, women of African descent, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries claimed their freedom in places across the Americas that were first colonized by Europeans. Except for Haiti, revolutions in the Americas did not necessarily bring about slavery's abolition.⁶ Black women actively participated in abolitionist work because they believed that in nations that were independent from European dictatorship because of modern-liberal conceptions of freedom, Black people could not be held as slaves.

The subjects of *Tried as By Fire* deployed Christian theological principles to justify their freedom demands. While these women might be viewed as eccentric radicals on the fringes of American Evangelical Christianity, they made needed contributions to the production of American articulations of Evangelical Christianity from the early republic through the nineteenth century. Using archival documents, including spiritual autobiographies, sermons, essays, letters, wills, and court records, this project shows that post-Revolution Black women in the United States invented a proto-Black feminist and womanist hermeneutic which allowed them to read the Christian Scriptures as a form of uplift for the most degraded people in American society and thereby to rethink the nation-state's limited ideas of gender and race. I describe these Black Christian abolitionist women as abolitionist theologians.

Although abolition is often understood to be an end point, in the case of the nineteenth century, the end of chattel slavery, the field of African diasporic studies has introduced the idea that abolition is a "struggle over the terms of the future."⁷ Abolition is an ideas that operates in the subjunctive tense to consider what will have to happen for us to live in a new world order that exists outside of the current regimes of racial capitalism that began during slavery and continued even for those persons of African descent who were not enslaved.⁸ The approach that scholars within the field of African diasporic studies have taken to abolition as a political ideology that produces new and more

just futures makes a conversation between abolitionist and theological thought possible. Theology is a political theory that begins and ends with a Deity. Because *Tried as By Fire* focuses on Black Christian women, it engages with the Evangelical Christian theological beliefs which would have inspired Black abolitionist women to understand the Kingdom of God as a condition to be created in the here and now. Nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians believed that God desired full freedom for all people in the here-and-now. They argued that the Spirit of God was upon all flesh, including theirs. They believed in a world that did not yet exist, but that they believed must exist for God's kingdom to be present on Earth. They were insistent that all people must be reborn or converted in the Christian theological sense to a new world order in which there were no systems of oppression.

In *Tried as By Fire*, I argue that nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians were political theorists. I track their theological visions through textual sources such as spiritual autobiographies, essays, speeches, and sermons. However, I also read against the grain of these sources to uncover how Black women, even those who did not write political tracts, lived their abolitionist theologies. Many Black Christian women from the colonial period through Reconstruction were abolitionist theologians. Their proto-womanist and Black feminist ways of interpreting the Christian Scriptures is revelatory; *Tried as By Fire* grapples with how their theories about faith, racism, sexism, and intimacy provide frameworks that allow us to understand abolitionist history in the Americas in new ways.

The United States' First Abolitionist Theologian

One of the first abolitionist theologians arrived in Massachusetts as human cargo. Although Massachusetts was one of the first states to abolish the slave trade, during the colonial period, many African persons were sold at its ports. One such person was abolitionist theologian Phillis (Wheatley), one of the most famous Black Christians of the colonial era. Phillis was "brought from Africa to America,"⁹ or more precisely from Senegal to Boston, in 1761, when she was about seven years of age. At the port in Boston, a small and no-doubt terrified and starved Phillis arrived for sale. She was

a slight girl with a “humble and modest demeanor.” She was purchased by John and Susanna Wheatley. At the time of purchase, John Wheatley already had multiple enslaved persons, but the enslaved women who served his wife were increasing in age. She wanted a young girl so who would be present to care for her as she aged. Susanna Wheatley went to the market herself to inspect the women. According to familial recollections of the encounter, she saw several healthy young women, but she gravitated toward the young Phillis who seemed to struggle with the change of climate. She assumed the girl was seven because she had recently lost her front teeth.¹⁰

The couple purchased her, led her away from the port and the ship that had been her home for an unspecified amount of time, and brought her into their home. During her early childhood in Senegal, she had a name, but in Boston, she was to be called Phillis. The name represents the violent theft that brought her to American shores. The couple also gave the young girl their surname, Wheatley. For Phillis, these names were a new way to be known, but she was adaptable and creative. Through her resilience in the face of impossibility and creative remaking of a new set of social arrangements, she represented what so many Black women in America were and what generations of Black woman would become. The girl who would, in eleven years’ time, become the poet who continues to animate the American imagination, first emerged on the shores of Boston in 1761 as a nameless figure who was devoid of an origin story. We do not know the first name she was provided at birth, but we know the surname Wheatley belonged to her captors. The predicament of her misnaming means that she is known to so many, but it is impossible to know her completely. In “America” Phillis was immediately born again into an Evangelical world which she did not create, but to which she continues to contribute.

Once she entered the Wheatley household as a seven-year-old stolen child, Phillis showed superior intelligence. Her intellect was demonstrated in her ability to learn nearly perfect English in about sixteen months. She also was industrious and taught herself to write.¹¹ Because of her intellectual

abilities, she was placed by her “owners” into a position of privilege above their other enslaved people even while they continued to hold her in captivity. They benefitted daily from her skills as an artist and her capable service. While the John and Susanna Wheatley never officially manumitted her, a biographer explained that “the chains which bound her to her master and mistress were the golden links of love, and the silken bands of gratitude.”¹² Even after Susanna Wheatley’s death, Phillis did nothing to negate the idea that she was bound to the Wheatley family by love. For Phillis and many other enslaved people, the line between affection and survival in an anti-Black nation state seems to have been blurry at best.

In 1773, the African American literary tradition began when Phillis, who worshipped regularly at Boston’s Old South Congregational Church, successfully published her first and only book of poetry called *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Her published poems explore American identity, celebrate elite Europeans whom she met during her time in Boston, and offer insight into her religious beliefs. The poems point to a kind of distance from her pain that historian Darlene Clark Hine has described as dissemblance.¹³ Even while the poems seem to provide insight into her interior life, it seems that the real Phillis hid just beyond the pretty verses. She did not write of the pain of being stolen from her homeland. She did not write of the terrors of being transported across the ocean against her will. She did not write of the unthinkable event of being sold at a Boston port like chattel. She did not detail any aspects of her life in the Wheatley household. Instead, she chose elegance, refinement, and a veneer of Christian piety. While her nineteenth-century successors also were largely evasive about the personal details of their lives, they deviated from Phillis in that they refused to conceal their rage about slavery, racism, and sexism.

Unfortunately for Phillis, when she first attempted to publish her poetry, the men who were the literary gatekeepers of Revolution-era Boston could not believe that a Black enslaved girl could have written such artful words. Therefore, a group of some of Boston’s most elite white men gathered

to test the young African woman who, at the time, would have been about seventeen years old. They did not record anything about the specific questions they asked her or how she responded to their line of questioning. However, whatever she said to them was sufficient for them to support her efforts. After meeting with her, they wrote two paragraphs affirming that she was indeed the author of the poems. Their words served as the preface of her book. As literary critic Henry Lewis Gates Jr. has described it, well into the nineteenth century, Phillis' book of poetry and the Black literary tradition in the United States were one and the same. The crisis is that her writing, and that of countless other Black American women writers, has received something worse than a poor reception. Black women's writings have historically received no reception at all from the public.¹⁴

A close reading of archival materials about her life after the 1773 publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, reveals that Phillis traveled to England with Susanna Wheatley's son to promote her poetry and to meet members of the English elite. It was in England that the famous engraving of her was made. She was settling into England and was being encouraged by her new friends there to remain until she could meet King George III when she was quickly pulled back to Boston where her ailing mistress was eager to see her protégé. Whether because of love or obligation, Phillis boarded a ship, crossed the Atlantic again, and returned to Susanna Wheatley's side. She could never move herself far from the Wheatley's "house of bondage."¹⁵ After Susanna Wheatley's death, John Wheatley also died as did their daughter. The son with whom she had traveled to England married and returned to England. The tone of the archival documents about her time after serving the Wheatley family indicates that Phillis was profoundly alone.¹⁶

After her 1773 return, Phillis lived in Massachusetts for the next nine years until her death. During those years, she married John Peters, a Black grocer who lived on Court Street and seemed to be a gentleman. All who knew her wondered why she had married Peters because he was not so successful in business as she had hoped. Yet, as poet Honorée Fanonne Jeffers muses in her book of

poetry based on Phillis' life, perhaps Peters was not the "low-down disruption that led to her demise." Perhaps he had not deceived her into marriage with false promises of security. Perhaps Phillis, and other Black women of her time, fell into deep, passionate, romantic love just as women of European descent did.¹⁷ Perhaps the potential of having her own family, a Black family, apart from the shadow of a white family who did nothing but use her intellect for their social, and financial gain, appealed to her. Perhaps when she looked into her husband's eyes, she saw the possibility of a future which the two of them would create together.

During the Revolutionary War, Phillis and John left Boston and went to Wilmington where they believed they would be safer. After they survived the war, Phillis returned to Boston alone where she was received by a niece of Susanna Wheatley until her husband came looking for her and she returned to live with him. During their marriage, they had three children, all of whom died in infancy. According to her friends, they did not know that Phillis was ill because Peters told them nothing about it. When they learned about her 1784 death, they buried her in an unmarked grave.¹⁸ America's first proto-Black feminist abolitionist theologian was dead in Boston by age thirty-one, and even the ones she loved failed to say her name at the time of her death. She was meant to be forgotten, but she left an ephemeral trace that has continued to inspire Black feminist epistemology and the literary tradition.

At first brush, Phillis's is a story of total devastation. Her early years were marked by bodily theft. After this cruel theft, she entered a ship where she was suspended in the oceanic with no understanding of what lay before her. There, her former identity was unmade. She was, during her time aboard the ship, everywhere and nowhere at all.¹⁹ At long last, she arrived in Boston where she was remade as a Black enslaved girl/woman. She was remade again into a member of the Wheatley family and an active practitioner of their faith. She is one of the best-known members of Boston's Old South Church, one of the nation's historic congregational communities. She was remade again as a successful poet. To support her poetry, she again braved the Atlantic. She was remade again as John

Peters' wife and the mother of their infant children. What is overlooked is perhaps her greatest rebirth as a friend to a woman who, like her, was enslaved in New England. Throughout the 1770s, she maintained a friendship through exchanging letters with Arbour (Phillis alternately spelled her name as Obour) Tanner who lived in Newport, Rhode Island. It was Obour who surrendered the letters she received from her friend Phillis for the historical record.²⁰ Obour wanted Phillis to be remembered as the complex human she was. She also wanted the world to know that Phillis was above all a friend to other enslaved women. However, when Phillis Wheatley's name is remembered, friendships do not figure into her narrative. As literary historian Tara Bynum noted, scholars rarely think of Black women's friendships today, much less friendships between enslaved women.²¹ However, Phillis and Obour's was a friendship rooted in their shared positionality as enslaved Black women in Revolution-era New England, their intellect, and their Christian faith that all things could be made new. The two shared a friendship that was rooted in abolitionist theological hope.

Methodology

Tried as By Fire is a project about the contradictions of freedom, religion, and futurity for Black Christian abolitionist women. This work contributes to Black feminist work that asserts that racial terror is always gendered.²² The chapters analyze the contradictions of Black womanhood from the colonial period through Reconstruction. The title of this dissertation borrows words from abolitionist and women's rights activist Maria W. Miller Stewart's 1833 farewell address to her friends in Boston. Stewart stepped away from public abolitionist activism because she believed many opposed her public efforts because of her gender and because of her focus on religion. She came before the public because she felt she had a moral and religious obligation to do so, but she explained that she experienced prejudice even from people who shared her race. As she offered her final goodbyes to the city, she spoke of a future meeting in which the social divisions she encountered would no longer be present. Abolitionist theologians were compelled by an ephemeral fiery source. Therefore, the primary

methodology of this project is close reading. Many nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians offered visions that demanded conformity to respectable Christian values for women, but *Tried as By Fire* reads for the contradictions, the silences, the refusal, the fire that it was too dangerous for them to openly unleash. This is an abolitionist and Black feminist methodology.

Stewart, Phillis, and others went before their communities and their nation because of love for themselves, other Black people, and all who suffered under a white supremacist regime. They did not always receive a warm reception, and at times they were ignored altogether. In addition to the reading method described in the preceding paragraph, this project also tends to the reality that although many Black women, public intellectuals and otherwise, were tried as by fire, they were never destroyed. As other Black women's historians such as Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Tera Hunter, and Sarah Haley have found in their work, Black women survived despite state violence because of their relationships with each other.²³ Although Maria Stewart, at the end of her public speaking career in Boston, described her life until 1833 as a "complete disappointment" because of her experiences of isolation,²⁴ I went to the archives in search of Black women's familial and friendship bonds. The Black feminist methodology of this project reads closely not only to mine the silences, but also to determine how documents such as letters of legal records reveal the overlooked intimate bonds Black women abolitionists cultivated.

Black American women intellectuals, like Phillis, offer Americanists a site of contradictions from which to theorize. Although I argue that there were many intellectuals among nineteenth-century Black women who did not write down their visions, the Black women intellectuals who are primary subjects in this project were an elite subgroup within a group that was consistently degraded and debased. Therefore, to write about eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black intellectual women is to write about a group of people who were simultaneously valorized and vehemently despised. Literary theorist Carla Peterson has described the social space such women inhabited as a "hybrid place" where

categories usually kept separate comingle and create “cultural forms perceived as grotesque by the dominant culture.”²⁵

Today many people know the name “Phillis Wheatley,” but few have intimately engaged with her poetic writings, which offer theories about religiosity and human potential. Thomas Jefferson, in his racist tract *Notes on the State of Virginia*, described Phillis Wheatley as a production of religion. For Jefferson, Phillis and her poetry were trifling and ephemeral. In his mind, she was not invested in anything real or even important and her poetry was so debased that it was below the dignity of criticism. If we are to agree with Henry Louis Gates’ assessment that Phillis *was* the Black American literary tradition until the nineteenth century, Jefferson’s words indicated that people of African descent in the early republic offered no intellectual value to the nation.

For the purposes of this project, what is perhaps most important about Jefferson’s words is that he did more than relegate Phillis to an allegedly irrelevant artist; his words also pointed to an American phenomenon of transforming Black women into sacred objects. Jefferson’s racist critique of Phillis indicates that since the colonial period, Black women in the United States have served as the sign and symbol of American religiosity. The social construction of the Black woman in America is tangled up with the social construction of religion in America. Therefore, to write and think about Black women in American history is to write and think an ephemeral or religious history. As Black feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers has succinctly summarized the social positionality of Black women, the Black woman in America is needed by her country, if she “were not here, [she] would have to be invented.”²⁶ Phillis was indeed the hope of her time and was reinvented by each one who met her. In the colonial and antebellum periods, religion was at the core of the foundations of American jurisprudence. Therefore, Jefferson’s words indicate that the idea of American nationhood is predicated upon the labors (artistic and otherwise) of Black American women.

Phillis was the first in a lineage of Black women in the United States whom I describe as abolitionist theologians. Abolitionist theologians bore witness to the horrors of white supremacy. They demanded with their writing, public speaking, and their bodies the end of slavery. They were complex thinkers who worked to dismantle all systems of oppression to be intimately linked to one another. They advocated for abolition not as an end, but rather as the advent of a new world of justice for all who were marginalized. They used their intellect to make these radical demands.

While *Tried as By Fire* is an intellectual history, it also offers a corporeal take on the experiences of Black intellectual women and the daily physical toll that racism, sexism, and classism took on their bodies. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were tumultuous times internationally for all people regardless of their race and gender, but Black enslaved women faced unique violations against their flesh. Although some enslaved women like Phillis and likely Obour performed domestic labor for white Americans who did not brutalize them physically, they endured the Middle Passage, an experience that might best be described as a rupture and suspension. Black feminist cultural theorist Christina Sharpe has described the Middle Passage as the beginning of “enormous and ongoing psychic, temporal, and bodily breaches.”²⁷ This experience of terror was the beginning of what would become their new lives in the American colonies, but while they were aboard the boat being remade, they traveled across the vast and great unknown. If they survived the journey across the Atlantic, they were sold like animals to the highest bidder. They never managed their lives and therefore never managed their bodies. They were at the mercy of their enslavers and knew their fate could change for the worst at any time. We cannot know why Phillis’ children did not survive infancy, but no doubt slavery took its physical toll on her body and by extension on her family. Through slavery and the death of her children, Phillis became a stranger to all, but her art and life offer ways to remake her. Therefore, this project is about Black women’s extraordinary intellect and their ideas about abolition, and it is about the ways Black women’s bodies became abolitionist sacred texts.

Phillis' story is one about intellect that was never received and a body that was worn down by decades of unjust labor. However, Phillis' story, like those of other abolitionist theologians, is at its root a story about love. Abolition is a rigorous intellectual theory that many Black women have lived with their bodies. However, abolition is also a theory that is encapsulated in the ways Black women have loved themselves and each other. Today, Phillis Wheatley's name is used by many an elementary school and community center. Her name is meant to promote intellectual growth within American young people. Boston-based frequently evoke her name and likeness when calling upon the state of Massachusetts to apologize for its role in slavery.²⁸ Nearly two hundred fifty years after her death, Phillis continues to provide uncompensated labor to promote the false promises of the American nation-state. The casual use of her name neglects that what allowed her to survive in a racist nation-state for as long as she did was her friends, and especially her friendship with a fellow enslaved New England woman. The methods of this project flow from the legacies of love and abolition which eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black abolitionist theologians created. *Tried as By Fire* demonstrates the connection between Black feminist conceptions of love or care and abolitionist politics.

Literature Review

If, as Black feminist cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman has argued, the archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence,²⁹ so too does the archive of Black freedom. *Tried as by Fire* mines the space of what I call the archives of Black quasi-freedom to learn new truths about Black Christian women's contributions to the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. The archives of Black quasi-freedom include the writings and speeches of free(d) eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black women, eighteenth and nineteenth-century abolitionist and feminist letters and poetry, newspapers, court documents, anti-slavery society reports, and mutual aid society reports that demonstrate the extent of the work that Black people did throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to liberate themselves from slavery and all other forms of oppression. *Tried as By Fire* is primarily concerned with

the experiences of free(d) and freeborn Christian women of African descent, but calling some people free implies that the opposite might also be true. Freedom was and is always a spectrum of possibilities and impossibilities. Therefore, *Tried as By Fire* explores freedom's limits and how abolitionist theologians consistently pushed those limits. *Tried as By Fire* is not the only historical study of nineteenth-century Black women abolitionists, however, it is the first to use Black feminist and womanist archival methods to explore the political theology of Black women abolitionists.

Tried as by Fire intervenes into four fields of study. Its primary intervention is into a field I describe as (un)freedom studies. Although (un)freedom studies is an atypical term to describe scholarship about slavery and its long afterlife in the United States, I argue that (un)freedom studies is a field into which scholars of African American History and African American cultural studies necessarily intervene because freedom is a status that has never been fixed or certain for African diasporic peoples, and especially not for African diasporic women. While the original research questions of this project were invested in telling a story about free Black women, the reality is that as Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has stated in her now definitive work on Black feminist epistemologies, "the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another."³⁰ To arrive at an understanding of what freedom means to Black women requires constant engagement with what captivity has meant. Black women's intellectual productions begin from the realities of oppression, but Black feminist thought allows Black women to move beyond oppression to live artfully. The secondary field into which *Tried as By Fire* intervenes is Black Women's History. While *Tried as By Fire* borrows from the methodological frameworks of Black women's historians generally, this project exists primarily at the intersection of Black Women's History and American Christian Women's History from the colonial era until the turn of the twentieth century. By centering nineteenth-century Black Christian women as the creators of a

theological framework, I reimagine the place of Black Christian women within American Religious History.

The third field into which *Tried as by Fire* intervenes is literary studies. Specifically, this project contributes to work on African American women's literature. This project utilizes the close reading methods that scholars in this subfield have created and offers new ways of closely reading Black women's writing through the lens of Black feminist and womanist thought. Finally, *Tried as by Fire* intervenes into the fields of Black feminist cultural theory and womanist ethics. Under the umbrella of Black feminist cultural theory, I include recent work in Black trans (or trans*) feminism. While there are differences in the origin stories and methodologies of Black feminism and womanism, in *Tried as by Fire* I bring them together because both fields theorize based on the particular experiences of Black women's lives. Both disciplines decenter the white masculine (and white feminist) dominance in their fields and present new theories that are only possible when we place Black women (and Black futurity more broadly) at the center of our analysis. The inclusion of Black trans* feminist thought recognizes the failure of the category of woman as it has been imagined in the modern liberal world. In April of 2022, as I completed this project, *The Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (GLQ) released a special issue called "Queer Fire: Liberation and Abolition." The special issue treated prison abolition as a project of queer liberation and queer liberation as an abolitionist project. The fire that Black abolitionist theologians set is intimately connected to the Black trans* fire which has always been part of Black social and political life. Both fires demand the end of the world that is and the beginning of a world where the particularity of Black women's freedom will liberate all people. Therefore, this project thinks capaciously about Black womanhood as the word "woman" was never one that was intended to protect Black women. The use of these frameworks to complete this project was urgent because this project only exists because of the refusal of generations of Black Christian women in the United States to allow themselves and their ideas to be forgotten.

(Un)Freedom Studies

Tried as by Fire explores slavery and its long afterlife, which began in the early 1780s when Pennsylvania became the first of the United States to legalize gradual abolition and Massachusetts became the first state to abolish slavery altogether. Although these states were nominally anti-slavery, their white citizens continued to benefit financially from the slave trade and maintained close social connections with slaveholders. Thus, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts inaugurated what would become what scholar Saidiya Hartman has described as slavery's long afterlife, which is defined by "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."³¹ As this project will demonstrate, these were the circumstances that most free(d) people of African descent faced at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Tried as By Fire questions the concept of freedom because freedom is an idea to which we arrive only through the lens of the crisis of unfreedom. In the Americas, freedom has historically been an impossibility for Black persons. The possibility of freedom for Black persons therefore is only to be found by either reading traditional archival sources for "contrary purposes" as Saidiya Hartman does in her monograph *Scenes of Subjection* or by looking to a set of materials that might not exist in official archives. Feminist cultural theorist Lisa Lowe has described these unofficial archives as "alternative archives." Lowe defines alternative archives as "cultural practices, artifacts, or ephemera of African American social life . . . black expressive arts of poetry, dance, visual culture, or music—that provide other versions of personhood and society, history and justice, and pleasure and possibility."³² While Black Americans have not collectively achieved the fullness of freedom as it is defined in the American liberal imagination, *Tried as by Fire* points to ways that nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians reimagined what freedom could be. Nineteenth-century Black women's political visions demanded a rethinking of the category of freedom.

The field of (un)freedom studies brings together the generative work of slavery studies scholars who have focused on Black enslaved women's experiences and scholars who have studied the experiences of free Black women as the experiences of these groups converge, overlap, and diverge in revelatory ways. The field of Black women and slavery begins with the pioneering scholarship of Angela Y. Davis and Deborah Gray White, both of whom revolutionized academic ideas about "the" Black enslaved experience by insisting that Black women played key and distinct roles from Black men in the community of enslaved people. Their scholarly contributions laid the groundwork for the work of Brenda E. Stevenson, Jennifer Morgan, Stephanie M.H. Camp, and most recently Jessica Marie Johnson.³³ Today, the field has broadened to include scholarship on sexuality and slavery.³⁴ This more recent work helpfully invites scholars to consider the enslaved as full persons who experienced pleasure, intimacy, and perhaps even love. As *Tried as By Fire* frames abolitionist theology as an ideology that depends on Black feminist practices of care and love, recent scholarly attention to intimacy makes it possible to ask new questions about enslaved and free Black women's experiences.

The field of free Black women's studies is more challenging to track than the field of Black enslaved women's history because Black women's experiences in enslavement are intertwined with their experiences as free and quasi-free people. The 2004 edited volume *Beyond Bondage* was the first to explore the experiences of "women of color who were not, strictly speaking, held in full legal bondage, or who did not consider themselves to be so bound, in the slave societies of the Americas."³⁵ David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine's simultaneously broad and narrow definition of these women's status points to the precarity of the lives of women of African descent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Freedom for them was defined as not being in "full legal bondage." However, more tellingly, Gaspar and Hine indicate that free women are those who do not consider themselves to be bound. (Un)freedom studies recognizes that freedom is both a legal status and an ideological, and perhaps even imaginative, space. Put differently, one can be unfree in the legal sense but choose to live

according to their own desires because they have decided in their minds that they are not bound by anyone. The spectrum of beliefs about freedom means that even free Black women in the nineteenth century were left to wrestle with the complications, contradictions, and failures of freedom. The liminality of freedom for Black women in the United States has been explored by many scholars, however *Tried as by Fire* is primarily in conversation with the scholarly work of historians Thavolia Glymph, Wilma King, Erica Armstrong Dunbar, and Tera Hunter.³⁶

Black Women's History

To write Black women's history is to write a history of the ephemeral, the unseen, and the future possibilities that are yet to be realized. *Tried as by Fire* takes up the inventive methodologies of Black women's historians who have, to borrow historian Marisa Fuentes' language, read *along the bias grain* thereby expanding the "legibility of . . . archival documents"³⁷ that overlook Black women, both free and enslaved.³⁸ While this project intervenes into the field of Black women's history generally, it specifically seeks to unsettle the category of "American religion" through a study of the contributions that nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians made to American religious history. The framework deployed in this project to reconsider Black women's contributions to American religion is indebted to American religious historian Catherine Brekus' pioneering work in her monograph *Strangers and Pilgrims* which explored the rich history of women's preaching in the United States, from 1740 until 1845.³⁹ Her argument that these women wrote and preached as though they knew they would one day be forgotten is one that has proven true in my research. As Brekus found, I have also discovered that while preaching women might have been viewed as eccentric radicals on the fringes of American Evangelical Christianity, they made remarkable contributions to the production of Evangelical Christian theology in the early Republic and well into the nineteenth century. Women's preaching has always been part of the American Christian story. Their words and witness changed the hearts and

minds of many. *Tried as By Fire* asserts that abolitionist theologian's political demands produced possibilities for female preachers that had not previously existed.

Because of an assumption which Thomas Jefferson first made of the essential religiosity of women of African descent in the United States, the history of Black women's religious lives is a field that remains understudied. As American religious historian Judith Weisenfeld has framed it, there has been voluminous scholarship about the institution of the Black church, a phrase that has become an umbrella term used to describe all historically Black denominations. Weisenfeld finds that such studies "exclude women's experiences because they do not fully appreciate the range of approaches that African-American women have taken to participate as agents in their own religious lives and the in the religious lives of their communities."⁴⁰ Weisenfeld's critique is insightful, but the challenge for scholars who wish to study Black women's religious history is how, when stepping away from institutional reports to still discover truths about Black women's spiritual lives. This work requires a more capacious understanding of what it means to be a religious person and to contribute to religious life as an un-ordained minister.

Scholars including Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Ula Taylor, and Valerie Cooper have responded to this challenge in their work. Each of these scholars offers methodologies that provide new insights about how to study Black women's religious lives. Higginbotham's study of the early twentieth-century women's movement centers Black Baptist women who, in 1900, formed an "alternate sphere of deliberation within the larger denominational context of the National Baptist Convention."⁴¹ Their Women's Convention was an auxiliary group of their denomination from which they could collectively perform activist work to condemn the sexism and racism that dominated early twentieth-century America both within and outside of religious organizations. Higginbotham's focus on Black women's work within their denomination points to the distinctive ways that Black women resisted white supremacy and sexism. Although the church refused to acknowledge women as formal

leaders, they understood their authority and that they could offer leadership for their religious group and their race because of their large numbers within the church. As *Tried as By Fire* will demonstrate, they used the church for contrary purposes to become meaningful and recognized community leaders by the turn of the twentieth century.

In her monograph on women in the Nation of Islam, Ula Taylor employs a similar approach to Higginbotham's. Although the Nation of Islam is condemned by many people who are outside of the faith as a patriarchal religion, Taylor concludes that, much like Black women's lives, the Nation of Islam is a site of contradictions. She finds that the "Nation of Islam becomes a vehicle to understand how freedom and prosperity comingle around patriarchy" by exploring the lives of Black women who joined the Nation of Islam between 1930 and 1975. Unlike other Black nation-building movements, Taylor found that the Nation of Islam became a space for women who had been disrespected, abused, and struggled to find their place in American society. Therefore, she argues that the Nation of Islam is a place that Black women turned to for refuge.⁴² Black women's participation in restrictive Black-male led religious spaces reveals two things. First, despite Black men's failure to recognize and support Black women's leadership, Black women have historically chosen racial solidarity with Black men over gender solidarity with white women. Second, despite their shortcomings, religious spaces have historically been places where Black women could dream of new futures. While religion in the United States has historically failed to live up to spirituality's radical potential, Black women have insisted that without a rich moral life, which they often constructed using religious principles, there can be no ethical political life.

Valerie Cooper took an unusual approach in her biographical monograph about abolitionist Maria W. Stewart. Because the documents about Stewart's life beyond her abolitionist speeches in antebellum Boston are scant, Cooper chose to focus on Stewart's use of the Bible in her speeches because Stewart used the Bible to underscore her political arguments. Therefore, she combined

historical analysis, literary theory, and biblical exegesis to argue that it is through her use of the Christian Scriptures that we learn more about who Stewart was.⁴³ Higginbotham, Taylor, and Cooper's methodologies show that there is much to be said about Black women's religious history if we possess the theoretical lenses that allow us to see it. Their practice of reading history differently in light of Black women's often marginalized experiences in the United States aligns with historian Elsa Barkley Brown's metaphor for studying Black women's history. She describes the work of Black women's historians as being like that of African American quilters who learn to find their symmetry through diversity. Barkley argues that our approach to Black women's history must be polyrhythmic and nonsymmetrical.⁴⁴ Borrowing the language of feminist scholar Bettina Aptheker, Barkley Brown urges historians to "pivot the center" of our historical inquiry.⁴⁵ Black women's history, and especially Black women's religious history requires defamiliarization of the familiar.

Nineteenth-Century Literary Studies

While the methodologies Black women's historians utilize have allowed even familiar archival texts that seemed to say nothing about Black women's experiences to speak new truths about Black women's lives, the work of literary theorists who study nineteenth-century Black women's writing have provided needed insight into how the women intervened into nineteenth-century discourse culture. While interest in Black women's literature has boomed in the past twenty years, some of the early work about nineteenth-century Black women writers has been most influential in framing the arguments made in this project.

In his 1986 project *Sisters of the Spirit*, William L. Andrews provides edited versions of three Black women's spiritual autobiographies. These women were Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia A. J. Foote. I discuss Lee and Elaw's spiritual autobiographies in *Tried as By Fire*. In the introduction to *Sisters of the Spirit*, Andrews writes that the earliest forms of autobiography in African American literature were conversion and captivity narratives that first appeared in England and the United States

in the late-eighteenth century. He explained that the structure of these autobiographical narratives, which predated the fugitive slave narratives, began when a person recognized their true identity unfettered by their sins or by the sin of slavery. Through their recognition of their sin and movement away from it, they attained what Andrews calls “spiritual as well as secular freedom.” The genre of the Black spiritual autobiography was taken up by Black men and women alike in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As spiritual autobiographers, women such as Elaw and Lee allowed themselves to share about more than only their secular lives. The power of the spiritual autobiographical genre is its ability to allow the author to make meaning of the small details of their lives and to demonstrate that their journey was one not only of historical change but also of what Andrews calls psychological reorientation.⁴⁶ While archival documents offer only so much about the everyday details of nineteenth-century Black women’s lives, a close reading of Lee and Elaw’s spiritual autobiographies provides an opportunity to examine the psyche of Black women whose lives were shaped by racial and gender terror and provides some insight into how they sustained themselves and built social lives.

In Marilyn Richardson’s 1987 project, *America’s First Black Woman Political Writer*, and Joycelyn Moody’s 2001 project, *Sentimental Confessions*, both scholars provide generative insights as literary scholars into Maria W. Stewart’s political writings. As I have indicated in the preceding section, Stewart’s antebellum-era political work shook the American political and theological imagination as she was one of the first women of African descent to produce a systematic Biblical Black feminist theoretical framework. Richardson framed Stewart’s words as a continuation of what scholar Perry Miller called the Puritan Jeremiad. Richardson described Stewart’s writing as a Black jeremiad which warned white Americans of the judgement that was coming because of slavery. Richardson framed Stewart’s public speeches during her years in Boston as “political sermons” in “secular forums.” Richardson explained that although Stewart believed people in her community were turning away

from their faith, she “announced and elaborated upon a celebratory vision of redemptive progress toward independence of body and spirit.”⁴⁷

Moody helpfully frames Stewart in relationship to her style of moral speaking or political preaching, and in relationship to women’s rhetoric in the nineteenth century. Moody points to Stewart’s refusals to reveal much about her personal life as a performance of the humility that all nineteenth-century women were urged to possess. Although she was a Black woman who never birthed children, Stewart un-self-consciously situated herself as a Biblical Republican mother. Moody argued that Stewart “Black, female, proud, and public, rhetorically exploits the ideology of true womanhood and the forces that would restrict her were it not for the forces’ conflicting race, class, and gender codes.”⁴⁸ Stewart’s public performances of protection, humility, and privacy point to the contradictions of nineteenth-century Black womanhood. For Black women, the category of “woman” did not protect them. They had no privacy. In response to a lack of privacy, they refused to divulge aspects of their lives. However, because these moments were not documented, today’s scholars are limited in what we can know about nineteenth-century Black women’s lives.

The problem of a lack of privacy for Black women is one Carla L. Peterson takes up in her 1995 monograph *Doers of the Word* about Black woman public speakers and essayists in the North. Peterson argues that Black women entered public civic debate by “consciously adopting a self-marginalization that became superimposed upon the already ascribed oppressions of race and gender and that paradoxically allowed empowerment.” They entered a liminal space that Peterson asserts functioned to allow them to have greater self-expression and the potential to effect change in society.⁴⁹ The idea that nineteenth-century Black women essayists and speakers entered the public sphere as conscious adopters of self-marginalization is one that cultural theorist Uri McMillan also considers in his monograph *Embodied Avatars* as he argues that Black women have historically “performed objecthood” to circumvent prescribed limitations on Black women in the public sphere.⁵⁰ *Tried as by*

Fire refuses to treat Black women intellectuals as mere victims of circumstance and instead tracks how they used the devastating social construction of Black womanhood which was meant to destroy them to produce a set of social possibilities that would have been impossible had they belonged to any other group. By so doing, they invented a distinctively American abolitionist political theory which could not have existed without their intervention.

Black Feminist and Womanist Theoretical Frameworks

Tried as by Fire is a Black feminist intellectual history of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black women abolitionists and their contributions to social and political life in their time. It also reflects upon the legacy of their actions and the implications their efforts have for our times. Although this project tells a story about Black women's activism in the past, it is also conscious of the role of power in the way that story is told as history is about "both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.'"⁵¹ The approach this project takes to history follows the lead of Black feminist theorist C. Riley Snorton who has described his monograph on the racial history of trans identity as "not a history per se so much as it is a set of political propositions, theories of history, and writerly experiments."⁵² Because of my particular set of research questions, the failure of the archive to produce narratives of Black Christian women in nineteenth-century America who lived free, and the realities of an international pandemic, *Tried as By Fire* is a set of theoretical propositions about Black women's history and how Black women's abolitionist visions have shaped and will continue to shape human life. The subjects of this project are contained in the past, but they are also present with us now, especially when we engage with them as political theorists.

Tried as by Fire is grounded in eighteenth and nineteenth-century archival materials. Although this is a historical project, it contributes to the ongoing activist work of Black feminists and womanists by demonstrating how, for Black women, the past is intimately intertwined with the present. To that

end, *Tried as by Fire* engages with Black feminist cultural theory, Black feminist archival theory, womanist social ethics, queer and trans of color critique, literary theory, and Biblical scholarship to situate abolitionist theologians as the creators of a Black feminist approach to Biblical womanhood which historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham proposes continued into the twentieth century. Black feminist approaches to Biblical womanhood stand to shift our understandings of the meaning of religion and womanhood in United States history.

Like other scholars who are interested in the relationship between religion and Black women's identities in the United States, I return often to Alice Walker's four-part definition of the word "womanist" from her 1983 book of non-fiction essays, *In Search of Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. In short, her definition of the word defined womanists as Black feminists or feminists of color who were audacious and willful. She defined womanists also as women who loved other women, whether sexually or non-sexually. Womanists are committed to survival, thriving, and communalism. She defined womanists as lovers of all things, including themselves. She concluded by defining the womanist through her relationship to feminists, "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."⁵³ Her definition framed Black feminism and womanism not as ideologies that are derivative of hegemonic feminism, but rather as ideologies that must be so that hegemonic feminism could also be. She also saw Black feminism and womanism as radically inclusive ideologies that had space for all non-white women, women who were not heterosexual, people who transcended the gender binary, people of all body shapes and sizes, and people who loved openly and radically. While this open definition threatens to include everyone therefore making the category obsolete, these are ideologies that inspire new ways of being that upend colonial social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality.

Although she does not define the word "womanist" in her fictional writings, my mind is also animated by the ways that Alice Walker explores theology, Blackness, sexuality, and womanhood in her 1982 epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*. Like other scholars whose work is at the intersection of

Black feminist theory and womanist social ethics, my work is greatly influenced by Walker's ways of theorizing her way through Black women's lived experiences. As Christian social ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas has posited, "womanists and Black feminists have long contended that Black women's writings should not be regarded merely as fiction—that is, art for art's sake—but rather as a researched response to Black women's socio-ethical experiences in the face of oppression."⁵⁴ Black feminist and womanist theorizations both proceed from the perspective that Black women desire to tell the truth, even in the speculative and artistic genres. For the Black feminist, Black women's speculations and hopes are indeed a statement of fact, and in *Tried as By Fire*, I treat Black women's speculations, desires, and hopes as statement of fact, or at least of statements of what must become fact.

As literary theorist Hazel Carby has demonstrated in her work on late-nineteenth-century Black women writers, although the 1980s represented a sort of renaissance in the "contemporary discovery and recognition of Black women by the corporate world of academia, publishing, and Hollywood," perhaps nineteenth-century Black women, for whom every move to resist white supremacy could end in death, represent a "more politically resonant renaissance." Their political writings allow us to consider the cultural politics of Black women in new ways.⁵⁵ Carby's caution in the late 1980s about being caught in the notion of a "Black women's renaissance" continues to be a contradiction for contemporary Black feminist scholars as the post-2020 moment offers a new sort of cultural currency for "work about Black women" with no new concern for how to ensure Black women have the resources to live full lives.

Tried as by Fire is concerned with how to locate Black women's interiority using a spotty archival record in which Black women primarily emerge through their experiences with either Black male authority or white supremacist authority. As the preceding pages have demonstrated, Black women's historians and literary theorists offer productive methodologies that have influenced this project. However, *Tried as By Fire* is invested in contributing to the intersection of Black feminist and womanist

thought, as it has developed through the generative new ideas offered by Black women writers like Alice Walker. Among womanists, this genealogy begins with Katie Cannon, a religious studies scholar who proposed a methodology that rethought Christian social ethics through the distinctive lens of Black women's experiences.⁵⁶ Cannon's ways of thinking through religion, race, and gender together have reshaped what is possible for feminist scholars within the religious studies academy, but scholars have only rarely womanist approaches to the hegemonic white supremacist methods that pervade all areas of the academy outside of religious studies.

In *Tried as By Fire*, I assert that Black feminism and womanism are linked ideologies. Walker defined a womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color. Therefore, I propose that Black feminism and womanism must be thought together as methods that allow Black women's lived experiences and the human desire to find community and wholeness in the space that Biblical scholar Dolores Williams has aptly described as the proverbial wilderness.⁵⁷ Black feminism and womanism allow us to rethink epistemologies that promise marginalized people nothing but social death. Black feminism and womanism point to the radical possibilities of what Black feminist cultural theorist Terrion Williamson has described as Black social life. Williamson has called Black social life the "eschewal and critique of the affliction of privilege that resides in the preoccupation with the individual self."⁵⁸ Williamson's argument builds on those of generations of Black feminist and womanist thinkers who have understood Blackness, not as a site of death, but as a site of radical future possibilities. Blackness, and Black womanhood specifically, find their meaning in our collectivity.

Review of Chapters

Tried as by Fire is a five-chapter project that examines how abolitionist theologians redefined the terms of Evangelical Christianity to create a new set of social and political possibilities for Black women. Their efforts produced the conditions that allowed Black women to become definitive leaders in Black communities (especially in Black Christian communities) by the turn of the twentieth century.

The chapters proceed thematically exploring ideas including the relationship between spirituality and the flesh for Black women, approaches to reading archival materials that silence Black women, the temporality of freedom for Black women, the Black feminist praxis of care, Black feminist approaches to memory and remembering, nineteenth-century Black feminist epistemologies, proto-womanist approaches to kinship, and the connection between Biblical feminist and radical abolitionist ideologies.

Chapter one offers a definition of proto-Black feminist theology through the lens of antebellum preacher Jarena Lee. In 1819, Lee became the first woman authorized by Rev. Richard Allen to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She self-published her spiritual autobiography, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee,” in Philadelphia in 1836. The autobiography’s epigraph, from the Hebrew Bible book of Joel, chapter 2, verse 28, declared that God had poured out God’s Spirit on flesh. That chapter uses archival research and a close reading practice to consider Jarena Lee’s proto-Black feminist theology of the flesh. By so doing, this chapter offers insight into where and how Black Christian women’s theological ideas intervened into the prevailing theological perspectives in the colonial and antebellum eras. Black women like Lee were Evangelical Christians, but their deeply embodied approach to Evangelicalism which centered human flesh, including Black women’s flesh, redefined what it meant to be a Christian in the United States.

Chapter two examines Black women’s contributions to the abolitionist movement from 1831 to 1860 by taking up Marisa Fuentes’ method of reading archival materials along the bias grain to make Black women’s lives more legible within the archival record. The records of Black women’s literary and mutual aid groups when read alongside the records of Female Anti-Slavery Societies in Philadelphia, Boston, and Bristol, England, reveal that in the height of slavery in the United States, Black women claimed freedom for themselves. Some of the most revolutionary actions were undertaken by unmarried, childless, Black teenage girls who, because they expanded the idea of femininity through their ability to do hard labor and their sexual desirability in the eyes of white

slaveholders demonstrated that Black teenage girls have always represented excess in the Americas. Their lives have always been an extension of that of Phillis (Wheatley), both the valueless commodity forced to labor for the nation-state without compensation and the highly valued object that is essential to state-making. The few extant writings we find from free Black women and girls in the North from 1831 to 1865 reveal that they were the architects of a freedom which they believed could not wait on a world that was to come. Instead, they demanded must happen in the here and now.

Chapter three explores proto-Black feminist intellectual Maria W. Miller Stewart's life through the lens of the friendships that animated her political and personal life. Stewart was a well-known Black activist who is best known as the first United States-born woman of any race to lecture before a mixed-gender audience in American history. She spoke about morality, abolition, and Black women's rights. After leaving Boston in 1835 she taught in New York and throughout the Upper South. Many scholars have revisited Stewart's writings and her experiences as a young activist in Boston. Very few have focused on her final decades as a struggling Episcopalian schoolteacher in Washington, D.C. She struggled primarily because as when her husband died in 1829, she was defrauded of what should have been a sizeable pension from his service in the War of 1812. This chapter proposes that Black Americans at the end of the nineteenth century produced the conditions for Black futurity through the practice of re-membering, that is, putting together the fractured pieces of each other's past to achieve justice for antebellum-era wrongs.

Chapter four, like chapter two, examines the transnational nature of abolitionist, feminist, and Christian activism in the nineteenth century through the example of itinerant Christian minister Zilpha Elaw. Chapter four provides a close reading of Elaw's spiritual autobiography, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, and Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw," which she self-published in 1846 in London. Although she was born outside of Philadelphia, Elaw felt called to take her itinerant ministry across the Atlantic Ocean. Like other free(d) Black Americans, she found an

interested audience for her controversial public speaking and writing career in England. Elaw's autobiographical writing about her ministry and transnational travels provide substantial information about the tenuous nature of motherhood and sisterhood for free-born nineteenth-century Black women in the urban north. Elaw's praxis, alongside her theories about religion and sexuality, offer a window into a proto-womanist practice of rethinking heteronormative approaches to kinship.

Finally, in chapter five, I explore Black women's contributions to the radical abolitionist tradition through the example of Jane Johnson, an enslaved mother of two from Virginia who in 1855, with the help of members of Philadelphia's abolitionist community walked away from her enslaver while he transported her through the region. Johnson's story appears in a report of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia as is told through the lens of a white man who was said to have saved her. I find Johnson's story again in Philadelphia District Court records. Her owner, who at the time was the United States' Foreign Minister to Nicaragua, urged the court to demand that the white man who had helped liberate her and her sons return them to his possession. Using the tools of Black feminist cultural theorists, I read Johnson's story anew as she might have experienced it to reveal that throughout the nineteenth century Black women and girls put their bodies on the line to liberate themselves and the people they loved from captivity. Their lives became a sacred text that demanded the end of slavery and all forms of captivity.

As a final methodological note, this project is about nineteenth-century Black Christian women. These women were a product of their time and often used masculine language to describe God. In *Tried as by Fire*, I avoid using the same masculine language that nineteenth-century actors (and many people today) use to describe God. As a Black feminist and womanist, I propose that many nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians would have imagined the Divine to be excessive of socially constructed gender categories. Therefore, I replace masculine language with God.

Tried as by Fire contends that nineteenth-century Black women's religious discourse was political discourse. Their discourse is best described as abolitionist theology. A close reading of their theological writings, speeches, and public witness allows us to rethink the origin story of feminism in the United States. More importantly, it allows a critical reexamination of the meaning of womanhood during the long nineteenth century. A close examination of these women's lives reveals that neither Biblical principles nor gender conventions prevented nineteenth-century women from claiming their rights. As women who were marginalized because of their race and gender, Black women took unique risks when they publicly resisted oppression. They openly resisted anyway. The abolitionist principles of nineteenth-century proto-Black feminists and womanists provide wisdom that is instructive in our current political moment. Their politics reveal that freedom is for the many, not for the few.

¹ Maria W. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 73-74.

² See Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7.

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Chapter 1

Spirited Flesh: Antebellum Proto-Black Feminist Theology

“For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? Seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man.” -Jarena Lee, 1836

The story of women of African descent in the United States is about their becoming mythologized figures who sought to disprove the myths about themselves because those myths were used to justify their deaths. Because of the perverse ways that Christianity developed in Early America, Black women in the Americas have historically struggled to defend their flesh, even against those who claimed to follow the way of Jesus. Their Black flesh and their Christian faith were seen as juxtaposed identities—one must overcome the other. Their flesh was in and of itself understood to be a theological problem.¹ Black women abolitionist theologians broke from the mythologies through their movements, and through their refusal to move. They believed their Black female flesh was not a thing to be overcome, but rather a thing to be honored. They believed their Black female flesh equipped them to offer a new perspective about Christian theology.

Their reimagining of Black female flesh is demonstrated nowhere more plainly than in the itinerant preaching ministries of Black women including Elizabeth, Sojourner Truth, Zilpha Elaw, and Jarena Lee, who is the subject of this chapter. These abolitionist theologians protested the white supremacist abuse they endured using spiritual language. By so doing, they remade the terms and terrain of the early American Evangelical Christian theological perspectives that were premised on the idea that God created some persons to occupy lower social standings than others. Indeed, each of these women was converted to the Christian faith, and for them conversion required a complete change in actions. Jarena Lee articulated a political theology that stated that God converted her soul and called her to ministry not in spite of her Black womanhood, but rather because those who heard her preach believed “what God would say by his poor coloured female instrument.”² It was in seeing

God's love made manifest through Black women who were so degraded in the United States that others could also be changed. The radical proposition that proto-Black feminist abolitionist theologians made was that Black female flesh was precious, honorable, and that their flesh itself held the power to remake worlds.

As this chapter will demonstrate, beginning in the Revolutionary Era, Black women became increasingly discontented with the failed promises of the early republic. They responded to their disenchantment by defying the gender and racial norms of their time. As cultural theorist Jayna Brown has succinctly articulated their gender politics, they were not necessarily seeking distance from their womanhood. Rather, they wanted to disavow “ideas of womanhood and sexuality under patriarchy.”³ Black woman abolitionist theologians were not ashamed to be women, in fact, many of them celebrated their womanhood and sought to deploy it to make a powerful impact. What shamed them was how the social construction of womanhood in the United States demeaned them as Black women when they were sure that, as Jarena Lee posited in the epigraph to this chapter, “the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man.” With the understanding that their womanhood and Blackness did not make them less than anyone else, they situated themselves as public political leaders, often using the religious language that was commonplace in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century United States.⁴ These abolitionist theologians were rooted in not only their African diasporic traditions but also to their Creolized identities as people born in the United States who demanded that the young nation state live up to its theistic promises. Lee's autobiography indicates that she read the words of the Christian Scriptures for herself, and she was determined that the same promises they offered to white masculine persons were also available to her. She and other Black Christian women possessed a proto-Black feminist desire that all ideologies that justified treating them as less than human be destroyed and that a more Godly vision be created in their stead.

Preacher Jarena Lee was called to preach the Christian Gospel around 1809, according to her recollections in her spiritual autobiography. In her self-published spiritual autobiography, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady,” which she self-published and printed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1836, Lee recounted the story of her call to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. She began her autobiography with an epigraph from the book of Joel chapter two, verse twenty-eight. The verse says, “And it shall come to pass . . . that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons, and your *daughters* [emphasis in original text] shall prophesy.”⁵ Lee’s foregrounding of this quote from Joel frames her autobiography as a proto-Black feminist theology of the flesh. She wanted her readers to understand her spiritual journey through the lens of her political demand that women, including Black women, be included within a Christian theological liberation framework.

Lee’s evocation of Joel’s words indicates the depth of her Scriptural engagement and the clarity of her theological vision. Most interpreters date the Hebrew Bible book of Joel to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. They frequently describe Joel as a proto-apocalyptic book because it correlates natural and human events. That said, the book of Joel is not about the so-called end times. Rather, the metaphorical language the author deploys evokes the feeling of the transitions between seasons. In both ancient and modern-day Israel, dry desert wind marks the change between the dry summer and the rainy, winter seasons. The author of Joel deploys the metaphor to show that the divine will emerge to deliver those who suffer through the pestilence, those who cry out as they are eaten by locusts, devoured by fire, and wandering through wilderness on days of darkness and gloom.⁶ The days of change that the prophet foretold would lead to social upheavals at every level, and God would care for the faithful during the times of change. The prophet foretold that when God began to participate in the work of setting things right, they would pour out their spirit on all humans, regardless of their social standing.

It is this image, of a God who intervenes in the here and now, raining down a holy wind that will change all people that Jarena Lee used as the epigraph of her spiritual autobiography. This passage, which evokes the urgency of change and a Divine promise to be present during change indicates that proto-Black feminist abolitionist theology demands that everything change. However, this theology is not about creating the end of time, rather it is about a final destruction of unjust system and the inauguration of a new world. Abolitionist theologians worked to create conditions that would be sustainable for the most people and for the longest time.

The use of the passage from Joel as an epigraph to her spiritual autobiography is a powerful statement from a woman of African descent who was born on February 11, 1783 in Cape May, New Jersey, and who spent her childhood from the age of seven working as a servant for a man she calls “Mr. Sharp,” in a place sixty miles away from the place of her birth.⁷ Lee’s choice to include these particular words from Joel as an epigraph reflects that for her, conversion was a collective experience. She was going to be “saved,” and she was determined to bring other people of all races and genders with her on her salvation journey. In fact, it was her low social standing in antebellum America that she argued made her a particularly effective Christian minister.⁸ She believed that when the words of salvation emerged from the lips of a poor woman of African descent, it gave those who had more societal power assurance that God also cared intimately for them.

Jarena Lee, a freeborn woman, is believed to be the second woman of African descent in the United States to preach publicly. Lee was also the first woman who was officially sanctioned to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The first woman of African descent who is believed to have preached publicly in the United States was Elizabeth (an evangelist known only by her first name who was born into slavery in Maryland in 1766).⁹ Women of European descent had begun to publicly proclaim the Word of God beginning with Anne Hutchinson in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s. Their actions were controversial and were condemned by many in their

community. However, for women of African descent to physically place themselves in the public square as bearers of knowledge was a doubly controversial political act. For Jarena Lee to take on the words of the prophet Joel and apply them to herself as a woman of African descent living in the United States was for her to radically reorient the Christian order in the United States. Through her preaching and her writing, Lee declared that the Spirit of God was poured out on all human flesh, including the flesh of women of African descent. She asserted that the Spiritual outpouring compelled her to act. The kinds of Black theology that developed in the antebellum United States cannot be disentangled from the ongoing threat to the Black body in the United States.

This chapter explores the deeply embodied proto-Black feminist theological epistemologies that developed in the late-eighteenth century because of the failures of the Declaration of Independence to offer freedom for all. The Declaration of Independence produced a category crisis in the new nation-state as Americans of all social statuses wrestled with what it meant to be free people living in a nation-state that was founded on liberal notions of freedom. The authors of the document failed to consider what it meant for the landless, enslaved, and female-bodied people its calls for freedom from tyranny excluded. Calls for freedom from tyranny elsewhere was a reminder that freedom was a status that was always yet to be realized. The fifty-six landholding men from the British colonies in the nascent nation-state they called the thirteen United States of America who penned the Declaration of Independence used it to declare their displeasure with the tyranny of Great Britain's king. As British subjects living in Great Britain's thirteen North American colonies, they asserted that governments rule at the will of the people and that the people had the right to "alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government."¹⁰ This chapter engages with what we might learn if we understand the kinds of theological work that women of African descent did in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a respond to failure and profound disappointment.

For them, theology was the only response because the nation state used theology to justify its behavior.

Despite having been excluded from the group of people whom the federal government identified as having Creator-endowed inalienable rights, Jarena Lee declared that the Spirit of God was poured out on all flesh. She declared not only her right to be seen as human, but also the right of all people of African descent to be seen as human. Her writing declared that the Divine entered days of human-created darkness, poured out the Divine Spirit on all of humanity, and empowered them to dismantle the very systems they had created in favor of a new set of social possibilities. In the early nineteenth century, Lee joined a group of women of all races in the United States who advocated for their right to be heard on religious and secular topics alike.¹¹ Although the women's writings indicate that they were not necessarily aware of each other, they all understood the failed promises of the Early American Republic, and they presented their critiques by appropriating the language of the Christian Scriptures. They formed a discursive network of fictive kin and add complexity to what we know about feminist epistemologies in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America. Their proto-feminist approaches to Christianity reshape the way we think about women's political activism in early America. Since history happens by "irregular bursts of consciousness,"¹² learning more about their proto-feminist epistemologies can help contemporary feminist activists to have our own burst of consciousness about the spirited direction of our world-making work.

Jarena Lee and her contemporaries, abolitionist theologians who included Maria W. Stewart, Elizabeth (a preacher known only by her first name), Zilpha Elaw, and Sojourner Truth, achieved their independence through a proto-Black feminist or proto-womanist approach to Christian theology. They preached and taught whenever and wherever they could. They often went on speaking or preaching tours outside of newly constituted institutional Black churches because the institutional church failed to incorporate their voices. They traveled throughout the Northeastern

United States, into the Southeastern United States, and even transnationally (Jarena Lee preached in Canada and Zilpha Elaw preached in England). They were all deeply aware of the embodied nature of freedom. They performed freedom with their bodies even as they encountered the realities of constraint because of their race and gender.

Their writings represent epistemologies of race and gender that have yet to be thoroughly interrogated. While they wrote spiritual autobiographies in the sense that their writing was about their experience from being “sinners” to being saved by the grace of God, they departed from the individualist Puritan model. Jarena Lee’s spiritual autobiography begins with a lie she told to avoid doing work in a white woman’s household, but it ends with her providing evidence to mixed-race audiences that “coloured people had souls.”¹³ By the end of her autobiography, Lee learned to speak truth, not just about herself, but also about a whole community of people who had been called non-humans. Lee and other Black women who penned spiritual autobiographies believed collectively. Their commitment to collectivity is revelatory because it indicates that Black spirituality and Black approaches to abolition are not individual. Freedom was and is a collective experience. Abolitionist theologians’ writings rupture our understandings of American religious discourse in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, Black women’s history, American political discourse in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, and the history of revolt and resistance in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic World.

Women and Religion in Early American History

White female preachers, such as Ann Lee, Harriet Livermore, and Jemima Wilkinson, contributed to diversifying the theological perspectives offered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as religious historian Catherine Brekus demonstrated in her monograph *Strangers and Pilgrims*.¹⁴ Despite the work that scholars including Valerie Cooper, Joycelyn Moody, Carla Peterson, Wilma King, Martha Jones,¹⁵ and other historians and literary theorists have done on nineteenth-

century Black women, too little work has been done to mine their interior lives. They have too often been treated as exemplars of their race and gender with little regard to the long tradition of American Christianity to which they responded and the richness of the Black Christian tradition that emerged in the early twentieth century because of their contributions. Today their work is often dismissed and not seen as a significant contribution to the American Black feminist intellectual tradition, just as it was often treated as minor or irrelevant in their own time. Building on the generative scholarship in Black feminist history about intimate methods for reading even familiar archival texts¹⁶, this chapter turns to sermons and spiritual autobiographies to point to the ways that Black Christian women refused neoliberal notions of progress and individuality and instead framed even their personal lives and everyday intimacies as being part of a collective freedom struggle. This chapter argues that it is urgent to not only remember them and their work, but also to make visible their epistemologies of liberation, epistemologies that were intimately linked to the realities of life in their Black female flesh.

While the Black women abolitionist theologians of the early nineteenth century might not have been aware of their preaching predecessors, Lee, Livermore, Wilkinson, and others, their continuation of early feminist theological work indicates that women of all races and free and enslaved people of African descent in early America took up Western Christian theology and interpreted it for contrary purposes. For them, theology was not neutral. It took sides. There was a side of Christian theology that promoted the continuation of imperial authority on both sides of the Atlantic, and there was another side that was committed to dismantling empire. They knew which side they would take. Black women were convicted by the message of Christianity, but their sense of conviction led them to advocate for radical inclusion along lines of race and gender rather than exclusion. They used their sacred fire to convert people of European descent to a more egalitarian way of being. They sought to shake up Christian theology, and by so doing, to shake up early

American political thought. Their contributions to American theology and politics complicate the way we understand the work of the faithful in early America. The way they transformed both antebellum American Christianity and the nascent institutional Black Church are an undertheorized area of inquiry. As historian Bettye Collier-Thomas succinctly framed it in her work on African American women and religion, Black women “were not converted to God—rather, they converted God to themselves.”¹⁷ Even the women themselves understood that the idea that God might call them to preach would be unthinkable to others. When, five years after her conversion, God called Jarena Lee to preach, she “immediately replied aloud, ‘No one will believe me.’”¹⁸ From the start, Lee knew that the problem facing her Christian ministry was not God’s failure, but rather the failure of humans to believe Black women. The crisis of not being believed is a perennial problem for Black women that Black feminist epistemologies have worked to resolve.

Free and quasi-free Black women who were members of the first Black churches in the urban north were excluded from official leadership roles. Their exclusion from leadership within eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black churches provides a compelling case study into the mechanics of power in United States history. Although Black people of all genders created Black religious spaces as a respite from the racism that punctuated every aspect of their lives, and Black women comprised most of the membership of early Black churches, Black male leaders within Black churches became recognized religious authorities while Black women were left to do what ethnographer Judith Casselberry has described as “the labor of faith.”¹⁹ Black women made emerging Black churches into functional space that would ensure Black futurity. The practice of elevating educated Black men into formal leadership positions while Black women of all ages, social classes, and education levels lead informally has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as Religious Studies scholars including Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Marla Frederick, and Judith Casselberry have demonstrated in their work.²⁰

The extant writings of Jarena Lee, Elizabeth, Zilpha Elaw, Maria W. Stewart, and Sojourner Truth demonstrate that although many institutional Black churches rejected Black women as formal leaders, the failure of the institution to include them did not prevent them from speaking and from forming spiritual communities that served Black people. Their labors represent a Northern offshoot of the “slave religion,” that is the early ventures of Black Americans into Western Christian ways of relating, that historian Albert Raboteau famously described as the “invisible institution” of the antebellum South.²¹ Although Lee, Elizabeth, Elaw, Stewart, and Truth, primarily worked in the North, all five women lived in or traveled to the South for a time. Furthermore, most free and manumitted Black women shared intimate connections with enslaved people.²²

In the seventeenth century, the European colonists who traveled to the Eastern shore of what would be called the United States of America justified their conquest and the institution of racial slavery in the Americas using the language of Evangelical Christianity. The spread of distinctively British forms of Christian doctrine throughout the Atlantic World cannot be disentangled from the spread of the British Empire and the transatlantic slave trade. British forms of Evangelical Christianity were colonial interpretations of Christianity. However, this chapter traces how the Americans of African descent who were converted to European forms of Christianity learned to interpret their new religion in ways that empowered them. This chapter discusses how Jarena Lee’s notion of what I characterize as spirited flesh responded to the failures of Evangelical Christianity in Early America, the failures of the American Revolution, and the failures of Black Christian men to account for the gendered nature of liberation. The divides in Christian theological teachings in the colonies ironically produced the very freedoms they intended to destroy. The theistic promises of the Declaration of Independence stirred a spirit of liberation in Black Americans, enslaved and free, and of all genders.

Ignited by spirit of the Age of Revolutions, women of all races preached publicly throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They believed, as Jarena Lee did, that Jesus died to save men and women alike. This chapter asserts that the Revolution happened at every level of American society, and people of all genders and races were inspired to seek freedom. The Victorian ideologies that emerged in the nineteenth century sought to impress respectable norms that separated the private from the public, male from female, and Black from white. However, this chapter will show that Black people, and especially Black women, refused to allow the state to silence them. For them, if un-freedom was based on a “defect” of their bodies, their freedom would also emerge by and through an embodied political theology that demanded liberation at all levels of society. They could not be silent when freedom was at stake. They saw no separation between the public and private so long as the state made their bodies and intellect into political objects. They refused to be silenced.

When Jarena Lee was told that there was no place for her in church leadership, she returned to the Gospels to assert that “the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man.” She asserted that to neglect women’s call to leadership was to imply a lack of wholeness within God. She returned to the figure of Mary Magdalene as a justification for why women must preach Christianity, she argued that Mary was the first to share the news of Jesus’ resurrection which she described as “the very climax of Christianity.” She even rethought American Christian vocabulary by stating that the definition of the idea of preaching had shifted over time. She returned to the story of the Resurrection, and Mary and the disciples’ preaching about it, to articulate that one need not be learned to preach. Her evidence to support her claim were the “unlearned fisherman” who preached despite their lack of education.²³ Lee’s analysis urged American Christians to return to the Scriptures to see that Christianity would never have been preached had it not first been embodied by unlearned persons. In fact, perhaps it was those of lowly social standing who were best equipped to preach the gospel. Ironically, the converted used the convertors’ own theological systems against them.

Freedom and Evangelicalism in Early America

European settlers brought their distinctive understandings of European Christianity with them to the American colonies. As most of the settlers fled to the Northeastern region of the area called the United States today, they understood themselves both as people who were persecuted for their faith and people who did the bidding of their European churches in a new region of the world. They were Christians who existed in the liminal space between death and new possibilities. We cannot separate their complicated status as both persecuted British subjects and victorious settlers in colonized lands from the way they proselytized Indigenous and enslaved peoples. Early Christians in the United States understood themselves to be at risk because of the violence they endured because of their faith in England. They held the feeling of being victims of those who violated their religious freedoms in tension with their understanding of themselves as the bearers of salvation to non-Europeans who did not practice Christianity. As theologian Willie James Jennings has articulated it, the problem facing Christianity in the Western world since the colonial period has been its diseased social imagination. Jennings writes, “Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality. It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities.”²⁴ Christianity in the Americas developed, not as a faith that was flexible and adaptable, but rather as a faith that was static and commandeering.

There are many denominations of Christianity to which European settlers in the Americas belonged. Each of those denominations emerged through violence. At the turn of the sixteenth century as colonizing nations ventured toward the Americas, Catholic Christians were prominent in nation states including France and Spain, and colonizers from those nation states brought their religion with them. Catholic monarchs were responsible to the centralized Catholic Church in Rome.²⁵ The Church of England was founded in 1534 when the British monarch separated from the

Catholic Church. Like the Catholic Church, the Church of England was highly centralized. To separate oneself from the Church was to separate oneself from a sense of national identity.

Protestant churches also emerged in Western Europe during the sixteenth century. Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin issued a theological critique of the Catholic Church.

Although there are many Christian theological traditions, many abolitionist theologians emerged from the heady Congregational tradition, which began in sixteenth-century England as an offshoot of the theological reforms of the time. The Congregational tradition gave rise to the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist traditions that were common in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America.²⁶ The prominence of the Congregational tradition in seventeenth-century New England also led to the establishment of colleges to train the clergy. The first of these institutions was Harvard College, founded in 1636. All these traditions were, at the time, called Evangelical Protestantism.

Today, the word Evangelical is bogged down by the prominence of the “Religious Right,” a group whose members often describe themselves as Evangelical Christians. Today, the term typically describes Christians who believe that they have been spiritually reborn, emphasize a literal reading of the Bible, promote personal piety, and maintain a commitment to missions.²⁷ While that approach to Christianity aligns with the itinerant ministry of many abolitionist theologians, they deviated from this definition in their treatment of the Bible as a living text which could speak to the contemporary condition of Black women who, like Jarena Lee struggled as wives, mothers of often sickly children, and domestic servants. In some ways, the ministry of Lee and her contemporaries point to the long history of Evangelical Christianity.

The word Evangelical has been in use since the time of the Early Church in the first century CE. It derives from the Greek word *euangelion* which roughly translates to “gospel” or “good news.”

“Gospel” and “Evangelical” are words that are used frequently throughout the New Testament of the Christian Scriptures to describe the message of the historical Jesus. This “gospel” message, according to the earliest recorded sermon preached to the Early Church was that although the historical Jesus was crucified by the Roman Government, God freed Him from death. Early Christians believed that after He was saved from death, Jesus’ Spirit was poured out onto His followers so they too could teach, heal, and be saved from what Peter, an Early Church leader and disciple of Jesus, called a “corrupt generation.”²⁸ Jesus’ followers created early Christian communities which were fellowships that were dedicated to worship, studying, and mutual aid. This early Church vision is the one that many nineteenth-century Black abolitionist theologians strove to create. Their vision for the church differed from that of Christian leaders who were of European descent.

The British Christians who traveled to the region they called New England to live for a time in a space they described as a wilderness where they would reform “the assemblies according to the model set forth in the New Testament”²⁹ used the word Evangelical to describe their faith. They used their interpretation of the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection to make sense of their efforts. They believed that Jesus called them to share His message throughout the world, and conquest was one way they believed they could share it. They justified their conquests through their interpretations of the Christian Scriptures. Their understanding of their religion required them not only to serve God, but also to serve their nation. They left their nation for New England because they were persecuted for their attempts to reform the Church of England. However, even while they critiqued the idea of a state church, they remained loyal to their national (British) government. Therefore, Evangelical Christianity from the time it emerged in New England was raced and gendered as the religion of the white male settler. For anyone else to adopt the faith meant that they either adopted settler colonial frameworks as a Christian ethical framework or that they had to interpret the Scriptures for themselves to produce an alternative Christian ethical framework.

Evangelical Christianity in colonial America cannot be separated from state authority. Even as it protested the brutality of the state, it did nothing to openly critique the merits of the nation state itself. However, not every Evangelical Christian agreed to participate in a religion that worked to serve state power. From 1630-1861, ideas about race and gender were shifting as the Atlantic World underwent what scholars have described as the Age of Revolutions.³⁰ Simultaneously, American Christianity was developing, and women of all races and men of African descent felt called to preach. They, like their white male counterparts, were inspired by the Age of Revolutions and felt called to lead a militant revolution of the soul. When they attempted to gain leadership status in white-lead churches, they learned that they were excluded from religious leadership in much the way they were excluded from citizenship in the new nation-state. Despite the constant resistance to their exclusion, they continued to demand that their voices be heard. Furthermore, they demanded that the new nation-state make good on its promise to make them free.

In the British colonies, notions of race, gender, and state religion were beginning to be explored through speeches and sermons starting in the seventeenth century. This section explores those shifts, beginning with an exploration of the sermons of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Roger Williams, a religious dissenter who was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The racial divisions between worshippers in the United States were not inevitable. The struggle between Winthrop and Williams in seventeenth-century Massachusetts is emblematic of the political and theological debates that would define Evangelical Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In early America, many northern churches of various denominations baptized and admitted Black and Indigenous peoples into their congregations.³¹ Although Christianity was understood to be a civilizing force for all who practiced it, northern churches were not committed to treating their baptized Black and Indigenous members as equal members of their congregations. Even while British settlers in Massachusetts claimed to want to

reform what they believed had gone wrong with religion in their home country, they reinforced the problems they claimed to resolve. Many Black and Indigenous persons in colonial America worshipped in white churches. Therefore, the debates between European Christian men in Early America influenced the shape of the church for centuries to come.

In the analysis that follows, Winthrop represents the settler state, and Williams represents an early critique of the settler state. If Williams' critiques had been accepted by the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, it had the potential to produce an intentionally interracial and intercultural American Christianity. Williams rejected the idea that anyone's body or conscious could be owned. He advocated that the state should have no authority over any individual's private theological convictions. Neither Winthrop nor Williams saw any separation between their theological ideas and their legal ideals. They very much understood their concerns to be theological, and as the Church managed the state, the theological and the legal were one and the same.

The first amendment to the constitution which worked to protect civil liberties cannot be separated from the crisis that occurred at the intersection of Evangelical Christianity, race, and gender during the colonial era. The First Amendment called upon everyone in early America to define religion and what religions would be protected under the law. It called also upon them to determine what it meant to speak freely, peacefully assemble, or petition the government for redress. The amendment's generality opened wide the space of freedom, but it also introduced ambiguity that continues to be contested.

John Winthrop and Roger Williams' theological essays provide one lens through which we can understand the complications of Evangelicalism in seventeenth-century America and how the tensions between Evangelicals of European descent naturally led to freedom of religion being inscribed into the law. Those who were not men of European descent and lived on American soil

were guaranteed no such freedoms. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Americans of European descent began to separate the theological from the political. The theological was considered a private concern while the political was a public one. Meanwhile, Americans of African descent continued to think more holistically about their faith and their public lives. However, like Winthrop and Williams, their perspectives about how their theology ought to influence their lives differed. By studying the writings of leaders such as John Winthrop and Roger Williams in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, we can begin to develop some understanding of what those convictions might have been. Winthrop's ideologies represented the failures of settler notions of Christian theology while Williams' rejections of forced conversions and critiques of connections between state authority and personal conviction gestured toward the kinds of critiques of conquest that Black Christian women who were invested in liberation would offer in beginning in the late eighteenth century.

John Winthrop was an English Puritan lawyer born in 1588. In 1630, as he led a group of colonists to across the Atlantic Ocean to North America, he penned a piece he called "A Modell [sic] of Christian Charity." He described himself as the "Brave Leader and famous Governor" (capitalization in the original document) of the "great Company of Religious people." In his theological essay, which he composed as an assertion followed as a list of evidence as to why the reader ought to agree with his assertion, Winthrop argued that God has decided that the condition of humanity must be that some must be rich while others are poor, some high and eminent while others are subjected. Winthrop's tone assumed the role of the defense attorney for the Divine. No doubt, many of the members of the "great Company of Religious people" who travelled to New England aboard the *Arrabella* wondered why, despite their commitment to their faith, they were the outcasts of their nation-state. Winthrop provided reasons for this "divine order." First, God shows

wisdom through difference, second, so that God can be merciful to the poor, and third so that people will have need for each other.³²

Winthrop believed that he and his fellow travelers were commissioned by God. He believed that their relationship to the divine was covenantal. For the journey to end well, he encouraged his fellow travelers to care for each other. If they cared for each other, Winthrop believed that God would “delight to dwell among [them].” As Winthrop continued to write, his tone shifted. He transformed from the passive victim of fate to the colonial authority who was to make property of a new land that he had yet to see. Winthrop wrote that should he and his fellow Christian travelers be true to their covenant with God, they would find that the “God of Israell [sic] is among [them], when tenn [sic] of [them] . . . shall resist a thousand of [their] enemies . . . that men shall say of succeeding plantacions [sic] the lord [sic] make it like that of New England.”³³

As his Scriptural evidence, Winthrop cited both the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Both Hebrew Bible books speak to the Children of Israel’s historic journey from slavery in Egypt to the so-called Promised Land that God would show them. In his speech, Winthrop called to mind Moses’ farewell speech to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 30. In Deuteronomy, Moses, the man whom God had called to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, spoke to the people shortly before his death. In Moses’ speech, he commanded the Israelites to make a new covenant with God. The expectation Moses set was covenantal fidelity. The people could choose how to respond to God’s call. However, the choices Moses set before them were blessings and life if they chose to follow God, and curses and death if they chose to worship other gods.³⁴ In his speech, Winthrop appropriated the role of Moses. In Winthrop’s imagination, he was the new Moses who was leading his people as they were soon to cross over into a land that he proclaimed God had set

aside for them. He commanded his fellow travelers to be faithful to God so they could possess the land after they passed “over this vast Sea.”³⁵

John Winthrop shared a warm albeit contentious relationship with his fellow New England Puritan Roger Williams. Like Winthrop, Williams was an Englishman who began a new life in the American colonies. In October of 1635, he was placed on trial in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Winthrop enumerated the four charges against Williams. The first charge was in response to Williams’ critique of the idea that King Charles held land in the Massachusetts Bay Colony by a royal charter. Williams argued that Indigenous peoples were the rightful inhabitants of the land and that anyone who lived on the land should compensate the local peoples for it, as he did when he was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony and settled in Providence, Rhode Island. The second charge was in response to his belief that no one should be required by law to pray. In a theocratic government, such an idea was a threat to the legal system. The third charge was related to Williams’ insistence that ministers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony formally break ties with the Church of England. The legitimacy of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was that its inhabitants sought reform within the Church of England, not separation. Williams’ critiques of the government and the church challenged the tenuous balance of power. The fourth charge against Williams was his belief that no state ought to police its people’s consciences. Rather, he believed that each person ought to regulate their own conscious. Williams’ bold rejection of the theological (and therefore legal) underpinning of the colony proved to be a sufficient reason to dismiss him from the colony. It was not until the early nineteenth century with the rise of Jeffersonian notions of religious freedom, that Williams came to be spoken of with reverence by early Americans. While he has been saluted as a pioneer of the exceptional American idea of religious liberty, what must be noted is that Williams and Winthrop disagreed about how to read and interpret the Christian Scriptures.³⁶

This difference between Winthrop and Williams' ideas comes through clearly in Williams' 1645 essay, "Christenings Make Not Christians." In it, Williams critiqued what he called a "false conversion" of Indigenous peoples. Drawing upon examples from the Hebrew Bible in which Israelites were forced to worship other gods, Williams asserted that it is not possible to convert people to Christianity through the "force of Armes [sic] and swords of steele [sic]." Williams argued that Jesus never compelled followers using earthly weapons and likewise, Jesus was not deterred from his mission by earthly weapons.³⁷ Williams' opinions about conversion were not only a rejection of the Church of England's missionization efforts. They were also a critique of Evangelical Christianity itself. Williams was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and he likewise wanted others to have the freedom to come to faith as he had. For Williams, to force theology was a misinterpretation of Jesus' call to teach others the "good news."

Williams' analysis represented a radical reorientation of Puritan life in the British North American colonies. Winthrop and others felt they had no choice but to expel him from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Ironically, Williams, not Winthrop, is remembered as a leader of American Calvinism. His belief that faith was something the faithful came to without being coerced to do so became the spirit of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As revivals spread throughout the early United States, Williams' attitude toward faith became more commonplace, and the early nation had to contend with the problem of total freedom as people of all genders and races were compelled to read Scripture for themselves, to interpret it, and to come to their own interpretations about its meanings. For people of all genders and races who were compelled by the changing conditions that arose in the Americas with the rise of industrialization and the Enlightenment ideologies that began to spread throughout the Western world, the meaning of Christianity began to shift. Gone were the days of allegiance to state-imposed spirituality. They

looked forward to a new day of the theological and political freedom to which Roger Williams gestured in seventeenth-century New England.

Revolutionary Theists

More than one hundred years after Roger Williams' expulsion from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the people who lived in the British colonies in North America continued to grapple with questions of freedom, personal conscious, and state authority. The authors of the United States' Declaration of Independence held it to be "self-evident" that all men were "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." The words of the document indicate that what defines a distinctively American identity is the ability to critique an unjust government and to alter and abolish any government that does not adequately respond to demands for reform. Ironically, it was this document, penned to justify the American activism that overthrew British authority in thirteen of its North American colonies that could also be used by non-white Americans to assert their political demand to be free.

The Declaration of Independence called abolition a God-ordained imperative for humans who lived in unjust conditions. The American Revolution marked the first time in modern colonial history that a group of colonies united to organize a revolution against their home government. Although the Declaration of Independence promised freedom from tyranny, the freedom of the fifty-six landholding men who wrote it was predicated upon the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty and the dehumanization of African laborers who continued to be held in indefinite racial slavery. Ironically, the landholding men who penned the document overlooked the tyranny that was inherent in their decision to claim the former British colonies as their own. They sought liberation from an unjust government, while they created a new unjust government. Despite calls for freedom of conscious, in the new nation-state, European notions of the Divine were written into the founding

document. The Revolution called for freedom from tyranny using theistic terms that had clear links to the ideologies of Protestant Christianity. Establishing a settler state which refused freedom to most of its inhabitants and calling it God-ordained produced a crisis to which Black theological thinkers of all genders responded.

Jarena Lee and her ideological contemporaries offered a theological vision to eighteenth and nineteenth-century America that was abolitionist in that it called for an end to all systems that disempowered people. They understood that in the early American republic, there was no separation between the secular and the sacred. Therefore, they rejected white supremacy using the only effective language they could, that is the language of American Christian theology. The constant trope of illness in Lee's spiritual autobiography and that of her contemporary Zilpha Elaw (whose ministry I discuss in Chapter 4) points to what Jayna Brown has called the "hellish conditions of Black people's lives." Brown argues that these instances of sickness pointed to Lee's "desperately sad state of mind" and that her mental condition could only be lifted when she participated in a spiritual community.³⁸ Alternatively however, Lee's constant illnesses might point to the disabling force of white supremacy which could only be overcome by devising a new and life-giving theology that centered poor, Black people. Lee's illnesses were about more than her personal mental health. They were a response to a structural crisis that she believed God called her to resolve. Lee and other people of African descent during the Age of Revolutions believed that God must be concerned with their lives. Black women like Jarena Lee insisted that Jesus came to save everyone, regardless of their ethnicity or gender.

Black women, especially those who, like Jarena Lee, traveled freely throughout the North and South, were the connective tissue of the antebellum Black community. As historians and cultural theorists who study Black women in antebellum America have demonstrated in their work, Black women were the center of not only life in the community of enslaved people in the antebellum

south and free and quasi free people in the antebellum north. Looking to the women of African descent whose wombs birthed either property or freedom because of the 1662 law and custom of *partus sequitur ventrem*,³⁹ which determined a child of African descent's slave status based on the free or enslaved status of their mother, helps us to understand the many meanings of liberty in a nation that was founded on principles of freedom. *Partus* represented a departure from the British common law which determined a child's social standing using patrilineal connections.

Treating African women's wombs as the determiners of children's futures dehumanized people of African descent by negating paternity and neglecting the systemic sexual terror that lay at the heart of the transatlantic slave trade. As historian Tera Hunter has phrased it, "African-American women's sexuality was a central axis of power of masters over slaves, the means by which gender, racial, and material oppression were enmeshed."⁴⁰ However, *partus* also created the potential that people of African descent could create families in ways that rejected white supremacist norms for kinship. Men of African descent could not be free unless women of African descent were also free. America was a nation in flux in 1800, and its women, especially its Black and indigenous women, held the power to determine its possible futures. Jarena Lee's insistence that God poured out God's Spirit on all flesh was a direct affront to the idea that the state could determine the shape of Black futures. Lee's words were almost ominous as they pointed to a time in the here-and-now in which all wrongs would be righted.

Lee joined other women of African descent who used their theology to make a new set of truth claims. These truth claims pushed against the dehumanizing theistic language of the Declaration of Independence. They also pointed to the failure of European forms of Christianity to produce the conditions for the kind of liberation the women believed the Christian Scriptures demanded. Lee and other women of African descent proudly clung to religion and engaged with the Christian Scriptures. They courageously used their theology to reject what they believed to be a

failed nation state and they called for total freedom for all people. As the wealthy European male powers that be in the nineteenth-century United States pointed toward the modern liberal promise of progress, Black Christians of all genders rejected that promise. They looked instead to the types of freedom to which Roger Williams' work had gestured. They focus on the eighteenth century's failed freedom promises, and, throughout the antebellum era, they pursued their freedom as a God-ordained imperative.

Black Masculine Approaches to Evangelicalism in the Early Republic

As historians Gary Nash and Erica Armstrong Dunbar have noted in their work, by the 1790s, Philadelphia was a city that was ripe for change. It became the testing ground for Black liberation. The process of gradual emancipation in Philadelphia was like the process in Massachusetts. When many people of African descent in the urban north became free, that freedom was in name only. Many entered indentured servitude, and none escaped the militant anti-Black sentiment of the antebellum era.⁴¹ While Philadelphia, and other northern cities, might have been a testing ground for Emancipation, they were likewise a testing ground for what Saidiya Hartman has called the afterlife of slavery.⁴² For nominally free people of African descent, at times, even freedom looked like premature death. While indentured servitude was a reprieve from chattel slavery, freedom from slavery but not from anti-Blackness is not freedom. While some free Black people contented themselves to with the freedoms they had,⁴³ others were radical abolitionists and argued that they ought to demand more. A concern that many Black liberationists navigated was finding space where they could share Black liberation epistemologies apart from often white-dominated abolitionist spaces.

During the antebellum era, free and enslaved people of African descent began to consider the idea of an institutionalized Christian theological space where they could negotiate questions of morality on their own terms. The idea of the Black Church is a sociological framework that

describes a religiously oriented social space that serves people of African descent in the United States. The idea of the Black Church has been, from its origins, at the center of Black social life. However, it has also been, since its origins, a site of anti-Black domination because it often reinforced white supremacist power structures. Today the term “Black Church” is mostly anachronistic, but the idea of the Black or “Negro” Church was at the center of early-twentieth-century debates among Black Americans about the place of religion and religious institutions in the struggle for social progress. Three of the most prominent Black public intellectuals of the early twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Benjamin Mays brought distinct concerns about Black religious practices to their intellectual work.⁴⁴ While men including Du Bois, Woodson, and Mays devoted much intellectual concern to the role of religiosity in post-Emancipation Black life, Black women also had a central role in shaping the early twentieth-century Black social space called the Black Church because they constituted two-thirds of its membership.⁴⁵ Black women also pursued leadership in the earliest Black Churches. They understood freedom in spiritual spaces to be as important as physical and economic freedom. Their spiritual autobiographies reflect their commitment to opposing gender conventions in their churches.⁴⁶

Black churches in the United States originated in the late eighteenth century primarily because Black parishioners were pushed out of white churches that never intended to treat Black parishioners as their equals. Put simply, anti-Black mob violence followed Black Northerners everywhere, including into churches. For Black Christians, the church was a place where their flesh was under assault. As singular sites that reflected the potential of Black freedom, Black churches anticipated what would happen post-Emancipation. They are microcosms of the limits and possibilities that would come with Black freedom. They demonstrate that while freedom was a site of incredible latitude for Black patriarchs, it remained a site of domination for Black women and children who were removed from the white paternalistic control of the plantation household and

were placed under the patronymic control of Black men.⁴⁷ Studying antebellum Black churches provides an opportunity for us to see what the afterlife of slavery would be within Black communities. What the afterlife of slavery looked like for Black women within Black social and political spaces was consistent exclusion from institutionalized power because of the adoption of white supremacist gender norms within Black communities. However, as they did in white social spaces, Black women staged an open rebellion against attempts to neglect or silence them. They consistently found ways to shape the future of their racial group. The gender and sexual dynamics of nascent Black churches imitated the norms of white society by making non-masculine people and their labors invisible, but a study of the extant archival documents written by and about them proves that they did incredible political labor in antebellum America.

The leaders and members of early Black churches were primarily people of African descent. The approach Black people who were confessionally Christian took to their faith was rooted in the reality of the Black experience in the United States. Black Americans did ally themselves with white anti-slavery societies, but they also had an independent, community-based approach to their abolitionist efforts. They produced a counter-public that was skeptical of the slave-holding republic in which they lived.⁴⁸ If we look only to recorded membership of institutional churches to determine the predominant dominations to which Black Christians belonged, we learn that most Black Christians by the turn of the nineteenth century were either Methodists or Baptists. However, the numbers in the early 1800s are deceptive. As historian Richard J. Boles finds, many Black Northerners affiliated with more liturgical traditions such as the Anglican Church.⁴⁹ However, in the antebellum era, the Baptist and Methodist churches were the religious revivals that were common throughout eighteenth and nineteenth-century America and therefore converted more people, including Black people, to Christianity.

Together, the Baptist and Methodist denominations in the United States shared a total of 89,600 members throughout the South that they gathered primarily through gatherings that historians have called “great awakenings.” The first of these religious awakenings occurred in the British colonies from 1730-1755 and the second from 1790-1840.⁵⁰ These awakenings inspired piety in people of all races and genders. That said, as American Religious historian Catherine Brekus has argued, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked a time of transatlantic awakening that encompassed not only the American colonies, but also England and Scotland.⁵¹ The revivals were religious, but they were rooted in secular anxieties as the world continued to change in ways that unsettled the Puritan temperament. When paired with the rise of egalitarian ideologies post-American Revolution, many white Evangelical denominations included Black people in their efforts to expand the reach of the church.⁵² The transatlantic revivals served to moralize the new nation in a distinctively American form of Christianity that continues to be preached to this day in some Evangelical congregations. Ironically, racial diversification within Evangelical congregations has historically failed to elicit antiracist work within the churches, and Black leaders have continued to advocate for understanding and full inclusion.

During the early-nineteenth century, the Methodists were most fervent in their efforts to convert people of African descent. They understood themselves to be the necessary preachers to the poor and disinherited, and enslaved Black people were ideal candidates for their theology, and Black Americans took to Methodism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Methodism was compelling because as it advocated for lay preachers and lay societies. It also simplified the liturgy. That said, Methodism was hierarchical, which meant that white Methodists could exert control over Black Methodists even after their conversion. Black male leaders exerted similar control over Black female preachers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church as it began to develop in the late eighteenth century. The Baptist tradition appealed to Black Americans who sought the

congregational freedom that Baptist polity offered. Independent Black Baptist churches originated as early as 1773. The First African Baptist Church was founded by Rev. George Leile in Savannah, Georgia. Rev. Leile was a formerly enslaved man who had received his freedom from British troops in exchange for his loyalty, but after their defeat he feared he might lose his freedom. He fled to Jamaica to establish a church there.⁵³ These abbreviated narratives about early Black Methodists and Baptists alone demonstrate how white supremacist power was always at work in the decision to establish early Black American Churches. Therefore, the development of Black Churches in the United States cannot be understood apart from the entrenchment of white supremacy in antebellum America. The existence of Black churches is a critique of white supremacy within American Christianity.

Black churches have historically been guided by a variety of theological and spiritual perspectives. For Black people, regardless of their religion, theology is political by virtue of the Blackness of the ones who share the theology. When people of African descent arrived in America beginning in the seventeenth century, they possessed a variety of religious traditions. These traditions included Yoruba religious practices, Voodoo, Islam, Christianity, and humanism. They continued to practice these religions in the Americas.⁵⁴ The antebellum Black Church, was a space that was potentially influenced as much by African indigenous religions as it was by Western Christian theology and ongoing white supremacist violence. It is important therefore not to overdetermine the place of Western (European) Christian thought the study of Black theologies in antebellum America as there were diverse ways that people of African descent approached the Bible and Western Christian teachings. Christian theology had a distinct meaning for free and enslaved Black Americans in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century who sought more complete liberation.

Perhaps the righteous zeal for Black liberation is captured most clearly in David Walker's September 1829 essay called "Appeal to the Coloured [sic] Citizens of the World." Walker was born in North Carolina in 1785 to a free woman and an enslaved man. In the 1820s, he lived in Boston, where he kept a clothing shop.⁵⁵ Walker wrote his 1829 manifesto as a call to action for marginalized people globally, but he was specific in his clarification that he wrote especially to Black people who lived in the United States. Walker was familiar with how to distribute his writing to a broad Black diasporic audience as he served as an agent and contributor in the African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal* which ran weekly from March 16, 1827-March 28, 1829. *Freedom's Journal* was distributed in Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, D.C., New York, Louisiana, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, Upper Canada, England, and Haiti.⁵⁶ Unlike the autobiographical writings of freedmen like Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano that were addressed to Americans of all races and were therefore less militant in tone,⁵⁷ Walker addressed his words specifically to his fellow Black Americans, and he did nothing to conceal his rage.

In his powerful manifesto, Walker described himself and his fellow Black Americans as the "the *most wretched, degraded and abject* set of beings that *ever lived* since the world began" (emphasis in original text). Walker framed America as a Christian nation, arguing that white Americans treated enslaved Black people in a manner that was more degrading than the treatment they would have received in a nation that was not led by people who proclaimed themselves to be Christians.⁵⁸ Walker's primary Scriptural evidence was from the Book of Exodus in which the Children of Israel were held in bondage in Egypt. Walker asserts that the treatment they received in Egypt was better than what Black Americans received in the United States.

Walker's incendiary language was a rigorous critique of white American epistemologies of the human which he delivered with the zeal of a Methodist minister. Throughout his treatise, Walker

mocked the reality that the so-called enlightened white Christian actively participated in the violence of slavery. Walker critique white Christians by presenting an alternative rendering of the Exodus story. Walker's choice to deploy the Exodus story served to mock white evangelicalism on its own terms. White American Christians took on the positionality of the oppressed group, wandering in the wilderness. Walker contended that their interpretation of current events was incorrect. He deployed what religious studies scholar Eddie Glaude has described as "nation language," meaning he participated in the process of making the story of the biblical exodus paradigmatic within the developing Black political culture of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Walker was invested in honoring the humanity of Black Americans and inspiring them to claim their freedom knowing that white Americans would not surrender it to them willingly.

However, Black Christian men's activist appeals were not monolithic. In his January 1, 1808, Thanksgiving Sermon at the St. Thomas African Episcopal Church (also called the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas) in Philadelphia, Rev. Absalom Jones preached a much more traditional sermon than Walker's about freedom for Black Americans. St. Thomas was founded in 1794; it stood at the corner of Fifth and St. James Streets. St. Thomas was the first African Episcopal Church in the United States. Rev. Absalom Jones was a leader among the free Black community in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Born in 1746 into slavery, Jones became the congregation's first rector in 1796.⁶⁰ He was a key leader, with Rev. Richard Allen, in the Free African Society. The free Black community was split between multiple Christian denominations including the Anglicanism, Methodism, and Quakerism. Jones, Allen, and others understood the limitations of their relationship with benevolent white Quakers who critiqued their ways of worshipping; he worked with an emerging group of Black activists to build a community for Black Christians in the city. The community would include both a school and a church. For Jones

and others, Black churches were not only about theology; they were also about creating conditions for mutual aid within Black communities to ensure their social welfare.

Absalom Jones and the group that worked with him worked to create the conditions for a Black Church with the support of Quakers and the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society. However, they also worked under a prevailing sentiment held in both the South and the North that Black people were innately handicapped. Even in Philadelphia, most white residents believed that their Black neighbors were forever degraded because of racial slavery.⁶¹ It was against that backdrop that Jones preached on January 1, 1808, to celebrate that the United States Congress had abolished the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Jones' epigraph came from the Biblical book of Exodus, chapter three, verses seven and eight. In these verses, the Lord saw the affliction that the Israelites endured while enslaved in Egypt. The Lord had heard them crying out with moral outrage about their experiences. The Lord promised not to be distant from them any longer. God would bring them to a place that flowed with "milk and honey." This land that God promised to deliver to them was the ancestral home of the Canaanite people.⁶²

This was the text that Jones exegeted to celebrate the abolition of the African slave trade. He noted that God was so moved by the cries of God's people that God rose to deliver them. Jones affirmed God's historical commitment to deliverance. Jones declared that God had seen the affliction of their "countrymen. Jones articulated a belief that God had borne witness to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and familial separation and hunger. Jones declared, "[God] *came down* (emphasis in the original text) into the United States, when they declared, in the constitution which they framed in 1788, that the trade in our African fellow-men, should cease in the year 1808." Jones declared that "the ocean [would] no more afford a refuge to their bodies."⁶³

Jones declaration that African bodies were no longer to be transported across the ocean as enslaved people gave him a reason to give thanks. He declared that every first of January should be

set apart as a day of public thanksgiving. He declared that they must share with future generations when they asked for a reason for the celebration that “on the day of which this is the anniversary, abolished the trade which dragged your fathers from their native country, and sold them as bondmen in the United States of America.”⁶⁴ Jones’ analysis lacked Walker’s militancy. While his grief about the ravishes of the slave trade is readily apparent in his sermon, he also failed to articulate the ongoing anti-Blackness that defined his life, even as a free person. Jones also openly built upon the nation language deployed by John Winthrop during his journey across the Atlantic nearly two hundred years prior. Jones framed the Black male enslaved person as the victim of the settler state. Yet, he continued to push for Black Americans to find their footing in a settler state that refused to offer them complete freedom. Black Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reinterpreted the Evangelical Christian tradition. The Scriptural interpretations Walker and Jones offered in their writings and sermons demonstrate that they often took up the colonial language of the Biblical story of the Exodus. Although they openly critiqued whiteness, they did not depart from the colonial impulses that the earliest European settlers had also read into the Scriptures. In their spiritual autobiographies, Black women turned away from the Exodus narrative. They chose to center different stories.

Spirited Flesh in Antebellum America

Women of African descent like Jarena Lee refused to support masculinist understanding of Christian faith. They reinvented Christian theology to suit the realities of their lives. By so doing, they pointed to proto-womanist or womanish ways of being in a nation-state that was bent on destroying them. For them, theology must be felt and embodied; theology had legs. They also refused to believe the myth that they had no souls. Near the end of her spiritual autobiography, Lee shared the story of a time when she had a meeting at her uncle’s house. A man came who was a deist. The man openly expressed his belief that Black people had no souls. After hearing her preach,

the man went out and called people to join him. He “said that [her] preaching might seem a small thing, yet he believed [she] had the worth of souls at heart . . . he now seemed to admit that coloured people had souls.” The man shook hands with her and shared that he was “a great slave holder.” From that day, she heard that he was changed for the better.⁶⁵ Lee and her contemporaries recognized that they must claim and save their own souls in a society that was determined to destroy their souls. Therefore, they used their theological writings to point to the failures of whiteness in the newly constituted United States. They sought something more than inclusion. They sought to dismantle ways of thinking theologically that dehumanized. Thinking theologically for themselves was a critique of empire.

While womanism and Black feminism have different origin stories, both point to Black women’s urgency desire for wholeness. The womanish model of selfhood insists that identity is borne through Black diasporic relationality. The personal and the collective are one-and-the-same.⁶⁶ The impossible promise of Black diasporic life, especially when paired with the ephemerality of faith in a Divine power they could not see, was that even when they moved in relative isolation, they moved together. Abolitionist theologians understood that they had a responsibility to look beyond what they believed to be happening around them. They recognized the evil around them as a cultural production. While the everyday harms they experienced were real, the justifications for that harm were based in a fictional social reality. They were empowered to push over and against a story that only existed to kill and erase them. They believed that the story they had been told about themselves could, should, and must be told differently.⁶⁷

In her 1836 spiritual autobiography, Jarena Lee unflinchingly described the challenges she faced as a Black woman who was called to preach. Despite the circumstances, she continued to preach. Lee’s life was that of a nomad. She first heard the Christian message in 1804 when she traveled with a group to hear a missionary of the Presbyterian order. Lee wrote little of the message

itself, only calling the minister “solemn” and “earnest.” Lee points to a reading of the Psalms which began with the phrase, “Lord, I am vile, conceived in sin,” as a turning point for her as she considered the condition of her soul. Lee wrote nothing about the race of the preacher or about the people who were assembled around her, no doubt because she was concerned with her personal spiritual condition, but the use of the words “Lord, I am vile, conceived in sin,” a hymn by Calvinist dissident, Isaac Watts,⁶⁸ point to a dehumanizing theology that taught the individual that their soul was corrupt as a means to manage their future behaviors. The words inspired such a dramatic shift in Jarena Lee who rushed to a brook a quarter mile from her home to drown herself. She heard a voice tell her to “put [her] head under, it will not distress,” but for some reason she could not articulate, her “thoughts were taken entirely from this purpose.” She believed she was saved by God, but she had not yet found her theological anchor.

Still in search of a spiritual home, Lee went into the country where she lived with a Roman Catholic family. The lady of the household saw her reading the Bible, took it from her, and gave her a novel instead which she refused to read. She departed from that home and went to Philadelphia where she attended Englishman Joseph Pilmore’s church. Pilmore had accepted a call from John Wesley, an English cleric who founded Methodism, to spread Methodism in the American colonies. In 1769, he became the first Methodist preacher in Philadelphia.⁶⁹ After three months, Lee wrote that she felt a “wall between [her] and communion with that people.” She felt the difference between them was insurmountable. While she failed to explicitly state that the insurmountable wall between her and the members of the English Church was their failure to embrace her because of her race, her autobiography seems to confirm that she was seeking community with other Americans of African descent.

The next Methodist community she visited hosted the Rev. Richard Allen. One of the leading Black ministers of the early nineteenth century, Allen was born on February 14, 1760, to parents

who were enslaved by Benjamin Chew, of Philadelphia. When he was a child, Chew sold Allen, three of his siblings, and his parents into Delaware, near Dover.⁷⁰ Allen was converted sometime around 1777, and he was compelled to preach. He arrived in the Philadelphia area to proselytize other Black Americans in 1786. Unlike Jarena Lee, Allen was no spiritual nomad. Post-conversion, he was loyal to the Methodist church, but he came to understand that there could be no biracial Christian community in Philadelphia so long as racial tensions persisted. When people of African descent were “dragged from the altar,” he determined that they should worship elsewhere.⁷¹

Because of the persecution against Black religionists who were physically abused when they worshipped in interracial congregations, in 1817, Richard Allen separated from white Methodism. This separation was something he had already planned to do since 1794 when a group of Black Methodists devised their plan to worship separately from white Methodists. Allen personally paid for them to purchase a blacksmith’s shop on Sixth and Lombard streets. However, by 1817 he was resolute in his idea that interracial worship was not possible. In 1817, he helped to establish a church called “Mother Bethel,” which was the first independent African Methodist Episcopal Church. Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia holds the distinction of being the oldest parcel of land continuously owned by African Americans.⁷² Allen and those who served alongside him were committed to promoting a distinctively Black approach to Methodism, and they were rebuffed at every turn by white Methodists who tried to sell their church out from under them.⁷³ The establishment of the Bethel A.M.E. Church was a first step for religious liberty for people of African descent in the United States, but they and the other congregations that would emerge in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition had a long journey ahead of them.

It was within this spiritual community, which was intentionally and distinctively Black that Jarena Lee finally felt that God had pardoned her soul. She described her conversion experience as a “lively turn of disposition.”⁷⁴ Despite the ecstasy she felt in community with other believers of African

descent in antebellum Philadelphia, Jarena Lee continued to struggle with her faith. After months of spiritual wrestling, Lee received a visit from a man of African descent named William Scott who taught her about how her soul could progress from “darkness.” Under his tutelage, Lee finally felt that her soul was sanctified. She felt she was in an “ocean of light and bliss.”⁷⁵

About four to five years after her soul was sanctified, she remembers that a silence fell on her. She provides no details that provide additional insight into when the time was or what the circumstances of her life were when it happened. What she does detail is that she heard a voice which distinctively commanded her to preach. She retorted that no one would “believe” her. The voice replied telling her that they would “put words in [her] mouth, and will turn [her] enemies to become [her] friends.”⁷⁶ Lee’s autobiography provides little clarity as to what she might have meant when she refused to preach because no one would believe her. Perhaps she meant that no one would believe her message. She might also have meant that no one would believe that women had a divine call to preach. Regardless of what she might have meant, within a few days, she was satisfied that the voice she heard was God, and she went to see Richard Allen to tell him about her perceived call to preach. Allen’s response was simple, the tradition “did not call for women preachers.” At first, this response pleased her, but with time, she began to feel that a fire was being smothered within her. She recognized that she was not being rejected from preaching because of a spiritual failing, but rather because of a perceived physical failure. In the same way that Black Americans in Philadelphia were believed to be permanently debilitated by their Blackness, Black women were believed to be, both within and outside of Black communal spaces, debilitated by their race and their gender. Lee posited instead that it was her identity as a Black woman that made her powerful and effective as a spiritual leader.

Recalling the Resurrection story from the Gospel of John, chapter twenty, Lee recalled that the Resurrected Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene. She was the first to preach that she had

seen Jesus in His resurrected form. Lee felt that to exclude her was to declare that Christ's work was incomplete. She believed that Jesus died for all people, no matter their gender. Furthermore, Lee rejected those who said that Mary Magdalene was not learned enough to preach. She argued that the earliest disciples, first-century fishermen, also had no formal education, and yet they were inspired to preach. So too, she believed, Jesus could inspire women to preach.⁷⁷ Lee's critique was not only of Black churches; hers was a critique of American state religion and its failure to include those who possessed formal education. She critiqued what Christianity had become, that is, a religion that operated in service to the European and United States imperial projects.⁷⁸ She pointed instead to the witness of the earliest Christ-followers who served one another by preaching and teaching. She womanishly asserted that Jesus Himself would have willingly and openly received her. In fact, for Jarena Lee, it was her Blackness and her womanhood that she felt made her an especially necessary addition to the preaching community.

In 1811, Jarena Lee experienced a new change as she married Mr. Joseph Lee, who pastored a congregation at Snow Hill, which was six miles away from Philadelphia. The move vexed her as she feared she might not find in Snow Hill, the community she loved so much in Philadelphia. After she was assured by God that she must remain in Snow Hill, she experienced one of the periods of illness that seemed to be commonplace for her. After her physical recovery, she faced familial losses. She lost, in just six years, five members of her family, including her husband. She was left alone with two infant children, but she received the support of friends which brought her comfort.⁷⁹ Lee provided no insight into the conditions of her husband's death. Her dissemblance⁸⁰ was so great that she did not even share which other members of her family had died. What her return to ministry after her husband's death indicates is that she, like other itinerant women preachers, treated marriage as its own sort of calling. Like other nineteenth-century respectable women, marriage became a mechanism of social control that drew them out of the public sphere and into the private. Whether

it was the urgency of Black widowhood or the feeling of a reprieve from the social institution of marriage, after Joseph Lee's death, Jarena Lee returned to Rev. (now Bishop) Richard Allen to ask for permission to become an exhorter in her congregation.⁸¹

During one of her visits to the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Richard Williams preached from the book of Jonah, chapter two, verse nine in which the prophet Jonah perceived non-believers to be forsaking their loyalty to the God of Israel. Jonah vowed to make proper sacrifices to his God upon his return home.⁸² Lee remembered that as Rev. Williams preached, he seemed to "have lost the spirit." She remembered that she had a "supernatural impulse" which compelled her to rise to her feet to exhort the congregation about the text. She provides no account of the words she spoke, but when she stopped speaking, she remembered her feeling of fear. She had not practiced good decorum and feared the leadership might expel her. Rev. Richard Allen's response surprised her. He stood before the entire assembly to share that Jarena Lee first sought his approval to preach eight years prior. He admitted that he had turned her away, but after hearing her exhortation, he believed she was called as much as any of the preachers present.

Jarena Lee was moved to action. The next Sabbath day, she felt compelled to preach but did not desire to do so in her church. She asked a woman who belonged to her society to help her by allowing her to hold a meeting in her home. The woman supported Lee as she preached in her home to a congregation of five persons. She continued to preach there for about six months until she received a call to preach at a place thirty miles away. Lee was fearful to accept because her son was very sick, but she knew she had work to do. Lee wrote that by her "instrumentality," the "Lord poured forth [the Lord's] spirit among the people." Although many who were assembled there were more learned than she, the Lord allowed her to speak words of great power.⁸³

After her experience, she returned home where friends were caring for her child and she felt compelled to return to Cape May, the place of her birth, after having been away for fourteen years. She left her sickly child with her mother and continued her preaching journey where she encountered others who did not believe people of color possessed souls, that is humanity. Although he continued to antagonize her after her speech, it seems that it convinced him that people of color indeed had souls. This man was a slaveholder who behaved viciously toward his enslaved people. Jarena Lee heard that after his encounter with her, he altered his behavior for the better.⁸⁴ It was in Cape May that Jarena Lee evolved as a new preacher, with the support of her natal community. She was a Black, poor, woman, and yet, she spoke of empire, faith, and new possibilities with a conviction that compelled others to recognize, not only her humanity, but also the humanity of people like her. Through her, people also came to believe in their own humanity and to be compelled to behave in ways that began to break down the unjust systems of their time. While she was not intimately connected with all her listeners and could not know for sure who was converted, her ministry was committed to planting the seeds of change, and her spiritual autobiography existed to bless the soul of each reader.

Conclusion

In his 1630 text “A Modell of Christian Charity,” John Winthrop declared that God ordained that “in all times some much be rich some poore [spelling in original manuscript], some highe [spelling in original manuscript] and eminent in power and dignitie [spelling in original manuscript]; others meane [spelling in original manuscript] and in subjection.”⁸⁵ He considered such an idea to be based in human reason. He considered human power imbalances to be essential; there was no other way. Jarena Lee, in 1836, presented an alternate way of thinking theologically, arguing in her spiritual autobiography that the by-laws of the churches might “bring into disrepute even the

word of life.”⁸⁶ She argued that hierarchies were not only divisive to humans, but that they were also divisive to the very message of the Christian faith.

Although Winthrop and Lee lived in different times, they shared a commitment to using theological language to discuss their present realities. Winthrop’s language presented a clear epistemology of white settler logic as it mandated power imbalances and treated them as natural. As his Calvinist faith was linked to colonial authority (the Church of England), his theology could not be disentangled from state power. Meanwhile, Lee pointed to a new way of believing, thinking, and knowing that was radically inclusive of the fullness of Black personhood. Even antebellum Black religious leaders David Walker, Absalom Jones, and Richard Allen failed to account for the fullness of Black personhood. For Lee, Blackness itself was sacred, holy, and Spirit-filled. Her determination to preach was a critique not only of the American religious establishment, but also of the slaveowners and white supremacists who would not affirm Black personhood. For Lee, theology was also fleshy. Her embodied notion of theology gestured toward the womanist theology that emerged in the American Religious academy in the late twentieth century.⁸⁷

Jarena Lee along with her contemporary Black preaching women in the antebellum era responded to failures within Evangelical Christianity, nascent Black Churches, and the American nation state by refusing to shrink away from the very fleshiness of their bodies. For them, their theology and their lives were always already political, and they understood the social, theological, and political potential of living political lives. Jarena Lee declared that God’s Spirit was not only for white theists and Black intellectuals. God’s Spirit was also for her, a poor Black, widowed woman who had shepherded herself into adulthood. The outpouring of the Spirit was for Lee a radically equalizing act that, if taken seriously, would disrupt the logics of Christian empires.

- ¹ See Chapter One of Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010).
- ² Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected From the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself.,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Philadelphia, Pa, 1836), 37.
- ³ Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 31.
- ⁴ See Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).
- ⁵ Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected From the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself.,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Philadelphia, Pa, 1836), 27.
- ⁶ Richard A. Henshaw and Marvin A. Sweeney, “Joel,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, 2006, 1209–10.
- ⁷ Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected From the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself.,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Philadelphia, Pa, 1836), 27.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 37.
- ⁹ Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, paperback Ed (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2003), 52.
- ¹⁰ “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, November 1, 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.
- ¹¹ See Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1-19.
- ¹² Miller, Perry, “Roger Williams: An Essay in Interpretation,” in Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams. Vol. 7: ...* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 17.
- ¹³ Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected From the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself.,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Philadelphia, Pa, 1836), 27 and 47.
- ¹⁴ Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998),
- ¹⁵ Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, paperback Ed (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2003), Martha S. Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans*, Carter G. Woodson Institute Series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), and Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women During the Slave Era* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
- ¹⁶ I am especially indebted to Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), and Hazel V Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019).
- ¹⁷ Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 11.
- ¹⁸ Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected From the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself.,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Philadelphia, Pa, 1836), 35.
- ¹⁹ Judith Casselberry, *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- ²⁰ Cheryl Gilkes, *If It Wasn’t for the Women: Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2003), and Judith Casselberry, *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- ²¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Updated ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- ²² See Loren Schweninger, “The Fragile Nature of Freedom: Free Women of Color in the U.S. South,” in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois

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- ²³ Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected From the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself,,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Philadelphia, Pa, 1836), 36-37.
- ²⁴ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.
- ²⁵ R. J. Knecht, *The French Wars of Religion, 1559-1598*, 3rd ed, Seminar Studies in History (Harlow, England ; New York: Longman, 2010).
- ²⁶ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England ; c. 1400 - c. 1580*, 2. ed (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).
- ²⁷ Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans*, Carter G. Woodson Institute Series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 13.
- ²⁸ See Acts 2 in Jouette M Bassler et al., *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books Student Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
- ²⁹ Miller, Perry, “Roger Williams: An Essay in Interpretation,” in Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams. Vol. 7: ...* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 2007).
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Chapter 2

Souls on Fire: Black Women's Trials for Their Freedom

"Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted . . . that day the Lord will raise us up . . . enough to aid and befriend us, and we shall begin to flourish."-Maria W. Miller Stewart, 1831

In the antebellum era, free Black women and girls treated the defense of their freedom as a theological act. Women organized across racial lines to pursue an abolitionist platform that was committed not only to ending slavery but also to ensuring women's rights. Their actions were controversial, even among the men who supported their political visions. Despite social and political prohibitions, women in the antebellum United States heeded the call of abolitionist Maria W. Miller Stewart to possess the spirit of independence. When men failed to include them in their anti-slavery groups because of their gender, they developed their own groups that worked tirelessly through the late-nineteenth century to achieve their goals. These proto-feminist efforts have been documented by historians who study nineteenth-century American women. Historians such as Manisha Sinha and Shirley Yee have definitively demonstrated that white women and elite Black women were leaders in the anti-slavery movement.¹

This chapter engages with abolitionist documents and anti-slavery society reports to advance a few claims. First, this chapter unravels Black women's abolitionist history from that of leading white women abolitionist whose stories inundate the archival record. Relatedly, this chapter will demonstrate that the proto-feminist movement was plagued by ambivalent racism directed by white women against their Black woman counterparts. Second, this chapter argues that Black women, through their distinctive ways of reading the Christian Scriptures and their defiance of gender mores re-invented the conditions for freedom. Unlike their white female counterparts, Black abolitionist theologians did not believe that the abolitionist political struggle would (or should) end with the end of slavery. Rather, they had a theological vision of a new heaven and a new earth that people of all

genders must collaborate to create. Third, this chapter contributes to the field of Black girlhood studies by pairing the crisis that unmarried and childless Black girls faced in the 1850s with Black feminist theorizations of contemporary Black girlhood. Unlike their Southern counterparts, childhood was a possibility for free Black girls in the North. Therefore, this chapter engages with the contradictions of Black girlhood as Black girls in the antebellum era, and today are seen both as hyper-valuable because of their perceived market value and valueless. To borrow the words of Black feminist ethnographer Aimee Meredith Cox, Black girls are perceived as “surplus by a combination of factors such as. . . race, class, geographic location, and sexuality.”²

The narrative of Black women’s open rebellion against slavery, sexism, and racism began in 1831, a turning point in the anti-slavery struggle in the United States. Increasingly, from the early 1820s and through the 1850s, white people in the North openly expressed their anti-Black and anti-Indigenous sentiments. They segregated churches along racial lines, instigated race riots, and insisted upon racial divisions in all social spaces.³ Their actions anticipated what slavery’s long afterlife would be like for Black people in the United States post-Emancipation. Although the transatlantic trade of enslaved people was criminalized in the United States in 1808, the domestic trade of enslaved people was legal and continued to reproduce unfree people throughout the United States. Even as the Northern states began to abolish slavery, it was an ongoing crisis that abolitionists refused to overlook.

In January of 1831, radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison began his abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* (*The Liberator* will be discussed in substantial detail in Chapter 3). Throughout 1831, slavery began to be discussed more in Boston, moving previously apathetic Northerners to take a firm stance against allowing it to continue anywhere in the United States. Many radical abolitionists urged Northerners to understand slavery as a grave moral concern, not

only for slaveholders, but for the entire nation. Abolitionists were resolute in their stance that every non-Black person in the United States benefitted socially and economically from the slavery system. Garrison and other concerned New Englanders formed the New England Anti-Slavery Society, which called for the immediate emancipation of all enslaved people in the United States.

In 1833, anti-slavery activists gathered in Philadelphia under the name of the National Anti-Slavery Convention. Philadelphia, the bedrock of American liberty, provided an apt site for an abolitionist critique of national principles of freedom for all while two million people remained enslaved. Attendees of the Anti-Slavery Convention committed themselves to organizing anti-slavery societies in every city and town in the United States. They enlisted “the pulpit and the press” to support their cause.⁴ However, neither the clerical establishment nor the mainstream newspapers validated politics. Instead, both the church and the nation called abolitionist politics a source of division. Not infrequently, abolitionists were called infidels who despised religion. The critique was ironic because many abolitionists carefully used religious language to justify their efforts. William Lloyd Garrison vehemently rejected the infidel label, arguing that if abolitionism was infidelity, then Jesus was a blasphemer. Garrison believed that Jesus was on the side of freedom and the devil was on the side of enslavement.⁵

The backlash against radical abolitionists meant that by 1835, abolitionists were in crisis as they worked to convert others to their cause. By 1835, the New England Anti-Slavery Society’s numbers had grown so large that they needed a more substantial venue to host their meeting. They requested use of Faneuil Hall, one of Boston’s central meeting places, only to be denied by the city. Pro-slavery advocates praised the city’s decision to exclude “an army of Jim Crows and their white associates”⁶ from hosting their meeting at Faneuil Hall. They feared the abolitionists would desecrate the space. Although the city recognized the role of white anti-slavery activists in the so-called

desecration of Massachusetts' secular sacred spaces, the brunt of the blame fell squarely on "an army of Jim Crows." The words caricatured and mocked Black Americans who sought nothing more than their freedom. Slavery was abolished in Massachusetts in 1783, but white Massachusetts residents were disinterested in upsetting their political and economic arrangements with Southern slaveholders by openly calling for the end of slavery throughout the nation.

As the abolitionist movement continued to grow in the 1830s, anti-slavery activist women in the United States and the United Kingdom joined the abolitionist struggle on their own terms. As historian Manisha Sinha succinctly phrased it, "women were abolition's most effective foot soldiers."⁷ Although the 1835 Faneuil Hall incident was meant to discourage abolitionist gatherings in New England and elsewhere, after the 1835 backlash, anti-slavery women worked more diligently than ever before to promote both abolition and women's rights; they saw the issues as intersecting concerns. Many of these women pursued a Garrisonian approach to abolition. The approach, which was credited to the radical politics of William Lloyd Garrison argued that abolitionism required more than the immediate emancipation of enslaved persons. Garrisonian abolitionists chose not to participate in mainstream political activity because they declared that they would have no union with slaveholders.⁸

Furthermore, radical abolitionists insisted that racial justice and gender equity were intertwined concerns. Their choice to include women's rights as part of an abolitionist ideology felt to many like an intentional affront to conservative clergymen's sensibilities.⁹ The boldness of women who were abolitionists during the antebellum era was their line in the sand. They publicly advocated for abolition even at the risk of being called disorderly and enduring verbal and physical backlash from all segments of society and at times even from the anti-slavery men whose cause they shared. The resistance that anti-slavery women faced in the 1830s compelled them to pursue new forms of

activist activity. Despite the so-called radical politics of their male counterparts in the anti-slavery activist project, the men maintained gendered understandings of who could successfully lead the abolitionist movement. Even the most liberal men still believed that (white) women needed (white) male protection and felt that verbose women, even the women who joined their cause, threatened the delicate social order.

Nineteenth-century abolitionist women felt differently about their political involvement than their male counterparts. They demanded immediate repentance from those who continued to hold people as chattel. For them, calling the United States to repent was the only way to assure peace.¹⁰ As Manisha Sinha has framed it in her work on Black abolitionists, women were “abolition’s . . . leaders and orators.”¹¹ The history of radical abolitionism in the 1830s is linked to the women’s liberation movement, the history of white progressive Evangelical Christianity, and labor rights. Women of all races in the antebellum United States had souls that were on fire for the political ideologies that mattered to them, and despite the gender norms of the nineteenth century, they refused to allow men to silence them.

Women’s Divergent Struggles in the Antebellum United States

Despite the women’s calls for the kind of peace that could only emerge through repentance from the evils of slaveholding, even Northern clergymen who believed in the anti-slavery movement urged women to be silent. The irrational fear of abolitionist women can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the pastoral letter penned by a group of Massachusetts clergymen in 1837 to discourage women from speaking in public, to discourage their congregations from listening to the women, and to shore up clerical authority in a society that was increasingly marked by difference of opinion. The letter indicates that the clergymen were angered because members of their congregations supported female abolitionists and orators such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké, white

sisters who were born into a wealthy slaveholding family in Charleston, South Carolina. Their firsthand experiences as benefactors of the slave system made them call for the entire enterprise to be dismantled.¹² While the Grimké sisters were a major source of concern, in the Massachusetts's clergymen's justifications for their distaste for the radical abolitionists' push for women's rights, one woman's name consistently emerged, Frances Wright D'Arusmont. D'Arusmont, whom the preachers often called Fanny Wright, was a Scottish-born orator. Her speaking tour throughout the United States demonstrated the transnational connections between proto feminists in the early nineteenth century. In 1828, Fanny Wright became the first woman to address mixed audiences of men and women in the United States.

Born in 1795 in Dundee, Scotland, Wright was the daughter and niece of some of the United Kingdom's most inquisitive minds. In her late adolescent years, she became curious about the United States and educated herself by reading everything she could at the University of Glasgow. Her writings about life and politics in the United States shifted perspectives in continental Europe about topics including religious and political freedom. In 1824, she chose to live in the United States because she believed it to be a place where progress was possible. In December of 1828 in Baltimore, Maryland, she spoke before a mixed group of all genders in an open theater that was crammed with people. In response to her words, she received "silent respect and enthusiastic sympathy." From there she traveled to Philadelphia, where she also encountered multiples and to New York.¹³ By all accounts, she spoke more compellingly than many male ministers. The ministers found her speeches to be inappropriate because she shared her ideas on civil and political rights, political economy, morals, and religion. When she spoke, congregations were moved by her words.¹⁴

Many of the established antebellum clergymen in the North were sure that the captivating and radical female orators would lead their congregations astray, thus causing division in the church.

It is no surprise that Wright was of particular concern because of her agnostic theology. Despite her choice not to join any religious sect, Wright expressed her desire to see all people gathered into “one common humanity.”¹⁵ Seeing so many of their congregants attracted to the discourse of a woman who was areligious and defied gender norms troubled many of the clergy. They asserted that female orators and their supporters made demands on what ministers could preach and inappropriately allowed speakers the minister did not invite into his pulpit to speak on the messages that he would not. The interventions of non-clerics into religious work seemed to them to be an attempt to usurp clerical authority. In a new nation that was built on a fragile foundation that allowed no religious establishment, difference of opinion in religious thought meant unprecedented freedom of thought, making the work of clergymen uniquely difficult. While the clergymen’s fears, to the contemporary reader, smack of gender bias, at the time, they felt that they alone were working to maintain the fragile separation that existed in the early nineteenth century between ecclesiastical life and political life outside of the church.

The Massachusetts clergymen’s letter, which they asked the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society to adopt, asserted that when a woman assumed the “place and tone of a man as a public reformer,” she indicated a lack of need and desire for male protection, causing even the men who were sympathetic to her cause to defend themselves against her.¹⁶ In an 1837 sermon, Rev. Parsons Cooke explained that female orators were “stripped of every womanly attribute.” He explained that by speaking publicly, women became “public property.” Furthermore, he argued that “to an unsophisticated ear, the term female orator, in whatever case the oratory might be displayed, or with however much purity of private character associated, has a sound too nearly allied to another that may not be named.”¹⁷ Female orators were framed as people who made their bodies available for public consumption while male orators were doing what was natural for a man to do.

The Massachusetts clergymen wanted women to maintain their social place for the benefit of both women and men. The problem was that abolitionist women spoke up because their male clerics failed to speak on topics, such as slavery and equal rights, that the women believed must be central to 1830s American Christian life. Northern clergymen collectively refused to take a radical abolitionist political position, but radical abolitionist Christians of all genders persisted in their efforts to reform churches. Throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, Christian abolitionists organized many religious bodies which individuals and congregations joined.¹⁸

Northern abolitionist women were appalled to find that their anti-slavery ministers were more invested in maintaining their status within the clerical elite than they were with doing what they could to sound the death knell to the system of slavery. Abolitionists believed that too few of the anti-slavery clergy were willing to sacrifice their comfort to differentiate themselves from the churches who openly supported slavery. The clergy who wished to continue their collegial communion with pro-slavery pastors in the South made what abolitionists understood to be a sinful compromise. Instead of pursuing the abolitionist cause fully, the beleaguered ministers critiqued abolitionists, and framed them as “infidels” who plotted the downfall of Christianity.¹⁹ Further, they admonished abolitionist women to be silent because women who were verbose public reformers represented a rejection of a divine order. They told the women and those who supported them to remember that to “do good, it is of the utmost importance that we be good.”²⁰

Anti-slavery women were determined to be heard both within and outside of their churches. Although they could not hold formal leadership positions in Anti-Slavery Societies because of their gender, women formed strong opinions about a wide array of political issues, which included slavery. When Anti-Slavery groups rejected women’s leadership within them and even proposed that women’s rights activism should not be included among abolitionist interests, radical abolitionist

women in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Boston, Massachusetts, London, England, and elsewhere, formed interracial and proto-feminist collaborations. As Frances Wright's time in the United States demonstrated, women's participation in abolitionism was both interracial and transnational. Anti-slavery and proto-feminist activists disentangled themselves from national politics and the concerns of their local churches and focused instead on their shared political and moral conviction that freedom was for the many, not for the few. Interracial and proto-feminist anti-slavery groups rejected patriarchal admonishments that they avoid "promiscuous conversations . . . with regard to the things 'which ought not be named'" and to practice the "modesty and delicacy which is the charm of domestic life."²¹

Anti-slavery women felt their activism was urgent because Black people, both enslaved and free, were bound up with the system of slavery. They most frequently approached their anti-slavery work from their privileged position as nineteenth-century mothers who celebrated their freedom and that of their children and encouraged other mothers to teach their children about personal liberty.²² As they saw the crisis of slavery becoming more pronounced and the futility of male leaders to overthrow a system that the women described as a "national sin," they believed that there was nothing feminine about remaining silent. They argued that faithful women must act to preserve the nation's soul. Their radical abolitionist feminism compelled them to defend one another's honor against male clerics and the political press which worked to debase them.

Historians who study women's political participation in the northern abolitionist movement encounter the Grimké sisters from Charleston, South Carolina at every turn. They stood out in their own time and continue to animate the historian's imagination today as sisters born into a wealthy slave holding family who used their intimate knowledge of Southern slavery to convincingly write and speak about the horrors of the slave system and the urgency of the immediate emancipation of

two million enslaved persons in the United States. For Northerners who did not see slavery unfolding before them, the Grimké sisters' choice to unflinchingly lay bare the realities of slavery helped to stir them from apathy. In her "Appeal to Christian Women of the South," published in 1836, Angelina Grimké wrote to those whose culture she most understood because it was the culture into which she was born. She carefully exegeted, beginning with the Hebrew Bible everything that could be said about the system of slavery.

She asserted that in the Christian Creation stories, man was given authority only over "irrational" living things and that there was nothing about God's command to have dominion over living creatures that at all anticipated that humanity would sinfully extend that command to permit them to dominate one another. Turning to the Christian Scriptures, she asserted that Jesus never outwardly condemned slavery because Jewish law did not permit the cruel system of American slavery. She encouraged the women who read her words to turn to the Scriptures to see if they interpreted them the same way she did, to pray about the system of slavery, to write and speak with everyone they could about the institution of slavery, and, if they felt moved to change, to immediately emancipate their enslaved people. Although they were women, Grimké believed that the Biblical examples of women including Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Elizabeth, and Anna should be their guide. In the face of wicked laws, she believed the only thing they could do as Christian women was to defy them.

Also, in 1836, Angelina Grimké's older sister Sarah also wrote to protest Southern slavery. Sarah Grimké framed her ideas in the form of a letter to the clergymen of the Southern states. Her argument proceeded in much the same way her sister's "Appeal" did with an exegesis of the Scriptures, beginning with the Creation story.²³ Based on the harsh reception the sisters received from Northern ministers, it is unlikely that Sarah Grimké's epistle was well-received by the Southern

clergymen whom she addressed. Although the letters were similar in their content, the difference between the letters was that Angelina wrote as a Southern Christian woman to other Southern Christian women while Sarah wrote to Southern clergy as a fellow Southerner whose critique of slavery was rooted in her interpretation of the Christian Scriptures that clergy taught her to hold dear. Angelina wrote to the women who knew her and those who did not because she was interested in relating to them as a sister. Sarah wrote to the clergy who had helped to shape her Christian theology to remind them that the teachings they instilled in her and other Southerners must be connected to immediate action.

The Grimké sisters used their writing to supplement their public speeches because their writing could be printed and distributed to people throughout the United States. Published tracts gave the abolitionist movement legs that it did not possess otherwise for those who had never heard an abolitionist's speech firsthand. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, and other abolitionist writers, wanted to correct the record about who abolitionists were and what they wished to accomplish through the abolition of slavery. For Angelina and Sarah Grimké, along with scores of other radical abolitionist women who maintained their Christian faith, the models for womanhood they found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures revealed to them that Biblical womanhood was not about subservience to male authority. Rather, they argued that the examples of powerful women in the Bible indicated that women were central activists in the Biblical story. They believed they were also called to be central activists in the American Christian story.

Organizational reports indicate that freeborn Black women in the North formally collaborated with white radical abolitionist women in Anti-Slavery Societies. However, those reports obscure that Black women throughout the nation of all social classes, literacy levels, and freedom statuses refused to wait passively for white women to join abolitionist efforts. Black women were

moved to anti-slavery ideologies long before white women were. This is a fact that anti-slavery histories often elide because gendered notions that “women” are to be protected made Black women, whether enslaved or free, invisible as scholars such as Angela Davis, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Sarah Haley have demonstrated in their work.²⁴

Nineteenth-century anti-slavery Black women proved that they were not the “poor Negroes” that white woman led anti-slavery groups often claimed that all people of African descent were. Black women also did not depend on men to protect them from slavery or any other form of anti-Black oppression. Instead, they courageously led themselves and each other to freedom. They worked fearlessly and tirelessly to protect themselves and their children. Despite the terrors of everyday life, they were determined to find the joy and the beauty in their freedom. As historian Tera Hunter has argued, neither white Northerners or Southern slaveholders understood what the joy of freedom signified for Black women. However, Black women were determined to endeavor to make meaning of their freedom and to make their lives worthwhile.²⁵ For women who identified as radical abolitionists, slavery’s immediate abolition was a moral issue of the highest order, and they insisted that as women they were uniquely qualified not only to speak about it, but also to act in major ways to defy it. They believed that to fail to speak out against slavery and to assert the importance of equal rights for people of all races and genders constituted a failure to “be good.”

Because women could not legally vote in the antebellum United States, many abolitionist women exercised influence in their homes and among their social groups to achieve their goals. Radicalized women of all races gathered in mutual aid groups, literary societies, and anti-slavery organizing groups to ensure their desires would not be thwarted. Such gatherings posed a unique danger for Black women both free and enslaved not only because of the mandate that women perform softness and gentleness to be protected by respectable men, but also because of the

Fugitive Slave Law of 1793. The 1793 law, which was expanded in 1850, was created to allow slaveholders to retrieve their enslaved people even when they crossed over state borders, allowed the arrest and seizure of any Black person deemed to be a “fugitive from justice” based on the oral testimony of an agent or attorney.²⁶ The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society described the law as an “unmerciful and revolting scheme” because it turned the North into what they called “a hunting-ground for slaveholders in pursuit of human game.” The Society also noted that many free Black people were already kidnapped annually even prior to the 1850 expansion of the Fugitive Slave Law. They believed that the expanded Fugitive Slave Law would only lead to more kidnappings.²⁷

Like enslaved Black people in the South who wondered how to find their loved ones after they were separated by sales, the families of free Black people in the North were left grieving after their loved ones had disappeared, presumably after being kidnapped and carried South. Whether in the North or the South, Black life in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century was marked by grief and terror as even free(d) people wondered how to maintain their tenuous grasp on freedom. While life was already challenging for free(d) Black people before the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the law meant that an increasing number of free Black women in the North endured arrest and imprisonment to defend their freedom. Their kidnappings and “returns” to the condition of slavery points to the impossibility of freedom for people of African descent in the United States. Even before universal emancipation, free(d) Black people endured slavery’s long afterlife.

In the antebellum era, free Black people in the North were always outside of the category of the “Americans.” For example, in antebellum Boston, free Black people lived in a segregated portion of town, on the West End of the Beacon Hill neighborhood, which came to be colloquially called “Nigger Hill.” Transportation, lecture halls, and entertainment venues were segregated. Free Black people in the North were met with daily insults in the streets, and their job prospects were limited.²⁸

Even the annual Boston Directory, which was created as a resource book which included the names of the city's inhabitants and other useful information for the community was racially segregated. Rather than including them among the annual list of the city's inhabitants in the "Directory" section, people of color's names were relegated to a separate section labeled "Coloured Persons." Such designations relegated people of color in antebellum Boston to the category of the non-person. It reinforced the idea that although they were free, they remained inferior. The racial segregation within the antebellum North anticipated the Jim Crow jurisprudence that would emerge later in the nineteenth century. Despite the limitations placed on Black people, both free and enslaved throughout the United States, Black women, through their refusal to be held captive physically, intellectually, or spiritually, asserted that they contributed to American life as much as anyone else. They were willing to face any trial if it would guarantee their freedom to exist as all American men did. They desired the same for each other and for their children. From 1832-1852, in the face of mounting political pressure, Black women not only shared political sermons²⁹ in which they denounced slavery, they also lived their political sermons through their willingness to undergo any trial to assure freedom for themselves and others.

Setting aside for a moment the efforts of radical white women in the antebellum era whose Christian theology demanded that they fight for abolition and who quickly transitioned post-Emancipation to become leading women's rights activists allows us to focus on how Black women, both educated and not, elite and poor, also allowed their faith to guide their insistence that they, their children, and all other people in America be free. Unlike white women whose moral codes drove them to abolitionist work, Black women's lives were always at risk and always politicized. Nineteenth century white women chose feminism, but for Black women, it was an imperative if they wished to live well. While no Black women of the time described themselves using the language of feminism, their feminism is on full display in the ways they lived. When we think about women's

work in the abolitionist movement, we must think first of Black girls and women who, whether enslaved or free, were at risk because of the very color of their skin. In the face of discrimination, they chose themselves and each other.

Like their white female counterparts, Black women took extraordinary risks when they chose to speak about abolition in public spaces. Women, both Black and white, gained inspiration and a sense of authority not only from women of European descent such as the Grimké sisters who were raised among the wealthy slaveholding class in Charleston, South Carolina, and Frances Wright who was raised among the European aristocracy, but from a mixed-race woman of African descent, Maria W. Miller Stewart. Stewart first began her secular ministry as an abolitionist theologian after personal tragedy in the fall of 1831 (I will discuss Stewart's personal losses further in Chapter 3). However, the risks taken by the Grimké sisters and Wright were not equivalent to those Stewart took as a woman of African descent. Black women were always relegated in the nineteenth century to the category of non-human, and therefore ungendered. However, it was ironically public speaking that made Black women's bodies legible as women's bodies and therefore unfit to speak about their political concerns in public although they could work like chattel in public despite their gender. Black women's extraordinary abolitionist work in the antebellum era required them not only to reject normative womanhood but also to reject prevailing ideas about a Divine gender and racial order. For them, abolition needed to happen in the mind, body, and soul.

The records of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem, and the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, along with some of the writing published in the Ladies' Department section of abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, especially the writings and speeches of abolitionist

essayist, educator, and public speaker Maria W. Miller Stewart, provide insight into women's interracial anti-slavery organizing and women of color's mutual aid efforts from 1831-1852. The interracial groups were essential to the movement's success because white women's work in anti-slavery societies alerted white activists to the extent of the sin of slavery and racial prejudice.³⁰ If wealthy and well-educated women like the Grimké sisters and Fanny Wright were upset about slavery, apathetic white Northerners began to consider that it might be something that should concern them also. However, focusing solely on the formal interracial groups obscures Black women's diligent efforts to emancipate themselves and their entire race. Women of African descent were the definitive leaders of anti-slavery work post-1831, and they did not look to educated, wealthy, white women to overthrow the system. Black women's efforts to abolish slavery and racial prejudice reveal that while white women like Frances Wright and the Grimké sisters found slavery to be abhorrent, they lacked a commitment to ensuring racial equality. It was Black women whose efforts insisted that both slavery and the gender binary were crises and that both must be abolished.

Even among white abolitionist women, the idea that enslaved Black people could manage lives of freedom without white intervention was unthinkable. Wright believed that the only way to do service to emancipated people of African descent and the nation was to force them through a "real moral, intellectual, and industrial apprenticeship." While she asserted that the apprenticeship would do the first generation little good, she thought they might use their earnings to go to a free colony, perhaps on the African coast to "improve their habits." Wright advocated for furthering the damaging familial separation that occurred among enslaved people and free Black people whose loved ones were kidnapped because she insisted that "children, brought up distinct from their parents . . . might evidently be expected to effect more."³¹

Angelina Grimké was similarly concerned about the ability of enslaved Blacks to thrive as free people. In her “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” Angelina Grimké compared Black Americans to Jesus’ friend Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha in John, chapter eleven, whom Jesus raised from the dead. She exclaimed that some might ask how Black people could be raised when “they had been dead four hundred years.” She assured her white female readership that “*we have nothing to do with how this is to be done; our business is to take away the stone which has covered up the dead body . . . to expose the putrid carcass.*” She believed Anti-Slavery societies did the work of taking away the stone that entombed Black people, leaving God to do the work of making Black people functional members of society.³²

Unlike their white female counterparts, Black intellectual women rejected the idea that people of African descent should be sent to free colonies, that children should be separated from their parents, and that people of African descent had been dead and entombed for four hundred years. Yes, slavery was damaging, and it had damaged the bodies of many people of African descent and the souls of those who permitted it to continue. And yet, the Black religious, intellectual, and physical traditions remained intact. Because Black traditions survived four hundred years of degradation and had not become a putrid carcass, what is more compelling than what Female Anti-Slavery Reports say about the antebellum interracial feminist anti-slavery movement is what they illuminate about Black women’s resistance in the antebellum era, if we read *along the bias grain*, to borrow the method of Black feminist historian Marisa Fuentes. Fuentes’ reading method mines archival documents for traces of the lives of the Black women who are not explicitly represented within them. Reading along the bias grain allows historians and theorists to expand the legibility of archival documents to make visible the women who were spectral influences on every aspect of public life.³³ If we read the Anti-Slavery reports and mutual aid group records expansively, and include the bits of knowledge we gain by reading the constitutions of Black women’s groups and

essays and poems by antebellum Black women who were committed to religion and abolition, we find that beneath the platitudes and misunderstandings of anti-slavery white women lie the lively physical and intellectual (I group their theological work under the category of intellectualism) efforts of free and enslaved Black women, both within and outside of organized women's groups, to liberate themselves.

Because it was not possible for free or enslaved Black women to comply with any gendered expectations in the nineteenth century, their actions in the face of state violence expanded the meaning of womanhood. So that they would not be entombed within the institution of slavery and its afterlife as Grimké asserted they were, Black women in the antebellum era heeded Maria W. Stewart's call to possess "the spirit of men" in their public lives. Their necessary possession of a masculine spirit existed alongside their desire to be respected as women. Thus, they remade femininity, shifted understandings of who the American Christian woman could be, and forever shifted what it meant to be a Biblical feminist woman in the United States. Together, they produced what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes as a "progressive gendered and racialized representation of orthodoxy."³⁴ They clung to the Christian Scriptures when they advocated for gender equality. Maria Stewart and other proto-Black feminist Christian women refused to be bound by gender norms because those norms did not serve Black women well. The only ideology they allowed to guide them was their commitment to morality, which they often framed through a lens of Christian respectability. Nineteenth-century Black women defined morality as the relentless pursuit of freedom, and they were willing to possess a masculine spirit and to die to attain it.

How Black Women Re-Invented Freedom

While Maria Stewart and the Grimké sisters emerge as leading women in the abolitionist struggle, many women participated in it through Anti-Slavery Societies and mutual aid groups.

Sometimes freedom was to be found in enclosures and personal conversations between friends. The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society were three leading women-led abolitionist groups that emerged in the 1830s. The Boston group formed in 1833 and disbanded in 1840. The Philadelphia group was established in 1833 and dissolved in 1870. The Salem group was formed in 1834 and disbanded in 1866. The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society was inspired by the New England Anti-Slavery Society's work. Some of the women felt interested in the anti-slavery efforts and formed their society which was initially comprised of twelve members. The Boston women struggled against their city's aversion to the abolitionist political platform. The women were critiqued both for their politics which allegedly incited riots in the city and for the fact that they were openly political women. Their opponents critiqued them for their discontent with "their proper sphere, the domestic fireside." Yet, the women insisted that their "garment of womanhood" did not absolve them from the "duties of spiritual existence."³⁵ When they heard people admonish them for being openly political, they understood it to be a critique of their call to live as their religion inspired them to live. Abolitionist discourse in antebellum Boston was decidedly Christian in its tone. The Christian tone of their discourse was intentional. In a city managed by a powerful Christian establishment, abolitionists understood that they must frame abolition as a concern that was not only political, but also one that was moral and religious.

The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society boasted the leadership of several feminist white women. Like the Boston Society, the group was led by white women who identified as radical Garrisonian abolitionists and suffragists. However, the leaders also included women who were members of Philadelphia's Black elite. The group's elite Black members were Sarah Douglass, a Black educator and activist and Margaretta, Sarah, and Harriet Forten, elite free Black women. The Forten women were some of the group's founding members. The family's consistent commitment

to abolition communicates their belief that Blackness in antebellum America was a shared experience of degradation for all Black people regardless of their economic standing. Although Black women participated as founders of Philadelphia's anti-slavery efforts, they frequently were not represented among the group's formal leadership from year to year. Their exclusion was a problem for anti-slavery work. Elite Black Philadelphians in the 1830s had no personal experience living as enslaved people, but they did have personal experience living as Black people. For a group that claimed to hold a commitment to Black liberation to fail to include Black women's voices in its annual leadership was a grave oversight which reveals that perhaps anti-slavery societies were concerned exclusively about the moral crisis of slavery without a sustained commitment to creating the social conditions that would allow free(d) Black people to thrive in the United States.

In her account of the interracial relationships within the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society's, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar writes that Sarah Douglass and Sarah Forten, in separate letters to Angelina Grimké and Sarah Grimké both recounted the racism they encountered as elite, free Black women in the urban North. For example, Douglass told Sarah Grimké that she was not allowed to sit with white Quakers at the meetings because there was a bench set aside for the people of color. Meanwhile, in her letter, Forten was unashamed to declare to Angelina Grimké that many so-called abolitionists were racist in their interactions with Black people and preferred to remain racially segregated.³⁶ Douglass and Forten's experiences despite their status as members of the elite Black community point to the importance of Black people being leaders in their own liberation. While Northern sentiment was generally opposed to slavery, white Northerners continued to benefit from racial prejudice, and white abolitionists were not immune to that prejudice.

The Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society had a more complex racial history than the Boston and Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Societies. The Female Anti-Slavery Society history in Salem

demonstrates the invaluable contributions that Black women made to abolition in the nineteenth century. The Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society that was formed in 1834 replaced a group that was formed in 1832 by women of African descent. While Philadelphia is often treated as the center, alongside New York City and Boston, of abolitionism in the United States, the Black women of Salem definitively situated their town as a fourth leading abolitionist center. The group formed by women of African descent in 1832 was called the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem. Members of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem wrote to William Lloyd Garrison in 1832 to inform him that in a recent speech in Salem he had erroneously stated that people of African descent had not formed any Anti-Slavery Societies. They thought that it was important that he know about their work in Salem. Garrison publicly corrected the mistake by reprinting their letter in *The Liberator* along with their constitution in which they described themselves as “females of color, of the commonwealth of Massachusetts” who convened “for [their] mutual improvement, and to promote the welfare of [their] color.”³⁷

Although the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem was a short-lived Black woman led political project that was replaced in 1834 by an interracial women’s anti-slavery society, their innovative efforts pointed to a general trend among Black women in the antebellum era. As historian Martha Jones has argued, free Black women did not know precisely where they fit into the new anti-slavery politics.³⁸ However, it was their very landlessness and dispossession that made their courage possible. They formed new spaces from which to protest because unlike many of their white female counterparts, they understood as Black women, both elites and non-elites, that they had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

What fails to emerge through the annual Anti-Slavery Society reports is the diligent work that women of African descent, both free and enslaved, did to support the abolitionist effort.

Women of color frequently worked together to care for each other and to improve the status of people who shared their race. The Ladies' Department section of abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* chronicled the stories of the groups of women of color that formed before 1835. These were mutual aid groups in which the women cared for each other through literary endeavors, prayer, advocacy, and raising funds. The women responded to what Black feminist theorist Saidiya Hartman has described as the "lived experience of enclosure and segregation" by gathering together. As Hartman described it, mutual aid is a "queer resource of Black survival."³⁹ Indeed, these groups seem to have been a queer survival resource for antebellum Black women. Under conditions that seemed to demand that they make themselves invisible or disappear altogether, the moral groups they formed to sustain each other made their lives livable and pointed to the possibilities of freedom for enslaved people. In the mutual aid groups, they held each other accountable, fortified themselves spiritually, pursued intellectual projects, and cared for each other in times of need. These mutual aid groups included the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem which formed in 1818, the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, which formed in 1831, and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston, which formed in 1832.

The Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem's constitution stated that the group came together in 1818 when they boasted forty to fifty members. Death and other challenges caused the group's size to decrease. The group's constitution was reprinted in the February 16, 1833 issue of *The Liberator* to announce that they were returning to their work. Their ten-article constitution explained that they met once a week and began all their sessions by reading a "profitable book, till all have come in who are expected." When members arrived, the constitution explained that they would begin with prayer and a reading from a chapter of the Bible, followed by a discussion about religion. Four times per year, group members would have a time of fasting and prayer. Group members also agreed not to ridicule each other and to maintain confidentiality within

the group. They offered membership to all women who were willing to abide by their rules. The dues to belong to the group were fifty-two cents per year. The group also held themselves to a high moral standard by refusing to allow any member who was accused of a “scandalous sin” of being part of the group until she gave “evidence of her repentance.”⁴⁰ What constituted a particularly scandalous sin or how members proved they were repentant is impossible to discern from the constitution, but what the group’s agreements do reveal is that free Black women held each other accountable for their actions.

On June 30, 1832, Garrison wrote in *The Liberator* that on a recent visit to Philadelphia, he met with the Female Literary Association, a group of educated women of color in Philadelphia. When he met with them, they had about twenty members. He called the Association “one of the most interesting spectacles” he had seen because of their sense of moral worth and intellect. The group members assembled every Tuesday for “mutual improvement in moral and literary pursuits.” The women who participated in the group shared their writing with each other anonymously. Garrison collected some of the pieces and in later issues of *The Liberator*, in the Ladies’ Department section, he began publishing some of the women’s writings to encourage other women of color to also share their sentiments in writing.⁴¹

One of the women from the group whose writing Garrison published wrote under the pseudonym Zillah. In a piece called “To a Friend,” Zillah wrote that she was “cast down, but not in despair” over American legislation. She explained in the piece that she had read of the Quakers, and in her reading, she stumbled upon an account of a Barbara Blaughton whom she described as a “young and timid woman, who, with the help of the Almighty, was enabled to endure cruel persecution, not only with patience but with joy.” Zillah explained that she read that Barbara was severely whipped to the point of bloodshed, but she sang songs of praise to God and rejoiced that

she was “counted worthy to suffer for his name.” As Barbara sang, her abuser became angry because she sang praises to God when he expected her to yell in pain. Zillah encouraged her readers to have a portion of Barbara’s fortitude in the face of suffering.

Zillah told her readers that God was on their side. She wrote that she saw with the “eye of faith” through the “veil of futurity” that they had an advocate around whom free(d) people gathered. Zillah saw a vision of a mother with an infant who approached their advocate unable to speak, only crying tears of gratitude. Through her veil of futurity, Zillah also saw people of all races mingling without disgust. She wrote that she heard “no wailing” and “no clanking chains.” This future which had not yet come to past was what made Black feminist hope possible. Despite what she could see in the present, beaten mothers, wailing, and clanking chains, Zillah believed in a world that was yet to be but that she and other women like her could imagine. In the final paragraph of her piece, Zillah anticipated that her readers would ask her how this change would come about. She told them that religion, the “religion of the meek and lowly Jesus” would reorient their world.⁴² For Zillah, religion was not about a set of doctrinal beliefs as it was for the white clergymen of the North. Rather, for Zillah, religion only had meaning if it compelled people to change their actions and governments to overthrow unjust systems. Zillah’s writing indicates that free Black women remained resolute despite the challenges of their lives. They were sustained as they navigated their challenges as free women and worked to overthrow slavery because of the fortitude of enslaved Black women coupled with their assurance that God was concerned about the cause of freedom. They believed that God was actively working to bring a future of justice for them, and they had only to work collaboratively with God to yield this future.

The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston functioned similarly to the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem. Like the Salem group, the Boston group was

comprised of women of color from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts who gathered to supply mutual aid to each other. The twenty-one articles of their constitution detailed specific responsibilities for each member of their leadership. The group's constitution indicated their commitment to being together with regularity as one article stated that those who missed the monthly meetings would be fined six and a quarter cents unless they could provide a reasonable apology for their absence. However, group members were also committed to caring for each other. Any group member who was sick would receive one dollar a week from the group's funds so long as the group could afford to support them. All candidates for membership were expected to be of "good moral character" and would receive the votes of the current membership. If members left the group, they could transfer their membership to any person who was approved by the rest of the group. The group also had one rather unexpected article. Article seventeen stated that "any member becoming obnoxious, may be removed from the society by a vote of the majority."⁴³ The constitution provides no insight into what behavior might be called obnoxious, however, what is clear is that group members held themselves and each other to high ethical standards. The group was a place for order, and within the safety of that order, group members could dream about the possibilities of the future they would co-create.

While the leadership within the Female Anti-Slavery Societies indicates that women of African descent led the abolitionist movement, usually from a place of deference to white women, the histories of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem, the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston provide ample evidence that Black women made their own freedom, inspired in large part by enslaved Black women. Free Black women's recognition that they must respond to the plight of the enslaved women of the South indicates that as theorist Angela Y. Davis asserted, Black women were at the center of the enslaved community.⁴⁴ The efforts of women of

color in the North indicate that Black women were also at the center of the community of free(d) Black people. However, it is only by reading along the bias grain of Anti-Slavery Society reports from the 1840s and 1850s that we can understand the depth of Black women's commitment to freedom.

The Cost of Black Girlhood

Annual Reports from the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (an interracial men's anti-slavery organization) in 1850 and 1851 reveal that free Black women faced legal trials, incarceration, sale, and death as they worked to maintain their freedom. Their trials force us to consider the value (or nonvalue) of free Black people, and especially free Black women and girls, after the criminalization of the transatlantic slave trade and in light of the Fugitive Slave Act. The insight that the anti-slavery reports provide into how the women responded to capture while they were free indicates how slaveholders and abolitionist valued them. However, more importantly, the accounts indicate that to the women, freedom was invaluable. They were willing to take great risks to maintain their freedom, even while others treated them as pawns in a political system.

In 1853, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society published their nineteenth annual report about their work. In the report, the group celebrated the international reach of their work as they had spent the year corresponding the Bristol and Clifton Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society and helping to begin an anti-slavery newspaper called *The Anti-Slavery Advocate* in London. The Bristol and Clifton group was a woman-only auxiliary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. The group received enslaved people who had escaped to freedom, and, because of the Fugitive Slave Act were unsafe even in the free states. For example, the group's 1851-1852 report recounted their meetings with William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft. One of the group's passions was

ensuring that ministers in Britain refused to open their pulpits to American ministers who refused to openly condemn the Fugitive Slave Law.⁴⁵ Like their American counterparts, the British women spoke directly and openly to men about what they perceived to be their political failures.

Amidst their celebration of their activities during the preceding year, the Philadelphia women included the harrowing story of Rachel and Elizabeth Parker. Rachel and Elizabeth were freeborn girls from Chester County, Pennsylvania, on the outskirts of Philadelphia. In December of 1850, they were kidnapped and taken to Baltimore where they were incarcerated while they awaited their trial. A Baltimore trader took Elizabeth to New Orleans where she was sold. The Philadelphia report provides no insight into the help that Elizabeth received from her friends that helped liberate her and return her to Baltimore to continue to await her trial with her sister. The Parker sisters were proven in 1851 to be free because there was overwhelming evidence in their favor.⁴⁶ The report shared their story perhaps to congratulate the group for a success story from the past year and to provide evidence that free Black people were at risk because of the Fugitive Slave Laws. However, the report contains no direct quotes from the sisters about their experience or from any of the supporters who helped secure their freedom. Even for abolitionists, Black women became the object and not the subject.

Despite the failures of the report, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society's passing account of what happened to the sisters indicates both the life-and-death risks that slavery posed even to free Black women and the resilience and courage of Black women in the face of extraordinary circumstances. The Parker sisters were incarcerated and placed on trial for moving freely in their Black bodies. Elizabeth Parker could be sold to New Orleans despite her free status. Even after the grave injustice of being kidnapped, unjustly incarcerated, and sold, she still was forced to return to a jail in Baltimore before she and her sister endured a trial to prove their free status.

While the Philadelphia report framed their experience as a victory for abolitionists, all the story proves is that Black women's lives in the nineteenth century were not their own. The report does not provide insight into how the Parker sisters felt safe to return to free life after learning that their freedom was always in question. Would they be able to produce sufficient evidence to prove their freedom again in the future?

Not all Black women who were stolen from freedom (or whose freedom was stolen) had the success the Parker sisters did. In their annual report in 1850, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (an anti-Garrisonian interracial group whose leaders were all men, but whose meetings women could attend) expressed outrage on behalf of the people of the free states for the cruelty shown to a young woman named Emily Russell. In 1849 (or perhaps in January of 1850), notorious slave traders named Bruin and Hill captured young Emily near Washington, D.C. They wanted to sell her for a large sum, and they incarcerated while they waited for the price they sought. When they did not receive what they believed to be a sufficient sum for her, they sent her further South.

Emily's mother, Nancy Cartwright, learned of the incident through a letter from Emily, which Emily addressed from Alexandria, Virginia on January 22, 1850, from Bruin's Jail. Cartwright was a free Black woman who lived in New York. She was known for her piety. She had purchased her own freedom and had secured freedom for many of her children through hard work and with the support of friends. Cartwright was appalled by the information her daughter shared. In her letter, Emily stated that she was captured with her Aunt Sally and her children and her Aunt Hagar and her children. She wrote in a pleading tone, begging her mother to come to her as soon as she could, because she feared she was soon to be sold further South. From the page, one can almost hear her cries as she wrote, "my dear mother, come now and see your distressed and heartbroken daughter once more. Mother! My dear mother, do not forsake me, for I feel desolate. Please come now."

Emily told her mother that if she could not make it all the way to Alexandria, to at least try to visit Washington, D.C. and see what could be done. Perhaps Cartwright was not confident in her own ability to write, because the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Report states that it was a friend of the family who wrote to Bruin and Hill on Cartwright's behalf to ask what price they would take to release Emily.

On January 31, 1850, Bruin and Hill wrote back to Cartwright from Alexandria. They stated that at the time they received the letter, they had "not yet bought the negroes." The admission that the group was new to them raises questions about where Emily, Sally, and Hagar, and the children had been before. Just how long had they traveled? How many hands had grasped onto them before they arrived in Alexandria? In response to the question of how they might persuade Bruin and Hill to bring Emily, Hagar, Sally, and the children back home, the terse letter stated, "All I have to say about the matter is that we paid very high for the negroes, and cannot afford to sell the girl Emily for less than EIGHTEEN HUNDRED DOLLARS" (emphasis in the original text). They continued to explain the extraordinary price for Emily by saying, "This may seem a high price to you, but Cotton being very high, consequently Slaves are high." Even while they stated a price for Emily, it seems likely based on the sentences that followed that there is no price they would have accepted for her. They explained that they had two or three offers for Emily from gentlemen from the South. They stated that the offers were sensible because she was "said to be the finest looking woman in this country."

The pairing of the rationale for Emily's high price being both her capacity to work in cotton fields and her beauty and desirability as a woman points to the complications of Black womanhood in the nineteenth century. Emily was rendered, through her kidnapping, incarceration, and sale, simultaneously the nonhuman other and the hyper-desirable woman. Because of her Blackness and

her woman-ness, she would perform both backbreaking labor in the fields and sexual labor in white men's households. Her experience points to the excessive nature of Black women. As theorist Terrion Williamson has framed it, "as a 'free' worker under capitalism, the individual has no value: only his or her labor power has value." However, in her analysis of the Black teenage girl, Williamson finds that the typical models of capitalist production and reproduction are upended as the young, unmarried, Black girl exists outside of all bounds thus, exposing the "fault lines of capitalist (re)production."⁴⁷

Williamson's idea that the Black teenage girl with boundless productive and reproductive capacity represents something excessive, something more, something boundless, is supported by the rest of Bruin and Hill's letter. The seemingly money-starved slave traders explained that for Hagar and her seven children, they would take \$2,500, and that for Sally and her four children, they would take \$2,800. They explained, "you may seem a little surprised at the difference in prices, but the difference in the negroes makes the difference in price." Bruin and Hill's vastly different treatment of a young, unmarried, Black woman without children and her aunts who both had multiple children reinforces the idea that Black people were not fungible. One could not simply be exchanged for each other. There were differences, and those differences mattered in the market economy. However, the difference in the market value between the unmarried and childless girl and her aunts also shows the contradiction at the heart of Blackness. How can Black girls be simultaneously the forgotten, the erased, the neglected, and the most valued?

Sadly, Emily's story did not end as the Parker sisters' story had. Bruin and Hill advised Cartwright and others who supported her that if they wanted to save her, they had better work quickly. They planned to start South with Emily, Hagar, Sally, and the eleven unnamed children on February 8. While the report indicated that there was no further correspondence on the issue, it

seems that Bruin and Hill went ahead with their plan to go South with their captives. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Report does not say how long Cartwright took to respond to the troubling letter from Bruin and Hill. No doubt, after all the effort she had put into purchasing her freedom along with that of several of her children, she felt extraordinary grief as she was confronted with the reality that for no other reason than the boundless potential of her young, childless, beautiful Black female body, Emily was soon to be stripped away from her. Within a week, she likely did not have sufficient time to collect funds that could be received in Alexandria before the group moved again. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Report stated that on her way into the Southern market, Emily Russell died.⁴⁸ Emily Russell's story is much like Elizabeth Parker's story, but the stories had wildly different conclusions. How did Elizabeth survive her harrowing journey from Chester County to Baltimore, to New Orleans, and back to Baltimore? How did Elizabeth survive to defend her freedom alongside her sister? Why did Emily never have a chance to live? What might have happened if she had been allowed to defend her freedom in a court of law? The answer to such questions cannot be known.

Together, the examples of Elizabeth and Rachel Parker and Emily Russell, shared in passing in lengthy anti-slavery annual reports demonstrate that white abolitionists were not the leaders of the radical abolitionist efforts in antebellum New England. Elizabeth, Rachel, and Emily's stories indicate that young Black women in antebellum America literally defended their freedom with their bodies. Emily's letter also demonstrates that in times of trouble, young Black women did not turn to radical abolitionist groups, they turned to the women who loved them. Emily did not use her paper and pen to alert political groups and to ask for their help. She used her paper and pen to plead that her mother help her. She did not ask her mother for financial help. She did not even ask her mother to rescue her. She simply pled with her mother to come to her "now." The temporality in which Black women demanded their freedom in antebellum America was now. They could not wait.

Emily's pleading indicates that the politics of freedom for young Black women were intimate. When she was locked away because of her Black skin, freedom to Emily meant being safely with her mother right now. She demanded nothing less and nothing more. For Emily, freedom meant the ability to relate safely to the people she loved. Slave holders had desires to profit off young Black women and white abolitionists also profited from Black women's struggles, but Emily Russell's story indicates that freedom for Black women meant being themselves and being known by one another.

Reimagining Gender

In the face of violent conditions, enslaved and free Black women's courageous choices to put their lives on the line to defend their freedoms forever shifted what it meant to be "a lady" in the United States. They shifted ladyhood because the category did not serve them at all. Even the most elite and respectable Black woman could not be a lady as their white counterparts were. Their very existence was an affront to the category of the "woman." Although group reports and constitutions from the nineteenth century indicate that white women were often the official leaders of female anti-slavery societies, Black women abolitionists, both free and enslaved, took critical risks that shaped early feminist history and determined the strides feminism must make at the turn of the twentieth century. By necessity, Black women redefined the terms and terrain of American womanhood. In a time that enforced a domestic double standard on Black women by expecting them to care for the private sphere of the home and look up to men while also requiring them to hold jobs outside of the home to supplement the family income, thereby placing them at risk of sexual violence,⁴⁹ Black women chose not to focus on becoming more proper ladies. Instead, they focused on achieving only one goal—freedom.

Black women, who were free, enslaved, and on the spectrum between the two, in antebellum America lived a Black feminist and radical abolitionist theory through their everyday actions. In her

October 1831 essay, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” abolitionist Maria W. Stewart addressed Black women directly, asking them how long they would continue to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles. Stewart’s reference to iron pots and kettles that buried Black women’s minds and talents indicates that pots and kettles were objects with which free Black women were intimately acquainted despite their free status. Many Black women in the North and the South the antebellum era worked as domestic servants in white households. Even *The Liberator* included weekly advertisements from households that sought Black domestics. Advertisements seeking “three respectable colored girls” and “a smart colored boy” and “a young colored girl, from 8 to 12 years of age” appeared with some regularity in the newspapers’ pages.⁵⁰ Although they were free, Black children and Black women continued to be the primary people upon whom white households in the North depended to tend to their domestic needs. This was a reality that even white people who called themselves anti-slavery uncritically accepted.

Stewart maintained no illusions that white people would change their minds about Black women unless Black women took an active role in changing what was believed to be true about them. Therefore, she urged them to begin to possess independent spirits as “the Americans do.” Stewart recognized that Black women were perpetual outsiders because for them “the rupture was the story.”⁵¹ The possibility of belonging in America or anywhere else was a foregone conclusion, but the possibility of living free remained. She was determined that she and other Black American women would live free even if the “Americans” did everything in their power to make Black women’s freedom impossible. Furthermore, Stewart named the differences between women because of race. She wrote, “the American ladies have the honor conferred on them, that by prudence and economy in their domestic concerns, and their unwearied attention in forming the minds and manners of their children, they laid the foundation of their becoming what they now are.”⁵² While

Stewart's analysis overlooked the privileges that made the "American ladies" prudence and economy in their domestic concerns possible, it also recognizes that in America, Black women existed outside the gendered university because they could not receive the privileges of women in white patriarchal households. This means that the category of woman was produced divergently.⁵³ The divergent experiences of woman forced proto-Black feminist Stewart to reconsider the meaning of the term in light of her experience as a Black woman.

To gain their freedom, Stewart argued that Black women must shapeshift. Here I deploy Black feminist ethnographer Aimee Meredith Cox's definition of shapeshifting, which describes how Black women and girls in the United States confront, challenge, invert, and unsettle systemic oppression. Shapeshifting is a theory, but more importantly it is a praxis.⁵⁴ It is a mode of insurgence and refusal. Stewart urged Black women to do something that for women whose gender afforded them social protections would have been unthinkable. The shapeshifting Stewart recommended was for Black women to "possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted." She reminded them that they might die if they sued for their rights and privileges but that they would certainly die if they did not. She explained that this fearless affect was something that God demanded of them, and that if they were only virtuous enough, God would elevate them so that they would "begin to flourish."⁵⁵

Stewart's encouragement to Black women who were assailed by men and by whiteness to possess the spirit of men points to the extent of the power that was bound up in masculinity in the nineteenth century. Like whiteness, masculinity became a sort of property right that Black women could not possess. For some, the inability to be powerful in the limited way that Americans defined power frustrated and discouraged them. Yet Stewart urged Black women to think again about what they could and could not do. She assured the "great and mighty men of America" that they could

“kill, tyrannize, and oppress” as much as they wanted, but the cries of people of African descent would “come up before the throne of God.” She informed her oppressors that God would plead their cause and would inform them that “our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired.” She reminded white Americans that it was the blood of her ancestors and the tears of her comrades who enriched America. She was unafraid of those who could kill the body and do no more.⁵⁶ Perhaps being too intimately acquainted with loss and death as a nineteenth century person of African descent stopped Stewart from being too afraid of death. She believed there were many fates worse than death, and the most damaging of these fates was to lose one’s soul.

When Stewart urged her fellow women of African descent to “possess the spirit of men,” she was not urging them to appropriate a white American masculine spirit. She knew the damage that the white American male spirit had done, and it was not something in which she desired to participate. Instead, Stewart urged Black women to possess a different sort of masculine spirit that completely transcended the gender binary as it was understood by those she called “the Americans.” To Stewart it was clear that Black women must reinvent the very terms and terrain of gender if they wished to survive in the Americas and assure the kind of future for their offspring that white American women assured for their children. As a woman who worked tirelessly for women’s rights, Stewart’s words pointed to gender itself as a kind of prison, especially for Black women.⁵⁷ If they wanted that future, they must not aspire to white female femininity, instead they were to refashion femininity because of the distinctiveness of the experiences of Black womanhood.

Like her contemporary Sojourner Truth who, on the abolitionist speaking circuit bore her breasts to the audience as evidence of her womanhood, Maria Stewart understood that Black women were not included under the umbrella of womanhood. Both women’s approaches to gender point to

a sort of trans* feminism that Black feminism has always incorporated.⁵⁸ I borrow the term trans* feminist from Marquis Bey and Kai M. Green who argued, that trans* “like blackness, can be embodied, but it actually marks a certain kind of orientation in the world, it is not fixed though always precarious.”⁵⁹

Stewart did not womanhood to become yet another prison or captive space for Black women. She recognized their precarity and wanted to point them toward a new way of orienting themselves in the world. Stewart did not seek to cross over from feminine to masculine. She was not ashamed of her gender, nor did she want to shrink away from it. Rather, she understood that Black women’s freedom meant going to some otherwise place that was yet to be created, but that she could imagine; this was a trans* future. Like Zillah of Philadelphia, Maria Stewart possessed the eyes of faith that allowed her to see through the veil of futurity to a world of freedom and justice. The problem was that not everyone had the eyes of faith. The lack of the Black feminist hermeneutic Zillah, Maria, and so many others had meant that they could not see the freedom possibilities that lay on the other side of the veil of futurity.

Conclusion

While women in the United States had participated in politics since the colonial era, 1831 marked the beginning of new forms of participation as some pursued a radical abolitionist political vision. Their radical abolitionism was in direct opposition to the position of many of the anti-slavery clerics who believed that abolitionists, and especially abolitionist women, sought to destroy the unity of the Church. However, the women were not interested in the anti-Black visions of peace that white Northern anti-slavery clergy offered. The women sought the kind of peace that could only emerge through personal and nationwide repentance. That is, they demanded immediate change in their society and believed that only after the change could they find peace.

While the archives yield bountiful stories of white women's participation in the anti-slavery movement, Black women's contributions to the anti-slavery movement are often obscured. Among women, Black women were those who were most directly impacted by the ravishes of slavery and anti-Blackness. Therefore, it is essential that we read Anti-Slavery Society documents along the bias grain, yielding additional space for us to see Black women's contributions to the movement. These documents tell the stories of enslaved and free Black women who courageously claimed the freedom they believed their nation should freely offer to all people regardless of race and gender. Black Christian women especially felt that freedom was a Biblical principle. For them, abolition of bondage in all its forms was a theological imperative.

While Black women such as Maria W. Stewart, Sarah Mapps Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Margaretta, Harriet, and Sarah Forten, were active abolitionists, Black women public speakers and writers took extraordinary risks to make their voices heard. At times, as was the case for Truth, they revealed their bodies to prove that although they were women, their voices must be heard in a highly immoral society. Young, childless Black women especially found that the nation needed all aspects of their labor, and free Black girls, especially in the 1840s and 1850s were carried off and sold into slavery. There can be no doubt that the most precarious social positionality in nineteenth-century America was held by Black women, and especially young, childless Black women. However, Black women's lives in the antebellum era were about so much more than suffering. Their work in mutual aid societies indicates that they dedicated their lives to caring for each other in a nation state that refused to care for them. Freedom for them looked like growing morally and spiritually, thriving intellectually, and relating to each other. Freedom was something that they demanded now.

Despite the challenges of Black womanhood in the antebellum United States, Black women consistently recognized that if they wanted liberation, it was for them to accomplish for themselves.

For them, liberation did not mean overthrowing an unjust system and remaking themselves as the white patriarchs of America, instead, they envisioned a different sort of world that was governed by what they understood to be Divine authority. They worked together to gain the wisdom they would need to produce a new world that did not yet exist, but that they believed must begin to exist if they were to flourish. They recognized that they lived outside of the gendered universe, and from that place of disempowerment, they envisioned new ways to think about and live into gender. Their intellect and praxis were proto-Black feminist and set the stage for what feminism would become by the turn of the twentieth century. Their souls were on fire.

¹ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016) and Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, 1. ed., 2. printing (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Pr, 1993).

² Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 13.

³ Richard Boles, *Dividing the Faith: The Rise of Segregated Churches in the Early American North*, Early American Places (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 200.

⁴ "Declaration of the National Anti-Slavery Convention," December 6, 1833, American Congregational Library.

⁵ William Lloyd Garrison, "The 'Infidelity' of Abolitionism" (The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), American Congregational Library.

⁶ "Refuge of Oppression," *The Liberator* (Reprinted from the *Boston Commercial Gazette*), June 3, 1835, Boston Athenaeum.

Jim Crow was a minstrel routine that was first performed in 1828. It came to be a derogatory and anti-Black term.

⁷ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 266.

⁸ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 93-94.

⁹ John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 64.

¹⁰ "Report of the Boston Female Anti Slavery Society; with a Concise Statement of Events, Previous and Subsequent to the Annual Meeting of 1835" (Boston: Published by the Society, 1836), 5.

¹¹ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 2.

¹² The sisters from South Carolina frequently spoke throughout New England to demand slavery's immediate abolition. Angelina Grimké did the unthinkable in 1838 when she addressed the Massachusetts State legislature. The building was filled to the brim with people who were eager to hear her speak. See Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition*, Rev. and expanded ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹³ See Frances D'Arusmont, "Biography and Notes of Frances Wright D'Arusmont" (Boston, 1849), Boston Athenaeum.

¹⁴ "From Mr. Winslow's sermon in "Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society with a Sketch of the Obstacles Thrown in the Way of Emancipation by Certain Clerical Abolitionists and Advocates for the Subjugation of Woman" (Boston, No. 25, Cornhill, 1837), American Congregational Library, 52.

¹⁵ Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "What Is the Matter? A Political Address as Delivered in Masonic Hall" (Masonic Hall, New York, October 28, 1838), Boston Athenaeum, 8.

¹⁶ "Document 21: General Association of Massachusetts Congregational Churches, 'Pastoral Letter,' 28 June 1837 | Alexander Street Documents," accessed September 20, 2021.

¹⁷ "From Mr. Cooke's Sermon" in "Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society with a Sketch of the Obstacles Thrown in the Way of Emancipation by Certain Clerical Abolitionists and Advocates for the Subjugation of Woman" (Boston, No. 25, Cornhill, 1837), American Congregational Library, 51.

- ¹⁸ John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 17.
- ¹⁹ Much of this debate plays out in *Their Opponents and Their Friends*, “Statements Respecting the American Abolitionists” (Dublin: Webb and Chapman, Printers, Great Brunswick-Street: The Bristol and Clifton Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, 1852), Boston Athenaeum.
- ²⁰ “Pastoral Letter”
- ²¹ “Pastoral Letter”
- ²² “Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society with a Sketch of the Obstacles Thrown in the Way of Emancipation by Certain Clerical Abolitionists and Advocates for the Subjugation of Woman” (Boston, No. 25, Cornhill, 1837), American Congregational Library, 35.
- ²³ Angelina Emily Grimke, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” (Adam Matthew Digital, 1836), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and Sarah M. Grimke, “An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States,” 1836, Boston Athenaeum.
- ²⁴ See for example Angela Davis, “Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Black Scholar*, 1971, 1–14, Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81, Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), and Sarah Haley, “‘Like I Was a Man’: Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (September 2013): 53–77.
- ²⁵ Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).
- ²⁶ “The Constitution of the United States with All the Acts of Congress Relation to Slavery” (D.M. Dewey: Arcade Hall, Rochester, NY, 1854), Boston Athenaeum, 17.
- ²⁷ “The Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Presented at New York” (William Harned, for the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, May 7, 1850), American Congregational Library, 85-86.
- ²⁸ See Richardson and Ebony A. Utley, “A Woman Made of Words: The Rhetorical Invention of Maria W. Stewart,” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway (Burlington, Vt.: Hanover: University of Vermont Press; Published by University Press of New England, 2007), 58.
- ²⁹ I am borrowing the phrase “political sermons” from the Marilyn Richardson chapter, cited above.
- ³⁰ Ryan Jordan, “Quakers, ‘Comeouters,’ and the Meaning of Abolitionism in the Antebellum Free States,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 4 (2004): 596.
- ³¹ Frances D’Arusmont, “Biography and Notes of Frances Wright D’Arusmont” (Boston, 1849), Boston Athenaeum, 28.
- ³² Angelina Emily Grimke, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” (Adam Matthew Digital, 1836), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 28.
- ³³ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 78.
- ³⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 123-124.
- ³⁵ “Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society” (1836), Boston Public Library, 14, 50.
- ³⁶ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 91-93.
- ³⁷ “Document 8: ‘Constitution of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Formed February 22, 1832,’ *Liberator*, 1... | Alexander Street Documents,” accessed September 20, 2021.
- ³⁸ Martha S. Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*, First edition (New York: Basic Books, 2020).
- ³⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).
- ⁴⁰ “Constitution of the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem,” *The Liberator*, February 16, 1833, sec. Ladies’ Department, Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁴¹ “Address to the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia on Their First Anniversary,” *The Liberator*, September 25, 1832, Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁴² Zillah, “To a Friend,” *The Liberator*, April 1, 1832, Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁴³ “Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston” (*The Liberator*, January 7, 1832), Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁴⁴ Angela Davis, “Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Black Scholar*, 1971, 1–14.
- ⁴⁵ “Special Report of the Bristol and Clifton Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society During Eighteen Months With a Statement of the Reasons of Its Separation from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society” (London, 1852), Boston Athenaeum.

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- ⁴⁶ *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, Printers, 1853), 11.
- ⁴⁷ Terrion L. Williamson, *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life*, Commonalities (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 108-112.
- ⁴⁸ “The Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Presented at New York” (William Harned, for the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, May 7, 1850), American Congregational Library, 106-107.
- ⁴⁹ See Marilyn Richardson, “Maria W. Stewart: America’s First Black Woman Political Writer,” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway (Burlington, Vt. : Hanover: University of Vermont Press ; Published by University Press of New England, 2007), 28.
- ⁵⁰ See the Wanted advertisement in *The Liberator*, June 30, 1831 and “An Excellent Situation” in *The Liberator*, January 5, 1832.
- ⁵¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 1. ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 42.
- ⁵² Maria W. Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 37.
- ⁵³ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 99.
- ⁵⁴ Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 7.
- ⁵⁵ Maria W. Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 38.
- ⁵⁶ Maria W. Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 38-41.
- ⁵⁷ See Marquis Bey and Jesse A. Goldberg, “Queer as in Abolition Now!,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 159–63.
- ⁵⁸ Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation,” *Souls* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 438–54.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 444.

Chapter 3

“She Really is a Remarkable Person”’: Care, Memory, and Black Futurity in the Advent of Freedom

But, as it is, she is really a remarkable person, considering all under which she has labored; and I hope now, as our Heavenly Father has permitted her to live to see the injustice that has been done to her, she may be spared still many years to enjoy life as she never has before; and when life’s journey is ended here, she will then receive her reward, for her work has been well and faithfully done on earth. -Louise C. Hatton, Boston, May 28, 1879

Remembering differently was a proto-Black feminist practice of care that destabilized colonial authority in the late-nineteenth century United States. The practice of what I call re-membering put together the fractured records of Black Americans’ lives during the antebellum era to create the conditions for Black survival and freedom in the post-Emancipation upper South. In this chapter, I track the practice of re-membering through the life of Maria W. Miller Stewart, a leading abolitionist whose intellectual contributions were discussed in the preceding chapter. This chapter joins other work in the fields of Black Studies, Black women’s history, and gender history that have rightly noted Maria W. Miller Stewart’s remarkable contributions to abolitionist and women’s history. However, it focuses on an understudied period of Miller Stewart’s life—her later years as a struggling educator and caregiver in Washington, D.C. This chapter studies this period in Stewart’s life through the lens of friendship, thus building on a central contention in *Tried as by Fire* that abolitionist theology is at its core about relationality, intimacy, and ultimately the love that holds the potential to remake broken worlds.

In 1867, in Washington, D.C., Louise C. Hatton, a non-Black woman,¹ met Stewart, a mixed-race woman of African descent. Hatton provided personal details about herself, nor did she explain how she came to know Stewart. However, the 1878 city directory of Washington, D.C. indicates that Hatton was employed at the intelligence office in Northwest Washington, D.C. According to Hatton, between 1867 and 1879, she and Stewart formed a friendship. In the context of their friendship, Miller Stewart requested Hatton’s support. Because of Hatton’s efforts on her behalf,

paired with the revolutionary memories of aged Black residents of Boston, Stewart achieved justice that had been denied for nearly fifty years. Stewart's ability to leverage her friendships to achieve political ends points to the urgency of relationship in achieving feminist political objectives.

When she met Louise Hatton in 1867 in Washington, D.C., Miller Stewart was sixty-four-years-old, and she was an active religious educator in the city. When they met, Hatton did not yet know that in 1832, Stewart became the first United States-born woman of any race to address mixed audiences of men and women. Stewart began her abolitionist and proto-Black feminist political and religious public speaking and essay writing career in Boston, Massachusetts in 1831. Stewart had, from her late adolescence, been engaged in a proto-Black feminist and womanist un-ordained ministry to Black people generally and Black women specifically.² However, by 1867, she had been living in Washington, D.C. for fourteen years weathering what historian Thavolia Glymph has called "the women's fight," that is, the way that American women of all ages, races, and social classes participated in the physical and ideological battles of the Civil War.³ Hatton wrote that she was drawn to Miller Stewart because when she interacted with her, "there was a quiet sadness and melancholy of expression which, to a close observer, denoted a life of sorrow and disappointment."⁴ Miller Stewart was consistently serving others, but she often moved apart from a community, shunned because of her insistence upon religious education and her dogged commitment to the often anti-Black Episcopal Church. However, her close relationships with Hatton, several leading Black ministers, and several Black friends and acquaintances she met through the years, and their advocacy on her behalf, allowed her to obtain some level of justice before her death.

Miller Stewart was born Maria Miller in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803 to free parents. She died at the Freedman's Hospital in Washington D.C. in 1880. During the intervening years, she lived in Boston, Massachusetts, Williamsburg and Long Island, New York, and Baltimore, Maryland. In each of these cities, she distinguished herself as an abolitionist and educator. History remembers

Miller Stewart as the first United States-born woman of any race to address mixed audiences of men and women. She began her political and religious public speaking career in Boston, Massachusetts in 1831.⁵ Whether or not she was aware of the tradition of proto-feminist theologians of white European descent who came before her, in 1831 she joined a lineage of women in the United States who used theological language to make their voices heard. Their proto-feminist speech was radical, not only in its content, but also because it was unexpected in a nation-state that thrived off the erasure of voices that did not belong to European men who owned property.⁶

Maria W. Miller Stewart was one of several women of African descent in the nineteenth-century United States who, as literary theorist Carla Peterson⁷ has put it, framed themselves as doers of the Word of God. They pursued their religious zeal by preaching, teaching, and advocating for the end of slavery. They advocated for others, but rarely did anyone advocate for them. At age thirty, when she considered her life, Miller Stewart called it a “complete disappointment.”⁸ Perhaps her disappointment is unsurprising, and it might have been shared by many of her contemporaries. She became an orphan at age five. She was sent to live with a clergyman’s family where she remained until age fifteen. During her time with the family, she worked as their domestic laborer. Although she was born into freedom, she never received the chance to enjoy a childhood. She writes that she learned virtue and piety as a servant in the clergyman’s household, but she received little to no formal education. After leaving the clergyman’s home, Miller Stewart lived independently for almost a decade and attended Sabbath schools to learn about the Bible.⁹ During those years of independence, she began to formulate ideas about religion, race, women’s rights, and slavery that she would later courageously share with audiences.

Maria Miller wed James W. Stewart, a mulatto (mixed-race) shipping agent at the First African Baptist Church on Belknap Street in Boston, Massachusetts before the Rev. Thomas Paul on August 10, 1826. Rev. Paul was a leading Black minister in the city for many years. According to

the 1826 Boston Directory, Paul was one of two men who pastored Black churches in Boston that year.¹⁰ The First African Baptist Church met at the African Meeting House, an abolitionist meeting house where Miller Stewart gave one of her early speeches. The choice of location for their union and the choice to have Rev. Paul officiate demonstrated their interest in Black liberation politics. When Miller and Stewart wed, she took on her husband's last name and middle initial. The groom, a shipping officer, was many years older than his then twenty-three-year-old bride. Archival records reveal that James Stewart was "about 30" when he enlisted in the War of 1812, and his death certificate indicates that he was fifty years old at the time of his death in 1829.¹¹

After her husband's untimely death, white businessmen profited from his death, and Miller Stewart was defrauded of what would have been a substantial inheritance.¹² Despite the painful experience, she never gave up on the possibility of justice; she encouraged other "fair daughters of Africa" to "sue for [their] rights and privileges." She noted that they might "die if [they] make the attempt," but she encouraged them to move forward anyway because "[they] shall certainly die if [they] do not."¹³ In 1831, Maria W. Miller Stewart became the first United States-born woman of any race to speak before audiences of men and women. Her politics demanded immediate justice for women of African descent in the United States, and she encouraged Black women to advocate for themselves in courts of law.

Miller Stewart said nothing in her surviving essays and devotionals about her relationship with her husband before they wed or about their experiences as a married couple. As had been the case for abolitionist theologians since Phillis Wheatley, Maria W. Miller Stewart refused to allow her marital status to define who she was or who she would become. While we can imagine that she married both for social and economic stability and out of a feeling of romantic love, after James Stewart's death, she focused exclusively on her love for God, and how that love would determine her future choices. In her writings, Miller Stewart focused not on her late husband, but rather on the

challenges she faced as a widowed Black woman, and her activist life. For the fifty years after her husband's death, Miller Stewart never remarried or had biological children. In her publications, she often called herself "Mrs. Miller Stewart." In her autobiographical account, she explains that she "was left a widow in 1829" and "brought to knowledge of the truth, as it is in Jesus, in 1830; in 1831 made a public profession of [her] faith in Christ."¹⁴ Although records indicate that Miller Stewart was a church goer before her marriage, it was not until after she became a widow that she felt her conversion to Christianity was complete. Her feeling that she was not converted until 1830 raises the question of how unmarried Black women might have experienced Christian theological principles in ways that diverged from their married peers. Perhaps there was something about the precarity of being Black, female, and without biological kin in nineteenth-century America that necessitated a different sort of conversion. This second kind of conversion, borne out of necessity and a desire to be connected to others, linked Miller Stewart with the community of people of African descent in ways she had not necessarily been connected before 1830.

Throughout her adult life, Miller Stewart was consistently serving others, but she often moved apart from a community. Even while she was all-consumed with her work of serving the free(d) Black community, her essays and speeches indicate that she faced rejection, loneliness, and profound loss. Her life was a series of contradictions. However, the events that occurred in her final years indicate that perhaps she was more beloved than she originally believed. When her book of essays and speeches, which she called *Meditations*, was republished in 1879, Louise Hatton was among the small group of individuals who wrote glowing letters, remembrances, and commendations¹⁵ about Maria W. Miller Stewart to include with the book. Notably, Hatton was the only woman to write a commendation that was included in the book. Like the contemporary book review, these commendations not only encouraged readers to purchase "Mrs. Stewart's book," they also told parts of the story of the unique woman who had penned the writings contained within the

book. Without their memories, there would be large gaps in our knowledge of Maria Miller Stewart's incredible life. While the writers had only known Miller Stewart as an adult which leaves lingering questions about how she was shaped by the losses of her adolescent years, their choice to remember her and to share their memories about her points to the lingering impact she made on the people she met between 1829 and 1867. Although the commendations are valuable to those who wish to know more about her life, they also indicate the overwhelming specter that overshadowed Black women writers, preachers, and intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century United States. As Phillis Wheatley had in 1773, Maria W. Miller Stewart needed to furnish evidence from others who were considered to be more reliable than herself that she indeed was a producer of intellect.¹⁶ However, there had been some evolution since Wheatley's publication in that Black men's voices were among her supporters, along with the voice of a presumably white woman. Rather than writing two paragraphs of support, they each returned to their memories of her to piece together the fragmented pieces of her life. This chapter treats their labor of re-membering Miller Stewart as being part of the intimate practice of care.

The name Maria W. Miller Stewart is familiar to many contemporary Black feminists and gender historians because she was "the first." However, the designation of being "the first" indicates that Miller Stewart opened a door through which others could also enter. Because of Louise Hatton's labor, Miller Stewart's legacy of abolitionist work was remembered even after her death. Her story was shared with women in the upper south who, like Hatton, were not aware of her antebellum-era work. Miller Stewart belonged to a community of proto-Black feminist women who worked collectively to end of racial and gender violence in nineteenth-century America. As has been demonstrated by Black feminist literary scholars, sociologists, and historians, Miller Stewart was the earliest public figure in an intellectual tradition which came to be called by the late 1970s, Black feminist thought.¹⁷ She is one of the first women whose names and deeds are evoked in Patricia Hill

Collins's sociological study *Black Feminist Thought*, Kristen Waters and Carol B. Conaway's edited volume *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions*, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's anthology *Words Like Fire*. All three texts treat her writings as an origin story of Black feminist thought in the United States.

These scholarly works rightly celebrate Miller Stewart for her accomplishments in 1830s Boston. They situate her as an early intersectional thinker who protested both racial and gender oppression during the slave era. However, by focusing almost exclusively on the words Miller Stewart said between 1831 and 1833 in Boston, Massachusetts, this scholarship also relegates Miller Stewart to the status of a symbol. While many of Miller Stewart's words are known to us through her writing, we know little about the quotidian experiences that shaped the fabric of her life. She fails to say in her writings how she related to others. Orphaned at a young age, widowed after a brief marriage, and childless, she arrives to us as a sort of queer performer with no present and no past.¹⁸ The queer nature of her life both marginalized her in the sense that she was even more unprotected than other free Black women living in the Americas in the nineteenth century and liberated her in the sense that it allowed her to travel, free from the constraints of marriage and the private home. Ironically, what liberated Miller Stewart from complete obscurity is her status as orphan and widow. Because she was both orphaned and widowed her legacy cannot be easily obscured by male figures. In part, it is because she is not attached to a leading male activist that she is so often forgotten or footnoted. However, the isolation she experienced in her time is often reproduced in the ways that contemporary scholars write and think about her life. Scholars must consider how Stewart survived. To what networks of care what she connected? How did she find hope and possibility in the face of extraordinary loneliness and disappointment?

Proto-Black feminist practices of care allowed Black women including Maria W. Miller Stewart not only to survive, but to become free during the nineteenth century. While this chapter cannot compensate for the loss of details about Miller Stewart's everyday life, it can use the

commendation letters found at the beginning of *Meditations* to explore how others remembered and cared for Miller Stewart. Writing and re-membering were part of the urgent practice of care for abolitionists in the nineteenth-century United States. A close reading of the letters helps us to accomplish a few things. First, the letters allow us to fill in some of the chasms the archive leaves about our knowledge of Miller Stewart. While none of the letter writers can speak to how she survived her adolescent years in Hartford, Connecticut without any biological kin, they provide some insight into how she spent her adult years. Second, the letters are a reminder that Maria Miller Stewart was not completely isolated. She found ideological allies and supporters at each stage of her adult life. Third, the letters are humane. Each writer provided a level of intimacy and care in the way they remembered Miller Stewart that allows us to confront the humanity that has so frequently been stripped away from Black activists. In the rush to transform Miller Stewart and other activists into a symbol of the Black radical tradition, the reality of their lives as full humans with human joys and sorrows has been neglected far too often.

To support the 1879 publication of *Meditations*, Miller Stewart received commendation letters from prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and leading pastors, Alexander Crummell, William Jefferson, and Henry Bailey. The inclusion of letters from Crummell, Jefferson, and Bailey to support the publication of *Meditations* indicate Miller Stewart's commitment to antebellum African American Churches. Miller Stewart herself was a member of the African Episcopal Church denomination, and "religion" shaped her approach to abolition.¹⁹ While institutional Black churches in nineteenth-century America had yet to ascend to the level of relevance they had among Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century,²⁰ Miller Stewart's commitment to serving in Black churches indicates the relevance of Black institutional churches in the lives of Black women in nineteenth-century America. It was in Black religious spaces that Black women were most adamant

about opposing the gender conventions that limited them.²¹ They believed that if they set their souls free, their minds and bodies would follow.

This chapter provides a close reading of what Garrison, Crummell, Jefferson, and Bailey remembered about Miller Stewart because their memories provide insight into how some of the leaders in abolitionist and religious circles might have perceived her. However, this chapter focuses on the letter of support Miller Stewart received from Louise Hatton. Hatton's letter of support for Miller Stewart and the advocacy she did to work toward economic and legal justice for Miller Stewart allows us to explore how women of all races in the nineteenth-century United States claimed freedom for themselves and each other on their own terms. While women living in the United States have never been equal to each other because of raced, classed, and sexual divisions, they have collectively recognized the failure of their nation to grant people of their gender equal rights under the law. They never passively waited to receive those freedoms. Instead, they worked collaboratively to care for each other and to advocate for justice. Without the care that Louise Hatton and other supporters, friends, and acquaintances provided, our knowledge of Miller Stewart and her work would be even more limited than it is. In nineteenth-century America, women did the caring labor of preserving each other's memory.

Through Hatton's efforts to recover parts of Maria Miller Stewart's life that had been intentionally obscured in Massachusetts courts, we learn how truly "remarkable" of a person Maria W. Miller Stewart was. In this chapter I explore the personal, interpersonal, and political shifts in antebellum America that might have compelled Miller Stewart to seek out "knowledge of the truth" after her husband's death. I also examine how the knowledge Miller Stewart gained in antebellum America as a Black woman abolitionist without kin and her constant efforts to advocate not only for other members of her race, but also for herself, reveals the intimate proto-Black feminist politics of care that newly emancipated Black women cultivated to ensure their futurity in the advent of

freedom. Care, for Miller Stewart and her contemporaries, was about guarding memories of each other. Re-membering was the intimate practice of putting fragmented thoughts together. These thoughts helped those who were part of the racial, gender, and sexual underclass in the nineteenth-century United States to through what the nation state said about them into crisis. They were makers of a more complete history. Together, they re-membered so they could make sense of the past, create a more just present, and ensure Black futurity.

A study of the support she received when she published her memoir *Meditations* in 1879 reveals that she survived not only because she was extraordinary, but also because of the care she received from communities of people, who, like her, were committed to freedom. In remembering Maria Miller Stewart primarily as a symbol for Black women's liberation, her life and her words have been stripped of their radicalism. She was more than a symbolic figure, she was an intellectual who shifted the thinking of not only white Americans, but also her fellow free Black Americans.²² It is politically urgent to re-member not only Miller Stewart's radicalism but also the radicalism of the people with whom she shared an ideological community and insured that she and other Black Americans would have justice. Our knowledge, not only of Maria Miller Stewart, but also of the world she inhabited for seventy-six years, will be enriched through a study of her life after she left 1830s Boston. The trajectory of her life as remembered by those who lived it with her, provides insight into the lives of the many Black women who were born in early nineteenth-century America and died post-Emancipation.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, it considers the conditions that necessitated Maria W. Miller Stewart's labor in 1830s Boston. This section will consider Miller Stewart's relationship with William Lloyd Garrison and the distinctive nature of proto-Black feminist abolitionist thought. Second, this chapter considers the how Miller Stewart's work in Black churches allows us to expand our understanding of what it meant to be a Black religious woman in late-nineteenth-century

America. This section will also frame Miller Stewart as a necessary unofficial minister to the free Black community in post-war Washington, D.C. Finally, this chapter considers the role of friendship and memory in feminist political organizing. It considers the impact of Maria W. Miller Stewart's pursuit of her late husband's pension and her receipt of the pension in 1879 meant for newly-freed Black women in the United States. It argues that without proto-Black feminist politics of care, Black women would not have survived life in the Reconstruction-era South. This chapter engages with the work of scholars who study religion, race, gender, and abolition in the antebellum United States alongside the work of scholars who have studied the same categories in postbellum America. My primary interlocutors in this chapter are historians Wilma King, Martha Jones, Angela Y. Davis, Brittney Cooper, Valerie Cooper, Sarah Haley, Tera Hunter, and Thavolia Glymph and literary and cultural theorists Saidiya Hartman, Hazel V. Carby, Marilyn Richardson, and Carla Peterson.

This chapter will provide a close reading of the commendations Miller Stewart received to support the publication of her book *Meditations*, which contained several of her devotional essays and autobiographical writing through a Black feminist lens. In this chapter, I treat memory as a form of care by following the lead of feminist archival theorists whose work on mining silence, refusal, and incommensurability point us toward the insurgent possibilities that nineteenth-century African American women shared with the world.²³ This chapter takes Louise Hatton's words to heart, Maria W. Miller Stewart was a remarkable person. In fact, she was one of a large number of remarkable people of African descent in antebellum America who achieved justice for themselves by remembering each other. A Black feminist approach to studying the lives of Miller Stewart and her contemporaries allows us to consider anew what characteristics they possessed that made them so remarkable. Treating Miller Stewart and her cohort as intellectuals allows us to seriously interrogate what wisdom about re-membering as part of the work of justice and the intimate practice of care they might have to offer us in our time.

Maria W. Miller Stewart: Abolitionist

Abolishing chattel slavery and ideologies that produced drastic power imbalances between the white landowning class and other Americans was the primary feminist problem in nineteenth-century America, and it continues to be the primary feminist concern facing today's activists. Black women have consistently led this feminist struggle.²⁴ As an abolitionist, Maria W. Miller Stewart was first inspired by Black liberationist David Walker, a southern-born Black man who was born to a free mother and an enslaved father.²⁵ He possessed a spiritual zeal for Black freedom which is perhaps captured most clearly in his September 1829 "Appeal to the Coloured [sic] Citizens of the World." While Walker's "appeal" was addressed to all marginalized people globally, he wrote especially to Black people who lived in the United States, and he did nothing to conceal his rage about the conditions in which they lived. Walker's "Appeal" was published in the Black-owned journalistic publication *Freedom's Journal* which ran for a brief time from March of 1827 until March of 1829. No doubt, the far-reaching and long-lasting impact of Walker's spirited writing demonstrated to Maria W. Stewart the value of writing to the success of the abolitionist movement.

In his appeal, David Walker described himself and his fellow Black Americans as the "the *most wretched, degraded and abject* set of beings that *ever lived* since the world began" (emphasis in original text). In his writing, Walker framed America as a Christian nation, arguing that white Americans treated enslaved Black people in a manner that was more degrading than the treatment they would have received in a nation that was not founded on the basis of a Protestant Christian worldview.²⁶ Walker's primary Scriptural evidence was from the Book of Exodus. The Book of Exodus, which was also used by European settlers to justify their conquests in the United States, finds the Children of Israel were held in bondage in Egypt. In Exodus, an Israelite leader who understood Egyptian power structures led the Israelites into the "Promised Land" that God set aside for them. Through his use of the Exodus story, Walker deployed a sort of Black nation language of

conquest.²⁷ He believed the Black Americans were a chosen people. Although his language was militant, his choice of biblical passages indicated his concern about the well-being of people of African descent living in the United States. He wanted them to be victorious over white supremacist violence. The remaining question is, where did Black women fit into Walker's overtly militant vision for Black futurity?

David Walker interacted with James and Maria W. Miller Stewart as Stewart's shipping business was beneficial to help Walker spread his words broadly among Black Americans. After her husband's death in 1829, Miller Stewart suffered yet another loss when Walker died of unknown causes in North Carolina in 1830.²⁸ No doubt, the grief she felt about Walker's death was compounded by the mystery that surrounded his death. It seems that other Black Bostonians who became acquainted with Walker during his time there were also shaken as rumors indicated that he died with a large bounty (perhaps \$3,000 or as high as \$30,000) on his head.²⁹ It was after the death of both her spouse and her intellectual mentor that Miller Stewart was converted, not only to faith, but also to a more definitive abolitionist political positionality. She did so during years that were filled with rumors of slave insurrections in the American South. Both in the minds of slaveholders and in the bodies and minds of people of African descent, it was time for radical and immediate change, and slaveholders feared that they would not be satisfied with the results of the changes.

For Miller Stewart, abolition was not only about ending slavery. It was also connected to efforts to ensure Black equality in the North and the South and to liberate women from gendered oppression. Her abolitionist theology was a theology of proto-Black feminist care. She wrote in her essay "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," that this experience was "the change" which caused her to feel a "strong desire with the help and assistance of God, to devote the remainder of [her] days to piety and virtue, and now possess that spirit of independence that, were [she] called upon, [she] would willingly sacrifice [her] life for the cause of God and [her] brethren."³⁰ Although

she was born free, the freedom of all people of African descent in the United States was a life-or-death concern for Maria Miller Stewart and for some of the other free Black women in antebellum Massachusetts.³¹ Unlike some of the other leading abolitionist women of her time, Stewart possessed a Biblical proto-Black feminist epistemology that invigorated her abolitionist activism.

In 1831, Maria W. Miller Stewart publicly advanced herself as a leading abolitionist intellectual. In advancing herself, she did not consider her race or her gender to be inhibitors, rather, she did what she believed God wanted her to do. She was determined that people of African descent would no longer be silent. While she did not demand that they “kill, burn, or destroy,” as some of the more militant activists of the time indicated they should,³² she did advocate for each one to “improve [their] talents; let not one lie buried in the earth. Show forth your powers of the mind.”³³ Miller Stewart led her community in using their talents and “powers of the mind” to advocate for abolition. Her activist praxis indicated that if minds could be transformed, world-shifting action would follow.

Like many of her contemporaries, Miller Stewart used publication to reach a wider audience. One of the prominent abolitionists in Boston in 1831 was a white man a few years Miller Stewart’s junior named William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison founded and published, with the help of abolitionist bookstore owner, Isaac Knapp, the most widely circulated abolitionist newspaper of the antebellum period. The newspaper was called *The Liberator* and ran from January of 1831 until December of 1865. The paper framed slavery as a moral issue and often featured sections on morality and the virtues of religion for the maintenance of mental and physical health. It also included letters to the editor, notices of marriages, obituaries, and advertisements for employment. Garrison and Knapp published *The Liberator* from Boston, Massachusetts because of Garrison’s belief that New Englanders were too apathetic about the cause of enslaved people. In addition to sharing the news of the day and abolitionist discourse, *The Liberator* included information about women’s issues and

even sections called the “Juvenile Department” which explained the reasons why slavery must be abolished to young people through skits, short stories, and poems. Although the newspaper had much to say to and about women and children, their words were rarely printed in the weekly newspaper.

Maria Miller Stewart was one of very few women of any race whose words appeared in *The Liberator* during its thirty-four-year run. In the November 12, 1831 edition of the newspaper, Stewart is paternalistically described by Garrison as the author of “the little tract” called “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build.” Her writing was well-received in New England. After it was published, a Boston clergyman addressed a letter to *The Liberator* to express his satisfaction with her writing. He described her as a person with “sterling wit” and that her writing was “in some instances . . . truly eloquent.” He believed that the United States would one day “place her name among the very few and not among the many.”³⁴ Whether the clergyman wrote more about Stewart’s writing is difficult to know since Garrison did not include the date on which he received the letter or the clergyman’s name. The brief commendation tentatively acknowledged Stewart’s intellect and her value not only to people of African descent, but to all Americans regardless of their race.

William Lloyd Garrison’s approach to abolition was, by the time he launched *The Liberator*, radical, and it became even more so in the following decades. In the first issue of the newspaper, he admitted that during a July 4, 1829 at Boston’s Park Street Church, he had advocated for gradual abolition. However, by January of 1831, he recanted that position and asked forgiveness of God and others for having ever uttered it aloud. He would no longer be moderate. He wrote to those who disagreed with his immediacy using intimate and gendered analogies. To those who argued for moderation, he encourage them to “tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually

extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present.”³⁵ In the same issue of *The Liberator*, Garrison lauded David Walker’s radical abolitionist efforts. Although Walker had been deceased for nearly six months by January of 1831, Garrison, Miller Stewart, and other members of the abolitionist community remained highly influenced by his work. Some, like Garrison, praised Walker and his work while others were determined that no Black man could be so learned that he penned such a manifesto. They asserted that their opposition was not to the content of the pamphlet, but rather to the idea that Walker wrote it. Garrison wrote of Walker’s *Appeal* that it caused the North Carolina Legislature to sit “with closed doors.” He stated that southerners might be “reasonably alarmed at the circulation of Mr. Walker’s Appeal.” He also described the document as the best “promoter of insurrection” that was ever “sent forth to an oppressed people.” He wrote that a future issue would examine Walker’s *Appeal* because it was “one of the most remarkable productions of the age.”³⁶

Garrison’s response to Maria Miller Stewart’s abolitionist epistemology was more tempered. He wrote his April 1879 commendation in support of the publication of Miller Stewart’s book *Mediations* in the form of a letter which he addressed directly to her. The medium of the letter expressed the intimacy between abolitionists, as Garrison exchanged letters with many abolitionist women and supported their work. However, the tone of his letter also showed the incomplete nature of care along racial and gender lines. The line between care and paternalism was thin for Garrison. In his letter to Miller Stewart, he was careful to note that he wrote to her from the city of Boston, which is where they had first met in 1831. He celebrated being reunited with her after forty-six years. For years, they had lost touch with each other which he wrote left him wondering whether she was alive. He celebrated the rareness of being reunited in the flesh with one whom he had not seen in so many years. It seems that, for a time, they had shared intimate closeness because of their

ideological kinship. Their reunion reminded him of the relationship they had shared during the early days of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts.

Before he could describe Miller Stewart's work in antebellum Massachusetts, he recalled their first meeting using gendered terms. He wrote that when they met, she "had then not long been married, and were in the flush and promise of a ripening womanhood, with a graceful form and a pleasing countenance."³⁷ His gratuitous memories of her "flush" and "promise of a ripening womanhood," point to the voyeuristic surveillance of women of African descent in the antebellum United States even from those who purported to be their friends. However, it also points to the role of normative beauty in the political work of nineteenth-century political women. It raises the question of whether an older woman with a less "pleasing countenance" could have accomplished what Miller Stewart did during her years on the abolitionist speaking circuit. Considering his admiration to meet with a Black woman who had the "promise of a ripening womanhood," it is no surprise that abolition for Garrison meant safeguarding Black women's sexuality. In an 1853 edition of *The Liberator*, Garrison called for abolition, using enslaved Black women's sexuality as his weapon. He wrote that a million women in the United States had "no protection for their chastity." He noted that they could be "ravished" by their masters. He called the children who were born from sexual assault "illegitimate." He noted that their white fathers willingly sold them. However, Garrison's concern was not so much for the great injustice visited upon enslaved women and their captive offspring as it was for the "burning hell in the very bosom of our country—a volcano of lust and impurity."³⁸

For Garrison, and many other white anti-slavery activists of all genders, slavery was, at its root, a gendered problem because it left enslaved women without male protectors. Garrison understood enslaved women to be hapless victims of sexual terror because they had no male protectors. He also saw the very public nature of their persecution as a problem for the nation's

morality. Even for white abolitionists, it was the Black woman's body, its publicness and failure, or perhaps even its inability to be protected, that produced the moral crisis at the heart of racial slavery. The problem with enslaved Black women, for Garrison, was that they threw the fragile gender norms of the nineteenth century into chaos. Through the publicly unprotected nature of their bodies, they demonstrated that womanhood and the social norms that accompanied it was always race-specific.³⁹ Garrison was bound to the idea that each gender had a specific place in the social order. His inability as a white man to control Black women's bodies produced a crisis for him with which it seems that he struggled to contend.

For Garrison, abolition was, in large part, about ending the sexual immorality that arose because of slavery and safely restoring (or establishing) the nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood for Black women by placing them beneath Black men within the social hierarchy. Garrison wanted to remove Black women from the paternalistic grasp of white Southern men who sexually violated them and assumed that he and other abolitionist white men could better safeguard female sexuality. Regardless of whether they were enslaved or free, Garrison's words indicate that in his mind, Black women were not the keepers of their sexuality, rather their sexuality was a tool of empire and would be treated as such. Further the mixing of the races was a clear concern for Garrison, who framed his concerns using legalistic language of legitimacy and illegitimacy. No doubt, he was concerned about the crisis of the social standing of mixed-race people in the nineteenth-century United States. He had yet to imagine a world where Black people of all genders were on equal social footing with white people of all genders.

After noting, using gendered terms, what her appearance and demeanor had been forty-six years prior, Garrison returned to describing the intellectual relationship he and Maria Miller Stewart had cultivated in antebellum Boston. He remembered having met Maria Miller Stewart when she entered his office at *The Liberator* seeking his advice about her writings. She had written a series of

devotions and essays that were about the “class” of people to which she belonged because of what he called her “complexional identity.”⁴⁰ At the time, Garrison was shocked that a person of color wrote with such ability, although he recognized in hindsight that many other people of color also possessed similar aptitude. Garrison was so impressed by Miller Stewart’s intellect and skill that he immediately set out to publish her writing in the form of a tract. He shared her work with the Massachusetts abolitionist community and expressed pride about having been able to do so.

As Garrison reflected on the work that they had done together nearly fifty years earlier, the veteran abolitionist was self-congratulatory for the progress of peoples of color in the United States, which he takes much credit for having inspired. Taking a step back from celebrating his close relationship with Miller Stewart, the author of the work he was asked to commend, Garrison used his commendation to praise the significant progress that Black Americans made in the North and the abolition of the chattel slavery system in the South. While he acknowledged the ongoing violence against Black Americans in the South, he celebrated their ascendancy from “victims into full citizenship.”⁴¹ Garrison’s choice to use the idea that Black Americans were moving from victimhood into citizenship is compelling because he would have been well-aware of the debates over African American emigration to West Africa or Haiti that raged in antebellum America. The emigration debate was about citizenship and where Black Americans, once free, would belong as they increasingly found that there was no safe place for them in the United States.⁴² This question was especially fraught for Black women who navigated their changing place in a raced, gendered, and sexualized order that was constructed to negate their humanity.

Post-Emancipation, the complications of the conversation about Black citizenship continued, and Garrison rightly described the conditions facing the formerly enslaved as “pitiable.” After the Civil War, citizenship was redefined through the lens of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, adopted on July 6, 1868. This Reconstruction-era Amendment stated

that all persons born and naturalized in the United States were citizens of the United States and of their state. Further, the Amendment clarified that their state should do nothing to deprive them of their right to life, liberty, or property, without the due process of law. However, as Garrison himself notes, Black Americans, even post-Emancipation continued to be deprived of their right to life, liberty, and property with or without the due process of law. As cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman has described the transition from slavery to freedom, the experience shared by Miller Stewart and other free(d) Black Americans “marked the transition from the pained and minimally sensate existence of the slave to the burdened individuality of the responsible and encumbered freed person.”⁴³ While Black Americans in nineteenth-century America were not victims of white supremacy as Garrison’s words indicate, in both slavery and freedom, they were subject to and encumbered by it.

William Lloyd Garrison’s words indicate that he was not impacted by the ongoing violence against Black Americans post-Emancipation. His writing celebrated his activism and that of other Northern abolitionists while it effectively stripped enslaved Americans of their agency in their own liberation stories. His words overlooked hundreds of years of ongoing struggle by enslaved and free Black people of all genders to make themselves free and to define freedom in ways that honored their cultural values. While Garrison was a friend to Black Americans, he did not share their social positionality and he could not relate to it. Because she was not only Black, but also a woman who without any biological kin,⁴⁴ he could relate even less to Maria Miller Stewart. Although she had been his colleague in the struggle to abolish chattel slavery, their experiences within the abolitionist struggle were miles apart. While Garrison acknowledged the ongoing reality of what he characterized as “complexional prejudice,” he could not begin to comprehend the full breadth and depth of racism or of Maria W. Miller Stewart’s political demands. His words indicate that while he published her words, he never completely understood them.

Although he did not understand the full content of her political demands as a widowed Black woman in the nineteenth century, Garrison did understand that Miller Stewart was a life-long laborer. He celebrated that she spent the entirety of her adult life committed to the cause of racial justice through her work as an educator and her consistent provisions of mutual aid. He concluded with a prayer that she would have all the support she needed to continue her work. Garrison advocated for Black Americans and worked alongside many Black abolitionists. It was Garrison who ensured that the world would see Maria W. Miller Stewart's writings, and much of her extant writing exists today because he published it. Yet, his ways of remembering her point to the conditions that caused her to leave the abolitionist speaking circuit, and to leave the city of Boston altogether, in 1833.

Miller Stewart explained to those who heard her Farewell Address on September 21, 1833 on Belknap Street that she was leaving because others, whom she assumed because of their race, gender, or politics, would support her did not. She framed her critique of other members of the free Black community in antebellum Boston using the Christian Scriptures. She argued that God in God's knowledge, which according to Isaiah 55 is above human knowledge, had "unloosed" her tongue to "confound and put all those to shame that . . . rose up against [her]." It was in her farewell speech that Miller Stewart most overtly stated that she believed that she faced opposition from people of her own race because of her gender. She questioned why her gender should prevent her from providing leadership and speaking on the public stage. She reminded her audience that God had also compelled women to lead in Biblical times.

In her Farewell Speech, Miller Stewart took the opportunity to provide a feminist reading of the Scriptures. She recalled that in ancient times, God had empowered Deborah to be a judge over all of Israel, in Judges 4. Miller Stewart also remembered the role of Esther, a young Jewish girl who was married to a king who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia,

in saving her people, Mary Magdalene, a friend of Jesus, in being the first to declare Jesus' resurrection, and the Samaritan woman, whom Jesus met at a well in John 4, in recognizing the presence of Jesus in her town. Miller Stewart noted that St. Paul, a Christian apostle whose writings about the early Church were extensive, had declared that women should not speak in public. However, Miller Stewart was unconcerned with the command because she felt strongly that had Paul known of their "wrongs and deprivations . . . he would make no objections to [their] pleading in public for [their] rights." Miller Stewart's neglect of the Pauline admonishment points to her womanish desire that her particular experience be respected within the Christian story. She was disinterested in a Christian social ethic that did not speak to Black women's particular needs. She was resolute in her idea that God would use the "feeble" social state of Black women to bring about the new future that must happen. In the speech, she explained that she felt that the first thirty years of her life had been almost a "complete disappointment." She believed that God had "tried [her] as by fire."⁴⁵ Disappointment followed her throughout her adult life. She never escaped the divine fire. William Lloyd Garrison was long-suffering in his efforts to free Black Americans from the chains of chattel slavery, but he never felt the heat of the fire that Black people in the nineteenth-century United States endured.

Maria W. Miller Stewart: Converted Christian

Because the care she received within New England abolitionist social circles was incomplete, Maria W. Miller Stewart turned to churches for support. Her experience with churches exemplified the epistemological struggle of free Black women in America. Her public wrestling with faith allows scholars a rare glimpse into what otherwise was an internal struggle. Nowhere can we see the complicated political effort to discover what it meant to be Black, Christian, and female in antebellum America expressed more profoundly than we do in her speeches in during her years in Boston. Notably, Miller Stewart did not rely upon white Americans to liberate Black Americans.

While she understood the role of white supremacy in the challenges that she and other Black people faced, she refused to lay blame solely at the feet of white Americans for the ongoing Black struggle for futurity. In her writing and speeches, she consistently asserted her belief that Black people could be changed and thus ensure their own futurity.

Miller Stewart's calls for Black self-improvement, and her belief that Black women needed to lead the effort is clearest in her Spring of 1832 speech before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. The Intelligence Society was a group of free "women of color" in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts who convened because of "a natural feeling for the welfare of [their] friends."⁴⁶ In her speech before the group, Miller Stewart described herself as an advocate for "the cause of God and for the cause of freedom."⁴⁷ Her theological framework caused her to encourage for people of African descent to advocate for themselves. She did not believe they ought to turn to William Lloyd Garrison and other white advocates in hopes that they would provide leadership for Black women to follow. Instead, she argued that "God has said, that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto [God]. True, but God uses means to bring about [God's] purposes; and unless the rising generation manifest a different temper and disposition towards each other from what we have manifested, the generation following will never be an enlightened people."⁴⁸ Miller Stewart's understanding of Biblical theology was that God wanted people to care for each other. She believed in the power of God to do salvific work, and she also believed that the hearts of human people must be changed. Therefore, she advocated for Black Americans to rise up in defense of themselves. She advised them to care for each other and asserted that God turned away from them because of their failure to care for each other.

She concluded her remarks by providing a brief analysis of 1 Corinthians 13:1. Rather than deploying the passage in the way it is often incorrectly interpreted as a call for people to exhibit love in their interpersonal relationships, Miller Stewart correctly asserted that the passage was about a

need to cultivate Christian unity as a universal ethic. For Miller Stewart, religion was about more than personal responsibility or even deeply held personal beliefs. The value of a shared set of morals and ethics for her was about a collective experience of moving people of African descent from a state of degradation to a state of freedom and equality. For her, Christian theology was only useful insofar as it was collective. She resolutely believed that free(d) Black women were uniquely positioned to liberate the entire race because they were an example to their husbands and children. She felt a sense of urgency about the love ethic she proposed because she believed that without it, Americans of African descent would have no future.

Miller Stewart grounded her messages in her interpretations of Christian scriptures. Because Blackness is always a political positionality and Miller Stewart explicitly framed her political critiques using religious language, we must consider her to be a political theologian. Her speeches reveal that she was compelled by a sense of obligation and responsibility not only to herself, but to “her people.”⁴⁹ Although her ideas were sometimes controversial among other free Black Americans, Black liberation was always at the center of her personal politics. She thought and believed collectively. She felt moved by what she understood to be her Christian mission to speak out not only against racism, but also against the injustices done to the “daughters of Africa” in her speeches. Although Miller Stewart spoke for herself, she did so with a feeling of reverence to people of African descent, and especially to women of African descent.

In historical and literary studies examinations of Miller Stewart’s writings, many scholars situate Miller Stewart primarily as a political thinker. Indeed, Miller Stewart was a political thinker. The modern binary of religious versus political was irrelevant to her, as it was to many Americans in the nineteenth century. Protestant Christianity was a common lens through which to frame social and political concerns.⁵⁰ Miller Stewart’s theological language and her political language were one-and-the-same. As religious studies scholar Valerie Cooper explains, “when Miller Stewart inserts

biblical verses into her writing, they are not just stylistic flourishes; they are the heart and soul of her message.”⁵¹ Although Miller Stewart was not completely unique in her use of Christian Scriptures because framing the political using theological language was common in the nineteenth century, it is also important to take seriously her commitment to doing political work through her association with Black churches. Not only was Miller Stewart a public theologian, she was also a proto-womanist un-ordained minister in the sense that she was deeply concerned with the pursuit of wholeness for Black people and acted as a servant or caregiver to all in her community, even if they failed to care for her. As Black churches began to emerge, Maria W. Miller Stewart was one of the women who believed the social space that was cultivated within Black religious spaces was essential to ensuring Black futurity. From the time of her conversion to Christianity, she maintained her membership with Black Episcopal Churches and supported the work that was done by Black churches in other denominations.

Miller Stewart’s extant writings from the 1830s indicate that she was invested in decentering herself within her theology so she could focus on a rigorous study of what the Christian Scriptures meant for Black people. She did not concern herself with the dominant Scriptural interpretations by her male contemporaries. In fact, she never wrote about having close relationships with pastors or about what she learned from them although she interacted with them regularly at all stages of her adult life. Even a cursory reading of her work indicates that she interpreted the Bible by and for herself. Just as Black American women had a unique plight in antebellum America, Miller Stewart’s epistemologies were uniquely her own. Her insistence upon being a self-possessed woman drew some of the Black pastors she met during her work as an abolitionist and educator to want to relate to her despite their ideological differences with her. Unlike Garrison, they understood her to be a lively conversation partner.

Three pastors wrote in support of Miller Stewart's writing when *Mediations* was published. From the tone of the commendations and from what can be ascertained about her church membership in Washington, D.C., it seems that of the three she shared the closest relationship with Rev. Alexander Crummell. However, all three men were well-acquainted with her theological beliefs and her efforts as an educator, and all expressed care for her and admiration for her contributions to Black social life. Her first pastoral commendation was written by Rev. Alexander Crummell. Crummell was a prominent Black minister, intellectual, and Black nationalist, who in 1879 was serving as the founding pastor of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. St. Luke's Episcopal Church was built in 1879 and Calvin T.S. Brent, Washington's earliest known Black architect, is credited with the design. St. Luke's is the oldest African American Episcopal congregation in Washington, D.C.⁵² Crummell was born to a free mother in 1819 in New York. He received his theological education in the Diocese of Massachusetts after he was denied entry to the General Theological Seminary (an Episcopalian Seminary in New York City) because he was Black. He moved to England in 1848 where he graduated from Queens College in Cambridge in 1853.⁵³

Crummell, like Maria W. Miller Stewart, believed that Black Americans needed "moral uplift." No doubt, Crummell and Miller Stewart found common ground in their shared commitment to using theology and moral teachings to change the conditions facing Black Americans. However, Crummell did not only assert that free Black Americans needed to seek moral uplift. He also recommended that they remove themselves from the United States and live in African diasporic colonies. Sending free Blacks who had labored for so long to support the United States to nations that were unfamiliar to them was a project that Maria W. Miller Stewart opposed.⁵⁴ However, for Crummell, the effort to change the course of Black Americans' lives meant supporting the American Colonization Society (ACS), the organization that founded the West African colony of Liberia in 1821. The question at the heart of the colonization debate was whether people whose ancestors had

been brought to the colonies as enslaved persons could ever be acclimated as full citizens or whether, once manumitted, they should “return” to an unfamiliar homeland to begin again. The question was whether full Black freedom was possible in the United States. Colonization advocates argued that there was no future for an interracial democracy in the United States, therefore they argued that free Black Americans and their descendants be removed and placed in colonies in West Africa or elsewhere.⁵⁵ Their opponents disagreed with their pessimistic perspective and asserted that Christian people ought to strive to form an interracial community in the United States. Furthermore, they believed that manumission was happening at slower rates. Ironically, they asserted that the ACS was slowing the gradual death of slavery.⁵⁶

Unlike the emigration that many free Black Americans did during the antebellum era to escape from slaveholders, colonization was premised on the idea that Black Americans should be removed from the United States and placed in colonies the United States had created elsewhere to house and manage them. Some advocates for colonization proposed that the United States purchase Texas and place emancipated Black Americans within a colony there. For its advocates, colonization was understood to be financially and politically expedient. However, it also provided a way, in the minds of many who were opposed to slavery but remained anti-Black, to preserve the separation of the races.⁵⁷ Many Black Americans were opposed to colonization efforts because it undercut their efforts to become full citizens in the United States. Yet, Crummell was convinced that beginning again in the new colonies was wise. He moved to Liberia and made frequent trips to the United States to encourage free Black Americans’ emigration to West Africa. He encountered opposition in Liberia and chose to return to the United States and settle in Washington, D.C. in 1873 where he re-invented himself as a “missionary at large to the colored people.”⁵⁸

In his commendation supporting Maria W. Miller Stewart’s *Meditations*, Crummell recounted having met her some forty years prior in New York City after his return from the Oneida Institute in

Central New York. He noted that he and his friends were surprised to encounter a young woman of African descent who possessed literary ambitions because, at the time, “few young women in New York . . . thought of these higher things, and it was a surprise to find another added to their number.”⁵⁹ Crummell’s “surprise” at meeting Miller Stewart because of his belief that few young women thought about “higher things” indicates that while he believed in Black women’s intellectual potential, he did not expect it. His words indicate the depth of the violence antebellum Black women endured. The violence was both physical and epistemic. Neither white society nor Black men expected that women of African descent could make valuable intellectual contributions. For a woman to become a leader in her racial group meant that she must, in a sense, differentiate herself from the norms of nineteenth-century womanhood. She must consent to being accused of promiscuity and to being physically and socially unprotected.

Despite his dismissive affect about Black women’s intellectual potential, Crummell’s tone reflects the care of a pastor who wanted nothing more than to see a member of his congregation achieve her goals. He understood that although Miller Stewart’s life was much different from his because of their gender and class differences, their survival, and the survival of future generations of Black people were intimately intertwined. Despite the sexist ideologies that undergirded Crummell’s memories of a young Maria Miller Stewart, his account offers a necessary corrective to historical accounts that inadequately account for Miller Stewart’s humanity. His recollections about her fill in some of the blank spaces in Miller Stewart’s biography that Miller Stewart herself refused to fill. For example, Crummell praised Miller Stewart’s intellect because she had received only “six weeks’ schooling.” He thought the depth of her thought was remarkable. He also explained that because she could not pen her own ideas, a “little girl of ten years” had written down each word of the book. That said, Crummell’s assessment of Miller Stewart’s level of literacy was probably not accurate as she had occasion to write by hand in 1830s Boston.

Despite his likely false assertion that she was illiterate, his commendation successfully showed the depth of Miller Stewart's humanity. He remembered that she had arrived in New York "still very much distressed at the loss of her husband." Crummell's account expressed awe about not only Miller Stewart's intellect, but also about her work ethic. Through Crummell, we learn that after she left Boston, Miller Stewart became a New York City public school teacher who taught in Brooklyn, and that in 1853, she went South to teach in Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington D.C. When he overcame his surprise about the intellect of the Black person who was not male, Crummell remembered Miller Stewart as a full human. While she was certainly unique and remarkable, Crummell's memories of her life in antebellum New York serve as a reminder that she was a human, not a symbol, and she should be remembered as such. At the end of her life, Miller Stewart also remembered Rev. Alexander Crummell and St. Luke's Episcopal Church. In her will, Miller Stewart bequeathed her United States bonds, worth one hundred dollars to the church to fund Crummell's salary as the church's rector.⁶⁰ No doubt, this Episcopal congregation that served Black Americans in the late nineteenth century survived because of Miller Stewart's generosity and that of other Black Episcopalian women.

Another pastor who wrote a commendation to support the publication of *Mediations* was Rev. William B. Jefferson, the pastor of Third Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Established in 1857, Third Baptist is the third oldest Black Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. It is also the oldest Black Baptist building still standing in Washington D.C. today.⁶¹ In his brief commendation, Jefferson, took a different approach than Crummell. He focused more on Miller Stewart's work than he did her humanity. While his commendation did not necessarily indicate his care for her, it did demonstrate the depth of her care for other people of African descent, which he found to be admirable. Jefferson was especially captivated by her work among Black students during the Civil War. When she migrated to the Upper South in 1853, Miller Stewart joined a community of Black

women, both enslaved and free, who created the conditions for their own freedom by refusing to labor for masters and instead seeking to “provide directly for one another.”⁶²

Jefferson remembered with fondness, that Miller Stewart was tireless in her pursuits to educate Black people in Washington, D.C. He recalled that she served a Sabbath School at the Church of the Epiphany in the morning. In the afternoon, she taught at the Church of the Incarnation, and in the evening, she taught at Trinity Parish. Jefferson remembered that through her labor, Miller Stewart gained “friends among all classes.” He also recalled that in 1871, she opened a school near the Freedman’s Hospital with support from the Episcopal Church. With the support of a Dr. Reyburn she raised two hundred dollars to purchase a building, and at times, she taught as many as seventy-five students. Jefferson also noted the commitment of the students at Howard University, a Historically Black University founded in Washington, D.C. in 1867, to supporting her efforts. Jefferson encouraged others to read her work because “the aim of her life is to promote the glory of God and the welfare of men.”⁶³ His memory of her efforts confirms the typical reading of Miller Stewart as a faithful and tireless servant of all people of African descent. His sentiments indicate that for many women of African descent who could not hold formal leadership positions in churches, becoming educators and teaching morality served as an alternative and more acceptable calling. If this is the case, we must more seriously investigate the care work was done by the Black female educators in nineteenth-century schools as it was Black women’s primary way of contributing to Black social, spiritual, and political life.

Rev. Alexander Crummell and Rev. William B. Jefferson were two of the three pastors who supported Miller Stewart’s writing. Rev. Henry Bailey’s commendation for *Meditations* points more clearly to Miller Stewart’s political savvy. Not only did she advocate for others, but she also advocated for herself. Bailey was the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, a small congregation that met on Vermont and T Streets.⁶⁴ Bailey first met Miller Stewart in 1863 when she began her work as

a teacher in Washington, D.C. In his commendation, Bailey shared some his theological differences with Maria Miller Stewart. He remembered Miller Stewart's efforts to establish a school in Washington, D.C. for Black children. His children were two of her first students. Bailey remembered members of the community approaching Miller Stewart to ask her to begin an independent free school, which she agreed to do. In time, however, they learned that her denomination, the Episcopal Church, was opposed to free schools. Because of the Episcopal Church's opposition to Miller Stewart's efforts to develop a free school, Bailey and others encouraged her to leave her denomination. For reasons that Bailey failed to reveal and that she does not clarify in her writing about her experiences as a member of Episcopal Churches in postbellum Maryland and Washington, D.C., Miller Stewart refused to leave the Episcopal Church.

In her autobiographical writing about her experience during the Civil War, Miller Stewart wrote about the failure of the Episcopal Church to care for her when she was in financial need. She wrote that "the proscription of the church at that time was awful. Sometimes she administered her communion to the blacks when they were at the table of the Lord, and sometimes she passed them by when they were at the table." Admittedly, Miller Stewart was appalled by the Episcopal Church's racist disregard for its Black parishioners, yet she refused to allow her frustrations with the church to push her away from it. Despite the blatant race-based exclusion within the church, she wrote "I clung to the church. And had I left, no one would have cared. But by grace I overcame."⁶⁵ The church failed not only Miller Stewart, but also free Black children in need of an education, yet Maria Miller Stewart clung to it and followed its rules despite her knowledge that the church had no regard for her. The Episcopal Church was a place where Miller Stewart knew she would find no care. Therefore, her friendships and her knowledge that God cared for her were essential. Bailey remembered that because of the Episcopal Church's refusal to help her form a free school, she opened a new school that students paid to attend. Despite their disagreement, Bailey sent his

children to Miller Stewart's new school. He concluded that she was "an honest and conscientious Christian worker."⁶⁶

While it is not readily apparent why Miller Stewart refused to leave the Episcopal Church or why the church refused to support her efforts to educate students even if they could not pay, what emerges from Bailey's story is Miller Stewart's sense of conviction. She was determined to be loyal to her denomination. Her loyalty to the church is ironic considering the denomination's disloyalty to Black Americans, as is evident in the denomination's treatment of Alexander Crummell as he trained for ministry. Yet, like Crummell, something about the Episcopal Church appealed to Miller Stewart. When scholars think about Black churches and Black religiosity in the United States, the focus is often on the Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal traditions as they converted the most people of African descent.⁶⁷ However, the focus on Black religious expression in Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal traditions fails to account for the reality that Black people in the nineteenth-century United States belonged to a wide array of Protestant denominations. They also practiced Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam, and African-derived traditions. Others had no specific religious affiliation but were led by spiritual concerns.⁶⁸

While we cannot ultimately know why Miller Stewart remained faithful to Black Episcopal Churches like St. Luke's even with the denomination's history of anti-Blackness, its choice to undercut her political goals, and its rejection even its Black clergy, Bailey's memory of her points to her refusal to submit to the desires of others. Her speaking career in Boston in the 1830s likewise pointed to Miller Stewart's Black feminist spirit of refusal. She would not leave a space just because the people within it made her uncomfortable. She always arrived and left on her own terms. Even without consistent support from members of Black communities in Washington, D.C., Miller Stewart accomplished her goal of educating newly emancipated Black children. Her commitment to consistently living according to her own ideologies, even if it means that she lost friends and

supporters along the way, points to the distinct positionality of Black women who fearlessly lived into their proto-Black feminist politics in intra-racial spaces. Like other nineteenth-century women of African descent, Miller Stewart understood the church to be a space in which she could and should demand her freedom. While she suffered and demanded justice on her own behalf, her support of St. Luke's Church indicates that she was also interested in ensuring that Black Episcopalians would always have a place within the church, as they had since the colonial era when they regularly affiliated with Church of England parishes.⁶⁹ Her connection to the church and her refusal to leave it called the denomination to task for its failure to support one of its most faithful members and those she cared about because of her race. Her insistence on remaining within a primarily white denomination forced the Episcopal Church to confront its racism. It was in her refusal to leave that Miller Stewart pointed to the irony of anti-Blackness within a Christian theological space. It speaks also to Miller Stewart's determination that the church must live up to its promises to be open to all people. Her insistence was an abolitionist theology of refusal to be ignored, neglected, or pushed aside. She believed, as Jarena Lee did, that God had poured out God's Spirit on all flesh. Therefore, she worked toward the creation of a future where Black women would find a home, and even become ordained as priests within the Episcopal Church.⁷⁰

Maria W. Miller Stewart: Friend

We know as much as we do about Maria W. Miller Stewart's life because of the friendships she cultivated throughout her adult life. Louise C. Hatton wrote the most complete biographical sketch of all the commendation writers in support of the publication of her memoir. Unlike Garrison, Crummell, Jefferson, and Bailey, Hatton was not well-known as an abolitionist or minister, but her writing indicates that she loved Maria Miller Stewart well, and it seems Miller Stewart also loved her. However, what emerges most clearly through Hatton's writing is that free Black people did what they could to care for each other. Hatton could not have helped Miller Stewart receive

justice without support from aged Black citizens who called Miller Stewart to mind nearly fifty years after her husband's death.

In her commendation, Hatton remembered that soon after she and Miller Stewart met in 1867, Miller Stewart entered a new position as the first matron of the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C. Louise Hatton wrote in her commendation that she knew nothing about what Miller Stewart's life had been before the Civil War. Hatton explained that "[Miller Stewart] almost entirely excluded herself from the outside world, and [Hatton] rarely ever met her, excepting she was going or coming from church or Sabbath-school, or from visiting or gathering in the school poor and destitute children in the neighborhood of the hospital."⁷¹ Once she began working as the matron at the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C. Hatton believed that Miller Stewart eluded her. Miller Stewart's elusive nature during her years at the Freedman's Hospital is not surprising. The Hospital was founded in 1862 to provide medical support to formerly enslaved people. During the latter years of the Civil War, large numbers of freed people congregated in Southern cities. Many of them had been separated from their loved ones through the domestic slave trade and the Civil War and had no way to reconnect with them.⁷² Due to their age, health conditions, or both, many of the people the hospital served could not take care of themselves.⁷³ As the hospital's matron, Miller Stewart worked directly for the War Department of the United States to help make order of the chaos that centuries of enslavement and the challenges of the Civil War visited upon Black people living in the Upper South. The process of creating healthy freed people was, no doubt, all-consuming.

Twelve years after Miller Stewart became consumed with her work at the hospital, her relationship with Hatton shifted when Hatton visited the Freedman's Hospital to say goodbye to Miller Stewart before an upcoming trip to Boston. When Miller Stewart learned about the trip, she noted the 1871 law passed by Congress to provide pensions to the unmarried widows of veterans of

the War of 1812.⁷⁴ Her husband had served for four years under Commodores Porter and Decatur and was honorably discharged in 1815. Nearly fifty years after his death, Miller Stewart remained unmarried and still wanted the government to provide her what was rightful hers by marriage. She asked Hatton if she would investigate her case during her time in Boston. She thought Hatton might meet with people who could identify her as James Stewart's widow. Perhaps she believed that as a white woman, Hatton could enter spaces that were foreclosed to Miller Stewart. Ever the faithful friend, Hatton agreed to do so.

By 1879, the forty-nine years that had elapsed since James Stewart's death made it challenging for Hatton to uncover the truth that would finally provide justice to his nearly seventy-five-year-old widow. However, Hatton was determined to try to learn more. To begin, she sought out some of the oldest residents of color in Boston who knew both members of the couple during their marriage. She found four reliable witnesses who were personally acquainted with both James and Maria W. Miller Stewart. Perhaps Hatton's inquiries around the city compelled the supplementary affidavit of John Brown, a seventy-four-year-old man who knew James W. Miller Stewart in Boston after the war. Brown remembered that Miller Stewart was a shipping master and that he often used Miller Stewart's services. While Brown did not meet James W. Miller Stewart until 1818, he remembered that it was known among their acquaintances that Miller Stewart was in the Navy during the War of 1812. Brown also remembered that Miller Stewart had a wife named Maria. Brown's recollections indicate the intimacies that existed among free Black men in antebellum Boston. Hatton's efforts might also have compelled the supplementary affidavit of Elizabeth Williams, a seventy-one-year-old woman who knew Maria [Miller] prior to her marriage. Williams remembered Miller Stewart's death and even his funeral although she could not remember the date. Williams confirmed that according to the terms of James W. Stewart's will, Maria Miller Stewart remained a widow and unmarried.⁷⁵ The intimate memories of those who had known Miller Stewart

were essential to achieving justice for her. Miller Stewart worked tirelessly throughout her adult life to advocate for Black Americans, and through their memories of her, Brown and Williams likewise advocated for her.

As Hatton learned more about Miller Stewart's life in 1830s Boston, she was horrified to learn about how she was mistreated after her husband's death. Hatton learned that James Stewart had been a man of some means and that his death and the subsequent fraud left his widow not only penniless, but also desperately alone as she lacked any living relatives. It was not until 1879 when Hatton informed her of the contents of her late husband's will that she even knew the full extent of the damage that had been done. Indignant, Hatton went to the Probate Court to read all the documents for herself. She was angered and appalled to see what happened to her friend, who she called "the most beautiful and loveliest of women."⁷⁶

However, Hatton did not remain dejected for long because she believed that God had answered her friend's prayers. Hatton took to heart Miller Stewart's sense of hope despite the pain she had endured. Rather than dwelling on the pain, Hatton celebrated, as many Black feminist thinkers and gender historians have done since then, the impressive life of Maria W. Miller Stewart. Hatton explained in her biographical sketch that "immediately after the death of her husband, [Miller Stewart] wrote and published her book; then went to New York; went to school seven years; then taught school several years, finally went South and did good work in instructing and teaching her unfortunate race."⁷⁷ Hatton's word choice indicates that she did not share Miller Stewart's racial background. If she was not a woman of African descent, Hatton's work on Miller Stewart's belief is a reminder of the urgency of interracial friendship among feminists. Despite Miller Stewart's best efforts to advocate for herself and despite her admonition that Black women know why they could not attain their rights,⁷⁸ there were no rights of a Black woman that anyone in nineteenth-century America felt bound to protect. Hatton was pleased that Miller Stewart had lived long enough to

receive the pension. As William Lloyd Garrison had been about his abolitionist record, Hatton also was self-congratulatory. She was thrilled that, because of the whole incident, she uncovered the wonderful story of Maria W. Miller Stewart which she believed would have otherwise “remained hidden until the end of time.”⁷⁹ While Hatton had indeed done the intimate, caring work of reassembling the disparate pieces of Miller Stewart’s story, we cannot erase John Brown, Elizabeth Williams, and the other two aged citizens of color in Boston who did the work of re-membering Maria Miller Stewart. What Miller Stewart could not have known as a young woman who encouraged others to sue for their rights is that the revolution would require not only self-advocacy, but also the revolutionary memories of passers-by.

While we cannot know whether Miller Stewart’s story would have remained hidden forever without Hatton’s intervention might, her statement points to the ongoing violence of state archives. While historians who study Black free people in the North certainly do not encounter the archive of death and destruction that slavery studies scholars do, there remain so many profound losses in the archives of Black quasi-freedom.⁸⁰ What Hatton’s work forty years after Miller Stewart’s departure from Boston indicates is that the radicalism of Miller Stewart’s life was largely unknown outside of Boston where she gave her initial speeches. Even more troubling was how her personal story and activist life were suppressed even among free Black people in Boston. It was the desire of the state for Miller Stewart to be immediately forgotten. Brown, Williams, and others failed to forget.

It was only through intimate conversations with African American Bostonians who were old enough to remember James and Maria Miller Stewart that Hatton could piece the story together. Her search through already buried archival materials was insufficient. She also required the memories of those who had known James and Maria Miller Stewart and were willing to call them to mind. Hatton’s search for Miller Stewart’s past indicates the study of African American women’s history is an intimate process. What the process requires is the painstaking labor that Hatton did to allow

Miller Stewart's memories of her own life to guide Hatton to the state archives and to allow those state archives to lead her to those who might also remember.⁸¹ Hatton navigated through an archive of violence and hope and deployed it to achieve justice that was nearly fifty years overdue.

Although Miller Stewart struggled for years to receive her husband's pension, Hatton's careful examination of what had happened to a friend she barely knew points to the urgency of care. While we know little about Hatton's race, her actions articulate a narrative of proto-feminist possibility. Post-Emancipation, women recognized the state did not function to serve them. Therefore, they cultivated a politics of care among themselves that flew in the face of state attempts to end Black women's lives and livelihoods. In 1829, Miller Stewart wanted justice in the form of her husband's pension, but she found a love that was far more enduring through her relationships which endured during the fifty years after her husband's death.

Miller Stewart's bond with Hatton points to the ways that she and other women of African descent reimagined kinship because of the losses they experienced. It was, at least in part, because of the loss of her husband, that Miller Stewart was compelled to join the abolitionist speaking circuit at all. Her loss also forced her to forge new friendships that seem to have enriched her life. Hatton concluded her commendation by saying that she believed that if Maria Miller Stewart had enjoyed "the advantages of an early education and an opportunity to have developed her superior intellect, she would have been the equal, if not the superior, of her sisters of the more favorite race. But, as it is, she is really a remarkable person, considering all under which she has labored."⁸² Hatton's musing about a set of alternate possibilities for Miller Stewart frame her as being somehow lesser than her white female contemporaries. All the experiences of her working-class life helped her to develop her distinct epistemology. She was one of the United States' earliest Black feminist thinkers. Louise Hatton was correct, her friend Maria Miller Stewart really was a remarkable person. The care that not only Hatton and the free Black people in Boston who remembered Miller Stewart exhibited

pointed to the tenacity of Black women at the turn of the twentieth century. They would work collectively as they moved into their uncertain future. Regardless of the future, they declared that the time of slavery was over. They were moving into a new temporality, one in which they would be free and their rights would be respected.

Conclusion

Maria W. Miller Stewart's name is well-known by United States gender historians and Black feminist cultural theorists because of her, to again borrow the language of her friend and advocate Louise Hatton, remarkable contributions to abolitionism, women's rights movements, nineteenth-century religious thought, and proto-Black feminist political thought. What has been lost along the way is how Miller Stewart cultivated a community around her. Even the most remarkable people cannot survive without care, and yet, Miller Stewart's writings about herself paint a picture of her complete isolation. In her early writings, she provided only a brief biographical sketch which informed her readers that she was an orphan by age five. From age five until age fifteen, Miller Stewart was a domestic laborer in a clergyman's home. While she benefited from the spiritual education she received in that household, the isolation of the job and her race, gender, and class prevented her from pursuing formal education. After living independently from age fifteen to age twenty-three and having received some education during those years, she wed a man of higher social standing. After his untimely death, she also endured the loss of an intellectual mentor in Black liberationist David Walker. By Miller Stewart's own admission, her life was plagued by disappointment and sorrow.

Yet, in the face of disappointment, Miller Stewart preached a message of hope and possibility in her political speeches and essays. She also demonstrated her concern for her community by serving as an educator to Black children. She was deeply concerned with teaching

future generations to advocate for themselves and to demand their rights. Maria Miller Stewart was an un-ordained minister who provided care to her community. She moved into white spaces including the Episcopal Church and refused to leave. She demanded in these spaces that Black people be remembered and that they receive what they needed.

Maria Miller Stewart was unique and remarkable, and yet, she belonged to an intimate community of care. Although she was alone, in the sense that she was without biological kin, she planted the seeds of proto-Black feminist thought in antebellum Boston. She contributed to what would become the ethos of Black feminism in Boston. However, much like many of her Black female contemporaries, Miller Stewart faced extraordinary challenges both from people outside of her race and those within it. Her public work made her a target for racialized and gendered violence. While Miller Stewart's ideologies were unique to her, her experience as a Black woman who demanded change in the here and now was not unique to her. Other Black women in the antebellum era and beyond pursued their faithful activism in the public sphere. Miller Stewart's work anticipated the rise of a Progressive Era Black feminist movement that was grounded within the social and political space of Black Churches.⁸³ Although she left the abolitionist speaking circuit in 1833, Miller Stewart remained an agitator for what she perceived to be the cause of justice. She was committed to caring for the free(d) community, even though she suffered to do so.

This chapter has used the fragmented memories of some of Maria W. Miller Stewart's friends and supporters as found in the 1879 publication of her memoir *Meditations* to tell the neglected story of Maria W. Miller Stewart's later years as an educator among free Black children in Civil War and Reconstruction-era Washington, D.C. During these years, Miller Stewart was active in the Black churches of the region. While she served in Black churches of many different denominations, she was a faithful member of Black Episcopal Churches. Her loyalty to the

Episcopal Church lost her supporters at times, but she was never completely without resources. During her years in Washington, D.C., she also aided the newly freed as an educator and fictive mother. A close study of Louise Hatton's efforts to attain long overdue justice for Miller Stewart and the memories of older Black Bostonians who called her to mind to help Hatton achieve her goal indicates that Miller Stewart surrounded herself with a community of proto-feminists who cared for her and were committed to justice, freedom, and Black futurity. Together, they wrestled against the profound disappointment, to borrow Miller Stewart's own words, that marked the experience of freedom for African Americans in nineteenth-century America.

Maria Miller Stewart was without biological kin throughout most of her life, but she was not without love. No doubt, the community of free Black women, both married and unmarried, who saw her finally saw her receive redress in 1879 because of the support she received from a caring friend were encouraged as they struggled with the burdened individuality that accompanied freedom. Black women of all social classes, who were grappling with the failures of Reconstruction, and demanded that slavery time was over, understood that they would need to offer mutuality and care to each other.⁸⁴ They needed to put together the fragmented pieces of their lives and construct a narrative that would necessitate their complete liberation. Like Hatton, even women in the North might have been unaware of Miller Stewart since, as Hatton found, her story had already been buried by the Massachusetts courts. As Black women who were working to create new lives for themselves in the advent of freedom began to learn more information about Maria Miller Stewart's challenging life, her activism, and the legal triumph she enjoyed mere months before her death, they had a sense of renewed hope. Their hope was not to be found in a government that refused to concern itself with their needs because of their race or in their labors, which were managed by white employers who worked at every turn to avoid renegotiating labor relations. Their hope was in each

other. They would advocate for each other and care for each other. Together, they would create the conditions for the world in which they wished to live.

¹ See “AncestryLibrary.Com - U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995,” accessed December 9, 2021, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/imageviewer/collections/2469/images/16024701?usePUB=true&_phsrc=Qac1&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=1039143025. I assume Hatton’s race based on her assertion in her commendation, that had Stewart received an excellent education, she might have become “the equal, if not the superior, of her sisters of the more favorite race.”

² Maria W. Stewart, *America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1987), xiii.

³ Thavolia Glymph, *The Women’s Fight: The Civil War’s Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation*, Littlefield History of the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁴ Maria W. Stewart, “Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman’s Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass” (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

⁵ Maria W. Miller Stewart, *America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1987).

⁶ See Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁷ Carla L Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

⁸ Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Mrs. Miller Stewart’s Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston,” in *Maria W. Miller Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

⁹ See Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 44-45.

¹⁰ “The Boston Directory; Containing Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations Places of Business and Dwelling Houses with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, and Wharfs, The City Officers, Public Offices and Banks, and Other Useful Information” (Boston: John H.A. Frost and Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1826), Boston Athenaeum.

¹¹ See footnote 4 in Maria W. Miller Stewart, *America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1987).

¹² Maria W. Miller Stewart, *America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1987), 7.

¹³ Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 38.

¹⁴ Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831).

¹⁵ After a preface written by Miller Stewart herself, the next section of the book is titled “letters and commendations” and contains supportive words written about Miller Stewart by those who have known her throughout her professional life.

¹⁶ *Collected Black Women’s Narratives*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), viii.

¹⁷ See for example Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, paperback Ed (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2003), Maria W. Miller Stewart, *America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1987), Carla L Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Here I am thinking about the theories about queerness advanced in José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

1999) and Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures (New York London: New York University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ See Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831).

²⁰ See Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2008) for more about the institution of the Black Church.

²¹ Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women During the Slave Era* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 4.

²² As has been noted in Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009) and Cathy Cohen, “The Radical Potential Of Queer? Twenty Years Later,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 140–44, Black queer and feminist people have often been stripped of their radicalism and thus removed from the revolutionary history of the Americas. I add Maria Miller Stewart to this group who have been de-fanged in service to neoliberal political goals.

²³ I am in conversation with Lisa Lowe, “History Hesitant,” *Social Text* 33, no. 4 125 (December 2015): 85–107, Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, June 2008, 1–14, Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), and Aisha K. Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844*, Envisioning Cuba (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

²⁴ This idea is supported in the work of many Black women’s historians including Martha S. Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*, (New York: Basic Books, 2020), Martha S. Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Gender, and Sexuality in American History (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 5.

²⁶ David Walker, “David Walker, 1785-1830. Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829.,” 1830, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html>.

²⁷ Black theologies rooted in the story of the exodus are explored in more detail in Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

²⁸ Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 7-8.

²⁹ A Colored Bostonian, “Death of Walker,” *The Liberator*, January 22, 1831, Boston Athenaeum.

³⁰ Maria W. Miller Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831).

³¹ See “Document 6B: ‘Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston,’ *Liberator*, 7 January 1832 | Alexander Street Documents,” accessed November 20, 2019, <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000684447?token=5a4c856ea5084ae2&customer=X/J9mRJernG7HEXJin diaZRLokNjLnr4szUyx7qUhdXk0Y/5nTRlaVDpTMUYH0WFLrFdD3PdqnFDeQnDHfYNjS8/q29f6YSgbKXSSX5K6PZzndC408Qau1ljjJ7Gi8McPu+dACXOmjI/SEMZRJ07KPKskPFW70EsH2ouG5eZoY+qhTHf57lyZyR/aoJQI7nkV0FBIZt9dVhtBPljDZyJ3A5Ptz6X2qH4j8hDhLgY7HiRIUS4J2hlF/O2q6qeX83m16NRucGYOfafNmCpu6jH1wLi+DHrM+tfFf/1kHgr03acAHZFGMeHEZViEGZMDzj4RowAwj7yfpX6FBNUHK0XgRfQImx74419y2VeMUUn71CkK W9zWfsoyUywBFmVRup97UP/HLXV2VurFIF+L5QX8D3sFf3mp77wsv74mctV5G2u7PWELPFRnl38GAZxyIh4m n51sIuyeDhUcI9L6EZ/YerZ6A7hXgDRzLex8QBxKd6488YXVzwx3d47nwoL3Eu0KQagDS0FmoH/Q8ychRWpWT hoKxK+wjJvtYaYETtEpGB1VTkpNKog/ZikSkM+QkXciPS9r9T6cNzZTSW07oTO4samFOSODYFwc1CfZT1L6>

Gf0AahOOvGUOhMgCfBsFh5KoEesQTy8SiGYo2JtNulW6NO7ELmVhVBKuvQ7NOcFJCxUN2PC5THerY//b+1WQJjl/I8eKpCOW0e2LDiEh7myjivh4dXkINpnYzYPvk7OcDg=.

³² Here I am thinking of the rebellions (or potential rebellions) in the US South led by Denmark Vesey, 1822, and Nat Turner, 1829. There were also slave rebellions (and rumors of them) elsewhere in the Atlantic World. Miller Stewart and others would have been captivated by the Haitian Revolution, 1791-1804.

³³ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," in *America's First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831), 29.

³⁴ *The Liberator*, November 12, 1831, Boston Athenaeum.

³⁵ William Lloyd Garrison, "To The Public," *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831, Boston Athenaeum.

³⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, "Walker's Pamphlet," *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831, Boston Athenaeum.

³⁷ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Miller Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Miller Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass" (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

³⁸ See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, 1. Oxford Univ. Press paperback (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 35.

³⁹ See Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81, Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), Tera W Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019), and Sarah Haley, "'Like I Was a Man': Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (September 2013): 53–77.

⁴⁰ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Miller Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Miller Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass" (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See the discussion in chapter 1 of Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, Studies in Legal History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴³ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 115-116.

⁴⁴ Garrison had a spouse and multiple children who lived into adulthood and supported his work.

⁴⁵ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Mrs. Miller Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," in *Maria W. Miller Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

⁴⁶ "Document 6B: 'Constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston,' *Liberator*, 7 January 1832 | Alexander Street Documents," accessed November 20, 2019.

⁴⁷ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America," in *Maria W. Miller Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1987), 52-53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁹ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," in *America's First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Boston, Massachusetts: Indiana Univ. Press, 1831).

⁵⁰ See Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁵¹ Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, like Fire: Maria Miller Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans*, Carter G. Woodson Institute Series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 4.

⁵² "1. EAST (FRONT) FACADE - St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Fifteenth & Church Streets Northwest, Washington, District of Columbia, DC," image, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed October 27, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.dc0279.photos/?sp=1>.

⁵³ "The Reverend Alexander Crummell, 1819-1898 · Leadership Gallery · The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice," <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/leadership/clergy/crummell>.

⁵⁴ Marilyn Richardson, "Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer," in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway (Burlington, Vt. : Hanover: University of Vermont Press ; Published by University Press of New England, 2007), 24.

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- ⁵⁵ Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, Studies in Legal History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 37.
- ⁵⁶ This was an active discussion via letters published in the January 8, 1833 edition of *The Liberator*.
- ⁵⁷ "Removal to Texas," *The Liberator*, January 22, 1831, Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁵⁸ "The Reverend Alexander Crummell, 1819-1898 · Leadership Gallery · The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice," <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/leadership/clergy/crummell>.
- ⁵⁹ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Miller Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Miller Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass" (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.
- ⁶⁰ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Last Will and Testament," February 5, 1880, District of Columbia Archives.
- ⁶¹ <https://www.thirdbaptistchurchdc.org/about>
- ⁶² Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, Fully revised and updated (New York: Basic Books a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2010), 45.
- ⁶³ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Miller Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Miller Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass" (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.
- ⁶⁴ Househistoryman, "The House History Man: First African New Church, 10th and V Streets, NW," *The House History Man* (blog), April 25, 2012, <http://househistoryman.blogspot.com/2012/04/first-african-new-church-10th-and-v.html>.
- ⁶⁵ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Sufferings During the War," in *Maria W. Miller Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 107-108.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).
- ⁶⁸ See Judith Weisenfeld, "We Have Been Believers: Patterns of African-American Women's Religiosity," in *This Far By Faith: Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography*, ed. Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman (New York London: Routledge, 1996), 1-18.
- ⁶⁹ Richard Boles, *Dividing the Faith: The Rise of Segregated Churches in the Early American North*, Early American Places (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 63.
- ⁷⁰ Pauli Murray was ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church on January 8, 1977, Marjorie Hyer, "First Black Woman To Be Ordained by Episcopal Church," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1977, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1977/01/07/first-black-woman-to-be-ordained-by-episcopal-church/b8f0c692-8a6d-4b01-bfbc-653520c94cf7/>.
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- ⁷⁴ "An Act Granting Pensions to Certain Soldiers and Sailors of the War of Eighteen Hundred and Twelve, and the Widows of Deceased Soldiers." (February 14, 1871), Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/41st-congress/session-3/c41s3ch50.pdf>.
- ⁷⁵ Maria W. Miller Stewart, *America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1987), 114-120.
- ⁷⁶ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Miller Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Miller Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass" (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.
- ⁷⁷ Maria W. Miller Stewart, "Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Miller Stewart, (Widow of the Late James W. Miller Stewart) Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass" (Washington, D.C., 1879), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.
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- ⁸⁰ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, June

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⁸¹ This process is much like the practice done by Hazel Carby in Hazel V Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019).

⁸² “Meditations.”

⁸³ See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁸⁴ See Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), and Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

Chapter 4

Remaking Kinship: Transatlantic Proto-Womanist Interventions

“The morning was calm, our minds resigned and peaceful, and we took, and held each other’s hand, in silence; which was at length broken by my daughter, who said, ‘Mother, we part now, but I think we shall yet meet again; the will of the Lord be done, and God be with thee.’”-Zilpha Elaw, 1846

Despite her intellect and commitment to Protestant Christian standards of virtue, itinerant preaching woman, Zilpha Elaw, who was born to free parents of African descent (whose names and surnames she failed to include in her spiritual autobiography) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania around the year 1790, was called scandalous because despite her Blackness and her womanhood, she moved freely, preached boldly, and produced new ways of practicing maternity. Her independent travels and insistence upon speaking publicly about race and theology caused a spectacle both in her natal homeland and when she traveled abroad to preach in England in 1840. This chapter explores how Zilpha Elaw deployed her preaching ministry to remake the terms and terrains of Black kinship. While other scholars have explored Elaw’s spiritual autobiography, this chapter places her writing within the lineage of transatlantic Black feminist and Black queer thought. Elaw’s writing and transatlantic journey from the United States to England point to the entanglements of complications of Blackness, even for those who were born free. Her struggle to (or ambivalence toward) maintaining her close connection with her daughter also demonstrates the impossibility of maternity for Black women, whether free or enslaved, in the nineteenth century.¹ However, like other Black diasporic mothers of the nineteenth century, Elaw remade kinship. Distinctively from some of her contemporaries, she used the Christian Scriptures and Christian theology in proto-Black feminist and womanist ways to produce her justification for exploring alternative forms of sociality.

While she did not overtly call for the abolition of slavery in her spiritual autobiography, the shadow of racial slavery looms large in Elaw’s writings. By refusing to be confined to a domestic life because of her race and gender, she called for the abolition of systems that might compel Black

women's confinement. Through her Christian ministry, she also called for the abolition of all limitations on human potential. Zilpha Elaw first converted to the Christian faith in 1808, when she was around age eighteen. Upon being converted, she became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Society.² She retained her membership with the Methodists throughout her adult life. No doubt, like many other Black Americans of the antebellum era, appreciated the benignity of Methodism. Prior to 1785, Methodists were opposed to slavery. Although their antislavery sentiment shifted, and the ministry of Rev. Richard Allen and others (discussed in chapter one) demonstrates the failures of Methodism on the issue of race, the Evangelical fervor of the early-nineteenth century captivated Black Americans just as it captured the attention of white Americans. Black Americans who were enslaved and working class were especially drawn to the Evangelical excitement of the time.³

Zilpha Elaw's 1808 conversion was only the beginning of her spiritual journey. In her 1846 spiritual autobiography and travel narrative, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw," (hereafter referred to as "Memoirs") she recalled attending a camp meeting in 1817. She was not specific about the location of the meeting, but it was probably held in or near Burlington, New Jersey. She and her husband Joseph Elaw, whom she wed in 1810 outside of Philadelphia, made their residence in Burlington, New Jersey before the War of 1812.⁴ She wrote in her autobiography that her experience at the 1817 camp meeting altered the course of her adult life and led her to pursue itinerant Christian preaching. According to her spiritual autobiography, she had great success as a preacher. This chapter considers both how she survived her domestic and transnational travels and how she, as a Black woman with the backing of no institutional churches managed to create her itinerant preaching life.

Elaw's memory of the camp meetings provide one of the clearest distillations of the atmosphere of camp meetings that historians have at our disposal. In part, her description is careful and detailed because she addressed her narrative to her English supporters. While they were likely

familiar with American Evangelicalism, Elaw's writing offered them a rare opportunity to learn about the religious fervor of the early nineteenth-century United States from the firsthand perspective of an American Christian who was also a woman of African descent. Camp meetings were riveting and spectacular gatherings that changed the course of many lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Elaw remembered that at the 1817 gathering, many thousands of people gathered in open air spaces, singing songs of praise to God. The meetings reduced many who were gathered to tears.

According to Elaw, to form a camp meeting, the date and time of the meeting was published extensively, and each family that planned to attend would bring their own tent with seats and the provisions they needed. Thousands would descend upon the meeting site for the meetings, which frequently lasted a week or longer. The group formed circular enclosures, inside which they pitched their tents. The space in the center was reserved for the minister. The worship would commence in the morning even before sunrise. Men with trumpets used the sound of their music to manage the various activities, including meals and socializing, that participants did during the day. On the last morning of the meeting, all the attendees gathered for a love feast. After the feast, everyone said farewell and proceeded to march away from the campground in the minister's presence.⁵ Elaw's recollection of the event indicates that everyone who attended the event was aware of how the proceedings should unfold and that no one fell out of step with the intimate choreography of worship and conversion. Her description also illustrates the liminal space between order (trumpets and processions to manage the meeting) and disorder (passionate and emotive worship experiences) that characterized life in the antebellum United States.

At the 1817 camp meeting, Elaw believed that God revealed to her that she was like another Phoebe, a female deacon in the Early Church who is referenced in the Book of Romans, chapter 16. Her perceived call to Christian ministry, led Elaw to believe that she needed to visit families and to

speak to them about salvation and their souls. She also believed she was called to visit the sick. She followed her perceived call and visited people of all social classes to discuss salvation with them. Her consistent ailments and injuries and God's providence toward in the midst of each struggle indicated to her that God must have more for her to undertake. Despite multiple physical setbacks, she continued her work to convert others to her faith.⁶

Shortly after her transformative moment at the camp meeting, Elaw visited her only living sister, Hannah. Hannah lived about twenty miles from Burlington in Philadelphia and had a terminal illness. Physical illness, both her illnesses and the illnesses of people she knew, is a repeating trope in Elaw's spiritual autobiography. Her frequent brushes with death, which are a common trope in the spiritual autobiography genre, reminded her of the urgency of the present moment. While much of Elaw's autobiography focused on her ministerial travels, her experiences with Hannah as she was dying represent one of the few times that Elaw recounted her active engagement with her biological family during her adult life. Notably, the interactions that led her to take significant steps in her Christian ministry were those she had with her sister and her daughter. As Black women who belonged to the same family, they shared a sense of urgency and had a message to convey which they wanted the world to hear.

Elaw's attentiveness to her sister's experience of illness and death demonstrates her desire to see and attend to Black women's pain. She used her ministry to provide a way to demonstrate God's desire to liberate women of African descent from the pain of their earthly lives. It is through her care for her sister that Elaw became increasingly assertive about her theology.⁷ Her theological assertions about her sister's life and death point to her anxieties about her own futurity. Hannah's slow expiration marked another shift in Elaw's spiritual journey as it forced her to grapple with her finitude. She too would one day be out of time. Her detailed description of Hannah's last days indicates her urgent desire to properly manage the time that was available to her.

While Elaw cared for and prayed over Hannah, Hannah informed the group who gathered to tend to her that she had seen Jesus. She declared that an angel had come to her to demand that she tell her sister Zilpha to preach the gospel. At that time, Elaw had her doubts about her call to preach. She struggled with her husband's condemnation not only of her preaching, but also of her choice to devote her life to serving God. In her autobiography, she explained that one of the biggest hinderances she faced at the beginning of her itinerant ministry was that about one year into their marriage her husband wanted her to "renounce her religion."

Elaw described her husband's renunciation of her desire to be a preacher as the crisis that caused her "troubles." She wrote that her struggles were so severe that she did not know what to do. However, she believed that God was with her, allowing her to "endure every trial with meekness."⁸ On one occasion when her husband finally came to hear her preach, he said "child, we are undone." Seeing his wife entering the public square as a Christian speaker angered him, and he encouraged her to abandon public speaking altogether.⁹ While Elaw was devastated that her husband did not support her, she believed that following her call from God was more urgent than tending to her husband's desire for her silence. Her choice to endure every challenge she faced with meekness does point, at least in part, to the gender crisis that free Black women faced in the antebellum United States. Despite her radicalism, Elaw's deference when she was in Joseph Elaw's presence indicates that she could not shake her fear of her husband which she most likely learned from Christian theology. This fear makes her no less of a radical, rather it points to her humanity. Even radicals have their limits.

It was not until her husband's death on January 27, 1823, about thirteen years after their union and seven years after her life-changing experience at the camp meeting, that Elaw pursued itinerant preaching without inhibitions. Her shift away from being a domestic servant and toward a more public life which required her to travel alone meant she placed herself and her daughter at

additional risk as she spoke not only locally, but also nationally and eventually abroad in England. In her spiritual autobiography and travel narrative, she remembered first feeling God commanding her to preach in England in April of 1828 when she saw two ships in the docks in Philadelphia headed to England and boarded neither of them. She felt that the time for her journey had not yet come. Instead of beginning her transatlantic voyage in 1828, she travelled to the southern territories of the United States despite her fear that she would be arrested and sold into slavery because of her “complexion and features.”¹⁰ No doubt her fears were warranted by the fugitive slave laws that allowed any Black American to be kidnapped and sold into slavery.¹¹ “Complexion and features” made the line between freedom and unfreedom blurry at best for women of African descent in antebellum America.

Despite the dangers of traveling as a woman of African descent in the antebellum South, Elaw visited Baltimore, Maryland, Annapolis, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, Virginia. She also visited Northern cities including Hartford, Connecticut and Boston, Massachusetts. She also went to Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Salem, Massachusetts, and Portland, Maine. Despite her frequent travels throughout the East Coast of the United States, and her various struggles and successes as an itinerant preacher, she continued to consider a voyage to England. She pled with God to lead her toward a different path, using her gender, race, and her feeling that she would be intellectually inferior in a “country so polished and enlightened” as the defense for her reluctance to go abroad. Yet, she recounted that she heard the Lord speaking to her as the Hebrew Bible indicated God had spoken to the Hebrew Bible prophet Jeremiah. God affirmed her ability to speak and commanded her to go where she was instructed to go.¹²

Zilpha Elaw’s sense of call was affirmed in 1837 when she had a vision while visiting some religious friends. In the vision, she was in a strange place talking with a stranger when three balls of fire came perpendicular to her head and exploded simultaneously. She saw herself fall to the ground.

As she was falling, she was lifted up by an unseen hand and placed on an animal that carried her to an upper chamber where she heard God's voice tell her that there was a message for her that would travel with her upon the seas.¹³ While we cannot speak to the veracity of her vision, the idea that she would choose to take a mission "upon the high seas" points to the urgency of movement across the Atlantic for African diasporic people in the Americas who had little control over their movement. She made this voyage by her own authority, coerced by no one but God.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, where her ancestors had been unmade and remade against their will, Elaw's freedom performance was to choose to be unmade and remade in service to God and herself. The tug she felt to travel points to the intimacies of the empire from which she could not seem to become disentangled. Elaw felt more confident that she must travel to England when, in 1839, during a visit to the Wesleyan Chapel in Providence, Rhode Island, she met a man she called Mr. Bedell and his travel companion. Both Bedell and his companion were English, and through their conversation with her, they affirmed that she was "destined by the Lord to minister the gospel in a foreign land."¹⁴

On June 10, 1840, Elaw rose from her bed and went to meet her adult daughter, who at this time must have been in her twenties. Her daughter met her mother along with her two sons. They all felt a powerful bond with their mother and grandmother. Zilpha Elaw's now adult daughter, who herself was a mother of two, had been left behind many times to work as a domestic servant or to stay with a gracious relative while her mother traveled to preach. While Elaw shared few details about her daughter and their relationship in "Memoirs," her words indicate that her daughter understood that her mother could not provide normative nineteenth-century forms of maternal care. Despite her mother's absence throughout her life, "Memoirs" indicates that she cared for her mother. She sought after her mother's joy. She delighted in her mother's ability to live more freely.

On that June day, Elaw's daughter held her mother's hands in her own and wished her well on her journey. She understood that it was time for her mother to depart, but she felt confident that they would see each other again. She hoped that God would go with her mother on her journey.¹⁵ Elaw did not record her response to her daughter's warm farewell, nor does her autobiography indicate whether she and her daughter reunited when she returned home. Elaw traveled to New York where she remained until July 1, 1840. From New York, she took a steamboat to the ship in Philadelphia. From Philadelphia, she set sail for London, where she arrived safely on July 25, 1840.

Through her memories of her preaching journey, as she recounted them in her slim 1846 volume, "Memoirs," which was part spiritual autobiography and part travel narrative, Zilpha Elaw remade ideas of Black kinship and sociality. In "Memoirs," Elaw focused on her spiritual and physical movements because she wrote that to focus on some of the more interesting and important details of her life would mean that she would "swell these pages beyond [her] present limited means for press."¹⁶ The self-published volume was, no doubt, costly for her to produce. Although she credited the book's brevity to publication limitations, her restraint throughout "Memoirs" is a metaphor for the restraint so many free Black women in the antebellum United States demonstrated as they navigated a world that was both racist and misogynistic in search of their full freedom.¹⁷ Even when telling her own story, Elaw placed firm limits upon what she would say. "Memoirs" is a unique example of nineteenth-century transatlantic literature, but scholars rarely engage with it as such. In the concluding sentences of "Memoirs," Elaw expressed her expectation that her "humble memoirs" would continue to be read even after her death. She requested the reader to give her work "attentive consideration."¹⁸ This chapter considers what we might learn about kinship, relationality, and possibility by showing attention to this underexamined contribution to nineteenth-century Black women's literature.

Taking Elaw seriously as an intellectual, this chapter invites scholars not only to read and engage with Elaw's transnational spiritual autobiography and travel narrative, but also to consider her autobiographical writing within the genealogy of Black queer and Black feminist thought produced by people of African descent in the United States. Her writing reveals the transatlantic intimacies that Black Americans forged in the nineteenth century and demonstrates how women of African descent remade maternity because of the challenges they faced. Elaw's epistemologies of race and gender are part of a legacy of Black Christian thought that has moved from a place of disappointment, shame, neglect, and profound loneliness because of the way that Christian theology was taught to Black Americans, to a site of generative social possibility.¹⁹ Elaw's nineteenth-century interpretations of Christian theology anticipated contemporary womanist theological ethics. She refused the death-dealing conditions to which white supremacy pointed and instead preached a theology of life and hope.

Because the few records about Elaw's life are scattered across disparate transnational archives, the best way to access her life story is through a close reading of "Memoirs."²⁰ Through her transnational movements while Black and female, Elaw was both limited by and excessive of nineteenth century archives. "Memoirs" reveals much about the historical moment through which she lived, which was a time of racial slavery, Protestant Christian religious revivals, and shifts in the meaning of womanhood and the role of women in society. However, and perhaps more importantly, a Black feminist and womanist reading of her writing reveals the epistemologies she developed to sustain herself in a rapidly modernizing world that called Black women, who were religious, non-religious, and on the spectrum between the two, deviant, promiscuous, and backward.

When Elaw arrived in England in 1840, African diasporic people had crossed the Atlantic before. What differentiated Elaw is that she was one of the few who traveled transnationally entirely because of a deep, and in her case, divinely-inspired, desire to do so. Her race and gender made her

movements radical. At a time when women's respectability was defined by protection and privacy and in which Black women were critiqued for their failure to possess bodies deemed worthy of protection, Elaw dared to take on the liminality of the Black public speaker, and she was willing to cross national boundaries to do so.²¹

Elaw's actions allow us to reimagine abolitionist work. Despite the many prohibitions, she was one of the prominent Black woman preachers of the antebellum era. She allowed her ministry to carry her even into places that might enslave her and even across the Atlantic Ocean where she knew no one. What made her an abolitionist theologian was her refusal to allow her gender or race to define who she would be or what she would do. It was in her everyday refusals to conform to the limitations placed on antebellum era Black women in the United States that she demanded abolition, not only of racial slavery, but also of gender conventions. She saw that she would never attain nineteenth-century respectability norms, so she deviated from them altogether.

This chapter builds on the interventions made by scholars in Black feminist theory and womanist theological ethics to respond to the two central questions of this chapter. The first question that is at the heart of this chapter is how did Elaw, a nineteenth-century Black itinerant preaching woman, survive her journeys throughout the United States and England? The second question is how did she manage to convert people of different genders and races? Her version of Christian theology differed from some of the emerging nineteenth century theological frameworks. Although she was aware of racism and sexism, she was insistent that there was one church of Jesus Christ in which she and everyone else were equally welcome. Her theology points to her sense of womanist hope in the face of hopeless conditions. Elaw's life provides an early example of how Black women in the United States have exercised their freedom by behaving womanishly.

Borrowing from Black feminist writer Alice Walker's definition of the word womanist,²² this chapter describes Elaw's transatlantic Christian itinerant ministry as womanish in that it recognized

the violent conditions facing Black people and worked to create wholeness despite those conditions. Elaw's ministry was womanish in a few senses. First, her movements, both physical and intellectual were audacious. She wanted to know, do, and be more than the racialized and gendered restrictions of her time said she could or should be. Throughout the nineteenth century, women in the United States were negotiating their rights. Elaw joined other women of all races who leveraged their understandings of Christian theology paired with their perception of the nation-state as being hypocritical to demand complete freedom for all, regardless of their gender.²³

Second, Elaw's interpretations of Christian theology allowed her to be a universalist. Like other Black women, both enslaved and free, Elaw worked to create the conditions that would make her entire community free. However, her desire that all might receive salvation in the theological sense allowed her to reach beyond the lines of race. For Elaw, humanity was Alice Walker's proverbial flower garden "with every color represented." Third, Elaw's womanish ways were apparent in her commitment to herself. Her itinerant preaching ministry showed the depth of her love for herself and others. She was faithful to her husband, but she never turned away from her perceived call to preach, even when it made him uncomfortable. Throughout her life, she grappled with physical ailments, and she recovered from each one by choosing to be faithful to God's call for her to preach.

Zilpha Elaw faced the same impossibility that all free Black women in the antebellum United States did. She responded to the impossibility of her life by redefining sociality literally and theologically. This chapter will proceed in three parts to demonstrate how she womanishly remade kinship and sociality. First, this chapter will focus on Elaw's relationship with her spouse, Joseph Elaw, to demonstrate the tensions in Elaw's life. As a free Black woman, Elaw should have benefitted socially from her marriage. While it seems that her spouse offered a sense of financial stability as a working-class man, he failed to offer her the support she needed to follow what she

perceived to be her call to Christian ministry. Elaw held a traditional Evangelical theology of marriage, which demanded that she subordinate herself to her husband because of her gender. However, she refused to subordinate herself to her husband's religious beliefs or to his constant demands that she stop preaching. Her disobedience toward her husband demonstrated her womanish audacity. She remade kinship and sociality was by treating God as a close personal friend. She treated her relationship with God as being superior to her other relationships.

Second, this chapter will explore Elaw's relationship with her daughter. Their relationship allows us to critical re-envision of the role of Black mothers in the antebellum United States. While she was born free, Elaw's life was no different from other free Black people in antebellum Philadelphia. She straddled the worlds between freedom and slavery as an indentured servant. She also faced familial separation at a young age. While nominal freedom came sooner for Black Philadelphians than it did for other Black people in the United States, Black women and girls received it last.²⁴ Whether enslaved or free, Black women's bodies in the nineteenth century were treated as available to all. According to both law and custom, Black women had no rights that anyone was bound to honor or protect, least of all the right to care for their children. Elaw's relationship to her daughter, and eventually to her two grandsons, demonstrated the extent of her radical self-love. She could not save her daughter from the impossibility that marked life for Black women in the antebellum era. She could instead demonstrate a way to demand something more by refusing to settle for a life as a domestic servant.

The third section of this chapter will demonstrate how Elaw broadened the definition of motherhood even beyond the biological constraints that were typically placed upon it in the antebellum era. Her experiences as a preacher in England demonstrate that Elaw was traditionally communal in the sense that she believed salvation was for all people. She believed that no soul was beyond redemption. While "Memoirs" shows the depth of her connection with her family of origin,

it shows even more acutely her desire to think differently about relationality. Through her passion for teaching about salvation, Elaw mothered people of all races and genders. During her voyage to England, she also mothered people who did not share her nationality. She demonstrated the transformational capacity of womanish life. While womanism as an ideology begins with the distinct experiences of women of African descent, as a proto-womanist thinker, Elaw demonstrated that beginning with the specific concerns of the most marginalized people pointed everyone toward a universal ethic of freedom and possibility.

Becoming One: A Womanish Reimagining of Marriage

In “Memoirs,” Zilpha Elaw recalled that her marriage to Joseph Elaw in 1810 was a form of “surrender.” While she believed he was a “very respectable young man,” she bemoaned the fact that he was not a “sincere and devoted disciple of Christ.” She warned her “unmarried sisters in Christ” against marrying men who did not share their religious beliefs. She described the burden of their marriage in embodied terms writing, “in general your lot would be better, if a millstone were hung about your necks, and you were drowned in the depths of the sea” than if they were to “plunge yourselves into all the sorrows, sins, and anomalies involved in a matrimonial alliance with an unbeliever.”²⁵ Elaw’s open critiques of her spouse demonstrate the depth of her womanish audacity. While her writing clarifies that she respected and even revered the institution of Christian marriage, she refused to respect her marriage to a man who refused to believe as she did. Even while she urged young women to respect men, she demanded that men who were worthy of that respect were only the men who conformed to her epistemological standards. The basis of her failure to comply with her husband’s wishes by ending her preaching ministry was in her assertion that he failed to believe as she did in the faith that had become her home. For Elaw, her conception of herself as being part of God’s family took precedence over all other relationships, including marriage.

For free and enslaved Black people in the antebellum United States, marriage was a complicated process, and “Memoirs” reveals that Elaw struggled to navigate those complications. Marriage in the antebellum United States and today has always been intertwined with a person’s race, gender, and sexual orientation. Marriage has, for Black women, always operated as a site of social control. It is the state’s attempt to intervene into every aspect of the social lives of Black people. As cultural historian Saidiya Hartman has demonstrated in her work on post-Emancipation Black intimacy, freedom placed Black women and children within “a locus of patriarchal control and protection that signified the gains of freedom. Yet the privatization of marital and familial relations assured neither women’s protection from the violence of outsiders nor protection from their spouses.” Hartman connects what happened privately to newly emancipated Black women to the violence they experienced in their lives outside of their homes.²⁶

Perhaps one thing that differentiated the unions between Black people who were born into freedom from those of Black people who were born into slavery were the motivations for marriage. For free Black people, marriage was a way to join an institution that connected them to Northern notions of domesticity. They provided a level of security for Black women who might not have worked outside of their homes. Some marriages could also contribute to the continuation of elite Black families, such as the Redmond and Forten families. While they were largely unsuccessful at doing so, elite Black Americans in the North often treated marriage as a way to conform to privatize Black women. Elite free Black families were generally freeborn, Northern-rooted, and light-skinned. Their men worked as small business owners and craftsmen. Some had more specialized vocations as ministers, such as Richard Allen, educators, independent businessmen, such as James W. Stewart, and physicians. This group often withdrew from the more charismatic Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal traditions to which working class free Black women such as Jarena Lee,

Sojourner Truth, and Zilpha Elaw belonged, and joined Black Episcopalian and Presbyterian congregations.²⁷

As a woman who was born free, but not to the class of elite, Northern, Black Americans, Zilpha Elaw encountered the dangerous intimacies of unbridled Black masculine authority both within the private space of her marriage and in the public space of her travels as a Christian minister. If for the elite, marriage offered an opportunity for men to shape women according to notions of “true womanhood,”²⁸ for Black people like Elaw who were not born into elite families, marriage provided an opportunity for men to shape women into docile objects. Although she did not physically experience the brutalities of the Middle Passage or chattel slavery, Elaw navigated what cultural theorist Christina Sharpe calls “ruptures with and a suspension of the known world that initiated enormous and ongoing psychic, temporal, and bodily breaches.”²⁹ Her memories of her early childhood and marriage indicate that she, like enslaved Black Americans, encountered regular psychic, temporal, and bodily breaches which often emerged in the form of physical ailments and spiritual anxieties.

The illusion of privacy within marriage was itself the thing that prevented Elaw from achieving full autonomy while she remained married to Joseph Elaw. Within her home, her husband became the sign and symbol of the patriarchal authority that controlled every aspect of her social and political life outside the home. In other words, for Elaw and women like her, the private space of the home was, in reality, an imposition of the social and political norms of the public world. For Black women in the antebellum United States, marriage was a public affair. Despite the paternalistic control her husband maintained in their household, Elaw found some autonomy and possibility even within the restrictions. Even while she wrote that Scripture stated that daughters ought to submit to the “paternal yoke” until their fathers presented them to their husbands and called women

the “endowment” of their husbands, Elaw’s autobiography indicates that she was not faithful to these so-called Scriptural commands.³⁰

At first brush, Elaw’s words are overtly anti-Black woman. To the scholar who wants to read her as a woman whose defiant life pointed to proto-Black feminist and abolitionist possibilities, her words are a disappointment. For her to demand that Black women live submissively from birth until death made patriarchy what historian Tera Hunter in her work on Black marriage has called the “third flesh.” Through this phrase, Hunter builds on the Christian theological idea that through marriage, two persons became one flesh. While this practice for free people demonstrated the economy of scarcity in which two must shrink into one in which there was only room for the male arbiter, for enslaved people, this practice made the couple non-existent.³¹ However, for Black people, the two were always three because of the intervention of white supremacist authority, which in Elaw’s case emerged in the form of a husband who negated her at every turn. Elaw’s commands that other women obey paternalistic authority show the profound irony and impossibility of free Black life, and especially the lives of non-elite free Black women. No matter how they might attempt to conform to notions of true womanhood, it was something they could not achieve.

Elaw herself did not, and could not, live up to the demands she placed on herself and other women because neither childhood nor marriage provided protections for Black women. Elaw’s experience of familial separation began when she was young. When she was six years old, her grandfather separated the family by taking her twelve-year-old brother to work on his farm. She did not see her brother again for another thirty years. At age twelve, her mother died while giving birth to her twenty-second child, all of whom, except for three, died in childbirth. Elaw wrote about her painful childhood in the space of a single sentence. In the following sentence, she explained that her father separated the family once again by sending his last two children away. Her younger sister was placed in an aunt’s care, and she was sent to Pierson and Rebecca Mitchel, with whom she stayed

until age eighteen. When she had been in the Mitchel home for one and a half years, her father also died, and she had no parental figures left behind.³² Her brevity in recounting her experiences while she was still a girl indicate that hers were not necessarily atypical circumstances. Like Maria W. Miller Stewart, her life was marked by a series of disappointments.

If Elaw lived apart from parental protection and care, what did she know of the parental yoke? It is likely that any Black American readers she might have had shared similar stories of pain and separation if they recalled their experiences as children. How then are we to read the audacious and independent Elaw's "Scriptural" interpretations of how women ought to be? How do we make sense of Elaw's commitment to a theological tradition which essentially called her life a sin? Elaw was womanist theologian Dolores Williams' proverbial sister in the wilderness.³³ She interpreted her wilderness experience using a theological lens through which spaces of isolation and loss shaped her for the better.

Elaw was well aware of the standard Christian theological teachings that demanded women's subordination to their male counterparts. She found the epistemological loophole, and she was unashamed to share it with those who read "Memoirs." After discussing the challenges of being married to Joseph Elaw, she explained to her reader that a Christian who was married to a non-Christian could not share the "mutual sympathy and affectionate accordance" that Christian couples enjoyed. She understood that a wife was "destined to be the help-meet of her husband." However, she believed that if he were not a Christian, she could not be "either his instrument or abettor in worldly lusts and sinful pursuits." Likewise, if the husband were a Christian while his wife was not, Elaw believed she was "not his help-meet, but his drawback and curse."³⁴ For Elaw, marriage was about partnership between two people, so long as they could agree to work collaboratively toward a shared vision. In her case, her husband was more invested in visits to dance halls than camp meetings. Therefore, she justified her audacious choice to continue to preach locally despite his

objections as appropriate because they were living outside Christian proscriptions for a proper marriage.

Elaw understood the Evangelical Christian teachings about marriage, but she disobeyed them because of her belief that her marriage to a man who wanted her to renounce her Christian faith was no marriage at all. While she believed that in an ideal world, women would be faithful daughters to fathers who would surrender them in marriage to Christian men, she found no men who met her standard. Therefore, she decided to allow God to guide her. By so doing, she reinvented masculinity in the sense that the masculine standard for her was not about achievements, but rather about orthodoxy. She also reinvented femininity in that femininity for her was not about obedience to men, but rather about possessing a vision that overshadowed that of men. In “Memoirs,” Elaw indicates that she remained faithful to her husband until his death. She also encouraged other women to marry and be faithful to their husbands. What she refused to do was to allow her husband’s ideologies, which in her mind were flawed, to cause her to adjust her ideologies.

Redefining Maternity: A Womanish Approach to Motherhood

While Zilpha Elaw was an audacious and willful wife, with her daughter, her objective was to show radical love. Elaw could and did not mother in the normative nineteenth-century sense of the term. Likewise, because of the challenges of nineteenth-century life, Elaw herself was not mothered or fathered. Yet, “Memoirs” indicates that Elaw’s daughter experienced maternal love. Although she did not cling to her daughter, Elaw never forgot her daughter. After her husband’s death and before her journey to England, connecting with her only child was a primary concern. In this way, Elaw was like other African diasporic mothers in the nineteenth century. Whether they were enslaved or free, Black women in the nineteenth-century United States consistently exceeded the limited boundaries that were placed around normative mothering practices. While Black women, both enslaved and free, endured blame for their so-called failures, both law and custom meant that

forming traditional kinship bonds was a challenge for them.³⁵ In the face of such challenges, they invented an alternative and unbreakable form of womanish love.

As the rich scholarship on enslaved women of African descent in the Americas has demonstrated, during the Middle Passage, African peoples were literally suspended in the oceanic. They were stripped from their indigenous homelands, but they were not Americans either. They were both everywhere and nowhere at all. Their humanity (and that of any offspring who would be born in the Americas) was being unmade and they were remade as commodities even before they reached American soil.³⁶ They were not considered according to normative understandings of gender in the post-Enlightenment that might have made women and children protected classes. They were simultaneously hyper-gendered through sexual violence and exploitation and ungendered through the expectation that they perform back-breaking physical labor.³⁷

Seventeenth-century colonists assumed that African peoples were permanent laborers who could be forced to have children at their owners' demand. In 1662, the Virginia General Assembly stipulated that the children of African slaves would follow the condition of their mothers. This kind of law meant that for Black people, sexual intimacy was not private. It had market value. Likewise, familial intimacy was not private or protected. Such a law denied Black men's paternity and provided no recourse for mothers to protect themselves from sexual predations of white men. The law made Black women a class of woman all their own. Because Blackness was aligned with slave status pre-Emancipation, even free and quasi-free Black women could not protect their children from enslavement and long-term indentured servitude.³⁸ People who belong to a class whose private intimacies can legally be laid bare in the public square as a matter of public opinion must adapt the very terms and terrain of privacy and intimacy to ensure their survival. Therefore, neither Black motherhood nor Black marriage can be defined by biological notions of sex and gender, but rather by a complex web of entanglements.

The experiences of Black Americans of all genders, which have been marked since the Middle Passage by sexual terror, allow us to rethink the meaning of the Black sexual body. As the recent work of historians within slavery studies has demonstrated, there has been far too little engagement with the relationship between sexuality and chattel slavery.³⁹ Considering the lack of engagement around how sexual intimacy happened during slavery, sexual expression among free Black Americans during the antebellum era seems to be unthinkable. If the womanist is one who loves people of all genders both sexually and non-sexually, pairing Elaw's relationship with her daughter with the idea of radical self-love becomes a way to move beyond framing Black maternity in the nineteenth century as an impossibility. Elaw's relationship with her daughter provides an opportunity to reframe nineteenth-century Black motherhood as the mother's own process of becoming remade. In Elaw's case, after Joseph Elaw's death, her relationship with her daughter paired with her desire to preach on a larger scale remade her for the better.

For Elaw, relationships were fragile. She did not share close bonds with her husband or with members of her family of origin, but "Memoirs" indicates that she faithfully tended to her relationships, despite their challenges. Although familial relationships were important to Elaw, her preaching career was shaped by people who were not part of her family. Her life as an itinerant would have been impossible without those who created opportunities for her. Therefore, her relational life demands that we engage with the very human connections that were at the heart of free Black women's relationships with each other during the slave era. While sexual abuse ran rampant during slavery, so too did physical and emotional love and intimacy. Through Elaw's infrequent references to her daughter in "Memoirs," we see a fragment of the possibilities and impossibilities of Black maternity in the antebellum United States. While most of Elaw's references to her daughter involve leaving her behind, they also consistently show her daughter supporting her. It was because of her daughter's support that Zilpha Elaw could be remade as a transnational

preacher after Joseph Elaw's death. Her daughter's compassion toward her re-birthed her as a Black Biblical Feminist Republican mother.

As a free woman of African descent in the nineteenth century, Elaw navigated a variety of obstacles. Her foremost concern would have been how she would define and make sense of her freedom. In 1823, when she began to travel outside of the northern states as an itinerant preacher, she went to the southern states where she wrote that "Satan much worried and distressed [her] soul with the fear of being arrested and sold for a slave." She recalled a time when she preached to a Black congregation. When she sat down, she feared that slave catchers would capture her as news of the "coloured (sic) female preacher" began to spread. It was only through her assurance that "Jesus hath made [her] free" that she felt she could continue to preach with conviction.⁴⁰ She received her assurance because of the person of a Savior who was not physically present. Her faith in the salvific authority of the person of Jesus points to the ephemerality of freedom for free Black Americans. It also indicates that the ephemeral, although unseen, is real.

A divine force that Elaw could not see assured her that, despite the reality of Black unfreedom, she was free to preach although she was Black and a woman. So, Elaw went into the southern states where she endured racism and sexism. However, it was also in the south that she became acquainted with supporters and friends of all races, religions, and genders. She recalled in 1828 that she even met friends and associates of the president of the United States during her time in Washington, D.C.⁴¹ The crisis at the heart of freedom is that it is defined by what it is not. The very definition of freedom assumes that not all living creatures can access freedom. Freedom is a noun that can be defined as "the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint." It also can be defined as "the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved."⁴² Freedom is defined by its inverse. The very definition of the term clarifies that a condition of liberal modernity is that it is not possible for all persons to simultaneously achieve freedom. The tension in

Elaw's life was how to live freely because of her belief that Jesus made her free while the reality for her and other Black Americans was that their bodies were not free.

The impossibility of achieving freedom was especially acute for Black and Indigenous women in the Americas for whom sexual violence was a structure of terror, devastation, and ultimately erasure. Elaw's experiences of being silenced because of her race, gender, and class both in the United States and in England indicate that her freedom was incomplete. She and her daughter already lived in what Black Studies scholars have called the afterlife of slavery.⁴³ Despite the limitations they faced, Elaw's spiritual autobiography indicates that she and her daughter related intimately to each other. We cannot know how Elaw's daughter understood her mother's inability to provide normative forms of maternal care to her.

Perhaps she understood her mother's inability to provide care in normative ways, according to nineteenth-century ideals of motherhood, as being part of the racist reordering of maternity for Black women in the United States. Many Black women were forced to play mammy in white domestic spaces while their children were destined for lives of degradation and servitude. Alternatively, she might have believed it was connected to the larger gender crisis in the antebellum world that made it impossible for women who entered the public and masculine sphere of the antebellum public speaker to find sites of protection and privacy. However, she knew for sure that she and her mother were entangled in a sort of impossibility, because of their race, class, and gender, from which they could not become disentangled.

In "Memoirs," Elaw the mother only comes into focus after Joseph Elaw's death. Being left without her husband as a source of financial support, Elaw negotiated the need to care financially for herself and her daughter while also honoring her call to be an itinerant preacher. Elaw did the same thing her father had done when her mother died. She sent her daughter to work as a domestic servant so that she could help support the family financially. After sending her daughter to work as a

servant, she wrote that she “procured a situation of servitude for my little girl, and another for myself, judging these the best means I could adopt for the liquidation of my debts.”⁴⁴ She made this choice entirely out of her belief that this was the only way they, as a Black woman and Black girl, could survive financially. She did not consider that perhaps God had different plans for her.

The commonplace nature of her choice to procure domestic servant positions for herself and her daughter is apparent in that the usually loquacious Elaw said virtually nothing of it. She wrote nothing about how she felt when her father sent her to Pierson and Rebecca Mitchel as a child. She also explained nothing about the work of domestic servants, or how she felt as a mother to surrender a young girl to do domestic work outside the home. She also said nothing of her daughter’s reaction to being sent away to work outside of their home. For Elaw, this was the only option in the face of rising financial debts. Procuring positions as domestic servants was how Black women in the nineteenth-century United States typically navigated their economic hardships. Even the white abolitionist posted advertisements with regularity seeking “respectable,” “intelligent,” and “trust-worthy” girls of color between the ages of eight and twelve to serve in their businesses and households. Even in the north, Black girls were expected to serve white Americans.

However, as was the case with most things in Elaw’s life, the commonplace never suited her. While working as a domestic servant, she became ill, and her condition quickly worsened. Rather than resting or seeking medical attention, she went home to open a school with the help of local Quakers in Burlington, New Jersey. Her school opened in 1823. Many of the strangers who visited the school were impressed by her efforts because she was a Black woman who committed to teaching Black students who white institutions refused to admit because of racial prejudice.⁴⁵ It would be another decade before well-known educator Prudence Crandall would open the Canterbury, Connecticut Female Boarding School to receive “young Ladies and little Misses of color” to the great consternation of many who were openly opposed allowing young Black women

to have access to education.⁴⁶ A July 6, 1833 edition abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* expressed in an article called “Savage Barbarity” their grief at hearing that “Miss Crandall” had been imprisoned “for presuming in this *republican and christian* land (emphasis and capitalization in the original text), to instruct young ladies of color!” They expressed their outrage that Crandall was punished and placed in the same cell as a murderer, for trying to educate women whom they described as being “ignorant and oppressed.”⁴⁷ In 1835, another woman, Rebecca Buffam of Philadelphia, also opened a school for young ladies of all races. Schooling was a tool for uplift for all young women at a time when formal education was often foreclosed to all but the sons of propertied white men.

Elaw’s paired the stories of sending her daughter to work as a domestic servant while she began a school for other Black children points to Elaw’s capacious understanding of relationality. It points also to the crisis of the free and widowed Black woman in the antebellum era. Elaw provided an extraordinarily rare opportunity for other Black children to receive an education, but childhood and educational opportunities were foreclosed to her daughter after her mother became a widow. Elaw said nothing of her daughter’s education, likely because she was not free to pursue one, or of the friendships she developed with her peers. Black childhood, whether enslaved or free, in the antebellum era was stolen.⁴⁸

Although Elaw wrote so little about her close relationship with her daughter, the deep intimacy they shared shaped her life. While she does not explicitly name what made her reticent to go to England in the 1820s or 1830s, her narration of saying goodbye to the United States provides insight into what might have kept her in her natal homeland until 1840. Elaw could demonstrate the depth of her love toward her daughter by pursuing God’s call. She traveled locally throughout her daughter’s childhood to preach. However, although the call she felt to preach even beyond the United States was strong, it seems she could not bring herself to leave her daughter in the care of others indefinitely. When her daughter reached adulthood, Elaw’s ministry also reached maturity.

For Elaw, being a mother was not about her constant presence, her ability to provide an excellent education, or even about her ability to avoid allowing her daughter to become a domestic servant. Instead, motherhood for her meant being an archive, a font of stories, about their past. Her daughter could use her mother's teachings to create the future she wanted. For Elaw's daughter, being a daughter was about being faithful and creating a safe home for her mother. Eventually, being a daughter meant allowing her mother to be free from the constraints of nineteenth-century American life entirely. Elaw's choice, even to include the exchange between herself and her daughter and to show that she would not leave the United States without saying goodbye to her indicates the tenderness she felt toward her only biological child. Normative nineteenth-century domesticated motherhood was not possible for Elaw, but her writing demonstrates that radical love of herself and her child was possible.

Transnational Black Futurity: Womanishly Renegotiating Kinship

Zilpha Elaw and her daughter both understood the urgency of relationality. They also recognized that relationships are akin to the womanist flower garden, with room for a variety of people. These broader ways of thinking about relationality are too often neglected within European colonial frameworks, yet Elaw's understanding of her faith allowed her to understand a wider circle of people whom she had met and whom she had never met as her siblings and friends. Near the end of her time in England, she exhorted her audience to be part of the "one church of Jesus Christ in this wilderness."⁴⁹ While her struggles were unique, she recognized that all of humanity lived in a proverbial wilderness, and she believed that only the person of Jesus could liberate them from it.

Although she could not perform the normative role of the doting nineteenth-century mother, Elaw cultivated a wide array of intimate bonds during her adult life. In "Memoirs," she indicates that she maintained close bonds with her friends. She also developed spiritual kinship, variously adopting the role of mother and sibling, with many of the people she met during her

travels as an itinerant preacher. Her ability to develop familial bonds with those to whom she was not related by blood or even nationality mirrored the leadership that Black women showed in the community of enslaved people.

Elaw's womanish ways of creating community were not unlike those of her contemporaries. One such contemporary was Isabella Van Wagenen, who changed her Sojourner Truth after she claimed her freedom. In 1827 Van Wagenen walked away from the plantation in rural New York where she was held as an enslaved her to seize her freedom openly and defiantly. She understood slavery to be a moral crisis. Like the famed Saul of Tarsus who became the apostle Paul upon his conversion to the Christian faith, Isabella Van Wagenen was inspired to be made new in every way. No longer would she be called the name a slave owner gave her. Instead, she would call herself "Sojourner" to represent that she had manifested her mission. She would also call herself "Truth" because she believed herself to be an earthly conduit for the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ Truth's choice to reject her previous name and take on a new one connected her not only to the matriarchs and patriarchs of her faith, but also to Black Americans who chose new names when they became free. These new freedom names reflected the new family they were forming. In Sojourner Truth's case, her new name clarified her commitment to belonging to an ideological family that transgressed race and gender lines. Like Elaw, whom Truth encountered on the Methodist preaching circuit in New York, Truth leveraged her relationships to maintain her freedom.⁵¹

After a seven-month period in 1827 and 1828 when she ministered in New York alongside other Black preaching women Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee, Elaw returned home in April of 1828 where she remained for a few days. During her stay, God's Spirit came upon her, and a voice told her that God would bring her to London, England where she would preach. She did not know what to do, but after a few days she decided to go to Philadelphia where she visited with her daughter and some friends. She told her friends about her uncertainty, but she believed that God would make the

path clear to her at the appropriate time. She concluded that it was not yet her time and continued her travels in the United States.⁵² During those travels, she continued to travel and converted many to the Christian faith.

Twelve years later, in 1840, she felt that the time for her itinerancy in England had arrived. She wrote her spiritual autobiography five years after she arrived in England. She described her time there as a “blessing to hundreds of persons” because they began to serve God. She was pleasantly surprised that some who had never heard sermons before were “attracted to hear the coloured (sic) female preacher, were inclosed (sic) in the gospel net, and [were] now walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord.” It seems that her listeners were attracted to a theological vision that was preached by a Black American woman. Her assurance of God’s love as a marginalized person presented hope to others. Elaw was grateful that God allowed her to travel throughout England. She was especially grateful to have been blessed with “spiritual children” everywhere she traveled.⁵³ For her, service to God extended her family. Again, Elaw expands how we think about maternity and family. In her preaching ministry, she considered herself to be a mother of those whom she taught about God’s love.

Prior to encountering Elaw during her travels, most English people would have only known Black people via what was written about them in British newspapers. The public sentiment in England would have framed Black preachers (and especially Black women preachers) as failed publicity stunts.⁵⁴ In a time when Black women were paraded by white male exhibitionists as freak shows, Black Americans in Europe were rendered as relics of a time gone by and objects for public consumption.⁵⁵ In a world that treated Black women and their bodies as objects to be consumed, Elaw did not spectacularize herself. Instead, she built intimate bonds of Christian charity with those whom she met during her travels. While others might have spectacularized her presence, she believed she was being faithful to God’s call for her to preach in England.

“Memoirs” indicates that Elaw used her ministry in England to create a sense of intimacy between Black Americans and English people. Her distaste for the statements about her and other Black Americans in the press is clear as she wrote in the dedication to “Memoirs” that her readers must “shun an infidel, obscene, or disloyal newspaper press . . . Remember that you are called to be saints, not politicians and newsmongers.” Therefore, she encouraged her siblings and spiritual children to turn to the Christian Scriptures which she told them would give them “an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”⁵⁶ Those who valued the Christian Scriptures above what she understood to be the false testimony of print journalists became Elaw’s kin. She mothered them by sharing her wisdom about the sanctified life with them. Elaw’s words indicate that she sought something more than the abolition of slavery and sexism. She also wanted the abolition of all the power structures of this world, and the inauguration of what she believed to be a more godly world, that is a world in which all of those in the “household of faith” would “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free.”⁵⁷

Zilpha Elaw first felt God calling her to travel to England to preach in the Spring of 1828. She did not arrive until on British soil until the Summer of 1840. While her autobiography is spiritual in the sense that it covers spiritual topics, it might more accurately be described as a travel narrative in which the “narrative is conceived from a transcendent point of view and unfolds according to God’s providential design.”⁵⁸ In addition to telling the story of her faith, Elaw most wanted to tell the story of her transatlantic voyage. She traveled at great risk to herself; despite the risks, she went because she believed that God wanted her to do so. As a woman who was born in 1790 as a free Black person in a former British colony, her trip to England provides a lens through which we can examine what cultural theorist Hazel Carby describes as the “interdependencies of empire.”⁵⁹

Elaw’s narrative allows her readers to think through a series of encounters. Elaw encounters a hostile nation-state in the United States, she encountered the Atlantic which she described as a

“rolling ocean beneath, gently moving wave after wave,”⁶⁰ and Elaw encountered a new and no less hostile nation-state when she arrived on July 25, 1840, in the London Docks. She stepped onto British soil for the first time on a Sunday. Having arrived on a day that she observed as a sabbath day of rest from work and other activities, she was immediately jarred by the sight of open shops. She could not believe that in the “metropolis of the most Christian country in the world, such a want of respect should be indicated towards (sic) the day which Jesus signalised (sic) by His resurrection.” It was some days before she met another Methodist when a woman’s appearance attracted her attention. Something about the woman’s physical appearance indicated to Elaw that she had encountered one who shared her faith.⁶¹

Shortly after she arrived in England, Elaw met with a man who advised her to return to the United States with haste. The man also told her that had he met her before she began her voyage and known her intention, “he would have advised [her] better.” Elaw rebuffed his advice. She retorted that she did not travel because of her personal desire to do so, but rather because of a Divine command to do so. Her rebuttal made no sense to her conversation partner who was compelled by what Elaw believed was ungodly reason. As she continued to write about the exchange, it seemed that her conversation partner was concerned that Elaw would earn no money during her sojourn in England. Elaw critiqued those who professed to be Christians, but whom she argued had no faith at all.⁶² It seemed that her mission in England was to convert people in a nation that believed itself to be moral and Christian to what she believed the Christian faith ought to be. She had no interest in gaining financially from her sojourn in England. Rather, she understood herself to be a missionary to British citizens. Just as the British Empire had missionized her natal home, she visited them to indoctrinate them into her womanish Christian theological framework. When the man encouraged Elaw to go home, she refused to do so. She had traveled across the

Atlantic Ocean, and she had no desire to return to the United States until she felt that God commanded her to go.

During her years in England, Elaw continued her mission as faithfully as she had while she was on American soil. In “Memoirs,” she recounted visits to small chapels all over England to attend “many religious tea meetings” which she found to be “very edifying and profitable to the soul.”⁶³ She also traveled to Kent, Salem, Canterbury, Yorkshire, Brotherton, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, London, and other cities and towns throughout England. She wrote that she converted people to the Christian faith wherever she went. Despite her physical ailments and dealings with people who challenged her ability to preach, Elaw was as always, persistent in her mission. Elaw was determined to contribute to increasing the family of God. Just as she had been converted at the camp meeting, so too she wanted to revive the souls of those she met on her travels in the United States and in England. Elaw had a proto-womanist desire to think broadly about community. In Elaw’s vision, all who were open to the message of Christian salvation were welcome. She desired that people of all races and genders experience full freedom, and she was willing to assume the role of the spiritual mother who would walk with them each step of their journey.

Conclusion

“Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw” is a text that must receive the attention of more scholars of nineteenth-century free Black life as it is a proto-Black feminist and proto-womanist transnational epistemology of race, religion, and ultimately freedom. Although Elaw was born free, her life was marked by a series of failures and restrictions. Her mother carried twenty-two children in her womb before she died, only three of whom survived to adulthood. She was separated at age six from her older brother, and after her mother’s death, she was also separated from her younger sister and her father. While she worked as a young domestic servant, her father also died. During her marriage to Joseph Elaw, she

encountered sexist hostility and rejection because of her desire to preach. Through it all, Elaw clung to her remaining family members and formed a support network of friends who became her kin. After Joseph Elaw's death, she was left to provide for herself and a young daughter. Many women would have resigned themselves to live out their lives as a domestic worker. Zilpha Elaw chose differently.

Zilpha Elaw believed that she was called to speak publicly about religion, both in the United States and in England. During her travels in the United States, she went even into the Southern territories, where she worried about her safety. She entrusted her young daughter to the care of friends. She preached alongside other Black women who had similar courage in the face of the impossible. While in England, she traveled widely and spoke openly despite her concerns about her appearance and her intellect. She gained supporters who became her kin during her travels. She refused to be restricted, and she offered others the gift of the kind of freedom she enjoyed. Her sense of freedom flew in the face of the extraordinary limitations on the minds and bodies of Black women, both enslaved and free in the United States.

"Memoirs" is about a series of movements. The movements happened both physically and within Elaw. As a woman of African descent, born in Philadelphia, who felt compelled to preach in England, Elaw belonged everywhere and nowhere. Her movement into the southern states and eventually across the Atlantic was a sign of solidarity with African diasporic people whose lives were defined by flight. According to Stephanie M.H. Camp, in the plantation South, enslaved Black people reimagined the space where they were held captive. They produced rival geographies by turning space that was meant to contain them into the mobile space they imagined it could be instead.⁶⁴ So too, free people of African descent reimagined space. They were also held captive under the panoptic glare of white Northerners who feared free(d) Black people. Elaw turned a world that limited her because of her race and gender into a rival geography, and she taught her spiritual

kin to do the same. Elaw joined other free Black Americans who transformed space to create the conditions for their freedom, and ultimately for the freedom of all. However, Elaw's movement also pointed to the impossibility of belonging for the people of African descent whose ancestors were ripped from their indigenous homelands and became Black. While Elaw's movements, both outward and inward, were dangerous, movement was also a necessity for any Black women who, like Elaw, refused to conform.

By the end of her narration of her travels in England, Elaw did not say why she believed God called her to cross the Atlantic Ocean and travel to England. However, she did express gratitude to God for helping her to make many friends while she was there. She knew how it felt to be the lonely stranger in a foreign land, and she experienced challenges since her voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. However, she had not been an "idle spectator in [her] Heavenly Master's cause." Somehow, despite all the challenges she faced, she managed to preach more than one thousand sermons during her six years in England.⁶⁵ Such a figure indicates that on an average of twice per day, Elaw found an audience that was receptive to hearing a message from her. Even if this number is hyperbolic, Elaw's contributions to nineteenth-century Methodist preaching history are undeniable.

As an itinerant minister, wife, sister, and mother, Elaw worked to enhance the family of faith. She found that the world was lacking in true morality. She moved with an ethic of womanist care. She wanted no one to be left out of what she understood to be God's divine mission. Her life story of faith, from being a fourteen-year-old encountering what she perceived to be the presence of Jesus Christ with her while she was milking a cow to being a nearly sixty-year-old, highly effective, transnational Methodist preacher is emblematic of the movement of Black American women in nineteenth-century America. Even under the most impossible of circumstances, they kept moving, bolstered by the relationships their traditionally communal ways of living made possible.

¹ In Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 35-36, Brown describes abolitionist theologians' relationships with their families. Generally, they rarely spoke about their children. They all seemed willing to their children behind to do their ministerial travels. None of them indicated that they missed their husbands at all.

² Zilpha Elaw, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw," in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1986), 56-58.

³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 50-51.

⁴ Elaw writes that her husband was a fuller by trade (he cleaned wool to prepare it to be turned into cloth). As the demand for cotton boomed in the American South, especially Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia, more hands were needed. Simultaneously, President James Madison enacted the Non-Intercourse Act which prohibited trade with England. See G. W. Daniels, "American Cotton Trade with Liverpool Under the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts," *The American Historical Review* 21, no. 2 (1916): 276-87.

⁵ Elaw, 64-66.

⁶ *Ibid*, 70-71.

⁷ See Joycelyn Moody's assessment of this event in Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, paperback Ed (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2003), 73-75.

⁸ Elaw, 63.

⁹ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 91.

¹¹ See Loren Schweninger, "The Fragile Nature of Freedom: Free Women of Color in the U.S. South," in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 106-24 and Wilma King, "Out of Bounds: Emancipated and Enslaved Women in Antebellum America," in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 127-44.

¹² Elaw, 137.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 138.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 64.

¹⁷ No doubt, this restraint is a precursor to what Darlene Clark Hine has called the "culture of dissemblance," the way that Black women hide their emotions about anti-Black woman violence in plain sight as a form of self-preservation. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-20 and Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 160.

¹⁹ I am thinking specifically of the novels of James Baldwin, especially *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*. I am thinking also of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and her definition of the word "womanist" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*. I am also thinking of Emily Townes' *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, E. Patrick Johnson's ethnographic interviews in *Honeypot*, and Ashon Crawley's *The Lonely Letters*.

²⁰ Kimberley Blockett sorts through some of these archival materials in "Disrupting Print: Emigration, the Press, and Narrative Subjectivity in the British Preaching and Writing of Zilpha Elaw, 1840-1860s," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no. 3 (September 2015): 94-109.

²¹ Here I am thinking with Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Oxford Univ. Press paperback (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989) and Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

²² This definition is in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983).

²³ See for example Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women During the Slave Era* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

²⁴ See chapter 2 in Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

²⁵ Elaw, 61.

- ²⁶ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 156.
- ²⁷ Carla L Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 8-9.
- ²⁸ See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, 1. Oxford Univ. Press paperback (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 26. Within the cult of true womanhood, wifehood and motherhood were considered to be the purpose of women's existence. Their activities were to occur in the space of the private home and their lives were to focus on pleasing their husbands.
- ²⁹ Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: The Making of Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.
- ³⁰ Elaw, 61.
- ³¹ Tera W Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019), 6.
- ³² Elaw, 53.
- ³³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).
- ³⁴ Elaw, 62.
- ³⁵ See the discussion of the mammy and the jezebel in Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).
- ³⁶ In Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana Chicago Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2016), Mustakeem offers a generative description of the experience of the Middle Passage.
- ³⁷ See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81, Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), Jennifer Lyle Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, Pa: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), and Natasha Lightfoot, "'So Far to Leeward': Eliza Moore's Fugitive Cosmopolitan Routes to Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (January 2022): 61–88.
- ³⁸ See Tera W Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019), Jennifer L. Morgan, "Partus Sequitur Ventrem," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 1–17, and Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland, Race in the Atlantic World, 1700-1900* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2015).
- ³⁹ Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, Gender and Slavery (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018).
- ⁴⁰ Elaw, 90-91.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, 96.
- ⁴² "FREEDOM | Definition of FREEDOM by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.Com Also Meaning of FREEDOM," Lexico Dictionaries | English, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/freedom>.
- ⁴³ Saidiya Hartman has described the afterlife of slavery as "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment." Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 1. ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
- ⁴⁴ Elaw, 85.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ "The Abolitionist," *The Liberator*, February 25, 1833, Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁴⁷ "Savage Barbarity," *The Liberator*, July 6, 1833, Boston Athenaeum.
- ⁴⁸ See Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) and Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
- ⁴⁹ Elaw, 159.
- ⁵⁰ Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America* (Urbana, Ill; Chesham: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 148-149.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, 58-97.
- ⁵² Elaw, 90.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 141.
- ⁵⁴ Kimberly Blockett, "Disrupting Print: Emigration, the Press, and Narrative Subjectivity in the British Preaching and Writing of Zilpha Elaw, 1840-1860s," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no. 3 (September 2015): 101.
- ⁵⁵ For example, Ellen and William Craft or Saartjie (Sarah) Bartman.
- ⁵⁶ Elaw, 52.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 160.

⁵⁸ Carla L Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 89.

⁵⁹ Hazel V Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019).

⁶⁰ Elaw, 139.

⁶¹ Ibid, 139-140.

⁶² Elaw, 141.

⁶³ Ibid, 142.

⁶⁴ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 158.

Chapter 5

Bodies on the Line: Reclaiming Black Women's Role in the Radical Abolitionist Tradition

"Farewell!—farewell!—'t were better far that we had never met, than meeting one brief moment here, to part—and then forget." -Ada in Philadelphia, June 12, 1832

"Variouslly named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world." -Saidiya Hartman, 2008

The central problem facing nineteenth-century Black abolitionist women was not that they never existed. They did exist. However, their very existence and their insistence upon being seen as activists within the abolitionist movement presented a problem for a society that wished to profit from their silent labors. Nineteenth-century Black abolitionist women were active in all aspects of social and political life. While their names become visible through church records and anti-slavery society reports, Black feminist and womanist methodologies allow a rereading of these sources. This rereading process reveals that Black abolitionist women had fuller lives and made more substantial contributions to radical abolitionism than the records might readily reveal. They belonged to religious communities and mutual aid groups. They served their families and friends. The people who met them were changed because of their efforts and by the impossibility of their lives in a world that demanded their erasure. They were the subjects of many social and political stories, but when the stories were retold, they became the objects. In their time and ours, the world was/is so busy. The cities were/are full of others who spoke more boisterously or eloquently or who were believed to speak more convincingly of Black women's political challenges than Black women themselves. No sooner had Black women abolitionists' presence been noted that it was forgotten and buried away.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy among many that befell nineteenth century Black abolitionist women was that despite their earnest efforts to liberate themselves and other captive people, they (and their work) were quickly forgotten. As Ada, a member of the Philadelphia Female Literary Association, a group of free women of color in Philadelphia who gathered to share their writing,¹

wrote in a poem she called “The Farewell,”² Black women were certain that they would be forgotten. Even the name, “Ada,” a name of Hebrew origin meaning “adornment,” might have been a pseudonym. Since she did not include a surname, we can know no more about her than what she includes in the poem. Her refusal to expose more about who she was indicates her certain feeling that she would soon be forgotten. Yet, her poetry operates as its own sort of political discourse; it is a lasting condemnation of the status quo. Her poetry was a “revelatory distillation of [her] experience . . . a vital necessity of [her] existence.”³

Ada wrote in the first stanza of “The Farewell” that she believed that the reader would soon forget her. She was the “stranger” who was only briefly seen in “the gay and busy world.” Despite her knowledge that she would likely be forgotten within moments of being seen, Ada impressed upon her reader that it was urgent that they try to remember her because it was better to have never met than to see each other even for a moment only to forget. It is readily apparent that Ada’s poetry allowed her to speak the visions that otherwise laid dormant within her. In her poetry, she could name the failures of her society. In the world of her feelings, which she could clearly express in verse, she saw the potential that one day all would be free, and that Black women’s contributions to freedom work would be remembered. She felt that although her name was unknown now, in the future, many would concern themselves with her fate and that of her sisters of African descent.

Ada and many other antebellum Black women were desperate to be remembered as the subjects in their own liberation stories. They had good reason to be concerned that they and their stories might be erased because all too often others were credited for their achievements. The crisis of being forgotten was a crisis for abolitionist Black women in the nineteenth century, and the crisis of being forgotten continues to be a crisis for political Black women. The amnesia surrounding Black women’s political lives requires us to pair memory with archival evidence to tell a more complete story of who Black political women were, are, and will be.

To be clear, the problem facing Black women abolitionists went beyond an intellectual crisis. To fail to recognize Black women, enslaved and free, as abolitionists is to fail to recognize the real stakes of abolitionist politics. To be radically abolitionist is to claim one's own personhood despite the efforts of any state authority or individual to negate their freedom. Each time a free or enslaved Black woman in the nineteenth century asserted her right to be free and to enjoy her freedom as she saw fit, she performed a radically abolitionist act. To perform such radicalism was dangerous as it could lead to loss of life. Despite the very real risks, again and again throughout the slave era, Black women courageously decided that they and their offspring would never be called slaves. Those whose race and gender meant that they were excluded from the status of normative humanity asserted that they were human. They would determine their destinies on their own terms. In a world that respected no part of them, including their bodies, such everyday acts of rebellion were dangerous but necessary.

This chapter offers a methodology, inspired by womanist theology and Black feminist cultural theory, that expands the limits of the archive thereby making the Black women who freed themselves from slavery by walking away from it the subjects rather than the objects of their own freedom narratives. Unlike the other Black woman abolitionists who are the subjects of this project, women including Phillis (Wheatley), Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Maria W. Miller Stewart, and Zilpha Elaw, most Black abolitionist women did not leave behind extant writings about their lives. Since nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians left so few extant documents, contemporary scholars are left to grapple with what many of their non-Black contemporaries said about their lives. Frequently, even when writing about the women's triumphs, those who remembered them objectified them or treated them as bystanders in their own heroic narratives.

In this chapter, I work to achieve three primary goals. First, I demonstrate the role that Black women played in the nineteenth-century radical abolitionist movement by specifically focusing

on one woman, Jane Johnson. Johnson is distinct from the other subjects of this dissertation because she did not leave behind extant writings about her experiences. Jane Johnson only emerges through the one story that her former so-called owner, the man who allegedly freed her, and the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, and a Philadelphia District Court told about her. Her experiences indicate that the definition of an abolitionist must expand to accommodate the radical activities of enslaved Black women who produced their own freedom conditions. Second, this chapter asserts that womanist and Black feminist cultural theory allow us to expand the limits of the archive to produce Black women as subjects not objects in abolitionist history. These methods also demonstrate the collectivity of Black life, and the key role Black women play in maintaining that collectivity. Although Jane Johnson appears in the archive as a woman who sought freedom only for herself and her two sons, Black feminist and womanist methods, which I call a womanist wilderness archival reading method, allow us to see that there was a community that nineteenth-century Black women created, even in the proverbial wilderness. What one Black woman achieved for herself, she also achieved for a group of women she might never meet.

Third, this chapter narrates Johnson's story as it emerges in the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia's 1855 report and District Court records about the case. The case demonstrated that tenuous nature of freedom, even in the Northern states, before the Civil War and anticipates the ongoing Black freedom struggle (and specifically the struggle for Black women's freedom) which persists today. Finally, this chapter offers a critical albeit speculative of imaginative rereading of Johnson's story by providing a close reading of the archival records about her using womanist and Black feminist methods. The womanist wilderness archival reading methods relies on the key facts presented in the archive and narrates how the incident might have unfolded if Jane Johnson were allowed to (or desired to) tell the story for herself. While Johnson's story is exclusively her own, reading her story anew also allows a reconsideration of the interior lives of other nineteenth-century

Black women who placed their bodies on the line in the pursuit of a more complete version of freedom.

Black Women Redefining Abolition

Nineteenth-century Black women were radical abolitionists. From the abolitionist speakers like Maria W. Stewart to abolitionist mothers like Margaret Garner and Sojourner Truth, all Black women performed acts of Black feminist refusal to permit their bodies or minds to be used without their consent to build a nation that routinely humiliated them. Many exercised what historian Kellie Carter Jackson describes as “protective violence” to defend themselves and their communities, and ultimately to overthrow slavery.⁴ To that end, they would not allow anyone to treat them or those they loved as less than human.⁵ While many archival documents sidestep ascribing agency to them, nineteenth-century Black women were nothing less than resourceful in the pursuit of their freedom. As Maria W. Miller Stewart did when she asked Louise C. Hatton to learn what she could about her lost War of 1812 widow’s pension, Black women in the nineteenth-century were unafraid to ask questions and to seek out allies to assure that once they reclaimed what was rightfully theirs, it would be theirs to hold. Their actions effectively force a reevaluation of what it means to be abolitionist. For them, abolitionism was something that happened on large and small scales. Although they pushed for the abolition of the system of slavery in the United States, ending slavery alone was not enough. For many Black women in the United States, and across the African diaspora in the nineteenth century, abolitionism was everyday labor that happened on plantations, in domestic spaces, in prisons, on public streets, in schools, and in houses of worship.

A primary example of the quotidian nature of abolitionist theology is the story of Jane Johnson and her sons and their escape from their “owner.” While the archive does not overflow with stories about Jane Johnson’s life, her efforts to free herself and her sons from slavery on a summer day in Philadelphia demonstrate her commitment to living a radically abolitionist life.

Johnson was a Black enslaved mother of two sons who claimed freedom for herself and her sons as they traveled through Philadelphia in the summer of 1855. She and her sons were enslaved by John Hill Wheeler and were allegedly stolen from Wheeler by Passmore Williamson, a white male abolitionist in Philadelphia, who hustled them off into freedom. The archives of slavery would ordinarily turn Jane Johnson and her boys into numbers in a ledger. However, she was courageous and demanded something more. On a summer day, while she passed through a city where she knew she was free, she produced the conditions for her liberation. By so doing, she provided herself and her sons with something essential—their names.

Because Wheeler was a man of means as the foreign minister to Nicaragua, after Johnson's successful escape, he took the case of his "stolen property" before the District Court. His choice to pursue his "property" placed Jane Johnson's name within the archival records. Johnson's story demonstrates that despite their knowledge that their efforts to liberate themselves and other members of their community would likely be forgotten, Black women acted audaciously in the pursuit of freedom. They were willing to surrender anything, including their lives and those of their children, to attain their freedom and ultimately to unsettle and overthrow the system of chattel slavery.

Despite the narrow focus which the courts and anti-slavery societies placed on the work that some white Northerners did to support abolitionist efforts, free Black Northerners frequently worked alongside enslaved Black Southerners to ensure that all Black people in the Americas would be free. Black Americans pursued freedom on their own terms and permitted white allies to join their efforts. The insistence of Black Americans including Jane Johnson upon forcing American courts to intervene in ways that either reinforced or eroded the slave system forced the Northern courts, which were often apathetic to the ongoing system of chattel slavery, to confront slavery head-on. By the 1850s, no abolitionists were willing to allow the North to quietly continue making

compromises with the slaveholding states. For them, to be any less than abolitionist was to be complicit with the system of chattel slavery.

The way Jane Johnson appears in archival records forces a reconsideration of how the state made sense of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement while it was ongoing. Her actions, as described by the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia and District Court records also call upon historians to reconsider how the idea of the nineteenth-century abolitionist has been framed. While there have been comprehensive studies of the history of abolitionism in the United States and others that have focused on white women's contributions to the early feminist movement in the United States (which includes their contributions to anti-slavery societies), most projects have not tended to Black women's contributions to radical theories of abolitionism and feminism. The studies that have discussed them have focused on those who left textual documents about their efforts, the women I have described throughout this project as abolitionist theologians. This problem of the failure to see the nineteenth-century Black woman abolitionist is the one that historian Shirley Yee sought to rectify in her 1993 monograph. Yee argued that although historians have studied individual Black women abolitionists, little attention has been devoted to Black women's collective role in the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement.⁶ The problem Yee identified in 1993 is still pervasive in gender history and African American history. Black women worked collaboratively across social class and freedom status throughout the nineteenth century to ensure freedom for themselves and their entire community.

Therefore, in this chapter I step away from studying the well-known Black woman abolitionists who have been the primary subjects of the preceding chapters. I also step away from focusing on Black women's work in institutions such as Black churches and abolitionist and mutual aid societies. Instead, I turn to Jane Johnson, who appears in the archive almost randomly. She is rendered in the archival documents about her as a minor figure. She is the woman who was never

intended to be made legible, but an unexpected disagreement between two white men, one a holder of enslaved Black people, and the other a resolutely anti-slavery person, made her visible in a new way. Through her representation in archival documents, she appears to be a woman who allowed a white man named Passmore Williamson to liberate her and her sons from captivity. It seems that she was inactive in the story of her own liberation. It also seems that she claimed her freedom exclusively for her own benefit. While being rendered invisible indicated that Jane Johnson and her sons were happy to remain in slavery, being rendered visible came with its own challenges because “to be visible was to be targeted for uplift or punishment, confinement or violence.”⁷ Regardless of how they were perceived by others, Jane Johnson’s actions were radically abolitionist and point to a primary way that Black women participated in the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Her actions indicate that although slavery was still a decade away from being legally abolished, Black women were already prepared to take their loved ones and walk away from unjust labor relations. They understood that their lives were theirs to own.

Nineteenth-century Black women wanted to be remembered as more than chattel. They wanted to be seen as full humans who contributed to the political and social developments of their time. They were theologians, essayists, poets, public speakers, and most of all they were the embodiment of the failures of a nation state that was built on the ideals of freedom for all. Yet, they were determined to embody instead new perceptions of what it meant to be a free person in the Americas. Nineteenth-century Black women, the enslaved, the free, and the quasi-free, were willing to sacrifice everything, including their bodies and their children’s bodies, for freedom. Although they understood that the nation-state would do all it could to snuff out their memory and their lives, nineteenth century they pursued abolition by deploying both their rhetoric and their bodies. Their use of their bodies as a symbolic and salvific tool aligns them with the Christian theology of Jesus

who was born to save the world through an act of bodily surrender. So too, everyday abolitionists such as Jane Johnson saved their world through acts of bodily surrender.

For the white anti-slavery activists who were discussed in chapters two and three, freedom was primarily an ideological space. As people who enjoyed their full social, political, and religious liberties, abolition (or anti-slavery work) was exclusively about ending chattel slavery. They believed slavery was immoral and many of them were ashamed to live in a country where people were held as chattel. However, they did not experience the violence of slavery in their bodies as people of African descent, whether free or enslaved did. They did not gain the courage from David Walker's "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" that Black Americans did. As largely educated, wealthy white Americans, they were committed to ending slavery because they understood that it was immoral. However, they were not committed to overthrowing the systemic injustices that rendered so many who lived in the United States to a status that was less than human. Meanwhile, anti-slavery Black women were committed to abolitionism with their whole lives because they had their whole lives to gain.

Black Women Abolitionists in the Womanist Wilderness

Because of their distinct lived experiences, nineteenth-century Black American women were necessarily the authors of a new analytical framework. They did what cultural theorist Christina Sharpe has called wake work; they lived in the past and present of terror. They lived what the state treated as un/imaginable lives.⁸ As the always excessive and otherwise figures in American history, the way they conceived of freedom differed radically from the way their contemporaries did. Since, whether free or enslaved, slavery was an event that for them continued to unfold, freedom was also an event that was constantly unfolding and frequently seemed to be incomplete. Freedom was theirs to invent and reinvent day by day, and at times, moment by moment. They produced their freedom by choosing to live free even as they experienced terror. Their rebellion was their refusal to allow

anything, including the seeming finality of physical death, to destroy them. By re-narrating their stories using the methodologies that Black feminist and womanist thinkers offer and pairing those methodologies with Black women's historiography, we gain new resources to use in the ongoing struggle to navigate life in the wake, the past and present of terror. Despite the constant efforts in their time to neglect their contributions to radical abolitionist work and the failure of historical projects about the time to center their efforts, radical Black abolitionist women live on through those who refuse to forget them.

By narrating Jane Johnson's story both as it appears in the archive and how it might otherwise appear, I want to speak to the nature of the way that Black women are made legible both as individuals and within communities of belonging within the archives that I call the archives of Black quasi-freedom. The term quasi-freedom aptly describes the legal status that many Black women, including the freeborn and manumitted, occupied in the nineteenth century as those who lived in the liminal space between freedom and unfreedom. For Black women, freedom was/is a gray area. The theoretical approach to the archive that I offer in this chapter is a provocation to scholars to reconsider abolitionist history through the lens of ordinary Black women in the United States. It is an invitation to think through the new possibilities that might emerge at the intersection of African American and Gender History if nineteenth-century Black women's intellectual and physical labors are considered as the creators of new kinds of freedom in the nineteenth century that exceeded the limitations of modern liberal ideas about freedom in their time.

There is much that is unknown about Jane Johnson as she only emerges in the archive because of an interaction she and her sons had with two white men, one a slaveholder, the other an abolitionist, on a steamboat on a summer day in Philadelphia in 1855. The documentation of the event tells us nothing about who she had been until that day or about who she became after seizing her freedom in broad daylight alongside her sons. Can these details about her life be known if they

are not written in the archival records? How can one narrate the story of what might have been in Jane Johnson's life? Answering these questions requires the methods of cultural historians⁹ who expand the legibility of the archive, thereby critiquing the traditional practices of historians who are faithful to the limits of what the archives yield. It also requires a deep dive into the findings of Black women's historians whose pioneering analysis of planter's records, newspapers, marriage records, census data, letters, and even WPA narratives have demonstrated the unique experiences of Black women during slavery. While many of these records cannot recover the voices of enslaved Black women, they do remind historians and theorists that Black enslaved women were active producers of the conditions for Black freedom.

To revisit Jane Johnson's story using Black feminist cultural theory as a method which allows a different way study both her life and the archives of quasi-freedom themselves is not to delve into the realm of fictional storytelling, but rather to use the scant documents that are available for purposes that differ from their original intent. Thereby, we might tell her story anew. This retelling of her story will grant her subjectivity in the story which ultimately is about her liberation and the liberatory work she performed as a Black mother. By rearranging the details of her story as they are recorded in the archive and placing it in relationship to the stories of the other Black abolitionist women whose efforts I have discussed in the preceding chapters, we learn about the fullness of who Jane Johnson was and how she transformed herself into an abolitionist, but also about the stories of the many ordinary Black women, who remain unnamed in anti-slavery society reports, church documents, and court records, but who likewise lived according to their own set of abolitionist politics. Although she appears in the archival documents as a solitary figure, Jane Johnson was not alone. As slavery studies scholars who examine Black women's history during slavery have demonstrated, many enslaved Black mothers made harrowing choices to ensure their children would one day become free people.¹⁰

Archival documents about Jane Johnson's movements toward freedom are best read using a womanist reading methodology that I call a womanist wilderness approach to the archive. This approach to reading stories that reveal little about Black women's interiority allows us to read their stories through the lens of the theological space of the wilderness, a place that is both barren and filled with the possibility of new futures. This reading method builds upon the foundational womanist work *Sisters in the Wilderness* by Biblical scholar Dolores Williams.¹¹ In *Sisters in the Wilderness* Williams developed a theological vision for Black women's liberation which she grounded in the Hebrew Bible story of Hagar (Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:9-21). Through her study, she realized that Hagar's story had striking similarities with Black women's story in the United States. Like many nineteenth-century Black women in the United States, Hagar was a woman of African descent who was enslaved. She faced physical and emotional brutality from her owner, a woman named Sarah. As would later be the case in the plantation South, powerful women like Sarah owned people as their slaves. These women largely performed domestic work, transforming the domestic spaces into a "site of struggle between women."¹² This arrangement in the ancient world and the antebellum era made it clear that womanhood was a fraught category, bound up in careful negotiations of authority.

The Genesis story indicates that Hagar routinely performed manual labor for Sarah, but the turning point in their relationship with each other occurred because of the crisis of motherhood. The central problem in their relationship was Sarah's insecurity within the ancient Israelite social structure which granted women social status based on their reproductive capacity. Despite her power, Sarah recognized that her seeming inability to bear children called her womanhood into question. Although the social mores rendered Hagar was the nonhuman other and Sarah the powerful woman, Sarah's inability to conceive a child ironically reversed their status. Sarah's perception of herself as the barren woman (a misconception that would later be corrected when she

bore a child) transformed Hagar into the hyperfeminine woman and Sarah into one who lacked power in the household she managed.

When Sarah found that she could not produce offspring from her own womb, she forced Hagar, her servant girl to become a surrogate mother. Sarah instructed her own husband, Abraham, to impregnate Hagar. The Biblical story says nothing of Hagar's reaction to her owner's husband initiating sexual relations with her to impregnate her with a child who would never truly be her own. The Biblical record also says nothing of Hagar's birthing experience. It reveals nothing of how she felt as she endured labor pains to bring a child who was conceived in terror into the world. When Sarah determined that her husband favored the pregnant Hagar because of her childbearing capacity, she was cruel to her. Hagar responded to the indignity by fleeing only to return because she believed God wanted her to continue in Sarah's household, at least until she could safely usher her child into the world. However, when Sarah successfully birthed a child from her own womb, she cast Hagar and her son Ishmael out of the home and out into the wilderness. They were without family members, cultural resources, or any tangible resources for their survival.

Williams thought that a close reading of Hagar's experience according to the account offered in the Hebrew Bible might point to a way she might construct a theology that began with the particularity of Black women's experiences in the United States. Like historian Elsa Barkley Brown, who described the process of Black women's historical research as quilt-work,¹³ Dolores Williams came to understand womanist theological work as a mosaic which would eventually come together for the benefit of future generations of Black women who sought to understand and describe their experiences by connecting the past with the present. Hagar's story is one of survival despite the violence she endured in Sarah's household. Her story points to wilderness as a productive space. Slavery, surrogate motherhood, and homelessness were meant to break Hagar. Instead, she did what generations of women of African descent in the United States have also done by turning an unjust

labor system on its head, expanding her conception of motherhood to allow her to love and protect her son despite the sexual abuses that led to her pregnancy, and creating a home and future for herself and her son in the wild.

The womanist wilderness archival reading method is built upon the lived experiences that have defined Black women's lives from the transatlantic slave trade to the present. This archival reading method examines the archival documents that provide limited insight into Black women's history during the nineteenth century not as a triumphant narrative of progress or a declining narrative of failure, but as a story of Black women's survival in spite of conditions that were created to destroy them. Furthermore, this reading method is insistent that abolitionist Black women's appearances in nineteenth century archives have implications not only for nineteenth-century actors, but also for those who continue to live in the United States.

Our destinies are intimately connected to Jane Johnson's destiny and to the destinies of so many other Black mothers who made courageous choices throughout the antebellum period. Therefore, we must grapple with the unique character of her life as an enslaved woman who sought out a path to freedom. When telling the story of Black liberation, we must center the heroic actions Black mothers including Jane Johnson took to preserve their life and the lives of their children. Nineteenth-century Black women survived in spite of the conditions that collaborated to destroy them, just as Hagar did both during her time as Sarah's enslaved property and after she left Sarah's home. Nineteenth-century Black women were abolitionist theologians. Regardless of the doctrinal beliefs to which they clung they made their living a sacred text by turning the objects that were intended to destroy them into instruments that would allow them to forge a new future.

A primary concern in this chapter the way that Jane Johnson's story appears in Philadelphia archives. Despite Johnson's heroic actions to initiate the strategy to claim her freedom, a white abolitionist named Passmore Williamson gained the credit for her escape. This framing of the story

within court records and the anti-slavery society report contributes to Black women's objectification. Using the womanist wilderness reading method, I consider how Johnson might become the subject of her own freedom narrative by examining the courage it took for individual Black women to claim their freedom without the support of anti-slavery and mutual aid institutions. Jane Johnson's story of enslavement, crossing state borders, and initiating conversations throughout the journey to see how she might escape with her sons was a wilderness experience. Although she was without supporters she knew personally, she found that there was a community of free Black Northerners who were invested in her liberation. While this chapter focuses on Johnson's little-known story, she must be understood as having belonged to a radical community of other Black women who, like her, made difficult choices to gain their freedom. Like Jane Johnson, other enslaved Black women were discontented to live as enslaved people, and they decided that they would no longer submit to the authority of another. Johnson's story is not unlike those of Sojourner Truth, a Black mother and wife who claimed her freedom on moral grounds¹⁴ and Margaret Garner, a Black mother and wife who was determined that her children would not live without their freedom.¹⁵ It is also like the stories of thousands of Black enslaved women whose names have yet to emerge in the archive who likewise rejected the idea that they or their children should live as enslaved people.

Abolition for Sojourner Truth, Margaret Garner, Jane Johnson, and many other nineteenth-century Black women was not about destroying the system of slavery. Rather, for them abolition was about producing a new world in which the conditions that made slavery possible ceased to exist. After describing how Jane Johnson's story emerges via the District Court and Anti-Slavery Society records, I will read her story again using a womanist wilderness lens. This method will allow me to bring together a speculative reading based on the existing accounts to place Jane Johnson and her lived experiences before, during, and after her escape at the center of the narrative. Centering her story is a radical Black feminist practice that intentionally calls the entire status of her crisis in

Philadelphia into question. Who and whose was Jane Johnson? This reading method reminds us that Jane Johnson became free in Philadelphia because she chose freedom for herself. The story changes if Johnson does not emerge as Wheeler's property or Williamson's damsel but instead as Jane, mother of Daniel and Isaiah, the person who is free to make the life she chooses. While the wilderness reading method cannot restore Jane Johnson's voice it has already been extracted from the record, this method renders her as the subject, rather than the object, of her freedom narrative.

The Recorded Version of Jane Johnson's Story

The Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, published in 1856, shared information about the group's work in the previous year and abolitionist efforts in the city. One of the events recounted in the report was Jane Johnson's story of claiming freedom for herself and her two sons. In 1855, Johnson was thirty-five-year-old enslaved woman. Her so-called owner was John Hill Wheeler, the United States foreign minister to Nicaragua from 1854-1857.¹⁶ During the summer of 1855, Wheeler traveled with Johnson and her enslaved children, Daniel age twelve, and Isaiah, age seven, from Virginia where they were legally held as his property. During their trip, he attempted to travel with them through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. While they were in Philadelphia, his plans were thwarted. Although Jane, Daniel, and Isaiah were legally his property in Virginia, Pennsylvania was a free state and Philadelphia an abolitionist capital. Wheeler's attempts to flaunt the law point to the contradictions of the law in the 1850s. At the time of the incident, he was a representative of the United States government and thereby would have been careful to follow federal laws. Yet because the nation held no consistent stance on the slavery issue, he felt empowered to traffic humans across multiple states in defiance of local laws preventing such actions.

According to the Anti-Slavery Society's Annual Report, in Philadelphia the travelers encountered an anti-slavery activist named Passmore Williamson. According to the report,

Williamson informed Jane Johnson that she and her children had the right to their freedom in the state of Pennsylvania. He had heard from others in the city that there was a woman matching Jane Johnson's description who wanted to assert that she and her sons were free because they were traveling through a free city. Williamson found them aboard a steamboat that was headed to New York at five o'clock in the evening. He had only heard about their presence in the city at four o'clock from Black anti-slavery activist William Still.¹⁷

The Annual Report states that when Johnson heard that she and her children were free because they were in a free state, she heeded Williamson's words by taking her sons and leaving Wheeler. The Report also stated that Wheeler believed that Johnson and the children were forced by Passmore Williamson to go to New York against their will. When Wheeler later took his concerns before the court, the Report says that Johnson was the principal defendant. Reportedly, she returned to Philadelphia to report under oath that she chose of her own volition to leave Wheeler.¹⁸ The information in the Female Anti-Slavery Society's Annual Report indicates the belief of white abolitionist women in 1850s Philadelphia that abolitionist efforts were largely successful. The Report's framing of Jane Johnson's story obscures her efforts to secure freedom on her own terms. The story is reported succinctly as one of triumph both for the anti-slavery efforts and for Johnson herself as she was allowed by the court to continue to live as a free person. While anti-slavery activists should celebrate that one woman escaped from her condition as an enslaved person, the society's retelling of Jane Johnson's story provides a linearity that elides the terror that must have permeated every aspect of her life whether she was enslaved or free. In no ways does the report empathize with her struggle as an enslaved and later "fugitive" Black mother of two who wanted nothing more than to determine the course of her own future.

The court records about Jane Johnson, Daniel, and Isaiah's escape tell a slightly fuller story than the concise version that appeared in the pages of the 1856 Female Anti-Slavery Society report.

The district court records indicate that Wheeler immediately sought to reclaim the persons whom he believed were his rightful property. The records from the Eastern District Court of Pennsylvania indicate that Wheeler petitioned the court on July 18, 1855, to issue a writ of habeas corpus to Williamson and demand that he produce before the court the formerly enslaved people whom Wheeler wished to have in his possession once again.

When he appeared before the court, Williamson testified that he had never held the formerly enslaved Jane, Daniel, and Isaiah and therefore could not bring them before the court. He claimed that although he had helped them recognize their right to freedom, they seized their freedom independently while he returned to the tasks of his day. Williamson's words indicated that for him helping enslaved Black Americans escape to freedom was part of everyday life for him. To him, Jane Johnson's story was unremarkable. He had not lingered with her to learn more about her life or her aspirations as a newly free person. He only used his privilege as a white Philadelphia resident to insist that Wheeler release her and her sons from their service.

Despite Williamson's claims to have done nothing other than inform Johnson that she and her sons were free, Wheeler insisted that Williamson was the first to introduce Johnson and her sons to the idea that they were free people. Wheeler stated that before Johnson and her children could respond, they were forced onto a boat and taken away from him. After Wheeler supplied his testimony against Williamson, additional testimonies followed. The people who testified insisted that they had seen "several negros forcing along a colored woman who was holding back with all her strength, and two boys who were also struggling."¹⁹ The dominant narrative of the event became that Williamson and twenty muscular Black people stormed the steamboat, threatened Wheeler's life, and stole Jane and her children from their enslaver. The narrative that Wheeler offered before the court also suggested that Jane and her children had a strong desire to remain with Wheeler.

Williamson's statement to the court indicated that he had a different explanation than Wheeler for the struggle that any witnesses to Jane Johnson's escape might have seen. He explained that when he found Jane, Daniel, and Isaiah the steamboat was soon to leave. Therefore, he informed her that if she wanted to be free, they must go at once. Williamson explained that she stood to go but Wheeler grabbed onto her. It was at that point that some of the Black onlookers took the children off the boat while Williamson tried to extricate her from her Wheeler's grasp. According to Williamson, Johnson and her sons left the boat with the assistance of a group of Black supporters, but that after leaving the boat, they had the freedom to decide where they would go next. Williamson claimed that they moved toward freedom while he returned to his everyday work.²⁰

Wheeler's supporters were unmoved by Williamson's claims. They argued that as the only white person (and thereby citizen) involved in the crime of aiding an enslaved person and her children as they escaped from their lawful owner, he could not excuse himself from taking responsibility for the loss of Wheeler's property. The analysis of the people involved with the case shows their refusal to believe that Black Americans could liberate themselves and each other from slavery. No one considered that Jane Johnson was aware that she was in a free state and that she had the right to claim her freedom. While Johnson and her children could be held liable by being forced to return to Wheeler and thereby to slavery, Williamson's defense of their right to own themselves also made him culpable for the crime of freeing them. Although slavery as a practice was illegal and was considered to be morally reprehensible in Philadelphia, Williamson, according to the court, could not take morality into his own hands. It was the purview of the court alone.

Williamson was deemed to have failed to respond to the writ of habeas corpus because he did not produce Jane Johnson and her children in the courtroom. Because of his failures, he was confined to jail in Philadelphia for the so-called criminal act of telling a Black woman that she and her children were not slaves, but people who could own their own lives and labors.²¹ He was later

discharged when Wheeler determined that his so-called property would not be returned to him no matter how long Williamson remained in prison.²² Both Wheeler and Williamson agreed that Black citizens helped Jane Johnson and her sons claim their freedom. They also agreed that human hands grasped onto her to either aid or restrict her movement. The accounts demonstrate the precarity of Black women's freedom movements. Even while Jane Johnson and her sons made every effort to claim their freedom on Johnson's terms, hands clung to their bodies to try to shift them according to their desires.

While this is only one case involving one enslaved woman and her children, it points to the larger fractures that were occurring nationwide because of slavery during the decade preceding the Civil War. According to the laws of the Southern States, Johnson and her sons were legally Wheeler's property. As a federal government official, Wheeler felt especially aggrieved when he lost his so-called property. However, in the Northern states, slavery was illegal. Wheeler had willingly brought his enslaved people into a free state. Jane Johnson and her sons were not so-called fugitives of the law. They took the freedom that was theirs because of the state into which Wheeler brought them by his own choice. The task of the court then became to determine whether Wheeler and Williamson were bound by the laws of Virginia where Wheeler's actions were legal or by those of Pennsylvania where they were illegal. However, more pressing than the question of states' rights was the concern of whether a Black mother held any authority over her own body and those of her children in the United States. Regardless of what story we believe about Jane Johnson's retreat from the steamboat, what matters most is the decision she made for herself in that moment about who and whose she would be.

On October 3, 1855, Jane Johnson's attorneys, Joseph B. Townsend and John M. Read, presented a petition on her behalf to the District Court in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. According to the petition, Jane Johnson had suspected that Wheeler would take her and her children

North from Washington, D.C. This news excited her because she was interested in becoming free. Johnson stated that on July 18, 1855, she and her sons were with Wheeler at the Bloodgood Hotel in Philadelphia from two until five o'clock in the afternoon. While they were there, Johnson somehow managed to escape Wheeler's presence and told a waiter that she and her children were enslaved and that they would like to become free. Around five o'clock, Wheeler took her and her sons to the steamboat which was to soon leave to take them to New York. On the boat, she was approached by a white man who she had never seen before. She had since learned that he was Passmore Williamson. Williamson asked her whether she wanted to be free, and she confirmed that she did. He told her to go quickly and to take her children with her because no one had the right to prohibit them from being free.

She rose to go, and despite Wheeler's best efforts to cling to her, she went ashore with her children. She stated that she had the help of a group of Black people who observed the struggle and helped her to freedom. Those who had arrived to assist her during her escape helped her into a carriage, and she and her children went away. She stated that Williamson did not go with them. Based on her assertion that she had only learned Williamson's name from the court proceedings, it seems that his statement that he had quickly returned to his work after their encounter on the steamboat was true. The reality was that although Williamson came aboard the steamboat to inform Wheeler that his actions were illegal, it was Jane Johnson along with other free Black Americans who witnessed and understood her struggle who spirited her off to her freedom.

From that day when strangers had helped Johnson and her sons escape from the steamboat, she had lived with Daniel and Isaiah as free people. Therefore, she wished not to be returned to servitude under Wheeler. Furthermore, she and her lawyers requested that Williamson be discharged from his imprisonment.²³ Johnson's version of the story both confirmed Williamson's innocence and added to the narrative her investment in her freedom. Freedom was not something she passively

received that day in Philadelphia, it was a condition she worked to produce for herself and her sons. She boldly countered her former slaveholder's claims that she wished to remain with him. She made it clear that she had sought out her freedom, and that since the day of her escape, she and her children lived as free people who made their own decisions.

Seeking the Freedom Path

In the preceding section I outlined the story of Jane Johnson's escape from slavery as narrated by the District Court and the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia. Neither of these are complete stories. Therefore, this section of the chapter focuses on retelling Jane Johnson's story using the womanist wilderness methodology that I introduced earlier in the chapter. This womanist wilderness method allows us a glimpse into Jane Johnson's life before her 1855 escape and her experiences as a free woman from 1855 until her death. This version of the story aims to produce Jane Johnson as a more complete person rather than a pawn in the national debate over freedom. Johnson was more than John Hill Wheeler's enslaved woman or Passmore Williamson's abolitionist trophy.

While she emerges through this story of a debate between two white male citizens of the United States who believed they could decide whether or not Black people would be free, her emergence provides an opportunity to reconsider what the lives of Black enslaved women and mothers, especially those who were in the service of federal officials, must have been like. In addition to revealing the interior life of Jane Johnson, this retelling also invites a reconsideration of Black women's roles in nineteenth-century abolitionist work and the ongoing political effort to produce a more free and just society. Black abolitionist women have consistently asserted that abolition is about more than an end (the end of slavery, the end of the prison, the end of police violence). Black abolitionist women instead have historically treated abolition as a sort of beginning, a gesture toward a different future.

If, in 1855, Jane Johnson was thirty-five years old, she was born in 1820 as an enslaved person in the plantation South. Her surname, Johnson, indicates that she might have been passed between the hands of many enslavers before she came to be in the possession of John Hill Wheeler. Perhaps both of her parents were enslaved people at the time of her birth. They might have lived on neighboring plantations, visiting each other when they could, or they could have had the same owner but lived under the constant concern that they might one day be separated. They might have been bound by marriage, by lingering ties of affection, or they could have been forced to produce children who would fuel the plantation economy of the antebellum South. We cannot know what terrors produced the conditions that caused Jane Johnson to be born as an enslaved child in 1820, but we do know that enslaved children could only be born in a nation that based status on race through “monstrous intimacies.”²⁴

After she was born, Jane Johnson’s experience might have been unlike that of other enslaved children. The adults in the enslaved community into which she was born likely did their best to protect her, leaving her in the care of older enslaved people who were too infirmed to work. However, at many times in her childhood, she likely performed field and domestic work. If her mother was allowed off the plantation to sell wares at a local market, she might have been allowed to join. Visits to the market would have opened her eyes to the world beyond the plantation. The courage enslaved women exhibited at the market might have inspired her to one day negotiate the terms for her freedom.

As an adolescent, she likely worked long days serving the needs of plantation owners and mistresses. She might have been sold one or more times to different enslavers. She would have lost connections with loved ones with each successive move. She might have enjoyed dressing well on Sundays and enjoying a brief respite from her labors. Perhaps she would have attended a Baptist, Methodist, or Episcopal worship service. She might have spent her afternoons connecting with

friends, seeking news about family members she left behind, and flirting with other young people in search of the kinds of lasting connections that no enslaver could break. In her early twenties, she might have made such a connection or perhaps she experienced an unwanted sexual gesture. Regardless of the unknowable circumstances, when she was twenty-two or twenty-three, she found that she was with child. In 1843, she birthed a son, whom she named Daniel. Four or five years later, she found that she was once again with child. In 1848, she birthed another son, whom she named Isaiah. As of 1843, Jane Johnson was not only an enslaved woman; she was an enslaved mother. Her boys were also enslaved. No doubt the gravity of having passed her status as an enslaved woman to her sons urged her to seek routes to freedom whenever she could. She would do what she could to make her sons free people.

When she learned in the summer of 1855 that her current owner, John Hill Wheeler was taking her and her sons across state lines to serve his wife while she was in New York, she saw a potential opening for freedom. Perhaps Wheeler had never intended to bring the boys, but she insisted that they would need the extra support the boys could offer. As an enslaved woman who had lived in the upper South for thirty-five years, she would have been aware that Philadelphia was a bastion of Black freedom. She might have heard by word of mouth or in print about the various anti-slavery groups that were helping enslaved men and women to successfully escape from slavery. Ironically, traveling as an enslaved woman opened numerous possibilities to begin the life of her choosing. Wheeler might have wondered why the enslaved woman seemed almost hopeful and pleased as he traveled with her, or he might have become accustomed to paying no mind to the affect of enslaved people. Perhaps he assumed that they were always satisfied to serve the desires of their masters. He failed to imagine that she might aspire to have more.

During the humid summer months, Wheeler traveled with thirty-five-year-old Jane Johnson and her two young sons over three hundred miles. They passed through Washington, D.C.,

Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey, until after several days of difficult travel they arrived in Philadelphia. Wheeler believed it best that they continue their journey to New York by steamboat. However, by the time they arrived in Philadelphia, it would still be hours until the five o'clock boat arrived. He audaciously walked through a city where slavery was illegal with three enslaved people in tow and casually dined in the Bloodgood Hotel restaurant while they awaited the next leg of their journey. The freedom that Jane Johnson had waited for her entire life was now seemed to be within her reach. She had passed through the city with Wheeler and had borne witness to the possibilities of freedom. She saw Black people who had arisen that morning and made choices about who they would be and what they would do. With every action, those free people had declared that the time for enslavement was over. They would choose the shape of their own lives. Johnson desired to join them. She also desired for her sons to understand at a young age that they were the shapers of their own lives. While Wheeler enjoyed his meal, she caught the eye of a waiter in the restaurant. She slipped away from the table for a moment. If Wheeler could be audacious, flaunting his status as a slave owner in a city known for freedom, she too would be audacious. She quickly whispered to the waiter that she and her sons were enslaved and that they would appreciate help from friends in the abolitionist city to escape with their lives.

Based on the situation's outcome, it seems that the waiter sprung into action, calling upon William Still, a freeborn Black man about Johnson's age who one of the city's most diligent Black abolitionists, to help. Still was the most active member of the Pennsylvania Vigilant Committee which was known for facilitating escapes from slavery and he would know exactly how to help Johnson.²⁵ Johnson returned to Wheeler with haste, fearing that he had seen her conspiring with the waiter. It was good that her desires for freedom were unthinkable to him. It was nearly five o'clock and Johnson felt her opportunity to become a free woman slipping through her fingers. She could no longer see the waiter she had begged for help, and she feared the worst. She, Daniel, and Isaiah

trailed Wheeler to the steamboat. It was nearly time to leave for New York. Perhaps she prayed as they walked to the boat, asking God to intervene on their behalf.

Suddenly, moments before the steamboat departed, she likely heard a commotion as an unexpected passenger barged onto the boat. She had no reason to suspect that this strange incident had anything to do with her. The boat was soon to depart, and she likely anticipated that the confusion would soon be over. However, suddenly, a man she had never seen before approached her, telling her that in Philadelphia she and her sons had the right to their freedom. She told him that she was aware, but that she did not know what to do. He advised her to take her sons and leave the boat. She did not think twice about his advice. She told her sons to stand up and began to hustle them away from an agitated Wheeler.

As she quickly collected herself to leave the boat, Wheeler gripped onto the fabric of her clothing. Perhaps he urged her to stay in sweet tones. More likely he cursed and threatened her for daring to leave. But Jane Johnson was resolute; freedom was right in front of her, and she would claim it, no matter the risk. Other free Black people who saw the commotion stepped in to help her. Black Philadelphians were accustomed to seeing fugitive and migrant Black people in their midst. They were aware of the risk they took by intervening to support Jane Johnson and her sons. Therefore, they recruited Passmore Williamson to collect them from Wheeler.²⁶ However, in that moment as Wheeler gripped onto the enslaved woman, they felt they had no choice except to intervene. They could not stand to see one of their own being so cruelly mistreated, and they would do anything to help her become free. Black women and men placed their own bodies at risk to retrieve hers from unjust captivity.

When she and her sons were safely off the boat, one of the free Black Philadelphians who had just helped her off the boat volunteered a carriage to them and encouraged them to travel to safety far away from Wheeler. Most likely, she confided in them about her anxieties, but they assured

her that their community was strong and that she had nothing to fear. In that moment, she was at a crossroads. Enslavement was terrible, but familiar. Freedom was a great unknown. But as she looked into the eyes of those who shared her skin color and had never been enslaved or were now living free, she knew she had only one choice. She chose to claim her freedom. With the help of her new friends, she began settling into her newfound freedom. Perhaps she left Philadelphia for her safety and lived quietly in a small New England town as other so-called fugitives did. She likely worked as a domestic servant and taught her sons to be vigilant of those who might try to lure them away. She knew that notorious slave catchers might try to capture them, and they would once again be sold South. She tried to forget what had come before and embrace the possibilities of her free future.

For Jane Johnson, a woman who had been enslaved since her childhood, it is likely that freedom was a tangle of emotions. It was something she had dreamed of achieving since she was a young girl. In her early twenties as she became a mother for the first time, freedom became a more urgent dream. She traveled North with Wheeler, keeping her eyes peeled for opportunities to slip away with Daniel and Isaiah. Based on her knowledge of the abolitionist efforts in Philadelphia, she knew it might offer her best opportunity for freedom, but when, during her time at the Bloodgood Hotel, no one came to save her, she resigned herself to the foiled attempt. She did not know what lay in store moments later. She could not forget the commotion on the steamboat. Even more than the showdown between Wheeler and Williamson, she could not forget the way that ordinary Black Philadelphians sprung into action. They were abolitionists who placed their futures at risk for her and her sons. After so many years of primarily receiving violent touches, this was her first time experiencing so many hands grasping onto her with an urgent love. Even in a moment that seemed like a wilderness experience, she found that she was not alone.

In the weeks after she claimed her freedom, she likely began hearing word from her new friends that her former owner demanded that she, Daniel, and Isaiah be returned to him. She was

afraid, but she knew she had the support of the entire free Black community and some of their white supporters. Perhaps some of her friends implored her to contact the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society and the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia to seek support. Perhaps elite free Black women like Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Forten sisters offered her their support. They might have helped her to secure legal aid to defend her right to freedom. They might also have traveled with her when she testified before the District Court saying that she found the path to freedom independently. She told the court that while she was grateful that Passmore Williamson boarded the boat to physically move her away from her so-called owner, until that moment she had never seen him. She told the court that until she heard about the charges against him, she had never even known his name. Their interaction was brief. She was supported by her fellow free Black people. It was to them that she and her sons now belonged.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century and today, Black women's contributions to radical abolitionism have largely been neglected or forgotten. While this amnesia is intellectually dishonest, it is also harmful most of all because it neglects the ways that Black women, both free and enslaved, sacrificed their lives to free themselves and each other. Black mothers were especially at risk when they claimed freedom for themselves as can be seen through the examples of Sojourner Truth, Margaret Garner, and so many women whose names are unrecorded, but who were willing to make any sacrifice so their children would never be enslaved. Work on Black women abolitionists is scarce, and the work that does focus on them tends to focus on those who were prolific writers and speakers, as my dissertation has largely done. However, this chapter has excavated the story of one woman who left no extant writings or speeches who was also an abolitionist.

The objectification of Jane Johnson within her own liberation story as it is recounted both by the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia and in the District Court records about her so-

called owner's attempts to retrieve her, points to the crisis of sources for Black women's historians and cultural theorists. Women like Jane Johnson exemplify the comparison that womanist Biblical scholar Dolores Williams has made between the Biblical character Hagar and Black women's experiences in the United States. Johnson's story elucidates that Black women's history is not the story of progressive triumph and improvement, but rather a story that erupts in fits and starts. It is not a narrative of triumph, but rather one of how Black women have survived in spite of the crises of life in the United States.

By deploying the methodologies of Black feminist archival theorists and Williams' idea of the womanist wilderness, this chapter provided a methodological technique of a womanist wilderness approach to the archive. This approach has sought out hope, relationality, and possibility in the midst of devastation. Such an approach allows scholars to read Johnson's story anew to discover Black women's agency in producing freedom in the decade before the Civil War. The anti-slavery records and court records indicate that Passmore Williamson, a white citizen of the city of Philadelphia, was a savior figure to Johnson who told her that Philadelphia was a free city and that she need not remain with John Hill Wheeler. However, upon her return to defend her freedom in court, Johnson stated that she asked a waiter for help before boarding the steamboat with Wheeler. Her statement indicated that she was aware of the opportunities that Philadelphia offered. She only needed someone to intervene into her wilderness and usher her into her new life.

A reexamination of the story recognizes that Johnson was a full person even before her dash toward freedom placed her name within the archival records. Before the summer of 1855, she had lived thirty-five years in the antebellum South. She knew the terrors of slavery, and it was a condition she was determined to leave behind. A rereading of her story indicates that she might have reveled in the possibilities of being trafficked with her sons across state lines. She could hardly contain her joy that Wheeler was willingly transporting them through hubs of Black freedom. He

was audacious enough to believe his actions were inconsequential. She was audacious enough to prove him wrong. Whether she survived her attempt to escape from his grasp or not, she was determined that she, Daniel, and Isaiah would die as free people.

¹ “Female Literary Association,” *The Liberator*, 1832, sec. Ladies’ Department, Boston Athenaeum.

² Ada, “The Farewell,” *The Liberator*, June 12, 1832, sec. The Ladies’ Department, Boston Athenaeum.

³ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lord* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 37.

⁴ Kellie Carter Jackson, ““Dare You Meet a Woman”: Black Women, Abolitionism, and Protective Violence, 1850–1859,” *Slavery & Abolition* 42, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 269–92.

⁵ On Black feminist refusal see “Sabotage and Black Feminist Refusal” in Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁶ Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, 1. ed., 2. printing (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Pr, 1993).

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 21.

⁸ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁹ See for example Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, June 2008, 1–14, Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), and Hazel V Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019).

¹⁰ See for example Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, Fully revised and updated (New York: Basic Books a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2010), Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Jennifer Lyle Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, Pa: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, Nachdr., (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1998), Tera W Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019), and Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, First 37 Ink/Atria Books paperback edition (New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi: 37 Ink/Atria, 2018).

¹¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

¹² Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

¹³ Elsa Barkley Brown, “African-American Women’s Quilting,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (July 1989): 921–29.

¹⁴ Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America* (Urbana, Ill; Chesham: University of Illinois Press, 2011)

¹⁵ “The Slave Tragedy in Cincinnati,” *The Cincinnati Times*, January 29, 1856.

¹⁶ Wheeler, John H. Diario de John Hill Wheeler, ministro de los Estados Unidos en Nicaragua, 1854-1857. Managua: [Fondo de Promoción Cultural, Banco de America], 1974.

¹⁷ Passmore, Williamson et al., *Case of Passmore Williamson: Report of the Proceedings on the Writ of Habeas Corpus, Issued by the Hon. John K. Kane, Judge of the District Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, in the Case of the United States of America Ex Rel. John H. Wheeler vs. Passmore Williamson: Including the Several Opinions Delivered and the Arguments of Counsel* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt & Son, 1856), 10.

¹⁸ *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, Printers, 1856), 7.

¹⁹ Passmore, Williamson et al., *Case of Passmore Williamson: Report of the Proceedings on the Writ of Habeas Corpus, Issued by the Hon. John K. Kane, Judge of the District Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, in the Case of the United States of America Ex Rel. John H. Wheeler vs. Passmore Williamson: Including the Several Opinions Delivered and the Arguments of Counsel* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt & Son, 1856), 7.

²⁰ Ibid, 10.

²¹ Ibid, 13-16.

²² Ibid, 162-163.

²³ Ibid, 164-166.

²⁴ Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: The Making of Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 387-388.

²⁶ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 89-90.

Conclusion

A Cause for Righteous Discontent

“Black women envisioned themselves as sorely needed missionaries to America. For the sake of America’s soul, they reasoned, the nation must put an end to ‘lines of color, of race, of blood, and of birth.’” -Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 1993

Since the colonial era, Black religious women have produced abolitionist theologies. They have historically been, to borrow the insightful language of Maria W. Miller Stewart, tried as by fire. As this dissertation has demonstrated, the fire of the United States’ racism and sexism sometimes destroyed nineteenth-century Black women and their families. They were forcibly silenced by people of all races and genders. They were defrauded of funds that were due to them. They were left to live in poverty despite their ongoing labors. They were physically and verbally abused. Many free Black women and girls were captured although they were free and incarcerated. Some found there was no one to save them from being sold into Southern slavery. Many died in the process of working toward liberation. However, this dissertation has also demonstrated that the fire of United States racism and sexism refined Black women. Through the fire, they were remade as preachers, prophets, and un-ordained ministers who carried a message of radical love stateside and abroad.

In the nineteenth century, Black Christian women were the sorely needed missionaries to the United States. Today, many Black women continue to be missionaries to the United States, whether or not the nation recognizes that fact. Here, the word missionary notes their sense of calling in the spiritual sense of the word, but also the reality that they were on a mission, in the secular sense of the term, to dismantle all systems that allowed any persons to be treated as nonhumans. As missionaries to the nation, they have frequently reinterpreted canonical Christian Scriptures to undergird their efforts. However, as this project demonstrates, we can also think of their prophetic witness a bit more capaciously. They made their bodies and lives into sacred texts that forced slavery’s abolition. Their theological visions refused slavery’s chains. They would never be bound.

Using archival sources, including spiritual autobiographies, newspaper articles, court records, letters, poetry, and anti-slavery society reports, *Tried as By Fire* has explored the contributions that Black Christian women made throughout the long nineteenth century to abolitionist politics. I argue that many Black women intervened into abolitionist ideologies using their distinctive proto-Black feminist and womanist approach to Evangelical Christian theology. They frequently deployed Christian theological language because Christian discourse was common in the nineteenth century. Their use of Christian discourse adds their voices to an ongoing conversation about nation-building and rights that had happened in the United States since the colonial period. However, they also used religious language because religious spaces were one of only a few spaces where Black women could make their voices heard. Although they did not, because of their gender, occupy formal leadership positions in the emerging Black churches, the monoracial space offered an opportunity to encounter fewer social barriers to their public speech. Methodist and Baptist theological principles allowed them to read and interpret Scriptures for themselves and to see themselves as those who were loved by God. Empowered by the idea that God called people regardless of gender to speak out about faith and politics, they put their beliefs into practice and dared the world to defy them.

While *Tried as By Fire* has provided close readings of many literary and archival texts, it has also treated Black women's lives as a sacred text. While some Black women left behind extant writings that provide insight into their lives, many did not. Just because the women are silent in the archival record does not mean that they were absent from some of the key historical events of their day. Black feminist and womanist approaches to reading archival documents, even those that are not explicitly concerned with Black women, expand the legibility of the documents. Black feminist and womanist approaches to reading even the familiar archival documents that are taken up by US historians reveal that Black women influenced every aspect of eighteenth and nineteenth-century social and political life. The spiritual autobiographies and of anti-slavery society and mutual aid

group reports I examine are documents other New England historians have studied. *Tried as By Fire* deviates from those studies primarily due to the method of bringing Black women to the center even of the stories that absent them.

This study has demonstrated that although the Black churches that began to emerge in the 1790s represented a rare social site of possibility for Black Christian women, they did not rely exclusively on Black churches as spaces to make their voices heard. Many Black Christian women “performed objecthood” to circumvent the prescribed limitations of Black women’s actions in public.¹ While their refusal to conform to gender norms placed them at extraordinary risk of social ostracization and physical violence, it also compelled Christian women who were also feminists to ask urgent questions about the relationship between their Evangelical Christian faith and the way that white male Christians since the colonial period imposed social constructs of race and gender in the name of the faith. Women, Black and white, who were confessionally Christian turned to the Scriptures for themselves and emerged with proto-feminist Christian theologies that challenged Protestant Christian approaches to American jurisprudence.

There have been three key findings of this dissertation. The first finding is that while white abolitionist feminist women often found a sense of community in Northern anti-slavery groups, Black Christian women who offered public witness to the evils of slavery, racism, sexual violence, and sexism were frequently socially isolated from other abolitionists and women’s rights activists. Ironically, they were isolated from a sense of social community even while abolitionists remembered them and praised their efforts. The experience of social isolation was especially profound for Black women who positioned themselves as public intellectuals. I have begun the lineage of Black intellectual women in the United States with the poet Phillis (Wheatley) whose measured lines of verse demonstrated the extent of dissemblance Black women did from the colonial period.²

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black women lived in a social space that I have described elsewhere as a “wilderness.” In this project, I have taken up, as womanist Biblical scholar Dolores Williams also does in her pioneering work on Biblical womanist theology, the Biblical motif of the wilderness. The wilderness a space that the Egyptian slave girl Hagar occupied in the book of Genesis after she fled from the Biblical patriarch, Abraham’s home. Before her experience in the wilderness, Hagar served as the personal slave of Sarah, Abraham’s wife. When Sarah struggled to conceive a child, she gave Hagar to her husband to be impregnated against her will. Sarah was determined that any child born in her household was her child. Although Hagar birthed her son through pain, Sarah became his mother until she managed to conceive and birth a son from her own womb. She believed this son to be superior to the child of an enslaved woman. She cast Hagar out. Her husband and new son were the evidence of her success as a woman in her society.³ Hagar and Sarah’s struggle points to mothering as a key site of terror for captive women.

Hagar left Sarah’s household with her son. Although she was far from home, she and her son managed to create a new home for themselves in the wilderness. Although Sarah was unconcerned with whether they lived or died, they refused to die. The wilderness space was the site of their strength and futurity, not the site of their eternal destruction. The proverbial wilderness is a place where Black women, enslaved and free, found themselves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as those cast out both by the men who shared their racial background and the women who shared their gender. Yet, they found in the wilderness as Hagar did in the Biblical story, a proverbial well of water that allowed them to sustain themselves. For Jarena Lee, that well of water was Bishop Richard Allen’s proclamation that she could preach as well as any man. For Philadelphia, Boston, and Salem women, that well of water was the support they provided each other in mutual aid and literary societies. For Maria W. Miller Stewart, that well of water was the friendships she cultivated with other abolitionists of all genders and races who saw that she was a remarkable person. For

Zilpha Elaw, that well of water was her bond with her biological daughter and her fictive motherhood of those who flocked to hear her preaching. For Jane Johnson, that well of water was Black Americans in Philadelphia who risked their freedom to ensure she and her sons would achieve theirs. For the many known and unknown Black women who were radical abolitionists that well of water was knowing each other and being known. They knew the world might not remember them and their labors, but they would remember each other and use their memories to engender future change.

The second finding of this dissertation is that while Biblical language was used frequently in nineteenth-century America by people with a variety of political visions, nineteenth-century Black Christian women devised a hermeneutic that was entirely their own. Following the lead of religious studies scholar Valerie Cooper who used her expertise in Biblical Studies to use Maria W. Stewart's hermeneutics to learn more about her life than archival evidence yields.⁴ While Stewart's Black male contemporaries tended to deploy the Exodus narrative to justify their desires for Black freedom,⁵ Black women including Stewart, Lee, and Elaw, turned to more obscure texts from 1 Kings, Joel, and Acts to develop a less militaristic theology. Stewart's theological interpretations recognized the profound risks that free Black people took when they demanded that white Americans offer them their full rights. Lee's hermeneutic offered a radical theology of the flesh that recognized Black women's worthiness in a nation that consistently treated them as nonhumans. Elaw's interpretation of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch offered a radical new interpretation of Blackness that refused to shrink away from the sexual violence at the heart of Black people's experiences in the United States and pointed to the possibilities that being Black offered her as a religious leader.

Black women, those who preached and those who did not, turned their lives into a sacred text in protest against white supremacy in the many ways it was made manifest in their time. Perhaps this theory is best demonstrated in the work of Black women's abolitionist groups, mutual aid

groups, and escapes from their so-called owners. Black abolitionist women in Salem, Massachusetts committed themselves to Christian abolitionism and contacted William Lloyd Garrison directly when he indicated in a speech that people of color did not form groups to defend their rights. Through their collectivity they found the courage not only to organize, but also to reject the claims of those who claimed to support them but refused to recognize their work. The constitution of the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston indicates that many Black women in Boston shared Stewart's political and theological vision. They met to read Scriptures and support each other, but they also believed that Black women must hold themselves and each other to the highest moral standards. While these examples of organizing are compelling, the intellectual abilities Phillis (Wheatley) possessed which allowed her to sever the master-slave relationship with her "owners" even while they continued to call her their slave and the foresight and intellectual acumen of Jane Johnson who traveled with her sons and her "owner" into Philadelphia, thereby making him the facilitator of her escape point to the ingenious work that an ephemeral force some might call the Divine allowed Black women to do in groups and even when isolated from groups.

The third finding of this dissertation that part of the reason why Black women's contributions to the radical abolitionist movement have always been overlooked is because of the politics of care that have historically undergirded Black women's political work. Put differently, Black women's political work has typically looked different than that of other political organizing efforts. They spoke out boldly about the issues that mattered to them, but they also saved themselves through the act of radically caring for each other by remembering each other and holding themselves and each other accountable for the morality of their behaviors. One of the greatest surprises of one of my trips to Special Collections at the Boston Athenaeum was reading the letters that Phillis (Wheatley) exchanged with her friend Arbour (or Obour) Tanner. The two women were

both enslaved in colonial and antebellum New England. Although the archive only yields Phillis' letters to Obour, Phillis' words provide a glimpse into Obour's daily life and interiority.

Phillis' letters to Obour reflect two things. First, the letters depict the depth of their faith in God. Throughout her life, Phillis experienced many losses due to her enslavement. She was without her birth family, she did not benefit from the cultural teachings and language of her nation of origin, she was stripped of her intellectual, religious, and physical freedoms, and at many times, she was without her health. Despite the disappointments and failures of her life, Phillis was never without a sense of hope. Presumably, she learned about Christianity through an English Congregational lens, but like abolitionist theologian successors, she remade what they taught her in light of her experiences. This was an audacious and womanish act.

Second, the letters reveal that any study of Black women's history and especially Black women's religious history must engage with the ephemeral world of gestures and feelings. It must engage both with the reality that Black women in the United States have survived because of the bonds of care they formed within the community of free and enslaved people. I entered the archive wondering how the mythical Phillis Wheatley lived as Phillis the woman. One response to that question is Obour. Phillis' letters reveal that she was often unable to write to her friend, but she pledged to be a faithful friend, and her letters indicate that Obour made similar promises to her. Obour wrote to Phillis whenever she could. Their womanish love sustained them. However, Phillis and Obour also survived because of the unseen force of "religion," as Thomas Jefferson described the force that produced Phillis (Wheatley). Abolitionist theologians were careful strategists, but strategy alone did not save their lives. Their distinctive Black feminist ways of translating Christianity also helped them to be reborn.

The primary investments of *Tried as By Fire* are to produce new archival reading methods that make Black Christian women's contributions to abolitionism more legible, to define what was

distinctively Black feminist and abolitionist about nineteenth-century Black women's theology, to explain the nineteenth-century praxis and theory of proto-Black feminist care, and ultimately to expand what we mean when we discuss Black women and religion. Although many of the women about whom I write in this project professed to be Evangelical Christians, I have worked against treating Black women as hyper-religious figures or even essentially Christian while also engaging deeply with their religious writings. Because they lived in an era when the secular and sacred were one and the same their religious writings were political writings that provide insight both into their political demands and their personal lives. As the inheritors of English Protestant jurisprudence, current residents of the United States are also entangled in the complications of a theological worldview that impacts our views on race, gender, sexuality, social class, and freedom. We are not as distant from our antebellum past as we might otherwise think ourselves to be.

Treating nineteenth-century Black women's theological writings as political writings is important in research about contemporary Black religious women whose contributions to politics might be overlooked because of their overtly Christian language. Although some contemporary Black women might primarily use the language of religion, even through that language, they produce rigorous political theories if we are open to hearing them. However, reengaging with their thought by reclaiming both their Evangelical Christian discourse and their political fire provides tools in the current struggle to overcome white supremacy in the many ways it is made manifest. As the so-called Religious Right provides funds to support conservative efforts to curb racial justice, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights, reclaiming the Evangelical Christian language of these nineteenth-century women allows those who are committed to abolition to reclaim the historic connection that abolitionist theory has with Christianity.

Two questions compelled the research that undergirds *Tried as By Fire*. The first question was how those who lived on the margins of American social and political life during the long nineteenth

century built a sense of community in the proverbial wilderness. I was interested in the proverbial wilderness because of Dolores Williams' contention that it is generative womanist space. The second question was how we might engage differently with archival documents to learn new truths about nineteenth-century Black Christian women in the urban North. The preceding summary of my findings constitute my attempt to respond to these questions. I have responded to the question of community formation through a combination of archival research, close reading, and Black feminist cultural and womanist social ethical methodological frameworks. I have responded to the question of archival engagement by bringing my Black feminist and womanist frameworks to bear in my study of archival documents. Through my research and writing, my goal has been to produce a Black feminist intellectual history of Black Christian women's contributions to abolitionist history. My goal has been to produce a study that links Black Christian women to a theoretical framework I have called abolitionist theology. This project intends to contribute to the rich conversations happening in the fields of Black women's history, Black feminist studies, and gender studies. It also hopes to contribute to the ongoing feminist activist discourse outside of academic spaces.

As I conclude this project, there are ongoing debates among feminists about the relationship between race and contemporary feminist thought. With rising interest in using the language of intersectionality while not always carefully attending to the genealogies of Black feminist theory that produced such a theory, Black feminists both within and outside of the academy have taken center stage in a debate about how feminism accounts for racial difference. Increased interest in Black feminism, or intersectional feminism as it is sometimes framed, represents both an opportunity for feminism and a fracture within the field as Black feminists want more than for race to become an additive category within feminist theory and politics. Instead, Black feminists, since Phillis (Wheatley) have proposed that any movement for women's rights must overthrow racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and ultimately the gender binary itself because these social constructions

have become a “matrix of domination” for Black women.⁶ For Black women, the category of “woman” as it has been imagined in the United States, has never been a place of belonging. As pioneering Black feminist and Black trans* feminist scholars have proven time and time again, Black feminist inquiry compels feminist engagement not only with race, but also with the category of “woman” and all the colonial violence the word brings to bear.⁷ The bold visions of Black feminism have meant that Black women themselves (ourselves) have become casualties in feminist and Black activist and academic work.⁸

In addition to the ongoing debates about race and the category of womanhood within feminist discourse, there are also prolonged calls for abolitionist politics that would dismantle the current policing system in the United States. This political vision that was first advanced in the early 1970s by Angela Y. Davis and other political prisoners has largely been led by Black and Indigenous feminists.⁹ There are also debates among Evangelical Christians about the role race, gender, and sexuality play in contemporary Christian life.¹⁰ A central concern of *Tried as By Fire* is what nineteenth-century Black women’s intellectual and practical contributions to Christian theology, abolitionist politics, and women’s rights discourse reveal in our fraught present moment. This archival project’s central concern has been how Black Christian women’s abolitionist past ruptures the present and inaugurates a new set of social and political possibilities in the current movements for religious autonomy, gender equality, and abolition.

As I look ahead to opportunities for future research about nineteenth-century Black Christian women’s contributions to the abolitionist movement, I recognize that I am not the first scholar to engage with this particular set of archival materials. Like many other scholars who study eighteenth and nineteenth-century United States History, my work mostly engages with archival materials that have been reviewed ad nauseum for the past two hundred years. However, my goal has been to present these materials anew by asking new questions about them and using a Black

feminist, Womanist Christian, and abolitionist theoretical framework. The key figures whose spiritual autobiographies I examine in this project are those whose writings are frequently examined. Future research should consider some of the less-frequently examined spiritual autobiographies such as Rebecca Cox Jackson's *Gifts of Power*¹¹ and Elizabeth (an enslaved woman known only by her first name).¹² Future researchers might also mine the archives for other less well-known spiritual autobiographies.

As I conclude my work on *Tried as By Fire* and consider how I will prepare this work for publication as a scholarly monograph, I am interested in building upon some of the archival findings that have surprised me. Thus, the monograph will focus on two ideas. First, I will step away from an exploration of the now familiar spiritual autobiographies of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw to study Black women's writings that I would also define as spiritual and autobiographical but that do not present according to the norms of the genre. Second, I will focus on the embodied nature of abolitionist theology for Black women. Although abolitionist theology is a theoretical and political framework which people of all races practiced in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, Black women faced a distinct bodily risk when they were publicly abolitionist.

To say more about my future considerations about the genre of the spiritual autobiography, I have been amazed by Black women's work in anti-slavery societies, literary societies, and mutual aid groups as I discussed in chapters two and five. I am taken with the rather moralistic and at times overtly Protestant Christian "respectable" language they used to manage group members. Therefore, my future monograph will engage with Black women's poetry, letters, and their efforts in societies as alternative spiritual autobiographies. Whereas the genre of the spiritual autobiography is concerned with the individual believer and their journey to salvation, my research about nineteenth-century Black women reveals that they formed networks of mutuality and love. Black women's spirituality is communal. I hope my future work will demonstrate that although many Black women in the United

States have professed to be Protestant Christians, Black Christian women have always been outsiders within American Christianity. They have used that outsider positionality to produce a version of Christianity that affirms the lived experiences of Black women in the United States. We have always been womanish.

To say more about the embodied risks of abolitionist theology for Black women, while many thinkers have rightfully focused their attention on the well-known Black woman abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Black women are not the group that typically comes to mind when we think of Black abolitionists. In my future work, I want to focus on some of my findings in the second and third chapters that pointed to the violent risks of resistance for Black women. I am interested in the experiences of being captured as a free person or fleeing from a so-called owner into freedom. However, I am also interested in the violence of the slow death that poet Phillis (Wheatley) experienced. I will explore the risks of the kinds of theology of the flesh that Jarena Lee practiced.

In their work on late-nineteenth-century Black women, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Martha S. Jones both indicate that by 1880, Black Christian women emerged as the definitive leaders of race work in the Black community.¹³ Although some of these women were ordained as Christian ministers, most served on auxiliary committees of the emerging historically Black denominations. I include among this legacy of women some of the un-ordained Christian women including blues women who used their music and their bodies to critique white supremacy and sexism, Black women writers and journalists who unflinchingly told the truth, Black women hair stylists who, by providing hair care provided community care, and Black women visual artists who manifested new worlds.

Although so much of Black Christian women's leadership has happened outside of pulpits, the past century has brought changes within the Protestant Christian tradition as more people in a

broad array of denominations are being commissioned to teach and preach. Black women continue to be among those who are called to the work of Christian ministry. Some of these women claim space both within pulpits and outside of them in the space of popular books, social media accounts, and podcasts, to speak openly about racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, transphobia, and settler colonialism, all of which are social problems that they describe as sinful. Unlike their nineteenth century forebearers, these women often refuse to dissemble from their pain. They are, like twentieth-century blues women, unflinching when they speak about the challenges of their lives and those of other marginalized peoples. They have been birthed through the pain and work to heal themselves and others.

While many nineteenth-century abolitionist theologians were not aware of the women's preaching legacy upon which they built, the strength of contemporary abolitionist preachers, the ordained and the un-ordained, is the knowledge of that legacy. What contemporary Black woman abolitionist theologians must do is to recognize that the work we do today is not new. We can build upon the wisdom from the past and add it to the methodological frameworks to which we adhere. We can, like nineteenth-century Black woman abolitionist theologians be tried as by fire and through the fire produce brand new worlds.

¹ Here, I am thinking through objecthood and liminality as discussed in Carla L Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

² On dissemblance see Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20.

³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴ Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans*, Carter G. Woodson Institute Series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

⁵ Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁷ Many scholars have pointed to the failure of gender to serve Black people, but I point especially to Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81, Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: The Making of Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC:

Duke University Press, 2010), C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation,” *Souls* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 438–54.

⁸ Although the intersectional framework presented in Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991 1990): 1241–1300 is now decades old, it now emerges as the most important keyword in feminist academic and activist discourse, often at Black women’s expense. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) and Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, Difference Incorporated (Minneapolis, Minn. London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

⁹ See Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*, Women, Gender, and Sexuality in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), and Patrisse Cullors, *What Is Abolition And Am I An Abolitionist?* | Patrisse Cullors, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RbFhM32YNI>.

¹⁰ In Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021), Du Mez tracks the history of Evangelical Christianity’s discourse about race, gender, and sexuality in the United States.

¹¹ Rebecca Jackson and Jean McMahon Humez, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

¹² “Elizabeth, 1765?-1866. Elizabeth, a Colored Minister of the Gospel Born in Slavery,” accessed July 29, 2020, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eliza2/eliza2.html>.

¹³ See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Martha S. Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

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