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Far from the Truth

Teaching the Politics of Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?"

Kay Siebler

If there is a canon of American women's rhetoric, Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman?" is a central text in that collection. Truth's "Ain't/Aren't I a Woman?" speech is included regularly in anthologies of women's literature, anthologies of women's rhetoric, and textbooks on history and women's studies throughout all levels of the curriculum. The version of Truth's speech that is typically anthologized, transcribed by Frances Gage twelve years after Truth delivered it, communicates an intentionally feminist message.

Gage's popular and well-read version of Truth's speech contains detailed narrative asides regarding Truth's physical presence and her audience's response to her words. The content of the Gage text focuses on issues of women's rights and creates a secondary connection to a slave's emancipation. Another version of the speech was published three weeks after the Women's Rights Convention of 1851 by Marcus Robinson in the *Anti-slavery Bugle*, an abolitionist publication edited by Robinson. The Robinson version, devoid of editorial asides and written without dialect, reads less dynamically. It makes a general call for equality and freedom with more biblical references and less humor. The Robinson and Gage versions of this 1851 speech are so different that many times my students are skeptical that they are reading the same speech.

When teaching Truth's speech, we need to articulate for our students that all its versions are only that: versions. Truth, unable to read or write, could not offer her own rhetoric in the written form. Her words (as we read them today) are never *her* words, but a representation of her words by who- ever transcribed them. These secondary rhetors were mindful of audience and purpose, *their* audience and purpose, which may have been a different audience and purpose from what Truth intended. We also need to help

our students analyze why, for contemporary audiences, the Gage version is the one reprinted and performed while the Robinson version is ignored. As I teach these texts, I ask my students, “Why is the Gage version the one most widely analyzed, anthologized and taught?” But before I can ask this question of students, even before we read the two texts, I have to offer them substantial background and context on Truth, the transcribers, and the publications in which the speech was originally published. We also watch several YouTube clips of performances of the speech (some by very famous people). By reading, viewing, and analyzing all these versions of the text we can get to interesting discussions on issues of politics, power, and systems of oppression. Using the Robinson and Gage versions to teach the politics of language allows students to analyze language from multiple perspectives, connecting the issues of gender and race in the text to contemporary social issues and the politics of language.

Gage, as a white feminist, might have had (or might still have) more cultural power than the authors of other versions, especially since the work of recovery associated with Truth’s word began with feminist scholars. Today, Gage’s version persists as Truth’s “truth” while the version that was first published in the *Anti-slavery Bugle* (“On Women’s Rights”) is largely forgotten or is mentioned and dismissed by many scholars and teachers. As a teacher I want my students to confront the politics of *why* this is the case. I want them to critically think through the complexities of these texts; through this process, they can make their own arguments about racism, sexism, dialect, translation/transcription, and audience.

In May 1851, Sojourner Truth was invited to the podium at one of the first women’s rights conventions to address a largely female, white, privileged- class crowd of suffragists in Akron, Ohio. This national conference was organized around the issue of voting rights for women. These facts cannot be disputed. From here, Truth’s rhetorical moment at the event fosters various narratives. Some contend that Truth took her place on the stage despite resistance by the white crowd (she was a freed slave and not a welcome voice to the racists in the crowd). In the first version of the speech published in 1863, Gage and others reported that the white feminists didn’t want Truth to speak for fear of confusing the causes of abolition and suffrage (Romans 1993; Logan 1995: 18). Gage included references to racist arguments against Truth. In Gage’s version of the

speech, she positions herself as fighting for Truth's right to speak against an overwhelming cry of protest from the convention attendees and planners (Gage 1863; Stanton, Anthony, Gage, and Harper 1881). Other historical scholars tell a different story. Nell Irvin Painter (1996: 123), a scholar of nineteenth-century African American women's rhetoric, wrote that Truth was welcomed at the conference and treated with respect and was given a place to speak in the same way the white feminists were, the convention attendees making connections between antislavery and feminism. Painter writes that Truth was a well-regarded celebrity among the people gathered at the convention (129). In giving context to Truth's texts for my students, I disclose these scholarly contradictions before we read the speeches. Three weeks after the convention, the *Anti-slavery Bugle* published Truth's remarks. Robinson was present at the convention and recorded his version of Truth's words in the June issue of his paper. Truth worked with Robinson on his transcription of the speech (Butler 2006). According to Painter's scholarship, Robinson and Truth were good friends who worked together on issues of women's rights as well as slave rights (1996: 120). Because of this friendship, one could argue that Robinson's *Bugle* version probably more closely reflected what Truth said or intended to say. In the Robinson version (Robinson 1851), the audience appears to be primarily male, and Truth argues that men will be the benefactors when women gain political rights: "Give it [women's rights] to her and you will feel better"; "If woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again"; "Man, where is your part?" If we are to assume that Truth's audience at the convention was largely white women, Truth's focus on arguing that men will benefit from these political movements seems an odd strategy. Yet if we read Robinson's version as an appeal to *his* audience of abolitionists — perhaps the majority of whom are male — these strategies fit that audience and purpose. As to Truth's own purpose, we can only speculate. Here the Women's Rights Convention audience was largely white, privileged-class feminists, but her purpose may have been to make the connection between women's rights and African American rights or to speak to issues of abolition to a group of feminist activists, or to speak of her own humanity to what she may have perceived to be people who didn't see her as a "woman" in the same manner that they perceived themselves to be "woman."

Gage first recorded her account of Truth's speech in the 23 April 1863 issue of the *New York Independent*, twelve years after the speech was given. The Gage version of the speech was also reproduced in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1878) and in the book Gage coedited with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881). The dialect represented in Gage's 1863 version is less severe than in the 1878 and 1881 versions. The issue of how writers represented Truth's dialect was a subject that Truth herself addressed. In an 1851 issue of the *Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph*, an article states that Truth prided herself on "fairly correct English, which is in all senses a foreign tongue to her People who report her often exaggerate her expressions, putting in to her mouth the most marked southern dialect, which Sojourner feels is rather taking an unfair advantage of her" (qtd. in Fitch and Mandziuk 1997: 129). Beyond the issue of dialect, because recording devices were not yet available, Gage relied on notes and memories that were more than a decade old. There is no record that Gage worked with Truth on the transcription of Truth's words. Critics such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1986: 444) charge that the dialect Gage represented is a white woman's version of how a southern, uneducated Black woman would sound. Since Sojourner Truth was born and raised in the North, her first language being Dutch, she would not have a dialect that resembled the stereotypical "slave dialect." In 1989 Campbell revised Gage's version of the speech, taking out the dialect. In Campbell's words, "Because Truth grew up speaking Dutch in upstate New York and had no contact with southerners, whites or Afro-Americans until her teens, it is unlikely that, although illiterate, she spoke in substandard southern dialect, in which the speech was recorded by Mrs. Gage" (1989: 99). Campbell changed the tagline "Ain't" to "Aren't," although she recognized that during the mid-nineteenth century "'ain't' was a proper grammatical form for the negative interrogative in the first person singular" (1986: 444). Campbell's revision, therefore, is made more for a contemporary ear than for a mid-nineteenth-century audience.

My students, by the time they read and discuss the Truth texts, are familiar with the politics of dialect. Early in the semester they read *The Color Purple* and we discuss the dialect Alice Walker uses for Celie, the narrator in the text. I have them do some

research on the grammatical rules and pronunciation features of African American English (AAE). I bring in poems by Paul Dunbar, some written in AAE, others in standard American English (SAE). Finally, I bring in an excerpt from Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* and we read how a white man chose to represent Jim's slave dialect. Through these lessons, my students see that AAE is not just "sloppy" SAE and that Walker, an African American woman, represents the dialect (via Celie) in ways that are consistent with the scholarship on AAE, while Twain (a white man) represents Jim's dialect as a more problematic form of "sloppy/stupid" SAE. We also talk about contemporary representations of AAE. Students point to the code switching between SAE and AAE of celebrities or politicians such as Oprah Winfrey, Chris Rock, and Michelle Obama. They also note Blacks in the public eye whom they have never heard code switch to AAE, citing Bryant Gumble, Barack Obama, and Condoleezza Rice. We discuss why some African Americans code switch and some do not and what it means for the audiences that are viewing or listening. One student wrote in his journal, analyzing the complexities of AAE,

You aren't taken seriously if you speak AAE in public. There is no way Barack Obama would be where he is today if he used AAE in his speeches. I once heard a clip of his wife, Michelle, using AAE to an audience in North Carolina — the audience was largely Black — and there was a lot of discussion about her language, that she was "too ghetto" to be First Lady. I think what she said was something like, "Ain't no Black people in Iowa." But that is the last time I heard her say anything in AAE. I think she learned her lesson.

By the time we get to the Truth speeches, the students have talked at length about the politics of dialect (especially AAE) and how dialect is represented to communicate identity or perspective. Sometimes these discussions get heated, with some students (regardless of ethnic identity) arguing that Black English is an inferior dialect and others that it is a rich language linked to cultural identity. The following is an excerpt from the journal of a student who, in previous discussions of AAE, went from arguing that Black English was an uneducated version of "proper" English to seeing AAE as a rich language:

At first when I read the Gage version I liked it better because of the dialect. It

made Truth sound more real to me. But in thinking about it, it is the same thing that Twain did: a white man representing an African American person's speech in a stereotypical way. I do think the dialect adds to the speech, but the fact that Gage is white is troubling to me. We talked in class about how Truth probably didn't speak in dialect. But someone brought up Oprah and how she doesn't speak in a dialect either, unless she is trying to make a point. Then she will slip into it. It could be possible that this is what Truth did, but I am still uncomfortable with a white woman [sic] recording it. I haven't decided what I think yet. I like the speech better with the dialect, but I resent Gage for writing it in dialect when she wasn't a speaker of that dialect herself. Even if she had good intentions, she was probably relying on stereotypes.

Robinson's representation of Truth's words in SAE provides a sketch of Truth without the politics of dialogue. As Campbell (1989) argues, writers typically do not represent dialect when transcribing speeches, so why would Gage insert the dialect? Could it have been to play into racist beliefs? Or perhaps — as the student above speculates — Truth herself engaged dialect as a rhetorical effect, even if it wasn't how she spoke. The dialect is a rhetorical strategy that Gage uses to make the text more effective for her audience. Gage's version creates an image of a racially romanticized picture of Sojourner Truth, creating the ex-slave that many people still need and use today. Truth was recorded as priding herself on the clarity with which she spoke SAE, so some students find it problematic that Gage inserted the dialect.

When Fitch and Mandziuk addressed the politics of dialect in their book on Truth's rhetorical position as an African American woman, they included both the Gage and Robinson versions of the text. They make the reader aware of the politics of dialect: "There has been no attempt to change any of those [versions of the speech] that were written in dialect, because the dialect represents how the transcriber either heard the speech or thought it should be" (1997: 6). These two scholars choose to quote the Robinson version in their essay, not the Gage version that includes the dialect. Fitch and Mandziuk imply that Gage represented the speech as she thought it should be or how she heard it, but they stop short of addressing *why* Gage heard or thought about the speech with heavy dialect and with detailed references to both how the audience

reacted to Truth and Truth's physical body.

Calling the Rhetorical Question

Upon first reading, my students notice that the tagline "Ain't I a Woman?" creates a marked difference between the texts. In the Gage version, this phrase was used throughout by Truth to reinforce her point, asking her audience to consider whether she, an ex-slave, was in fact a *woman*, or rather simply a *female*, an object of ownership and property. The use of this line is quite effective. The Robinson version, titled "On Women's Rights," doesn't include the question. Some argue that if Truth had used the phrase as repeatedly as Gage represents her using it, it would have appeared in Robinson's version (Fitch and Mandziuk 1997: 18). The closest phrase to "Ain't I a Woman?" in the Robinson version is a sentence in the first paragraph of Truth's speech: "I am a woman's rights." This statement of fact (instead of a question), declaring that she is a woman's rights (not questioning whether she is a woman), alters the meaning of Truth's argument. The statement implies that Truth embodies rights for women: she has worked, she has plowed, she has physical strength and power. Conversely, the question "Ain't I a Woman?" implies that Truth is asking her audience to consider why she shouldn't be seen as a woman instead of simply a female ex-slave. As I teach these texts to students, I also offer them context for the historical moment of being a woman (and being a white woman or a Black woman) and of being of a slave or servant class versus a privileged class. They need to understand the historical context to pick through the complexities inherent in the texts.

The Cult of True Womanhood, a (white) conservative response to the suffragist movement, defined *womanhood* as relegated to the domestic sphere, a morally superior position that was not to be sullied by politics. In this definition, women were squarely out of the public eye and, of course, were *white*. "Public argument, thus, was removed from proper female behavior" (Bacon 2002: 35). With the line "Ain't I a Woman?" Truth is positioning herself as one who has been cast out of the Cult of True Womanhood. For Gage's book audience and Truth's convention audience, this would have been an effective move because the white women political activists had also been ostracized from the definition of *womanhood*.

The tagline was not just about a connection to Truth's white activist audience but also a commentary on race inequities regarding women. Typically African American women, slaves as well as ex-slaves, carried the stereotype of being promiscuous or sexually licentious and therefore were not considered to be "true women," that is, modest and pure (Bacon 2002: 43). With Gage's tagline, Truth calls upon her audience to disrupt the stereotype of African American women's sexuality. By the standards of white culture she was *not* considered a woman bound by modesty and purity. As Bacon writes, the definition that excluded African Americans from entering the Cult of True Womanhood "allowed them to resist traditional norms of gender that would limit them and to find avenues for activism that were unavailable to their white counterparts" (48).

Besides the tagline/titles, there are other dramatic shifts in meaning between the Gage and Robinson versions of Truth's speech. A poignant difference comes when Truth references a "pint half full" and how she needs more. In Robinson, she is quoted as saying, "As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart — why cant she have her little pint-full?" This statement seems to suggest that Truth is acknowledging that women indeed have less capacity for intelligence than men and will always have only a "pint" of intellect to a man's "quart," hardly a feminist message. For Robinson's purpose, the message did not need to be feminist, only abolitionist. Gage (in Campbell's version) alludes to something different using the same metaphor, the revision taking on a feminist and antiracist slant. In speaking of intellect, Truth (according to Gage) said, "What's that got to do with woman's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?" This version suggests that Truth believes a discussion of intellect is beside the point; women and "Negroes" deserve the same kinds of rights as white men; white men need to give a small portion of their rights to the rest of the population toward the goal of equality for all.

I ask my students to consider these differences in the context of the audiences. Through that awareness, students are able to work through each nuanced or blatant difference and analyze why the editor/transcriber made the choice he or she did. But sometimes it can be overwhelming, too. One student wrote,

It is crazy for me to look at all the little tiny differences in these two very short

speeches and how much they change the meaning. Sometimes it is one word — like the use of “ain’t” versus “aren’t” and sometimes it is a big difference like the different story of Lazarus in the short version. But it all means something.

Sometimes I feel so confused — all these differences and what they mean. It gets overwhelming. My brain starts to hurt and then shuts down.

Some students bleat out that we are “overanalyzing” the speech. My challenge as an educator is to know how to help the students analyze the many differences without them feeling overwhelmed. Many times teachers feel pressure to move quickly through the syllabus or an analysis. But doing this level of analysis means spending the time over days and weeks to sustain the inter-rogation and go deeper. As with any class, some love the exercise of analysis and others are vexed by it. In addition, many are uncomfortable talking about issues of race, class, and gender. It is especially difficult for some Anglo students to speak out about race dynamics in a classroom where they don’t want to offend or sound racist to their African American peers. My strategy is to move slowly and accept the offerings the students make, even if some don’t get as far in their analysis as I would like. I challenge them to take the risk and keep talking. In most classes, there are enough students who are practiced critical thinkers to challenge the students who might not be as evolved in that skill. At those times, I can facilitate discussion as opposed to inserting my own opinion. At other times, especially where trepidation because of race or the fear of sounding racist is palpable, I will insert my teacher voice to say what others may be thinking but are too timid to say, for example, that many people think AAE sounds unintelligent or uneducated; some whites need to see representations of African Americans that reinforce a racist hierarchy; both women and African Americans often have to be hyper-correct in their language in order for some whites or men to see them as equals. The objective of these lessons is to get the students thinking about the complexity of rhetorical choices made by any speaker or writer. I want them to understand that there are very large consequences for even the smallest word choice that a speaker or writer may make. Students can see the power of rhetorical choices in the different versions of the speech; through their close examination of these texts, they can understand the long-lasting ramifications of word-level choices and the power of language.

Religion as a Vehicle for Voice

Biblical references are a dominant feature in both the Gage and Robinson versions of Truth's speech, although there are different biblical references in each version. As other African American women did, Truth accessed the public realm first through religion. Religion offered African American women a way to "resist traditional dictates that removed them from the public realm" (Bacon 2002: 50). Religious rhetoric also added ethos, as the speaker was seen as more pious. African American women used biblical references to counter some whites' racist and sexist perceptions that African Americans were of questionable morality because they were African American females and because they were speaking in public. As a preacher by profession, Truth would have had the biblical references in her rhetorical toolbox, but those references also worked effectively in the context of the convention because the Bible's representation of women was used as a primary argument for True Womanhood and against suffrage. Fitch and Mandziuk (1997: 77) have argued that Truth's use of examples featuring Eve and Mary portray women as having a powerful role in Christianity. If one looks closely at Truth's reference to the Adam and Eve story, the Gage and Robinson versions communicate different messages about the role and power of women, even using the same examples. In both texts Truth makes reference to Adam and Eve, where Eve is alleged to be the temptress, leading Adam (and thus all human beings) into mortal sin. Robinson quotes Truth as saying, "I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again" (160). In this quotation the audience hears Truth suggesting that Eve *is* at fault for the problems of "man" and that only through more cultural power will she be able to set things right. Truth is suggesting that women owe men some restitution for the ways of the world. In the Campbell version of Gage, however, the wording of this example reflects a different nuance. "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, these together . . . ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again; and now they are asking to do it, the men better let them" (Campbell 1989: 101). The audience can hear in this statement that women are strong and able. The blame for the wrongs of the world is upon men, not women. In this version Truth suggests that only women can "fix" what is

awry, but because men have the cultural power, men need to move aside so women can do their work. Gage's rephrasing of the example shows women as powerful, capable, and ready to remedy problems created by men. Students, especially those with a strong Christian background of Bible reading or those familiar with the biblical references, pick up on these changes in how the Bible stories are represented. One student wrote:

At first when I read the Eve story, I thought it was the same old thing. But after class discussion, looking closer, I was amazed at how different the meaning can be just with a few word changes. Same story, totally different meanings. It is like when people use the story about Sodom and Gomorra [*sic*] to argue that God is against homosexuality. But I have heard others use the same passages and interpret them as a statement about rape, not gayness. It makes me think about the various translations of the bible itself and how choosing each word can change the meaning of the stories.

In an example using Lazarus, a figure in the New Testament, Robinson records Truth as saying that women can be valued as helpmates of men, but the ultimate power belongs in patriarchy. According to Christian belief, Lazarus was a man raised from the dead by Christ. In the Lazarus story, the role of women is to have faith that Jesus can raise Lazarus's lifeless form. Robinson (1851: 160) quotes Truth as saying, "The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept — and Lazarus came forth." In this telling of the story, the women become secondary players to the power of God. It shows Truth pointing out that women were counsel to male power. But the story is, in the end, about the power of Christ and the importance of male power. Women are accepted by Christ, but they are assistants. Gage's version doesn't reference the parable of Lazarus. If Gage had included this biblical example it would have weakened the feminist point that she alleges Truth is making. In the Robinson version, the message of women taking power in the world is tempered, the rhetoric reinforcing a less radical perspective of how women should enter the political realm: as helpers, as people who need to right wrongs they have previously made.

Truth's powerful presence

The issue of power — specifically the power of women — is less ambiguous when considering the physical manifestation of Truth. Both Gage and Robinson mention Truth's body — and her powerful physical presence — in their versions of the text. In his introduction to her speech, Robinson refers to Truth's physical appearance with general descriptions, noting “her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, . . . her strong and truthful tones” (160). From this the reader understands that Truth was passionate and strong in both body and voice. Between Robinson's and Gage's transcriptions, one would come to understand that Truth's physical presence, the rhetoric of her body and voice, were important as a significant means of persuasion. However, when Gage refers to the specifics of Truth's body — “this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eye piercing the upper air She spoke in deep tones”; “and, raising herself to her full hight [*sic*], and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder”; “she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power”; “she pointed her significant finger”; “She had taken us up in her great strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty” — Gage is piecing out parts of Truth to engage the reader's senses. Some students, upon reading these asides of Truth's stature, express indignation. One student wrote, “She [Gage] makes her (Truth) sound like some sort of monster. The one phrase ‘eye piercing the upper air’ makes her sound like an animal, not human at all. Gage's talk of all of her specific body parts makes me think of those charts from high school nutrition class, Cuts of Meat.”

The way Gage presents Truth's physical form can be read as reinforcing racist sensibilities of African American women and the stereotype that they were masculine in voice and stature, with mule-like strength. Gage's reference to her “strong arms” in two instances creates a masculinized version of Truth, yet her statement about those arms carrying the audience “safely over the slough of difficulty” harkens to a stereotypical role of the strong Black slave taking care of her more fragile white mistress. In Gage's version, Truth is both threatening (a powerful Black woman who is pointing fingers at her white audience and baring her muscles) and comforting (using those same powerful arms to “carry”). Given the historical moment, any African Americans would be

considered threatening if they took space and power, especially in the context of a white audience. When one further considers the gender dynamics of Truth's body rhetoric, where white women were covered from neck to ankle as a way of showing modesty, Truth baring her arm up to her shoulder places her outside the realm of femininity and reinforces the cultural commodity of African American women as *not* women, but only female (chattel to be dissected and regarded according to body parts).

Gage's asides about Truth's body reinforce the objectification of the Black female body. Since Robinson's audience was a group of people who were arguing politically that African Americans deserved the rights of human beings in the American political system, such descriptions would have weakened his purpose. Gage's asides strengthen her feminist point that women are valued only for their bodies, whether for manual labor or for sex and reproduction. The references to Truth's muscular arm and of watching children being sold off into slavery also further Gage's purpose of portraying women as strong and capable, an idea that benefited Gage's feminist purpose. Gage portrays Truth as strong, smart, and capable despite the cultural forces that have beaten her down. In Gage's version, Truth perseveres because of her strength, undeterred by the forces of racism and sexism.

Gage was not the only transcriber who focused on Truth's physical presence in detail. In other speeches her "long bony fingers," her height, and the darkness of her skin were habitually mentioned (Fitch and Mandziuk 1997: 6). The issue of her skin — and how dark it was — would also position Truth as a threatening or exotic rhetor for white audiences. Robinson's version chooses to diminish the focus on Truth's physical differences from her white audience, focusing on her as a rhetor, not a *Black* rhetor.

Truth was very aware of her limitations as an African American woman speaker. As Robinson writes in his introduction to her words, Truth "asked permission" to speak and said she would be brief. By asking for the right to speak, Truth acknowledges that she does not have the authority to take public space. By suggesting that she will not take up a lot of time (indeed, the speech is very short by both Gage's and Robinson's representations), Truth is nodding to the assumption that her white audience(s) will not believe she has anything important to say to them for any length of time. However, the

closing of the Robinson version shows Truth assuming power. In his version, Truth ends her speech with an analogy of the white man being between a hawk and a buzzard, a place of anxiety and danger. With this closing, Truth does not seem deferential to her audience, white or male. The Robinson ending would be a violation of the oratorical norms of the time, where women “strategically end[ed] with professions of traditional goodwill that connect to women’s ostensibly pure motive . . . [thereby] deploy[ing] the conventions of femininity to expand the expectations of women’s role in society and to create a specific mandate for women’s public persuasion” (Bacon 2002: 115). In the Gage version Truth deploys the acceptable and expected tactic of humble modesty by ending with “Bleeged to ye for hearin’ on me, and now ole Sojourner ha’n’t got nothin’ more to say” (Gage 1863: 15). Unlike the Robinson ending, the Gage ending positions Truth as grateful to her audience for allowing her to speak. My students generally prefer the Robinson ending. They want to see Truth as a hero who is not going to apologize or defer to her audience. I ask them, “But what would be the most effective ending for her intended audience?” The answers the students offer change depending on whether the intended audience is the 1850s abolitionists, the 1850s feminists, or contemporary high school and college students. The “ah-ha” moments come when students begin to understand that context and audience are essential to creating an interesting and viable analysis and how the complexities of race, class, and gender influence context and audience.

Rhetoric of Humor and Satire

One rhetorical tool that worked well with her audience then and now is Truth’s humor. The function of humor, wit, and satire takes on more prominence in the Gage version because Gage punctuates the speech with narrative asides that document the applause and appreciative response of the audience. But the use of humor and satire as represented in Gage’s text also adds depth to the speech. When I ask students to compare one short excerpt that appears in both versions, they can see the difference. Where Robinson wrote, “And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where is your part?” Gage wrote:

Then that little man in black [a clergyman] there, he says women can't have as much rights as man, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from? (*Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated,*) Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him. (*Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man.*) (Campbell 1989: 101)

In the Robinson version the sense of Truth's humor and sarcasm are obscured. From the narrative asides provided by Gage, we see how the additions of humor softened her audience and won over the racists. Fitch and Mandziuk (1997: 31) write, "Humor helped women speakers and writers of the 1800s to ingratiate themselves to their audiences, thus helping them to narrow the line between acceptance and rejection of their liberal ideas." Even contemporary audiences prefer the humorous asides and audience responses. My students often declare that the Gage version places them in the excitement of the moment. Because of these asides, they are rooting for Truth and feel that they are facing her resistant audience with her. According to the Gage version (1881: 194), the audience's hostility toward Truth as an African American ex-slave was extreme ("A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and there fell on the listening ear, 'An abolition affair!' 'Woman's rights and niggers!' 'I told you so!' 'Go it, darkey!'), but by the end of the speech Truth had won the racists over:

Amid roars of applause, she returned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands with her, and congratulate the glorious old mother, and bid her God-speed on her mission of "testifyin' agin concerning the wickedness of this 'ere people." (194)

Today Gage's asides are one reason students (and others) tend to prefer her version, finding it more interesting and rich. Through the asides, the speech becomes a

narrative, a scene and not just a text. The character of Truth comes alive, and thus the version lends itself to contemporary performances. I have witnessed several of these during Black History Month and Women's History Month at high schools or colleges. As a class we watch and analyze similar performances of the Gage version online.

Rhetoric of Narrative

By all accounts Truth was a superlative storyteller. Using personal narratives, Truth's speeches were captivating for her audiences. In the speech given at the women's rights conventions, we see the power of her storytelling in both versions of the texts. In the Robinson version, she begins her speech emphasizing the first person and the realities of her own life, offering herself up as the primary example of what embodies "women's rights." The short sentence "I am a woman's rights" brings immediate context to Truth's life and experiences. These issues, she was saying, are not abstract to her because she had lived them. She continues,

I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. (Robinson 1851: 160)

This first-person narrative shows Truth's ability to keep up with men in the realm of field labor. By focusing on her physical strength she rebukes the cultural belief that women are weaker of constitution and strength than men (Fitch and Mandziuk 1997: 73). Although the white women of privilege may have had no personal connection with this narrative, working-class women, poor women, and ex-slaves would have heard their realities ring true in Truth's words, making a powerful point for the *Bugle* audience. Even the white women of privilege would be able to identify with the charge that women are weaker and therefore not deserving of rights. By using her own experience as the tool to persuade, Truth is also educating the white audience about her lived experience as a slave. Today students and others like the "strong female" message. Regardless of whether they identify as feminist or pro-feminist, contemporary audiences like to see themselves as supporting strong women. Women students especially like the way the

Gage text positions Truth as standing up to racism and sexism, making connections to the 2008 presidential race, a ready example of rhetoric that was drenched in issues of race and gender. A student wrote, “Truth had the courage to face an audience of very racist and sexist people and she won them over. When Barak [sic] Obama first started running for president, some of my friends said he’d get assassinated because he was black. They said America wasn’t ready for a black president. But that didn’t scare Obama. He kept speaking out and I think — like Truth — changed people’s minds.”

In the Gage (Campbell’s version), the imperative command Truth gives her audience — “Look at me!” — demands that the audience consider the material and physical reality of the woman before them. Her reference to “the lash” emphasizes her life as a slave and the inhumanity suffered by slaves. This mention of slave whippings in the Gage version makes a point to her white, privileged audience that isn’t made in the Robinson version. When Truth talks of being helped over mud puddles (Gage), a chivalrous act reserved for women of social stature, she nods to a class distinction. By connecting these three themes (issues of class, her physical strength, and the inhumanity of slavery), Gage has Truth delivering a strong point about the strength and perseverance of women in the face of institutional sexism using very abbreviated personal examples. Fitch and Mandziuk (1997: 70) write, “Her narrative of racial difference created a clear contrast and vision between herself and this audience.” This strategy of using personal history to raise a white audience’s consciousness was typical of African American women rhetors of this time (Campbell 1986: 443). Gage’s version reinforces the strength of women and their ability to rise above the oppressive forces that are determined to keep them silent and disempowered. In Truth, Gage portrays a woman who is a force to be reckoned with, a woman who can stand toe to toe with any man in strength, wit, and intellect.

In the second paragraph of the speech, Gage has Truth offering one of the most provocative examples of her narrative. “I have borne thirteen children and seen them almost all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard — and aren’t I a woman?” (1989: 100). This example of having one’s children *sold* from them would be powerful, emphasizing a connection to the women in the audience as well as making a point about the inhumanity of slavery.

The example of Truth lamenting her sold children does not appear in the Robinson version. Why wouldn't Robinson, an abolitionist activist, include such a provocative example in the text? Perhaps Truth didn't use the example. Even if we are to believe that Truth used it, it is a false narrative. Truth, by her own account, had only eight children, and they were not slaves to be sold but indentured servants. It was Truth who left her children behind when she fled slavery, carrying only the youngest with her (Washington 1993: xv). Perhaps Truth was recasting the story of her own childhood, born to a mother and father who had twelve or thirteen children. Truth was separated from her parents at an early age due to slavery (Washington 1993: xiv). Although Truth's story of having to witness the selling of her children was not true, the dramatic narrative served well rhetorically (Fitch and Mandziuk 1997: 57). It is also possible that Gage made up this example. Lively discussions ensue when students are asked to speculate whether or not Gage fabricated it, especially when students have the background information necessary to look at all these dynamics critically. Students become invested in making their own claims about why this example about Truth and her children exists only in Gage's version. The emotional response they have themselves to a mother's tears evokes other examples from popular texts they are familiar with. A nontraditional student who was a mother herself wrote:

I can see her [Truth] crying out as they take her children away. I can't imagine that pain myself. It would make me wild with grief. It reminds me of seeing a scene in the movie *Beloved* where the white slave holder comes for [the character played by] Oprah's baby. Or the scene in *Steel Magnolias* when Sally Fields's daughter is buried. It seems to be the worst grief possible, a child being taken from a mother.

Conclusion

When reading these versions of Truth's famous speech, students can see that the rhetoric used is quite different. Beyond the first-person narrative examples, the complexities of those examples and what issues they foreground are important to discuss (gender or class or slavery or all three). Students can do this when the teacher provides context for Truth herself, the Women's Rights Convention of 1851, the social

and political dynamics of race and gender during this time, and the audiences/purposes for the publications in which Truth's speech was published. But it is also important to have the discussion about contemporary audiences. By using questions or prompts such as "How is humor used in each speech? Biblical references? Editorial commentary?" "What are the politics of dialect, especially given a white woman transcribing the words of an African American woman?" and "Why is the Gage version more appealing to contemporary audiences?" students are able to create rich analyses of the texts and audiences. The result is a much more complicated and layered understanding of Truth's words.

When we approach these texts as scholars and teachers, we have an obligation to Truth and all that she represents to tackle these complexities. We must teach these versions together instead of privileging the Gage version over all others. Talking about the politics of dialect is not enough. We need to go beyond that and discuss with our colleagues and our students the potential motives and reasons behind these two dramatically different versions of the same speech. We need to discuss not just the audience and purpose of Truth's rhetorical moment at the women's convention but Gage's and Robinson's audiences and purposes as well.

Sojourner Truth is too important to our rhetorical canon and to our history as American women to misrepresent her work and words. We will never know what Sojourner Truth said on that fateful day in 1851, but we can honor her voice by interrogating and teaching the complexities and politics of the words recorded as her own, in as many versions as we can find.

Robinson's Version of Truth's Speech (as published in the Anti-slavery Bugle, 21 June 1851)

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity: "May I say a few words?" Receiving

an affirmative answer, she proceeded:

“I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man a quart — why cant she have her little pint-full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, — for we cant take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. Why children, if you have a woman’s rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble. I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept — and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.”

Gage’s Version of Truth’s Speech (as published in the Independent, 23 April 1863)

Slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had hardly lifted her head. “Don’t let her speak,” gasped a half-dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front; laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me.

There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced “Sojourner Truth,” and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments. The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eye piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones,

which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the door and windows.

“Well, chillen, whar dar’s so much racket dar must be som’ting out o’kilter. I tink dat, ’twixt de niggers of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking ’bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking ’bout? Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place;” and, raising herself to her full hight [*sic*], and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, “And ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm,” and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power. “I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me — and ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much as eat as much as a man, (when I could get it,) and bear de lash as well — and ar’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen ’em mos’ all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard — and ar’n’t I a woman? Den dey talks ’bout dis ting in de head. What dis dey call it?” “Intellect,” whispered some one near. “Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do with woman’s rights or niggers’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, wouldn’t ye be mean not to let me have a little half-measure full?” and she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud. “Den dat little man in black dar, he say woman can’t have as much rights as man ’cause Christ wa’n’t a woman. *Whar did your Christ come from?*”

Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eye of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated,

“Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him.” Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man. Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of Mother Eve. I cannot follow her through it all. It was pointed and witty and solemn, eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she ended by asserting “that if de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder,” and she glanced her

eye over us, "ought to be able to turn it back and git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to, de men better let 'em." (Long continued cheering.) "Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner ha'n't got nothin' more to say."

Amid roars of applause she turned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her great strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor.

Gage's Version of Truth's Speech (as published in History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 2, 1881)

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

I chanced on that occasion to wear my first laurels in public life as president of the meeting. At my request order was restored and the business of the Convention went on. Morning, afternoon, and evening exercises came and went. Again and again, timorous and trembling ones came to me and said, with earnestness, "Don't let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and niggers and we shall be utterly denounced." My only answer was, "We shall see when the time comes."

The second day the work waxed warm. Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions presented. One claimed superior rights and privileges for man, on the grounds of "superior intellect"; another, because of the "manhood of Christ; if God had desired the equality of woman, He would have given some token of His will through the birth, life and death of the Saviour." Another gave us a theological view of the "sin of the first mother."

There were very few women in those days who dared to "speak in meeting" and

the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the best of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneerers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture, as they supposed of the “strong-minded.” When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who till now had scarcely lifted her head. “Don’t let her speak!” gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced “Sojourner Truth,” and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments.

The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows.

“Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin’ out o’ kilter. I tink dat ’twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin’ ’bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all dis here talkin’ ’bout?”

“Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber halps me into carriages, or ober mudpuddles, or gibs me any best place!”

And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, “And ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [And here she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power] “I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear de lash as well! And ar’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen ’em mos’ all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ar’n’t I a woman?”

“Den dey talks ’bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?” “Intellect,” whispered someone near. “Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do wid womin’s rights or niggers’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn’t ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?” And she pointed her significant

finger, and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.

“Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can’t have as much rights as men, ’cause Christ wan’t a woman! Whar did your Christ come from?” Rolling thunder couldn’t have stilled that crowd, as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated, “Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin’ to do wid Him.” Oh, what a rebuke that was to the little man.

Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of Mother Eve, I cannot follow her through it all. It was pointed and witty, and solemn; eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she ended by asserting, “If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder [and she glanced her eye over the platform] ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let ’em.” Long continued cheering greeted this. “ ’Bleeged to ye for hearin’ on me, and now ole Sojourner han’t got nothin’ more to say.”

Amid roars of applause, she returned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands with her, and congratulate the glorious old mother, and bid her God-speed on her mission of “testifyin’ agin concerning the wickedness of this ’ere people.”

Campbell’s Version Based on Truth’s Speech Published in Gage’s History of Woman Suffrage (as published in Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol. 2, 1989)

I rose and announced “Sojourner Truth,” and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments. The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eye piercing the upper air, like one in a dream. At her first word, there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which,

though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows: —

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out o' kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women of the North all a-talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon.

But what's all this here talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles or gives me any best place (*and raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked*), and aren't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (*And she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power.*) I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me — and aren't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well — and aren't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them almost all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard — and aren't I a woman? Then they talk about this thing in the head — what's this they call it? (*"Intellect," whispered someone near.*) That's it honey. What's that got to do with woman's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? (*And she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.*)

Then that little man in black [a clergyman] there, he says women can't have as much rights as man, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from? (*Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated,*) Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him. (*Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man.*)

(*Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of mother Eve. I cannot follower [sic] her through it all. It was pointed, and witty, and solemn, eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she eneded [sic] by asserting that*) If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, these together

(*and she glanced her eye over us*), ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again; and now they are asking to do it, the men better let them. (*Long-continued cheering.*)

'Bliged to you for hearing on me, and now old Sojourner hasn't got anything more to say.

(*Amid roars of applause, she turned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day and turned the jibes and sneers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands, and congratulate the glorious old mother and bid her God speed on her mission of "testifying again concerning the wickedness of this here people."*)

Note

Kay Siebler thanks Chelsie Pearson for bringing to her attention the fact that there were more than two versions of Truth's speech to be considered.

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