

3rd Class and Race in the Early Women's Rights Campaign

As Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wended their way arm in arm down great Queen Street that night, reviewing the exciting scenes of the day, they agreed to hold a woman's rights convention on their return to America, as the men to whom they had just listened had manifested their great need of some education on that question. Thus the missionary work for the emancipation of woman in "the land of the free and the home of the brave" was then and there inaugurated.¹

This conversation, which took place in London on the opening day of the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention, is frequently assumed to contain the real story behind the birth of the organized women's movement in the United States. As such, it has acquired a somewhat legendary significance. And like most legends, the truth it presumes to embody is far less unequivocal than it appears. This anecdote and its surrounding circumstances have been made the basis of a popular interpretation of the women's rights movement as having been primarily inspired—or rather provoked—by the insufferable male supremacy within the anti-slavery campaign.

No doubt the U.S. women who had expected to participate in the London conference were quite furious when they found themselves excluded by majority vote, "fenced off behind a bar and a

curtain similar to those used in churches to screen the choir from public gaze."² Lucretia Mott, like the other women officially representing the American Anti-Slavery Society, had further cause for anger and indignation. For she had just recently emerged from a turbulent struggle around the issue of female abolitionists' right to participate on a basis of full equality in the work of the Anti-Slavery Society. Yet for a woman who had been excluded from membership in the Society some seven years previously, this was no new experience. If she was indeed inspired to fight for women's rights by the London events—by the fact that, as two contemporary feminist authors put it, "the leading male radicals, those most concerned with social inequalities . . . also discriminate against women"³—it was an inspiration that had struck her long before 1840.

Unlike Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was not an experienced political activist when the London convention took place. Accompanying her husband of only several weeks on what she called their "wedding journey",⁴ she was attending her first anti-slavery meeting not as a delegate but, rather, as the wife of an abolitionist leader. Mrs. Stanton was thus somewhat handicapped, lacking the perspective forged by years of struggle in defense of women's right to contribute to the anti-slavery cause. When she wrote (along with Susan B. Anthony, in their *History of Woman Suffrage*) that during her conversation in 1840 with Lucretia Mott, "a missionary work for the emancipation of women . . . was then and there inaugurated,"⁵ her remarks did not account for the accumulated lessons wrought by almost a decade during which abolitionist women had battled for their political emancipation as women.

Although they were defeated at the London convention, the abolitionist women did discover evidence that their past struggles had achieved a few positive results. For they were supported by some of the male anti-slavery leaders, who opposed the move to

exclude them. William Lloyd Garrison—"brave noble Garrison"⁶—who arrived too late to participate in the debate, refused to take his seat, remaining during the entire ten-day convention "a silent spectator in the gallery."⁷ According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's account, Nathaniel P. Rogers of Concord, New Hampshire, was the only other male abolitionist who joined the women in the gallery.⁸ Why the Black abolitionist Charles Remond is not mentioned in Stanton's description of the events is rather puzzling. He was also, as he himself wrote in an article published in the *Liberator*, "a silent listener."⁹

Charles Remond wrote that he experienced one of the few great disappointments of his life when he discovered, upon his arrival, that the women had been excluded from the convention floor. He had good reason to feel distressed, for his own travel expenses had been paid by several women's groups.

I was almost entirely indebted to the kind and generous members of the Bangor Female Anti-Slavery Society, the Portland Sewing Circle, and the Newport Young Ladies' Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society, for aid in visiting this country.¹⁰

Remond felt compelled to refuse his seat in the convention, because he could not otherwise be the "honored representative of the three female associations, at once most praiseworthy in their object and efficient in this cooperation."¹¹ Not all of the men, therefore, were the "bigoted Abolitionists"¹² to whom Stanton refers in her historical account. At least some of them had learned to detect and challenge the injustices of male supremacy.

Whereas Elizabeth Cady Stanton's interest in abolitionism was quite recent, she had conducted a personal fight against sexism throughout her youth. Encouraged by her father—a wealthy and unabashedly conservative judge—she had defied orthodoxy in her studies as well as in her leisure activities. She studied Greek and

mathematics and learned horseback riding, all of which were generally barred to girls. At age sixteen, Elizabeth was the only girl in her high school graduating class.¹³ Before her marriage, the young Stanton passed much of her time with her father and had even begun to study the law seriously under his guidance.

By 1848 Stanton was a full-time housewife and mother. Living with her husband in Seneca Falls, New York, she was often unable to hire servants because they were so scarce in that area. Her own anticlimactic and frustrating life made her especially sensitive to the middle-class white woman's predicament. In explaining her decision to contact Lucretia Mott, whom she had not seen for eight years, she mentioned her domestic situation first among her several motives for issuing a call to a women's convention.

The general discontent I felt with woman's portion as wife, mother, housekeeper, physician and spiritual guide . . . and the wearied, anxious look of the majority of women, impressed me with the strong feeling that some active measures should be taken to remedy the wrongs of society in general and of women in particular. My experiences at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, all I had read of the legal status of women, and the oppression I saw everywhere, together swept across my soul, intensified now by many personal experiences. It seemed as if all the elements had conspired to impell me to some onward step. I could not see what to do or where to begin—my only thought was a public meeting for protest and discussion.¹⁴

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's life exhibited all the basic elements, in their most contradictory form, of the middle-class woman's dilemma. Her diligent efforts to achieve excellence in her studies, the knowledge she had gained as a law student, and all the other ways she had cultivated her intellectual powers—all this had come to naught. Marriage and motherhood precluded the achievement

of the goals she had set for herself as a single woman. Moreover, her involvement in the abolitionist movement during the years following the London convention had taught her that it was possible to organize a political challenge to oppression. Many of the women who would answer the call to attend the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls were becoming conscious of similar contradictions in their lives and had likewise seen, from the example of the anti-slavery struggle, that it was possible to fight for equality.

As the Seneca Falls Convention was being planned, Elizabeth Cady Stanton proposed a resolution which appeared too radical even to her co-conventioner Lucretia Mott. Although Mrs. Mott's experiences in the anti-slavery movement had certainly persuaded her that women urgently needed to exercise political power, she opposed the introduction of a resolution on woman suffrage. Such a move would be interpreted as absurd and outrageous, she thought, and would consequently undermine the importance of the meeting. Stanton's husband also opposed the raising of the suffrage issue—and kept his promise to leave town if she insisted on presenting the resolution. Frederick Douglass was the only prominent figure who agreed that the convention should call for women's right to vote.

Several years before the Seneca Falls meeting, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had firmly convinced Frederick Douglass that the vote should be extended to women.

I could not meet her arguments except with the shallow plea of "custom," "natural division of duties," "indelicacy of woman's taking part in politics," the common talk of "woman's sphere," and the like, all of which that able woman, who was then no less logical than now, brushed away by those arguments which she has so often and effectively used since and which no man has successfully

refuted. If intelligence is the only true and rational basis of government, it follows that that is the best government which draws its life and power from the largest sources of wisdom, energy and goodness at its command.¹⁵

Among the approximately three hundred women and men attending the Seneca Falls Convention, the issue of electoral power for women was the only major point of contention: the suffrage resolution alone was not unanimously endorsed. That the controversial proposal was presented at all, however, was due to Frederick Douglass' willingness to second Stanton's motion and to employ his oratorical abilities in defense of women's right to vote.¹⁶

During those early days when women's rights was not yet a legitimate cause, when woman suffrage was unfamiliar and unpopular as a demand, Frederick Douglass publicly agitated for the political equality of women. In the immediate aftermath of the Seneca Falls Convention, he published an editorial in his newspaper, the *North Star*. Entitled "The Rights of Women," its content was quite radical for the times:

In respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for men. We go further, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for men to exercise, it is equally so for woman. All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman, and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering the law of the land.¹⁷

Frederick Douglass was also responsible for officially introducing the issue of women's rights to the Black Liberation movement, where it was enthusiastically welcomed. As S. Jay Walker points

out, Douglass spoke out at the National Convention of Colored Freedmen that was held in Cleveland, Ohio, around the time of the Seneca Falls meeting:

He succeeded in amending a resolution defining delegates so that it would be "understood 'to include *women*,' " an amendment that was carried "with three cheers for women's rights!"¹⁸

Elizabeth Cady Stanton devoted expressions of praise to Douglass for his steadfast defense of the Seneca Falls Convention in face of the widespread ridicule voiced in the press.

So pronounced was the popular voice against us, in the parlor, press and pulpit, that most of the ladies who had attended the convention and signed the declaration, one by one withdrew their names and influence and joined our persecutors. Our friends gave us the cold shoulder and felt themselves disgraced by the whole proceeding.¹⁹

The uproar did not dissuade Douglass, nor did it achieve its goal of nipping the battle for women's rights in the bud. Parlor, press and pulpit, try as they might, could not reverse this trend. Only one month passed before another convention took place in Rochester, New York—whose daring innovation and precedent for future meetings was a female presiding officer.²⁰ Frederick Douglass again manifested his loyalty to his sisters by arguing once more for the suffrage resolution, which passed in Rochester by a much larger margin than at Seneca Falls.²¹

The advocacy of women's rights could not be forbidden. Not yet acceptable to the makers of public opinion, the issue of women's equality, now embodied in an embryonic movement, supported by Black people who were fighting for their own freedom, established itself as an indelible element of public life in the

United States. But what was it all about? How was the question of women's equality defined other than by the suffrage issue which had prompted the derogatory publicity about the Seneca Falls Convention? Were the grievances outlined in the Declaration of Sentiments and the demands put forth in the resolutions truly reflective of the problems and needs of the women of the United States?

The emphatic focus of the Seneca Falls Declaration was the institution of marriage and its many injurious effects on women: marriage robbed women of their property rights, making wives economically—as well as morally—dependent on their husbands. Demanding absolute obedience from wives, the institution of marriage gave husbands the right to punish their wives, and what is more, the laws of separation and divorce were almost entirely based on male supremacy.²² As a result of women's inferior status within marriage, the Seneca Falls Declaration argued, they suffered inequalities in educational institutions as well as in the professions. "Profitable employments" and "all avenues to wealth and distinction" (such as medicine, law and theology) were absolutely inaccessible to women.²³ The Declaration concludes its list of grievances with an evocation of women's mental and psychological dependence, which has left them with little "confidence and self-respect."²⁴

The inestimable importance of the Seneca Falls Declaration was its role as the *articulated consciousness of women's rights* at midcentury. It was the theoretical culmination of years of unsure, often silent, challenges aimed at a political, social, domestic and religious condition which was contradictory, frustrating and downright oppressive for women of the bourgeoisie and the rising middle classes. However, as a rigorous consummation of the consciousness of white middle-class women's dilemma, the Declaration all but ignored the predicament of white working-class women, as it ignored the condition of Black women in the South

and North alike. In other words, the Seneca Falls Declaration proposed an analysis of the female condition which disregarded the circumstances of women outside the social class of the document's framers.

But what about those women who *worked* for a living—the white women, for example, who operated the textile mills in the Northeast? In 1831, when the textile industry was still the major focus of the new industrial revolution, women comprised the undisputed majority of industrial workers. In the textile mills, scattered throughout New England, there were 38,927 women workers as compared to 18,539 men.²⁵ The pioneering “mill girls” had been recruited from local farm families. The profit-seeking millowners represented life in the mills as an attractive and instructive prelude to married life. Both the Waltham and Lowell systems were portrayed as “surrogate families” where the young farm women would be rigorously supervised by matrons in an atmosphere akin to the finishing school. But what was the reality of mill life? Incredibly long hours—twelve, fourteen or even sixteen hours daily; atrocious working conditions; inhumanly crowded living quarters; and

So little time was allowed for meals—one half hour at noon for dinner—that the women raced from the hot, humid weaving room several blocks to their boarding houses, gulped down their main meal of the day, and ran back to the mill in terror of being fined if they were late. In winter they dared not stop to button their coats and often ate without taking them off. This was pneumonia season. In summer, spoiled food and poor sanitation led to dysentery. Tuberculosis was with them in every season.²⁶

The mill women fought back. Beginning in the late 1820s—long before the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention—working women staged “turn-outs” and strikes, militantly protesting the double

oppression they suffered as women and as industrial workers. In Dover, New Hampshire, for example, the mill women walked off the job in 1828 to dramatize their opposition to newly instituted restrictions. They “shocked the community by parading with banners and flags, shooting off gunpowder.”²⁷

By the summer of 1848, when the Seneca Falls Convention took place, conditions in the mills—hardly ideal to begin with—had deteriorated to such an extent that the New England farmers' daughters were fast becoming a minority in the textile labor force. Replacing the women from “well-born,” “Yankee” backgrounds were immigrant women who, like their fathers, brothers and husbands, were becoming the industrial proletariat of the nation. These women—unlike their predecessors, whose families owned land—had nothing to rely upon but their labor power. When they resisted, they were fighting for their right to survive. They fought so passionately that “in the 1840's, women workers were in the leadership of labor militancy in the United States.”²⁸

Campaigning for the ten-hour day, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association presented petitions to the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1843 and 1844. When the Legislature agreed to hold public hearings, the Lowell women acquired the distinction of winning the very first investigation of labor conditions by a government body in the history of the United States.²⁹ This was clearly a blow for women's rights—and it predated, by four years, the official launching of the women's movement.

Judging from the struggles conducted by white working women—their relentless defense of their dignity as workers and as women, their conscious as well as implicit challenges to the sexist ideology of womanhood—they had more than earned the right to be lauded as pioneers of the women's movement. But their trail-blazing role was all but ignored by the leading initiators of the new movement, who did not comprehend that women workers experienced and challenged male supremacy in their own special

way. As if to drive this point home, history has imparted a final irony to the movement initiated in 1848: Of all the women attending the Seneca Falls Convention, the only one to live long enough to actually exercise her right to vote over seventy years later was a working woman by the name of Charlotte Woodward.³⁰

Charlotte Woodward's motives for signing the Seneca Falls Declaration were hardly identical to those of the more prosperous women. Her purpose for attending the convention was to seek advice on improving her status as a worker. As a glovemaker, her occupation was not yet industrialized: she worked at home, receiving wages legally controlled by the men in her family. Describing the circumstances of her work, she expressed that spirit of rebellion which had brought her to Seneca Falls:

We women work secretly in the seclusion of our bed chambers because all society was built on the theory that men, not women, earned money and that men alone supported the family . . . I do not believe that there was any community in which the souls of some women were not beating their wings in rebellion. For my own obscure self I can say that every fibre of my being rebelled, although silently, all the hours that I sat and sewed gloves for a miserable pittance which, as it was earned, could never be mine. I wanted to work, but I wanted to choose my task and I wanted to collect my wages. That was my form of rebellion against the life into which I was born.³¹

Charlotte Woodward and the several other working women present at the convention were serious—they were more serious about women's rights than about anything else in their lives.

At the last session of the convention, Lucretia Mott proposed a final resolution calling both for the overthrow of the pulpit and "for the securing to women *an equal participation with men*

in the various trades, professions and commerce." [my emphasis]³² Was this a mere afterthought? A charitable gesture toward Charlotte Woodward and her working-class sisters? Or did the small contingent of working-class women protest the exclusion of their interests from the original resolutions, causing Lucretia Mott, the long-time anti-slavery activist, to stand up on their behalf? If Sarah Grimke had been present, she might have insisted, as she said on another occasion:

There are in the poorer classes many strong honest hearts weary of being slaves and tools who are worthy of freedom and who will use it worthily.³³

If the recognition accorded working women at the Seneca Falls meeting was all but negligible, there was not even a cursory mention of the rights of another group of women who also "rebelled against the lives into which they were born."³⁴ In the South they rebelled against slavery and in the North against a dubious condition of freedom called racism. While at least one Black man was present among the Seneca Falls conferees, there was not a single Black woman in attendance. Nor did the convention's documents make even a passing reference to Black women. In light of the organizers' abolitionist involvement, it would seem puzzling that slave women were entirely disregarded.

But this problem was not a new one. The Grimke sisters had previously criticized a number of female anti-slavery societies for ignoring the condition of Black women and for sometimes manifesting blatantly racist prejudices. During the preparations for the founding convention of the National Female Anti-Slavery Society, Angelina Grimke had to take the initiative to guarantee more than a token presence of Black women. Moreover, she suggested that a special address be delivered at that convention to the free Black people of the North. Since no one—not even Lucretia Mott

—would prepare the address, Angelina's sister Sarah had to deliver the speech.³⁵ As early as 1837 the Grimke sisters chastised the New York Female Anti-Slavery Society for failing to involve Black women in their work. "On account of their strong aristocratic feelings," Angelina regretfully said,

... they were most exceedingly inefficient. ... We have had serious thought of forming an Anti-Slavery Society among our colored sisters and getting them to invite their white friends to join them, in this way we think we could get the most efficient white females in the city to join them.³⁶

The absence of Black women at the Seneca Falls Convention was all the more conspicuous in light of their previous contributions to the fight for women's rights. More than a decade before this meeting, Maria Stewart had responded to attacks on her right to deliver public lectures by emphatically asking, "What if I am a woman?"³⁷ This Black woman was the first native-born female lecturer who addressed audiences of both men and women.³⁸ And in 1827 *Freedom's Journal*—the first Black newspaper in this country—published a Black woman's letter on women's rights. "Matilda," as she identified herself, demanded education for Black women at a time when schooling for women was a controversial and quite unpopular issue. Her letter appeared in this pioneering New York journal the year before the Scottish-born Frances Wright began to lecture on equal education for women.

I would address myself to all mothers, and say to them, that while it is necessary to possess a knowledge of pudding-making, something more is requisite. It is their bounden duty to store their daughters' minds with useful learning. They should be made to devote their leisure time to reading books, whence they would derive valuable information, which could never be taken from them.³⁹

Long before the first women's convention, middle-class white women had struggled for the right to education. Matilda's comments—later confirmed by the ease with which Prudence Crandall recruited Black girls for her besieged school in Connecticut—demonstrated that white and Black women were indeed united in their desire for education. Unfortunately, this connection was not acknowledged during the convention at Seneca Falls.

The failure to recognize the potential for an integrated women's movement—particularly against sexism in education—was dramatically revealed in an episode occurring during the crucial summer of 1848. Ironically, it involved the daughter of Frederick Douglass. After her official admission to a girls' seminary in Rochester, New York, Douglass' daughter was formally prohibited from attending classes with the white girls. The principal who issued the order was an abolitionist woman! When Douglass and his wife protested this segregationist policy, the principal asked each white girl to vote on the issue, indicating that one objection would suffice to continue the exclusion. After the white girls voted in favor of integrating the classroom, the principal approached the girls' parents, using the one resulting objection as an excuse to exclude Douglass' daughter.⁴⁰

That a white woman associated with the anti-slavery movement could assume a racist posture toward a Black girl in the North reflected a major weakness in the abolitionist campaign—its failure to promote a broad anti-racist consciousness. This serious shortcoming, abundantly criticized by the Grimke sisters and others, was unfortunately carried over into the organized movement for women's rights.

However oblivious the early women's rights activists may have been to the plight of their Black sisters, the echoes of the new women's movement were felt throughout the organized Black Liberation struggle. As mentioned above, the National Convention of Colored Freedmen passed a resolution on the equality of women in 1848.⁴¹ Upon Frederick Douglass' initiative, this

Cleveland gathering had resolved that women should be elected delegates on an equal basis with men. Shortly thereafter, a convention of Negro people in Philadelphia not only invited Black women to participate, but in recognition of the new movement launched in Seneca Falls, also asked white women to join them. Lucretia Mott described her decision to attend in a letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton:

We are now in the midst of a convention of the colored people of the city. Douglass and Delany—Remond and Garnet are here—all taking an active part—and as they include women and *white* women too, I can do no less, with the interest I feel in the cause of the slave, as well as of woman, than be present and take a little part—So yesterday, in a pouring rain, Sarah Pugh and self walked down there and expect to do the same today.⁴²

Two years after the Seneca Falls Convention, the first National Convention on Women's Rights was held in Worcester, Massachusetts. Whether she was actually invited or came on her own initiative, Sojourner Truth was among the participants. Her presence there and the speeches she delivered at subsequent women's rights meetings symbolized Black women's solidarity with the new cause. They aspired to be free not only from racist oppression but also from sexist domination. "Ain't I a Woman?"⁴³—the refrain of the speech Sojourner Truth delivered at an 1851 women's convention in Akron, Ohio—remains one of the most frequently quoted slogans of the nineteenth-century women's movement.

Sojourner Truth single-handedly rescued the Akron women's meeting from the disruptive jeers of hostile men. Of all the women attending the gathering, she alone was able to answer aggressively the male supremacist arguments of the boisterous provocateurs. Possessing an undeniable charisma and powerful oratorical abilities, Sojourner Truth tore down the claims that

female weakness was incompatible with suffrage—and she did this with irrefutable logic. The leader of the provocateurs had argued that it was ridiculous for women to desire the vote, since they could not even walk over a puddle or get into a carriage without the help of a man. Sojourner Truth pointed out with compelling simplicity that she herself had never been helped over mud puddles or into carriages. "And ain't I a woman?" With a voice like "rolling thunder,"⁴⁴ she said, "Look at me! Look at my arm," and rolled up her sleeve to reveal the "tremendous muscular power" of her arm.⁴⁵

I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?⁴⁶

As the only Black woman attending the Akron convention, Sojourner Truth had done what not one of her timid white sisters was capable of doing. According to the chairperson, "there were very few women in those days who dared to 'speak in meeting.'" Having powerfully pleaded the cause of her sex, having commanded the attention of the white women as well as their disruptive male adversaries, Sojourner Truth was spontaneously applauded as the hero of the day. She had not only dealt a crushing defeat to the men's "weaker sex" argument, but had also refuted their thesis that male supremacy was a Christian principle, since Christ himself was a man:

That little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman. Where did Christ come from?⁴⁷

According to the presiding officer, "rolling thunder couldn't have stilled that crowd, as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire."⁴⁸

Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him.⁴⁹

As for the horrendous sin committed by Eve, this was hardly an argument against women's capabilities. On the contrary, it was an enormous plus:

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them.⁵⁰

The men's belligerence was quieted and the women were bursting with pride, their "hearts beating with gratitude" and "more than one of us with streaming eyes."⁵¹ Frances Dana Gage, the presiding officer of the Akron convention, continued her description of the impact of Sojourner Truth's speech:

She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration.⁵²

Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" address had deeper implications, for it was also, it seems, a comment on the racist attitudes of the same white women who later praised their Black sister. Not a few of the Akron women had been initially opposed to a Black woman having a voice in their convention, and the

anti-women's righters had tried to take advantage of this racism. In the words of Frances Dana Gage:

The leaders of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, gaunt black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted with an uncouth sunbonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and there fell on the listening ear, "An abolition affair!" "I told you so!" "Go it, darkey!"⁵³

On the second day of the convention, when Sojourner Truth rose to answer the male supremacist assault, leading white women attempted to persuade Gage to prevent her from speaking.

"Don't let her speak!" gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced "Sojourner Truth," and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments.⁵⁴

Fortunately for the Ohio women, for the women's movement in general—for whom Sojourner Truth's speech established a militant fighting spirit—and for us today who still receive inspiration from her words, Frances Dana Gage did not succumb to these racist pressures of her comrades. When this Black woman did rise to speak, her answer to the male supremacists also contained a profound lesson for the white women. In repeating her question "Ain't I a woman?" no less than four times, she exposed the class-bias and racism of the new women's movement. All women were not white and all women did not enjoy the material comfort of the middle classes and the bourgeoisie. Sojourner

Truth herself was Black—she was an ex-slave—but she was no less a woman than any of her white sisters at the convention. That her race and her economic condition were different from theirs did not annul her womanhood. And as a Black woman, her claim to equal rights was no less legitimate than that of white middle-class women. At a national women's convention two years later, she was still fighting efforts to prevent her from speaking.

I know that it feels a kind of hissing and tickling like to see a colored woman get up and tell you about things and Woman's Rights. We have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again, and now I am here.⁵⁵

Throughout the 1850s local and national conventions attracted increasing numbers of women to the campaign for equality. It was never an unusual occurrence for Sojourner Truth to appear at these meetings, and despite inevitable hostility, to rise and have her say. In representing her Black sisters—both slave and “free”—she imparted a fighting spirit to the campaign for women's rights. This was Sojourner Truth's unique historical contribution. And in case white women tended to forget that Black women were no less women than they, her presence and her speeches served as a constant reminder. Black women were also going to get their rights.

Meanwhile, large numbers of Black women were manifesting their commitment to freedom and equality in ways that were less closely connected with the newly organized women's movement. The Underground Railroad claimed the energies of numerous Northern Black women. Jane Lewis, for example, a resident of New Lebanon, Ohio, regularly rowed her boat across the Ohio River, rescuing many a fugitive slave.⁵⁶ Frances E. W. Harper, a dedicated feminist and the most popular Black poet at midcen-

tury, was one of the most active lecturers associated with the anti-slavery movement. Charlotte Forten, who became a leading Black educator during the post-Civil War period, was likewise an active abolitionist. Sarah Remond, who lectured against slavery in England, Ireland and Scotland, exercised a vast influence on public opinion, and according to one historian, “kept the Tories from intervening on the side of the Confederacy.”⁵⁷

Even the most radical white abolitionists, basing their opposition to slavery on moral and humanitarian grounds, failed to understand that the rapidly developing capitalism of the North was also an oppressive system. They viewed slavery as a detestable and inhuman institution, an archaic transgression of justice. But they did not recognize that the white worker in the North, his or her status as “free” laborer notwithstanding, was no different from the enslaved “worker” in the South: both were victims of economic exploitation. As militant as William Lloyd Garrison is supposed to have been, he was vehemently against wage laborers' right to organize. The inaugural issue of the *Liberator* included an article denouncing the efforts of Boston workers to form a political party:

An attempt has been made—it is still in the making—we regret to say—to inflame the minds of our working classes against the more opulent, and to persuade men that they are condemned and oppressed by a wealthy aristocracy . . . It is in the highest degree criminal, therefore, to exasperate our mechanics to deeds of violence or to array them under a party banner.⁵⁸

As a rule, white abolitionists either defended the industrial capitalists or expressed no conscious class loyalty at all. This unquestioning acceptance of the capitalist economic system was evident in the program of the women's rights movement as well. If most

abolitionists viewed slavery as a nasty blemish which needed to be eliminated, most women's righters viewed male supremacy in a similar manner—as an immoral flaw in their otherwise acceptable society.

The leaders of the women's rights movement did not suspect that the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women might be systematically related. Within the early women's movement, little was said about white working people—not even about white women workers. Though many of the women were supporters of the abolitionist campaign, they failed to integrate their anti-slavery consciousness into their analysis of women's oppression.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the women's rights leaders were persuaded to redirect their energies toward a defense of the Union cause. But in suspending their agitation for sexual equality, they learned how deeply racism had planted itself in the soil of U.S. society. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony traveled throughout the state of New York delivering pro-Union lectures demanding "immediate and unconditional emancipation."⁵⁹

... and they received the roughest treatment of their lives at the hands of aroused mobs in every city where they stopped between Buffalo and Albany. In Syracuse the hall was invaded by a crowd of men brandishing knives and pistols.⁶⁰

If they had not previously recognized that the South held no monopoly on racism, their experiences as agitators for the Union cause should have taught them that there was indeed racism in the North—and that it could be brutal.

When the military draft was instituted in the North, large-scale riots in major urban centers were fomented by pro-slavery forces.

They brought violence and death to the free Black population. In July, 1863, mobs in New York City

... destroyed the recruiting stations, set fire to an armory, attacked the *Tribune* and prominent Republicans, burned a Negro orphan asylum, and generally created chaos throughout the city. The mobs directed their fury especially against the Negroes, assailing them wherever found. Many were murdered. ... It is calculated that some 1,000 people were killed and wounded ...⁶¹

If the degree to which the North itself was infected with racism had formerly gone unrecognized, the mob violence of 1863 demonstrated that anti-Black sentiment was deep and widespread and potentially murderous. If the South had a monopoly on slavery, it was certainly not alone in its sponsorship of racism.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had agreed with the radical abolitionists that the Civil War could be hastily ended by emancipating the slaves and recruiting them into the Union Army. They attempted to rally masses of women to their position by issuing a call to organize a Women's Loyal League. At the founding meeting, hundreds of women agreed to promote the war effort by circulating petitions demanding the emancipation of the slaves. They were not so unanimous, however, in their response to Susan B. Anthony's resolution linking the rights of women to the liberation of Black people.

The proposed resolution stated that there can never be a true peace in this Republic until the "civil and political rights of all citizens of African descent and all women" are practically established.⁶² Unfortunately, in light of the postwar developments, it appears that this resolution may have been motivated by the fear that (white) women might be left behind when the slaves emerged into the light of freedom. But Angelina Grimke proposed a principled defense of the unity between Black Libera-

tion and Women's Liberation: "I want to be identified with the Negro," she insisted. "Until he gets his rights, we shall never have ours."⁶³

I rejoice exceedingly that the resolution should combine us with the Negro. I feel that we have been with him; that the iron has entered into our souls. True, we have not felt the slave-holder's lash! true we have not had our hands manacled, but our *hearts* have been crushed.⁶⁴

At this founding convention of the Women's Loyal League—to which all the veterans of the abolitionist campaign and the women's rights movement were invited—Angelina Grimke characteristically proposed the most advanced interpretation of the war she described as "our second revolution."⁶⁵

The war is not, as the South falsely pretends, a war of races, nor of sections, nor of political parties, but a war of *Principles*, a war upon the working classes, whether white or black . . . In this war, the black man was the first victim, the workingman of whatever color the next; and now *all* who contend for the rights of labor, for free speech, free schools, free suffrage, and a free government . . . are driven to do battle in defense of these or to fall with them, victims of the same violence that for two centuries has held the black man a prisoner of war. While the South has waged this war against human rights, the North has stood by holding the garments of those who were stoning liberty to death . . .

The nation is in a death-struggle. It must either become one vast slaveocracy of petty tyrants, or wholly the land of the free . . .⁶⁶

Angelina Grimke's brilliant "Address to the Soldiers of Our Second Revolution" demonstrated that her political consciousness was far more advanced than most of her contemporaries. In her

speech she proposed a radical theory and practice which *could have been realized* through an alliance embracing labor, Black people and women. If, as Karl Marx said, "labor in a white skin can never be free as long as labor in a black skin is branded," it was also true, as Angelina Grimke lucidly insisted, that the democratic struggles of the times—especially the fight for women's equality—could be most effectively waged in association with the struggle for Black Liberation.