

# Sojourner Truth and Her Contemporary Media: Reports of Truth's Identity, Intelligence, and Eloquence

Karis Blaker | University of Michigan – Ann Arbor

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Late nineteenth-century news reporters struggled with depictions of Sojourner Truth. There was tension between her obvious influence and dominant ideologies at the time, but the acknowledgments of her power, regardless of how mediated, were enough to solidify her place in American history. People were incredibly fascinated by her, even if they were not quite ready to accept her message. While they were sure to mention her race, gender, and lack of formal education in derogatory ways, the fact that the media reported on her so heavily reveals the novelty status of Truth, and the platform that this gave her in a time when people like her were not readily listened to. Their interest in her might have more to do with the sensationalized aspects of her identity (her status as a former slave, an uneducated black woman, her presumed old age), but that interest made sure her reputation as an effective advocate of abolition and women's rights lived on long after she did. This says a lot about how people of marginalized identities find a platform from which to speak and are remembered for their insistence on such a platform, despite attempts to mediate their influence. This article examines historical newspapers for how mediated these reports were and explores the impact that mediation may have had on Truth's reputation in her own time.

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Today, Sojourner Truth is regarded as an inspirational figure in American history, celebrated for her contributions to the causes of abolition and women's rights. The general perception of her in her own time, however, is not well known. Her life and work are now thought of as importantly representing formerly enslaved women in that time period, but was she taken seriously by her own media and audiences? This article attempts to uncover Truth's contemporary public image by researching representations of her in the press of her time. In looking at Sojourner Truth's media representation in her own time, I am investigating who is authorized to speak in social justice movements, and how those who are unauthorized

find platforms from which to speak anyway. What do reports on Truth reveal about her authority, or what people perceived her authorization to be?

In order to answer these questions, I researched historical newspaper articles printed between the years of 1850 and 1885 that mention Sojourner Truth, either in the title or in the full text, using the ProQuest *Historical Newspapers* database. I looked for any depictions, positive or negative, of Truth's identity, personality, style, and ideas. Of the twenty articles my research located, I chose to analyze eight that demonstrate clearly contradictory reports of Truth, either between two articles printed by the same newspaper, or within a single article,

and best represent the tension between Truth's revolutionary influence on abolition and women's rights and news media's desire to maintain dominant cultural hierarchies of race and gender.

In these articles, I noted three themes in depictions of Sojourner Truth. The first is *identity*: reports of Truth tend to indicate her race and her age, no matter the topic of the article. In some cases, her identity is the topic of the entire piece. Truth's *intelligence* is the second theme heavily reported on in these articles, mostly in regards to her perceived lack of intelligence, or the fact that she had no formal education. The final theme I noted is Truth's *eloquence*: reporters focused on the way Truth talked, often attributing her methods to her identity and/or intelligence.

## Literature Review

There exists a significant amount of scholarship regarding Sojourner Truth's activism and rhetoric. Much research on Truth focuses on her historical legacy. Nell Irvine Painter, for example, in *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, aims to explain the most well-known Truth anecdotes, including her best-known speech, in terms of their historical context and their influence on her legacy. Painter's book operates under the same assumption my research does, which is that what we know about Truth comes from the accounts of other (usually white) people. Painter analyzes primarily the transcriptions of Truth's speeches and interactions with notable historical figures.

Truth has also been noted by rhetorical scholars whose work is focused on antebellum women and African American rhetors and activists. For example, Carla Peterson wrote *Doers of the Word: African-American*

*Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880)*, which details the work of activists and rhetors, including Sojourner Truth, in the same time period my research is focused on. Peterson's work aims to understand Northern African American women's discourse in this time period "as generated both from within their culture and as a response to the dominant discourses of racism and sexism" (6). Additionally, Lindal Buchanan's book *Regendering Delivery: The Fifth Canon and Antebellum Women Rhetors* focuses on the collaboration with men and with white women that was necessary for Truth's words to be heard and then to be remembered. This research deals with the process of Truth's gaining a public presence. Meredith Minister does similar work in her article "Female, Black, and Able: Representations of Sojourner Truth and Theories of Embodiment," where she points out how Sojourner Truth's rhetoric often operates within an ideology of ability when advocating for women's rights and abolition, maintaining that women and African-Americans are strong, capable, and most importantly, able. Minister draws on Truth's most famous speech, 1851's "Ain't I a Woman?," in this analysis to demonstrate how and where she employs this ideology of ability.

Many scholars have analyzed "Ain't I a Woman?," attempting to deal with the problem of not knowing the exact words she used and instead only having access to its two drastically different transcriptions. Michael Phillips-Anderson of Monmouth University, for example, explains these complications in his work for the "Voices of Democracy" United States Oratory Project, concluding that it is clear Truth defended her identity as a woman and a citizen, which is consistent between these transcriptions,

but her words cannot be fully understood due to a lack of an authentic account of her remarks (21).

This scholarship has done much to establish what we know about Truth's life and how we can begin to understand her rhetoric when we are left with only the accounts of other people. However, these scholars do not take up an examination of Truth's contemporary public perception. To this end, Roseann Mandziuk has significantly contributed to research of Truth's rhetoric, the politics behind depictions of her, and the way that historians and the American public remember her. In her article "Grotesque and Ludicrous, but Yet Inspiring: Depictions of Sojourner Truth and Rhetorics of Domination," Mandziuk looks at descriptions of Truth's delivery, and depictions of her as both grotesque and as the "African Sybil." In "Commemorating Sojourner Truth: Negotiating the Politics of Race and Gender in the Spaces of Public Memory," Mandziuk describes how modern methods of remembering Truth as a historical icon raise questions about reconstructions and shifts in cultural values, and how issues of race and gender are negotiated in public memory. Lastly, "The Rhetorical Construction of Sojourner Truth," coauthored with Suzanne P. Fitch, tracks the transformation of Truth's image as it is represented by historians.

These three articles argue that contemporary media depictions of Truth, while acknowledging her influence, also undermine it so as to maintain certain power dynamics pertaining to race and gender, hence the contradictory reports of her in the nineteenth century. In the conclusion of "Grotesque and Ludicrous," Mandziuk asks, "Is any representation of an African American female in the public consciousness better

than none?" (289). This is the starting point of my research, which is concerned with the inconsistencies between Truth's contemporary public representation and her notable legacy in American history. I do not deal with what we know of Truth's words, but rather with how she was represented in the press during the time she was making these speeches. I pay attention to similar themes as Peterson, Buchanan, and Mandziuk, particularly power dynamics, but in the sense of how these complicated dynamics might have influenced both the ways the press reported on Truth in her own time and her resulting historical legacy. I also discuss Truth's best-known speech, paying attention instead to the fact that this speech exists in two drastically different versions.

While Mandziuk's work benefits my understanding of Truth's contemporary media persona, my own analysis of depictions of Truth and their implications raises the question of how Truth's positive and impactful reputation has survived throughout history despite, or maybe because of, the contradictory and often degrading reports of the day. In light of these findings, I argue that depictions and reports of Sojourner Truth in the media of her own time show a very different public figure than the modern, wholly positive one. As Mandziuk points out, Sojourner Truth is "a figure known only through the accounts of others" ("Grotesque" 467). Newspapers were inconsistent in reporting her speech patterns and the impact, or significance, of her ideas. Her contemporary media were more concerned with anecdotes surrounding her perceived negative identities and did not take her authority as a lecturer or preacher as seriously as today we might think they had. However, Truth remains an

important figure in the history of women's rights and the abolition of slavery. I argue further that the public's fascination with Truth as a novelty, and the undeniable power she exuded, regardless of how heavily mediated, was enough to cement her reputation in American history.

## **Background**

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Bomfree in the state of New York in 1797. Truth was born into slavery, and was bought and sold four times before she escaped in 1827, one year before the emancipation of all New York slaves went into effect (Michals). She had five children, the first born in 1815. Her daughter Sophia escaped with her as an infant in 1827. Her son Peter was returned to her with the help of an abolitionist family after being sold into slavery illegally. Truth is known for her activism in abolition and women's rights. Her life was also dedicated to her work as an evangelical preacher and lecturer in the nineteenth century.

By the 1830s, Truth had moved to New York City, began working for a minister, and participated in religious revivals. In 1843, she renamed herself Sojourner Truth, claiming that she had been called on to speak the truth (Michals). This is when her lecturing career began. In 1850, Truth dictated a narrative of her life, which brought her national recognition (Michals). Truth is best known for her 1851 speech given at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, later transcribed and titled "Ain't I a Woman?" In this speech, Truth challenged beliefs of inferiority having to do with gender and race by prompting her audience to consider her great strength and durability in conjunction with her status as a woman (Michals). For her Civil War work of organizing supplies

for black troops and encouraging young men to join the Union, Truth was invited to the White House for a meeting with President Abraham Lincoln in 1864. From there she helped former slaves find jobs with the Freedmen's Bureau and continued advocating for gender and racial equality as long as her health allowed (Michals). After a long life of touring and engaging with contemporary activists, she eventually settled in Battle Creek, Michigan, near three of her daughters, where she died in 1883 (Michals).

Sojourner Truth's historical legacy today is that of a prominent abolitionist and women's rights activist. Truth was named one of *Smithsonian* magazine's "100 Most Influential People of All Time" in 2014 (Frail). The Episcopal Church's calendar of saints remembers Sojourner Truth each year on July 20th along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and Harriet Tubman ("Liturgical"). Tina Allen's twelve-foot bronze sculpture of Sojourner Truth was dedicated in 1999, the estimated bicentennial of Truth's birth, in Battle Creek's Monument Park (Singhania 31). In 2016 it was announced that Sojourner Truth's image would appear on the back of a newly designed \$10 bill along with Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, and the 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession (U.S. Department of the Treasury). On September 19, 2018, the U.S. Secretary of the Navy announced the name of the last ship of six named in honor of U.S. civil and human rights heroes as USNS *Sojourner Truth* ("U.S. Navy"). All of these tributes to Truth represent her notable historical legacy as an activist.

## **The Identity of Sojourner Truth**

I begin my analysis with an exploration of how Truth's contemporary news media

wrote about her various identities. Readers today are often interested in how Truth rose from such humble beginnings to prominence, and audiences in her day were as well. Truth's identities pertaining to her age, race, and gender are indicated in passing in most contemporary articles, and one or more of these components of identity are the central topic of the article in some cases. In a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article from November 14, 1853, a reporter recounts one of Truth's lectures in Anthony, New York. The reporter describes Truth's demeanor while lecturing, and writes about the hymn she sang and the experiences as a slave that she detailed. The reporter also references her racial identity in terms of its significance to the demographic of her audience:

A respectable audience of colored people assembled at their church ... to listen to an address from a woman of their race, named Sojourner Truth. At 8 o'clock, Sojourner arose and asked some person present who possessed the spirit of prayer to give utterance to it. An elderly colored man responded to her invitation. Mrs. Truth commenced her discourse by singing a hymn. ("Article 11")

This report suggests that Truth's relevance is reserved for people of color. The report acknowledges the respectability of the audience, and Truth by extension. However, by noting the racial identity of Truth and her audience as a commonality—"assembled at their church ... to listen to ... a woman of their race"—the report suggests that Truth is only impactful to members of her own race, and is therefore unremarkable, or at least presumably less interesting to white audiences.

This same article also expresses awe, or maybe disbelief, that "a colored woman could address a white audience of a thousand people, and be listened to with respectful attention" ("Article 11"). In contrast, this statement does suggest some sort of remarkability, but it is more on the part of the audience than on that of Truth. The fact that the audience did not react negatively to Truth's presence and words is what is presumed to be a remarkable victory here. To continue the downplaying of Truth's significance, the article notes that "Mrs. Truth is something of a reformer in her way" ("Article 11"). Again, the article acknowledges that Truth is doing something remarkable, reforming something, presumably dominant ways of thinking about race and gender. This writer does downplay Truth's significance by using vague ("something of") and qualifying ("in her way") language to make it clear that she still is, in fact, a woman of color. This language suggests there must be a limit to her remarkability and to what she can reform.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed a special correspondence article from Battle Creek, Michigan, where Truth resided, on December 5, 1880. This report attached generalized, stereotypical ideas to Truth in terms of her racial identity. The headline read "Further Reminiscences of the Career of the African Sybil," foregrounding the article's attempt to acknowledge Truth's many accomplishments and great impact in the realms of her spirituality, oratorical career (Sybils are both ancient Greek oracles, whose prophesies are received via divine inspiration from deities, and divinely empowered speakers), and social reform. The writer notes that Truth had been honored by the city during its 1876 Centennial

celebration: “It was generally desired by all that Sojourner should occupy a prominent place at an exhibition to be given in the city. She was to represent the ‘Freedman’ coming from the shackles of Slavery into Freedom” (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). On the one hand, the writer reveals that most people believe Truth belongs on a platform where her words can be heard. In contrast to the 1853 article, however, this writer suggests that Truth’s authorization as a speaker is that she stands in as a representative of all former slaves. In honoring Truth, this report also diminishes her and her cause by making Truth the voice of an entire group of people who are otherwise silenced.

The article above also marvels at the possibility of Truth having a platform at all, by saying that “It hardly seems possible that a person who has been on a level with the cattle and swine, and for so many years subjected to such demoralizing influences, should have retained her moral integrity to such an extent, and cherished so successfully the religious sentiment in her soul” (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). This statement demonstrates a reluctance to explicitly praise Truth. The comparison to cattle and swine is degrading and devalues her presence as only representative of an insignificant group of people. However, it commends her for her extensive “moral integrity” and refers to her as “successful” in her convictions. Also, the writer admits to Truth having been subject to demoralizing influences, indicating some level of agreement regarding Truth’s cause for equality. Many of these reporters, presumably white and definitely literate, are writing about her from a position that is not completely against Truth and her beliefs. A common theme discussed in a lot of Manzdiuk’s work is the upholding of power

dynamics happening at the foreground of depictions such as these. While I agree the concern of upholding power dynamics is certainly present, I think we can also see in this case a writer struggling to reconcile their racial beliefs with what seems to be genuine admiration for Truth, even if the only language they have to describe the horrors of slavery is “demoralizing influences.”

In addition to race, contemporary writers focus on Truth’s identity as a woman as it related to her audience. For example, a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article, published August 13, 1879, describes her thus: “Sojourner Truth,’ the aged colored woman so well known throughout the Northern States, spoke last night at the Langley Avenue M.E. Church to a very good audience, mostly composed of ladies.” Similar to the way other articles depicted her position as only relevant to African Americans, or to former slaves specifically, this tactic depicts her as only significant to audiences comprised of women. Here too we see a contradiction in her depiction. By layering indicators of her novelty identities (“the aged colored woman”), the writer represents her as a person who *should* have limited impact, but is instead “so well known throughout the Northern States.” Even though she is an aged colored woman speaking to an audience “mostly composed of ladies,” the conviction of the press to note her widespread reputation is telling of her great and lasting influence.

Truth’s age is another identity of great concern to her contemporary media. In a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article from November 26, 1880, also a special correspondence from Battle Creek, Michigan, the headline “Over 100 Years of Age—The Oldest Living Lecturer in America” appears. The article

reports that “‘Sojourner’ has been described so often that her appearance needs no comment. She looks more like 60 than 103 years old, as she is claimed to be” (M.E.B., 26 Nov.). Here, her age is a topic of speculation, which happens frequently in contemporary reports of Truth. Reporters are fascinated by the prospect of a centenarian, but this is another example of news media’s tendency to discuss Truth’s various novelty identities rather than her message.

In contrast to the speculation about her age, an article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed on December 5, 1880, reports on this part of her identity as a sort of a triumph against all odds. The headline reads, “A Centenarian Who Has Played a Stirring Part in the Country’s History,” and in it is stated that Truth “still lingers on the verge of time, presenting to the world the *extraordinary spectacle* of a woman who, by native force, rose from the dregs of social life to become the defender of her race. Her parallel exists not in history. She stands by the closing century like a twin sister” (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). This newspaper sensationalizes a part of her identity that is called into question in a previous article. Contemporary reports of Truth characterize her by using her identities to generate interest. Though they are certainly concerned with her threat to dominant ideologies, as scholars have suggested, the press is also fascinated by her life story, which must have granted her some sort of notoriety, however underwhelming.

### **The Intelligence of Sojourner Truth**

Truth’s intelligence, or perceived lack thereof, is another theme heavily reported on. Most of these reports are negative, and assume her unintelligence based on her identities. Targeting Truth’s lack of formal

education, and assuming her unintelligence based on that background, is a way to minimize her impact. The report further attempts to maintain these contemporary power dynamics regarding race and gender hierarchies that Truth constantly threatened, but also serves to tell another aspect of her life story worthy of regard. Many writers are fascinated with Truth’s abilities despite a lack of education, but this perception is inconsistent. Some reports explicitly state her unintelligence; others simply marvel at how far she came with no education; while many imply that there is some limit to her ability to succeed to ensure that she is still a non-threat.

The same November 26, 1880, article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* mentioned earlier explicitly targets Truth’s intelligence, while a continuation of the article published about one week later praises her knowledge. The first article states, “Sojourner is often asked her age. She is as ignorant of its date as the fossil in the limestone rock” (M.E.B., 26 Nov.). It also says that Truth “is very ignorant,—does not even know her letters, and cannot read a word. What she knows is nearly all intuitive.” In the December 5, 1880 *Chicago Daily Tribune* article previously mentioned, two relevant descriptions of Truth’s intelligence appear. The first is “Through all scenes of her eventful life may be traced the energy of a naturally powerful mind; the fearlessness and childlike simplicity of one untrammelled by education or conventional customs” (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). The second description reads, “Her memory is a vast storehouse of knowledge. . . . True to the character of Sibyl which genius has awarded her.”

Both the November and December 1880 *Chicago Daily Tribune* articles discuss Truth’s



intelligence, but the language is very different. The first explicitly states that she is unintelligent (or perhaps a different kind of intelligent) because she has no education, and implies that her old age is a factor as well. In the second, her lack of education is framed as a good thing. She is strong-minded, free from traditional modes of knowledge-making, and her intelligence is completely natural and intuitive. These are highly contradictory reports. Her lack of education is the focus in both, but the second article establishes this as a better alternative, as if she had been given the gift of no education. It even gives her the status of a genius, but the previous description of her “childlike simplicity” undermines this and implies there is no reason to believe Truth’s intelligence could threaten dominant customs in any significant way. To disarm a threat by saying it is not one, or has no power, is another way of reinforcing dominant hierarchies of late nineteenth century.

Another method of targeting Truth’s intelligence is to report on her ideas in ways that establish their radicalness or inaccuracy. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* article from October 21, 1881 uses the headline, “Her Radical Definition of What Coercive Temperance Means: It Includes Abstinence from Tobacco and Abolition of Hanging.” This article explicitly challenges her ideas, but it first introduces her as unintelligent and unworthy of forming opinions about these topics, let alone of leading a discussion about them.

A three-hours’ prayer-meeting was held in Lower Farwell Hall yesterday afternoon under the auspices of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The attendance was very large, especially between 3 and 4 o’clock,

when Sojourner Truth spoke. ... It had been announced that Sojourner Truth would lead the meeting, but she was unable to do so, since she cannot tell A from Z.

After all, no reasonable person could support such “radical” ideas such as teetotalling or abolishing capital punishment. Her supposed lack of reason—“She cannot tell A from Z”—is reason enough to discredit her ideas, which makes them unlikely to have any impact on people who only know her as she is represented in the press.

Some reporters tried to attack the veracity of Truth’s claims, often including a mocking reference to her name. An article from the Franklin Files Letter section of the *Boston Daily Globe*, published on December 23, 1883, begins with the headline, “Sojourner Truth a Humbug” and claims to have uncovered Truth’s real age. The reporter states that they had received convincing evidence that proved Truth’s claim to be over one hundred years old when she died was false, and that she was a “conscious humbug” (or a liar, essentially), which, in the writer’s opinion, is why her ideas regarding religion were not taken seriously by prominent religious leaders. The article concludes with this statement from the informant: “But she was eloquent in her uncouth way ... and no doubt did a great deal of good among ignorant people, whom educated preachers could not have moved at all” (8). This statement acknowledges her influence, but undermines its significance. Here, Truth’s intelligence is acknowledged as a kind of strong-mindedness and intuition apparent only to unintelligent people, but it is made clear that those who are educated did not appreciate her, nor should they have



bothered listening to her at all.

Despite the desire to discredit her, even writers skeptical of her ideas acknowledge her eloquence and the positive, lasting impact she had on her audiences. Looking beyond the negative claims about Truth, one recognizes the powerful historical figure the present day knows her to be. And we might wonder if some contemporary writers would have felt compelled to discredit her with implicitly racist remarks and the desire to preserve existing hierarchies, diminishing the perceived threat of Truth as a smart black woman.

### **The Eloquence of Sojourner Truth**

Contemporary reports of Sojourner Truth focused on the way she talked, often attributing her methods to her identity or intelligence. Depictions of her dialect are inconsistent. Mandziuk and Fitch state that “the very fact that no one knows what she sounded like has led to two variant views on how her language should be reported” (129). Her dialect is either misrepresented as that of a Southern slave, which she was not, or she is quoted in perfect English, which is unlikely due to her language background. She was raised speaking Dutch, and learned English from the various families under whose ownership she lived. People who did know her, such as the children of her last owner, reported that she spoke similarly to an uneducated nineteenth-century white person from her region (Mandziuk and Fitch 128-29).

Even Truth’s most famous speech, commonly referred to as “Ain’t I a Woman?” has been subjected to rhetorical construction. There are two vastly different versions of this speech from the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. A few weeks

after the convention, Reverend Marius Robinson published a transcription of Truth’s speech along with context for Truth’s demeanor and the audience’s reaction in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. Thirty years later, Frances Gage published a new version of the same speech, in which Truth’s words are presented in such a way that evokes a Southern slave dialect (Truth “Address”). Phillips-Anderson explains the complications of understanding these depictions of Truth’s words due to the lack of an authentic transcript of her speech (28-30).

An article from *Detroit Free Press* printed in March 8, 1868, is one instance where I found a report of Truth’s words in which they resemble Southern slave dialect. The article supposedly quotes an entire conversation between Sojourner Truth and a “temperance man,” Mr. Goodrich, about Truth’s beliefs regarding temperance and tobacco use, but the tone and content suggest the writer took some liberties, if not making up the incident wholesale. The beginning of this “interrogatory” is as follows:

“Aunt Sojourner, do you think you are a Christian?”

“Yes, Brudder Goodrich, I speak I am.”

“Aunt Sojourner, do you believe in the Bible?”

“Yes, Brudder Goodrich, I bleeve the Scriptures; though I can’t read them as you can.” (“Sojourner Truth” 8 Mar.)

And the conversation continues on in this style, so the article claims. This is a characterization of Truth in which she is simple and ignorant, yet endearingly and comically so. By fashioning her dialect in this way,

reporters can acknowledge her ideas without asking the public to take them too seriously.

The two previously mentioned editions of the special correspondence from Battle Creek, Michigan, printed in the Chicago Daily Tribune in 1880 offer contradictory depictions of Truth's dialect. In these articles, the following supposed quotes from Truth appear: "Sisters, I ain't clear what ye be after. If women wants any rights any more den she's got, why don't dey jes' take 'em, and not be talking about it?" (M.E.B., 26 Nov.); and "I's not warthy to sit up yar: but, if I can do any work or say anythin' for the people, I'll do dat'" (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). Other times, she is quoted with no dialect, or in perfect English. In the same article, on two separate occasions, her dialect is depicted in two contradictory fashions. Printing her words in this Southern slave dialect marks her identity and her background in such a way that, at this time, could easily be used to disregard her significance. The lack of consistency in the transcriptions of her "dialect" suggests that the writer may have been taking some liberties with her speech, trying to rhetorically construct a generic, uneducated racial stereotype to readers.

In addition to reports about her dialect, I found numerous quotes regarding Truth's rhetoric. Contemporary reports made inconsistent claims about which elements of her rhetoric were intentional and which were intuitive, and about how her audience received her at various lectures. Several articles reference "Ain't I a Woman?," giving conflicting reports about Truth's demeanor during the speech, and about how the audience reacted to it.

The *Anti-Slavery Bugle* published an account of the Women's Rights Convention

in Akron, Ohio on June 21, 1851, in which the following statement appears:

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. (Robinson)

In contrast, the November 26, 1880 article from the Chicago Daily Tribune has an account of the same event that reads as follows:

Slowly from her seat on the steps rose Sojourner Truth, who till now had scarcely lifted her head. "Don't let her speak," gasped half-a-dozen of the leaders on the stand. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid down her old sun-bonnet at her feet, and looked at Mrs. Gago with her great, speaking eyes. Mrs. G. rose and announced to the audience, "Sojourner Truth." There was a hissing sound of disapprobation. Sojourner spoke in deep tones, and at the first words there was a profound hush. (M.E.B., 26 Nov.)

The difference between these two accounts shows the agendas of these two newspapers. The first quote is vague about the audience's reaction to Truth, yet is very specific about her powerful and moving speech. The second goes into great detail about the audience's reaction to her speech, and the backlash Truth received for standing up to speak at all, but does not reveal

much about her actual words. The report from the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* suggests that this outlet is more apt to highlight the strengths of Truth herself at this event, while the *Tribune's* interest is in how people reacted to this person speaking on such a platform. However, the contrast here also suggests the undeniable power of Truth's presence. The *Bugle's* message is more positive, while the *Tribune* continues to struggle with Truth's growing impact on audiences of more and more people.

Truth's rhetorical style is heavily scrutinized in many contemporary articles. Opinions regarding her style are inconsistent across publications in how she is depicted, and to what extent Truth is intentional in her style. This often supports a representation of Truth as intuitive and lacking formal education. For instance, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* published an article on August 13, 1879, stating that

The aged lecturer spoke for an hour or so in a rambling and discursive style. Her utterances were marked by a deep devotion, and evidenced her full belief in the somewhat peculiar ideas of the attributes of the Almighty and the Savior which she holds. Anything like a report of her discourse it would be impossible to give in such shape as to render it readable. Her story was entirely autobiographical, and was listened to throughout with great attention. ("Sojourner Truth" 13 Aug.)

There are no quotes from Truth's lecture in this article, only paraphrased accounts of the topics she discussed and the writer's opinion on her eloquence and impact. This description suggests that while Truth's lecture was impassioned and possibly moving

to the audience, her style was "rambling," incoherent, and impossible to transcribe. This implies a lack of intentional style on Truth's part, which downplays her authority as a well-known lecturer who is knowledgeable of topics that this writer deems "peculiar." The writer does, however, report the favorable reactions by the audience to her stories.

In the *Chicago Daily Tribune* article from December 5, 1880, an article written with the notion of paying homage to Truth's life and work, appears another headline that reads "Interesting Sayings and Doings of a Very Remarkable Parsonage." Under this headline appears the statement, "Because many of the stories would be so unnatural that people would believe them untrue, which would injure her name of 'Sojourner Truth.' 'And, honey,' said she in her quaint way, 'I wouldn't have people think I'd tell a lie for all the world'" (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). This statement targets Truth's storytelling as a rhetorical method, by questioning the authenticity of such stories and mocking her chosen name of "Truth." Though this statement does not explicitly call Truth a liar, it does imply that some people have a hard time believing her, which places doubt in the minds of readers and future listeners, harming her credibility as a lecturer. It also suggests that she is being coy or ironic rather than straightforward as her name and reputation would indicate.

In the same article are very real praises of Truth's rhetoric. Reports of her enthusiasm and fervor are mentioned. The writer marvels at her confidence, and the bright, clear, positive, and ecstatic tones of her message. The report says, "I cannot but think that Sojourner, with the same culture, might have spoken words as eloquent and undying

as those of the African saint Augustine or Tertullian” (M.E.B., 5 Dec.). While this claim may not harm Truth’s credibility as a lecturer, it does further essentialize and characterize her rhetoric in terms of her race. Still, she is compared here to powerful characters, and often likened to an “African Sybil”—an often divinely inspired oracle or prophet—by various newspapers. Her significance as a reformer, though somewhat contained by the press’s intentionally constructed reports, is undeniable by even those who wish to minimize it (Mandziuk “Grotesque” 476). While suggesting that her message was divinely inspired would seem to diminish her agency by giving credit for her eloquence to God, it also suggests a recognizable righteousness of her cause. Even as they might undermine her, writers could not help but confirm her power.

## **Conclusion**

Though Sojourner Truth is now remembered as an inspirational figure in areas of American history such as abolition and women’s rights, the general perception of her in her own time does not reflect that notable image to its full extent. Contemporary reports of her life and work struggle to acknowledge Truth’s impact, while also containing the threat she posed on dominant discourses of race and gender. In Mandziuk’s words, these reports “reveal the rhetorical means that were summoned to preserve dominant power in the face of demands for gender and racial equality” (“Grotesque” 468).

Contemporary reports on Truth reveal that her agency and authority to speak was

not widely recognized. Instead, she is typically depicted as representative of a marginalized people, and reporters preferred to imply that her impact lay solely in those spaces in order to maintain power over that impact. Based on my analysis of these historical newspapers, I agree with Mandziuk’s general argument that depictions and reports of Truth in her contemporary press are inconsistent in conveying her rhetorical strategies, her impact on and significance to her audiences, and the overall intelligence of her ideas. The focus, instead, is on characterizing her as representative of perceived negative identities in order to maintain contemporary power dynamics (“Grotesque” 468). Yet at the same time, I argue, these negative reports did not have as much of an impact on Truth’s lasting reputation as Mandziuk suggests they do.

The press’s fascination with Truth as a novelty (she was black, a freed slave, a woman, and a supposed centenarian) that I found in nineteenth-century newspapers help answer Mandziuk’s question of whether any representation at all of black women in this time was notable. Indeed, even unsupportive contemporary writers seemed to acknowledge her power as a speaker or reconcile their feelings with her message, while more open-minded readers admitted admiration for her cause. Regardless of their feelings, almost all writers recognize that she would become—or was already—a notable figure in American history. Because Truth was such an undeniably revolutionary, powerful figure, her legacy remains intact.

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