# CLASSIC AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES



LOTTED BY

WILLIAM L. ANDREWS



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O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O, ye daughters of Africa! what have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? what examples have ye set before the rising generation? what foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn?

— MARIA W. STEWART (1831)

n October 1831, only a few weeks after the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, had electrified the United States, a black woman named Maria W. Stewart stepped into the printing office of a newly launched Boston antislavery newspaper, The Liberator, to ask its editor, William Lloyd Garrison, to publish a pamphlet she had written. Hitherto unknown to Garrison, Stewart brought with her no credentials as a writer or a journalist. The 28-year-old widow had been inspired by her recent conversion to Christianity and by the life and writing of David Walker, whose militant opposition to slavery and championing of African American unity and pride had found fearless expression in David Walker's Appeal in 1829. Some, including slaveholders in the South, whom many blamed for Walker's mysterious death in 1830, thought the Appeal had incited Nat Turner to preach violence against whites. Maria Stewart's manuscript, Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build, which Garrison swiftly published, echoed Walker's demands for justice and freedom for black people North and South. "WE CLAIM OUR RIGHTS," Stewart thundered, prophesying ominously to white America: "Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee." Assuring her African American readership that "though Walker sleeps, yet he lives," Stewart nevertheless counseled "my brethren" to "sheath your swords," "calm your angry passions," "arm yourselves with the weapons of prayer," and "make a mighty effort" to "promote ourselves and improve our own talents." The battle for "rights and privileges" would be fought and won via intellectual, moral, and spiritual struggle—what Stewart called "head-work"—through which, she contended, white Americans had gained their social and political supremacy while black Americans "had done their drudgery." It was high time for black Americans to "practice head-work too, and keep what we have got, and get what we can."

What distinguished Maria Stewart from David Walker and other contemporary advocates of African American solidarity, self-help, and racial pride was the role she reserved for black women in building the "sure foundation" on which a vital, progressive black community in America would rest. Black leaders in the northern United States in the first half of the nineteenth century generally reserved for black women the responsibilities of the home, wherein husbands would find respite from their labors in the wordaday world and children would be nurtured mentally and morally to become respectable, self-supporting citizens. Stewart upheld traditional beliefs about woman's duties to family and to serving as a standard of moral rectitude exemplary to man. She mobilized key themes of contemporary African American selfimprovement ideology, unity of action and the cultivation of the intellect, as two powerful means of social ascendancy for black Americans.1 Her specific aim, however, was to embolden black women in particular to adopt a distinctive brand of economic activism in and for the purpose of female education. To counter pervasive prejudice against "the daughters of Africa" that

"they have no ambition, they have no force," Stewart exhorted black women to "raise a fund ourselves" so that "we might be able to lay the corner stone for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us." If "the higher branches of knowledge" that whites enjoyed were inaccessible to black women, they must seize the initiative, pool their resources, and build institutions of higher learning by and for themselves. Such efforts would ensure that "the fair daughters of Africa" would not "be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles."<sup>2</sup>

Having rejected the silent anonymity of domestic servanthood that she had known firsthand since the death of her husband in 1829, Stewart's Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality pioneered a new kind of public "head-work" for black American women. A year later, Stewart took a bold and more daring step toward intellectual independence for "the daughters of Africa" by delivering in Boston the first of a series of four public lectures. This act directly defied American traditions forbidding women of any color from addressing political issues at a public forum. Undeterred by censure, Stewart inveighed against slavery in the South and racism and discrimination in the North, while pleading with African Americans to work together to become "an enlightened people." One way to reach that goal was for black men to open their minds to the prospect that "God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive, by their example both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at present" (emphasis added). A powerful "religious spirit" in fifteenth-century Europe had led to "women occupying the chairs of Philosophy and Justice; women writing in Greek, and studying in Hebrew." "Why cannot a religious spirit animate us now?" Stewart asked, thereby calling forth such a spirit among the women in her audience. "Why cannot we become divines and scholars?"3

No one can tell how many African American women were inspired by Maria Stewart, or whether her speeches and writing, collected in 1835 under the title Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart,4 galvanized specific black women to undertake the kind of public "head-work" that Stewart personally exemplified. What is clear is that within a year of the publication of Stewart's Productions, an African American woman preacher named Jarena Lee, strongly imbued with the "religious spirit" that Stewart had invoked in her writing, made public an account of her life and her calling to the ministry, which she entitled The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel (1836). For more than a decade before she decided to publish her autobiography, Lee had kept a journal of her travels and work as an itinerant Methodist evangelist in the North. In 1833 she hired an editor to prepare a "corrected" part of her original narrative for publication, believing that "disadvantages of education" disqualified her from direct authorship of her story.5 But three years later, perhaps heartened by the appearance of Stewart's Productions, Lee published her complete life story at her own expense. Her autobiography's telling subtitle, Written by Herself, asserted both Lee's self-confident identity as "a Coloured Lady" and her independence as an author. No doubt Lee knew that African American spiritual autobiography before 1836 had been the exclusive province of males, most notably Richard Allen, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and the most influential black religious figure in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Yet she persevered, recording in her Life and Religious Experience Allen's ambivalence toward her evolving self-consciousness as a preacher and his ultimate endorsement of her call. In an enlarged and updated edition of her autobiography that Lee brought out in 1849, she recalled Allen's having encouraged her to publish the first edition of her Life.7

As the first African American woman to write a spiritual autobiography, Jarena Lee invited black women to think and express themselves in a fashion even more radical than that advocated by Maria Stewart. Unlike Stewart's Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, a personal essay with an autobiographical preface, Jarena Lee's Life and Religious Experience centers on its author's life from birth to maturity. Lee's decision to make her own life a text, suggesting that her religious experience is so important that it merits a full autobiographical accounting, required substantial spiritual selfconfidence. In the eyes of the world she was, after all, merely a black "servant maid," a woman who could claim no special status or attainments worthy of publicity in early nineteenth-century America. Yet, because Lee became convinced that she had been sanctified by a "holy energy which burned within me, as a fire," she felt an exceptional freedom and obligation to tell others about the redemptive significance of her own life experiences. At first, Lee satisfied her need to express the "holy energy" within by speaking out in church. At the same time, however, like many evangelical Protestants of her time, in the wake of her conversion Lee also began to keep a journal in which she meditated on spiritual matters. Once assured that God had chosen her for a special preaching mission, however, Lee became convinced that keeping a daily journal for her own reflection was not enough. If she could discern in her entire life a design and purpose that led her to what she called "the work I had to do," then it was just as much her responsibility to write her life's story to the glory of God as it was to preach the Word for the same purpose.

Impelled by the same "sweet serenity" and "holy joy" that sustained her through her pioneering preaching career, Jarena Lee wrote her autobiography, unembarrassed by what would have been judged in her time an unseemly self-absorption, especially on the part of an uneducated, lower-class black woman. Audaciously, Lee proclaimed herself "A Coloured Lady" on the title page of her autobiography and made clear, in the conclusion of her *Life*, why her story needed to be not only recorded but publicized and read. "For the

satisfaction of such as may follow after me," Lee states, "I have recorded how the Lord called me to his work, and how he has kept me from falling from grace, as I feared I should." Writing autobiography, therefore, was a natural extension of "the work" of preaching that God called her to do. Lee was not only called but authorized by God, in a doubly significant way. The conviction of her calling endowed her with a special authority to make of her own life a text—how she was called and how she was kept from falling—which she had to record so that "such as may follow after me," which might be women as well as men, would be similarly inspired. Thus, in responding to God's call and making her text, Lee became an author, writing "by herself" a story of herself and publishing that story from her own meager resources to ensure that the inspirational and exemplary character of this "Coloured Lady" would not be forgotten.

The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee voiced the keynotes of a new kind of narrative self-expression espoused by a series of independent African American women who found in the turbulent environment of the 1840s and 1850s, when agitation for women's rights arose from the antislavery struggle, a summons to speak out for freedom. At the heart of Lee's narrative are her conversion and the individual faith that arose from it, a faith that empowered her as a preacher and authorized her as an autobiographer. Although Lee professed complete spiritual centeredness on and submission to God, her faith manifested itself in an equally complete self-reliance, which allowed her to ignore masculine prerogative, even in the traditionally maledominated church, and to cultivate instead women's faith communities as her base of operation.8 It was women, not men, who nurtured her earliest preaching, she points out plainly in her autobiography. That she intended to foster a female readership is explicit from the outset of her story, which begins with an epigraph from the Book of Joel in which God promises to pour out the Spirit so that "your sons, and your daughters shall prophesy." Part of the

feminist agenda implicit in the narrative structure of Lee's autobiography itself is her patterning of her life as a journey that moves away from marriage and family toward what she calls "the work I had to do," her career as a preacher and writer. This work becomes so all-encompassing that Lee "breaks up housekeeping," leaves her young son with other women, and departs from her hometown, reborn as a traveling preacher of the Word, coming and going at the behest of the Spirit, unbidden by and unbeholden to any established secular or religious authority. From individual faith springs the power to speak a truth that men—first black men, then white men, and finally slaveholding men in her narrative—are moved to acknowledge.

Why does Lee plot the story of her career so that it reaches its culmination in a male slaveholder's acknowledgment of the validity of her calling and her message? It may appear that this decision by the black woman narrator grants unwarranted weight to white masculine endorsement of her work. But the fact that Lee notes that after hearing her preach, the formerly cruel slaveholder "became greatly altered in his ways toward the better" hints at her belief in a larger social mission for black women of the Word in the world of whites, though in 1836 she seems only on the threshold of articulating that mission. Within a decade, however, a successor to Lee would step onto the national stage, testifying to a faith that had propelled her out of slavery and into a new calling as exponent of an African American social gospel dedicated to creating a renewing ideal of community across gender and racial divisions in America.

When Sojourner Truth, a self-emancipated former slave from New York, began to compose her autobiography with her collaborator, Olive Gilbert, in 1846, the ultimate outcome, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, published four years later in Boston and New York, made a crucial contribution to the burgeoning slave narrative tradition in the United States. A year before Truth and Gilbert cemented their literary partnership, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick* 

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Douglass, an American Slave had come out, winning an enthusiastic audience at home and abroad and stimulating the writing of further slave narratives, also very positively received, by William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, and James W. C. Pennington.<sup>9</sup> Although Truth, a traveling preacher since receiving her call in 1843, may have been inspired by the work of her fellow itinerant in the Gospel, Jarena Lee, it is even more likely that the accounts of former slaves such as Douglass, whose narrative is quoted in Truth's autobiography, stimulated Truth and Gilbert to create their text. By 1850 a large number of slave narratives were in circulation in North America and Great Britain, and some had been translated into a variety of European languages.<sup>10</sup> But no one had described the outrages of slavery in the United States from a female slave's point of view.<sup>11</sup> It was Truth's detailed and often heart-rending depiction of slavery's assault on the dignity of black women, especially as mothers, that made the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* the first woman's slave narrative in the United States.

Part of the significance of Truth's narrative is reflected in its title, which reads in full Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828. In 1850 few people in the so-called free states of the North wanted to remember that slavery had enjoyed legal sanction in the state of New York a little more than two decades earlier. Unlike the famous male fugitive slaves who made a living excoriating the plantation system of the South, Sojourner Truth had never been closer to Dixie than the Bowery. She had never seen the dissipated southern aristocrats, sadistic overseers, and ruthless slave drivers who represented slavery in the minds of so many northern readers of slave narratives. Nor would Truth cast herself in the popular role of heroic fugitive, à la Douglass, Bibb, or Brown, whose arduous journey from southern enslavement to freedom and success in the North brought most male slave narratives of this time to a satisfying conclusion. Because what Truth knew of slavery in New York

hardly fit the conventions of the slave narrative in the middle of the nine-teenth century, she and her collaborator had to devise a different kind of story. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* would focus more on the suffering of separated families than on the abuse of a single individual. It would stress the spiritual resources of female slaves more than the physical resistance of male slaves. It would identify freedom with the power of a black mother to reclaim her child rather than with African American achievement of status and influence in the white world.

To help present her unusual life story to the public, Sojourner Truth, unable herself to read or write, chose an unmarried northern white woman, Olive Gilbert, whom Truth knew to be a committed reformer and an outspoken opponent of slavery.<sup>12</sup> This interracial collaboration produced a remarkable text unlike any work of African American life writing up to that time. One striking aspect of this collaboration is its deliberate blurring of the identity of the book's author. The title page of the Narrative of Sojourner Truth does not identify its author, although the bottom of the page announces that the book was "Printed for the Author." Nowhere in the book is Olive Gilbert's name mentioned. Yet the first sentence of the Narrative informs the reader that this is a "biography," not an autobiography, the "subject" of which is Sojourner Truth, who is referred to thereafter in the third person ("she") rather than the first person ("I"). Prior to the publication of Narrative of Sojourner Truth, white abolitionists who helped former slaves get their autobiographies into print were careful to delimit their role in the production of these texts to that of "editor" or scribe. For instance, the sensational Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide (1849) was subtitled Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself with Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns, who also lists himself, with Brown, on the title page of the narrative as its "publisher." Similarly, the subtitle of The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada (1849) reads As Narrated by Himself, to signal that although Henson did not write it, the narration is still his autobiography simply recorded by the hand of another.<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between Truth and Gilbert is a good deal more complicated, and creative, than the division of labor that seems to have governed the black and white men who produced the Brown and Henson texts. At times, the author as biographer of Sojourner Truth is intent on using the one-time slave's experience as a pretext for lectures to the reader on various evils of slavery. On these occasions, Truth herself becomes more the object than the subject of the narrative, and the perspective and agenda of the white biographer dominate the text. There is no reason to think that Truth disagreed with Gilbert over the need to unmask and denounce the evils of slavery, especially for slave women. But once the narrative moves beyond the history of Isabella, the "Northern Slave," to recount the mission of the irrepressibly free and independent-minded Sojourner Truth, the dual authorship of this book starts to show a strain. The white biographer seems unsure of how to represent the unique character of Truth, "this child of nature" about whose "most curious and original views" the biographer cannot help but betray a distinct ambivalence. To call a woman over 50 a "child," albeit a child "of nature," testifies to the white biographer's condescension, even as the phrase also suggests a degree of admiration for the genuineness of the black woman's spirit and her lack of pretension. There may also be praise in referring to Truth's "views" as "original," but if they are "curious," they may not be entirely credible. The farther one reads in the narrative, the more the biographer seems at a loss adequately to represent what it is that made Sojourner Truth so impressively original. This seems to be one reason the voice of Truth herself and the voices of those who witnessed her in action assume increasing prominence in the later part of the Narrative. The editorializing biographer gives way to a more reportorial narrator who, perhaps because she does not know how to classify, much less explain, this singular representative of black womanhood, seems more content simply to let Truth and those who have seen and heard her speak. By the end of the Narrative, the voice of Sojourner Truth, whose "spirit-stirring animation" the biographer confesses "can never be transmitted to paper," receives sufficient articulation to place Truth herself, rather than her collaborator, at the speaking center of the text.14 The quotations attributed to Truth indicate that her divinely inspired mission, that of "testifying of the hope that was in her," was dynamic, not static, a work in progress, not chained to a particular religious doctrine or sociopolitical program. The conclusion of her 1850 Narrative suggests that, having settled in Northampton, Massachusetts, among communitarians, utopians, and other idealistic social reformers, Sojourner Truth aimed to play a leading role in building progressive communities with like-minded people, irrespective of race or religious persuasion. Unlike her predecessors, Stewart and Lee, whose work had been primarily within black communities in the North, Truth's Narrative signaled that she was dedicated not only to the abolition of slavery but to the eradication of many other gendered and class-based hierarchies that separated men and women in America.

Publishing her *Narrative* in 1850 was a crucial step in the establishment of Sojourner Truth as a larger-than-life icon of the antislavery and women's rights struggle in the tumultuous decade before the Civil War. Before the *Narrative* the woman who called herself Sojourner Truth was known in a few small evangelical circles in New York and Massachusetts for her preaching, singing, and praying, all rendered, according to one adherent quoted in the *Narrative*, in "her singular and sometimes uncouth modes of expression." After enlisting Gilbert and gaining the ear and the trust of powerful abolitionists like Garrison, who wrote a preface to Truth's *Narrative* five years after writing a preface to Douglass's, Sojourner Truth was on her way to becoming

the most publicly recognized and politically influential African American woman of her time.

The end of the decade that was launched on the publication of the Narrative of Sojourner Truth yielded two additional "firsts" in African American women's literature: a short story entitled "The Two Offers" (1859) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an accomplished woman of letters and a veteran of the New England antislavery lecture circuit, and a novel, Our Nig (1859), by Harriet E. Wilson, as obscure in her own time as Harper or Truth were prominent. Yet, since 1983, when Henry Louis Gates Jr. ascertained that Wilson was a black American woman, Our Nig has attracted a great deal more attention than Harper's trailblazing short story. This is due in part to the fact that the racial identities of the characters in "The Two Offers" are not specified, while the full title of Wilson's novel—Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There—promises a thorough examination of contemporary racial issues through the eyes of the author, who is identified on the novel's title page as "'Our Nig.'" The hybrid form of Our Nig, an autobiography wrapped in the veil of a third-person narrated novel, has also intrigued critics for some of the same reasons that the mixed voices of Narrative of Sojourner Truth have attracted critical analysis. In contrast to the formal tensions and open-ended outcome of Our Nig, "The Two Offers" reads fairly conventionally, concluding with a temperance moral that can divert a reader's attention from its more subversive message to women about marriage.

Despite many differences, both Wilson and Harper turned to fiction at the same time and for reasons very similar to those that led white American women writers to start writing fiction in the late eighteenth century: questions about marriage versus the autonomy of a single life as options for women. "Implicitly and explicitly," Cathy N. Davidson observes, "the novels [by American women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] acknowledge that married life can be bitterly unhappy and encourage women to circumvent disaster by weighing any prospective suitors in the balance of good sense-society's and her own." Thus, early white American women's fiction urged "that the woman must take greater control of her life and must make shrewd judgments of the men who come into her life."15 Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, and Sojourner Truth also portrayed themselves as women who took control of their lives, most notably, in the cases of Stewart and Lee, after their husbands' death. But the question of whether marriage would be the best choice for a woman who wishes to exercise self-determination, spiritual or secular, the autobiographies that launched the early African American women's narrative tradition hesitate to answer. What is perhaps most socially significant about the turn to fiction by Harper and Wilson in 1859 is that with the new imaginative latitude that this form of storytelling allowed, both women could ask what might happen to a black woman who chooses not to marry or who, having married, finds her husband a burden rather than a blessing. Neither Harper nor Wilson disputes antebellum America's traditional assumptions about the value and virtue of marriage for women or the strong investment that black American women had in marriage as a means of attaining social respectability. 16 But both Harper and Wilson write "beyond the ending" of the standard plot of women's fiction of their time, which typically concludes with a fulfilling marriage for the heroine.<sup>17</sup> The upshot of both "The Two Offers" and Our Nig is a remarkable examination of the prospects of women who, because they either choose a single status or are abandoned by their husbands, become, willy-nilly, independent career women.

"The Two Offers" focuses on the tragedy of sweet, passive Laura Lagrange, who, fearful of becoming an "old maid," yields to convention and sentiment and marries a feckless husband. He proves quite unworthy of her;

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