

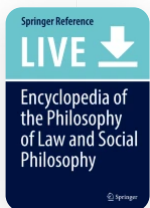
[Home](#) > [Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy](#) > Living reference work entry

Truth, Sojourner

| Living reference work entry | First Online: 15 December 2023

| pp 1–6 | [Cite this living reference work entry](#)

✓ Access provided by SpringerReference Community



[Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy](#)

[Barbara Giovanna Bello](#)

6 Accesses

Access provided by SpringerReference Community. [Download reference work entry](#)

[PDF](#)

Introduction

Sojourner Truth was born as the enslaved Isabella (Belle) Baumfree between 1797 and 1800 (actual date unknown) in rural Hurley (Ulster County, New York). She was legally

emancipated in 1827 and then “became” Sojourner Truth, an itinerant preacher and activist, in 1843.

She is the first of her kind in so many ways that, not surprisingly, she is regarded as a “symbol,” an “icon,” a “legend,” a “philosopher,” and a “study for the philosophers.”

Her story is one of a caterpillar’s metamorphosis from chrysalis to butterfly, marked by her determination to embark on a self-empowering journey of liberation from slavery that led to radical abolitionist and feminist militancy, underpinned by a vibrant spirituality.

Truth succeeded in turning disappointment into opportunity, despite the challenges, standing up for her rights in the courts several times. In the course of her life, she gave memorable speeches to thousands of people, sometimes at abolitionists’ and feminists’ conventions, often as the only black woman – or one of the few. She never learned to read or write, but she had the powerful gift of eloquence, which enabled her to fulfil her spiritual and social mission of achieving greater social justice. As she said: “I tell you I can’t read a book, but I can read the people.”

Her life and work bear witness to how abuse but also solidarity can develop along interlocking lines of oppression, showing the complexity of human relationships in asymmetrical hierarchies. She is undoubtedly an example of “proto-intersectional figures (Casadei [2023](#); Smiet [2021](#)),” embodying the feminist-antiracist-class claims and intersectional activism *ante litteram* that has inspired generations of black feminists in the US and many “others” beyond.

By publishing her own *Narrative* in 1850, dictated to her friend Olive Gilbert, Truth left us one of the earliest written records of the oft-neglected literary genre of the slave narrative, which was supported by abolitionists at the time. This book can be considered as an act of self-representation and vindication, providing first-hand information about her assertions of rights that can be read as political acts in the broadest sense even before “becoming” Sojourner Truth. She then agreed that some excerpts of the *Book of Life*, a collection of her work and correspondence, could be edited by Frances Titus and published in 1875 along with Gilbert’s 1850 *Narrative* (Gilbert and Titus [1875](#)). This edition served to support her in her

old age. Although it resembles an authorized biography, Truth's account is mediated by the editor's selection of personal correspondence, the object of much scrutiny by later scholars. An integral edition, including the *Memorial Chapter*, was published by Titus in 1884, after Truth's death on November 26, 1883, in Battle Creek, Michigan. Her later activity as a feminist abolitionist and preacher comes to us through these and a wide range of other sources, from which the imprint she has left on the path of rights, considerable also because of her remarkable personality, needs to be reconstructed (Painter [1997](#)).

From Slavery to Emancipation

Sojourner Truth was born as Isabella, the youngest daughter of James – called “Bomefree” (“tree” in low Dutch) due to his height – and Elizabeth (Betsy or “Mau Mau,” i.e. “Mama” in Dutch), at the time enslaved to a Dutch owner. She was brought up in the Dutch-speaking slave community, a circumstance that would create language barriers with her future English-speaking owners but also characterized the fluent English she would later acquire, making her inflection impressive and unforgettable.

Of her more than ten siblings, Peter was the only one she knew, the others having been sold when she was too young to later remember them.

From early childhood, Isabella's memories were shaped by the many injustices suffered by slaves. She was particularly troubled by the parents' inconsolable sorrow over the loss of the children who had been sold and their fear of being separated from their two remaining ones, which in fact happened when she was about 9 years old. This is when “*the war begun*” for her. In the *Narrative*, she testifies to the pain caused by this treatment as well as the cruelty of slave auctions. She also describes the inhumane conditions in which slaves were forced to live and the violence against them, which she had to endure herself under her owners (Charles Ardinburgh, John Nealy, a fisherman named Sriver, and John J. Dumont). For instance, she witnessed the release of old slaves (including her own father) who could no longer be exploited and thus became a burden to the owners. She experienced the shocking separation from Robert, the slave of an English owner, who was forced to marry one of his master's slaves to secure his property over their children, after being brutally beaten in front of Isabella. She was battered, whipped, verbally and sexually abused. She was able to stand

hard work.

During the 16 years she spent with Dumont, she was married to his slave Thomas around 1815: the alleged number of children she bore is shrouded in mystery. In fact, according to the *Narrative*, she had five children (Diana, Thomas, Peter, Elizabeth, and Sophia), while she mentions having borne 13 children in other speeches, including the world famous one held at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio.

Until early adulthood, Isabella internalized the submission to her owners that affected her self-esteem, confidence, and autonomy, although a sense of ambivalence toward them emerges from the *Narrative* and the *Book of life*. She seemed to feel a kind of devotion to her masters and, in short, subjected herself to the patriarchal and racist system in which she had been brought up. At the same time, as a freed woman, she acknowledged the hatred she felt for them while suffering their mistreatment. Nevertheless, she forgave Dumont in the last chapter of her *Narrative*.

Subordination, humiliation, and poverty would become the seeds leading Isabella to free herself from slavery: they did not prevent her from imagining that a different future might be possible for herself and other slaves. She had promised her children that one day they would all live together in a home of their own, a dream that was only partially fulfilled in 1856.

She did not wait for Dumont – her owner at the time – to free her and her husband under the New York law of 1827. Disappointed by her owner's reconsideration of his promise to emancipate her and Thomas a year earlier, which he attributed to a form of compensation for an injury to her right hand that prevented her from being fully effective, she chose this moment to take the first step toward freedom through an act of dissent. She left her family, not knowing where and to whom to go, and finally headed to New York City, where she lived until 1843.

At the beginning of her stay in the city, Mr. and Mrs. Van Wagener, both abolitionists, welcomed her kindly, gave her a job, and played a fundamental role in her liberation from Dumont. She became legally free in July 1827 at the age of approximately 40, but she then

counted her years from the time she was emancipated, when she “began to live.”

From Isabella to Sojourner Truth

The vibrant city of New York opened up new worlds for Isabella, and Painter’s assumption that moving there from the countryside helped keep Isabella’s life from falling into oblivion is probably correct. Undoubtedly, this was the chrysalis in which the future Sojourner Truth was to germinate. However, during her 16 years in the city it appears that she was not directly involved in the insurgent activism of New York’s black community. Her development as a woman, mother, and rights holder prevailed over her social activism at this stage, but it was a crucial period for her future militancy.

Isabella’s spiritual sensitivity, personal development, and intuitive belief in social justice evolved throughout her life, as did her civic and social engagement. Her struggle for rights was deeply intertwined with her belief in a God who would provide her with the necessary means to achieve justice in spite of all the material circumstances that acted against her, if she asked him aloud for help, as her mother had taught her in her childhood. Raised in the Dutch slave community of the North, her faith was originally influenced by the syncretism of the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church, Armenian Methodism, and Animism, but this did not prevent her from approaching different religious communities. At the time of her liberation, she could be loosely defined as a Methodist, moving through “perfectionism” to Pentecostalism to Millerites, to which Angelina and Sarah M. Grimké and other abolitionists also belonged.

These experiences influenced such things as the style of her future mission as the anti-slavery feminist “Sojourner Truth,” characterized by a simple life and listening to the Holy Spirit.

Loyal and obedient, Isabella became increasingly aware of her rights. Although her past enslavement was legitimized by law, she relied on the law as a means of asserting her rights and even took her claims to court to have them enforced. For example, when she learned that Dumont had illegally sold her 5-year-old son, Peter, out of state, she filed a lawsuit to get her son back, supported by members of the Quaker community. After her long and

painful trajectory which she followed in order to be heard and trusted as a black woman, she succeeded in obtaining a judgment in her favor. New York also presented Isabella with the disillusionment with the sect (“Kingdom”) led by controversial preacher Mathias (Robert Matthews), to which she had belonged for several years until its dispersal in 1835, as well as a series of material challenges to her own survival.

After a few years, she paused, inquired within herself, reviewed her life, and decided that the city was no longer the place for her. She felt spiritually called to travel east and lecture, once again facing the unknown but with a new awareness.

In 1843, in a symbolic act that marked the beginning of her new life as an itinerant preacher, she gave herself a new name by which she is best known: Sojourner Truth. *Sojourner* means “someone not at home”; *Truth* expresses “her role as preacher.”

Abolitionist–Feminist Activism: Sojourner Truth’s Time

Because of the scars of slavery on her female body and her survival as a poor, single, black mother in New York, she had a heightened awareness of how patriarchy and racism perpetuated hierarchies in society than either black and white men or white women.

She joined new networks that supported her further steps toward anti-slavery feminism, such as the “Northampton Education and Labour Association” in Massachusetts in 1844, founded by abolitionists. Here she met William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) – one of the founders of the “American Anti-Slavery Society” and editor of the *Boston Liberator*, a radical abolitionist newspaper – who had previously published the *Narrative* by Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), a well-known successful escaped slave. Truth’s *Narrative* was published (on credit) by Garrison’s own printer (George Brown Yerrinton) in 1850, also through loans and the help of donors. The proceeds were used to pay off the mortgage on her house.

She met lifelong friends, such as the radical abolitionists Amy and Isaac Post. Amy co-founded the “Western New York Anti-Slavery Society” in 1843 and was one of the feminists who prepared the Seneca Falls Convention, which Truth attended. She became friends with Emily and Marius Robinson (1806–1878), respectively, the publisher and editor of the

“Anti-Slavery Bugle,” which reported on feminist meetings, including the Convention in Akron on May 28, 1851, mentioned above.

It was here that Truth delivered one of her most quoted speeches, best known as “Ain’t I a Woman?”, the provocative rhetorical question that punctuated her words, according to the account of the writer Frances Diana Gage, who chaired the meeting.

This empowering speech was centered on three main claims: she could testify that women can do as much work as men because she had experienced it; women should have the same rights and chances as men; Jesus himself was created by God and carried by a woman, provocatively challenging the male audience: “Man, where is your part?”

Truth fought on several issues, including the rights of women and the black community in general, as well as those of black women, elderly, and children.

Equal pay for equal work and women’s suffrage were key feminist concerns. She wanted women to have their rights and voices. In one of her speeches on women’s economic autonomy from men, she made it clear that the master mentality does not exist in a vacuum.

As for black women, she warned that if they were not given the same rights as black men, the latter would continue to rule over women and “it will be just as bad as before,” even after black men were granted the right to vote (which occurred with the 15th Amendment, passed on February 26, 1869, and ratified on February 3, 1870).

Her assertion of the right to vote led her to complain at the Battle Creek Board of Registration to be added to the voters’ list, although she was unsuccessful.

In Washington, she fought for access to public transport, persuading the president of the street railway to order the removal of the so-called “Jim Crow car.” Later, a law was passed giving blacks the same rights as whites. On another occasion, when she managed to get on a carriage and was assaulted by the conductor, she replied that she “knew the laws as well as he did.” Once again, she believed in the law as a weapon to achieve justice in practice, and she even filed a complaint against the conductor, who had injured her shoulder.

She devoted much energy to helping freed blacks gain access to social rights in Washington: education for children, housing for the elderly and invalids, and land. To achieve these goals, she promoted a widely signed petition to present to the Senate and House of Representatives, trusting in democracy by believing that a majority would embrace this cause. Her vision was for blacks not to be dependent on welfare but to have the opportunity to support themselves and become “useful citizens.”

She met at least three US presidents in her lifetime: Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), Andrew Johnson (1808–1875), and Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885), as a result of the connections provided by feminist abolitionist Lucy Colman (1817–1906) and Truth’s growing notoriety (Colman [1891](#)).

The recognition of Truth’s work was due to many factors, but one important one was the significant press coverage of her activities. This enabled her activities and speeches to have a powerful impact on the public and the networks of acquaintances and friends who could witness and support her.

Even in her old age, she is described as statuesque – a tall and strong woman with a deep, powerful, baritone voice and her sex was often questioned. During one meeting in Indiana in 1858, she was asked to have her breast inspected by some ladies present. In response, after an impassioned speech about the many white babies she had nursed, she exposed her breast to the audience and asked “if they, too, wished to suck.” In this way, she infantilized and ridiculed them.

If the *Narrative* was her self-representation through words, the photographic *cartes de visite* – very popular at the time – were her new way of communicating who she was in the first person: she chose the background and pose of the portrait and opted for a sober style.

All in all, Truth emerges as a complex woman, whose voice could range from whispery and calm to bold and passionate, and whose eloquence gave her authority and captivated listeners. She expressed, through her own particular style, unconventionality, gentle rebelliousness, provocative subversion, tenderness, fairness, and irony.

Legacy

In 2009, Truth became the first black woman to be honored with a sculpture in the United States Capitol. Her recognition as one of the most important “political” actors of her time has been accompanied by a lively interest on the part of activists as well as scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including theology, history, philosophy, social science, and literature. She has also inspired educational material and graphic novels.

Her significant intellectual contribution and living testimony were brought to wider international attention by black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, who entitled her first major book, widely translated (*Ain't I a Woman?* [1981](#); see also Brah and Phoenix [2004](#); White [1985](#)), after her. Rather than focusing on Truth's life, hooks was interested in the political messages she conveyed and their significance for later struggles. The phrase has been used for a large number of feminist claims.

Sojourner Truth can be seen as an example of what Patricia Hill Collins (“Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems*, 33, 6, 1986: 14–32) calls an “outsider within.”

On the one hand, she was an “insider” among the abolitionists and also, later, the feminist networks that welcomed her. Both of these groups included influential white activists who testified to the esteem and affection for Isabella/Sojourner; some examples of their accounts were recorded in her *Book of Life*. Their relationship was praised by almost all concerned. On the other hand, she often remained an “outsider” because of her subordinate socio-economic position, that of a formerly enslaved black woman despite her involvement in these movements.

An important part of her legacy is the creative and proud use of her “outsider within status,” providing a distinctive and prominent standpoint on blacks' and women's rights. Through her activism, Truth helped to demystify white dominance and patriarchy in a variety of settings, ultimately paving the way for interlocking struggle in many different contexts and teaching to everyone ways to subvert the *status quo*.

Conclusion

While Truth's militancy emerged from 1843, the earlier stages of her life paved the way for her commitment to both the abolitionist and feminist causes. She embodied an intersectional epistemological stance, effort, and action that has inspired many ever since, managing to link the claims of black people with those of women, the poor, and the elderly. Guided by a deep spirituality, she trusted that God would provide for her needs.

Although she endured enslavement and discrimination, she trusted the law as a means of achieving social justice, which she sought for herself and others.

Her long-lasting fame is probably due to a series of serendipitous circumstances, but her speeches and actions are an invaluable legacy for taking a critical look at the *status quo* with an eye to social change.

Cross-References

[Douglass, Frederick](#)

[Grimké, Sarah M.](#)

References

Brah A, Phoenix A (2004) Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *J Int Women's Stud* 3:75–86

[Google Scholar](#)

Casadei Th (2023) Alle origini dell'intersezionalità: Sojourner Truth (ca 1797–1883). About gender. *Int J Gender Stud* 361–377

[Google Scholar](#)

Colman L (1891) Reminiscences. H.L. Green, Buffalo

[Book](#) [Google Scholar](#)

Gilbert O, Titus FW (1875) Narrative of Sojourner Truth: a bondswoman of olden times, emancipated by the New York Legislature in the early part of the present century; with a history of her labors and correspondence drawn from her “book of life” (1878; Salem, N.H., 1990). The Author, Boston

[Google Scholar](#)

hooks bell (1981) Ain’t I a woman. Black women and feminism. South End Press, Boston

[Google Scholar](#)

Painter NI (1997) Sojourner Truth. A life, A symbol. W. W. Norton, New York

[Google Scholar](#)

Smiet K (2021) Sojourner Truth and intersectionality. Traveling truths in feminist scholarship. Routledge, Abingdon/New York

[Google Scholar](#)

White DG (1985) Art’n’t I a woman? Female slaves in the plantation south. W.W. Norton, New York

[Google Scholar](#)

Author information

Authors and Affiliations

DISTU-Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, History, Philosophy and Law Studies, Tuscia University, Viterbo, Italy
Barbara Giovanna Bello

Corresponding author

Correspondence to [Barbara Giovanna Bello](#).

Editor information

Editors and Affiliations

Regents Professor of the University System of Maryland and Director of the University of Baltimore Center for International and Comparative Law, University of Baltimore School of Law, Baltimore, USA
Mortimer Sellers

Professor for Legal and Social Philosophy, Department of Legal Theory, International and European Law, University of Salzburg, Austria, Churfurststrasse 1, 5020 Salzburg, Austria
Stephan Kirste

Section Editor information

Department of Law, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Modena, Italy
Gianfrancesco Zanetti

Rights and permissions

[Reprints and permissions](#)

Copyright information

© 2024 Springer Science + Business Media B.V., Dordrecht

About this entry

Cite this entry

Bello, B.G. (2024). Truth, Sojourner. In: Sellers, M., Kirste, S. (eds) Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6730-0_992-1

[.RIS](#) [.ENW](#) [.BIB](#)

DOI	Received	Accepted
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6730-0_992-1	13 June 2023	11 July 2023
Published	Publisher Name	Print ISBN
15 December 2023	Springer, Dordrecht	978-94-007-6730-0
Online ISBN	eBook Packages	
978-94-007-6730-0	Springer Reference Law and Criminology	
	Reference Module Humanities and Social Sciences	
	Reference Module Business, Economics and Social Sciences	

Publish with us

Policies and ethics

Truth, Sojourner



Barbara Giovanna Bello
DISTU-Department of Modern Languages and
Literatures, History, Philosophy and Law Studies,
Tuscia University, Viterbo, Italy

Introduction

Sojourner Truth was born as the enslaved Isabella (Belle) Baumfree between 1797 and 1800 (actual date unknown) in rural Hurley (Ulster County, New York). She was legally emancipated in 1827 and then “became” Sojourner Truth, an itinerant preacher and activist, in 1843.

She is the first of her kind in so many ways that, not surprisingly, she is regarded as a “symbol,” an “icon,” a “legend,” a “philosopher,” and a “study for the philosophers.”

Her story is one of a caterpillar’s metamorphosis from chrysalis to butterfly, marked by her determination to embark on a self-empowering journey of liberation from slavery that led to radical abolitionist and feminist militancy, underpinned by a vibrant spirituality.

Truth succeeded in turning disappointment into opportunity, despite the challenges, standing up for her rights in the courts several times. In the course of her life, she gave memorable speeches to thousands of people, sometimes at abolitionists’ and feminists’ conventions, often as the only black woman – or one of the few. She never

learned to read or write, but she had the powerful gift of eloquence, which enabled her to fulfil her spiritual and social mission of achieving greater social justice. As she said: “I tell you I can’t read a book, but I can read the people.”

Her life and work bear witness to how abuse but also solidarity can develop along interlocking lines of oppression, showing the complexity of human relationships in asymmetrical hierarchies. She is undoubtedly an example of “proto-intersectional figures (Casadei 2023; Smiet 2021),” embodying the feminist-antiracist-class claims and intersectional activism *ante litteram* that has inspired generations of black feminists in the US and many “others” beyond.

By publishing her own *Narrative* in 1850, dictated to her friend Olive Gilbert, Truth left us one of the earliest written records of the oft-neglected literary genre of the slave narrative, which was supported by abolitionists at the time. This book can be considered as an act of self-representation and vindication, providing first-hand information about her assertions of rights that can be read as political acts in the broadest sense even before “becoming” Sojourner Truth. She then agreed that some excerpts of the *Book of Life*, a collection of her work and correspondence, could be edited by Frances Titus and published in 1875 along with Gilbert’s 1850 *Narrative* (Gilbert and Titus 1875). This edition served to support her in her old age. Although it resembles an authorized biography, Truth’s account is mediated by the editor’s selection of personal correspondence, the object of

much scrutiny by later scholars. An integral edition, including the *Memorial Chapter*, was published by Titus in 1884, after Truth's death on November 26, 1883, in Battle Creek, Michigan. Her later activity as a feminist abolitionist and preacher comes to us through these and a wide range of other sources, from which the imprint she has left on the path of rights, considerable also because of her remarkable personality, needs to be reconstructed (Painter 1997).

From Slavery to Emancipation

Sojourner Truth was born as Isabella, the youngest daughter of James – called “Bomefree” (“tree” in low Dutch) due to his height – and Elizabeth (Betsy or “Mau Mau,” i.e. “Mama” in Dutch), at the time enslaved to a Dutch owner. She was brought up in the Dutch-speaking slave community, a circumstance that would create language barriers with her future English-speaking owners but also characterized the fluent English she would later acquire, making her inflection impressive and unforgettable.

Of her more than ten siblings, Peter was the only one she knew, the others having been sold when she was too young to later remember them.

From early childhood, Isabella's memories were shaped by the many injustices suffered by slaves. She was particularly troubled by the parents' inconsolable sorrow over the loss of the children who had been sold and their fear of being separated from their two remaining ones, which in fact happened when she was about 9 years old. This is when “*the war begun*” for her. In the *Narrative*, she testifies to the pain caused by this treatment as well as the cruelty of slave auctions. She also describes the inhumane conditions in which slaves were forced to live and the violence against them, which she had to endure herself under her owners (Charles Ardinburgh, John Nealy, a fisherman named Sriver, and John J. Dumont). For instance, she witnessed the release of old slaves (including her own father) who could no longer be exploited and thus became a burden to the owners. She experienced the shocking separation from Robert, the

slave of an English owner, who was forced to marry one of his master's slaves to secure his property over their children, after being brutally beaten in front of Isabella. She was battered, whipped, verbally and sexually abused. She was able to stand hard work.

During the 16 years she spent with Dumont, she was married to his slave Thomas around 1815: the alleged number of children she bore is shrouded in mystery. In fact, according to the *Narrative*, she had five children (Diana, Thomas, Peter, Elizabeth, and Sophia), while she mentions having borne 13 children in other speeches, including the world famous one held at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio.

Until early adulthood, Isabella internalized the submission to her owners that affected her self-esteem, confidence, and autonomy, although a sense of ambivalence toward them emerges from the *Narrative* and the *Book of life*. She seemed to feel a kind of devotion to her masters and, in short, subjected herself to the patriarchal and racist system in which she had been brought up. At the same time, as a freed woman, she acknowledged the hatred she felt for them while suffering their mistreatment. Nevertheless, she forgave Dumont in the last chapter of her *Narrative*.

Subordination, humiliation, and poverty would become the seeds leading Isabella to free herself from slavery: they did not prevent her from imagining that a different future might be possible for herself and other slaves. She had promised her children that one day they would all live together in a home of their own, a dream that was only partially fulfilled in 1856.

She did not wait for Dumont – her owner at the time – to free her and her husband under the New York law of 1827. Disappointed by her owner's reconsideration of his promise to emancipate her and Thomas a year earlier, which he attributed to a form of compensation for an injury to her right hand that prevented her from being fully effective, she chose this moment to take the first step toward freedom through an act of dissent. She left her family, not knowing where and to whom to go, and finally headed to New York City, where she lived until 1843.

At the beginning of her stay in the city, Mr. and Mrs. Van Wagener, both abolitionists, welcomed her kindly, gave her a job, and played a fundamental role in her liberation from Dumont. She became legally free in July 1827 at the age of approximately 40, but she then counted her years from the time she was emancipated, when she “began to live.”

From Isabella to Sojourner Truth

The vibrant city of New York opened up new worlds for Isabella, and Painter’s assumption that moving there from the countryside helped keep Isabella’s life from falling into oblivion is probably correct. Undoubtedly, this was the chrysalis in which the future Sojourner Truth was to germinate. However, during her 16 years in the city it appears that she was not directly involved in the insurgent activism of New York’s black community. Her development as a woman, mother, and rights holder prevailed over her social activism at this stage, but it was a crucial period for her future militancy.

Isabella’s spiritual sensitivity, personal development, and intuitive belief in social justice evolved throughout her life, as did her civic and social engagement. Her struggle for rights was deeply intertwined with her belief in a God who would provide her with the necessary means to achieve justice in spite of all the material circumstances that acted against her, if she asked him aloud for help, as her mother had taught her in her childhood. Raised in the Dutch slave community of the North, her faith was originally influenced by the syncretism of the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church, Armenian Methodism, and Animism, but this did not prevent her from approaching different religious communities. At the time of her liberation, she could be loosely defined as a Methodist, moving through “perfectionism” to Pentecostalism to Millerites, to which Angelina and Sarah M. Grimké and other abolitionists also belonged.

These experiences influenced such things as the style of her future mission as the anti-slavery

feminist “Sojourner Truth,” characterized by a simple life and listening to the Holy Spirit.

Loyal and obedient, Isabella became increasingly aware of her rights. Although her past enslavement was legitimized by law, she relied on the law as a means of asserting her rights and even took her claims to court to have them enforced. For example, when she learned that Dumont had illegally sold her 5-year-old son, Peter, out of state, she filed a lawsuit to get her son back, supported by members of the Quaker community. After her long and painful trajectory which she followed in order to be heard and trusted as a black woman, she succeeded in obtaining a judgment in her favor. New York also presented Isabella with the disillusionment with the sect (“Kingdom”) led by controversial preacher Mathias (Robert Matthews), to which she had belonged for several years until its dispersal in 1835, as well as a series of material challenges to her own survival.

After a few years, she paused, inquired within herself, reviewed her life, and decided that the city was no longer the place for her. She felt spiritually called to travel east and lecture, once again facing the unknown but with a new awareness.

In 1843, in a symbolic act that marked the beginning of her new life as an itinerant preacher, she gave herself a new name by which she is best known: Sojourner Truth. *Sojourner* means “someone not at home”; *Truth* expresses “her role as preacher.”

Abolitionist-Feminist Activism: Sojourner Truth’s Time

Because of the scars of slavery on her female body and her survival as a poor, single, black mother in New York, she had a heightened awareness of how patriarchy and racism perpetuated hierarchies in society than either black and white men or white women.

She joined new networks that supported her further steps toward anti-slavery feminism, such as the “Northampton Education and Labour Association” in Massachusetts in 1844, founded by abolitionists. Here she met William Lloyd

Garrison (1805–1879) – one of the founders of the “American Anti-Slavery Society” and editor of the *Boston Liberator*, a radical abolitionist newspaper – who had previously published the *Narrative* by Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), a well-known successful escaped slave. Truth’s *Narrative* was published (on credit) by Garrison’s own printer (George Brown Yerrinton) in 1850, also through loans and the help of donors. The proceeds were used to pay off the mortgage on her house.

She met lifelong friends, such as the radical abolitionists Amy and Isaac Post. Amy co-founded the “Western New York Anti-Slavery Society” in 1843 and was one of the feminists who prepared the Seneca Falls Convention, which Truth attended. She became friends with Emily and Marius Robinson (1806–1878), respectively, the publisher and editor of the “Anti-Slavery Bugle,” which reported on feminist meetings, including the Convention in Akron on May 28, 1851, mentioned above.

It was here that Truth delivered one of her most quoted speeches, best known as “Ain’t I a Woman?”, the provocative rhetorical question that punctuated her words, according to the account of the writer Frances Diana Gage, who chaired the meeting.

This empowering speech was centered on three main claims: she could testify that women can do as much work as men because she had experienced it; women should have the same rights and chances as men; Jesus himself was created by God and carried by a woman, provocatively challenging the male audience: “Man, where is your part?”

Truth fought on several issues, including the rights of women and the black community in general, as well as those of black women, elderly, and children.

Equal pay for equal work and women’s suffrage were key feminist concerns. She wanted women to have their rights and voices. In one of her speeches on women’s economic autonomy from men, she made it clear that the master mentality does not exist in a vacuum.

As for black women, she warned that if they were not given the same rights as black men, the latter would continue to rule over women and “it

will be just as bad as before,” even after black men were granted the right to vote (which occurred with the 15th Amendment, passed on February 26, 1869, and ratified on February 3, 1870).

Her assertion of the right to vote led her to complain at the Battle Creek Board of Registration to be added to the voters’ list, although she was unsuccessful.

In Washington, she fought for access to public transport, persuading the president of the street railway to order the removal of the so-called “Jim Crow car.” Later, a law was passed giving blacks the same rights as whites. On another occasion, when she managed to get on a carriage and was assaulted by the conductor, she replied that she “knew the laws as well as he did.” Once again, she believed in the law as a weapon to achieve justice in practice, and she even filed a complaint against the conductor, who had injured her shoulder.

She devoted much energy to helping freed blacks gain access to social rights in Washington: education for children, housing for the elderly and invalids, and land. To achieve these goals, she promoted a widely signed petition to present to the Senate and House of Representatives, trusting in democracy by believing that a majority would embrace this cause. Her vision was for blacks not to be dependent on welfare but to have the opportunity to support themselves and become “useful citizens.”

She met at least three US presidents in her lifetime: Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), Andrew Johnson (1808–1875), and Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885), as a result of the connections provided by feminist abolitionist Lucy Colman (1817–1906) and Truth’s growing notoriety (Colman 1891).

The recognition of Truth’s work was due to many factors, but one important one was the significant press coverage of her activities. This enabled her activities and speeches to have a powerful impact on the public and the networks of acquaintances and friends who could witness and support her.

Even in her old age, she is described as statuesque – a tall and strong woman with a deep, powerful, baritone voice and her sex was often

questioned. During one meeting in Indiana in 1858, she was asked to have her breast inspected by some ladies present. In response, after an impassioned speech about the many white babies she had nursed, she exposed her breast to the audience and asked “if they, too, wished to suck.” In this way, she infantilized and ridiculed them.

If the *Narrative* was her self-representation through words, the photographic *cartes de visite* – very popular at the time – were her new way of communicating who she was in the first person: she chose the background and pose of the portrait and opted for a sober style.

All in all, Truth emerges as a complex woman, whose voice could range from whispery and calm to bold and passionate, and whose eloquence gave her authority and captivated listeners. She expressed, through her own particular style, unconventionality, gentle rebelliousness, provocative subversion, tenderness, fairness, and irony.

Legacy

In 2009, Truth became the first black woman to be honored with a sculpture in the United States Capitol. Her recognition as one of the most important “political” actors of her time has been accompanied by a lively interest on the part of activists as well as scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including theology, history, philosophy, social science, and literature. She has also inspired educational material and graphic novels.

Her significant intellectual contribution and living testimony were brought to wider international attention by black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, who entitled her first major book, widely translated (*Ain't I a Woman?* 1981; see also Brah and Phoenix 2004; White 1985), after her. Rather than focusing on Truth's life, hooks was interested in the political messages she conveyed and their significance for later struggles. The phrase has been used for a large number of feminist claims.

Sojourner Truth can be seen as an example of what Patricia Hill Collins (“Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance

of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems*, 33, 6, 1986: 14–32) calls an “outsider within.”

On the one hand, she was an “insider” among the abolitionists and also, later, the feminist networks that welcomed her. Both of these groups included influential white activists who testified to the esteem and affection for Isabella/Sojourner; some examples of their accounts were recorded in her *Book of Life*. Their relationship was praised by almost all concerned. On the other hand, she often remained an “outsider” because of her subordinate socio-economic position, that of a formerly enslaved black woman despite her involvement in these movements.

An important part of her legacy is the creative and proud use of her “outsider within status,” providing a distinctive and prominent standpoint on blacks' and women's rights. Through her activism, Truth helped to demystify white dominance and patriarchy in a variety of settings, ultimately paving the way for interlocking struggle in many different contexts and teaching to everyone ways to subvert the *status quo*.

Conclusion

While Truth's militancy emerged from 1843, the earlier stages of her life paved the way for her commitment to both the abolitionist and feminist causes. She embodied an intersectional epistemological stance, effort, and action that has inspired many ever since, managing to link the claims of black people with those of women, the poor, and the elderly. Guided by a deep spirituality, she trusted that God would provide for her needs.

Although she endured enslavement and discrimination, she trusted the law as a means of achieving social justice, which she sought for herself and others.

Her long-lasting fame is probably due to a series of serendipitous circumstances, but her speeches and actions are an invaluable legacy for taking a critical look at the *status quo* with an eye to social change.

Cross-References

- [Douglass, Frederick](#)
- [Grimké, Sarah M.](#)

References

- Brah A, Phoenix A (2004) Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *J Int Women's Stud* 3:75–86
- Casadei Th (2023) Alle origini dell'intersezionalità: Sojourner Truth (ca 1797–1883). About gender. *Int J Gender Stud* 361–377
- Colman L (1891) *Reminiscences*. H.L. Green, Buffalo
- Gilbert O, Titus FW (1875) *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: a bondswoman of olden times, emancipated by the New York Legislature in the early part of the present century; with a history of her labors and correspondence drawn from her "book of life"* (1878; Salem, N.H., 1990). The Author, Boston
- hooks bell (1981) *Ain't I a woman. Black women and feminism*. South End Press, Boston
- Painter NI (1997) *Sojourner Truth. A life, A symbol*. W. W. Norton, New York
- Smiet K (2021) *Sojourner Truth and intersectionality. Traveling truths in feminist scholarship*. Routledge, Abingdon/New York
- White DG (1985) *Ain't I a woman? Female slaves in the plantation south*. W.W. Norton, New York

© 2024 Springer Science + Business Media B.V., Dordrecht

About this entry

Cite this entry

Bello, B.G. (2024). Truth, Sojourner. In: Sellers, M., Kirste, S. (eds) Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6730-0_992-1

[.RIS↓](#) [.ENW↓](#) [.BIB↓](#)

DOI	Received	Accepted
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6730-0_992-1	13 June 2023	11 July 2023
Published	Publisher Name	Print ISBN
15 December 2023	Springer, Dordrecht	978-94-007-6730-0
Online ISBN	eBook Packages	
978-94-007-6730-0	Springer Reference Law and Criminology	
	Reference Module Humanities and Social Sciences	
	Reference Module Business, Economics and Social Sciences	

Publish with us
