

Final Essay Assignment: Sojourner Truth, Ain't I a Woman?

Identity for Sojourner Truth was a foregone conclusion before her appearance at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron. She battled her entire life theoretically to establish dignity as a human being within slavery, let alone as a woman of color. However, changing her name in 1843 to symbolize a strong identity within her faith was the beginning of her legacy as a preacher, public speaker, and advocate for women's rights and the abolitionist movement. Influences of place, education, and the press championed Truth's identity. Ironically, in her efforts to establish a voice within slavery and the women's movement, identity was also created by those who sought to control it.

Although touted as inaccurate, Gage's version of Truth's speech at Akron describes those opposing her as less than human, with her supporters unwittingly competing to define an identity for her to suit their respective agendas. Within Gage's account is an example of an attack on Truth's person as the crowd decried, "An abolition affair!" "Woman's rights and niggers!" "I told you so!" "Go it, darkey!" (McGraw-Hill 1413) However, by boldly stepping forward and declaring her identity that day, Brah and Phoenix emphasize that Truth's experience in Akron was a potent reminder that the struggle for equality is a complex and ongoing rhetorical process within a democratic society (77). Sojourner would ultimately deliver her message of freedom and equality to cultures and people across the country, which defined identity as she encountered various views publicly and privately.

Within the realm of education, although Truth was illiterate and said to have a learning disability, she wasted no time marketing herself, securing white abolitionist ghostwriters for her

platforms and frequently downplaying the importance of formal education. Instead, "she relied on her homegrown wisdom to promote her charm" (Samra 162). Painter states it was Truth's position that "she did not need to read in order to know" (Painter 466). Further, as illustrated in the Gage account of Truth's speech, the author writes, "She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house..." (McGraw-Hill 1413) Sojourner positively identified with the respective movements by aligning herself with white figureheads of abolition and suffrage. Although perceived as a pawn per se, she ultimately fulfilled a need in America's political culture. Finally, formed within her speeches, sermons, and published works on suffrage and freedom, her identity split into a "symbol – Sojourner Truth, who stands for strong black women," and a "historical character Isabella, who was born into slavery." (Painter 464). The media of the nineteenth century, considered print newspapers, held less merit through conventional channels for Truth as, according to Samra, she chose to market herself and her published *Narrative* by "word of mouth and a good sales pitch" (Samra 159). Within Truth's *Narrative*, published a year earlier, were the seeds of intersectionality, an ideology about how social and political identities associate to form prejudice and privilege (namely, suffrage and slavery). Further, Sojourner recognized a sense of self at the convention in Akron that day, "march[ing] deliberately into the church, walk[ing] with the air of a queen up the aisle, and tak[ing] her seat upon the pulpit steps" (McGraw-Hill 1413), and could very well be considered "her epiphany, or birth, as a woman, and an artist" (Samra 169).

The author's identity change from a Christian worldview is inherent in Truth's name change from Isabella Van Wagener (born Isabella Baumfree) to Sojourner Truth in 1843 to express her convictions of faith (McGraw-Hill 1412). Sojourner looked to her name to secure her

sense of self, an identity she confirmed while attending a Methodist church and experiencing a revelation from God. Truth's speech in Akron was almost entirely from a Biblical worldview, stating, from Robinson's version, "I have heard the Bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again" (McGraw-Hill 1412). Over time, Truth became a preacher and learned through practice and repetition. Finally, her biographer wrote that Sojourner listened every minute for the voice of the Holy Spirit for direction over education, reiterating the impetus for her name change within scripture, "For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding" (*The Bible*, English Standard Version, 1 Chron. 29:15).

Sojourner Truth remains a symbol and historic character over the political and societal issue of equality that remains pervasive today. She proved her identity as a Christ-follower with a permanent name change to mirror scripture, boldly spoke in places across the country as a preacher and intersectional advocate, and wisely connected with educated and influential suffragists and abolitionists to convey her *Narrative*. Finally, reflective of her name, Truth evidenced that she could successfully sojourn and influence the media of her time with her faith and countenance alone.

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