

Abstract

“Why sit ye here and Die”? Counter-Hegemonic Histories of the Black Female Intellectual in Nineteenth Century America.

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This paper examines the work and lives of black female activist-Intellectuals in the years before the formation of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) in 1896. Looking deeper at arguments originally made by Maria Stewart concerning the denial of black women's ambitions and limiting potential in their working lives, the analysis employs the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, in particular his notion of the intellectual, to help reflect on the centrality of these black women in the development of an early counter-hegemonic movement.

“Why sit ye here and Die”?

Counter-Hegemonic Histories of the Black Female Intellectual in Nineteenth Century America.

O, horrible idea, indeed! to possess noble souls aspiring after high and honorable acquirements, yet confined by the chains of ignorance and poverty to lives of continual drudgery and toil. Neither do I know of any who have enriched themselves by spending their lives as house-domestics, washing windows, shaking carpets, brushing boots, or tending upon gentlemen's tables. I can but die for expressing my sentiments; and I am as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence; for I and a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast.¹

On 21st September 1832 Maria W. Stewart spoke these powerful words in her lecture “Why Sit Ye Here and Die?” Delivered at the site of the monthly meetings of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in Boston, it was received by an interracial audience of both black and white anti-slavery campaigners. Stewart’s lectures spoke directly to black members of her audience, and focussed on themes of black racial uplift and white racial prejudice, particularly in equality of opportunity and dignity in their working lives. She urged black people in the United States towards radical activism, proclaiming “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. Come let us plead our cause before the whites: if they save us alive, we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die.”² In making such a rousing and shockingly radical claim, the lecture recognized the urgent need to expose the horrors of

¹ Maria W. Stewart, “Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston, September 21 1832,” in Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart: America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 45-49, 46.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

racial prejudice in the free states that saw black women unable to secure employment, chiefly because of the racial stereotypes that cast black people as “idle and lazy.”³

Historically, and contrary to common assumption, black women in the United States have always been at the forefront of black intellectual activism, whether at the local or national level. Yet, the histories and conceptual understandings embedded in the idea of black intellectuals are often framed by androcentrism, consciously or not, placing a masculine perspective at the centre of how we might understand the term and related activism. Since the earliest years of the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-16th century, however, women – often anonymous and silenced - across the black diaspora have been central to the development of intellectual communities. Yet, the history of the black intellectual has presented a somewhat limited interpretation of who might count under this term. Understandings of the black intellectual in the minds of a non-specialist audience has been largely shaped by previous scholarly understandings of the black intellectual as typically gendered as male contributing to regional or national public discourses of the United States through speeches, lectures, and essays.⁴

In addition to this exaggerated focus on men black intellectual history, the field’s temporal focus tends to begin in the early 20th century. The formation of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) in 1896 is often where the scholarly

³ Ibid., 46

⁴ For examples of this over the past two decades see Patrick Rael *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North*. (Chapel Hill, NC., University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Gerald Horne, *W. E. B. DuBois: A Biography* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 2009); Bruce J. Dierenfield and John White, *A History of African-American Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. DuBois: An American Prophet*. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Peter J. Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, (New York: Routledge, 2015); David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Jason Sokol, *The Heavens Might Crack: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

histories of the black female intellectual begins in the United States.⁵ As Teresa Zackodnik has argued, ‘the black public sphere is often understood as a [not only] masculine [but also] a largely twentieth century phenomenon,’ thus the work of many black women before this time toward civil and legal equality has been historically marginal to narratives of civil rights and black intellectualism.⁶ In addition, many black female intellectuals lack archives of their own and the historian is left to reconstruct their lives and their activism from scattered references in the papers of others. These are usually excavated from more prominent members of the circles in which they lived and labored. This is particularly apparent for women of the earlier nineteenth century when black women’s voices were especially muted by the legal structures of many southern states where it was illegal to teach enslaved African Americans to read and write. In addition, the least powerful in a racially ordered and patriarchal hegemonic structures of nineteenth century America, black women, primarily categorised as laborers, whether free or enslaved, were not regarded as worthy of record through the curation of their own archive.⁷

And yet, despite this lack, in recent years there has been a growing number of published work on the public lives of pre-1896 black women who rightly claim the name of intellectual, including Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper and, of course, Maria W.

⁵ See Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Claire Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2009); Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2008); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defence of Themselves* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2009).

⁶ Teresa Zackodnik, *Press, Platform Pulpit: Black Feminist Politics in the Era of Reform* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), xxxv.

⁷ All of these women focussed upon in this paper lack stand-alone archival holdings. As a consequence all material cited here has been pulled from other sources including edited collections, William Still’s *The Underground Railroad* and newspaper pieces written by or about them from Black and activist newspapers of the era including *The Christian Recorder*, *Frederick Douglass Paper*, and *The Liberator*.

Stewart.⁸ This article contributes and builds upon this scholarship, considering these women as an early foundation of black female intellectualism in the West, reflecting denied and frustrated potential in black women's working lives. It therefore locates the foundations of discourses central to the theoretical underpinnings of the NACWC including, as Brittney C. Cooper argues, an "undisputed dignity...a fundamental recognition of one's inherent humanity" and a "centring [of the] Black female body as a means to cathect Black social thought."⁹

Brittney Cooper has rightfully lamented the methodological results of the historical triage performed on black female intellectual history, arguing that "when we have recovered a Black woman figure, that is, when we have saved her from being buried and lost to the annals of history...then we treat her as though it's time to move on to the next patient."¹⁰ While this article is guilty of also performing historical triage, compiling a *list* of Black female intellectuals in the earlier nineteenth century, it moves beyond just *recovery* to engage with the theoretical ideas that formed the basis of these women's ideas and thoughts, setting the basis for a "genealogy of Black women's knowledge production," from its very foundations.¹¹

To achieve this, we apply work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, in particular his notion of the intellectual.¹² Gramsci's work is productive in helping to understand the

⁸ See Zackodnik, *Press, Platform, Pulpit*: Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women During the Slave Era* (Columbia, MO. and London: University of Missouri Press, 2008); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998); Carla Peterson, "'Doers of the Word': African American Women Speakers & Writers in the North (1830-1880)" (New Brunswick, NJ., and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Frances Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day: A Francis Ellen Watkins Reader* (New York: Feminist Press CUNY, 1989).

⁹ Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10

¹² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q., Hoare & G. N. Smith, eds. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

centrality of black women in the development of a counter-hegemonic movement within a society that had fairly fixed ideas about working roles. Following Anthony Bogues, we agree that “Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and its various modes of structuring thought suggest possible directions of how to study black radical thought and black political intellectuals. Radical Africana is obviously engaged in the creation of counterhegemonic texts. However, the critical question is: At what moment does that rupture begin?”¹³ We take this question on, exploring counter-hegemonic texts (delivered by radical black women of the time in the United States) – providing stories about human and political struggle, that have rarely been considered as central contributors to this ‘rupture’.

Bringing these women’s voices together in an imagined political community and using their written speeches, lectures, sermons, letters and oral testimony as source materials, we argue that it is evident that a counter-hegemonic force had been established by the late 1870s which not only directly challenged the ruling intellectual currents of nineteenth century America but was fundamental in the creation of the NACWC at the turn of the century. Our contribution, therefore, is to challenge the view that women did not have a central role in the intellectual resistance of the time, and that, as it is often is, their role is overlooked and neglected. Using a Gramscian framework to understand the collective nature of the resistance, embedded within the emerging counter culture of the time, we show how black women challenged and fought for change within society in a multiplicity of ways. As Larry J. Griffin and Kenneth A. Bollen have argued, such movements rooted in the earlier 19th century established a foundation for a collective memory for modern black resistance

¹³ Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

movements led by black intellectuals who continue the struggle for fairness and respect for marginalised individuals in their daily working lives.¹⁴

Historicizing the Creation of the Hegemony in post-Revolutionary America

Intellectuals of the pre-Civil War era helped to maintain the political hegemony of America's white ruling class through the proliferation of images, both textual and visual, within the public sphere. In this sense, as Gramsci would argue, these 'cultural artefacts are deeply imbued with the process of intellectual civilising.'¹⁵ They worked to shape the consciousness of ordinary citizens to secure their consent to be governed and to accept the perceived necessity and justness of slavery. As Barbara Novak has argued, landscape artists of the antebellum era such as Thomas Cole and Asher Durand depicted the spectacular beauty of the American landscape in their work, impressing the need to conquer and tame through settlement, farming and property, including slaves, ideally resulting in a "civilisation" process of the land and the communities inhabiting it.¹⁶ Working within discourses of manifest destiny, their work demonstrated scant regard for Native Americans or enslaved black people who were entirely absent from their considerations in the images.

At least four million black people were enslaved in the American South at the start of the Civil War in 1865. These men, women, and children had been denied their very personhood let alone their rights of citizenship given that they had been legally defined as property, human chattel, since the codification of slavery on North American shores through the latter half of the seventeenth century. As slave status was legally inherited through the

¹⁴ Larry J., Griffin and Kenneth. A. Bollen, "What do these Memories Do? Civil Rights Remembrance and Racial Attitudes," *American Sociological Review* Volume 74, No 4 (Aug, 2009), 594-614.

¹⁵ Marcia Landy, "Gramsci, In and On Media," in Joseph Francese. ed., *Perspectives on Gramsci*. (London: Routledge, 2009), 124-135, 120.

¹⁶ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

mother's line of descent, being born to a free black woman provided a modicum of security to her immediate descendants and subsequent generations.¹⁷ Numbers of free blacks increased in the northern states following the American Revolution with its central ideals of liberty and fraternity seemingly contradicted by the existence of racial slavery on the North American continent. As Wilma King argues, "the Revolutionary War ideology was responsible for the largest increase in the free population when states north of Delaware either ended slavery or made provisions for gradual emancipation." Indeed, by the start of the Civil War women constituted over 50% of the free black population, ensuring their own and their family's wellbeing through working outside of their homes in a variety of mostly service-industries roles including sewing, laundering clothes, and midwifery. Many others went into domestic service, including Maria Stewart, thus competing for employment with immigrant Irish women, particularly in the urban centres of antebellum New York and other major cities.¹⁸

Yet, the privilege of "freedom" and subsequent entry into the free labor market on the part of black women did not mean that the northern states were absent discourses of anti-black racism and racial discrimination. In order to impress notions of "otherness" in relation to the black populations of the United States, the popular press of the late 18th and 19th century published derogatory cartoons and illustrations of them, produced as part of a series or published in newspapers such as *Harpers Weekly*. These emphasised particular facial features, such as the nose or the hair, and further racialized them. Such images worked as an affront to ideals of morality, respectability, and propriety – key to white America's

¹⁷ See Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Esp. Chp. 4, "Engendering Racial Difference, 1640-1670," and Chp. 6, "From Foul Crimes to Spurious Issue: Sexual Regulation and the Social Construction of Race."

¹⁸ King, *The Essence of Liberty*, 9, 1, 63.

aspirations of self, regardless of class. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, these representations “shape[d] consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies.”¹⁹ Thus, when the Senate passed the second Fugitive Slave law as part of Henry Clay’s compromise of 1850, making the north complicit in slavery despite its illegality in most of the northern states, such depictions played a part in maintaining support – albeit tentatively - for such an act. Similarly, when Chief Justice Taney delivered the majority opinion in the Supreme Court’s decision in *Scott vs. Sandford* in 1857, declaring all those of African descent in the United States “non-citizens,” notions of otherness were central to this legal ruling.²⁰ While increased sectionalism between the northern and southern states over the issue of state rights and the expansion of slavery was clearly visible by this point, it bears stating that one of the three branches of government in the United States (laying within the structural domain of power) had legally codified black people as non-citizens and without rights.

While hegemonic discourses of race and racial difference were central in shaping beliefs and attitudes regarding black people in the United States during this era, ideas around gender conventions and models of “appropriate behaviour” regulated by sex and class privileges were also central to shaping the hegemonic order of the day. The Revolutionary period’s embodiment of “Republican womanhood,” exemplifying white womanly civic virtue in their role as both wife and mother, shifted to an explicit focus on the domestic setting as the emerging industrial order of the early national period saw an increasingly separate function

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 304.

²⁰ For a discussion of the Dredd Scott case and its implications for the American legal and political system see Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dredd Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1978). For a more recent analysis concerning the ways and means that black Americans sought to claim their legal rights of citizenship in the immediate decades before the Dredd Scott decision see Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) .

between the workplace and home. Gender ideologies were used to demarcate the spheres of home and work life, with women alone acquiring, at least ideologically, the role of angel of the household. Ministering to the physical, moral, and spiritual needs of both husband and children in the carefully crafted spaces of the nineteenth century home, this was now understood as the civic and moral duty of the wife and mother. This was embodied in the ideal of the “true woman”, who had matured from her republican sister in the Revolutionary era to become the moral guardian of the nation through her duties in the domestic spaces of the antebellum home. As Barbara Welter’s ground-breaking essay of 1966 argued, the ideal of true womanhood was, “divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman.”²¹ This ideal of womanhood was held aloft as the epitome of what women should and could be, regardless of whether class or race or both excluded one from aspiring to this.

While this model of womanhood was raised above all others in the ideological apparatus of the new Republic, it also ensured that women had no formal political or legal power. As Linda Kerber points out:

Just as white planter's claim that democracy in the antebellum South necessarily rested on the economic base of black slavery, so male egalitarian society was said to rest on the moral base of deference among a class of people – women - who would devote their efforts to service by raising sons and disciplining husbands to be virtuous citizens of the republic...Women were to contain their political

²¹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* Volume 18, No. 2, (summer 1966), 151-174, 152.

judgments within their homes and families; they were not to bridge the world outside and the world within...She was a citizen but not really a constituent.²²

Yet, when Kerber references “women” in the above quote, she is discussing white women of a certain class and race, which entitled them to the privileges of citizenship but not the rights of speaking publicly or privately, so it seemed at least, on political matters. Yet, white, educated women like Angelina Grimké, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton did enter the political arena as much as their “rights” would allow. While unable to vote, they went one step beyond serving as the nation’s moral conscience, speaking out on public platforms of temperance, anti-slavery, and women’s rights. Joelle Million argues that because public speaking was ‘a political tool reserved for public leaders,’ the women who assumed the right to speak on a public platform to try and ‘influence public thought through public address...challenge[d] a long tradition of masculine exclusivity.’²³ Often they were encouraged by others taking the first steps towards a more vocal opposition against the perceived ills of antebellum America. For example, Lucy Stone’s decision to take a more activist role on the question of women’s rights developed in the mid-1830s following the furore caused by Sarah and Angelina Grimké’s antislavery speeches in the early 1830s delivered to audiences of both women and men on the public platform of antislavery activism. While female reformers might talk in private spaces to other women about the big political issues of the day, Congregational ministers condemned the actions of the Grimke sisters speaking out on a public platform to audiences of mixed race and gender given the

²² Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother and the Woman Citizen: Contradictions and Choices in Revolutionary America," in Linda K. Kerber and Sherron De Hart, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119-128, 126.

²³ Joelle Million, *Women's Voices, Women's Place: Lucy Stone and the Birth of the Women's Right's Movement*. (California: Praeger, 2003), 29.

God-given order of society, whereby they “assumed the place of man as public reformer,” and supposedly violated her feminine nature.²⁴

Rebecca Traister has applauded the work of women like the Grimké sisters and Maria Stewart who “provided a radical new model of women’s participation in civic and political life.”²⁵ Yet, when Stewart stepped into the public arena in the early 1830s to assume the “male role of public reformer,” she was doubly discredited as both a woman and a black person. As a twenty-six year old black woman, widowed in 1829 after just three years of marriage to James W. Stewart, a shipping agent, Maria lived and worked in Boston during the 1830s as part of the city’s small free black community of 1,875 out of total population of over 60,000.²⁶ The challenges of maintaining her participation in the reform movements of the period were therefore different to those of her white reforming sisters such as the Grimké sisters and Lucy Stone. Stewart experienced a racially hostile environment not just in the lecture halls of the City where she spoke to multiracial audiences of both men and women, but also on the streets of Boston and in her life experiences more widely. As Marilyn Richardson points out, as a resident of 1830s Boston, Stewart lived and worked in a city where “Blacks lived in segregated housing in a few crowded areas of the city. They were restricted to special sections on public transportation, in lecture halls, and in places of entertainment.”²⁷ Employment opportunities were limited, if not legally then through racial discourses that cast black people as intellectually inferior and prone to idleness. Consequently, black women were relegated to the lowest sector of the labor market in the

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁵ Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 210.

²⁶ Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart: America’s First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

northern free state, listed in Boston's 1826 "City Directory" as "cooks, laundresses and proprietors of boarding houses."²⁸ Many, like Stewart had been, were domestic servants labouring in the homes of privileged white people belonging to the growing urban middle classes of lawyers, merchants, and managers. Thus, when Stewart talked of anti-black discrimination in employment practices, resulting in black women living a life of "toil and drudgery," she was speaking from the realities of her own experiences.

Stewart's intellectual fires were sparked following the death of her husband James W. Stewart in December 1829. Aside from the deep grief Stewart must have experienced at her husband's sudden and untimely death, it also prompted her to consider the discriminatory legal practices that saw her bereft of her deceased husband's substantial property holdings and the income that would have accrued from this. Angry at this injustice and virtually penniless, Stewart must have recalled the words of fellow Black Bostonian's David Walker's incendiary *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of World* (1828) with no small degree of incredulity given her current predicament: "In this very city when a man of color dies, if he owned any real estate it most generally fell into the hands of some white person. The wife and children of the deceased may weep and lament if they please but will be kept smug enough by its white possessor."²⁹ It is probable that Stewart and David Walker were acquainted with each other, living and working in Boston at the same time as each other, attending events at the African Meeting House, and frequenting the same social and intellectual circles. Yet despite this, it is Walker, as a black man, who is most renowned for his radical activities, lectures, and pamphlets excoriating anti-black racism, the system of slavery, and white racial supremacy. Although Stewart was undoubtedly influenced by

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ David Walker (1829) *David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 12.

Walker and his fiery rhetoric grounded in Biblical injunctions, her own intellectualism around racial rights and the equality of women within 1830s Boston and beyond is deserving of much more merit and significance. Michelle Wallace's argument that black feminist creativity is a problem in Anglo-American culture is particularly resonant here. Wallace explains that because black women lack power in scholarly disciplines of knowledge production they are subsequently "denied the most visible forms of discursive and intellectual subjectivity."³⁰ While white women and black men already occupy a status of the 'Other' in relation to the white male, who, "approximating the Law of the Father, make statements of universality," Wallace contends that black women are therefore positioned relationally as "the Other of the Other in relation to the dominant discourse."³¹ This is clearly evidenced in the public intellectual cultures of early nineteenth century America, where black women were defined as the most powerless (the other of the other) against the dominant hegemonic discourses of the white ruling patriarch.

Theorizing the Creation of the Hegemony in post-Revolutionary America.

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which gives it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function, not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.³²

³⁰ Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 215.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

³² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q., Hoare & G. N. Smith, eds. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 5.

Gramsci considered the intellectual as a particularly revealing category of work within a society, revealing how the current order or hegemony operates and sustains its power chiefly by manufacturing consent. A number of authors have applied his ideas to understand the continuing dominance of a ruling order in the context of slavery including Eugene Genovese and Frank Wilderson.³³ Gramsci suggested there were two main types of intellectuals in society who do such work. Firstly, traditional intellectuals, i.e. those who function as an intellectual for the dominant group but who put themselves forward as “autonomous and independent of the dominant social group.”³⁴ They pre-date the current hegemony – so in the 19th Century United States this could be the leaders within church movements – and help to secure hegemony (and consent to that hegemony) by acting “as if they present an objective world view that is not connected to the dominant class or most powerful social groups of the time.”³⁵ Conversely, Gramsci suggests ‘organic’ intellectuals are those which are formed as the dominant social group rises to power. These can be scientists or academics or lawyers or teachers who “all organize ideas and present ways of understanding the world that is adopted by others.”³⁶

The strongest example of organic intellectuals in 19th century North America were the founders themselves. As Paul Finkelman reminds us, the ruling elite in the immediate post-Revolutionary period and through the pre-Civil War years condoned racial slavery as an economic good. Indeed, at least twelve presidents were slaveholders during the pre-Civil War

³³ Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-Americans' Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Frank Wilderson III, “Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities* Volume 9, No. 2 (2003), 225-240.

³⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 7.

³⁵ Peter Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

era including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson.³⁷ Numerous public institutions in the United States, including universities, national monuments, and even the White House were built by enslaved people. Moreover, as market demand in the north for raw produce grown in the southern slave states increased, the system of racial slavery increasingly extended into the south-west and places like Mississippi and Louisiana became key to trading in both sugar and black bodies. Indeed, as Edward E. Baptist has argued in relation to the development of the capitalist systems of the market on the North American mainland “slavery’s expansion shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics of the new nation.”³⁸

There are two further features of Gramsci’s notion of the intellectual productive for this study. Firstly, while he tends to think about intellectuals in terms of social groups or classes of people we can, according to Gramsci, also apply it we can also apply it to other categories of identity, such as race, ethnicity, or sexuality. As Jones suggests, it was “integral to the development of a politicised black identity, above all in America, that this emergence was theorized and represented by black intellectuals.”³⁹ It was through these intellectuals of colour that counter hegemonic movements began to formulate a sense of who they were and who they might want to be in the future to retain a sense of personhood that might otherwise been lost. Secondly, Gramsci’s notion of the intellectual is anti-elitist at its core – he suggests that “all men [and presumably women are included in this notion of ‘men’] are ‘philosophers’.”⁴⁰ Indeed, he says that “all men [sic] are intellectuals...but not all men [sic]

³⁷ Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

³⁸ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xxi.

³⁹ Steven Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2006), 84.

⁴⁰ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 323.

have in society the function of intellectuals.⁴¹ It is the activity therefore which denotes an intellectual rather than some kind of special status. As Peter Ives explains, “philosophers and intellectuals do not necessarily possess higher intelligence or profundity or even greater ability to reason per se.” They simply have a different function in which they have a “position within society...[reflecting]...the way that you organize and disseminate ideas and the impact they have. One’s ideas are never free floating and totally individual but rather they are rooted in one’s position within society.”⁴²

In this sense, while intellectuals are used to support the hegemony of the current order – the founders producing texts that supported their worldview – Gramsci also helps us to understand how intellectuals from all sorts of backgrounds can potentially contribute to formulate counter-hegemonic movements that might challenge the current orthodoxy. As Marcia Landy notes, intellectuals might contribute towards the reinforcement of the current hegemony or, most importantly - for our concerns – they might utilise them as sites of resistance.⁴³ That is, individuals might utilise sites or spaces of resistance to encourage different expressions of resistance including writing, dance, song or perhaps even music. Indeed, Cornel West traces what we might call African American counter hegemonic intellectuals to the Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical tradition of performance.⁴⁴ Anthony Bogues however, critiques West for focussing on “various applications of western categories to black intellectual production rather than excavating the

⁴¹Ibid, 9.

⁴² Ives, *Language and Hegemony*, 75.

⁴³ Marcia Landy, “Gramsci, In and On Media,” in Joseph Francese. ed., *Perspectives on Gramsci*. (London: Routledge, 2009), 124-135, 116.

⁴⁴ Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 72-3.

tradition itself.”⁴⁵ He criticises West for ignoring the contribution of black intellectuals and calls for a more historical approach which uncovers the true contribution of black literary intellectuals.

The black female intellectual of nineteenth century America we identify here is clearly an example of this kind of resistance, alluded to by Bogues and overlooked by West. The women can be positioned as organic intellectuals emerging as part of a counter hegemonic movement that laid the foundations for 200 years of resistance that continues today. As Stuart Hall suggests “it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know...to know deeply and profoundly.”⁴⁶ It is in the following sections that we show how these women did ‘know, deeply and profoundly’ because they were living and experiencing a struggle within their own working lives every day. We argue that they are elucidating a vision of what Gramsci called a “shared life”, inspiring a possibility that most black women (and most women indeed) could only dream about: equality and dignity in their working and daily lives.⁴⁷

Local and participatory activism in the antebellum and Civil War period then, due to overwhelming constraints, was predominantly an activity carried out by middle-class white women. It was, however, complemented by a handful of black women whose lives were more overtly shaped by a momentum of oppositional politics in the nineteenth century, striving to achieve dignity for black women (and all black people in the United States) in all aspects of their working lives. Acts such as public speaking, writing, performing and art could all be counted among the ways in which black women contributed to shaping the counter-

⁴⁵Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies’, in L.Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Trenchler, eds., *Cultural Studies*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 277–294, 268.

⁴⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 418.

hegemonic discourse that Maria Stewart had already begun in the 1830s through her highly politicized writings. What follows is a consideration of the ways in which some black female intellectuals of the pre-1870s presented a collective oppositional politics – or counter-hegemonic thought - to contest ideologies of the political elite that represented the black race – especially black women - as morally, culturally and intellectually inferior. These women are positioned as early, foundational examples of resistance driven by black female intellectuals in 19th century North America that led to later widespread collective resistance and the fight for inclusive citizenship. Three major examples of resistance are employed including: regaining control of the black female body, reclaiming heritage and reconstructing citizenship, and education and role models for change. These tactics of resistance within the counter hegemonic struggle sought to wrestle back power and gain dignity and respect for black people, particularly black women, in their own working lives.

“She is not Colored, She is Painted”: Regaining Control of the Black Female Body

As Janell Hobson has recently argued, “the visual representation of Black womanhood holds cultural power when rendered as a serious aesthetic subject for beauty, desirability, and bodily autonomy.”⁴⁸ While Hobson talks of the literal representation of black female bodies in art, she also asks us to consider the histories of the ways in which black women have contested hegemonic representations of themselves as individuals and as a collective. Many of the women discussed in this paper presented a performance of black womanhood in 1850s and 1860s America that was either counter to that of the accepted stereotypes or else succeeded in subtly questioning racialized gendered representations of the era. Through the dissonant performances of the black female body, these women began to develop a collective

⁴⁸ Janell Hobson, “Portraits of Black Womanhood,” *Black Perspectives*, 14 Dec 2017, <http://www.aaihs.org/portraits-of-black-womanhood/> (14 Dec 2017)

oppositional argument to the dominance of elite white ruling men, aiming to challenge the ignominies of the ideologically shaped hegemonies of nineteenth century American culture. We might here consider Brittney C. Cooper's argument that black women intellectuals of the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century employed "embodied discourse...a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies...by placing them in the texts they write and speak."⁴⁹ While Cooper focuses her argument on women post 1896, it is significant that black female intellectuals of the earlier period were employing such strategies much earlier than has hereto been recognised, "seeing the Black female body as a form of possibility."⁵⁰ Thus we can see how such discourses took embryonic form across the United States among black female intellectuals as a means to champion the black woman's body and mind.

Frances E. W. Harper was an abolitionist, anti-black racism campaigner and women's right's activist from the early 1850s. Part of the black intellectual movement of the nineteenth century, Harper was perhaps the most prolific black female writer of the period. In addition to her pieces written for black newspapers, poems, short stories, and novels, including *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869) and *Iola Leroy* (1892), Harper also entered the lecture circuit, touring the northern and western states of the U.S before the abolition of slavery in 1865, and then embarking on nationwide tours during Reconstruction and beyond. Speaking and writing on the platforms of abolition, women's rights, and black equality, Harper engaged in what Barbara Harlow defines as a "literature of resistance [which] sees itself...as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production."⁵¹ In a Gramscian sense, Harper was struggling as part of a counter

⁴⁹ Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Barbara Harlow, "Narratives of Resistance," *New Formations* Volume 1, (spring 1987), 131-35, 134.

hegemony to challenge and redefine what had become a 'common sense' understanding of how African American women were expected to live their lives during this period. Whilst subjugation and resignation had become naturalised and accepted by many, 'common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself'.⁵² Intellectuals such as Francis Harper were therefore central to challenging the dominant hegemony of the period and creating new opportunities for resistance against what was expected of black women of the time.

Harper's lectures during the 1850s and 1860s, performed in front of interracial audiences, were received with a mixed response. Several among her white audiences demonstrated a tone of incredulity that the woman on the platform was black ('she must be painted'); similarly, they could not quite believe such intelligence and articulacy could be possessed by a woman. Indeed, she wrote to a friend during her lecture tour in the mid-antebellum era with a hint of amusement at the audiences reactions to her regarding her sex: "you would laugh if you were to hear some of the remarks which my lectures call forth: 'She is a man,' again."⁵³ Yet, other aspects of her lectures received high praise, especially for their articulacy and eloquence. Speaking before an audience in Randolph County, Indiana, in June 1859 for example, news of Harper's impending talk had prompted much interest: "The courthouse was filled to overflowing, and the largest house that could be obtained in Farmland was too small to hold the large number that flocked to hear her." For, as the correspondent for the *Randolph County Journal* continued, "She is one of the best female speakers we ever listened to and her lectures are well received."⁵⁴ A newspaper report drawn

⁵² Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, "Common Sense Neoliberalism," *Soundings* Volume 55, (2013), 9-25, 20.

⁵³ Letter from Frances E. W. Harper, Undated, William Still (1872) *The Underground Railroad*, sourced at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15263/15263-h/15263-h.htm> (18 Dec 2017).

⁵⁴ *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 9 July 1859, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1859-07-09/ed-1/seq-1/> (25 Sept 2017).

from the war years in mid-1864, reiterated this praise for Harper, remarking that her ‘Lecture on the Mission of the War,’ “was so replete with logical reasoning and rhetorical diction, that those who heard her said it was the most masterly production they have ever listened to on the subject.” Indeed, when she repeated the same lecture a few nights later, the local newspaper, remarked that “seldom have we heard a more cogent, forcible, and eloquent lecture, especially by a woman.”⁵⁵

Harper thus confounded expectations of black womanhood in the early nineteenth century by proving herself eloquent, articulate, and intelligent. Positioning herself as an exception to the model modesty and reservedness that the ruling hegemony had employed, Harper used this “exception” to demonstrate her “exceptional” capacity to have herself heard and listened to attentively and with noted praise by white audiences. White abolitionist and women’s rights campaigner Grace Greenwood had attended a lecture that Harper gave in Philadelphia as part of a series, undoubtedly some time before the abolition of slavery. Greenwood’s account is worth quoting at length given the apparent power, not only in Harper’s words, but also her ‘performance’ on the podium:

She has a noble head, this bronze muse; a strong face, with a shadowed glow upon it, indicative of thoughtful fervor, and of a nature most femininely sensitive, but not in the least morbid. Her form is delicate, her hands daintily small. She stands quietly beside her desk, and speaks without notes, with gestures few and fitting. Her manner is marked by dignity and composure. She is never assuming, never theatrical. In the first part of her lecture she was most impressive in her pleading for the race with whom her lot is cast. There was something touching in her attitude as their representative. The woe of two

⁵⁵ *Christian Recorder*, 21 May 1864, accessed via *Accessible Archives* <https://www.accessible.com/> (18 Dec 2017).

hundred years sighed through her tones. Every glance of her sad eyes was a mournful remonstrance against injustice and wrong.⁵⁶

Greenwood's report of Harper's bodily performance conforms to ideals of nineteenth century feminine sentimentalisation, with her dignified 'pleading' and delicate frame and gait.⁵⁷ It is accounts such as Greenwood's that have led Carla Peterson to consider Harper as occupying a 'quiet' body in the white American imaginary in relation to the black woman in the nineteenth century.⁵⁸

Her professed 'quiet-ness' in terms of bodily performance would have been read as non-threatening by white America and thus non-powerful and not capable of meaningful resistance. Yet the very composed and reserved 'quietness' of her composure contrasted with the powerful 'loudness' of her voice, proving herself able, as she was, to throw it out over a crowd of 600, despite a full lecture tour that saw Harper lecture nightly over the one-week course of her first lecture tour in 1854. As she noted, "Never, perhaps, was a speaker, old or young, favored with a more attentive audience.... My voice is not wanting in strength, as I am aware of, to reach pretty well over the house."⁵⁹ From her lecturing debut to biracial audiences in New England, she went on to counter first impressions of her 'quiet body' through the Civil War and Reconstruction via her lectures and more private meetings with

⁵⁶ Still, *Underground Railroad*.

⁵⁷ For further reading see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nora Doyle, *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America*. (Chapel Hill, NC., and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁵⁸ Carla Peterson, "'Doers of the Word': African American Women Speakers & Writers in the North (1830-1880" (New Brunswick, NJ., and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 122.

⁵⁹ Still, *Underground Railroad*.

formerly enslaved people throughout the south, especially freed women who she encouraged to have self-respect and dignity in their working lives in the post-emancipation age:

Part of my lectures are given privately to women...I am going to talk with them about their daughters, and about things connected with the welfare of the race. Now is the time for our women to begin to try to lift up their heads and plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone.⁶⁰

While compassionate towards others of her race, Harper was not averse to pointing out to white Americans their crimes against her people and a reminder of their common humanity. In her speech delivered at the Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention in New York in May 1866, "We are all Bound up Together", to an audience of mainly white women, Harper directly criticized the histories of brutality and pain the black race had suffered at the hands of white America and its impact on the white as well as black populations of the United States:

We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul. You tried that in the case of the Negro. You pressed him [sic] down for two centuries; and in so doing you crippled the moral strength and paralyzed the spiritual energies of the white men [sic] of the country....Society cannot afford to neglect the enlightenment of any class of its members.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Extract from a letter dated "Greenville, Georgia, March 29th" cited in Ibid.

⁶¹ Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "We are all Bound up Together" (1866), sourced at Blackpast.Org <http://www.blackpast.org/1866-frances-ellen-watkins-harper-we-are-all-bound-together-0> (19 Dec 2017).

The content and performance of Harper's speeches belied her "quiet" black body. Countering white male hegemonic arguments about black people, women in general, and black women in particular, Harper challenged models of feminine passivity and intellectual inferiority through her wonderfully direct and articulate addresses to biracial audiences across the nation.

‘[F]lashing up and Startling the Public’: The Black Female Body and Its Performative Potential.

Another black female intellectual of the era, Sojourner Truth, was never cast in the 'quiet body' role as Harper was. Yet, Truth used her body in various ways and through various means, to represent images of black women as possessing their own representation of self, agency, and dignity in their working lives. Unlike Harper, who was born a free woman in Baltimore, Maryland, Truth was born into slavery in New York State in the early 1800s. Escaping from slavery in 1826 with her young daughter, Sophia, a year before the State had officially abolished the institution, Truth was a lifelong illiterate and used her remarkable abilities of extemporisation to address biracial conventions in the 1850s through the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, famed author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) conducted an interview with Truth in an 1863 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Stowe participated in racialized discourses of benevolent racism, much like Grace Greenwood's account of Harper although in very different ways. As Truth entered the room, Stowe recounted that "a tall, spare form arose to meet me. *She was evidently a full-blooded African*, and though now aged and worn with many hardships, *still gave the impression of a physical development which in early youth must have been as fine a specimen of the torrid zone.*"⁶² Well-grounded in the

⁶² Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Libyan Sybil" *Atlantic Monthly* 11 (April 1863), 473-481, sourced at *University of Virginia, Electronic Text Center*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20110212025056/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer->

racialist tones of white abolition, Stowe continued with a description of Truth containing racial signifiers that confirmed to her mostly white readers that Truth was the ‘exoticized other’:

I do not recollect ever to have been conversant with anyone who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence... In the modern Spiritualistic phraseology, she would be described as having a strong sphere. Her tall form, as she rose up before me, is still vivid to my mind... On her head, she wore a bright Madras handkerchief, arranged as a turban, after the manner of her race. She seemed perfectly self-possessed and at her ease, -- in fact, there was almost an unconscious superiority, not unmixed with a solemn twinkle of humor, in the odd, composed manner in which she looked down on me....⁶³

Stowe’s description evokes images of voodooism and conjuration – religious beliefs and magical practices rooted in Africa. Truth’s *self-possession...silent and subtle power...tall form* were all used by Stowe to define Truth as almost otherworldly, or at the very least, not suited to a model of womanhood that nineteenth century white America would understand. However, it was through depictions such as these that Truth articulated a presence of self on the lecture circuit from the 1850s through to her death in November 1883. What white contemporaries of Truth, such as Stowe, neglected to consider were the ways in which black female intellectuals of the era and since have created an oppositional politics countering

[new2?id=StoSojo.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1](#) (19 Dec 2017). Authors’ emphasis.

⁶³ Ibid.

racialized hegemonic discourses through laying claims to power, particularly over self-representation and bodily performance.⁶⁴

Strategies of shaping counter-hegemonic narratives for black female intellectuals, especially on the lecture circuit, differed depending on their specific performance styles. Like Harper, uncertainty over Truth's gender on the part of her white audiences were familiar. Yet, while Harper's audience demonstrated uncertainty about her sex, her already noted performance of 'quiet articulacy' on the lecture podium coupled with her slight frame allowed her to enact a noted model of womanhood which helped to dispel such questions. Not so for Sojourner Truth. As Harriet Beecher Stowe's account makes clear, Truth's self-assurance in front of a white audience combined with her unmistakable presence occasioned by her stature gave rise to charges that she must be a man, masquerading as a woman. While Harper relied on her so-called quiet performance however, Truth, literally used her body as evidence of not only her gender identity but also as proof of the ways in which that female body had been abused and exploited by white America.

Holding a series of anti-slavery meetings in Indiana in September 1858, Truth's audience at one of these gatherings was made up of several pro-slavery Democrats. As the meeting came to a close and people began to leave one of the audience members, a Dr. T. W. Strain, requested that "the large congregation 'hold on' and stated that a doubt existed in the minds of many persons present respecting the sex of the speaker, and that it was his impression that a majority of them believed the speaker to be a man." This conclusion had been reached on account of her voice, which, many had surmised was too deep to be that of a woman. Strain insisted that in order to prove her sex, that Truth "submit her breast for the inspection of some of the ladies present, that the doubt might be removed by their

⁶⁴ For further discussion of this see Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), Chp. 4, " 'The Deeds Done in My Body': Performance, Black (ened) Women, and Adah Isaacs Menken in the Racial Imaginary," 132-206.

testimony.”⁶⁵ Truth’s agency at this moment was pivotal as she refused the ‘delicacy’ of discreetly providing proof of her female-ness to a small number of women. Instead, she demanded that she proved her credibility as a black woman to the whole congregation, for as she reminded them, “it was not her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame.”⁶⁶

Truth’s act of disrobing in front of an all-white audience was not only courageous and dignified but also presented a form of truth-telling in relation to the bodily exploitation that African-American women endured, free or enslaved. Her white audience attempted to shame her black body through an act completely at odds with the ideals of (white) feminine decorum and respectability. Yet, it was her audiences’ shame that Truth capitalized on, not only through the demand that a woman bare her breasts but also reminding them of the importance of the black female breast in the (re)productive labor of the nation:

Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to man's estate; that, although they had sucked her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck!⁶⁷

Through, “[f]lashing up and startling the public” Truth’s actions here can be read in what Lauren Berlant terms as a “diva act of citizenship.”⁶⁸ Berlant argues that such acts suspend

⁶⁵ *The Liberator*, 15 Oct 1858, sourced at *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (5 Jan 2018).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 223.

the dominant narrative, allowing for subaltern political activism through a reinterpretation of the accepted version of history. In the process, as Berlant also points out:

she re-narrates the dominant history as one that abjected people have once lived sotto voce, but no more; and she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they consent.⁶⁹

Through the act of baring her breast to this white audience Truth deftly reinforced the brutal and violent histories of enslavement on the North American continent. She was therefore enacting a diva act of citizenship, encapsulating the oppositional politics she had lived throughout her activist life.

Both Truth and Harper employed their bodies in both concrete and more abstract ways, as a challenge to their white audience through words - whether written or spoken - to reject the ideological hegemonies of power in early nineteenth century America. Through this means they aimed to help dismantle the powers of a male white elitist state which sanctioned anti-black racism and had denied the full privileges of citizenship – rights of education, dignity, and ambition - in the United States to all black people since its formation. Yet, while several black female intellectuals like Truth and Harper were fighting for recognition of citizenship rights *within* the United States, others were also keen to invoke a collective history of a shared African past and look to a future beyond the racial brutalities black people were facing in the United States.

⁶⁹ Ibid

‘Oh Ye Daughters of Africa, Awake!’ Reclaiming Heritage and Reconstructing Citizenship

The belief that African people – including those in the diaspora – shared the common history and destiny of pan-Africanism has been a central component of black intellectual thought in the United States for over two hundred years.⁷⁰ Such ideas in the 19th century have historically been closely associated with black male thinkers such as Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois. However, black female intellectuals of the early nineteenth century also employed such arguments in order to counter hegemonic discourses concerning the absence of black histories and nationhood among black people in the United States. Indeed, in Gramscian terms and as Paul Polgar notes, this was a central component of the development of a new ‘historic bloc’ in which a counter hegemony inclusive of a newly constructed kind of *inclusive* and multi-racial American citizenship could spring forth and be built.⁷¹

Maria W. Stewart employed the histories of the continent of Africa in her speeches as a means to invoke a sense of pride in her audience and instil in them a sense of collective history that they might emulate and carry forward in their working lives. In her “Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,” in Boston, on 27 February 1833, Stewart reminded her audience of the intellectual significance of the African continent in the ancient world:

⁷⁰ See Olanwuche P. Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776-1991* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1994); Sidney Lemelle and Robin Kelley, *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (New York: Verso Press, 1994); Ronald W. Walters, *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements* (Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press 1993).

⁷¹ Paul J. Polgar, "To Raise Them to an Equal Participation": Early National Abolitionism, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship. *Journal of the Early Republic* Volume 31, No 2 (summer 2011), 229-258.

History informs us that we sprang from one of the most learned nations of the whole earth; from the seat, if not the parent of science. Yes, poor despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school for learning, and the most illustrious men in Greece flocked thither for instruction.⁷²

Drawing on both the Old and New Testament, Stewart's speeches called on those of African descent to account for their lack of resistance to oppression, the 'highest form of obedience to God,' in Stewart's view.⁷³ Reproving her audience for the current "thick mist of moral gloom [hanging] over millions of our race," Stewart demanded that they begin speaking up for themselves as political activists to demand the rights and privileges of citizenship, such as access to dignity and fair treatment at work: "when will your voices be heard in our legislative halls...contending for equal rights and liberty."⁷⁴ Counter-hegemonic discourses are evident in Stewart's re-remembering of the triumphs of African knowledge and progress to counter the exclusions of these significant contributions to global histories. Yet, they are also perhaps more clearly marked in her descriptions of the unruly and harmful forces wielded by state power in early nineteenth century America and the eventual triumph over such iniquity.

Employing biblical references again to ground her analysis in moral rectitude, Stewart compared America to the biblical city of Babylon, synonymous with sin, immorality, and shameful pride "for she has boasted in her heart 'I sit a queen and am no widow, and shall see

⁷² Maria W. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston, September 21 1832," in Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Women Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 56-64, 58.

⁷³ Marilyn Richardson, "Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer," in Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, eds., *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking their Minds*. Lebanon, NH., University of Vermont Press, 2007, 13-37, 18.

⁷⁴ Maria W. Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall," in Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart*, 59.

no sorrow.’ (Revelations, 18:7)!”⁷⁵ Embodying America, or the patriarchal federated States, as the whore of Babylon, Stewart decried ‘her’ for being:

the seller of slaves and the souls of men...she has put [the African] completely beneath her feet and she means to keep them there; her right hand supports the reign of government and her left hand the wheel of power, and she is determined not to let go her grasp.⁷⁶

To counter the abominations of Babylonia’s (read: white America’s) past, Stewart held up a prophetic promise to her audiences that “powerful sons and daughters of Africa shall shortly arise, who will put down vice and immorality among us, and declare by him that sitteth upon the throne that they will have their rights.” Stewart heralded violent retaliation, echoing fellow black abolitionist, David Walker, that if white America refused such liberties to the black race, citing God’s wrath at the “oppression of injured Africa,” if this request be denied.⁷⁷

While black female intellectuals like Maria Stewart engaged in nascent discourses of pan-Africanism, others advocated a more transnational approach, urging African Americans to emigrate in order to finally realize the capacity for dignified labor in their working and familial lives. Mary Ann Shadd Cary was probably the earliest black female proponent of this in the 1850s, promoting a scheme of emigration to Canada and once there the formation of a racially integrated society. As Carol B. Conaway argues, there were a number of nationalist perspectives in black intellectual thought in the nineteenth century ranging from Frederick

⁷⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Douglass' nativist integration to Martin Delany's nationalist separatist philosophy. Shadd Cary's stance was somewhere in between these two very different models of the formation of a collective black nationhood.⁷⁸ The Cary family had migrated to Canada in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, causing alarm among members of free black communities across the United States lest they should be mistaken for a fugitive and sold into slavery. Once there, Shadd Cary co-founded the weekly newspaper, *The Provincial Freeman*, along with Rev. Samuel Ringgold Ward, its first issue published on 24 March 1853. As Conaway has noted, as the first black female editor of a newspaper, Shadd Cary, "entered the almost exclusive male profession of antebellum journalism and exhibited boldness that was uncharacteristic of most women at the time."⁷⁹

Such boldness was typical of Shadd Cary throughout her activist career and she was relentless, as Peterson points out, in her insistence "on her right to participate in the masculine public spheres of debate."⁸⁰ Shadd Cary's published her 'Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West, in Its Moral, Social and Political Aspect: with Suggestions respecting Mexico, West Indies and Vancouver's Island for the Information of Colored Emigrants' in 1852. Its central premise was that "the passage of the odious fugitive slave law has made residence in the United States ...dangerous in the extreme," making settlement in British Canada, (current day Ontario) the northern neighbor of the United States, a realistic

⁷⁸ Carol B. Conaway, "Mary Ann Shadd Cary: A Visionary of the Black Press," in Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway. eds., *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking their Minds* (Lebanon, NH., University of Vermont Press, 2007), 216-245, 216.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸⁰ Peterson, Carla Peterson, "'Doers of the Word': African American Women Speakers & Writers in the North (1830-1880)" (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 102.

alternative.⁸¹ Furthermore, Shadd Cary argued that there was little potential for a revision of political and cultural thinking in the U.S when:

[O]n the one hand, a pro-slavery administration, with its entire controllable force, is bearing upon them with fatal effect; on the other, the Colonization Society, in the garb of *Christianity* and *Philanthropy*, is seconding the efforts of the first named power, by bringing into the lists a vast moral and social influence, thus making more effective the agencies employed.⁸²

Her counter-hegemonic stance is evident here in her critique of the current structures of ruling power in the United State, with the political governance of the country evidently supported through cultural and social means.

Shadd Cary's *Plea* compared the *dangers* of remaining in the United States with the opportunities presented to black emigrants to British Canada including its climate, opportunities for labor, and interracial education:

[the climate is] the most desirable known in such a high latitude, for emigrants generally and colored people particularly...the soil is second to none for agricultural purposes...if a colored man understands his business, he receives the public patronage the same as a white man ... students of all complexions associate together, in the better class schools and colleges.⁸³

⁸¹ Mary Ann Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West, in Its Moral, Social and Political Aspect: with Suggestions respecting Mexico, West Indies and Vancouver's Island for the Information of Colored Emigrants*, (Detroit, 1852) sourced at *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/cihm_47542 (12 Jan 2018).

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8, 11, 16, 20.

Shadd Cary took every opportunity to encourage this model of emigration, believing it the only way to see her race survive and thrive. She evidenced her ‘boldness’ even when her audience were hostile to her intentions of speaking in public as a black woman. Despite consternation at her presence there, her contribution to the National Convention of Colored people in Philadelphia in the fall of 1855 was met with praise by the correspondent writing for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. Reflecting on her speech, which was initially given 10 minutes but then extended because of the interest it provoked, the correspondent admitted that:

She is a superior woman; and it is useless to deny it; and, however much we may differ with her on the subject of emigration. She obtained the floor and proceeded and succeeded in making one of the most convincing and telling speeches in favour of Canadian emigration that I have ever heard.⁸⁴

Shadd Cary used her editorship of *The Provincial Freeman* from March 1853 through August 1857, to represent the successes of the 40,000 black emigrants, fugitives and freedmen, already settled in Canada. Her newspaper sought to encourage others to make the same choice through relating success stories of black emigrants being transformed into model citizens given the right opportunities under a supposedly non-racist system of governance.

“We are [all] Born with Faculties and Power, Capable of Almost Anything”: Education and Role Models for Racial Uplift

⁸⁴ “From Our Brooklyn Correspondent,” *Frederick Douglass Paper*, 9 November 1855, sourced at *Accessible Archives*, <https://www.accessible.com/> (12 Jan 2018).

Shadd Cary argued that access to equal education was integral to the development of the model black citizen in Canada West in terms of racial uplift and black women's fight to achieve dignity in their labor. Indeed, one correspondent to the *Provincial Freeman* in 1854 reminded black émigrés that:

We must educate ourselves and educate our children. Let the young men (and the young women too) form Literary and Debating Societies, and let those who have no talent for public speaking, let them learn and practice writing.⁸⁵

Similarly to other black female intellectuals of the era, Shadd Cary had spent much of her working life educating others as a teacher, in the antebellum United States & Canada and through Reconstruction. She encouraged freedpeople to educate themselves as a mean of self-liberation. At the age of 60, she graduated from the Howard University Law School, as only the second black women in the United States to earn her law degree.⁸⁶

Another black female intellectual who championed the notion of liberation through education was the free colored teacher Julia C. Collins. Living and working as a teacher in a school in Williamsport, Pennsylvania during the early 1860s, Collins penned several pieces for the black newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, advancing the importance of education for black people, especially so in the wake of pending Union victory in the Civil War and the promise of rights of citizenship including formal schooling. Collins took care to remind her readers in her April 1864 essay, 'Mental Improvement' that "We are [all] born with faculties

⁸⁵ *Provincial Freeman*, 22 April 1854, sourced at *Accessible Archives* <https://www.accessible.com/> (19 Jan 2018).

⁸⁶ Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We are your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 164.

and power, capable of almost anything.”⁸⁷ Comparing white and black children at birth she countered the idea that the white race were innately superior in terms of intellect, arguing that, they were both “[d]estitute alike of knowledge, the children of the white race have, in this respect, no advantage over the black; both have everything to learn.”⁸⁸ Her “Intelligent Women” piece, published in June 1864, encouraged black women in particular, as part of their responsibility to the future of the race to “improve every opportunity that is offered for our moral and intellectual culture...not merely as matter of taste...it is incumbent upon us, as a duty.”⁸⁹

Edmonia G. Highgate, the daughter of formerly enslaved parents, was a school teacher who also wrote for the *Recorder* during the closing years of the war and into the early years of Reconstruction. Evidencing activism at the local level in addition to her intellectualist perspective, Highgate wrote to the American Missionary Association in January 1864, making an application to travel to the south to teach, pointing out that as a teacher “she could labor advantageously in the field for my newly freed brethren.”⁹⁰ Her experiences teaching in the south from 1864 through 1870 were particularly challenging, not least because of the rudimentary environments she taught in, the basic need for teaching equipment, and the conditions of poverty and hardship that the formerly enslaved remained in despite their newly won freedoms.⁹¹ Yet Highgate’s letters throughout her years of teaching document the

⁸⁷ Julia C. Collins, ‘Mental Improvement’ *Christian Recorder*, 16 April 1864 accessed via *Accessible Archive* (8th April 2018).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Julia C. Collins, “Intelligent Women,” *Christian Recorder*, 4 June 1864 accessed via *Accessible Archive* (16 April 2018).

⁹⁰ Edmonia G. Highgate to Rev George Whipple, 18 Jan 1864, in Sterling, ed., *We are Your Sisters*, 294.

⁹¹ Edmonia G. Highgate to anonymous, 31 October 1868, in *Ibid.*, 300.

realities of her appointment in the Reconstruction south, which was often dangerous and violent:

Twice I have been shot at in my room. My night scholars have been shot but none killed. The rebels here threatened to burn down the school and house in which I board before the first month was passed yet they have not materially harmed us.⁹²

Despite the threats of danger to her life and that of her students, Highgate persisted in the role of educating the formerly enslaved, acknowledging the vital role that teachers played in allowing black people to realize their ambitions and achieve success. In her unique and articulate style, she urged black men and women in a *Reorder* piece in July 1866 to:

Create Something, Aspire to leave something immortal behind you. That's the life's test at last. The monument you leave - I don't mean granite or marble – but something that will stand the corruption of the ages. A principle well developed will in science or ethics - A cause will - An immortal healthy soul.⁹³

Highgate (1866) encouraged black men and women to provide role models for future generations to model and aspire to, claiming that active citizenry now would lead to uplift for the future race: “The race needs living, working demonstrations - the world does. Young man, [and woman] the master in world-reconstruction has called; is calling, but will not enact, for you and your sister.”⁹⁴ Such strong words from black female intellectuals such as

⁹² Edmonia G. Highgate to Rev M. E. Strieby, 17 Dec 1866, in *Ibid.*, 299.

⁹³ Edmonia G. Highgate, “Neglected Opportunities”, *Christian Recorder*, 14 July 1866, accessed via *Accessible Archive* (27 April 2018).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Highgate and other women featured in this paper present a call to black people in the early nineteenth century through Reconstruction. This was a demand for self-realization, of reclaiming dignity and respect in their chosen professions in life – whether that be from the humble washer woman or the unskilled laborer to the lawyer or teacher.

Conclusion

As Mia Bay, Farah Griffin, Martha S. Jones and Barbara D. Savage have noted, ‘black women artists, activists, and intellectuals have [long] provided critical insight into issues of national and global importance. Shaped by lives lived at the crossroad of race, gender, and justice, their ideas have been distinctive but often ignored.’⁹⁵ With this in mind and reflecting on the exclusion of many black women, historically, from the concept of an intellectual, this article has sought to reconfigure the significance of black women to the intellectual discourses of nineteenth century America through their words, manners and actions. By positioning them and their ideas as a vital part of the counter-hegemonic order, these women were fundamental in shaping the black intellectual culture of the period. In re-telling the neglected stories of these women we have broadened the foundations of a collective memory for modern black resistance movements led by black intellectuals who continue the struggle for fairness and respect for marginalised individuals in their daily working lives.

To return to Maria Stewart and the opening words of this article, ‘Why sit ye here and die?’ early black female intellectuals challenged this refrain in their working lives, urging others to find means through the work they did to counter this prevailing hegemony that cast black people as mentally and morally unsuitable to claim a place within America’s citizenry.

⁹⁵ Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones and Barbara D. Savage. eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1. See Pt II ‘Race and Gender in the Postemancipation Era,’ 75-194, for a focus on nineteenth-century black female intellectuals.

Patricia Hill Collins has noted that Maria Stewart established a complex and multifarious intellectual tradition for Black women that was always going to run against the grain of prevailing ideologies of white racial superiority.⁹⁶ As we have argued through this paper, and concurring with Collins, Maria W. Stewart and other black female intellectuals of the early nineteenth century did indeed institute a rich tradition of black intellectualism among women of color. The themes that they invoked of dignity in labor, educational ambitions, and resistance to racial stereotypes of feckless idleness, were carried forward by black female intellectuals in the collective memory of subsequent years to create a solid counter-hegemonic force rallying against anti-black racism and championing cries for social justice and civil rights.

⁹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 5.