Women's Work

An Anthology of African-American Women's Historical Writings from Antebellum America to the Harlem Renaissance

Edited by Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp and Kathryn Lofton

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INTRODUCTION

In 1887, Union Army veteran and prominent Baptist pastor William J. Simmons published *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising*, a series of 117 sketches profiling representative race men. Weighing in at over one thousand pages, this survey included recognizable heroes like Frederick Douglass, Crispus Attucks, Henry Highland Garnet, and Alexander Crummell. But there were also many more chapters devoted to lesser known figures, including attorneys, carpenters, pastors, merchants, phrenologists, artists, and scholars. In his Preface, Simmons hoped his would be a suitable text "to be put into the hands of intelligent, aspiring young people everywhere, that they might see the means and manners of men's elevation, and by this be led to undertake the task of going through high schools and colleges."[1] Like William Cooper Nell's *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) and William Wells Brown's *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), Simmons' *Men of Mark* related the stories of particular black men in order to serve the whole of the race. This was a usable history, supplying for young students not only a source of race pride, but also standard-bearers to which they might aspire.[2]

Simmons dedicated *Men of Mark* to the very people he excluded from his admiring survey, "the women of our race." Not just any women, but "especially to the devoted, self-sacrificing mothers who molded the lives of the subjects of these sketches, laboring and praying for their success," Simmons

[1] William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland: W.W. Williams, 1887), 6.
[2] Steven Mailloux, "Thinking with Rhetorical Figures: Performing Racial and Disciplinary Identities in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," *American Literary History* 18:4 (2006), 700.

continued. "It is sent forth with the earnest hope that future mothers will be inspired to give special attention to the training of their children, and thereby fit them for honorable, happy and useful lives."[3] Some analogous collections, like Monroe Majors' *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* (1893), included descriptions of notable black women. But Simmons chose instead to celebrate models of black manhood, assigning to women the conveyance of his message. For Simmons and other contemporaneous black historians, women could conduct eminence, but they were not eminent. Women educated, but they did not revolutionize. It was little wonder that Fannie Barrier Williams argued in 1900 that "the consciousness of being fully free has not yet come to the great masses of the colored women in this country."[4] In Reconstruction America, many black women served to promote the progress of men.

Despite the limits of their social circumstances, women spoke. They educated. They wrote. Simmons' dedication indicated how some historians understood black women's fostering role in history. But it missed just how much women were also, always, participating in the process of historical authorship. Whether in schoolrooms or kitchens, state houses or church pulpits, women have always been historians. Although few women, white or black, participated in the academic study of history until the mid-twentieth century, women functioned as primary translators and teachers, offering explanations, allegories, and scholastic narrations of the past.

To understand the histories written by women, it is necessary to appreciate the importance of historical narration within African America. "Almost as soon as blacks could write," Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett have written, "they set out to redefine—against already received racial stereotypes—who and what a black person was, and how unlike the racist stereotype the black original could actually be."[5] From eighteenth-century ruminations on ancient Ethiopia to twentieth century celebrations of Black History Month, African Americans have sought to frame, explicate, and resolve their individual lives through the communal rehabilitations of history. The relating of history has provided African Americans with a

[3] Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 3.

[4] Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Club Movement among Colored Women of America," *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 54.

[5] Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, "Introduction," *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3.

consistent and defiant counter to white claims that Africans had no past of any value.[6]

Even as they have been occasionally exiled from the encyclopedias and monographs of celebratory race memory, women have played a central role in the dissemination of this mystical historiography. In the United States, black women have labored to sustain the cogency of their race and their families through the promotion of Christian and historical education for themselves and for their families. Their narratives permeated their childrearing, Sunday school education programs, and public activism. Long before black women entered print culture in large numbers in the twentieth century, several orators, church women, and organizers found their voices, and committed them to print. These are the texts anthologized in *Women's Work*. "Persons of color who endeavor to inhabit and nurture cultural spaces outside of the traditions that define them as 'other' and 'outsider' face a dilemma," writes philosopher Christa Acampora, "they can cling to romantic notions of a cultural past from which they are geographically and historically separated, or they can strive to invent a culture anew."[7] In the texts that follow, readers will find romance and invention in abundance. Spanning from antebellum America to the Harlem Renaissance, this collection observes women of color as they borrow, remake, and retell the stories about their collective racial past.

Gathering together African-American women's historical writing fills a lacuna in the documentary record. As others have argued, the rise of the modern university accompanied a celebration of the singular, self-motivated intellect. Documentary scholarship throughout the twentieth century tended to highlight singular historical events and individual statements that mirrored this individuated aesthetic of modern achievement. Historians of African-American literature found themselves succumbing to these interpretive standards, with frequently majestic results. Due to the impressive documentary efforts of William Andrews, Herbert Aptheker, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Dorothy Porter, contemporary students and scholars have at their disposal a wide variety of slave narratives, political statements, and fictional works written by African Americans in the nineteenth century. These collections have formed the groundwork in the effort to reclaim African-American history. Relying upon modern presumptions about political engagement and

[6] Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Harvard University Press, 2010); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

[7] Christa Davis Acampora, "On Making and Remaking: An Introduction," *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*, eds. Christa Davis Acampora and Angela L. Cotton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 2.

selfhood, they anthologized documents that reflected the new academic standards in the African-American past.

Yet gaps in this republished record are increasingly evident. Reviewing the last generation of documentary collections would likely lead the average reader to assume that African Americans had but two writing ambitions. Either they were informed by a Romantic literary aspiration that employed the narrative form to construct an individuated self, or they were motivated by the desire for racial uplift that resulted in political manifestos and sermons. While the reclamation of the literary record focuses on the "discovery" of the individual African-American intellectual genius, documents recounting African-American political labors tend to consolidate this polity into a body determined by phenotype and common oppression. In his 1971 overview of African-American historiography, *Black Historians*, Earl E. Thorpe may have provided the thesis for these documentary efforts when he suggested that "the central theme of black history is the quest of Afro-Americans for freedom, equality, and manhood."[8] For many twentieth-century documentary editors, the only way to understand African-American history was as the history of a racial struggle limited by the liberties of democratic politics and promoted by heroic conceptions of modern man.

Recent scholarship, however, has yielded new and useful insights about the experiences, perceptions, and practices of nineteenth-century African Americans. Ongoing studies of African-American literature have investigated the assortment of socially conscious fictions produced during and after slavery.[9] Meanwhile, work by Eddie Glaude, Wilson Moses, Albert Raboteau, and David Wills, among others, has insightfully demonstrated the crucial shaping power of history—especially history fueled by religious paradigms—for the development of black culture and politics in this period.[10]

[8] Earl E. Thorpe, *Black Historians* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1971), 4.

[9] For more on African-American women's literature, see Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Karla F. C. Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). See also Casper LeRoy Jordan, *A Bibliographical Guide to African-American Women Writers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).

[10] Eddie Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Wilson Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Albert J. Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 17–36; and David W. Wills, "Exodus Piety: African American Religion in an Age of Immigration," in Jonathan D. Sarna, ed., *Minority Faiths and the American Protestant Mainstream* (University of Illinois Press, 1998), 136–190.

This scholarship encourages investigations into denominational and sacred histories as much as heroic sermons and spiritual memoirs. To be sure, sermons and autobiographies reveal a great deal about the historical past. But equally abundant are works of history by African Americans that do not merely speak of the individual, or cohere to modern conceptions of history or self. Rather than providing clear political polemic or social argument, these works are laced with Christian imagery and the idiosyncratic ancient historiographies. They make prophetic claims about the future, but these claims are frequently more supernatural than material. The documents included in *Women's Work* are simultaneously fantastical and revolutionary, Christian and scholarly, intellectual and popular. They pull us from the rarified historical imagination of the university and into the quotidian educational spaces of lived religion and lay institutional engagement.

It is here that we find women writing, speaking, and mapping long stories of the black past. In periodical literature, in self-published books of essays, plays, and poetry, and in speeches delivered to audiences both in the United States and abroad, African-American women helped shape narratives of the collective past that encouraged commitment to, and faith in, the present and future of the race, their gender, and the nation as a whole. While many scholars have carefully traced other sorts of domestic and reform work performed by African-American women in the ninety-year period recorded here, we focus on their scholasticism, on the process of creating community through the pen and the voice, as a vital and overlooked form of work performed by black women. Monographs and anthologies about white women's intellectual activity suggest that women played a important role in the creation of national history.[11] Yet if European American women are only recently being noticed for these intellectual contributions, African-American women are still largely represented in the scholarship primarily as religious enthusiasts (such as Eliza Foote or Zilpha Elaw), artists (Edmonia Lewis), or political reformers (Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells-Barnett). New studies of black historicism in the early national and Reconstruction eras do not mention female contributions to that historiography.[12] But women were also, alongside

[11] Nina Baym, "Between Enlightenment and Victorian: Toward a Narrative of American Women Writers Writing History," *Critical Inquiry* 18:1 (Autumn 1991), 22–41; Mary Kelley, "Whether to Make Her Surname More or Adams: Writing Women's History," in *Learning to Stand & Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 191–244.

[12] John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African-American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Stephen Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

and in conversation with their black male counterparts, the creators of collective values and loyalties passed along in intellectual activity.

Most of these women did not receive notice for their work in their lifetimes. Nonetheless, their renderings of a racial past set the stage for much of the acclaimed black literature of the twentieth century.[13] Years before women were admitted to seminary Maria Stewart interpreted biblical prophecy to speak to the plight of black women in Boston in the 1830s in a style that presaged the declarations of later black clergy. She left public life after delivering only four public speeches. Hallie Quinn Brown, who published half a dozen historical volumes between 1880 and the 1920s, was one of the most prominent churchwomen, elocutionists, and educational fundraisers of her day. Even though the main library at Central State University in Ohio is named after her, her historical works have been largely forgotten by contemporary audiences. Tropes, themes, and signal figures of these documents may be discerned in later novels and poems of twentieth- and twenty-first century black literature.

The best known set of authors represented in this volume are those who wrote and spoke in the critical chronological pivot of the 1890s, when a flood of institutional developments and demographic factors fostered a moment of immense historical creativity.[14] Within a short set of years, the novels *Megda* (1891) and *Iola Leroy* (1892), as well as the short story "*Aunt Lindy*" (1893) were published.[15] The year 1893 also included the Congress of Representative Women, where Frances Harper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Sarah J. Early, and Hallie Q. Brown delivered addresses on the current dilemmas and future prospects of black women. The club movement among African-American women expanded greatly, and in 1895 the first Congress of Colored Women of the United States convened in Boston. These club women, as Anne Ruggles Gere and Sarah R. Robbins have demonstrated,

[13] Writing on the social efficacy of black women's writings, Jacqueline Royster has made three observations. First, that "the very act of writing…is a bold and courageous enterprise" for women without significant social status. Second, African-American women have consistently included "social, political, and economic problems" as "focal points" in their writing. Third, most writing by African-American women was in preparation for presentation in public arenas and, therefore, functions locatively. Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 104.

[14] Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Women Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 116. For more on religious activism by women in the same time period, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[15] Duchess Harris, "Nineteenth Century Black Feminist Writing and Organizing as a Humanist Act," in *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 59.

"used literacy to create gendered spaces of collaborative agency," encouraging book clubs, recommending reading lists, and promoting literary education across black America.[16] The subsequent organization of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, the National League of Colored Women, and the National Association of Colored Women provided networks for political activism, educational innovation, and intellectual community.[17] There were black women historians prior to 1890, but after that date, they began to have a recognizable audience.

What was remarkable about these women was their stunning, overlapping productivity, as they simultaneously engaged antilynching efforts, church missionary work, curriculum development, and writing. Few leading African-American women were any one thing exclusively: no one was *just* a novelist, or just a poet, or just an activist, Christian, or mother. Indeed, the fusion of multiplicity is partly what we seek to document in *Women's Work*. The texts mirror this variety, as none of them offer only one genre of expression, demonstrating instead the overlap between fiction and nonfiction, between history and romance. In these texts one sees the constructed nature of any decision about proper historical form. There is surprising historical truth found in poems, plays, and novels; there are surprising inaccuracies in textbooks, treatises, footnotes, and speeches. Such claims are commonplace in postmodern conversations about historicity; it is striking to witness them here, in these texts, in the voices of authors so confident in the malleability of form in service of historical knowledge.

This malleability was also imposed on many women by external circumstances. African-American women who wanted to write history had to overcome the double handicap of race and gender discrimination. At the turn of the twentieth century, as the first African-American male academics earned PhDs and gained access to previously all-white professional guilds, black women were largely excluded from occupational advancement on the basis of their sex. Even the earliest historical organizations founded by African-American men to advance race literature, such as the American Negro Academy (1897), did not accept female members and rarely published the work of female authors. And African-American Protestant churches, long the seedbed for the growth of Christian historical narration, excluded women

[16] Anne Ruggles Gere and Sarah R. Robbins, "Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn-of-the-Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21:3 (1996), 674.

[17] Duchess Harris, "Nineteenth-Century Black Feminist Writing and Organizing as a Humanist Act," in *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 59–60.

from their pulpits into the late twentieth century. Women had to find alternative venues for their work to those occupied by men, and they did so through the creative adaptation of the genres of fiction, poetry, plays, pageants, and speeches.[18]

Some constants can be discerned amidst this mélange. First, among the many sites in which these texts were produced (including denominations, clubs, and seminaries), the most hallowed was the home. African-American women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wrote many sentimental fictions that celebrated bourgeois domesticity.[19] Such excess of attention was, in part, an attempt to promote the presence of something that, in slavery, was absent. "A look back upon African-American literature shows that home is ubiquitous and nowhere at the same time," describes literary scholar Valerie Prince.[20] Indeed, for many of the women in this volume, the task of preserving the black home was central to their activism. Sometimes this created nostalgic renditions of the past, or simplified renditions of identity. "African American clubwomen followed the lead of white women once again in the twentieth century, writing histories that presented figures as upstanding matriarchs devoid of sexuality," writes historian Julie Des Jardins.[21] Sexuality was not the only thing female characters seemed devoid of in these narratives; all crevices or personal complexities were smoothed over in service to the promotion of a racial ideal. Any problems in these stories were those made by social situations. The women are drawn to be of impeccable character, and it is the world which corrupts. This was an intentional consistency, advised by leaders in the community. Fannie Barrier Williams, for example, argued that the job of the New Negro Woman was primarily to foster homemaking, to create, in her words, "shrines of all the domestic virtues." This was, she suggested, the only way to defend against cultural presumptions of the black woman's rootlessness.[22] Naming home, and profiling its careful preservation by women throughout the African-American past, was a central task for black women historians.

Other themes, too, appear repeatedly in the texts that follow. Particular emphasis was placed on the reclamation of ancient sources and genealogies.

[18] Mary Helen Washington, ed., *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* (Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1987), xviii.

[19] Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 62.

[20] Valerie Sweeney Prince, *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 2.

[21] Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 126.

[22] Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 60.

Long before black nationalist histories of the Sixties and subsequent Afrocentric curricula, African Americans turned to ancient sources and civilizations to situate their respectable roots in triumphant civilizations. Black historians and activists in the nineteenth century attacked the "curse of Ham" and rewrote paradigms of "Western" civilization in order to demonstrate their dominant communal presence throughout the ages. Through the use of analogies and figures from classical literature and history, African-American women attempted to continue the promise of the ancient black past into the present, articulating a prideful sense of history and a stalwart Christian decorum. Included here are excerpts from textbooks, pedagogical polemics, popular poems, and sermons assessing ancient Ethiopia and African preslavery experiences. Looking backward to an African past from which they were ripped away, these authors sought to profile a continent, and a united people from that continent, in which young black Americans could take pride and emulate.[23] They were, as many of these texts invoke, once kings and queens.

Religion threads nearly all of these texts, either invisibly as the site of production or obviously in the narrative tropes, examples, and moral expressions. In African-American communities, religion was often divisive, as denominational competition was a contested aspect of collective African-American experience. But in these texts, unity of Christian disposition is favored over and above institutional discrimination. Their authors often seem to construct an alternative world, in which biblical chronology is more vivid and predictive than the American social context. On the whole, these authors actively explain their commentaries, teaching as they write, presuming little about the audience's knowledge of what they preach. Yet in matters of religion, much is presumed, including a basic familiarity with the Bible and knowledge of the basic chronology of Christian history. The postulated audience of these texts is presumptively Protestant. African-American women writers "defined their faith not only as a miraculous fire that invited prayerful thoughts and thoughtful souls to Zion but as a flame that invigorated earthly lives," writes literary historian Barbara McCaskill, "Their short fiction, poetry, memoirs, and speeches describe a Christianity that is relevant, immediate, politicized."[24] Within religious history, African-American women are often

[23] Not everyone agreed looking back was the right prescription for black progress, as explained by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988), 139.

[24] Barbara McCaskill, "'To Labor…and Fight on the Side of God': Spirit, Class, and Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Literature," in *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 164.

memorialized as sages, radicals, or ecstatics. *Women's Work* contributes to an ongoing complication of this typology, adding to it the roles of theologian and church historian.[25]

Pervading these works is the importance of a united historical consciousness. Unity resounds in these texts, as their writers profile a people and a culture united in a variety of ways: in a history of enslavement, in gendered experience, in racial segregation, in American patriotism, and in religious devotion. Sometimes privileging African-American political unity or nationalism, but sometimes not, these voices cohere into a communal aspiration. Preserving black history was not just a textual venture for these women but also an activist one. The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), for example, became custodian of Douglass's Cedar Hill estate in 1916 when male executors of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Home Association (FDMHA) expressed to then NACW president Mary Talbert that they were no longer willing to raise funds to maintain the property.[26] Preservation occurred too through conversations about historical subjects at club meetings and the new black literary associations. Historical discussions at meetings of the Boston Literary and Historical Association "were the catalyst for the debate of intricate issues of historical representation, misrepresentation, and self-representation," writes literary historian Elizabeth McHenry.[27] "Questions of historical representation remained so important to the Boston Literary Association that its membership decided to strengthen the 'Historical' aspect of the organization to ensure that research would be conducted and publications written to augment their understanding of their own past."[28] Historical

[25] Other work seeking to recalibrate descriptions of African-American female religiosity include Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Delores Carpenter, "Black Women in Religious Institutions: A Historical Summary from Slavery to the 1960s," *Journal of Religious Thought* 46 (Winter 1989–Spring 1990), 7–27; Richard J. Douglass-Chin, *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Together and in Harness': Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10:4 (Summer 1985), 678–699; R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, eds., *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power and Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Sylvia M. Jacobs, "African-American Women Missionaries Confront the African Way of Life," in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, eds. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1997), 89–100; Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman, eds., *This Far by Faith: Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[26] Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America*, 124.

[27] Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 174–175.

[28] McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 177.

investigation, education, and conversation offered an opportunity to construct a common vocabulary, as well as a common sense of progress.

"The passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history," wrote historian Pierre Nora. "The historian is one who prevents history from becoming *merely* history."[29] The women anthologized here labored in their texts to make history present, to make sure it never became mere history. Emerging in the century prior to the large-scale professionalization of historical studies within the American academy, they were, with a few exceptions, not certified by "experts" in the field. Relying on memory, limited libraries, and the Bible, they constructed tales to tell the stories that needed to be heard, not those stories that needed to be proven. As historian Bonnie G. Smith has noted with respect to the gendered character of history, "Professionalism is a relationship dependent on discredited voices and devalued narratives," on accounts that serve as a "low" foil to the "high" status of authorized renderings of the past.[30] In contrast to "professional history," the documents assembled here are histories with a particular political, cultural, and collective purpose: to assemble the diversity of African-American lives into a common narrative experience. With their unique domestic and social authority, black women offered a compelling portrait of the black historical past. By reading these anthologized texts, readers can trace the process by which the socially marginalized narrate their identities into the American mainstream. Through the discourse of history, African-American women educated their children, parishioners, and students to the tactics of endurance, survival, and ascendance in the republic.

[29] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 291, 294.

[30] Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 10.

ONE

Maria W. Stewart

(1803–1879)

Born Maria Miller in Hartford, Connecticut, and orphaned at the age of five, Maria W. Stewart might never have risen above the ranks of many indentured blacks in the nominally free north save for a string of bad luck, a solid knowledge of the Bible, and a fiery temperament. Little is known about her parents or her early childhood. Taken under the wing of a local clergy family at age five, Stewart was "bound out" as a servant, an occupation at which she would toil for the subsequent two decades. While she received no formal education, she did attend Sabbath school classes offered to blacks and learned enough to read the Bible, the text that formed the basis of her worldview.

In 1826 she married James W. Stewart, an entrepreneurial Boston shipping outfitter, and joined the ranks of the small black middle-class community in that city. She and her husband also became friends with David Walker, an ardent Methodist, antislavery advocate, and writer. Walker contributed to the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, but it was in his incendiary 1829 pamphlet, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, that Walker called for revolt in the face of racial oppression and encouraged southern slaves to rise up against their masters. Copies of his work were smuggled into southern ports on ships and in sailors' clothes and distributed widely, likely with the help of the Stewart shipping business, among others.

Source: Maria W. Stewart, "An Address Delivered before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America," *The Liberator* (28 April 1832).

Between late 1829 and 1830, however, Maria Stewart lost these two most important relationships through the deaths of both James Stewart and David Walker. Despite a protracted legal battle, white businessmen then robbed the widow of her husband's sizable estate, leaving her alone and destitute. But Stewart found her political and religious convictions and her public voice over the next few years: Between 1831 and 1833 she delivered a series of addresses in Boston that were published in the pages of *The Liberator*, the most widely circulated antislavery newspaper of the day. Taking up Walker's cause and clothing herself in the mantle of biblical prophecy, Stewart delivered scathing speeches that called upon African Americans to improve themselves morally, economically, and politically. As much as she hated the oppression of blacks by whites, she also despised the failings of the black community to attain Christian purity, and to argue more vehemently for their civil rights.

Stewart was the first known African-American woman to speak to mixed-race audiences of both men and women. More than a civil leader, she saw herself as a holy warrior for Christ. In her 1832 address to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America, reprinted here, Stewart placed the African race in a sacred history and located herself as a prophet in a millennial battle. "I am speaking as one who expects to give account at the bar of God," she proclaimed. "I have enlisted in holy warfare, and Jesus is my captain." Stewart enjoined black women to recognize the role of the race in the divine plan, and called on them to rise up and live out their God-given destiny. She likened their work to that of ancient Israel, and compared the cause to the recent revolutionary efforts in France, Haiti, and Poland. Only through recognizing their place in history, Stewart suggested, would African Americans save themselves politically and spiritually, in this world and in the world to come.

An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America (1832)

The frowns of the world shall never discourage me, nor its smiles flatter me; for with the help of God, I am resolved to withstand the fiery darts of the devil, and the assaults of wicked men. The righteous are as bold as a lion, but the wicked teeth when no man pursueth. I fear neither men nor devils; for the God in whom I trust is able to deliver me from the rage and malice of my enemies, and from them that rise up against me. The only motive that has prompted me to raise my voice in your behalf, my friends, is because I have