
Introduction

Nell Irvin Painter

Sojourner Truth's memory is a study in the power of words. To start with, her very name commands attention: someone named "Sojourner Truth" must have been somebody. Second, the pithy comments that made her enduring reputation sum up wisdom that every right-thinking person recognizes as true, long before having put the truth into words. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries her best-known phrase was "Frederick, is God dead?" Today we are more likely to associate her with another rhetorical question: "Ar'n't I a woman?"

The reputations of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, also a former slave who was active in the mid-nineteenth century, have somehow survived several generations. But unlike

Tubman, who led hundreds of slaves to freedom and is remembered, appropriately, as the "Moses of her people," Truth's actions are not so easily characterized. Few who know her name can recall what, exactly, she is famous for beyond her lines. This very mystery creates a curiosity about the person behind the phrases and draws readers to life-writing about her, whether in the form of biography or autobiography.

SOJOURNER TRUTH LIFE-WRITING

Throughout her life Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883) was illiterate, which means that virtually everything we know of her comes either through other people's documentation or information she narrated to others.¹ Her first piece of life-writing, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, which she published herself with the assistance of a Connecticut abolitionist amanuensis named Olive Gilbert, appeared in 1850. This third-person biography is very much an as-told-to story that includes Gilbert's interpretations of what she thought Truth must have been feeling at given times. It consists of a 128-page narrative that covers her life through slavery, emancipation in 1827, and activities as a freedwoman up to 1849. Later editions of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, which appeared in 1878 and 1885, added reprints of newspaper clippings and quotations from Truth's "Book of Life," which was essentially an auto-graph book in which she collected greetings and signatures of famous people, including President Abraham Lincoln. The *Narrative* forms the bases of all subsequent biographical writing about Truth. Harriet Beecher Stowe drew upon it to prepare the most widely circulated nineteenth-century essay on Truth, "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl," which appeared in the April 1863 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Truth's memory remained alive thanks to new editions of her *Narrative* and short entries in anthologies and collected biographies. The first volume of *The History of Woman Suffrage* (1881) includes the "Reminiscences" by Frances D. Gage, which had also ap-

peared in the 1878 edition of Sojourner Truth's *Narrative*. Gage's account presents the most familiar version of what has come to be known as the "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech of 1851. In 1902 Pauline Hopkins, editor of *The Colored American*, published a short biographical sketch of Truth in her magazine.²

The first full-length biography of Truth, *God's Faithful Pilgrim*, by Arthur Huff Fauset, an anthropology professor at Howard University, appeared in 1937. The book was the first volume of what was to have been a series of biographies of prominent African Americans.³ Thanks to Fauset's book and to short entries in collective biographies, Truth remained firmly implanted in African-American historiography until the Civil Rights era, which produced two new full-length biographies.

Interestingly enough, both of Truth's 1960s biographers were Left-leaning women of European heritage. Hertha Pauli, originally from Austria, published *Her Name Was Sojourner Truth* in 1962.⁴ Five years later, Jacqueline Bernard, originally from France, published *Journey Toward Freedom*, republished for the first time in this edition. Neither Fauset, Pauli, or Bernard was a professional historian, and all three wrote for general and young readers, aiming, perhaps, for their most likely audiences and recognizing, certainly, the difficulty of presenting any kind of rigorously historical biography of a subject who lacked personal papers entirely.

JOURNEY TOWARD FREEDOM

First published in 1967, Jacqueline Bernard's *Journey Toward Freedom* received prominent and positive reviews. Robert Coles reviewed the book in the *Washington Post*, and Richard Elman, in the *New York Times Book Review*, remarked that Bernard was "quietly factual" in her presentation of history and "lyrical when the demand arises." The *Times Book Review* listed *Journey Toward Freedom* as one of the best books of 1967. The *Saturday Review* found the biography "inspiring."⁵

Using material from *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Stowe's "Libyan Sibyl," and a variety of local and specialized histories, Bernard constructed the backbone of her biography of Truth. To appeal to general readers, she added dialogue, some from the *Narrative*, other from her own imagination. *Journey Toward Freedom* is a narrative history that closely follows its sources, giving a whole chapter to Sojourner Truth's encounter with roughnecks one evening in the woods of western Massachusetts and a chapter to Truth's residence in the Northampton Association in 1844–1846, which brought her into contact with Garrisonian abolitionists and women's rights advocates. While Truth's ability to calm young men who had intended initially to disrupt her camp meeting demonstrates her powers of persuasion, the episode does not represent a turning point in Truth's development. However, the importance of Truth's stay in Northampton cannot be understated, as it remade her public persona. Having been an itinerant preacher along Methodist and Millerite lines since she had taken the name Sojourner Truth in 1843, after Northampton Truth began to speak up for anti-slavery and feminist causes. Without her stay at the Northampton Association, Sojourner Truth probably would not have become any better known than other black women preachers of the antebellum era such as her fellow Methodists, Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw.⁶

General readers may still read Bernard with satisfaction, for, despite a few historical inaccuracies, her story is sound. Her readers will learn when Isabella Van Wagenen became Sojourner Truth, what she did on the lecture circuit, and with whom she traveled. Bernard is particularly good on Truth's last years, during which she secured aid for the freedpeople and collected signatures on a petition to Congress for western lands.

Journey Toward Freedom does contain a few small errors. Contrary to Bernard's recountal, Isabella/Sojourner Truth had attended camp meetings before 1843 (p. 124). In fact, she had begun to make a reputation as a gifted preacher shortly after her arrival in New York City in 1829. The book is factually

misleading in one instance only, the year in which Truth asked Frederick Douglass whether God were dead. Perhaps for rhetorical punch, Bernard puts this question into the same chapter with Truth's speech before the Akron women's rights convention of 1851, when she asked "and ar'n't I a woman?" (p. 167). Truth confronted Douglass in 1859, after Douglass and John Brown had held extensive conversations and Douglass was doubting whether the abolition of slavery could be accomplished peaceably.⁷

The most interesting aspects of Bernard's interpretation of Sojourner Truth concern Truth's feelings about race. In this regard Bernard takes two approaches. She emphasizes material that is mentioned in passing in the *Narrative*, and she makes up scenes that do not appear in the *Narrative* at all. In the first instance, Bernard presents an enslaved Isabella who is an intensely lonely young woman whose loneliness is her own doing. This Isabella has chosen to give her loyalty to her master, John Dumont, whom she identifies with God. Isabella takes great satisfaction—which Bernard characterizes as an "obsession"—in pleasing Dumont, for which her fellow slaves make fun of her. In two separate passages, Bernard quotes their taunting Isabella with the jeer: "White man's pet!" (In the *Narrative* Isabella says once that Dumont's slaves called her "white man's nigger.") Cut off from friendship and support from her fellow slaves by her attachment to Dumont, Bernard's Isabella nonetheless fails to forge close ties with whites. She misses the company of black people, realizing all the while that she is incapable of being truly close to her fellow slaves. In the early pages of *Journey Toward Freedom*, Isabella's feelings towards her fellow slaves are deeply ambivalent. Bernard writes that she was "a young woman alone in both the white and black worlds."⁸

According to both the *Narrative* and Bernard, Isabella had a brief love affair that ended tragically. Then Isabella married Tom, an older man who was also a slave of John Dumont's, evidently at Dumont's instigation. Although Isabella bore Tom five children, *Journey Toward Freedom* depicts an empty rela-

tionship between Tom and Isabella, as though Isabella felt no attachment to her husband. As sources that would illuminate these emotions do not exist, it is not possible to know whether her relationship with Tom was characterized by the same ambivalence that Bernard sees in the young Isabella's relationships with other black people, including Tom. But the *Narrative* seems to point toward a warmer union, a fairly ordinary, nineteenth-century, working-class marriage that was neither coercive nor middle-class-companionate. Isabella felt enough confidence in Tom to leave her children in his care when she went to New York City in 1829.

Bernard's Isabella/Sojourner Truth is a woman who loves her children intensely but who cannot afford to have them with her until she moves to Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1856. In Battle Creek, Truth gathers her daughters (she had lost contact with her only son, Peter, when he was a young sailor in the early 1830s) and grandchildren around her in a house that she pays for by lecturing and selling her book, songs, and calling cards. Yet even when she is surrounded by family and depends on them, Bernard's Truth remains a more solitary character than appears in the *Narrative*.

Bernard's most inventive interpretation relates to Isabella's discovery of Methodism in 1828. Bernard describes Isabella's witnessing of a service in a new Methodist church in her Ulster County neighborhood, in which members of the congregation tell how they found Jesus. As all those inside the church are white, Isabella does not enter. But she watches the service from outside for several hours. As Isabella realizes the similarity between her own conversion experience and those described by the Methodists, Bernard quotes her saying to herself: "How can white folks be so much like me?" (p. 87). On second reading, one realizes that "so much like me" means "having had religious experiences similar to mine." But given the portrayal of an Isabella suspended between two racial (not religious) worlds, the question seems at first to mean something both more literal and more general. It seems to say that Isabella, this lonely woman who had felt at home with neither

white nor black people, found her community among whites. Creating an entire scene that does not occur in the *Narrative*, and having Isabella describe the congregants by race, Bernard emphasizes the whiteness over the Methodism of the beloved community that Isabella discovers in 1828. This scene makes race more salient in *Journey Toward Freedom* than it is in the *Narrative*.

I suspect that Bernard realized the tenuousness of any attachment across racial lines in antebellum America and that she was saying (at least) two things at once in the quote in which Isabella realizes her identity with white Methodists. More obviously, Bernard lets Isabella find a group of people to whom she feels some ties. Yet by underlining the Methodists' race, Bernard warns readers that the identification between white Methodists and black Isabella cannot be complete or easy. The common religious identity that Isabella finds with white Methodists helps her leave Ulster County but does not give her an entirely new spiritual home. This description of Isabella's ambivalence and estrangement may apply equally well to Jacqueline Bernard's own experience.

JACQUELINE BERNARD

One of Bernard's friends observed that biographers do not choose their subjects haphazardly. Just as Bernard described Truth as "a powerful personality . . . [of] strong-minded opinions and no-nonsense behavior," so these phrases applied full well to Bernard herself. Bernard was unusually self-reliant, called by a playwright friend "one of the most sweetly independent women I have ever known." A person of great energy, Bernard was also a resourceful woman whose friends and acquaintances admired her spunk and good humor. One of her many friends remembered that "she always made you feel by her example that a woman on her own could lead a rich, full life." Yet she could also be self-righteous, judgmental,

withdrawn, and ultimately mysterious. As readers come away from *Journey Toward Freedom* feeling that they cannot know Sojourner Truth fully, so friends sometimes felt that part of Jacqueline Bernard remained beyond their ken.⁹

Bernard lived an unusual life, all of which she did not reveal to the friends of her maturity. She was born Jacqueline de Sieyes in the French Alps in 1921; her father was a French count, her mother a Bostonian. The family left France when Jacqueline was a child, and she was raised in the United States. Although Bernard lived in Washington, D.C., with her mother, while her father lived in New York City, she felt closer to her father than to her mother. Graduating from the Madeira School in 1939, Bernard attended Vassar College for two years, during which she was a restless and mediocre student. By 1940 or 1941 she was casting about for adventure, pleading with her father to help her find work in a settlement house or join the Free French in Brazzaville in French Equatorial Africa. Failing in both ambitions, she dropped out of Vassar, spent a year at the University of Chicago, then made her way to Mexico City, where she worked on *Tiempo*, a weekly magazine, and met and married Allen Bernard. They had a son, Joel, in 1945. In 1949, they divorced. With another divorced friend, Bernard founded Parents Without Partners in 1956 but left the organization as it became little more than a place to meet people. "I was interested in social change, not a social life," she said.¹⁰

Between the end of her marriage and the publication of *Journey Toward Freedom*, Bernard worked at a variety of jobs that will sound familiar to educated women of her generation. She found employment as a waitress, factory worker, Macy's salesperson, substitute teacher, and in a host of other positions that were ill-paid and unchallenging. In the early 1960s, while her son was an undergraduate at Cornell University, she took courses at the City College of New York and began working on her biography of Sojourner Truth.

Without Bernard's testimony on the point, I cannot say exactly what drew her to Truth. A fellow writer and acquaintance, Dorothy Sterling, had mentioned the possibility of

Bernard's contributing a volume to a series of biographies for young people, but that project seems to have come to fruition as *Voices from the Southwest*, which Bernard published in 1973. The answer seems to lie in Bernard's personal politics. In the 1950s she was briefly a member of the Communist Party, which was the only political party in the United States at the time that put black civil rights at the top of its agenda. Although Bernard left the CP rather quickly—lacking, her son suspects, a sufficiently bureaucratic and sectarian personality for that organization at that time—she kept her concern for racial justice.¹¹ She began work on the Truth biography in 1962 and in 1964 raised money for northern students, including her son, who went to Mississippi to register black voters during Freedom Summer. In short, Bernard's biographical undertaking of the early 1960s did not represent a new turn in her thinking. Her sister recalls that Bernard had "always [been] interested in women of courage" and had long exhibited a "sensitivity to injustice. . . . Civil rights and racial equality had certainly been a central part of her thinking for a decade before [1962]."¹²

In the late 1960s, after W. W. Norton published *Journey Toward Freedom*, Bernard demonstrated against the Vietnam War and for the United Farm Workers. She published her book on Southwesterners and tried in vain to publish a similar book on Appalachian women. In 1969 Dell brought out a paperback edition of *Journey Toward Freedom*, but by the early 1970s both hardcover and softcover editions were out of print, despite having made bestseller lists with sales of more than 25,000 copies. As early as 1973 Bernard realized that Truth was becoming a heroine for feminists, and she wanted to revise *Journey Toward Freedom* so as to portray Truth as a feminist as well as an abolitionist. Bernard's Truth did not appear to be an attractive property to publishers in the 1970s and 1980s, so that neither Bernard nor her agent was able to get the book reprinted within her lifetime.

After going to dinner and attending a movie with friends, Jacqueline Bernard was murdered in her apartment on Riverside

Drive, New York, in August 1983. The murder has not been solved.

When I agreed to write this Introduction, I knew nothing about Jacqueline Bernard beyond the information conveyed in the paragraph at the back of the hardcover edition of *Journey Toward Freedom*. Having gotten to know her after her death, I feel doubly privileged to be able to comment on the lives of both an intriguing biographical subject and an engaging biographer. Both Truth and Bernard were fine, big, mature women with deep convictions about the value of every human life. Both were eloquent and fearless feminists who can teach us about women's strength and eloquence. Both had the knack of expressing their truths pungently, illuminating the worlds in which they lived. Both, finally, elude our complete understanding.

NOTES

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1. See Carleton Mabey, "Sojourner Truth, Bold Prophet: Why Did She Never Learn to Read?" *New York History* (January 1988), 55-77.

2. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al., eds. *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1 (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881), 115-117; Pauline Hopkins, *Colored American Magazine*, 1902.

3. Arthur Huff Fauset. *Sojourner Truth: God's Faithful Pilgrim* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938). The series did not continue.

4. Hertha Pauli. *Her Name Was Sojourner Truth* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962). The sister of the Nobel Prize physicist Wolfgang Pauli, Hertha Pauli had been an actress and playwright in Germany and in her native Vienna until the Nazi era. She moved to Paris after the Nazi occupation of Austria in 1938 and to the United States after the fall of France in 1940. In addition to her study of So-

journer Truth, Pauli also wrote a biography of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. She died in New York in 1973, at the age of sixty-three.

5. *New York Times Book Review*, 26 Nov. 1967; *Saturday Review*, 16 Dec. 1967.

6. On Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, see William Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1986).

7. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (New York, 1892), 275.

8. *Journey Toward Freedom*, 37-38, 40-42, 63.

9. Madelon Bedell, Eve Merriam, and Livia Turgeon, quoted in Linda Wolfe, "The Death of an Idealist: Who Killed Jacqui Bernard?" *New York Magazine*, 17 Oct. 1983, 67-68.

10. Quoted in Wolfe, 64.

11. Joel Bernard to Nell Irvin Painter, telephone interview, 14 Dec. 1989.

12. Henriette Montgomery to Dorothy Sterling, 21 Oct. 1988.