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Black Women in Antebellum America: Active Agents in the Fight for Freedom

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**Black Women in
Antebellum America:
Active Agents in the Fight For Freedom**

by
Sandra M. Grayson

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT BOSTON
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This paper addresses the topic of Black women's active involvement in anti-slavery efforts during the pre-civil war period. It examines the ways in which Black women protested slavery through their participation in slave revolts, as well as through their narratives, speeches, poetry, and essays. Sandra M. Grayson is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Foreword

Through this series of publications, the William Monroe Trotter Institute is making available copies of selected reports and papers from research conducted at the Institute. The analyses and conclusions contained in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions or endorsement of the Trotter Institute or the University of Massachusetts Boston.

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Introduction

African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heartfelt interest.¹

The most prominent images of Black women in antebellum America depicted in classes across the United States are of passive victims as opposed to active agents of change. The names and deeds of Black women like Frances E. W. Harper, Maria Stewart, Sarah Mapps Douglass, and Sarah Jane Giddings are not an integral part of American education. Further, most history books overlook Black women's roles in antebellum America—oversights which can be considered suppression through historical omission. In order to reflect a more accurate picture of American history, public and private school curriculums need to include texts by and about Black women (slave, free-born, and former slaves) who were active agents in shaping their own lives as well as altering the course of history. This paper explores some of the ways in which Black women were active agents in the fight for freedom during the slave era.

Black Women, Slavery, and Resistance

In antebellum America, resistance to slavery took on many forms for Black women. Some Black women, for instance, participated in slave revolts. One such case involves an unnamed woman, the only Black woman of six leaders who, in August 1829, planned to kill the traders leading them from Maryland to the South to be sold. Two white people, the leader and a guard, were killed and most of the slaves escaped. However, a posse captured the slaves and all six leaders were sentenced to be hung. On November 20, 1829, the five men were hanged. Because “the woman was found to

be pregnant [she was] permitted to remain in jail for several months until after the birth of the child, whereupon, on May 25, 1830, she was publicly hanged.”²

Black women were also involved in fights with the militia. In South Carolina, for example, a Black woman and a child (both fugitives) were killed during a confrontation between a body of militia and a community of fugitive slaves.³ In other cases, a woman would “rebel in a manner commensurate with the work demands imposed upon her. ‘She’d get stubborn like a mule and quit,’” or she would take her hoe, knock down the overseer, and hit him across the head.⁴

Another form of resistance was to poison the master. Many Black women had “knowledge of and access to poisonous herbs, gleaned from African as well as Indian and other American lore, which they transmitted down through the generations.”⁵ White residents of South Carolina were so concerned about this issue that in 1751 they amended the Negro Act of 1740 as follows:

... any black who should instruct another “in the knowledge of any poisonous root, plant, herb, or other poison whatever, he or she, so offending shall upon conviction thereof suffer death as a felon.” The law also prohibited physicians, apothecaries, or druggists from admitting slaves to places in which drugs were kept or allowing them to administer drugs to other slaves.⁶

Moreover, in 1811, Kentucky “declared conspiracy or poisoning by slaves, crimes punishable by death.”⁷ It is unclear how many Black women poisoned their masters, but as cooks and house servants, the women were in a privileged position to do so.

Between the 1830s and the 1840s, Black women were among the twenty to thirty thousand slaves who escaped the South. They were also among an estimated fifty thousand fugitives living in Canada in 1855. Harriet Tubman (1820?-1913), for example, escaped from slavery then returned to the South 19 times and led over 300 slaves (including her family) to freedom. Tubman asserted, “There was one of two things I has a *right* to, liberty, or death, if I could not have one, I would have de oder; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted.”⁸

Black women also protested slavery through narratives, poetry, speeches, and essays. Their narratives were among the “more than six thousand extant narratives of American Negro slaves”⁹ and include Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Lucy Delaney’s *From the Darkness Cometh the Light: Or, Struggles for Freedom*. Other literary works include Frances E. W. Harper’s *The Slave Mother*, *The Slave Auction*, and *The Fugitive’s Wife*; and Maria W. Stewart’s *An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall*, and *Cause for Encouragement*.

Among the Black lecturers during the slave era were Maria Stewart (1803-1879), Sojourner Truth (1797?-1883), and Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911). Maria Stewart, a free-born Black woman orphaned at the age of five and “bound out in a clergyman’s family” until she was fifteen years old, was the first American-born woman, white or Black, recorded to have “mounted a lecture platform and raised a political argument before a ‘promiscuous’ audience [in September 1832], that is, one composed of both men and women. . . . Hers was a call to action, urging blacks to demand their human rights from their white oppressors.”¹⁰ In addition to being a pioneer Black abolitionist, Stewart fought for the rights of free Blacks and was politically active both during and after the Civil War. In response to the Colonization Society’s plans to send free Blacks to Liberia, she asked: “Why sit ye here and die? If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die. If we sit here, we shall die.”¹¹ She felt that Blacks had to stay in America and fight for their rights:

They [whites] would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through. African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heartfelt interest.¹²

Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist, escaped from slavery before she was freed by the New York State Emancipation Act of 1827. She lectured at camp meetings, revivals, and conventions in numerous states between 1843 and 1878, promoting equal rights for both Black people and white women. Her story is chronicled in the biography, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*.¹³ During her address at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (a presentation that became known as her "Ain't I a Woman" speech), Truth explained:

The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have women's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble. . . . Man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.¹⁴

In 1854, Frances E. W. Harper, a free-born Black woman, became a lecturer for the Anti-Slavery Society in Maine "and was soon speaking throughout New England, Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania, earning a reputation as an effective platform orator and punctuating her lectures with her own rather inspirational verse."¹⁵ Also in 1854, the first of her ten volumes of poetry, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, was issued. She published one novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892), and is "credited with the first short story by an African-American, 'The Two Offers,' published in 1859."¹⁶

Although *The Two Offers* focuses on two white women, Laura Lagrange who dies of a broken heart and Janette Alston who becomes a writer and abolitionist, the story subverts the cult of true womanhood, a doctrine which idealized white women but excluded slave women. The four main principles of true womanhood are piety, purity, domesticity, and obedience. While white men extolled the white woman "as the 'nobler half of humanity'" and depicted her as a goddess who was virtuous, pure, and innocent,¹⁷ they defined slave women as "instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force."¹⁸ Further, slave women were "victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous

mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women.”¹⁹ Harriet Jacobs, a former slave, explained that slave women were “entirely unprotected by law or custom,” and the laws reduced them to “the condition of a chattel, entirely subjected to the will of another.”²⁰

In *The Two Offers*, the narrator signifies on the accepted cultural truth of true womanhood when she argues that “no perfect womanhood is developed by imperfect culture.”²¹ She explains further:

You may paint her [the true woman] in poetry or fiction as a frail vine, clinging to her brother man for support and dying when deprived of it, and all this may sound well enough to please the imaginations of school-girls, or lovelorn maidens. But woman—the true woman—if you would render her happy, it needs more than the mere development of her affectional nature. . . . The true aim of female education should be, a development of not one or two but all the faculties of the human soul.²²

The Two Offers can be seen as a protest against slavery (in that Janette is an abolitionist) as well as a critique of true womanhood, a doctrine which further marginalized and oppressed slave women.

Established on December 9, 1833, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery (PFAS) was one of the organizations through which Black women protested slavery. Sarah Mapps Douglass (1806-1882), a free-born Black woman, helped launch the PFAS. Not only was she “a charter member, [she] served the group at various times as recording secretary, librarian, member of the board of directors, member of the committee in charge of the annual fairs, and member of the education committee.”²³ She was also a schoolteacher and writer. Her articles include “An Address” published in the *Liberator* on July 21, 1832; “Appeal of the Philadelphia Association” published in the *North Star* on September 7, 1849; and “Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Fair” published by the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on December 20, 1849.

The Forten sisters (Margaretta, Sarah Louisa, and Harriet), free-born Black women, were also active members of PFAS:

Early minutes of the [PFAS] report the election of Margaretta Forten, a schoolteacher, as the first recording secretary after the organization was established in 1834; as treasurer in 1836; and as a manager of the group in 1840. Sarah Louisa Forten was appointed to the nominating committee on December 8, 1834, and was elected to the Board of Managers in January 1836. . . . [They were re-elected] to these and other equally responsible positions throughout the life of the society.²⁴

Harriet Forten was elected as a delegate to the Free Production Convention on November 12, 1839 and was “prominent in its social and fund-raising activities, and served each year on the Annual Fair Committee.”²⁵

A valuable source, one that is often overlooked, for records of Black women’s resistance to slavery is *Douglass’ Monthly*. Originally entitled *North Star* (1847), *Douglass’ Monthly* was established by Frederick Douglass and became one of the leading abolitionist newspapers of the era. In the Inaugural Edition of the *North Star*, Douglass dedicated his newspaper “to the cause of our long oppressed and plundered fellow countryman” and asserted that the newspaper

. . . shall fearlessly assert your rights, faithfully proclaim your wrongs, and earnestly demand for you instant and even-handed justice. Giving no quarter to slavery at the South, it will hold no truce with oppressors at the North. While it shall boldly advocate emancipation for our enslaved brethren, it will omit no opportunity to gain for the nominally free, complete enfranchisement.²⁶

In the following pages, I bring together five articles that were published in 1859 in *Douglass’ Monthly*—texts that further illustrate the various ways in which Black women resisted slavery during antebellum America. These newspaper articles create vivid images of the lives of Black women throughout the era and provide insights into their continued struggle against their white oppressors. For each article, I used the spelling and punctuation from the original texts.

One article that appeared in *Douglass' Monthly* in January 1859, entitled "A Story of the Underground Railroad," focuses on a slave named Katy who led her family to freedom. After Katy witnessed her master whip her husband to death, she was determined to gain her freedom as well as that of her two daughters (aged ten and twelve at the time of her husband's murder). Twenty years had passed before Katy was able to save enough money to escape the South. By which time, her daughters were married to fellow slaves and each had three children:

[Katy] felt that she could easily provide for her own safety in flight, but was resolved to leave neither child nor grandchild in bondage. She saw, too, that those incumbrances were increasing in number, that her master was becoming embarrassed in his finances, and that some of them must be sold to relieve him. It might be her own offspring who would thus be taken. While they were united was therefore the time for them to fly. The flight agreed upon, preparation was made, and a night selected. They knew that dogs might be put on their trail. To prevent their feet depositing a scent which the dogs would recognize and follow, they filled their shoes with a preparation which effectively throws them off. . . . An hour before midnight the whole party, one daughter alone excepted [who was too afraid to leave], took up their dangerous march.

During their journey toward freedom, they had to hide in swamps or thickets in the daytime. Katy "forded creeks with heavy child on her shoulder, and swam broad rivers, supporting with one hand the same laborious burden." After travelling about four weeks, they encountered a white man ("an agent") who ran the first station on the Underground Railroad. To their pleasant surprise, they had reached Pennsylvania. The agent gave them food, clean clothes, and a place to sleep. The following night the agent's sons took Katy and her family to Philadelphia. Katy was hired as a cook for a hotel, and after saving three months' wages, she quit her job and returned to Virginia to rescue the daughter who was too afraid to leave the first time. She made her way back to the plantation, and the slaves

related to her how exasperated her master had been on discovering that ten of his chattels had gone off in a body; that when pursuit had been found unavailing, her poor timid daughter had been subjected to repeated torture to compel a disclosure of the plot; that from this cruelty she was even scarcely recovered; that in the interval the master had died, and that his negroes were all soon to be sold at auction.

The slaves brought Katy's daughter to her, and the two were ready to leave the plantation before midnight. Two men, "glowing with aspirations for liberty," joined Katy. Following nearly the same route that she had taken during the first escape, Katy again reached the first station on the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania where the agent gave them food and clothing. The fugitives safely reached freedom.

"Alleged Kidnapping Case," an article that appeared in *Douglass' Monthly* in April 1859, depicts the story of a free Black woman named Catherine Jackson who attempted to get legal protection from various authorities when a member of the West family was determined to sell her as a slave:

[Catherine] was last living in the family of Senator Wright of New Jersey, as a servant. Her mother was a slave of the West family, in Fairfax County, State of Virginia, and was by will set free, and received her papers as such in 1835. The girl Catherine was born in 1837, in Philadelphia, where her mother had removed. Soon after, the mother returned with her to Virginia, making the family of the Wests her home, looking up to them for protection, Catherine generally residing in this city. One of the West family having removed to this city, came to the determination to arrest Catherine and sell her as a slave. She getting word of his intentions, went into Virginia and procured a paper from the elder West, requesting Justice Donn to protect her, and forewarning all persons from interfering with her. Notwithstanding this, the younger West, having been forewarned of the consequences, by the assistance of Police Officer Daw, went to the residence of Senator Wright, and, under the promise of carrying her to the magistrate, took her into possession and carried her to the office of Jno. C. Cook, a dealer in negroes, and from there down into Virginia, where he met Mr. Cook and sold her, and she was immediately carried into the town of Alexandria, where she still remains.

Warrants were issued for the arrest of West, but as yet he has eluded the officers.—Measures have been taken to have the matter before the Grand Jury, with a view of holding the parties for kidnapping, as well conspiracy.

In another article that was published in *Douglass' Monthly* in April 1859 entitled, "A Mother in Prison for Attempting to Free Her Children," Juliet, a Black woman, was sent to jail for trying to rescue her ten children from slavery. Juliet had been purchased by Rev. John G. Fee from his father (John Fee) so that he could liberate her:

which he did from a sense of gratitude, she having been his nurse in infancy, and having often cradled him in her arms while a child. About four years since, she removed to Ohio, sixteen miles from her old home. Her youngest children, four in number, born after her liberation, she took with her to Ohio, but she left ten children and grandchildren still in bondage. These she resolved to make a desperate effort to redeem, as she was daily expecting the youngest son of John Fee (who was visiting his father) to return to his home in New Orleans, and take some of the slave children with him. She made the attempt, and dared to trample under foot the slave code of our State, and, as her indictment has it, attempted to entice away certain slave property of John Fee. In proof of this, and as the chief witnesses against her, appeared two men—John Anderson and Wm. Chalfant.

The arrest was made on the 18th of last October, at which time a warrant was served on her, wherein she was charged with enticing or attempting to entice away ten slaves, the property of John Fee and others; and failing to furnish the requisite security (\$500,) she was thrown into jail. . . . On the day she was again brought before the Court to be tried for a violation of the law, the penalty of which is imprisonment in the Penitentiary not less than two nor more than five years. The Jury made short work of it. They were out but twenty minutes, when they returned to their seats, and pronounced a verdict of Guilty, and she was sentenced to three years imprisonment. And this expiation to the outraged law of Kentucky she must make for endeavoring to free two of her own children from Slavery.

Listed under "Miscellaneous News Items" in *Douglass' Monthly* in October 1859 is the following paragraph about Harriet Ashe who bought her son Edward's freedom:

. . . Harriet Ashe, a colored woman in the city of Washington, has succeeded in raising a thousand dollars for the purchase of her son Edward. The benevolent persons who contributed to the worthy object will be gratified to learn that the effort in his behalf has been successful, and that the boy is now free.

Another article to appear in *Douglass' Monthly* in October 1859 (and the fifth in the series that my paper brings together) is an account of Sarah Jane Giddings, a free-born Black woman who

was taken to Texas when she was twelve years old and was made a slave. She spent ten years in slavery then escaped:

[Sarah left her mistress and] fled across the river to Canada. Her master, not disposed to part with his "property" . . . in this manner, followed Sarah Jane to the Clifton House, where she had obtained employment, and attempted to induce her to return with him. In this effort, it is said, the proprietor of the Clifton House aided the Southerner so far as he could, and even entrapped the girl, with a design to surrender her to her former owner. . . .

On Saturday Mr. Shears requested Sarah Jane to go to one of the cottages adjoining the Hotel, for the purpose of cleaning it out, accompanying her himself to the door. As soon as she entered she found to her great amazement her old master waiting to receive her. He immediately locked the door, and, putting the key in his pocket, piled every possible art to induce her to cross the river. Every offer, however, was rejected, the girl preferring her freedom to slavery, with all its promised advantages. He kept her here for some time, refusing to let her go, threatening violence if necessary. Fortunately, some colored waiters noticed that all was not right, and, after receiving no satisfaction from Mr. Shears, to whom they communicated their fears, they resolved on rescuing their friend themselves, [a goal at which they were successful].

Sarah arrived safely in Toronto. Although she was destitute, she had many friends to help her.

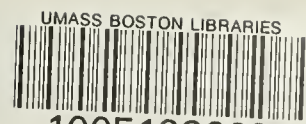
Conclusion

The deeds of the Black women explored in this paper illustrate some of the ways in which they were active agents of change during the slave era. Further, the texts examined are part of a larger body of records about Black women in the slave era, information that is usually overlooked in public and private school curriculums. Rather than images of Black women who were active agents in history, the most common images of Black women in antebellum America represented in classrooms across the United States are of passive victims. In order to achieve a more accurate and complete picture of American history, texts by and about Black women like those explored in this paper need to be an integral part of American education.

ENDNOTES

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