7. Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?”

African-American women were active in the movement to abolish slavery as speakers, writers, conductors on the Underground Railroad, and by claiming their freedom and the freedom of their families. As an enslaved woman in New York, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) lost two of her five children in the slave market. In 1827, when her owner broke his promise to free her, she took matters into her own hands. To begin her new life she discarded her slave name and took the name Sojourner Truth, for the journeys she would make and the words she would speak in the cause of freedom. Truth earned a wide reputation as a religious and abolitionist orator and made numerous cross-country speaking tours (see text p. 163).

While many white female abolitionists found a voice for their own claims to equality, the boundaries of race were often difficult to cross. In a women’s rights meeting in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, three years following the Seneca Falls Convention, Sojourner Truth reminded her listeners that the cause of women’s rights should include all women, Frances Gage, who chaired the Akron meeting, repeated Truth’s speech in the six-volume History of Women Suffrage.


I chanced on that occasion to wear my first laurel in public life as president of the meeting. . . . Morning, afternoon, and evening exercises came and went. Through all these sessions of Sojourner, quiet and reticent as the “Lybian Stymph,” sat crouched against the wall on the corner of the pulpit stairs, her sun-bonnet shading her eyes, her elbows on her knees, her chin resting upon her broad, pale palms. . . . Again and again, timorous and trembling ones came to me and said, withEarnestness, “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 negroes, and we shall be utterly denounced.” . . . Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Universalists ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions presented. One claimed superior rights and privileges for man, on the ground of “superior intellect”; another, because of the “manhood of Christ; if God had desired the equality of woman, He would have given some tokens of His will through the birth, life, and death of the Saviour.” Another gave us a theological view of the “six of our first mother.”

There were very few women in those days who dared to “speak in meeting”; and the augest teachers of the people were seemingly getting the better of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discontinuance, as they supposed, of the “strong-minded.” Some of the tender-souled friends were on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere be-}

killed a storm. 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 her 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, children, what dar is to much racket dar must be somethin’ out o’ kilter. I think dar ‘twist de niggers of de Soul and de woman at de Norf, all talkin’ tout 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 woman needs so be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhere. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or obey ol’ mud-puddles, or gib me any best place?” And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, “And ain’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
ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilren, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Den day talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?" ("Intelect," whispered some one near.) "Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do wid women's rights or nigger's rights? if my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours 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 dat, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ ain't a woman! What did your Christ come from?" "Rolling thunder couldn't have stilled dis crowd, as dis those deep, winderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated, "What did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him." Oh, what a re-buke that was to that little man.

Turning again to another objector, she took up the de-fense of Mother Eve. I can not follow her through it all. It was pointed, and witty, and solemn; eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she ended by as-serting: "If de lust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, de women togeder (and she glanced her eye over the plat-form) 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 hearpin' on me, and now ole Sojourner hasn'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 diffi-culty turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that sub-diured the mobblish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and ad-miration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands with her, and congratulate the glorious old mother, and bid God-speed on her mission of "testifyin' agin the wickedness of this 'ere people."

Questions
1. How does Sojourner Truth use her own experience to challenge notions of wom-anhood held by her audience?
2. In what way does she counter the arguments presented by the men at this Akron meeting?
3. In what way does this excerpt demonstrate the boundaries between women as well as potential solidarity based on gender?